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## WORLD AFFAIRS

### War fatigue

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**Despite more than half the population opposing a war escalation in Afghanistan, Obama skilfully meanders to a compromise plan.**

JIM YOUNG /REUTERS



**President Barack Obama speaks on his Afghanistan policy at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point on December 1.**

ON December 1, United States President Barack Obama walked against the current of his own party. Polls released on the threshold of his speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point showed that 61 per cent of registered Democrats opposed an escalation in Afghanistan. In addition, 52 per cent of the total population believed that the war itself was not worth fighting.

Several prominent Democrat and Republican lawmakers had gone on record to excoriate the war from various standpoints, some because they see it as a financial drain, others because it is seen to be unwinnable, and finally many do not see nation-building as the end point for a U.S. mission. All told, there is a fatigue with the War on Terror.

Two days after the speech, the White House held a jobs summit that failed to enthuse people. It came just as the Department of Labour was prepared to point to a further 11,000 jobs lost in November. The broadest measure of unemployment (U-6) puts the rate at 17.5 per cent, the highest it has been in decades. The service sector contracted during this month. The stimulus package over this past year

produced a temporary boost for certain sectors (such as automobiles and construction), but these came without any major technological innovation – which means that there will be a return to the status quo once the stimulus money slows down.

Vice-President Joe Biden promised that there would be no more asset bubbles. One wonders, then, how the U.S. economy is going to recover. In recent decades its growth has been premised upon these bubbles (housing, Internet, credit). The Obama administration is seeking more stimulus money, this time to target jobs through the private sector. It is unlikely that the U.S. Congress will have the stomach for another large disbursement.

The President had no trouble asking for money towards Afghanistan. Representative John Murtha, who chairs the House Defence Appropriations Committee, and was a strong opponent of President George W. Bush's perpetual war funding request, quickly obliged Obama. "I don't see any circumstances under which the President would lose the battle for money this year." Even as Murtha questioned the very premise of the Obama strategy ("I'm not sure there's a goal here that can be achieved"), he agreed to sign off on the money. Defence Secretary Robert Gates told Congress that the bill for the additional 30,000 troops would be at least \$40 billion. Add that to the supplemental of \$65 billion already committed for 2010. The National Priorities Project estimates that the 2010 funding for the Afghan sector alone could exceed \$325 billion.

In his speech, Obama recognised that money would be an issue for a population whose jobs vanish, and whose blood and treasure is expended on a war that is inexplicable. He put a timeline for the war, saying, "That's why our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended; because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own."

## ANATOMY OF A DECISION

ANJA NIEDRINGHAUS/AP



**Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top U.S. and NATO commander for Afghanistan, at a function in Kabul on November 15. In the background is a poster of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.**

Obama seems not to have the temperament for empire-building. In his campaign book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he describes his revulsion with the Reagan years, "I bemoaned the effect of Reagan's policies toward the Third World: his administration's support for the apartheid regime of South Africa, the funding of El Salvador's death squads, the invasion of tiny, hapless Grenada." His was not to be the administration of war and threats.

Afghanistan is barely mentioned in the book, although when he published it (2006) he had already charted out his own vision; that Iraq was the "bad war" and that Afghanistan was the missed "good war". If only the Bush administration had committed more troops to Tora Bora and not distracted that "war of necessity" with the Iraq "war of choice", things would be at a much prettier pass. His commitment was to prosecute the Afghan war and to draw down from Iraq. In some ways, Obama has simply honoured his campaign promise on December 1.

It was a long road to get to that speech. Right after the election, Obama announced that his team, led by Bruce Riedel, would conduct a full review of the Afghanistan strategy. Riedel is a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst who served in the Bill Clinton administration in the South Asia section. He had just published a sober study of the situation, *The Search for Al Qaeda* (Brookings, 2008), which argued for more realistic goals in the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan. This review led to the creation of the Af-Pak concept, the linkage between the Afghanistan war and U.S. policy in Pakistan as well as the creation of the Special Envoy to Af-Pak, Richard Holbrooke. But it did not articulate a full-blown analysis of war strategy. That was left to the generals. In September 2009, *The Washington Post* published a very significant leaked document. This was General Stanley McChrystal's "Initial Assessment" on the war effort in Afghanistan. It was honest in its appraisal of the problem and suggested that if at least 80,000 more troops were not deployed to Afghanistan, the U.S. would face "mission failure". This was a shot against the bow, asking the White House to respond. Anonymous White House officials hastened to say that McChrystal was simply trying to put political pressure on the Obama administration, which had once more ducked down, continuing its review, and refusing to take a position on troop increases. Obama himself told the media that this long war had already become a failure and that the public should not think "that by sending more troops, we're automatically going to make Americans safe". This was a debate between the military and the civilian leadership in plain sight.

On October 1, McChrystal fired back in a speech at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. The war aim, for the general in charge of the Afghan campaign, was much more than what the White House had articulated. According to McChrystal, "When the Taliban has success, that provides sanctuary from which Al Qaeda can operate transnationally." Not only did he link the fortunes of Al Qaeda with the Taliban, but he also suggested that the Taliban did not even need to take Kabul to produce safe havens for the minions of Osama bin Laden. It was too much for the White House. McChrystal was summoned to Copenhagen, where Obama had delivered his failed attempt to bring the Olympics to Chicago. On board Air Force One, informed sources say, Obama rebuked McChrystal.

A few days later, *The New York Times* quoted senior administration officials as saying: "The Taliban in Afghanistan do not pose a direct threat to the United States," and that the Taliban and Al Qaeda are united "mainly on the tactical front". The Taliban, meanwhile, is part of the social landscape of Afghanistan and cannot be uprooted by a military campaign. The debate had become fierce.

Joining the fray was U.S. Ambassador to Kabul Karl Eikenberry, whose secret cables to the White House found themselves on the front pages of the newspapers. Eikenberry is a retired three-star general who served in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2007 and was Obama's unusual choice to head the Embassy in Kabul.

The current leadership in the military are all close friends, a band of comrades who left West Point at about the same time: Commander of the U.S. Central Command David Petraeus (class of 1974), McChrystal (class of 1976), General in charge of Iraq Raymond Odierno (class of 1976), and Eikenberry (class of 1973).

This group saw Eikenberry as its intellectual leader. Eikenberry's cables asked for caution, in particular not to rely upon the Hamid Karzai government. This rattled McChrystal and the team who wanted a troop increase. The "West Point Boys" had a break in the ranks.

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES/AFP



**At a job fair in October in Oak Brook, Illinois.**

Biden favoured a plan to use more Special Services missions and aerial drone attacks to contain and pressure Al Qaeda. These would mainly be conducted in Pakistan, including in Balochistan and the two Waziristans (*The New York Times* reported on December 4 that the White House had authorised an increase in the covert drone programme).

Between Biden's slim enhancement and McChrystal's substantial troop increase came the compromise. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen and Secretary of Defence Gates argued for a troop increase of about 35,000, with more pressure to be brought on Pakistan to clean up its borderlands (Obama mentioned Pakistan 25 times in his 33-minute address). This compromise plan is now Obama policy.

Response to the plan came fast and furious. The conservative hawks welcomed it because they would always welcome a troop increase. The Republican leaders dithered because while they cannot be seen to cross the military (in this case McChrystal), they did not want to line up behind Obama. Libertarians at the Cato Institute worried about the cost of the war and pointed out that the U.S. should only consider its vital national interests and not nation-building.

Obama has said that he has not invested in nation-building as such, but the President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haase quite correctly pointed out that the entire strategy relied upon the creation of the Afghan National Army, a pillar of the Afghan state. "A policy of counter-insurgency," he said, "is wrapped in a larger policy of nation-building."

Liberal intellectuals who are close to the White House, such as Riedel, hastily defended the plan, even pointing out that the 2011 end date was reasonable ("Miracles are not likely, but major change should be visible"). Some sections of the Congressional Democrats, led by Barbara Lee, who voted against the 2001 war, have pledged to make as much noise against the escalation as possible.

With more than half the population opposed to this escalation, one would imagine that even a little noise might produce traction. But with Obama's skilful meandering, it is far more likely that he will gain support for what even he had to admit is unclear. "The road ahead is long," he pointed out. "There will be difficult days."