

President Obama's Afghanistan Escalation Speech

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December 2, 2009 · By [Phyllis Bennis](#)

An assessment of what Obama said—and what he didn't say.

There was one way in which President Obama's escalation speech brought significant relief to the 59% of people in this country, as well as the overwhelming majorities of people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East and elsewhere who oppose the U.S. war in Afghanistan: It was a pretty lousy speech. That is, it had none of the power, the lyricism, the passion for history, the capacity to engage and to persuade virtually every listener, even those who may ultimately disagree, that have characterized the president's earlier addresses.

And for that failure, we should be very grateful.

Because everything else in this politically and militarily defensive speech reflected accountability not to President Obama's base, the extraordinary mobilization of people who swept this anti-war and anti-racist candidate into office, but rather to the exigencies of Washington's traditional military, political, and corporate power-brokers who define "national security."

In a speech like this, widely acknowledged to be setting the framework for the security/foreign policy/military paradigm for the bulk of Obama's still-new presidency, location matters. West Point was crucial partly for tactical reasons (nowhere but a military setting, with young cadets under tight command, could the president count on applause and a standing ovation in response to a huge escalation of an unpopular war). But it was also important for Obama to claim West Point as his own after Bush's 2002 speech there, an address that first identified preemptive war as the basis of the Bush Doctrine and a new foreign policy paradigm.

There was an important honesty in one aspect of President Obama's speech. All claims that the U.S. war was bringing democracy to Afghanistan, modernizing a backward country, and liberating Afghan women, are off the agenda — except when the Pentagon identifies them as possible "force multipliers" to achieve the military goal. And that goal hasn't changed — "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future." So now it's official. It's not about Afghanistan and Afghans at all — it's all about us.

It's a good thing the White House has dropped that rhetoric as the past eight years has brought few social improvements. Afghanistan ranks second to last in the UN's Human Development Index, and just in the last few weeks UNICEF identified Afghanistan as one of the three worst places in the world for a child to be born. As for improving the lives of women Afghanistan retains the second-highest level of maternal mortality of any country in the world — even after eight years of U.S. occupation. Is further military escalation likely to change that?

Ironic Timing

Less than two days after his escalation speech, Obama will host a jobs summit at the White House. Whatever his official message, the millions of unemployed in the U.S. know that 30,000 more troops in Afghanistan adds \$30 billion this year to the already out-of-control war budget — and means that the only jobs available will be in the military. What clearer example could there be of the Afghanistan war as a war against poor people — those who die in Afghanistan and those left jobless and desperate here at home? A week later, Obama travels to Norway to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. Not even the best speechwriters will be able to portray sending thousands of young women and men across the world to kill and die as evidence of the newest Nobel laureate's commitment to global peace.

And the day of the speech itself was World AIDS Day. The UNAIDS noted that all of its country goals — treatment for 6–7 million people, screening 70 million pregnant women, providing preventive services to 37 million people — could be accomplished with just \$25 billion. That's what the United States will spend fighting in Afghanistan in just three months. Timing matters.

The result was a speech that reflected Obama's centrist-in-chief effort to please all his constituencies. Some will be quite satisfied. Mainstream Republicans were delighted. They were careful not to praise too much, but as Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss noted, President Obama's escalation was "the right analysis, the right decision." General McChrystal, Obama's handpicked top commander in Afghanistan, was quite satisfied: He had asked for 40,000 new troops, and got 30,000 U.S. troops and a promise (we'll see...) of 5,000 more from NATO and other allies. More significantly, he and Bush hold-over Secretary of Defense Robert Gates got the president's endorsement of a full-scale counterinsurgency plan.

Mainstream Democrats were likely delighted — assertion of their party's military credentials, with talk of a "transition to Afghan responsibility" to soothe their constituents' outrage. They may be uneasy about the additional costs, but could take solace in Obama's promise to "work closely with Congress to address these costs as we work to bring down our deficit." Just how anyone would "address" these spiraling billions remains unclear.

The ones not happy — besides the young cadets in the audience, other soldiers facing new and endlessly renewed deployments, and their families — are the massive numbers of people who swept Obama into office on a mobilized tide of anti-war, anti-racist and anti-poverty commitments. Talk of beginning a "transition" 18 months down the line, with NO commitment for an actual troop withdrawal, isn't going to satisfy them.

And President Obama seemed to know that. So he resorted to an old tactic, long relied on by George W. Bush: book-ending his speech with the trope of 9/11, pleading for a return to the moment "when this war began, we were united — bound together by the fresh memory of a horrific attack, and by the determination to defend our homeland and the values we hold dear. I refuse to accept the notion that we cannot summon that unity again." What Obama left out, and perhaps hoped that we have forgotten, was that the human solidarity that created such unity in the wake of the 9/11 attacks — not only across the United States, but around the world as well — *began to erode as soon as the war in Afghanistan began.* Because we knew then, as we know today, that the war in Afghanistan was never legitimate, was never moral, was never going to keep us safe," and was never a "good war."

What Did the Speech Say?

- Thirty thousand new U.S. troops will be sent to Afghanistan “at the fastest possible pace.” In July 2011, 18 months from now, the U.S. will “begin to transfer our forces out of Afghanistan.”
- No more “blank checks” to the Afghan government; the U.S. expects those it assists to combat corruption and “deliver for the people,” and that those “who are ineffective or corrupt to be held accountable.”
- The U.S. goals in Afghanistan are to “deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s Security Forces and government, so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s future.”
- The government of Pakistan is our friend and ally, and “our success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan.”
- Unlike the Soviets and other earlier empires in Afghanistan, the U.S. has “no interest in occupying your country. We will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens. And we will seek a partnership with Afghanistan grounded in mutual respect.”

What Was Left Out

- The 18-month timeline references only the “beginning” of transferring U.S. troops out of Afghanistan; there was no reference to finishing transfer of all troops out of Afghanistan and ending the occupation. The words “exit” or “exit strategy” do not appear in the speech, and the word “withdraw” appears only in a reference to what the U.S. will NOT do.
- There was absolutely no explanation of how this year’s \$30 billion additional costs for the 30,000 more troops, on top of the billions more already in the pipeline, would be paid for. Obama referred only to his intention to consult with Congress to “address” these costs while bringing down the deficit. The inevitable impact this spending would have on jobs, health care, or climate change was ignored.
- The speech assumed Afghan support for the U.S. occupation, ignoring the massive evidence to the contrary. Just hours before Obama spoke, the *Wall Street Journal* stated matter-of-factly that “when the U.S. forces enter an area, the levels of violence generally increase, causing anger and dissatisfaction among the local population.” It quoted a pro-Karzai parliamentarian who said, “If new troops come and are stationed in civilian areas, when they draw Taliban attacks civilians will end up being killed.”
- Obama paid no attention to the increasingly visible opposition to the Karzai government and the U.S. occupation from the majority Pashtun population — whose southern and eastern Afghanistan territory will be the operations center for the new troop escalation. The *Journal* quoted a shopkeeper in the southern city of Kandahar who said, “If we get more troops, there will be more bloodshed. Only Afghans themselves can solve this problem.” The Pashtuns, who make up the majority of the Taliban, are increasingly defining Afghanistan’s civil war as an ethnic war against supporters of the old U.S.-backed Northern Alliance, whose Tajik and Uzbek militants now make up the majority of the Afghan National Army.
- There was no reference to the U.S.-paid mercenaries (both local and internationals, all paid through U.S. contractor corporations) in Afghanistan, whose numbers rose by 40% just between June and September, now totaling 104,101, and already outnumbering U.S. troops.
- While claiming the U.S. may not have the same interests as earlier empires, Obama has now acknowledged that the U.S. is occupying Afghan land not to protect Afghan interests, but to protect the U.S. and U.S. citizens.

- There was no acknowledgement of the widely held view that there are fewer than 100 members of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and perhaps as few as 300 over the border in Pakistan — so the U.S. will now be deploying more than 100,000 of its own troops, plus tens of thousands of NATO and other allied troops, in a global, lethal, impoverishing war to go after 400 people.
- Obama spoke of Afghanistan as a war of necessity, saying “We did not ask for this fight. On September 11, 2001, 19 men hijacked four airplanes and used them to murder nearly 3,000 people.” He ignored the fact that none of the hijackers were Afghans, none lived in Afghanistan (they lived in Hamburg), none trained in Afghanistan (they trained in Florida), and none went to flight school in Afghanistan (that was in Minnesota).
- Obama spoke of the existing involvement of NATO and other allied governments, and asked for additional troop commitments; he did not mention the massive opposition to the war all those governments face (70% opposition in the UK, the highest troop contributor), with several countries pulling their troops out. He described the “broad coalition of 43 nations that support our aims,” but ignored the reality that many of those nations have deployed troops numbering only in the double or even single digits — one from Georgia, two from Iceland, four from Austria, seven each from Ireland and Jordan, 10 from Bosnia, etc.
- The speech acknowledged that the recent election of President Karzai was “marred by fraud,” but maintained the fiction that Karzai’s presidency is somehow still “consistent with Afghanistan’s laws and constitution.” There was no acknowledgement of the widespread Afghan view of Karzai as simultaneously corrupt, incompetent, and dependent on the U.S. occupation, and that trying to win “hearts and minds” to back a government lacking local legitimacy ensures failure.
- Describing an alleged “partnership” with Pakistan, Obama ignored the danger of a U.S. troop escalation further destabilizing Pakistan, and sidelined the fact that recent polls indicate 59% of Pakistanis view the U.S. as the greatest threat, more than three times as those who see arch-rival India as the most threatening, and almost six times more than those who identify the Taliban. Obama stayed silent about the on-going special forces and drone strikes in Pakistan, with no indication whether his future escalation will include ratcheting up those attacks.
- There was no reference to the need for a broad regional diplomatic strategy; the word “India” did not appear in the speech and Obama ignored Islamabad’s concerns vis-à-vis India, which shape much of Pakistan’s historic support for the Taliban and other insurgent forces in Afghanistan. He thus disregarded the most important regional dynamics at work.
- While referencing the U.S. “transition” out of Iraq, Obama didn’t acknowledge the level of violence continuing there, where more civilians continue to die than are dying in Afghanistan, nor the 113,731 mercenaries bolstering the U.S. military there. While proposing Iraq as a model for getting U.S. troops out, he ignored the reality that there are still 124,000 U.S. troops occupying Iraq.

Anti-War Escalation Needed

Near the end of his speech, Obama tried to speak to his antiwar one-time supporters, speaking to the legacy of Vietnam. It was here that the speech’s internal weakness was perhaps most clear. Obama refused to respond to the actual analogy between the quagmire of Vietnam, which led to the collapse of Johnson’s Great Society programs, and the threat to Obama’s ambitious domestic agenda collapsing under the pressure of funding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, he created straw analogies, ignoring the massive challenge of waging an illegitimate, unpopular war at a moment of dire economic crisis.

Obama also did not acknowledge that about 30% of all U.S. casualties in the 8-year war in Afghanistan have occurred during the 11 months of his presidency. He did not remind us that the cost of this war, with the new escalation, will be about \$100 billion a year, or \$2 billion

every week, or more than \$11 million every hour. He didn't tell us that the same one-year amount, \$100 billion, could cover the cost of ALL of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals: clean water, health care, primary education and vaccinations for the people of every one of the poorest 21 countries in the world.

He didn't ask us to consider what adding another \$100 billion — let alone \$500 billion, or half a TRILLION dollars over the next five years — to the already ballooning deficit will do to our chances for real health care reform.

President Obama didn't ask us that. But we know the answer to that question. We need to build a movement that can respond to that answer, that can respond to the new challenges of these new conditions — because while this is not a new war, we face a new political moment. We need to build new alliances into a movement that can bring this war and occupation to a rapid end, so that we can begin to make good on our real obligations to the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as to the people of our own country who struggle to find jobs, health care, and climate justice. We need to build a movement with roots in the trade unions, in the labor movement, and among those struggling for economic rights, particularly among communities of color. We have to push Congress to make good on their “concerns” regarding this new escalation by refusing to pay for it, and to support those members of Congress who are trying to do just that. Congress hasn't given Obama a blank check for this war yet — not even a \$30 billion check. And there's still time for us to make sure they don't.

We have a lot of work to do.

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Fellow Phyllis Bennis directs the New Internationalism Project at IPS. The Middle East component of the Project challenges the drive towards U.S. empire in that region and beyond, focusing particularly on ending the U.S. wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and supporting a just and comprehensive peace based on an end to Israeli occupation and apartheid policies in Palestine. The United Nations component analyzes U.S. domination of the UN and attempts to strengthen the potential role of the UN as part of a new internationalism and the global resistance to empire. Since September 11, 2001, the New Internationalism Project has also been involved in examining the root causes of, and critiquing U.S. responses to that tragedy.

Phyllis is also a fellow of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. She has been a writer, analyst, and activist on Middle East and UN issues for many years. While working as a journalist at the United Nations during the run-up to the 1990-91 Gulf War, she began examining U.S. domination of the UN, and stayed involved in work on Iraq sanctions and disarmament, and later the U.S. wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1999, Phyllis accompanied a delegation of congressional aides to Iraq to examine the impact of U.S.-led economic sanctions on humanitarian conditions there, and later joined former UN Assistant Secretary General Denis Halliday, who had resigned his position as Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq to protest the impact of sanctions, in a speaking tour. In 2001 she helped found and remains on the steering committee of the U.S. Campaign to End Israeli Occupation. She works closely with the United for Peace and Justice anti-war coalition, co-chairs the UN-based International Coordinating Network on Palestine, and since 2002 has played an active role in the growing global peace movement. She continues to serve as an adviser to several

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