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U.S. Military Escalation in Afghanistan: A Response to President Obama

By Richard Drake

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Mr. President, in your speech at West Point on 1 December you spoke about the benign intentions of American foreign policy. You said that since the days of FDR, “our country has borne a special burden,” fighting all over the world for freedom and the betterment of peoples. You also said, “For unlike the great powers of old, we have not sought domination....We do not seek to occupy other nations’ resources or target other peoples because their faith or ethnicity is different from ours.” Although these words triggered an outburst of sustained applause from the audience, I think that your description of American foreign policy leaves out some important truths. I would like to comment on some of these missing truths, the contemplation of which might lead to a negative judgment of your Afghanistan policy.

First, it would have been more accurate to begin your historical overview of American foreign policy with Woodrow Wilson, not with FDR. It was Wilson in his war message to Congress on 2 April 1917 who issued the first fully articulated call for the U.S. to fight for the peace and liberation of the world. He said that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Seeking nothing for itself, he concluded, the U.S. would serve as the champion of humanity.

Two days after the President’s war message to Congress, Senator Robert La Follette, a Republican from Wisconsin, rose to speak in the Senate. His speech lasted four hours. He

thought that far from going to war to make the world safe for democracy, the President's professed aim, we actually were going to war to make the world safe for Wall Street.

Ever since those fateful days of April 1917, historians of American foreign policy have been split between, on the one hand, defenders of Wilson and, on the other, defenders of La Follette. The policy makers themselves, especially since FDR and including you, Mr. President, have been Wilsonians.

After listening to your campaign speeches about change we can believe in—and being inspired by those speeches—it is disillusioning to me that in your West Point address you merely echoed the Washington consensus on American foreign policy. Your speech revealed no sign of your having familiarized yourself with the opposition argument about the historical record of American foreign policy. That opposition argument needs to be taken into account as a corrective to your assumption that the proposed surge in Afghanistan is in line with our country's foreign policy ideals. The Afghanistan surge might be in line with an entirely different set of precedents, the ones bitterly denounced by Senator La Follette in his rebuttal to President Wilson's call for war in 1917.

In a highly compressed way, I am going to draw on the arguments of William Appleman Williams for a synthesis of the dark view of American foreign policy. He is, I think, the seminal thinker for the opposition argument. In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), he declares that from its inception the United States has been a roaring engine of domination and exploitation in the world. Once the American continent had been swept clean of indigenous opposition, the U.S. turned outward. He wrote in a later book, *Empire as a Way of Life* (1980), that with the epochal Spanish-American War of 1898, "America was entering into the argument among the rich about how to control the poor." Williams summed up American foreign policy in the twentieth century as "the benevolent American desire to reform the world in its own image," i.e., to become the preceptor and, in effect, the ruler of all mankind. He had especially harsh words for FDR—a flamboyant, world-saving Wilsonian in his view—as I am afraid he would have for you, Mr. President.

Among American historians and political scientists who were or have been influenced by Williams, we find Walter Karp, Gabriel Kolko, Walter La Feber, Chalmers Johnson, and Andrew Bacevich. Politically, these individuals span the entire spectrum of political opinion, from left to right. There are Democrats and Republicans among them and some socialists. Their books should be required reading for all American citizens, including Presidents. Their ideas call into question the notion of American exceptionalism, on which your speech, Mr. President, is based. In fact, we are very much like the great powers of old. They, too, thought that they were doing good in the world. As a rule, the only good they did was for their own ruling classes.

Thorstein Veblen, one of the more perceptive geniuses produced by the United States and in some important respects a precursor of Williams, devoted his entire career to the task of exposing the realities of power that lay behind the pieties of the elites who controlled and exploited the vast and variegated under classes of the world. High-flown moralistic language he wrote, generally serves as a screen of diplomatic verbiage behind which the senior statesmen of the Great Powers continue their pursuit of political chicane and aggrandizement. The kinetic

energy behind American foreign policy inclines me to the belief that with the surge in Afghanistan we are getting not change we can believe in, but more of the old game.