

Obama denounces Bush for sending too few troops to Afghanistan

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Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama blasted as too little and too late the decision announced by President Bush Tuesday to withdraw 8,000 US troops from Iraq and divert combat units to Afghanistan.

Obama's remarks came in response to Bush's speech before a uniformed audience at the National Defense University in Washington. Bush hailed the "success" of the surge that he ordered at the beginning of 2007, sending an additional 30,000 US troops into occupied Iraq.

"While the enemy in Iraq is still dangerous, we have seized the offensive, and the Iraqi forces are becoming increasingly capable of leading and winning the fight," Bush said.

The negligible character of the change that Bush announced, however, belies his claims about the surge's supposed success. In essence, one Marine battalion and one Army brigade from the 10th Mountain Division, both of which had been scheduled to deploy to Iraq, will be sent to Afghanistan instead.

In addition, Bush announced that the Pentagon would withdraw some 3,400 "combat support forces," including construction engineers, aviation personnel, military police and others.

The net result is a reduction in the US occupation force by about 8,000—4,000 before the end of the year and another 4,000 in January—leaving close to 140,000 troops still in Iraq, more than the number deployed there before the surge began.

The claim made by the US president that this minimal withdrawal—less than 5 percent of the occupation force—represents a policy of "return on success" is inflated, to say the least.

The reality, recognized by US military commanders, is that the much vaunted success of the surge is temporary and unstable. It is based not on the imposition of a viable US client regime in Baghdad or acceptance by the Iraqi people of being turned into semi-colonial subjects of US imperialism, but rather has been achieved by bleeding of the country white, with over a million killed and three-and-a-half million more driven into exile or turned into internal refugees.

As journalist Bob Woodward has revealed in his new book, *The War Within: Secret White House History 2006-2008*, much of the success attributed to the surge is owed to Washington's resort to special forces death squads, which carried out the systematic assassination of individuals believed to be in the leadership of the resistance to the US occupation.

In an interview with McClatchy Newspapers, retired Army Lt. Col. John Nagl, one of the architects of the US counter-insurgency

strategy in Iraq, described the gains made by US forces against the resistance as "fragile." He warned against "pulling out prematurely and then having to go back and clear them out again."

Speaking before the House Armed Services Committee Wednesday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates made the same essential point, calling for a "cautious and flexible" policy regarding US troop deployments in Iraq. "I would also urge our leaders to keep in mind that we should expect to be involved in Iraq for years to come," Gates added.

Speaking at the same congressional hearing, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided a grim assessment of the situation confronting the US in its war in Afghanistan. "I'm not convinced we're winning it in Afghanistan," warned Mullen, adding, "We're running out of time."

He said that the forces resisting US occupation—routinely described by Washington and the US media as the Taliban and Al Qaeda—have proven capable of carrying out "ever more sophisticated—even infantry-like—attacks against fixed coalition positions."

The Pentagon spokesmen acknowledged that the additional forces whom Bush proposes to send to Afghanistan next year amount to less than half the troop buildup that American commanders have requested. Despite the inadequate character of these reinforcements, Mullen stressed that "the risk of not sending them is too great a risk to ignore."

Among the most significant aspects of the testimony, however, was the official confirmation that Washington's intervention in the region is increasingly focused not just on Afghanistan, but on Pakistan as well.

The launching of three deadly US missile strikes in less than a week against targets inside Pakistani territory, as well as a ground assault there by helicopter-borne special forces commandos last week, had already made clear the widening international character of the American intervention.

Mullen told the congressional panel that the Pentagon is "looking at a new, more comprehensive strategy for the region" that would direct the US military intervention on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

"In my view, these two nations are inextricably linked in a common insurgency that crosses the border between them," said the joint chiefs chairman. US forces can "hunt down and kill extremists as they cross over the border from Pakistan," Mullen

continued, but warned that unless the US extended the operation to Pakistan to “eliminate the safe havens from which they operate, they enemy will only keep coming.”

In fact, the *New York Times* reported Thursday that President Bush in July secretly approved orders which for the first time allow American special operations units to carry out ground assaults inside Pakistan without the prior approval of the Pakistani government.

Replying to Bush’s speech before the National Defense University, Obama, at a press conference in Dayton, Ohio later that day, declared, “His plan comes up short. It is not enough troops, not enough resources, with not enough urgency.”

Obama accused Bush and McCain of failing to grasp that “the central front in the war on terror is not in Iraq, and it never was—the central front is in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the terrorists who hit us on 9/11 are still plotting attacks seven years later.”

The Democratic presidential candidate said that his own strategy would include “responsibly removing our combat brigades” from Iraq and redeploying US forces “to finish the job in Afghanistan.” This would involve, he added, “more focus on eliminating the Taliban and Al Qaeda sanctuary along the Pakistan border.”

Referring to the Bush administration’s decision to make a limited redeployment and, implicitly, to the recent US strikes across the Pakistani border, Obama said, “I am glad that the president is moving in the direction of the policy that I have advocated for years.”

For his part, Republican presidential candidate John McCain lashed out at Obama, charging that his Democratic opponent “believes we must lose in Iraq to succeed in Afghanistan.”

In reality, what is emerging is a consensus policy of the US political establishment to continue the wars and occupations in both countries, while escalating the US intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Obama’s talk of withdrawing “combat brigades” from Iraq is meant to conceal his support for leaving tens of thousands of US troops behind to carry out counterinsurgency operations and protect US interests in the country, including control of its oil fields.

As for his claim that Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute the “central front in the war on terror” and that American forces are fighting “the terrorists who hit us on 9/11,” the Democratic candidate is engaging in the same kind of lying propaganda that the Bush administration used to promote the war in Iraq.

The reality is that the US intervention in Afghanistan—like the one in Iraq—is aimed not at combating terrorism, but at securing US hegemony over crucial energy reserves and pipeline routes in both regions.

US-led forces are engaged in a dirty colonial-style war in Afghanistan, confronting popular resistance from forces that have nothing to do with Al Qaeda. To suppress this resistance, they have resorted to an increasingly indiscriminate use of air power, killing growing numbers of civilians and, in turn, fueling popular hatred of the occupation.

Even as Obama was speaking on Tuesday, it was revealed that yet another US air strike had killed two Afghan civilians and

wounded another ten. This was the fourth such deadly bombardment in barely two weeks, including the murderous strike in Herat that killed 90 people, including 60 children.

This is the supposedly “good war” against terrorism promoted by Barack Obama.

Obama also vowed that he would “rebuild the military,” referring to his proposal to add another 100,000 troops to the ranks of the Army and the Marines. How this increase in troop levels is to be achieved, Obama has yet to spell out.

One of the more significant revelations in the Woodward book deals with opposition within the joint chiefs to the emerging Bush administration “surge” policy at the end of 2006. Among the concerns expressed, the book recounts, was that a failure of the escalation to suppress resistance could necessitate the reinstatement of the military draft. Woodward quotes the former joint chiefs chairman, Marine Gen. Peter Pace, as stating, “... then you are forced to conscription, which no one wants to talk about.”

No doubt, one of the considerations within America’s ruling political establishment as its faces the upcoming election is that an Obama presidency and a Democratic administration could prove the best political option for taking the measures needed to continue and expand the military campaigns in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. These measures would likely include the reinstatement of the draft.

Obama won the Democratic primary largely by posing as an opponent of the Iraq war and lambasting his principal rival, Hillary Clinton, for her vote to authorize the US invasion. The candidate’s remarks Tuesday, however, make clear once again that the Democrats are not running in the November election as opponents of US militarism.

Rather, the policy put forward by Obama amounts to a change in tactics aimed at better pursuing the original aims of the wars launched by the Bush administration. It calls merely for shifting some US combat forces from Iraq in order to intensify US military aggression against the people of Afghanistan and widen it across the border into Pakistan.

With less than two months until voters go to the polls, it is now obvious—despite the concerted attempts to generate illusions in Obama—that the two-party system will once again deny the American people any means of expressing their overwhelming opposition to war. Rather, the only choice offered by the Democrats and Republicans is between two candidates representing the interests of the US financial oligarchy, both of them committed to continuing the current occupations and wars and preparing new and even bloodier military conflagrations.



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