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EDITORIAL: Scaling down our war in Iraq

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September 07, 2010 9:09 AM

With combat in Iraq formally ended, we hope the remaining U.S. troops there will be able to leave on time. And when they come home, they should be proud of their service. They're part of the finest fighting force in the world.

President Obama announced in a national address last Tuesday that America had "turned the page" on combat operations in the Iraq war. From a peak of 170,000 troops in October 2007, the level now has dropped to 49,700. Combat deaths also have fallen sharply, from more than 100 a month during early 2007 to a handful each month at present.

U.S. war deaths in Iraq stand at just over 4,400.

Have the fighting and the fatalities been worth it? Was the U.S. mission in Iraq accomplished? We asked Col. Sal Nodjomian, the new commander of Eglin Air Force Base's 96th Air Base Wing, when he visited the Daily News' editorial board last week.

Col. Nodjomian, who spent some time in Iraq, answered carefully. He said he knows U.S. troops did "a lot of great things" — such as opening schools and forming local partnerships — and "had a lot of successes that never made it to the media here." He said most Iraqis "really appreciated our presence there."

Indeed, a new poll shows that a majority of Americans believe Iraqis now are better off thanks to U.S. involvement.

Despite the official end of combat, the engagement is far from over, explained Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. U.S. troops will continue training Iraqi troops and preparing the country for self-government.

Mr. Preble said Americans should care about Iraqis "having control over their system of government" instead of devolving into some form of tyranny. "But there are limits," he said, "to what the U.S. government can do to make that happen."

"The war won't be won until all U.S. troops are home," Mr. Preble cautioned. "It's supposed to happen by the end of next year. I hope we stick to that plan."

We hope so, too.

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