

Assessing Obama's 'Peace' Moves

Exclusive: American neocons are accusing President Barack Obama of “losing” Iraq with his final troop withdrawal and some anti-war activists are encouraged by his possible strategy shift away from combat in Afghanistan. So, is there a sea change underway in the course of the U.S. ship of state, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In another step toward bringing George W. Bush's two major wars to an end, the Obama administration is planning to transition the U.S. military role in Afghanistan to mostly advising and training Afghan troops rather than engaging in large-scale combat operations.

Although the shift revealed to several U.S. news organizations does not necessarily mean a speed-up in the scheduled troop withdrawal by 2014, it does suggest that President Barack Obama wants to follow up his removal of all U.S. troops from Iraq next month with a phase-down of the decade-long Afghan War.

The two developments represent a defeat for the neocons, who have long advocated an unapologetic American imperialism especially in Muslim lands, and a victory for the American anti-war movement, which has joined with the Occupy Wall Street protests in calling for a redirection of budget priorities away from coddling bankers and spending on wars to programs to create jobs and rebuild the middle-class.

The American Left is often hesitant to see anything positive in incremental changes like the pullout from Iraq and the combat shift in Afghanistan preferring to focus on the dark clouds, not the silver linings but some anti-war activists have found reason to cheer the recent shift in the political winds.

“If we don't understand that we are beginning to move things in the right direction, many among us will lose heart and others will miscalculate,” wrote anti-war activist David Swanson. “Why leak this proposal now [about reducing combat in Afghanistan]? What has changed is that people in the United States, and in Europe as well, are in the streets, the squares, and the parks.

“On a daily basis marches through DC streets are shouting, ‘How do you fix the deficit? End the wars, tax the rich!’ The media coverage has changed. It is the passion and the action that has changed in this moment.”

Besides the nationwide protests, another change is in the make-up of the Obama administration's national security hierarchy. Finally, the President has gotten rid of many holdovers from the Bush administration, such as Robert Gates at

Defense and the old high command in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Though some on the Left have criticized Leon Panetta both for his stewardship at the CIA and his statements as the new Defense Secretary Panetta has been a behind-the-scenes force in transitioning American war policies from large-scale conflicts to more targeted Special Forces operations.

In essence, the contingent within the Obama administration that favors limited counter-terror operations instead of major military occupations has gained the upper hand. In 2009, Gates and the military high command prevailed in the policy debates on the Afghan War, largely by resisting Obama's repeated requests for an exit strategy and proposing only an escalation.

When Obama consented to a 30,000 troop "surge" in late 2009, it was widely interpreted that the Gates/Pentagon faction (supported by Obama's hawkish Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) had won out over Vice President Joe Biden and others who opposed the large-scale escalation and wanted a concentration on Special Forces attacks against suspected terrorists.

Gates and the commanders, such as Gen. David Petraeus, then tried to put the best face on the Afghan "surge" much as they had on the Iraq War "surge" in 2007 but whatever security gains were achieved in Afghanistan were fragile at best and came at a steep cost in lives and money.

The killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden on May 2 overseen by CIA Director Panetta was hailed as an achievement of the more targeted military approach, and Gates's departure at the end of June removed one of the most effective advocates for "surge" strategies.

Gates's replacement, Panetta, quickly disappointed some on the Left with his spirited defense of the Pentagon's budget, but it may be a case of watching what he does, not what he says. He bucked the generals when he began talking about a modest stay-behind force in Iraq of only 3,000 to 5,000 "trainers" instead of at least 18,000 as the commanders wanted.

Again, some on the Left decried Panetta for even proposing this modest training force, but that missed the point. Once the number had been reduced to several thousand, the value of such a small contingent was quickly outweighed by the political and security risks involved in leaving those troops behind.

President Obama and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki could then cite a disagreement over whether the U.S. troops would have immunity from prosecution to settle on a complete withdrawal.

'Who Lost Iraq?'

While some on the American Left have doubted the significance of Obama's final Iraq withdrawal next month, the American Right and especially the neocons have complained loudly. On Friday, Charles Krauthammer, part of the Washington Post's vast stable of neocon writers, framed the attack on Obama as "Who lost Iraq?"

To make the case of blaming Obama, Krauthammer relied on the neocon-constructed narrative of the Iraq War: that after a string of early mistakes, the war was "won" by George W. Bush's "surge" in 2007 and that Bush's "status of forces agreement" with Iraq, which called for the U.S. troop withdrawal by 2011, was always meant to be modified to permit a permanent U.S. military presence.

The notion of the "successful surge" leading to "victory at last" was largely mythical the reasons for the decline in Iraqi political violence related more to other factors, including the recognition that the U.S. military occupation was finally coming to an end but the "surge" narrative has been useful in cleansing the neocons of the blood and waste caused by the neocon-driven Iraq invasion in 2003.

Now, a new chapter of this neocon Iraq War narrative is being written by Krauthammer and others that the Iraq War had been "won" but that Obama and his antiwar allies then stabbed "the troops" in the back by squandering their hard-fought "victory."

Krauthammer wrote: "When [Obama] became president in January 2009, he was handed a war that was won. The surge had succeeded. Obama was left with but a single task: Negotiate a new status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) to reinforce these gains and create a strategic partnership with the Arab world's only democracy. He blew it.

"Negotiations, such as they were, finally collapsed last month. There is no agreement, no partnership. As of Dec. 31, the U.S. military presence in Iraq will be liquidated.

"Three years, two abject failures. The first was the administration's inability, at the height of American post-surge power, to broker a centrist nationalist coalition governed by the major blocs, one predominantly Shiite (Maliki's), one predominantly Sunni (Ayad Allawi's), one Kurdish ...

"The second failure was the SOFA itself. U.S. commanders recommended nearly 20,000 troops, considerably fewer than our 28,500 in Korea, 40,000 in Japan and 54,000 in Germany. The president rejected those proposals, choosing instead a level of 3,000 to 5,000 troops.

"A deployment so risibly small would have to expend all its energies simply protecting itself ... The Obama proposal was an unmistakable signal of

unseriousness. It became clear that he simply wanted out, leaving any Iraqi foolish enough to maintain a pro-American orientation exposed to Iranian influence, now unopposed and potentially lethal.”

Krauthammer concluded: “Three years and a won war had given Obama the opportunity to establish a lasting strategic alliance with the Arab world’s second most important power. He failed, though he hardly tried very hard. Indeed, he portrays the evacuation as a success, the fulfillment of a campaign promise.

“Obama was to usher in an era of not hard power, not soft power, but smart power. Which turns out in Iraq to be .â€%.â€%. no power. Years from now, we will be asking not ‘Who lost Iraq?’, that already is clear, but ‘Why?’”

Strategic Defeat

In other words, Krauthammer and the neocons “get” what is happening, even though they twist it to fit their propaganda needs. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq does represent a defeat for the kind of U.S. imperialism that the neocons have long advocated and a victory for Americans who have opposed military adventures (and for the Iraqi people who resisted the occupation).

But the truth behind Krauthammer’s imperious question “who lost Iraq?” is this: the war in Iraq was “lost” as soon as it was begun in March 2003 at least once it became clear that the Iraqis would resist a U.S. military conquest.

Yes, Bush’s occupation of Iraq was bungled, too, but it was the determination of the Iraqi people not to accept their status as a modern-day colony and as a base for U.S. power projection in the Middle East that doomed the neocons’ imperial project. Millions of Americans also joined in rejecting an illegal war as well as the neocons’ hubristic vision of a “New American Century.”

Nevertheless, the neocons have now chosen to frame the issue of this strategic U.S. defeat in Iraq as a case of disloyal or feckless Americans, including President Obama, undermining U.S. national security, much as similar “who lost” attack lines were used by the Right regarding China in the 1940s and Vietnam in the 1970s.

There are many ugly parallels in history to this blame-game approach. Adolf Hitler exploited mythology about Jews and other “disloyal” Germans betraying the nation during World War I as part of his propaganda to establish Nazi political supremacy in the 1930s.

Now, the neocons are trying to build on their own myth of a war “won” but then “betrayed” as justification for ousting Obama from office in 2012 and restoring

neocron domination of American foreign policy under a President Mitt Romney or a President Rick Perry.

To do this, the neocons must count on the sloppy thinking of the mainstream news media, getting U.S. journalists to “recall” the wonders of the “successful surge,” the conventional wisdom that was happily embraced in 2008 although it never was true. [For more on the “surge” myth, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Two Dangerous Bush-Cheney Myths.”]

The other wild card for the neocons’ “who lost Iraq?” propaganda theme is the revitalized American Left, finally merging the twin issues of wasteful military spending and financial policies benefiting the richest one percent.

If the Left can get past its historic trait of seeing the glass as always half empty rather than sometimes half full, it might recognize – as David Swanson suggests – that some progress is finally being made.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry’s *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.
