

Obama sees optimism on Afghanistan

Fri, 12/17/2010 - 5:02pm | posted by Jason Pye

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The Obama Administration is [claiming progress in Afghanistan](#) and that the timetable for beginning withdrawal in July of next year is on time:

President Obama says the United States is "on track" in Afghanistan. He released a year-end strategy review Thursday that says al Qaeda's senior leadership is weaker than it's been since the U.S. invasion in 2001.

In much of the country the Taliban's momentum has been stopped or reversed. U.S. troops will begin leaving in July as scheduled.

CBS News national security correspondent David Martin reports a year ago, the U.S. was, by many accounts, losing in Afghanistan. Now the commander in chief says the tide of battle has turned.

"We've gone on the offensive, targeting the Taliban and its leaders and pushing them out of their strongholds," says Mr. Obama.

Defense secretary Gates is just back from visiting U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

"The sense of progress among those closest to the fight is palpable. The Taliban control far less territory today than they did a year ago," he says.

Progress is only temporary unless Afghan forces can take over the fighting from the Americans and that will require 18 to 24 months depending on the area. For instance, the former Taliban stronghold of Marjah in southern Afghanistan where the Marines launched an offensive 11 months ago.

"If you look at Marjah in terms of next summer - so six months from now - we think we're going to be in a pretty good place in Marjah," says Gates.

That fits the president's timetable of beginning a withdrawal down from the current 100,000 troops in July 2011 but still leaves the U.S. a long way from meeting its goal of all combat troops out by the end of 2014.

Polling shows that [60% of Americans](#) now believe the war in Afghanistan, which has gone on for nine years, [is not worth fighting](#). No doubt, President Barack Obama, who really is [Bush Lite on foreign policy](#), sees the political problem that represents.

Over at [Cato @ Liberty](#), Malou Innocent offers her thoughts on the news:

modest and ephemeral tactical gains have given the administration cause for optimism. It also gives the military a chance to buy more time, which means that the president will stick to his pledge to begin withdrawing troops in July 2011. But a residual U.S. troop presence will remain in the country long after that official date.

Any policy, including war, makes sense only insofar as the United States and its citizens receive significant benefits in exchange for that policy's political and economic costs. The Afghan War's current cost-benefit disparity would call for a scale-down in mission objectives and correspondingly in troop presence. But for now, the United States would rather fixate on [pipe dreams](#) and on [asserting America's permanent role in Central Asia](#).

So, Afghanistan is the next Iraq. We'll "withdraw," but we're not leaving. We'll just be changing the name from "combat troops" to "peace keepers."

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