

## *The Least Bad Option in Afghanistan*

**A DailyKos.com Dairy Entry, a My.BarackObama.com Blog Entry,  
An OpEdNews.com Entry, and an E-Mail to Progressive Activists**

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After eight years of mismanagement of the Afghan War under Pres. Bush—as if the incompetence and corruption of the government in Kabul, let alone the medieval madness of the Taliban and the murderous plots of Al Qaeda, weren't difficulties enough—there are no good options left in Afghanistan, only less bad ones. Whether you agree with him or not, it is obvious from listening to [Pres. Obama's speech last night](#) that while he was “dithering” (as if former Vice Pres. Cheney had any credibility left to voice criticism) Pres. Obama has done his best to balance the military and political realities, both here and abroad, to arrive at his strategy. His earnest, sober reasoning—in stark contrast to [the “shoot from the hip” leadership of Bush](#)—should be respected, even if one disagrees with his ultimate decision: what I agree is the least bad option.

I love and respect the anti-war activists who value peace and love above all else. If they ruled the world, there would be no wars or 9/11s. Unfortunately, there are. Yes, people are dying horrible deaths now in wartorn regions; but people died horrible deaths on 9/11 in an otherwise peaceful city. Ultimately, we have to do whatever we can to stop both.

The main problem I have with the criticisms of Obama's Afghan policy from the Left is that I have heard no convincing reason given for why or how Al Qaeda leaders and camps, now in Pakistan, would not simply return to Afghanistan if we were to leave tomorrow. They then would have power centers and substantial resources on both sides of the border; and we would be at a greater, pre-9/11 distance, with fewer effective options to thwart them, as they do indeed continue to plot the slaughter of innocent people worldwide. The fact there there are fewer than 100 Qaeda fighters left in Afghanistan, where we do have great numbers of troops, and far more Qaeda in Pakistan, where we do not, is an argument for force, not against it.

But of course, only in a Neo-Con fantasy world could we afford to commit countless numbers of troops for endless periods of time; and only in a Neo-Con fantasy world would people of other countries welcome such occupation with bouquets of roses. We need specific objectives, such as the disruption and destruction of Al Qaeda networks, as the president outlined last night, accompanied by a realistic means of withdrawing once those objectives have been met, without unduly risking the gains we have made.

Thus, the president's timetable for not only escalating our forces—to push the Taliban back, long enough and far enough for local forces to be trained to hold their own—but also later de-escalating—a timetable scathed by the Right, as allegedly allowing our enemy to simply wait us out (as if our then-massive forces would be doing nothing to weaken them)—is the president's way of not writing a blank check, as he said, for an unlimited, open-ended operation (which would be an occupation, not a counter-terrorist operation, as it began but has been long bungled by Bush). The inept, corrupt government in Baghdad in effect held our forces hostage in Iraq by its years of failure to meet "benchmarks." Only after we gave the Iraqi government a timetable for our withdrawal has there been anything even remotely resembling true progress on their part.

Ultimately, it is up to the Afghans, like any people, to take responsibility for their own country. But their not having done so in the past cost us as well as them dearly. And the fact that their leadership is corrupt, as at the polls, does make our job much more difficult, damn them; but that does not, somehow, give me any confidence in their leadership's willingness or ability to take that responsibility, without our further pressure, as with the timetable.

Given the tribal nature of Afghanistan, the "carrots and sticks" of our diplomatic and military efforts must be exerted not only "from the top down," with the central Kabul government, but also "from the grassroots up," in the valleys and territories where Afghans' first loyalties lie. And that will require civilian efforts

—as in agriculture (other than the lucrative, corrupting opium poppy trade) and other mundane, yet vital concerns—as the president declared. But such efforts cannot realistically progress without military security—preferably, increasingly provided by Afghan forces.

We cannot afford to rebuild their entire nation—as the president kept stressing last night, we have our own nation to rebuild (after the economic policies of the Bush administration, as disastrous as his foreign policies)—but we cannot afford to let Afghanistan once again descend into chaos, exploited by the narcodollar-rich Taliban and the petrodollar-rich Qaeda. 9/11 happened; that or worse can happen again, as we saw in Madrid, London, Bali, and elsewhere. We must do whatever we can to stop it.

Either immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan—without better training of local forces and improvement of civilian infrastructure—or unlimited occupation—without a timetable for withdrawal, putting pressure on the locals, and without a care for the costs, in terms of precious lives or finite resources—is unrealistic. The reality, again, is that after eight years of mismanagement of the war under Bush—[including letting Osama bin Laden escape from Tora Bora years ago](#)—there are no good options in Afghanistan, only less bad ones. And I believe that Pres. Obama, after much serious deliberation, has chosen the least bad option, the best hope for our success in disrupting and dismantling Al Qaeda, now based primarily in Pakistan, and pushing back the Taliban long enough to restabilize Afghanistan, for our

eventual withdrawal. I wish it were not so; I realize there will be terrible losses and considerable risks. But I just have not heard a better plan, with a more realistic chance of averting even greater losses and greater risks. God help us all.