

Obama issues order for escalation in Afghanistan

Barry Grey

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At a White House meeting with military leaders on Sunday, President Barack Obama formally issued the order to send at least 30,000 additional US troops to Afghanistan. Underscoring his contemptuous attitude toward popular opposition to the war or any other democratic considerations, Obama did not wait to issue the order until he had offered his explanation for the escalation to the American people in tonight's nationally televised speech.

The new "surge" follows the 21,000 additional troops Obama ordered to Afghanistan in the first weeks of his administration. It will bring the total US troop deployment to 100,000—the highest since the invasion eight years ago.

In escalating US violence in Afghanistan and threatening more direct military involvement in Pakistan, the administration is defying public opinion in the two countries, where popular opposition to US military operations is pervasive, and in the US itself, where opinion polls show that a majority of the American people is opposed to the war.

In its contempt for the will of the people, as in its policies on the economy, war and democratic rights, the Obama administration is continuing without a hitch the basic policies and methods of the Bush administration, which were repudiated by the electorate when it voted for Obama on the basis of his claim to be the candidate of "change."

It is highly significant that, after the manner of his predecessor, Obama has chosen the US Military Academy at West Point as the venue for tonight's nationally televised speech. He is not speaking as the civilian president from the Oval Office, as is traditional for major presidential policy statements, or going before the elected legislators in Congress.

Instead, he has chosen to address the officer corps who will be entrusted with carrying out his orders. He will speak as a military figure—the commander in chief—before a captive audience, outlining policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan that were set by the top military brass.

Obama's choice of venue demonstrates that the main constituency to which he is appealing is the military. The more the administration pursues right-wing, unpopular policies—whether bailing out the banks, attacking civil liberties, or escalating the war—the more it seeks to base itself on the military and the national security apparatus.

The increasingly open and powerful role of the military in US political life has reached the point where the formal trappings of democracy have become almost irrelevant. Obama is signaling that the military represents an independent constituency, separate and apart from the people, whose approval must be secured, regardless of the sentiments of the population.

This shift in civilian-military relations is long in the making, but the weight of the military in political matters has in recent years reached unprecedented proportions. Nearly half a century has passed since President Eisenhower, in his farewell address, warned of the growing power of what he called the "military-industrial complex."

The intervening years have seen an eruption of American militarism, which has grown ever more virulent as the US ruling class has sought to offset the decline in its global economic position by exploiting its military supremacy to pursue its strategic aims. The erosion of the constitutionally mandated subordination of the military to civilian authority is one of the hallmarks of the decay of American democracy.

It would have been inconceivable, for example, for

John F. Kennedy to have delivered his address to the nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis before a military audience. US imperialism at that time was still compelled to adhere, at least publicly, to constitutional norms regarding the deference of the military to civilian rule.

The White House no doubt calculates that a speech by the commander in chief to a friendly audience, replete with military trappings, with the president flanked by military brass, will help whip up patriotism and intimidate those opposed to the war.

Less than one year after his inauguration, the candidate of “change” is aping his predecessor, who delivered his major policy speeches almost exclusively before military and national security audiences.

Obama has essentially adopted the position of Bush, who told a press conference in July of 2007 that in pursuing an unpopular war in Iraq he was obliged to take into account a number of constituencies. The American people were relegated to just one of several constituencies, the most important of which were the military and military families.

The *Washington Post*’s Dana Milbank in a column today points to Obama’s increasingly public association with the military. He writes: “Already in his young presidency, the Nobel Peace Prize winner has addressed the troops at Osan air base in South Korea, Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, Naval Air Station Jacksonville in Florida, the US Naval Academy in Annapolis and Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. (For different purposes, he also spoke at the memorial for shooting victims at Fort Hood and welcomed home the remains of troops at Dover Air Base.) The vice president and the first lady, in turn, have made the rounds at half a dozen other facilities.

“Presidential addresses to the uniformed military were relatively rare before Bush. A tally by George Mason University found that in past years, presidents sometimes spoke to military groups only once (Bill Clinton in 1993, Richard Nixon in 1969), twice (Gerald Ford in 1974) or not at all (Ronald Reagan in 1985). But Bush gave ‘far more’ such speeches, including 13 in 2005 alone.

“The proliferation began in 2002, when Bush went to West Point for a June 1 speech to the cadets detailing the doctrine of preemptive war... But they [the troops] are required to be loyal, and when their commander in

chief talks, whether it’s Bush or Obama, they salute. Or applaud. Or yell ‘Hoo-ah.’ And on Tuesday night, this military pageantry will only compound the sense on the left that Obama is not the man they thought he was.”

The militarization of American political life is inseparably bound up with an imperialist policy, continued and intensified by Obama, of ceaseless colonial-style wars, aimed ultimately at bigger powers such as Russia and China.

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