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## Obama's Afghanistan Review: A Whitewash of a Disastrous Occupation

By Phyllis Bennis and Kevin Martin

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Apparently nothing can happen in the U.S. war in Afghanistan that doesn't mean good news. If violence rises, it's because "we're taking the fight to the enemy." The Pentagon must be taking a lot of fighting to whoever they're calling the enemy – this year alone the war has killed over 2500 Afghan civilians, and almost 500 U.S. troops and more than 200 other NATO forces have died too. Of course in those isolated areas where violence may have dropped, it's because "our strategy is winning."

President Obama's most recent Afghanistan review process resulted – surprise! – in the announcement that the U.S./NATO occupation will continue at least until 2014. Another four years of war, death, and devastation for the people of Afghanistan, as well as for the young U.S. soldiers drafted by poverty and lack of opportunity and sent to kill and die there in escalating numbers.

That earlier promise of July 2011 as the pull-out date? That one was always at least partially a sham – designed to pacify Obama's powerfully anti-war base. The language even when first announced was a carefully ambiguous version that sounded like "July 2011 will start a process to determine whether conditions might allow preparation for beginning consideration of when the partial transfer of some control to Afghan forces might allow for a partial withdrawal of a few U.S. troops..."

As is recognized by the 60% of people in the U.S. who understand that the war in Afghanistan is “not worth fighting,” this is a war we cannot win and cannot afford. There is no military solution – we’ve heard that for years now, from the very leaders orchestrating the war, in the Pentagon, in Congress, in the White House. And yet, the military battle goes on, despite its inevitable failure.

And the cost continues to rise, exacting a huge price from U.S. taxpayers. The 2010 military budget plus the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq totaled over one TRILLION dollars – an amount so huge we can’t even comprehend it. Here’s one slightly smaller, that maybe we can grasp. Just the cost of President Obama’s escalation this last year, those additional 30,000 troops, was over \$33 billion. That money could instead have been used to create 600,000 new green middle-class jobs here at home – and still had \$3 billion left over to help with the rebuilding of post-occupation Afghanistan. Wouldn’t those 60% of Americans who think the war is not worth fighting have preferred to use the money for jobs instead of war?

President Obama told us the military is succeeding in its mission to “disrupt and dismantle, defeat and destroy” al Qaeda. And yet the CIA and other intelligence agencies acknowledge there are somewhere between 50 and 100 al Qaeda operatives even in Afghanistan. So we’ve sent 100,000 troops to wage war against the insurgents in Afghanistan who aren’t al Qaeda. Do they really believe that al Qaeda-style terrorism really requires large swathes of territory? They’re not training up battalions of soldiers who need to practice. All they really need are a few garage-sized labs and an Internet café with a fast connection.

As is true in any guerrilla war, the insurgents will fade before massed conventional forces, only to reappear when those forces move on. “Clearing” an area of the Taliban or other Afghan opposition forces is relatively easy; “holding” the area, not so much. And “building” – that’s pretty much off the agenda altogether. Why? It has a lot to do with the Afghan government, as well as the Afghan National Army and National Police. We hear a lot about how we’re making improvements in their recruitment and training, how they’re gaining skills and capacity every day. That’s probably all true. (Recruitment is fairly easy in a country with such pervasive unemployment.)

But it’s mostly irrelevant too. The problem isn’t training, it isn’t even the widespread lack of literacy. Many Taliban, Haqqani, and other fighters are largely illiterate also, and have no access to sophisticated training. It’s not about training, it’s about loyalty. And there’s no reason in the world to believe that a majority of Afghans, even those temporarily accepting pay in military or civil service, are going to develop real loyalty to a U.S.-imposed, western-style “strong central government” when there is nothing anywhere in Afghan culture that has created strong central governments or primarily national identity. That would be the case even with a legitimate, relatively honest administration in Kabul – let alone Hamid Karzai’s government that remains so thoroughly mired in fraud and corruption linked to the billions of U.S. tax dollars funneling in and out of Afghanistan.

Ironically, while President Obama’s review was all about the positive, the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan was leaked just the day before. And boy, did they see things differently. The NIE is important – it reflects the consensus view of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies – the CIA, the DIA, the NSA and all the rest. And what they said was profoundly different from the rosy-eyed assessment of the White House and the

Pentagon. Officials briefed on the NIE said it acknowledged that large swaths of Afghanistan are still at risk of falling to the Taliban. And that there is no chance for anything resembling success in Afghanistan without the kind of massive shift in Pakistan that would eliminate the Afghan Taliban's current access to safe havens across the border.

And as of now, since the government in Pakistan we're propping up with billions of dollars in military and economic aid has made quite clear that it – especially its powerful ISI intelligence agency – has no intention of ending support for the Afghan Taliban, the possibility of “success” seems to be just about zero.

It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. The Pakistani government is perfectly happy to accept U.S. aid and weapons and use them to go after the Pakistani Taliban – who could indeed threaten the stability, maybe even the survival of the current government in Islamabad. But they are just as clear that the Afghan Taliban, currently taking advantage of Pakistan's welcome and support, is pretty much the opposite of a threat to the government in Islamabad. To the contrary, the Afghan Taliban are understood to represent Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan – especially against those of Pakistan's arch-rival India. And, like every regional government surrounding Afghanistan, Pakistan is looking out for its own interests, making sure it has a reliable surrogate in Kabul, especially whenever the U.S. troops begin to leave.

The ultimate military goal, we are told, is to make sure the Taliban doesn't come back to power, because supposedly that will prevent al Qaeda from launching another 9/11. Let's just take a “worst case scenario.” The U.S. invasion, war and occupation have devastated Afghanistan, and in a post-occupation scenario the Taliban will certainly be one of the forces contending for political power. Could they win?

Maybe – they did once before, in 1996, when a huge proportion of Afghans welcomed them because the Taliban promised to end the five years of bloody inter-warlord fighting that had devastated the country and nearly destroyed Kabul.

What if they did? The Taliban leadership are no fools – they know they lost their hold on power only because of their protection (for a while) of al Qaeda and its leaders. Chances are pretty good they might not want to risk that again.

And if they did? We know that war doesn't work against terrorism – what does work, what has worked in every example where the U.S. has managed to find and capture top al Qaeda officials or information, has not been bombing but good intelligence, good police work, good cooperation with other governments and international institutions. That hasn't changed. That's why we need – and shouldn't fear – negotiations with everybody at the table. Including the Taliban.

The U.S. war and occupation has not made Afghans safer, more secure, more prosperous – they still have one of the lowest life expectancies on earth. The war has not protected women – Afghan women still die in childbirth at rates second highest in the world. And children are not better off – UNICEF reports that Afghan babies are more likely to die before their first or fifth birthdays than any other children in the world.

War isn't working. Sixty percent of Americans know it. The U.S. intelligence agencies know it too. And we're thinking even President Obama knows it.

The president was quoted in Bob Woodward's recent book *Obama's Wars* as saying he would not lose his political base over Afghanistan, yet he is risking exactly that. Despite some significant political victories on gay rights and disarmament in the lame duck session of Congress that have him looking much better than after the mid-term election "shellacking" just seven weeks ago, Obama and his political advisers must know his chances of re-election will be very poor if the economy is still in the doldrums and we remain mired in a seemingly endless war in Afghanistan. His base, both on the war and peace side, and the economic justice side, simply won't hustle for him as it did in 2008 (and without said hustle he'd still be the junior senator from Illinois).

Our main concern is not for the president's re-election prospects, it's to end this disastrous war as soon as possible. But it's conceivable the two could be strategically linked. The president's anti-war base must connect the urgency of getting out of Afghanistan and making serious cuts in the military budget, with the immediate need to reinvest in the working economy, job creation, and environmental restoration. That means building powerful alliances with the key movements rising in response to the economic crisis, and fighting now for immigrant, labor, community and civil rights.

If the president and his political team are as savvy as everyone thinks they are (or at least were in the 2008 campaign), they'd do well to get in front of that wave and run on a genuine peace and green prosperity platform. Imagine if that happened, and President Obama really did start paying attention to his anti-war base, and began carrying out the dramatic shift in policy necessary to insure a real withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, a genuine move to close Guantanamo, a final withdrawal of all remaining troops in Iraq, a serious level of pressure on Israel to end its occupation, as well as to launch a serious New Deal to create green jobs and rebuild the economy... Then not only would the president likely coast to re-election, but the Afghan and U.S. people would be the real beneficiaries – instead of banks, war profiteers and Wall Street – and THAT election would really be one for the history books.