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Newsroom

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Lessons from Iraq
Des Moines, IA | October 12, 2007

Let me start by congratulating a great American, Al Gore, for being named this year's winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Vice President Gore has been an extraordinary leader for this country. Through his many years of public service; his early and vocal opposition to the war in Iraq; and -- above all -- his singular leadership in drawing attention to the global climate crisis, Al Gore has advanced the cause of peace at home and around the world. This award is richly deserved.

You know, it was five years ago yesterday that the United States Senate voted to give President Bush the authority to wage war in Iraq. At the time, I was a candidate for the U.S. Senate and I spoke out strongly in opposition to going to war. Nearly all of my opponents for the Democratic nomination for President made a different choice, and voted to authorize the war.

Now, some have asked me, "Why are you always reminding us that you opposed the war? Isn't that yesterday's news? Is that experience really relevant?"
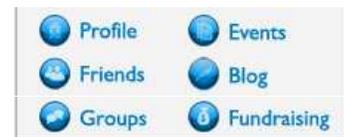
And what I always say is this -- this isn't just about the past, it's about the future. I don't talk about my opposition to the war to say "I told you so." I wish the war had gone differently. But the reason I talk about it is because I truly believe that the judgment, and the conviction, and the accountability that each of us showed on the most important foreign policy decision of our lives is the best indicator you have of how each of us will make those decisions going forward.

How we made that decision, and how we talk about it, is critical to understanding what we would do as President. Will we carefully evaluate the evidence and the consequences of action, or will we skip over the intelligence and scare people with the consequences of inaction? Will we make these decisions based on polls, or based on our principles? Will we have the courage to make the tough choice, or will we just choose the course that makes us look tough?

These decisions aren't just Washington parlor games about who's up and who's down. These are life and death decisions. They impact your safety and security. Above all, they impact the soldier from Iowa, or the airman from Illinois, and every single one of our brave young men and women who are in harm's way, and all of their families and friends back home.

Now, it's easy to oppose a war after it has gone wrong. It's easy to say -- years later -- that the war shouldn't have happened, given what we know now about how badly it has turned out. But every single one of us running for President only had one chance to make a judgment about whether or not to go to war.

As I travel around the country, so many Americans ask me: how did we go so wrong in Iraq? And they're not just asking because they want to understand the past -- they're asking because they don't want their leaders to make the same mistakes again in the future. They don't want leaders who will bog us down in unnecessary wars; they don't want leaders who allow America to lose its standing; and they don't want leaders who tell the American people

anything less than the full truth about where they stand and what they'll do.

That is a big part of what this campaign is about. Because we need to learn the painful lessons of the Iraq War if we're going to secure this country and renew America's leadership.

The first thing we have to understand is what happened in Iraq. Because there are two ways to look at this. The first way is to say that Iraq is a disaster because of George Bush's mismanagement. Or because of the arrogance and incompetence of Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld in prosecuting the war. Or because Iraq's Prime Minister just hasn't been up to the job.

But I take a different view. I think the problem isn't just *how* we've fought the war -- it's that we fought the war in the first place. Because the truth is, the war in Iraq should never have been authorized, and it should never have been waged. The Iraq War had nothing to do with al Qaeda or 9/11. It was based on exaggerated fears and unconvincing intelligence. And it has left America less safe, and less respected around the world.

Five years ago, my friends warned me not to speak up against the war. Going to war was popular. So was President Bush. You'll be putting your political career on the line, they said. But I just didn't see how Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat. I was convinced that a war would distract us from Afghanistan and al Qaeda, and fan the flames of extremism and terrorism. And I didn't get into politics to stay silent on the tough issues, or to tailor my positions to the polls. I didn't want to look back, after an unnecessary war had been waged, and regret that I didn't speak out against going to war just because going to war was popular. So I spoke out against what I called a "rash war" -- a "war based not on reason but on politics."

But the conventional thinking in Washington lined up for war. The President and his advisors told us that the only way to stop Saddam Hussein from getting a nuclear weapon was to go to war, that we couldn't let the smoking gun be a mushroom cloud. Leading Democrats -- including Senator Clinton -- echoed the erroneous line that there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. We were counseled by some of the most experienced voices in Washington that the only way for Democrats to look tough was to talk, act, and vote like Republicans.

There is no doubt that President Bush failed us in the run-up to war. But the American people weren't just failed by the President -- they were failed by the Congress. Too many members of Congress failed to ask hard questions. Too many members of Congress, including some of my opponents in this race, failed to read the National Intelligence Estimate for themselves -- an intelligence report that was so unconvincing, and so filled with qualifications, that the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee decided to vote against the war when he read it for himself. Too many Democrats fell in line with George Bush, and voted to give him the open-ended authority to wage war that he uses to this day. So let's be clear: without that vote, there would be no war.

Senator Edwards voted for the war in 2002. He has renounced that vote, instead of pretending that it was a vote for anything but war. But Senator Clinton makes a different argument. She says that she wasn't really voting for war back in 2002, she was voting for more inspections, or she was voting for more diplomacy. But all of us know what was being debated in the Congress in the fall of 2002. We didn't need to authorize a war in order to have United Nations weapons inspections. No one thought Congress was debating whether or not to conduct diplomacy. The headlines on October 12, 2002 did not read: "Congress authorizes diplomacy with Iraq" -- the headlines on October 12, 2002 read "Congress backs war."

In the course of this campaign, we haven't just seen different candidates talk about their vote in different ways -- we've seen how different candidates have drawn different lessons from their experience of the Iraq War.

Five years later, we should all have learned the lessons of that vote -- we should all have learned that you can't give this Administration an excuse to wage war. But just last month, the Senate voted for an amendment that raises the risk that we could repeat the mistake of Iraq.

Here is why this amendment is so reckless. It opens with seventeen findings that highlight Iran's influence inside of Iraq. Then it says we have to structure our military presence inside Iraq to counter Iran. It goes on to say that it is "a critical national interest of the United States" to prevent the Iranian government from exerting influence inside Iraq. Why is this amendment so dangerous? Because George Bush and Dick Cheney could use this language to justify keeping our troops in Iraq as long as they can point to a threat from Iran. And because they could use this language to justify an attack on Iran as a part of the ongoing war in Iraq.

I don't want to give this President any excuse, or any opening for war. Because as we learned with the authorization of the Iraq War -- when you give this President a blank check, you can't be surprised when he cashes it.

Senator Clinton is the only Democratic candidate for president who supports this amendment. She said, like she did five years ago, that it is a way to support diplomacy. I disagree. We all know that Iran poses a threat. We do need to mount international pressure to stop Iran's nuclear program. We do need to tighten sanctions on the Iranian regime -- particularly on Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which supports terrorism. But this must be done separately from any saber-rattling about checking Iranian influence with our military presence in Iraq.

We should not be arguing that our troops have to stay in Iraq to counter Iran. Now is the time to end the war in Iraq. Now is the time to start bringing our troops out of Iraq -- immediately. That's why I have a plan to remove one or two combat brigades a month so that we get all of our combat troops out of Iraq within 16 months -- that's as quickly and responsibly as we can do this. The only troops I will keep in Iraq for a limited time will protect our diplomats and carry out targeted strikes on al Qaeda -- not sustained combat. And I will launch the diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives that are so badly needed. So let there be no doubt: I will end this war.

Now is not the time to give George Bush and Dick Cheney any excuse to escalate this war. Now is not the time for the Congress to send mixed messages. That's why my position today is the same as it was when I stood up in Iowa on September 12 and said: "George Bush and Dick Cheney must hear -- loud and clear -- from the American people and the Congress: you don't have our support, and you don't have our authorization for another war."

Five years after that vote for war, we should all have learned the lesson that the cowboy diplomacy of not talking to people we don't like doesn't work. We do need tougher diplomacy with Iran. But the way to support tough diplomacy is not to vote for reckless amendments -- the way to support diplomacy is to actually pursue it. That's what I've called for throughout this campaign -- direct diplomacy, without preconditions. And that's what I'll do as President. Not the Bush-Cheney diplomacy of talking to our friends and ignoring our enemies. Real, direct, and sustained diplomacy.

A couple of months ago, Senator Clinton called me "naïve and irresponsible" for taking this position, and said that we could lose propaganda battles if we met with leaders we didn't like. Just yesterday, though, she called for diplomacy with Iran without preconditions. So I'm not sure if any of us knows exactly where she stands on this. But I can tell you this: when I am President of the United States, the American people and the world will always know where I stand.

I don't see how we can rally the world unless we have a President who is willing to lead. I'm not afraid that America will lose a propaganda battle with a petty tyrant -- we need to go before the world and win those battles. And as President, I will.

You know, the cautious, conventional thinking in Washington says that Democrats can't take these positions. Or that we need to say one thing in a caucus and primary campaign, but another in a general election. This is the conventional thinking that said that Democrats had to vote for war in 2002 because there was an election coming up -- an election that we lost. The conventional thinking that says that Democrats can't win elections, unless they talk, act and vote like Republicans when it comes to foreign policy and national security.

Well, I'm not running to conform to Washington's conventional thinking -- I'm running to challenge it. That's what I did in 2002. That's what I did in 2004. And that's what I will do as President of the United States.

Because I think the pundits have it wrong. I think the American people have had enough of politicians who go out of their way to look tough, who say one thing in a caucus and another in a general election. When I am the nominee of our party, the choice will be clear. My Republican opponent won't be able to say that we both supported this war in Iraq. He won't be able to say that we really agree about using the war in Iraq to justify military action against Iran, or about the diplomacy of not talking and saber-rattling. He won't be able to say that I haven't been open and straight with the American people, or that I've changed my positions. And you know what? The American people want that choice. Because I believe that's what we need in our next President.

We've had enough of a misguided war in Iraq that never should have been fought -- a war that needs to end.

We've had enough of Presidents who put tough talk ahead of real diplomacy.

And we've had enough of politicians who put power over principle, of a government in Washington that shuts you out, and of presidents who don't hold themselves accountable.

This is about what we stand for as Democrats. But much more than that -- it's about what we stand for as Americans. Because there are plenty of Democrats and plenty of Independents and, yes, plenty of Republicans out there who are ready to turn the page on the broken politics and blustering foreign policy coming from Washington. That's how we're going to bring this country together. That's how we're going to restore our security and renew our standing in the world. Not by shifting with the political winds, but by standing strong in any storm, and standing up for what we believe.

I would not be on this stage today if the promise of America had not brought my father across an ocean. I would not be on this stage if generations of Americans had not fought before me so that the American dream could be extended to a man named Barack Obama. That's why I have spent my own life fighting for that dream, no matter how difficult it's been, no matter how tough it was to take a stand. That's why I will always tell you where I stand and what I believe. And when I am President, that is how we will meet the hard challenges, and reclaim that dream, and make the United States of America a light to the world once more.