

Unfinished business

From the Editors in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

President Obama did what Americans wanted him to do in his August 31 televised speech: turn the page on the war in Iraq and put that conflict behind the country. Or at least he attempted to do that. He put the best construction possible on the war, saying that the U.S. military had "put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people" and had given the country an opportunity "to embrace a new destiny." He acknowledged, however, that "violence will not end" with the removal of U.S. combat troops. "Extremists will continue to set off bombs, attack Iraqi civilians, and try to spark sectarian strife."

So was the war worth it? Sixty percent of Americans say no. The claims that originally bolstered the resort to war—that Saddam Hussein's regime threatened the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction and was aligned with al-Qaeda terrorists—were discredited early in the war. The wildly idealistic notion, treasured by the war's architects, that the removal of Hussein would transform Iraq into a beacon of stable democratic governance in the Middle East crumbled as Iraq plunged into sectarian violence. Obama's praise, appropriately, was for the bravery of the U.S. soldiers, not for the wisdom of U.S. leaders or the justice of the cause.

The result of the war remains unclear. "Wars are not won by just the fighting," said James Dubik, an army lieutenant general affiliated with the Institute for the Study of War. He went on to tell *USA Today* that it could well take 20 years of diplomatic and economic efforts before it is evident whether the Iraq war helped bring about a better peace than existed under Hussein or simply set the stage for another war.

Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright argue [in this issue](#) of the *Century* that the aftermath of a war needs as much moral reflection as do questions about when a war is legitimately launched and how it is legitimately conducted. A just postwar situation, they suggest, is one in which social stability is restored, wrongdoers are punished and enemies reconciled.

By those criteria, postwar Iraq is woefully unjust. Its political parties distrust each other so much that they have been unable to form a government six months after

elections. Its judicial system is rife with corruption and intimidation. Its security is precarious. Millions of people remain displaced. There's a good chance that the nation will collapse into sectarian and tribal violence, fueled by neighboring countries seeking their own strategic advantage.

Establishing a just peace is a moral claim on those who initiate war, Allman and Winright argue. If that is true, then the U.S. responsibility in Iraq is far from over.