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# Pressure mounts as Obama seeks Afghan delay

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With his military leaders pushing for a troop escalation in Afghanistan amid waning political support for the conflict at home, President Obama is in a tough spot with no clear plan and a looming deadline.

The leak of a status assessment by Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal that the White House has apparently been sitting on ratcheted up the pressure on Obama, who is sounding increasingly reluctant to commit more troops to the fight.

The report, which appeared in The Washington Post, warns that without more troops, the United States faces "failure" in Afghanistan. Even so, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs indicated Obama will not be rushed.

"The president is going to focus on getting the strategy right, and I'm not going to go through what options he may or may not have," Gibbs said.

The report appeared to erase any political cover the White House generated through a Sunday round of network interviews by Obama, calling for caution and deliberation in deciding how to proceed in Afghanistan.

Among the administration's concerns are how a push for more troops could alienate liberals in Congress and hurt Obama's prospects on health care reform.

"There is not a lot of enthusiasm for an additional commitment of troops and a lack of interest generally in doing much else in Afghanistan," said Juan Carlos Zarate, a former deputy national security adviser and a foreign policy expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

## Obama on Afghanistan: Then and now

That was then:

"Our troops have fought valiantly (in Afghanistan), but Iraq has deprived them of the support they need -- and deserve. As a

Recent polls have found an erosion of public support for the fight in Afghanistan, a once-popular war that lost backing as it dragged on with numerous setbacks and no clear exit strategy.

Obama told ABC News he is a "skeptical audience" for calls to increase troops to Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Republicans like Sen. John McCain have offered continued support for the president's escalation of the war but are now demanding that Obama heed his field commander's calls. "Time for a decision," McCain wrote on the micro-blogging site Twitter about the leaked McChrystal report.

"We're there because al Qaeda killed 3,000 Americans and we cannot allow extremists who want to do violence to the United States to be able to operate with impunity," Obama said. "I think we lost that focus for a while and you started seeing a classic case of mission creep where we're just there and we start taking on a whole bunch of different missions."

Malou Innocent, an expert on the region at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Obama is largely to blame for mission creep -- noting that his interest in pursuing al Qaeda plus other extremist groups expanded the focus in Afghanistan.

"It immediately put us on a nation-building path" toward creating infrastructure, a legitimate government and more, Innocent said. "That is not what the American people signed up for."

Obama just last month was sounding much more warlike, telling the Veterans of Foreign Wars that Afghanistan is a "war of necessity" that is "not just worth fighting," but "fundamental to the defense of our people."

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result, parts of Afghanistan are falling into the hands of the Taliban, and a mix of terrorism, drugs and corruption threatens to overwhelm the country. As president, I would deploy at least two additional brigades to Afghanistan to reinforce our counterterrorism operations and support NATO's efforts against the Taliban."

» Obama Aug. 1, 2007 campaign speech (on Feb. 17, 2009, he ordered two additional brigades to Afghanistan)

"This will not be quick, nor easy. But we must never forget: This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting. This is a -- this is fundamental to the defense of our people."

» Obama, Aug. 17, 2009 speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention

This is now:

"The only thing I've said to my folks is, a, I want an unvarnished assessment, but, I don't want to put the resource question before the strategy question, you know, because there is a natural inclination to say, if I get more, then I can do more. But right now, the question is, the first question is, are we doing the right thing? Are we pursuing the right strategy?"

» Obama in an interview with CNN, Sept. 20, 2009

"What I did not want is a situation in which we are just continually sending more and more troops, or putting [in] more and more resources, without having looked at how the whole thing fits together; making sure that our efforts, in terms of building Afghan capacity is in place, that our civilian and diplomatic efforts are in place."

» Obama, in a Sept. 20, 2009, interview with CBS News

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