Obama's speech on Afghanistan: A compendium of lies

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In his December 1 speech at West Point announcing the deployment of 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan, President Barack Obama attempted to justify a major escalation of a deeply unpopular war on the basis of lies and distortions. That he had to resort to such falsifications reflects both the reactionary character of his policy and the fact that it is being imposed in violation of the popular will.

To justify the escalation, Obama recycled the Bush administration's myths about the "war on terror." He cynically presented the US as an altruistic power, forced into a global war for democracy by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

As he sought to frame US imperialist policy within the template of the "war on terror," however, his speech descended into utter incoherence.

Obama's account of the US' recent wars contradicted his own assertion that Washington was single-mindedly pursuing Al Qaeda. In 2001, he said, the US attacked Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda—though most of the September 11 hijackers were, in fact, from Saudi Arabia, the US' major Arab ally in the Middle East.

The US invasion was legitimate, he argued, because Afghanistan was Al Qaeda's base of operations and the Taliban regime harbored and protected the terrorist group.

Obama brushed over the failure of the US invasion to dismantle Al Qaeda by saying that "after escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002, Al Qaeda's leadership established a safe haven there."

Thus, from 2002 to 2009, the US pursued wars in Iraq and Afghanistan supposedly directed against Al Qaeda, while the latter was based in another country altogether—Pakistan, a long-standing US ally.

Obama even suggested that Al Qaeda enjoys the protection of sections of the Pakistani state, declaring, "[T]here have been those in Pakistan who have argued that the struggle against extremism is not their fight, and that Pakistan is better off doing little, or seeking accommodation with those who use violence."

This account raises an obvious and unexplained double standard. If the security of the American people required the US to invade Afghanistan and remove an Al Qaeda-friendly regime there, why shouldn't the same apply to the government of Pakistan?

Instead, Obama hailed Pakistan as an ally in the struggle against "violent extremism" and called for a US-Pakistan partnership based on "mutual trust."

This only demonstrates the fraudulent character of the official rationale for the war, which Obama and the rest of the US political establishment know to be a tissue of lies.

Then there is the question of the Afghan government in whose defense the US is supposedly waging war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. While initially praising the regime of President Hamid Karzai as a "legitimate government," Obama went on to acknowledge that it suffers from "corruption, the drug trade, an underdeveloped economy, and insufficient security forces."

In a display of utter cynicism, he claimed that Karzai's recent reelection, universally recognized as the outcome of fraud and ballot-stuffing, had nevertheless produced a legitimate government. "Although it was marred by fraud," Obama said, "that election produced a government that is consistent with Afghanistan's laws and Constitution."

Obama's attempts to give noble-sounding reasons for deploying 30,000 more US troops were as sinister as they were self-contradictory. In Orwellian style, he told the Afghan people, who have already suffered under

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US occupation for eight years, “We have no interest in occupying your country.”

He contrasted the US’ allegedly benevolent attitude towards Afghanistan with the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979-1989. In fact, the US has manipulated Afghan politics for 30 years.

Beginning in 1979, the US financed and backed Islamic fundamentalist resistance to the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, with the aim of provoking a Soviet invasion. Thus the US was politically complicit in millions of Afghan deaths during the Soviet occupation and the civil war that followed. The Islamist forces Washington is fighting today in Afghanistan largely descend from groups it supported against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Amid wars that have cost over a million lives and have involved the widespread use of torture at US-run prisons, Obama insisted that US policy will “tend to the light of freedom, and justice, and opportunity, and respect for the dignity of all peoples.”

Obama boasted of having ended torture. This is an empty and false claim belied by reports of ongoing torture at US prisons in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as well as Obama’s continuation of rendition and his opposition to any investigation of government officials who ordered and oversaw the use of torture.

He reiterated his pledge to close Guantanamo, but was silent on his insistence that US torture prisons in Afghanistan, such as at the Bagram military base, remain open.

The central lie in Obama’s speech, however, was the claim that his escalation plans would allow US troops to return quickly from Afghanistan, starting in 2011.

In fact, as Obama indicated elsewhere in his speech, this escalation is one step in a broader plan for even further wars. “The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly,” he said, “and it extends well beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Mentioning Somalia and Yemen as potential targets, he added, “our effort will involve disorderly regions and diffuse enemies.”

The inclusion of this passage made clear that Obama was basing his Afghan policy on a report issued last month by Anthony Cordesman of the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Cordesman wrote: “The President must be frank about the fact that any form of victory in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be part of a much wider and longer struggle. He must make it clear that the ideological, demographic, governance, economic, and other pressures that divide the Islamic world mean the world will face threats in many other nations that will endure indefinitely into the future. He should mention the risks in Yemen and Somalia, make it clear that the Iraq war is not over, and warn that we will still face both a domestic threat and a combination of insurgency and terrorism that will continue to extend from Morocco to the Philippines, and from Central Asia deep into Africa, regardless of how well we do in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

He added: “…the present level of US, allied, Afghan and Pakistani casualties will almost certainly double and probably more than triple before something approaching victory is won.”

In short, the US will be fighting immensely costly wars over a considerable portion of the earth’s surface in regions stretching thousands of miles in every direction.

Reduced to its essentials, the perspective of Obama and his advisors is a future of endless war to maintain the US’ position as the global hegemon. Beyond the question of controlling oil revenues and trade routes in the Middle East and Central Asia, what is at stake is the US’ position as a world power. Like the British withdrawal from Suez in 1956-1957, a forced US withdrawal from Afghanistan would be a devastating blow to Washington’s prestige.

Obama’s Afghan policy arises from this dynamic of US imperialism: Since retreat at any point threatens catastrophe, the only choice is ever-expanding escalation.

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