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Tonight's Speech From the Oval Office

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 31, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

President Obama will give his second address to the nation tonight from the Oval Office. He plans to discuss the end of combat operations by U.S. troops in Iraq and the on-going war effort in Afghanistan. Before the speech, the President will travel to Fort Bliss, Texas, to visit veterans of the war in Iraq.

The President needs to do four things in his speech tonight. First, and foremost, he must commend the 1.5 million troops who served in Iraq. They who bore the burden of the war should never have to bear the burden of the arguments about the war. They were sent to do an impossible task ? made more impossible because the tasks were so badly misunderstood by Rumsfeld et al. ? and they did it with all the devotion and dedication we have come to expect from the military.

Second, the President needs to acknowledge that he was wrong about the ?surge.? The fact that President Obama intends to call President George W. Bush before the speech may be an indication that he will do so. I hope so. For all the on-going problems in Iraq, especially the inability of the political leadership to form a new government, there is greater stability today than there was before the surge and there is a greater capacity on the part of the Iraqi military to deal with on-going instability. It costs Obama nothing to be gracious by admitting he was wrong.

Third, and related to the prior point, Obama needs to argue that the strategy that worked in Iraq is now at work in Afghanistan. The problems in Afghanistan are markedly different from those in Iraq, and the strategy is not identical, but counter-insurgency is the only available means of achieving sufficient security to permit us to depart. There are no guarantees in war, and the President should be clear about that, but the strategy being pursued in Afghanistan by General Petraeus is the best of a bad set of options, and the only option with even a glimmer of a chance at success.

Finally, the President must strike a different tone from the blustery rhetoric of his predecessor. His speech will not only be listened to here in America, but abroad, and our continued ability to generate international cooperation on a host of important issues will depend largely on the President?s ability to articulate a different stance towards the world. At a time when the ugly, anti-Muslim bigotry that has manifested itself in response to the planned mosque in lower Manhattan, and elsewhere, is poisoning America?s image abroad, it is vital that the President reiterate the fact that America is not at war with Islam. Already, Al-Qaeda is using the controversy surrounding the mosque as a recruiting tool: Nice job conservatives. Part of the President?s speech must be aimed at those millions of young Muslims who still would jump at the chance to come to America if they could. To borrow a phrase that was repeated many times at Saturday?s Glenn Beck rally, ?the land of the free? must include the freedom to worship, and not just for Christians.

Politically, it may be a mistake for the President to speak to the nation on this subject at this time. Americans are more concerned about unemployment than about Al-Qaeda. But, it is a president?s job to note and commend the effort, and the lives, that were sacrificed in Iraq. As we leave that war, our nation has no reason to hold its head high, but our soldiers and sailors do. The war in Iraq was a strategic blunder of the first order, but that milk was spilt by the time Obama arrived in the Oval Office. He has kept his promise to the American people to end our

combat role in that country. That is no small achievement.

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