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Obama and Iraq

The risks of a premature U.S. withdrawal.

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In a week of symbolic breaks with the ancien regime, President Obama called in U.S. war commanders last Wednesday to signal his desire to get out of Iraq. Then, meeting over, he issued a vague statement about planning "a responsible military drawdown" that omitted mention of his campaign promise to pull out within 16 months.



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For Iraq's sake, long may such obfuscation reign. The country faces big tests in the coming year, starting with provincial elections on Saturday. Robust American engagement guided Iraq out of its bloodiest days in 2006. The military commanders who implemented the successful surge now counsel against hasty withdrawal, lest those

gains be lost. This is a potential win-win for Mr. Obama. If Iraq emerges from 2009 as a stronger democracy, the White House could then reduce troop levels with little risk of relapse. The President, who prospered in the Democratic primaries thanks to his antiwar stance, will reap the strategic benefit. Let historians appreciate the irony.

The 146,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq today are needed less to end violence than as glue for a still fragile polity. The GIs are the honest brokers in an Iraq recovering from vicious sectarian fighting, and they are crucial to building a steadily improving Iraqi Army. To withdraw in 16 months, the U.S. would have to start immediately to rotate out a brigade roughly each month, taking its eye off those crucial missions.

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into the fold through the ballot box, along the way helping to give birth to vibrant retail politics. Some 14,000 candidates from 400 parties battle for 440 seats on 14 (of 18) provincial councils. There will also be a referendum on the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement this summer, and parliamentary elections by the end of the year.

In Today's Opinion Journal

American GIs can make sure these elections come off smoothly and are

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accepted broadly as legitimate. The current campaign has seen an uptick in suicide attacks and bombings, showing that diehard Sunni insurgents and Iran-backed militias still want to sabotage democracy in Mesopotamia. Iran lost its fight to stop the U.S. forces deal last year and is sure to try again. A Shiite democracy on its border is an existential rebuke to the mullahs. Military commanders are bracing for Iran to stir up trouble in the months ahead, particularly in the south. By helping Iraq resist this powerplay, Mr. Obama will only strengthen his hand for his promised diplomacy with Tehran.












General Ray Odierno, the commander in Iraq, says the U.S. will be able to pull out two, possibly three, of 14 brigades in 2009, assuming all goes well. Last year's forces agreement obliges cuts. By summer, American combat forces are supposed to be out of the cities, and out of the country by the end of 2011, well in time for the next U.S. Presidential election.

The new Administration may still be tempted to pull out in bigger numbers sooner – both to appease its antiwar left and spend less on defense. Another argument is that the U.S. can't beef up in Afghanistan without quick reductions in Iraq. As a matter of arithmetic, that's broadly correct. But before a larger force can do much good in Afghanistan the U.S. needs a plan for deploying it.

Here's the lose-lose scenario: Allow Iraq to deteriorate by withdrawing too soon and push into Afghanistan without a better strategy. Mr. Obama has inherited a victory in Iraq that he can't afford to squander.

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