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The Nation

The Road to Re-Election Runs Through Kabul?

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The real goals of the Afghanistan escalation are domestic and electoral. Like Lyndon Johnson, who escalated in Vietnam, Obama lives in mortal fear of being called a wimp by Republicans.

To cover his flank and look tough in the next US election, Obama is expanding the war in Afghanistan. To look strong in front of swing voters, he will sacrifice the lives of hundreds of US soldiers, allow many more to be horribly maimed, waste a minimum of \$30 billion in public money and in the process kill many thousands of Afghan civilians.

It is political theater, nothing else. What are the other possible explanations for Obama's escalation? And why has he pledged to start drawing down the new deployment after only a year of fighting?

Is it to get the job done? To rebuild Afghanistan? To kill Osama bin Laden and crush Al Qaeda? No, all those goals are nearly impossible. And Al Qaeda is too small and internationally defused to destroy.

Some say the Afghanistan war and the escalation are about building a pipeline to export gas from Central Asia. Nonsense--only a maniac would invest large sums of money in building a pipeline there. In the late 1990s the Argentine firm Bidas and the US firm Unocal jockeyed for the right to build such a project. But that dream, always tentative, has evaporated. It will be many decades, at best, before Afghanistan is safe enough to host a new, foreign-owned gas pipeline.

Others say the Afghanistan war is about establishing US military bases to menace China, Russia and Iran. Indeed, because of its occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US now has bases on either side of Iran and small bases in Central Asia. But these do not require this escalation.

The real purpose of these 30,000 soldiers is to make Obama look tough as he heads toward the next US presidential election.

As a landlocked, underdeveloped, fragmented buffer state with few resources, Afghanistan has long served as a means to get at other issues. Consider the history of how the United States has used Afghanistan.

First, during the cold war Jimmy Carter and then Ronald Reagan used the country as the Soviet "bear trap." Later, George W. Bush used it to trampoline into Iraq. The Bush administration discussed regime change in Iraq at one of its first cabinet meetings. Among other things, the administration wanted direct economic control, and indirect geostrategic control, over Iraq's vast oil wealth. That has been partially accomplished, as witnessed by the recent Exxon and Royal Dutch Shell deals there.

The only credible way into Iraq was via Afghanistan. On September 15, 2001, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz actually suggested that the United States skip an invasion of Afghanistan and go directly to Iraq. But that would have made coalition-building impossible. After all, Al Qaeda was in the Taliban's Afghanistan.

So, the Afghan invasion was done--but on the cheap, fast and light. And then for eight years Afghanistan festered as the forgotten other war.

Then came the US presidential elections of 2008. Obama promised to end the Iraq War. But living in fear of being called a wimp, he too used Afghanistan. It became a rhetorical charm, political mojo in his masculine war dance: he promised to lose Iraq (withdrawal, or redeployment if you prefer) but to do so while salvaging our national honor by winning the "necessary" war in Afghanistan. In short, he used Afghanistan to show that we was not the soft, meek, scared little Democrat portrayed in GOP spin.

Wait, you say, most Americans want out of Afghanistan! So what?

Presidential elections are not decided by the majority of voters but rather by *swing voters, in swing states*. By "Reagan Democrats" and "Clinton conservatives." By a sliver of older, whiter, middle- and working-class men and (less so) women, in rural and suburban Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Tennessee, Michigan, etc.

This demographic has a strong sense of national honor, a fondness for the military, a traditional sense of masculinity and the role of violence in ordering the world, and perhaps a too-simple view of international politics. Obama feels he must go to the polls able to tell them he was not afraid to fight, that he made a good effort in Afghanistan.

Never mind the reality of the war. What will it look like? Nay, what will it feel like to swing voters? Will they believe that the young black president with the funny Muslim name cut and ran?

There is nothing else to Obama's Afghanistan strategy. The war is a lost cause but a useful story. Victory in Afghanistan is re-election in 2012.

But the ghost of LBJ's re-election surrender in 1968 stalks the young president. The irony is that if Obama cannot claim progress and begin drawing down in time, his Afghanistan gamble may backfire and cost him a second term in the White House. And, if the escalated war grinds on and on, the expense--which some speculate could reach hundreds of billions of dollars over ten years--would badly damage Obama's ability to invest in progressive domestic spending.

Whatever the outcome, Obama has made it clear: he is willing to kill to get re-elected.