

go out and solve problems either at home or abroad; you might say that I'm now in the business of training international activists. And if you want a career in the foreign policy establishment, you don't want the United States doing less because that would mean fewer jobs out there.

And finally, I think the professional incentives in the foreign policy establishment increasingly incline its members to favor the use of force. Consider what the former president of the Council of Foreign Relations, Leslie Gelb, recently admitted in an article. He wrote that his own support for the Iraq War—and he did endorse the decision to invade—reflected what he called “an unfortunate tendency within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.” Gelb is saying that to be taken seriously in Washington, you have to show that you are tough and that you are in favor of a hawkish approach to things.

So even if Barack Obama understood that the United States needed a more restrained foreign policy, one that avoided international quagmires, relied more on regional allies, recognized that we are not very good at social engineering on a global scale, he would be hard pressed to find very many people in the foreign policy establishment to support him. It would be darn difficult to staff that particular administration. And that is of course why you are seeing the usual people in the usual jobs pursuing the usual policies we've tried in the past and achieving essentially the same results.

So if I were part of Obama's team—and you might have guessed I'm not likely to be—I'd be worried. He's heading into the second half of his first term with a sluggish economy. There's lots of good social science evidence that tells us the state of the economy will play a big role in the next round of elections, both

the midterms in 2010 and but also the general election in 2012. There are not a lot of big foreign policy accomplishments for Obama to point to, and there are no easy problems he can capitalize on and claim credit for in the near term. So if I were a Republican Party leader, I'd be feeling kind of smug right now.

But no matter which party you belong to or favor this situation ought to worry you. It's not good when global problems fester, it's not good when the United States engages on issues and fails to make any progress, it's not good when we claim we're going to do something and then we visibly fail, because that undermines the sense that we know how to actually achieve things. It makes other countries even less inclined to listen to us in the future.

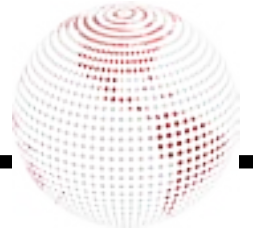
I take no pleasure in offering such a grim forecast. My wife and I put as much money as the law allowed into Obama's campaign; I voted for him with enthusiasm; and I was thrilled as my children and I sat watching his inauguration. My one consolation, and it may console some of you as well, is that it would have been even worse if the 2008 results had been different.

Which brings me to my very last point. Some of you may remember that President Obama quoted the Koran, the Torah and the Bible in his Cairo speech. Given his fondness for religious texts, I think it is appropriate for me to end with a biblical quotation too, and it sums up the task he now faces. This passage is from the Book of James chapter 2, verse 22: “A man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” Ultimately we are going to judge his foreign policy by what he *achieves*—by whether he ever earns that Nobel Peace Prize—and not just by his good intentions. As is probably clear, I am not particularly optimistic about his chances, but I would be delighted to be proven wrong.

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“Obama in Egypt.” [wikimedia commons. 8 Nov 2010. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obama_in_Egypt,_P060409PS-0223.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obama_in_Egypt,_P060409PS-0223.jpg)
“Barack Obama and Hu Jintao participate in an official arrival ceremony the Great Hall of the People.” [wikimedia commons. 8 Nov 2010. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barack_Obama_and_Hu_Jintao_participate_in_an_official_arrival_ceremony_the_Great_Hall_of_the_People.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barack_Obama_and_Hu_Jintao_participate_in_an_official_arrival_ceremony_the_Great_Hall_of_the_People.jpg)

Obama and Afghanistan



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In his campaign for the American presidency, Barack Obama emphasized the “right war” in Afghanistan in order both to highlight the folly of the “wrong war” in Iraq and to establish that he was not against all wars – just “dumb” ones.¹ Al Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001 produced the plans and personnel that led to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, argued Obama, the George W. Bush administration distracted itself from the job of eliminating al Qaeda by bungling its way into Iraq. Emboldened, the Taliban began to undermine the U.S.-backed Afghan government and sought to return to power, raising the specter of a renewed training ground for Islamic extremists. As president, Obama promised the American voters, he would devote the resources necessary to successfully prosecute the counterinsurgency campaign.

In his first months in office, Obama moved swiftly to fulfill his campaign pledges. He appointed the Democratic Party's star troubleshooter, Richard Holbrooke, as his special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He ordered a strategy review to be completed in his first months in office. Even before the review was finished, Obama had announced a substantial increase in American troops for the conflict, amidst reports that the number would grow even further as the year wore on. And in the summer he inserted as commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan

General Stanley McChrystal, whose Special Forces background would ensure a keen understanding of what was required to wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign.

Obama's determination to prosecute the war, however, ran into two serious problems during the summer of 2009. One was the failure of Afghan President Hamid Karzai to inspire confidence in the legitimacy of his government; the August elections involved massive voter fraud, making it more difficult to gain public support, either in Afghanistan or the United States, for the American military effort. The other was the skittishness of the Democratic Party; with an economy continuing to sour, leading members of Congress, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), made clear their desire to draw down the military effort, particularly as the number of American battle deaths continued to rise.

With the announcement that 30,000 additional American troops would head to Afghanistan in 2010 to reverse the momentum of the Taliban balanced against the declaration that those troops would begin coming home the following year, Obama's December 2009 West Point speech highlighted that the president had no good options in Afghanistan. He does not know whether American and allied forces can train Afghans in sufficient quality and quantity to take over responsibility for protecting the government, but he does not want an indefinite American presence.

While Obama's early rhetoric about the stakes involved in the conflict suggested that the United States needed to make an all-out effort, the December 2009 speech highlighted that the president was eager to emphasize that he could find a way out. The news at West Point was the exit date. The White House had leaked for weeks that the president was likely to order 30,000 more troops into battle. By beginning to talk about when he would start getting out, the president reflected the larger mood of the country. At the end of eight years and in the face of continued high unemployment, Americans were tired of hearing that they needed to be at war. At West Point, Obama began to change to narrative from his earlier commitment to a "war of necessity" to a story that would make clear that his election in 2008 meant that America would not be at war indefinitely. By reminding voters that all combat troops would leave Iraq by the end of 2011 and telling them that troops would begin to leave Afghanistan, Obama signaled that his reelection campaign in 2012 would trumpet his efforts to end America's wars, not intensify them.

A War of Necessity?

The distinctions Obama drew between Iraq and Afghanistan during the campaign in 2008 were vital to his candidacy, but they also contributed to the growing sense in 2009 that the Afghanistan war had now become "Obama's war." In the campaign, he scored points with the Democratic Party base by emphasizing his opposition to the Iraq war from the start (in contrast to his chief opponent for the nomination, New York Senator Hillary Clinton); he built his credentials with independents by arguing the need to transfer troops, resources, and attention away from Iraq to the war in Afghanistan. "Iraq is not the central front in the war on terrorism, and it never has been," wrote candidate Obama in a New York Times op-ed in July 2008. "As president, I would pursue a new strategy, and begin by providing at least two additional combat brigades to support

our effort in Afghanistan. We need more troops, more helicopters, better intelligence-gathering and more nonmilitary assistance to accomplish the mission there."²

A week after the president took office, administration officials sent signals that the president sought to focus more American attention on the war, leaving development work to be done by European allies, and they made clear to Afghan President Hamid Karzai that they had no intention of tolerating his corruption. Narrowing the American emphasis, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared, "If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose." Therefore, he added, "My own personal view is that our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorists and extremists to attack the United States and our allies."³

Two months later, the administration released its strategy review for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the president made clear that he was focused on one major objective. "I want the American people to understand," said Obama, "that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent



President Obama addresses the outlook for American involvement in Afghanistan during his December 2009 speech at West Point.

their return to either country in the future." Following his campaign rhetoric about the central front in the war on terror, the president declared, "Al Qaeda and its allies – the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks – are in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Multiple intelligence estimates have warned that Al

Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan." Combating the threat, Obama said, was not simply a matter of finding Al Qaeda members and eliminating them. It also meant going after the Taliban, a task for which he had ordered 17,000 additional American combat troops: "[I]f the Afghan government falls to the Taliban – or allows Al Qaeda to go unchallenged – that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can."⁴

The strategy paper recognized, however, that the counterinsurgency campaign would not be successful without focusing some attention on government capacity, economic development and indigenous security capabilities in both Pakistan and Afghanistan – i.e., nation building. In his March address, the president announced his support for a bill in Congress that would provide \$1.5 billion yearly in assistance to go directly to the Pakistani people for 5 years. A further goal was to train Afghan army and police forces to create by the end of 2011 a 134,000 strong Afghan army and an 82,000 member police force (a number that many, including Holbrooke and McChrystal, deemed inadequate).

One major innovation of the new administration's approach was linking the fate of the two nations, thereby giving rise to the term "AfPak." As the White Paper put it, "The ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven, while insurgency in Afghanistan feeds instability in Pakistan." It also laid out what it called "realistic and achievable objectives." These included, however, "promoting a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan," and "assisting efforts to enhance civilian control and stable constitutional government in Pakistan and a vibrant economy that provides opportunity for the people of Pakistan." The White Paper itself noted, "These are daunting tasks."⁵

A second new strategy element would

be the effort to distinguish between those Taliban deemed "irreconcilable" and those viewed as willing to end their insurgency. The paper explicitly sought to get "non-ideologically committed insurgents to lay down their arms, reject Al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan Constitution." This element of the strategy reflected the perceived success in Iraq resulting from turning former insurgents into responsible participants of the developing new order.

At the end of the summer, Obama reiterated his thinking on the war in an address before the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Phoenix: "[M]ilitary power alone will not win this war ... [W]e also need diplomacy and development and good governance. And our new strategy has a clear mission and defined goals: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its extremist allies." He added, "This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity."⁶ Having said it was not a choice, he suggested that he was prepared to see it through to the end.

Ironically, the person chiefly responsible for bringing the terms "wars of choice" and "wars of necessity" into the American debate, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and author of a book comparing the two Iraq wars, suggested the president had it wrong. Surely, said Haass, the United States had to go after the Taliban initially to get at the source of the 9/11 attacks. But a war of necessity involved both "vital national interests" and a "lack of viable alternatives to the use of military force to protect those interests." Under those criteria, Afghanistan didn't count. If it were a war of necessity, Haass wrote, "it would justify any level of effort. It is not and does not."⁷

By laying down such a clear marker on the necessity of fighting the war, the president made it extremely difficult to do anything other than ramp up the American commitment. But the administration sent mixed signals as 2009 wore on. Obama did announce a troop increase after coming into office before his strategy

review was even complete. But his National Security Adviser James Jones caused a stir that summer when on a visit to Afghanistan, he made clear that asking for more troops so soon after Obama had ordered 21,000 troops to deploy (17,000 in a combat role, 4,000 to train Afghan forces) would cause the president to have a “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot” (What the f---?) moment.⁸ According to sources close to the team advising McChrystal, as the new

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commander was preparing his policy review for the president, Secretary Gates also made clear that asking for more troops was unwise.⁹

As summer gave way to fall in Obama's first year, the president was putting himself in an unenviable position, having declared that the war was one the United States had to win but not wanting to escalate the number of American troops any further. He had promised that Bush's “underresourced war” would now finally get the attention it deserved. But would it?

A New Commander and a New Strategy

As the Obama team prepared to assess its policy for the second time that year, General McChrystal's review of the situation and his recommendations going forward to fulfill the president's goals became the central focus of both supporters and critics of the war.

McChrystal had established two new objectives for a more successful counterinsurgency strategy after replacing Gen. David McKiernan as theater commander. One was to protect the population of Afghanistan; the new commander was concerned that ISAF spent too much time on troop protection and not enough on providing security for the population. The second was to reduce civilian casualties, whose rise had turned the Afghan population against the Western military effort (as well

as cost support for the mission in Europe). McChrystal declared, “The point of security is to enable governance.... My metric is not the enemy killed, not ground taken: it's how much governance we've got.”¹⁰

A list of the metrics that would be used to gauge success appeared online in mid-September.¹¹ It reiterated the basic goal laid out by the president in March: “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” But the document demonstrated the difficulty of merely disrupting terrorist networks rather than more ambitious governance goals. There were metrics clearly focused on measuring the strength of the insurgency – e.g., how much territory the insurgents held vs. that secured by American, coalition and Afghan government forces. But a number of the



American soldiers on patrol near the village of Kowtay, Khowst Province Afghanistan

metrics had to do with the effectiveness and popularity of the government in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whereas goals such as increasing Pakistani counterinsurgency capabilities or strengthening Afghan national security forces are within reason, however, laying out metrics that include Pakistani public opinion of government performance and progress in that judicial system becoming free of military involvement would simply set the Obama administration up for never-ending nation building.¹²

McChrystal's initial assessment of the situation in Afghanistan was delivered to Washington on August 30, leaked to Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* and published on September 21, creating a firestorm in the nation's capital. McChrystal suggested in his report that readers not focus on force or resource requirements; “The key takeaway from this assessment,” he wrote, “is the urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way that we think and operate.” He reiterated that the mission had to shift its emphasis from “seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces” and focus on the Afghan population (a strategy that had led to increasing numbers of American casualties). He argued that the next year was critical for laying the ground for success; failure to gain the initiative would risk “an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible.” Building up indigenous capabilities was essential, and McChrystal called for increasing the size of the Afghan army to 134,000 not by December 2011 as originally called for but by October 2010, with an eye toward then going up to 240,000.¹³

The leaking of the assessment highlighted differences within the administration and on Capitol Hill. Vice President Biden, who opposed the troop increases announced at the onset of the administration, was once again arguing against more troops and reconfiguring the strategy to focus on knocking out individual Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders from afar. Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, who supported the troop increase in the spring, continued to do so in the fall as did Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who supported his military commanders. While Obama's Democratic base made clear its opposition to more troops, Republicans such as John McCain urged Obama to stand tough.

The White House made clear, however, that it was rethinking a strategy that Obama had outlined in March and reiterated in August. Although it is hard to imagine anyone was surprised that President Hamid Karzai

engaged in massive electoral fraud to stay in office, some in the administration were calling his growing illegitimacy a “game-changer.” Combined with Congressional Democratic opposition, an increase in American casualties, and eroding public support, that election led officials in Washington to begin to redefine their strategy.¹⁴

The Obama Dilemma

As Obama's first year in office drew to a close, Afghanistan was fast becoming his most intractable and significant challenge as president. Politically, he was increasingly at odds with his Democratic Party base. If he hadn't agreed to military requests for more troops, he would have risked a tremendous civilian-military rift; since he did agree, he risked being compared to Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam.

In his campaign, Obama said he would end the “bad war” in Iraq and resource the “good war” in Afghanistan. He promised early in his presidency to focus not on unrealistic objectives but rather on eliminating the threat posed by Al Qaeda. Recognizing that Pakistan was as big a problem as Afghanistan (since Al Qaeda has largely left its camps there to take up residence across the border), he developed a strategy for thinking about these two countries in tandem. And he told the American public that the war was one of “necessity.”

But by fall, he realized that he was being asked to send more troops to a conflict whose objectives had once again grown. To eliminate Al Qaeda and prevent the Taliban's return was not just about eliminating bad guys and retaking territory; it was, as it was in the Bush years, about winning hearts and minds. McChrystal argued that the United States had to show the population why it should support the American-led effort. That meant protecting Afghans, and helping Afghanistan create an effective government. It meant shoring up the government of Pakistan and rooting out corruption there or risk facing a

backlash from the population. But it doesn't take a realist to recognize how high a bar that is. Even if one isn't trying to build Switzerland in the heart of Central Asia, the prospects of a stable, effective central government emerging in the poorest country on earth even with significantly more numbers of American



General Stanley McChrystal, former Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, in a strategy meeting with American Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and President Obama in December of 2009.

troops are slim at best.

In the midst of these dilemmas, Obama went to West Point on December 1, 2009 to lay out his strategy before the country, the allies, the Afghan people, and the world.¹⁵ The speech was the culmination of a review process that had involved national security deliberations at the highest level over several months, leading to charges by former Vice President Dick Cheney and others that the president was "dithering." Obama insisted that in-depth discussion was necessary to come up with the right answers, and that seat-of-the-pants decision-making in the previous administration had generated many of the problems he inherited.

The president began his speech with his usual remarks: the war was legitimate, the Bush administration never provided sufficient resources, and the problem was growing worse. And then he delivered the results of his review: "As Commander-in-Chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops

will begin to come home." It was a surge, but one that came with a time limit. The Afghan government would know that America was going to do more to reverse the momentum the Taliban had built in recent months, but there would be no "blank checks" or open-ended commitments. President Karzai was on notice that he had a limited amount of time to shore up the capabilities of his government to take responsibility for security.

The president's announcement helped him with different constituencies. By providing General McChrystal with most of the troops he wanted, Obama avoided a rift with his military leaders. By announcing a time frame for beginning to bring troops home, he signaled to his Democratic Party base that he understood the country could not afford to let the war drag on indefinitely.

But the obvious contradictions in those core two sentences of the speech left him open to criticism from the left and right. For those in the Democratic Party who see the costs of the war as weighing down the American economy, the addition of 30,000

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troops was unwelcome news. Meanwhile, many on the right believe that announcing a withdrawal date merely gives comfort to the Taliban that they can simply wait out the American presence.

The problem is not just political. The argument that the United States has a vital national interest requiring it to send more troops but that it can begin to bring some troops home in July 2011 is contradictory.

"I make this decision," said the president, "because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan." If American security was at stake in December 2009, it will still be at stake in July 2011. The Karzai government is unlikely to be ready to begin standing on its own. The

Taliban will continue its insurgency. If the war is still one of necessity, in which core interests are threatened, then the United States has to remain for as long as it takes. If America's vital interests are not sufficient to require an indefinite commitment, and if there are fewer than 100 Al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan, why does the United States need 100,000 troops there?

It's clear from what is known about the 2009 deliberations that the president was looking for ways not to accede to the military's push for escalation and skeptical that counterinsurgency could succeed. Obama made clear to his advisers that he did not want an open-ended commitment and was trying to find an exit strategy.¹⁶

And while at the end of the 2009 review process, Obama spelled out his Afghanistan strategy in a six-page memo to his civilian and military advisers, he told them that they would meet in December 2010 to assess the results and decide on the nature of the withdrawal timetable. Those like Clinton and Gates who supported more troops have emphasized that the July 2011 date was going to be conditions-based and that nothing hasty would occur. Meanwhile, Vice President Biden made clear on several occasions that he believed troops would be leaving as quickly as they had gone in. Thus the same debate that occurred before

the December 2009 speech was inevitably going to occur before the December 2010 decision. Obama felt boxed in by the military in 2009, and he will undoubtedly feel the same way at the end of 2010. After all, his new commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus (who replaced McChrystal after the latter was fired over remarks he and his staff made in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine), pushed hard to get the troop increase in 2009 and will continue to oppose a precipitous withdrawal.

But Obama clearly wants to be seen as the president who ended the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan so that America can focus on its domestic problems. During his time in office, he has articulated the view that America's power is limited and its financial resources constrained. He will combat threats, not because he believes he can eliminate them but to make problems manageable. And he will do so by working closely with other nations and international institutions in order both to make America a more responsible power but also a less burdened one. He may have talked about a war of necessity in 2009, but he has signaled that what he truly believes is necessary is the withdrawal. The question is whether politically he can find a way to get out of the country he said was a necessity to be in.

Endnotes

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