

Barack Obama and Afghanistan

More of the Same, Packaged as Change

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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When asked in Berlin by CNN's Candy Crowley whether he believed the United States needed to apologize for anything over the past 7 ½ years in terms of foreign policy, candidate Obama responded, "No, I don't believe in the U.S. apologizing. As I said I think the war in Iraq was a mistake..."

So what does our contemporary "charmer of change," Barack Obama, propose regarding Afghanistan?

In mid-December 2006, a charter member of the U.S. defense intellectual establishment and enthusiast of precision bombing, Anthony Cordesman, fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, advanced a set of proposals which would allegedly allow the U.S. to win the war in Afghanistan. The essence involves: far greater amounts of military and economic "aid"; the economic aid must be managed from the outside; the aid should focus upon projects like roads, water and to a lesser degree, schools and medical services; NATO allies especially slackers like France, Germany, Italy and Spain need to increase aid to Afghanistan; U.S. military forces are too small "to do the job" because of competing demands from Iraq and, hence, again those same NATO allies must provide larger, stronger and better-equipped forces to engage in combat (without political constraints); and as in Iraq, emphasis needs to be upon proper training of Afghan army and police forces. Cordesman wants the U.S. to furnish an additional \$5.9 billion during the current fiscal year. In effect, Cordesman proposes nothing which has not long ago been suggested (even back in the days of Vietnam where the official clamor was for more "aid" and Vietnamizing the fighting).

Candidate Obama appears to have adopted wholesale what Cordesman was proposing about two year ago with one qualification: Obama recognizes that the U.S.'s traditional European NATO allies will not provide large numbers of additional fighting forces, hence Obama proposes rotating three divisions or about 10,000 U.S. troops out of Iraq and into Afghanistan.

If we examine candidate Obama's most important prepared foreign policy speech to-date, that given on July 14, 2008, we find the elements of what as president he might do in Afghanistan. He forthrightly casts his interest in Afghanistan purely in terms of "making America safer":

I will focus this strategy on five goals essential to making America safer: ending the war in Iraq responsibly; finishing the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban; securing all nuclear weapons and materials from terrorists and rogue states; achieving true energy security; and rebuilding our alliances to meet the

challenges of the 21st century.

In other words, Obama is committed to “finishing the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban,” translated as the fight against “Muslim extremism.” Notwithstanding that this exemplifies a worst case example of fallacious sunk-cost reasoning, George W. Bush and candidate McCain would not disagree. He continues

Our troops and our NATO allies are performing heroically in Afghanistan, but I have argued for years that we lack the resources to finish the job because of our commitment to Iraq. That’s what the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said earlier this month. And that’s why, as President, I will make the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be. This is a war that we have to win.... We need more troops, more helicopters, more satellites, and more Predator drones in the Afghan border region. And we must make it clear that if Pakistan cannot or will not act, we will take out high-level terrorist targets like bin Laden if we have them in our sights. ...Make no mistake: we can’t succeed in Afghanistan or secure our homeland unless we change our Pakistan policy. We must expect more of the Pakistani government, but we must offer more than a blank check to a General who has lost the confidence of his people.

Resources need to be focused upon Afghanistan because it “is the war we have to win.” In July 2008, the *International Herald Tribune* called it “the war of necessity against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.” Why? Candidate Obama points to Taliban controlling parts of Afghanistan and Al Qaeda possessing an “expanding base in Pakistan.” These are alleged to be spawning grounds of “another attack on our homeland.” George W. Bush and candidate McCain would concur in being in error.

Very solid reasons now exist why Al Qaeda is not interested in mounting Palestinian-style attacks in America. Any attack would have to be bigger than 9/11. As the ever-prescient Mike Scheuer writes,

Al-Qaeda does not want to fight the United States for any longer than is needed to drive it as far as possible out of the Middle East, and its doctrine for so doing has, in Osama bin Laden’s formulation, three components: (a) bleed America to bankruptcy; (b) spread out U.S. forces to the greatest extent possible; and (c) promote Vietnam-era-like domestic disunity. Based on this doctrine, al-Qaeda leaders have decided that attacks in the United States are only worthwhile if they have maximum and simultaneous impact in three areas: high and enduring economic costs, severe casualties, and lasting negative psychological impact.

In fact, all three of bin Laden’s components have been realized – casualties, costs, and domestic disunity – all without a follow-up to the 9/11 attack.

And how will this victory over radical Islam be accomplished? Obama’s recipe for success involves:

- Sending 2-3 *combat* brigades (each of 3-5,000 troops) to Afghanistan;
- Pressure NATO allies to follow suit;
- More use of drones, aircraft, etc. ;
- Training Afghan “security” forces;

- Supporting an Afghan judiciary;
- Proposing an additional \$1 billion in non-military assistance each year with safeguards to see no corruption and resources flowing to areas other than Kabul;
- Invest in alternative livelihoods to poppies;
- Pressure Pakistan to carry the fight into its tribal areas and reward it for so doing with military and non-military aid;
- Should Pakistan fail to act in the tribal areas, the United States under Obama would act unilaterally;

New? Change? President George W. Bush and candidate McCain have long signed on to exactly these policies. Certainly both would also see Afghanistan primarily through the lens of “making America safer.” George Bush Sr. did just that during 1988-1990 when America was presumed safer once the Soviets were out of Afghanistan. Then, he cut and ran.

Candidate Obama adopts the Pentagon’s military solution - defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban - without paying much attention to either what gave rise to these groups_or to the complexity of tribal society on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Even more importantly, he fails to acknowledge that the current bombing, night-time assaults upon villages, hooding and abducting suspects, kicking down doors and entering women’s quarters, etc. is forging an unlimited supply of recruits to the resistance. No, all we hear is “Our troops and our NATO allies are performing heroically in Afghanistan...” The complete failure to improve life for those living in rural southern, eastern and northeastern Afghanistan alongside unbridled corruption, profligate wealth and Afghanistan’s current culture of official impunity further stokes the resistance. All we hear is a vague promise of \$1 billion more aid per year.

As Patrick Buchanan points out candidate Obama has absolutely no exit strategy from Afghanistan, other than a presumed military victory. He utterly fails to understand the axiom of the guerrilla strategy: *the guerrilla wins if he fails to lose*. For the guerrilla it’s not about winning pitched battles, it’s about continuing the fight. The Taliban and associates have no difficulty with that: fighters from the Pashtun borderlands and monies from the Gulf States (and elsewhere).

Moreover, Buchanan continues

And, using the old 10-to-one ratio of regular troops needed to defeat guerrillas, if the Taliban can recruit 1,000 new fighters, they can see Obama’s two-brigade bet, and raise him. Just as Uncle Ho raised LBJ again and again. What does President Obama do then? Send in 10,000 more?*

The aim of shifting 2-3 U.S. combat brigades to Afghanistan, greatly increasing the use of drones in order to unleash the fire power of Hellfire missiles or the “guided” bombs of B1-B’s, letting U.S. Special Forces and Navy Seals Teams loose to sow mayhem in the border regions on both sides of the Durand Line merely serves to continue the status-quo of death and destruction. Yet there are those like Ann Marlowe in the *Wall Street Journal* who believe that the military solution in Afghanistan is to employ special forces to deal with the “bad guys” infiltrating from Pakistan. For her, “defeating the enemy is best accomplished by highly trained fighters who travel light.” Does Ms. Marlowe who was thrice embedded with U.S. occupation forces in Afghanistan recall the Green Berets in Vietnam or the Soviet Spetsnaz in Afghanistan?

For some four years, U.S. Special Forces had free reign in the Afghan province of Kunar. With what effect? Kunar today is one of Afghanistan's most volatile provinces just as it was when the Soviets unleashed their elite Spetsnaz units there. Britain could not seal the border between the Irelands with 40,000 soldiers. The Soviets with 120,000 troops under a unified command structure and three times as many Afghan satrap soldiers could not quell the mujahideen resistance. Candidate Obama advocates a policy of escalation simply in order not to lose. In doing such, he follows in the footsteps of Gordon Brown's ambassador in Kabul who threatens "to stay for 30 years" in an endless campaign of despair from which withdrawal is perceived as politically impossible. Thirty years for what? A campaign to prop up an embattled, corrupt, unpopular puppet regime in Kabul, a task for which Britain and its NATO allies are terribly undermanned? No, but rather as Jenkins points out to keep NATO alive in Europe. NATO's agitated chief, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, certainly appears as a man fighting for his job. He should be as most Europeans see the Afghan conflict as wrong, immoral, America's war, all about oil, and probably lost. For them NATO was created to deter the Soviet Union, not to supply foot soldiers to America's wars in the Muslim world.

Most alarmingly, candidate Obama and others before him (including George W. Bush) crudely conflate the Taliban with Al Qaeda when in fact, the two groups share very little and do not regard each other with high esteem. The Taliban and Al Qaeda represent two very different entities. The former comprise an ethno-national phenomenon rooted in space, appealing then and now to a loosely aligned movement, largely of Pashtun Afghans. The Taliban have profound roots in parts of Afghanistan. They form only part of the disparate resistance to the U.S./NATO occupation (other parts being nationalists, those seeking revenge for injury to family, those involved in poppy cultivation who perceive the West as threatening their livelihoods, those frustrated with Karzai's and the West's failed promises, unemployed men, etc.). Al Qaeda, on the other hand, is a de-territorialized, stateless organization formed to wage violent jihad anywhere in the world against those deemed to be Islam's enemies. From a group spatially located in Afghanistan during the Taliban era, Al Qaeda has transformed itself into a decentralized, floating coalition of militant groups united in jihad. But for candidate Obama a simple undefined enemy exists: a unified Al Qaeda and Taliban who will be crushed by a few more brigades of occupation soldiers, Global Hawks in the skies and a billion dollars annually. Obama's informal adviser, Afghan scholar Barnett Rubin, has long been arguing that "the problem really is in neighboring Pakistan, where Taliban and Al Qaeda commanders lurk."

Encouraging cross border air and ground attacks raises the ire of the fiercely independent Pashtun tribals in the borderlands and further isolates a weak, post-Musharef regime in Islamabad bent on its own independent course of action. Moreover, Pakistan has lost thousands of its troops in fighting in the tribal lands under Musharef. The recent killing of 11 Pakistani frontier soldiers by U.S. Hellfire missiles promises to be a harbinger of the future. The elected political leaders of Pakistan's borderlands virulently oppose Obama's unilateralism, e.g., the wily governor of the North-West Province, Owais Ghani, spoke out forcefully against Obama's hinting at U.S. incursions.

Pashtun nationalism is far cry from Al Qaeda's world *jihad*. Indeed, a quite convincing case can be made that the best antidote to a resurgent Al Qaeda would be support for the Taliban. But such fine-tuning escapes candidate Obama and his entourage of former Clinton foreign policy advisers (e.g., Susan Rice, Anthony Lake, etc.) and of others advocating "nation-building." Change? George W. Bush, John McCain and Barack Obama are united in advocating policies which cement an alliance between Al Qaeda and the Taliban. They all

privilege a military approach over a civilian one of negotiating.

On the “winnig hearts and minds” dimension, candiate Obama promises an extra \$ 1 billion annually to be spent mostly outside Kabul. The record of U.S. monies budgeted for Afghanistan is clear:

Table. United States’ Budgeted Outlays for “Operation Enduring Freedom” by Fiscal Year (in \$ billions)

Total

DOD & VA Medical

Foreign aid

Aid/Total

FY 2001-2

\$ 20.8

20.0

0.8

3.8%

FY 2003

14.7

14.0

0.7

4.8%

FY 2004

14.5

12.4

2.2

15.1%

FY 2005

20.8

18.0

2.8

13.5%

FY 2006

19.0

17.9

1.1

5.8%

FY 2007

36.9

35.0

1.9

5.1%

FY 2008

36.5

34.5

2.0

5.5%

Sources: Wheeler (2007), op. cit. and Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, updated June 23, 2008): 18-19

But how will such U.S funds be brought to a countryside largely controlled by a hostile resistance? Many parts of Afghanistan most desirous of improving everyday living are simply off-limits to non-governmental organizations, let alone the U.S. Government. The US/NATO strategy of relying upon an ink blot of “aid” radiating out from 2-3 dozen heavily fortified PRT bases and scores of U.S. forward operating bases is at best very limited. So in order to “secure” the countryside which will then be lavished with candidate Obama’s annual largesse of an extra billion dollars, the US/NATO needs to either bomb or take ground casualties, expel the resistance, and especially hold territory. Building another well or a school has little meaning in the Pashtun code of honor (Pashtunwali), but the killing of a family member demands revenge be taken against the perpetrator. Simon Jenkins has stressed that American, Canadian, British, Dutch and even Estonian troops (those brave “new Europeans” forming part of the “coalition” of the bribed) simply snatch and hold towns for a while but are unable to command local loyalty. “They cannot hope to garrison every settlement.” Musa Qala retaken by the British with much fanfare is a typical case, a success which is a failure.

In other words, candidate Obama promises nothing other than what already is: more prolonged low-intensity conflict with endless death and destruction. If the U.S. military escalation of the past two years is any indication, a further escalation as he proposes will simply lead to more dead Afghan civilians, a countryside and towns racked with the deadly explosions of IED's and suicide bombers followed by the destruction unleashed by equally deadly close air support (CAS) strikes. A strong correlation exists during 2004-2007 between levels of U.S. occupation soldiers in Afghanistan, tonnage of bombs dropped and numbers of dead and injured Afghans. Will the monetary value of dead Afghan remain about one-tenth that of an Alaskan sea otter? Will yet more CAS air strikes continue killing ten times more Afghan civilians per ton dropped than the numbers killed in Serbia in 1999? Why should an Obama future be different?

The candidate of change in Afghanistan? History has clearly shown it's easy to invade and conquer Afghanistan but it's terribly difficult to govern and exit honorably. Obama is no Mikhail Gorbachev who took Russia out of the Afghan fiasco when he realized what many Russian leaders had been too scared to admit in public - that Russia could not win the war and the cost of maintaining such a vast force in Afghanistan was crippling Russia's already weak economy. The cost of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was \$171 billion in FY2007 and an estimated \$195 billion in FY2008.

Candidate Obama, his Clinton era advisers, and sadly all too many others fail to recognize a web of inter-connected, persistent constraints, or of given realities. One might label them as the "five cannots": US/NATO cannot send 400,000 combat troops to garrison Afghanistan's towns, hamlets and countryside_(which is a pre-condition for reconstruction to win hearts and minds_); the US/NATO cannot impose a powerful central government upon Afghanistan_; the US/NATO cannot neutralize the very effective least-cost weapons of choice of the Afghan resistance (IED's and suicide bombers); the US/NATO cannot seal the Afghan-Pakistan border and hence will not eliminate the vital sanctuary so necessary to a guerrilla movement); and lastly, the Pakistan government has never been able to dominate its vast tribal borderlands and there is no reason to believe such will change. Those who choose not to understand these "five cannots" advocate change in a vacuum. A military impasse begets a political solution.

The perceived poison of a foreign occupation, the rampant corruption, the all-too-frequent desecration of Islam by the occupiers, the sheer folly of the US/NATO seeking to extend the writ of a central government to the Pashtun tribal regions_, the spiraling count of civilian deaths has shifted the Afghan struggle towards a war of national liberation. Anatol Lieven of King's College (London) puts it aptly. Afghanistan is

Becoming a sort of surreal hunting estate, in which the U.S. and NATO breed the very terrorists they then track down.

Candidates Obama and McCain promise more of the same carnage *packaged as change*.

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Occupation forces Commander McNeill has said himself that according to the current counterterrorism doctrine, it would take 400,000 troops to pacify Afghanistan in the long term (from Ulrich Fichtner, "Why NATO Troops Can't Deliver Peace in Afghanistan," *Der Spiegel* (May 29, 2008) at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-556304,00.html>

The umbrella organization ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief) reported 463 insurgent attacks during May and 569 in June 2008. Nineteen aid workers have been killed this year. The result has been greatly scaled back aid and relief efforts ("Record Afghan Unrest Hampering Aid NGOs," *Agence France Presse* (August 1, 2008) at <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5h9LKPSwMVEzC25r7wQ4-XuOkz4sw>).

see Johnson and Mason (2008), op. cit

As Gerard Chaliand, veteran geo-strategist of so-called asymmetrical wars, put it recently, "victory is impossible in Afghanistan...Today one must try to negotiate," because the Taliban control much of the local power in the south and east of the country (Immanuel Wallerstein, "Afghanistan: Shoals Ahead for President Obama," *Middle East Online* (August 1, 2008)).

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