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Obama and the Afghan Abyss

Why it's time for the U.S. to get out of Afghanistan

Terry Michael

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As President Barack Obama ponders the moral case against tossing more young American soldiers into the Afghan abyss, he faces several political obstacles, including some of his own making.

In a classic primary gaffe to fix a verbal stumble, Obama opted to sound tough on Afghanistan and Pakistan after asserting he'd talk to dictators. His chief opponent—and current Secretary of State—Hillary Clinton, pounced. So in the next news cycle he sounded tough as nails. Compounding the error early this year, Obama sent more troops and a new commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, but left the mission open-ended, thus appearing to fill an implied campaign promise.

Now Republicans are painting the young president as naive for suggesting he might downgrade the mission. And the GOP war hawks are setting McChrystal up for hero status in the same way they elevated David Petraeus in Iraq, implying that control over mission, strategy, and tactics should be in professional military hands, instead of those of the Commander-in-Chief—who has that constitutional obligation.

The second dilemma Obama faces in trying to alter course is a *gotcha* press corps, especially the talking air heads of cable babble, who are always ready to hold an official to every word he uttered in the silly season of a campaign. As someone who teaches college journalists about politics, I take the watchdog role of the press seriously. But I also worked in electoral

politics, including a presidential primary, plus 8 years on Capitol Hill. The heat of a primary race is no place to formulate sound policy.

Candidates are pulled every which way by operatives and consultants, not to mention the press pack, who see no farther than the next news cycle. An often young and inexperienced press corps, especially talking-points babblers on ideologically polarized cable networks, make it excessively difficult for an elected official to change course in office—even when it makes infinite good sense to do.

Third, finally, and most importantly, Obama faces the intra-party impediment of a Democratic foreign policy establishment, which thinks the party still looks like a bunch of Cold War era, national security weaklings compared to the toughness of "Reagan Democrats." Never mind that the Cold War is over, and the Reagan Democrats are mostly dead! Replacing the "good war" (WWII) and Depression era center of the 1980s' electorate are the 21st century sex, drugs, and rock & roll non-interventionist Baby Boomers and Gen X'ers.

The "neo-con lite" wing of the Democratic Party, headquartered at the so-called Democratic Leadership Council, was started by the military-obsessed, Southern wing of the party way back in 1984. These self-styled "Democratic" foreign policy wizards colluded with George W. Bush and the neo-cons in promoting the Iraq tragedy, instead of saving us from it!

You can also find these neo-con lites on the editorial pages of the "liberal" *Washington Post*, which aggressively supported the Iraq madness and has tried ad nauseam to defend its discredited position. Now, the neo-con lites seek to compound their foolishness by working to maneuver Obama into sending more troops to the Graveyard of Empires.

Mr. President, your decision about Afghanistan is *not* a political choice. This isn't a highway appropriations bill or even your healthcare reform plan, open to tinkering here and marginally adjusting there.

There are potentially thousands of young lives at stake, individuals who you will send to die and be maimed. And the choice of stepping up this horror—rather than drawing it down—will engender bitter hatred from Afghans caught in the crossfire.

Do not listen to the Washington foreign policy establishment and its brother institution, the never-ceasing military industrial complex, which believe that America, because we have big hard power, has to intervene and use that power for nation-building and the hallucination that geographic entities like Iraq and Afghanistan can develop liberty-loving democracies. There have to be indigenous movements for that to happen, and there are no such movements in the tribal, theocratic cultures of the Middle East—with the possible exception of Iran, unless our war hawks drive the young people there into the nationalist arms of the loonies who now run their country.

Do the right thing, Mr. President. We kicked out the Taliban *eight* years ago. It is long-since time to hugely scale back our effort and troop commitment.

While many congressional Democrats are still afraid of their Cold War shadows, you have our party's base massively favoring withdrawal, and a majority of independents are solidly with you. Get us out now.

