Obama tops Bush in troop buildup

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The combined US troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have now reached a higher level than existed at any time under the presidency of George W. Bush. This surge past the record set by its predecessor marks another grim milestone in the Obama administration's escalation of American militarism.

In addition to the 21,000 US soldiers and Marines that Obama ordered deployed to Afghanistan as part of the escalation he unveiled last March, another 13,000 "support" troops are being quietly sent to the country with no official announcement, the *Washington Post* reported Tuesday.

This stealth buildup is a replay of the methods used by the Bush administration in its Iraq surge, when it announced the deployment of an additional 20,000 combat troops while saying nothing about the 8,000 support troops sent with them.

In neither case was the failure to declare the full number an oversight. Obama, like Bush before him, recognizes that the military interventions he oversees are deeply unpopular with the majority of the American people.

According to the troop numbers provided by the *Post*, there are now 65,000 US troops in Afghanistan, with another 124,000 still in Iraq, for a total of 189,000 American military personnel waging two colonial-style wars and occupations. At the height of the Bush administration's 2007 "surge" in Iraq, there were 26,000 US troops in Afghanistan and 160,000 in Iraq, for a total of 186,000.

There is every indication that the policies being pursued by the Obama White House will send these numbers significantly higher.

Over the weekend, military officials revealed to the media that the proposal for increased troop levels in Afghanistan submitted by the American commander there, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, included a high-end figure of 80,000—in addition to the 68,000 that are to be deployed by the end of this year.

The *New York Times*, echoing official sources, commented that this highest request was "highly unlikely to be considered seriously by the White House." While this may well be true—for now—the leaking of the number serves a definite political purpose, making Obama's ultimate agreement to a smaller surge—still involving tens of thousands of additional troops in Afghanistan—seem like a reasonable compromise between the White House and the Pentagon.

While visiting Britain this week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the US commitment to continuing the Afghanistan war. "We are not changing our strategy, our strategy remains to achieve the goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda and its extremist allies, and denying them safe haven and the capacity to strike us here in London, or New York or anywhere else," she said in a radio interview. "One should never doubt our commitment or our leadership, we intend to pursue the goal," Clinton continued. "We will not rest until we do defeat Al Qaeda."

Clinton's remarks make clear that the Obama administration, while dropping the term "war on terrorism" coined by the Bush White House, continues to embrace the methods underlying this terminology—in particular, the attempt to terrorize the American people into accepting US wars of conquest and aggression.

The claim that 68,000 US troops—with tens of thousands more likely to follow—are in Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda and prevent another 9/11 is a transparent pretext. Top US security and military officials have concurred that there are a grand total of approximately 100 individuals affiliated with Al Qaeda presently in Afghanistan, without any means of carrying out an attack on another country. If and when McChrystal's request for additional troops is met, there will be 1,000 or more US soldiers and Marines in

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Afghanistan for every Al Qaeda member.

The target of the military escalation is not Al Qaeda, but rather the people of Afghanistan. Washington is attempting to suppress growing popular resistance to the occupation and is prepared to sacrifice the lives of untold numbers of Afghans, as well as those of hundreds if not thousands more US soldiers, to that end.

The defeat of "terrorism" is no more the strategic aim pursued by Washington in Afghanistan than it is in Iraq. US military might has been unleashed in both countries to assert the hegemony of American imperialism over Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, which are the two largest sources of the world's energy supplies.

The potential costs of this venture are immense. A report prepared by the Pentagon last January describes the stated US goal of achieving a stable client state in Afghanistan as an operation that "will last, at a minimum, decades." Appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday, Gen. Barry McCaffrey (ret.) was slightly more optimistic, saying that it would take "10 years of $5 billion a month," in addition to major fighting.

In Iraq, meanwhile, there is no reason to believe that the stated deadline for pulling US troops out by 2012 will be met. On the contrary, the instability and continued resistance created by the American occupation and the destruction of Iraqi society will be used as a justification for continuing the occupation and asserting US control over the country's oil fields.

And the threat that the US interventions will provoke new and potentially far bloodier conflicts is growing, as evidenced by the mounting crisis in Pakistan and increasing tensions throughout the Indian subcontinent flowing from the war in Afghanistan.

The debate that is now taking place in the Obama White House is over committing generations of young Americans to endless wars and occupations.

Under conditions in which resources are being denied for desperately needed jobs and basic social services, even more social wealth will be diverted to build up the US military.

Expanding the ranks of the Army is necessary if any significant escalation of the war in Afghanistan is to be sustained. The military is stretched to the breaking point by the two occupations. Even if Obama approves 40,000 more troops, nowhere near that number are immediately available.

While the American political establishment is no doubt counting on a double-digit unemployment rate driving jobless youth into the military, there is growing objective pressure for the reintroduction of conscription, with youth once again drafted to fight in colonial wars.

Millions of people voted for Barack Obama last November in the vain hope that his election would reverse the escalation of militarism initiated under Bush. Their votes, like the growing popular sentiment against the Afghan war, have been disregarded as the Obama administration continues this escalation in the interest of the financial oligarchy that it serves.

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