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Afghanistan: The Betrayal

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I did not think he would lose me so soon—sooner than Bill Clinton did. Like many people, I was deeply invested in the success of our first African-American president. I had written op-ed pieces and **articles** to support him in *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*. My wife and I had maxed out in donations for him. Our children had been ardent for his cause.

Others I respect have given up on him before now. I can see why. His backtracking on the treatment of torture (and photographs of torture), his hesitations to give up on rendition, on detentions, on military commissions, and on signing statements, are **disheartening continuations** of George W. Bush's heritage. But I **kept hoping** that he was using these concessions to buy leeway for his most important position, for the ground on which his presidential bid was predicated.

There was only one thing that brought him to the attention of the nation as a future president. It was opposition to the Iraq war. None of his serious rivals for the Democratic nomination had that credential—not Hillary Clinton, not Joseph Biden, not John Edwards. It set him apart. He put in clarion terms the truth about that war—that it was a dumb war, that it went after an enemy where he was not hiding, that it had no indigenous base of support, that it had no sensible goal and no foreseeable cutoff point.

He said that he would not oppose war in general, but dumb wars. On that basis, we went for him. And now he betrays us. Although he talked of a larger commitment to Afghanistan during his campaign, he has now officially adopted his very own war, one with all the disqualifications that he attacked in the Iraq engagement. This war too is a dumb one. It has even less indigenous props than Iraq did.

Iraq at least had a functioning government (though a tyrannical one). The Afghanistan government that replaced the Taliban is not only corrupt but ineffectual. The country is riven by tribal war, Islamic militancy, and warlordism, and fueled by a drug economy —interrupting the drug industry will destabilize what order there is and increase hostility to us.

We have been in Afghanistan for eight years, earning hatred as occupiers, and after this record for longevity in American wars we will be there for still more years earning even more hatred. It gives us not another Iraq but another Vietnam, with wobbly rulers and an alien culture.

Although Obama says he plans to begin withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, he will meanwhile be sending there not only soldiers but the contract employees that cling about us now like camp followers, corrupt adjuncts in perpetuity. Obama did not mention these plagues that now equal the number of military personnel we dispatch. We are sending off thousands of people to take and give bribes to drug dealers in Afghanistan.

If we had wanted Bush's wars, and contractors, and corruption, we could have voted for John McCain. At least we would have seen our foe facing us, not felt him at our back, as now we do. The Republicans are given a great boon by this new war. They can use its cost to say that domestic needs are too expensive to be met—health care, education, infrastructure. They can say that military recruitments from the poor make job creation unnecessary. They can call it Obama's war when it is really theirs. They can attack it and support it at the same time, with equal advantage.

I cannot vote for any Republican. But Obama will not get another penny from me, or another word of praise, after this betrayal. And in all this I know that my disappointment does not matter. What really matters are the lives of the young men and women he is sending off to senseless deaths.