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Gene Healy: So much for the peace presidency

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This Thursday, Barack Obama will swing by Oslo to pick up the Nobel Peace Prize -- just over a week after he announced that he'd escalate the war in Afghanistan. Awkward.

When Obama won the prize in October, you had to wonder whether the self-esteem movement, where every kid gets a trophy, had made its way from little league to the Nobel Committee. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. -- and a guy running two wars, who'd been president for two weeks when nominations closed?

Despite the committee chairman's defensive insistence that Obama "got the prize for what he has done," clearly it was awarded for what the committee hoped he might do (which is rather like giving a physics Nobel to a guy who hopes he'll invent cold fusion).

Well, if the committee hoped a pre-emptive prize would influence Obama's behavior, they must feel pretty silly right now. On Dec. 1, the former surge critic spoke at West Point, defending his decision to throw 30,000 more troops into an unpopular, unwinnable, and unnecessary war.

Sure, the president packaged the decision as part of a plan to "begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011." But that's not the beginning of a genuine withdrawal. It's, er, an "inflection point," according to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, at which, maybe, "some handful, or some small number" will be able to come home.

If we're lucky, maybe as many troops as the president just surged, but "it's hard to envision that conditions [will allow] a further withdrawal beyond that," says another senior adviser. "We're going to be in the region for a long time," says National Security Adviser Gen. James L. Jones.

That's not a popular policy. Nearly 70 percent of Americans in a new CBS News poll think the war is going badly, and the latest numbers from Pew show the largest share of respondents favoring a drawdown.

Nor is it a wise policy. The president's speech emphasized "the fundamental connection between our war effort in Afghanistan and the extremist safe havens in Pakistan."

Well, yes. But it's not at all clear we've helped stabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan by driving hordes of militants across the border.

Meanwhile, per Gen. Jones, the "maximum estimate" of al Qaeda operatives remaining in Afghanistan is "less than 100." Yet when the Afghan surge comes on line, we'll have more than 100,000 troops in theater, risking their lives for the quixotic task of bringing functional governance to a land that seems dead set against it.

As recently as the Clinton administration, Republicans were nation-building skeptics, with John McCain leading the fight for withdrawal from Somalia, and, irony of ironies, in 1999, then-candidate George W. Bush criticized our lack of an "exit strategy" in Kosovo.

Republican support for slogging on in Afghanistan remains strong right now, but there are stirrings of dissent. Several GOP congressmen, including Dana Rohrabacher, of California, Ed Whitfield, of Kentucky, Roscoe Bartlett, of Maryland, and, of course, Ron Paul, of Texas, have announced their opposition to the surge.

Freshman Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah recently said, "I can take pot shots at ACORN all day long," but now it's more important to "stand up and support the notion that it is time to bring our soldiers home." Writing in the Daily Beast, Reihan Salam predicts that "over the next year, Republicans will begin to abandon the president en masse over Afghanistan."

That remains to be seen. But this much is clear: Despite Obama's on-again, off-again insistence that Afghanistan is a "war of necessity," it's become a war of choice. And no true peace president spills blood in wars of choice.

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