



Obama touts progress, orders drawdown

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By **Mimi Hall** and **Tom Vanden Brook**, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — **President Obama** heralded the beginning of the end of the nation's 10-year war in Afghanistan on Wednesday, citing success in the battle against al-Qaeda and the Taliban but offering no guarantee that the nation's heavy investment in lives and treasure will leave behind a stable and secure nation.

"We have put al-Qaeda on a path to defeat, and we will not relent until the job is done," Obama said. At the same time, "we will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government."

In ordering 10,000 servicemembers home by the end of this year and 23,000 more by the end of next summer, Obama rejected the advice of Gen. **David Petraeus**, the commander of troops in Afghanistan. He urged that fewer troops be withdrawn, according to three senior administration officials who declined to be identified.

Instead, the president ceded to public discontent with a war that has cost \$444 billion and seen more than 1,500 servicemembers killed and 12,000 wounded since then-president **George W. Bush** launched attacks after 9/11. "America, it is

time to focus on nation building here at home," Obama said in a nod to anxiety about the sluggish economy and growing deficits.

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Under Obama's new orders, all 33,000 servicemembers he sent to Afghanistan in December 2009 will be out within months of when voters go to the polls next year to determine whether he wins a second term in office. All 99,000 servicemembers will be out by 2014. "The tide of war is receding," Obama said.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates said he supports Obama's decision.

Obama hailed substantial progress toward the goal he set for the surge: to defeat al-Qaeda and turn back Taliban gains, particularly in the southern part of the country. He said the effort was designed to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven, ensure that the Taliban would not be able to regain control of the country and train Afghan security forces.

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Reaction to the drawdown announcement was mixed: House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said continuing to degrade al-Qaeda must "take priority over any calendar dates"; House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California called the drawdown too slow and said she would "continue to press for a better outcome."

Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the withdrawals are "warranted" but argued for an overhaul of U.S. foreign policy to avoid "outsized missions that have declined in strategic importance."

Jeffrey Dressler, a military analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, a non-partisan policy research organization whose staff has advised Petraeus, said the withdrawal of U.S. forces now endangers gains made in the south during the last 18 months. Instead, forces should be moved closer to the border with Pakistan, where Haqqani network insurgents remain potent. "The conditions on the ground do not merit a withdrawal. Period," he said.

Christopher Preble, a foreign policy expert at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) think tank, said there's no need to keep nearly 70,000 servicemembers in Afghanistan given that it is no longer a base for al-Qaeda operations. "The modest withdrawal of troops signals a failure to rethink our strategy in the region, which is desperately needed after 10 years of war," he said. "An increasing number in Congress and the public are skeptical of the need to maintain such a massive footprint in the country," he said.

Obama said al-Qaeda has been dramatically weakened, particularly by the May 1 raid that

killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Documents found in bin Laden's compound, Obama said, showed the extent of the damage done to al-Qaeda's operations.

During the speech, Obama said [NATO](#) allies had also played a large role in securing Afghanistan. He said further details on the future of the military coalition will be determined at a NATO conference in Chicago next May.

Obama addresses soldiers today at New York's Fort Drum, home to the Army's 10th Mountain Division.

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