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Obama's Afghanistan Speech: A Guide for the Perplexed

Tom Hayden
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President Obama's dramatic speech from Afghanistan should be parsed as a careful election-year orchestration of his plan to "wind down" the war. It is no accident that the speech came during the first-year commemoration of the killing of Osama bin Laden, the event providing Obama the rationale for ending American combat while placing hawks and political rivals on the defensive.

For reasons historians will have to explore, George Bush dropped the pursuit of bin Laden, providing Obama with a chance that few top Democrats are given: to prove himself "tougher" on terrorism than his critics. Obama took the risk. The question now is whether the rewards he reaps will be for real peace or a disastrous quagmire.

Between now and November, the narrative of killing the Al Qaeda leader will be politicized and repeated in the mainstream media and Obama campaign films and speeches that many will find inappropriate. Obama himself may have kept his pride in check last year when he said "we don't need to spike the football" and "we don't trot out this stuff as trophies" (speaking of photos of bin Laden's body). Then Obama's top aide David Axelrod seemed to test the boastful political line, "Ask Osama bin Laden," when answering a question about Obama's toughness. Since then, the bin Laden assassination is increasingly about spiking the football, leading CNN's Jack Cafferty to accuse Obama of being "hypocrite-in-chief" and allowing the Republicans to grab the opportunity to change the subject.

Obama spoke to multiple and conflicting audiences from Afghanistan. Primarily, of course, his speech was to America's voters and families, especially those upset by the suffering of their loved ones or the dark suspicion that the war has been for naught. But Obama also intended to frame the Chicago summit for NATO members and the world media, and include a peace incentive for the Taliban and Pakistan, while still assuring the Afghan allies and the military that he's committed to the long run. These contradictions are impossible to smooth over. But there were signals worth heeding.

For the first time, Obama acknowledged and embraced the "direct discussions" going on with the Taliban towards a "negotiated peace." That statement may seem mild enough to peace activists who remember the long years of talks that dragged on during Vietnam. For a commander-in-chief, however, talking with the perpetrators (or avid abettors) of the 9/11 attacks is potentially volatile in the extreme. Obama needs to defuse any potential backlash from the talks going bad.

Obama's stated conditions for talking with the Taliban were (1) their breaking with Al Qaeda, which means a credible agreement to prevent safe havens in Afghanistan, a condition the Taliban can accept; (2) that they abide by Afghan "laws," as distinct from the more rigid Afghan constitution; and (3) a protection of Afghanistan's sovereignty, which is different from the country's present form of governance, is closed to the Taliban. None of these starting points are insuperable obstructions to progress, not even Obama's more general call for human rights for "men and women." Agreeing to repudiate "violence" is far easier than surrendering weapons, as the Northern Ireland experience proved.

On his side, Obama offered a "clear timeline to wind down the war," a nod towards the Taliban's longstanding demand for an explicit timetable for withdrawal. Obama's generals and all Republicans abhor "timelines," especially during political campaigns.

Obama spoke directly to public opinion when he refused to leave "immediately," on the grounds that Afghanistan will need an "opportunity to stabilize," an observation the vast majority of Americans will accept, at least for a time, if US troop withdrawals are proceeding on course and casualties are down. And if Afghanistan fails to take the "opportunity to stabilize," then it will have had its "decent interval."

Finally, Obama spoke of the need for "global consensus," including Pakistan as an "equal partner" with legitimate "interests" in Afghanistan. The euphemism "global" masks whatever agreements being sought with non-NATO powers like Russia, China, India and, directly or indirectly, Iran.

Obama significantly noted that there are no agreements yet concerning specific American troop levels to be left beyond 2014, or levels of Western funding for those troops. Afghanistan's president Karzai has been shopping for \$2-4 billion in annual subsidies for at least a decade, figures that will test NATO's resolve during a deepening recession. These issues are left open to serious debate in Congress and Western governments, unless a surprise settlement is jammed through the NATO summit. The recently heralded US agreements to "share" control of night raids with the Afghan security forces and turn over imprisoned detainees to the Afghans involve so many unresolved ambiguities that Obama chose not to trumpet them as measures of progress.

The ultra-sensitive matter of permanent US bases, opposed by a Congressional majority, was finessed by a White House spokesman as a matter of keeping “access to, and use of, Afghan facilities” down the road, but without permanent bases. Past 2014, Obama committed himself to two “narrow security missions,” training and counterterrorism. With Iraq as a template, it remains to be seen how those play out.

Drones were not mentioned, but Obama is feeling pressure to deflate a concern that will not go away. An agreement involving Pakistan as an equal partner suggests that drones, which are hated in Pakistan, could be shelved or suspended as part of a settlement process.

In summary, the final deal, if any, is still a work in progress, on the fast track to a fix in Chicago.

Public opinion, in the US, NATO, Afghanistan and Pakistan, is already a decisive factor in shaping the speed and character of this endgame. But public opinion is shaped not by television news so much as the processes of everyday life, where anti-war activism can sometimes channel massive impatience with war and recession into a popular tide towards peace. If peace activists simply keep mounting local support for Barbara Lee’s legislation to cut funding and her Congressional letter to Obama, they are speeding the tide.