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Why send more troops to Iraq?

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Through careful incrementalism and downplaying his actions, President Barack Obama has shrewdly avoided scrutiny of repeated military interventions and robbed the American people of robust debate about the where, when, and why of American warfare.

Close on the heels of Obama's decision to keep 8,400 troops in Afghanistan indefinitely, the administration recently announced that it would send another 560 troops to Iraq to help retake the city of Mosul from the Islamic State (ISIS). This move will bring the total number of American troops in Iraq to somewhere around 5,000. In the scheme of things, 5,000 does not sound like a remarkable figure. The U.S. sent over 150,000 troops to fight the 2003 Iraq War and deployed over 500,000 troops to the Middle East for the first Gulf War.

And in many ways the decision to help Iraqi forces retake the city of Mosul also seems unremarkable. ISIS is a global menace, after all, sparking terrorism around the world and threatening the stability of the Middle East. Moreover, Obama has promised that the American forces will not engage in direct combat but will instead provide support for Iraqi troops. On the surface, sending a few additional troops to help Iraq take care of ISIS simply looks like a smart strategy.

Unfortunately, this approach to American strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq has produced a long and drawn out failure over the past 15 years. National security concerns provide scant justification for direct involvement in the Middle East. ISIS is an imminent threat to Iraq and its neighbors but represents a distant threat to Americans. And, in fact, the best way to reduce the threat of terrorism against Americans is to disengage from internecine warfare in the region, not to stir hatred and enmity through continued air strikes, drone strikes, and an ongoing military presence.

Beyond this, the danger of Obama's decision is that it signals an unhealthy evolution in the American way of war. In the wake of Vietnam political leaders like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and General Colin Powell helped articulate a new approach to military intervention. Instead of getting bogged down in endless wars with little prospect for success, the Weinberger and Powell doctrines encouraged presidents to identify limited missions clearly, to use overwhelming military force in pursuit of quick victory, and to use military force only when vital national interests were at stake and with the full backing of the American people. The result of

this post-Vietnam strategic evolution was seen in the high-tech, low-casualty warfare that proved so successful during the Gulf War in 1991.

President Obama, meanwhile, has abandoned the strategy that worked so well then. In place of a clearly defined mission Obama has substituted an amorphous commitment to the security and stability of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria with no clear national security rationale and no clear endpoint in sight. In place of overwhelming military force is the “light footprint,” which serves to keep American casualties low while sacrificing the ability to achieve any kind of military victory in a reasonable amount of time.

And finally, Obama has obscured the true shape of his Middle East strategy through his own version of “salami tactics.” By focusing the news media’s attention on discrete efforts like the retaking of Mosul or the killing of a specific terrorist leader, and by adding just a few troops here and a few troops there, he avoids debate about his overall strategy. Meanwhile the United States gets ever more deeply enmeshed in the Middle Eastern morass.

The implications of this approach to war are chilling. Without a clear national security rationale, military intervention stops being a tool of foreign policy and risks becoming either folly or tragedy. Failure to put limits on the mission or to define a clear strategy for victory puts lives at risk, invites political infighting, and raises the costs of intervention. Finally, it robs the American people of the opportunity to participate in a free-ranging debate and make their will known.

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