

# IF WE WERE OBAMA...A RESPONSE TO OBAMA'S TROOP "WITHDRAWAL"

Written by Mike Ferner

A veteran's perspective makes it clear that two major points must be made in response to President Obama's announcement regarding combat troops leaving Iraq.

First, there is no such thing as "non combat troops." It is a contradiction in terms. It is internally inconsistent. It is illogical. It is simply not true.

Ask any of the millions of men and women who went through basic training and they can tell you that every U.S. troop anywhere in the world was indoctrinated and trained in the basics of combat. While in Iraq, the transition from mechanics or communications back to combat-ready soldier takes but an order. "Non-combat troops" is simply the latest in a long line of military euphemisms meant to obscure painful reality.

The second point can best be made by drafting a section of the President's remarks for him. If Veterans For Peace were to do that it would read something like this.

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"And now, fellow Americans, let us begin a new era of candor and honesty about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Specifically, I'm referring to the true costs of war - something that must be considered if we are to judge if continued war is worth it.

You have seen that the cost to taxpayers of these wars has exceeded one trillion dollars, nearly all of which has been considered 'off budget,' appropriated by extraordinary or 'supplemental' spending bills. It may be hard to believe that, large though that figure may be, it is but the smaller portion of what we will spend in total.

We are already investing unprecedented amounts in Veterans Administration staff and facilities to try and cope with the millions of men and women who have cycled through a war zone deployment - and of course many have been through multiple deployments.

Our experience thus far tells us to expect literally hundreds of thousands of cases of PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injuries - injuries that are often difficult to diagnose at first and difficult to treat. These are, of course, in addition to the many thousands of visibly wounded who, at great expense, must go through rehabilitation and a lifetime of support in order to function to their fullest. Thousands more will require years, perhaps decades, of long-term care because their injuries have left them so broken they require round-the-clock attention.

But since we are initiating an era of candor, we go farther - and by that I mean the cost to families, communities and society as a whole. Volumes have literally been written on this point, but let me leave you with a brief example you can easily expand for yourself.

We have already heard of the abnormally high rate of suicides among returning veterans. The real number is undoubtedly higher since some will always remain a mystery. We've heard also of a growing tide of domestic violence that leaves families broken and terrorized.

Beyond the draining medical, psychological and emotional costs to the individuals directly involved, imagine the cost to the communities where this occurs: whole battalions of police, fire, EMT, courts, probation officers, social workers and sadly, prison guards will be needed to deal with the true costs of war. It is uncomfortable to admit, but this is indeed one area of the economy I can guarantee will grow significantly.

Then there is an exponentially greater cost borne by the people of Iraq and Afghanistan - greater in every way: emotionally, economically, in human suffering, in destroyed opportunities, in shattered lives and minds, in hearts that will remain forever broken. We can do precious little to repair much of that kind of damage. But I can tell you this, my fellow Americans, we must at least pay the bill to rebuild the roads, water and sewer plants, hospitals, schools and residences we have destroyed.

It is not pleasant to describe such things and indeed, these costs will continue to weigh heavily on our nation well into our grandchildren's generation. But we cannot pretend otherwise."

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This is the message that should come from the White House tonight if truth were indeed the coin of the realm. We won't hear it, but that will make it no less true.

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