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# Iraq War Anniversary Brings First Signs Of Conflict's End

## Six years after the invasion of Iraq, Barack Obama has promised that U.S. troops will leave by 2010.

By Gil Kaufman

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The combination of last year's historic presidential election and the equally unprecedented meltdown of the American economy has

forced another major story off the front pages and screens of many news outlets: the Iraq war.

On the sixth anniversary of the March 20, 2003, invasion of Iraq (March 19 in the United States), American troops continue to face sporadic, deadly battles with insurgent forces and suicide bombers every day. But for the first time since combat began under the previous administration, there is now an ending point on the horizon for the campaign that has lasted longer than World War II.

Six years after former President George W. Bush committed troops to what his administration promised would be a short, decisive battle, President Barack Obama has promised that U.S. combat troops will leave Iraq by August 2010 and that the U.S. will withdraw fully from the country by the end of 2011.

The main combat efforts have been over for several years as the mission has largely turned

into a reconstruction project amid a push to train Iraqi troops to protect their own country. And while levels of violence are way down, just last week suicide



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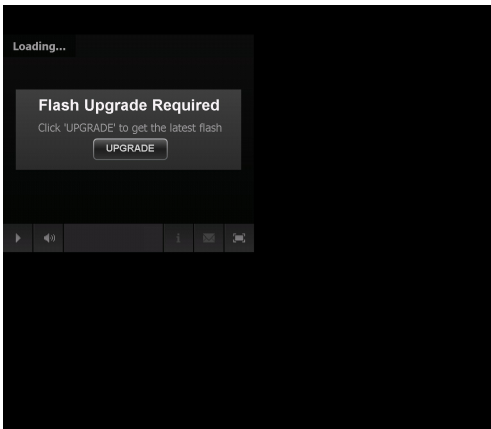
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bombers killed 60 people in two different attacks in Baghdad, proving that the country still has a long way to go despite the 90 percent decrease in violence since early 2007.

Casualties have also gone down considerably since Bush implemented an influx of troops in 2007 to combat insurgent forces, while the country's economy is improving and a fledgling, though still deeply divided, democracy is continuing to take shape.

Even as U.S. forces prepare to leave Iraq — where more than **4,200 U.S. troops** and, by some counts, nearly **100,000 Iraqi civilians** have been killed — President Obama has promised more vigorous efforts in a battle that has been going on even longer. The fight in Afghanistan (where no invading force has ever won a war) began in October of 2001 in response to the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and, according to most experts, has been undermanned since day one.

"[The troop reduction] is what most of the American people wanted," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the country's first and largest nonpartisan organization representing veterans of both wars. "The important thing is, from my standpoint, that it feels like we're finally at a point where, for the first time since 9/11, we're all sort of united again."

Though the troop surge in Iraq is long over and the news of 50,000 combat troops returning is welcome, Rieckhoff warned that we need to prepare for another surge, this one of returning veterans who will need support to get back on their feet.

While President Obama has pledged to end the war in Iraq, he has also committed to sending up to 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan in an attempt to finally crush al Qaeda forces in that country, and, if possible, capture elusive terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. The troop increase comes on the heels of Wednesday's news that by 2011 the Army plans to **phase out its controversial "stop-loss" practice**, which keeps soldiers on duty beyond their obligation and which has resulted in some troops doing multiple tours of duty.

The announcement, which included news that soldiers who continue to serve under the policy will be offered extra pay, was a victory celebrated by **MTV's Bill of Rights for American Veterans**, or BRAVE, which distributed a petition in October that urged the new president to raise awareness and support veterans' issues, including extra pay for troops that are stop-lossed.

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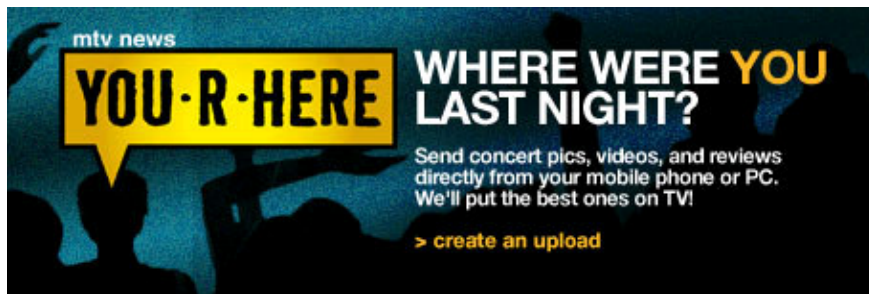
Rieckhoff celebrated the stop-loss victory, pointing to a touching moment on Wednesday night's "Real World," in which castmember Ryan was informed that he was being sent back to combat on the very same day that the news about the stop-loss cessation hit headlines.

"We need to think about guys like Ryan. What do we do to support them when they get home?" asked Rieckhoff, who noted that he'd gotten hundreds of calls about the episode. "There have been 1.8 million troops in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11, and their average age is 24 to 26, and they're going to face some big challenges, like health care, education and jobs," he said. "When they come home, they're facing the same issues the average American is, but it's even harder because veterans have a higher unemployment rate and a mortgage failure and foreclosure rate that's four times higher than average." (The IAVA and Ad Council recently [launched a campaign](#) to help veterans ease the transition back to civilian life.)

For Rieckhoff, the end of combat in Iraq and the ramping up in Afghanistan is a bittersweet moment, but he holds out hope that the missteps in Iraq will not be repeated.

"[President Obama] can learn from Bush's mistakes and prepare us and manage expectations for what's going to happen in Afghanistan," he said. "You can't just ram it down people's throats [again] and say, 'We're doubling down in Afghanistan.' It has to be a dialogue."

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