

Afghanistan war escalation: The Nation seeks to “protect” the Obama administration from itself

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The war in Afghanistan is increasingly taking center stage in American political life. As the Obama administration, urged on by the Pentagon, prepares to deploy tens of thousands more US troops to the bloody conflict, popular opinion is turning against the involvement. A crisis of historic dimensions is shaping up.

The American liberal “left,” the *Nation* magazine, the so-called anti-war movements, various publications and think tanks, all endorsed Barack Obama in the 2008 election, claiming that his—in the words of *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel last November—would be a “Transformational Presidency.”

Far from acting to “end the endless wars” and initiating “a politics of sanity and justice and peace,” as vanden Heuvel encouraged people to believe Obama would do, the new administration has continued and even deepened the carnage in Central Asia. While attempting to maintain the fragile stability in Iraq, based on the mass killings of opponents to the foreign occupation and a savage “ethnic cleansing,” Washington is expanding the war into Afghanistan and Pakistan, threatening a much wider conflagration. The election of Barack Obama, for US ruling circles, was merely an opportunity to effect a change in tactics.

Popular expectations of the Obama government are fading; a mood of widespread disappointment and even bitterness is setting in. In this context, the American ex-left acts to promote illusions in the Democrats and shore up the two-party system, in the interests of US imperialism.

The *Nation*’s editors, along with other elements in this milieu, are made nervous by the change in public sentiment, bound up in particular with the looming military buildup in Afghanistan. In “Opposing Escalation in Afghanistan” (August 27), David Cortright, director of policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and co-chair of the Win Without War coalition, writes, for example:

“The war in Afghanistan is an albatross that risks dragging down the Obama administration and undermining its progressive policy agenda. Afghanistan is now Obama’s war, and its failure would be Obama’s failure, with disastrous political consequences for other issues. The president’s political standing, the Democratic Party’s electoral prospects in 2010 and 2012, the government’s ability to fund health reform and other social priorities—all will be jeopardized if US policy in Afghanistan continues to falter. Progressives who care about this administration and want it to succeed must rally to protect the president. We must argue for a more effective and less militarized strategy in Afghanistan and work to prevent further military escalation.”

These themes are repeated in various articles in the *Nation*. In an editorial dated August 26, the magazine comments that a majority of the American people “is increasingly aware that the more blood and treasure we pour down the Afghan drain, the less we’ll have to spend on economic recovery, healthcare reform and building a green economy at home. Those who want to protect Obama’s reform agenda should seek alternatives to a militarized strategy in Afghanistan.”

Vanden Heuvel, in a piece August 31 devoted to Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russ Feingold’s call “for a flexible timetable to bring US troops out of Afghanistan,” also appeals to “progressives who want to see President Obama succeed [and who] see Afghanistan as a threat to his presidency.”

Robert Scheer, the veteran journalist and a contributing editor at the *Nation*, writes September 2, “Barack Obama is threatened with a quagmire that could bog down his presidency. LBJ also had a progressive agenda in mind, beginning with his war on poverty, but it was soon overwhelmed by the cost and divisiveness engendered by a meaningless, and seemingly endless, war in Vietnam.

“Meaningless is the right term for the Afghanistan war,

too, because our bloody attempt to conquer this foreign land has nothing to do with its stated purpose of enhancing our national security.”

In addition to their apologetics for Obama and the Democrats, the various articles cited are characterized by their superficiality and lack of seriousness. What, after all, are the economic and political driving forces of the conflict? Why is the US occupying Afghanistan at great cost? Does American capitalism have geopolitical aims in the region?

That the vast energy reserves in Central Asia and the Middle East might be of interest to the US ruling elite, that the collapse of the USSR has witnessed the vast expansion of American military operations in the region, that the US is engaged in a ferocious global competition with its rivals over cheap labor, markets and raw materials...the *Nation's* authors consider none of this.

In reality, they work entirely within the parameters of the official political debate conducted by the Democratic and Republican parties and the mass media. The *Nation* accepts the argument that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being waged for “national security” and against “terrorism,” while favoring what it considers a more effective means of pursuing those goals: less reliance on the military, greater diplomatic effort, replacement of “the US-led NATO occupation with a multinational coalition,” in general, fewer “US fingerprints.”

However, the US is not engaged in a lengthy, massively expensive, increasingly deadly war in Afghanistan for democracy, regional stability, the fight against terrorism or any other purpose along these lines. The Obama policy is not “misguided” and “wrongheaded,” as the *Nation* editorial suggests. Nor is the Afghan conflict “meaningless,” as Scheer inanely contends. The American ruling elite is pursuing a neo-colonial occupation, aimed at ensuring US control of a strategically vital, energy-rich region. It is quite prepared to spend many billions of dollars and sacrifice the lives of enormous numbers of both Afghans and Americans to achieve that end.

From time to time, the *Nation's* editors are prepared to acknowledge the brutal and unpopular character of the US-led war in Afghanistan. A July 7, 2009, article, for instance, describing American bombings of civilians, asked in its headline, “Are Afghan Lives Worth Anything?” Thus, the magazine's arguments about the need to defend Obama's otherwise “progressive” agenda lack even a formal logic. How is it possible that such an administration, supposedly dedicated to the interests of the common man, could be conducting a ruthless, lethal war in Central Asia?

The bailout of the banks and the corporate aristocracy at home, military aggression abroad, are two sides of the same coin. The Obama administration doesn't have two policies,

it has one imperialist policy, directed against the international working class and the oppressed.

If one were to be entirely frank, one would have to say that the *Nation*, along with Feingold, other congressional Democrats and the entire American liberal “left,” is not at all opposed to American military intervention in Central Asia. This privileged, complacent social layer only voices opposition when things go badly, when there is the danger of popular opposition in the US and the discrediting of the Democratic Party.

Even now, vanden Heuvel and the rest do not call for the immediate withdrawal of the US military from Afghanistan. Cortright, of “Win Without War,” specifically opposes such a slogan in his *Nation* article: “Some antiwar groups have called for immediate military withdrawal, but this is not a widespread view. A narrow emphasis on military withdrawal implies indifference to the plight of the Afghan people and a willingness to cede the country to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Many Americans believe that the United States has an obligation to help the people of Afghanistan, especially its women.”

In other words, the predatory, imperialist occupation of Afghanistan should continue. The name of the group ought to be changed to “Win With Just the Right Amount of War.”

As we noted above, Cortright observes that “Afghanistan is now Obama's war.” He is being too modest. The *Nation* and the entire desiccated body of official American liberal opinion supported Obama and helped him attain office, lying to the population in the process. These elements bear a responsibility for the new administration's policies. The bloody, criminal war in Afghanistan is the *Nation's* and the American “left”'s war, and they are all deeply, deeply discredited thereby.



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