

TROOPS: War has killed more than 2,230 Americans, cost more than \$1 trillion

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he was dropping plans to withdraw nearly all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of next year. Instead, he'll leave office with at least 5,500 on the ground to help protect gains made during 14 years of war.

As a result, the winner of the 2016 presidential election will become the third American commander in chief to oversee the Afghan war.

The president's goal of ending the wars he inherited had already been tarnished by the return of U.S. forces to Iraq last year, 2½ years after they left. The troops are there to help Iraq fight the Islamic State, a mission Obama has said will likely outlast his presidency.

Obama never mentioned Iraq Thursday, but the tenuous situation there has no doubt hung over his decision-making on Afghanistan. Obama's critics contend the decision to withdraw from Iraq created the vacuum that

allowed the Islamic State to thrive and warned leaving Afghanistan next year could have the same consequences.

Military commanders have argued for months that Afghans needed additional assistance and support from the U.S. to beat back a resurgent Taliban and keep the Islamic State from using the country as a haven.

The president had originally planned to withdraw all but a small embassy-based force from Afghanistan in late 2016, shortly before leaving office. Under the new \$15 billion-a-year plan, the U.S. will maintain its current force of 9,800 through most of 2016, then begin drawing down to 5,500 late in the year or in early 2017.

Obama's decision thrusts the war into the middle of a presidential campaign that so far has barely touched on Afghanistan. Candidates now will be pressed to say how they will try to do what Obama could not — end a conflict that has killed more

than 2,230 American service members and cost more than \$1 trillion.

On Thursday, leading Democratic candidates — including Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served as Obama's secretary of state — were silent about the president's decision. Last year, after Obama announced his original 2016 withdrawal timeline, Clinton said she would be open to extending the U.S. presence if Afghan leaders made that request.

The president's revamped plan was welcomed by several Republican presidential candidates, but some said 5,500 troops would not be enough.

"If he is truly committed to fighting terrorism and securing a stable Afghanistan, he shouldn't short-change what our military commanders have said they need to complete the mission," said Jeb Bush. The former Florida governor did

not say how many troops he thought would be sufficient.

According to a defense official, the president approved the highest number requested by commanders, with the greatest amount of flexibility.

Former technology executive Carly Fiorina called Obama's decision a "recognition of reality" in Afghanistan. And New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said the president was "waking up to the fact that disengaging America from the world and allowing there to be safe havens for terrorists is not the right way to protect American homeland security and national security."

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was an outlier among Republican candidates. He vowed to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan immediately if elected president.

U.S. officials say Afghan President Ashraf Ghani asked Obama to keep the troops in

his country when they met in Washington earlier this year. Obama sees Ghani as a more reliable partner than former President Hamid Karzai, a mercurial leader who deeply frustrated the White House.

Obama's meeting with Ghani set off a months-long re-evaluation of the U.S. role in Afghanistan.

The president's decision was reinforced when Taliban fighters took control of the key northern city of Kunduz late last month, leading to a protracted battle with Afghan forces supported by U.S. airstrikes. During the fighting, a U.S. air attack hit a hospital, killing 12 Doctors Without Borders staff and 10 patients.

The Associated Press reported Thursday that American special operations analysts were gathering intelligence on the hospital days before it was destroyed because they believed it was being used by a Pakistani

operative to coordinate Taliban activity.

The U.S. forces that Obama spoke of Thursday will continue with their current two-track mission: counterterrorism operations and training and assisting Afghan security forces. The troops will be based in Kabul and at Bagram Air Field, as well as bases in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

Ghani welcomed the decision, saying it sent a message to the Taliban and terrorist groups that their actions "will produce no result other than defeat."

Officials said the draw-down to 5,500 would begin late next year or in early 2017, with the pace determined by military commanders. They said NATO allies had expressed support for extending the troop presence in Afghanistan, but they did not outline any specific commitments from other nations.

DEPOT: Board voted to sign a letter to ask the Army for easement on the land

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and consensus-minded, but also that you need the land to be free, need it clean and need it with water," he said.

Smith said the Army had heard about the water funding package the state legislature passed to provide more water to the Umatilla Basin and assumed that some of that water could be used for the site. He said he explained that the water was already committed to much more attractive agricultural projects and wasn't available for the development authority's use.

During Thursday's meeting Smith also broached the question of applying an enterprise zone to at least portions of the depot site zoned for industrial use. Port of Morrow director Gary Neal said an enterprise zone — which gives developers a break on property taxes for the first few years of a project — was a must, considering any developer shopping for a site would be offered a tax break at other potential locations in the state.

as a state representative. When the federal Office of Economic Adjustment recently renewed the grant that funds the Columbia Development Authority, however, it said that Smith must be an employee and the money for benefits was a "use it or lose it" situation in which the board would no longer be able to offer benefits to potential future executive directors if it didn't start offering them to Smith.

The board voted to give Smith an unspecified amount of cash in lieu of benefits so that they would not lose the funding in case something happened to Smith and a new executive director was needed.

At the end of the meeting the board listened to a short presentation from Northwest Oregon Water Association director J.R. Cook. He noted that the association was now able to move "fairly fast" on its flagship water project after the Umatilla Basin funding package was approved by the legislature and needed a final design completed by February 2016.

"I think if you're not going to have one, you're not going to be in the game," he said.

The question that remained unanswered during the meeting was whether the Columbia Development Authority would apply to the state for an enterprise zone, keeping in mind that the authority was expected to last seven years after the land transfer, or if something should be cobbled together from Umatilla County, Morrow County and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation enterprise zones.

The meeting took place in the Stafford Hansell Government Building in Hermiston, signifying the change from administrative functions being housed by the Port of Morrow to being under the umbrella of Umatilla County. Smith said the change was suggested because up to 80 percent of the future economic development on the depot land is expected to take place on the Umatilla County side of the line.

When Smith was hired as executive director he opted to work as a contractor instead of an employee because he already had a benefits package from his other job

He said if the association was given permission to run a 42-inch pipeline inside the east fence at the depot it would be much easier than trying to get easements from nine different property owners on the other side of the fence.

"There will be a trench, we'll put the pipe in, put the sand back over it and in a year you won't even know it's there," Cook said.

Smith encouraged the board to sign a letter in support of asking the Army for the easement before the land is officially transferred over to the Columbia Development Authority.

"I think this is a great opportunity for us to help a partner," he said.

The board voted unanimously to sign the letter.

In other business the board also reviewed the completed survey by Ferguson Surveying and Engineering and discussed the process of updating the master lease with the Army that is allowing the authority to make some revenue by renting out the cement igloos on the site to the Walla Walla Foundry and other entities.

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