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The Coming Surge Into Afghanistan

Obama and the Graveyard of Empires

By GARY LEUPP

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Joint Chief of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen is reportedly recommending to President-Elect Obama that the U.S. increase by 30,000 its current force of 32,000 in Afghanistan. That, as Robert Dreyfuss points out in a recent column, is about 20,000 more troops than Obama was proposing while on the campaign trail.

Obama, who has enthused about refocusing the “War on Terror” back on Afghanistan, is likely to accede to the admiral’s request. There are at present under NATO command approximately 31,000 non-U.S. troops within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) fighting the Taliban and other “insurgents” in Afghanistan. (80% of these are from from the UK, Germany,

France, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Australia, and Turkey.) Popular opinion in most of those countries runs high against continued deployment, but except in Australia it is of course sold as an obligation of NATO membership.

Add to these the redoubled U.S. force and we'll have a have a robust occupation army of 93,000 foreigners. With the exception of Albania and Azerbaijan, which have sent only small contingents, all participating nations are historically Christian, encouraging the Afghan perception that their Muslim nation is under infidel attack. In the 1980s, the Mujahadeen encouraged by the Reagan administration viewed the Soviet-backed secular regime as an assault on their religion and way of life; Soviet troops peaking at over 100,000 in 1987, with the advantage of supply lines from the immediately neighboring USSR, and including numerous ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks who could speak local languages and had some understanding of local culture, could not repress the rag-tag CIA-supplied guerrillas and secure control of the country.

Nor, as Michael Beardon warned in his prescient article in *Foreign Affairs* in November 2001, entitled "Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires," could an honor roll of would-be conquerors from Alexander the Great in the third century BCE to the British in the nineteenth century defeat the hardy, fiercely independent Afghan tribesmen.

Beardon citing Louis Dupree, the premier historian of Afghanistan, attributed the "British disaster" of 1878-81 to four "mistakes": the occupation of Afghan territory by foreign troops, the placing of an unpopular ruler in power, harsh acts committed against local enemies, and paltry subsidies paid to local allies. "The United States would be wise to consider them today," he concluded. Again, Beardon was writing just as the U.S. was beginning its adventure in Afghanistan, and when the war in Iraq based on lies was still a twinkle in Dick Cheney's eye.

Does Obama, often described as lacking knowledge of foreign affairs, and praised (by all the wrong people) for reaching out to (all the wrong) "experienced" foreign policy wonks, really believe that he can succeed in Afghanistan where so many others have failed?

Here perhaps we find the audacity of sheer historical ignorance. The audacity of hope that "Yes, we can"---with a center-right Democratic administration, better than a far-right Republican administration---sufficiently stabilize Afghanistan to achieve the primary U.S. (imperialist) objectives in the region.

Obama seems to believe that the U.S. can defeat those resisting the foreign presence and its local allies, stabilize the thoroughly corrupt Northern Alliance warlord regime with Hamid Karzai as its symbolic head, and stem the flow of Taliban back and forth across the Pakistan border. Most importantly, it can finally get that *oil pipeline* done---the one that's to run from the Caspian Sea through Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to the Indian Ocean bypassing Russia and unfriendly Iran. The deal was signed in December 2002 but construction has been stymied by the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. That pipeline is, I believe, the big prize.

The war on Iraq has been in my opinion less "a war for oil" actually promoted by Big Oil than a war engineered by neoconservative ideologues to reconfigure Southwest Asia for longterm U.S. and Israeli geopolitical advantage. But it's in fact been disastrous for the interests of U.S.

imperialism, and bitterly divided the ruling class. It's produced the highly unusual situation where one faction of that class has bet its money on an African-American named Barack Hussein Osama (accused of "socialism" by his right wing critics) to rectify the situation. While I don't expect a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq under what will in fact be a center-right administration, the focus will be on the competition for control over Central Asian oil and gas. That means a degree of control over Afghanistan that has eluded Washington since the invasion of 2001.

In the view of the faction of hawks Obama represents, the Iraq War has been a colossal distraction from the Afghan War. The problem isn't just that Bush diverted troops to Iraq "before we got bin Laden" or wiped out all the remnants of al-Qaeda, a group notoriously difficult to quantify or even define. The problem is that he used 9-11 for one purpose rather than another. He used the toppling of the Taliban to segue into Iraq rather than to rigorously pursue the agenda for U.S. hegemony over Central Asia centering around control of Caspian Sea oil and gas.

Obama presumably wants to go back in force and do Afghanistan properly. That doesn't necessarily mean wiping out the Taliban mentality that (say) requires women to wear burqas (that mentality is, after all, pre-Taliban and not so different from the mentality prevalent in societies such as Saudi Arabia whose governments are pro-U.S.). The U.S. and ISAF don't need to produce a social revolution to maintain permanent bases (encircling China) or to construct and protect a pipeline providing privileged access to oil and natural gas. All they need to do is maintaining a puppet regime with minimal authority and establish a sufficient level of stability to attain such objectives.

But even that is proving a highly difficult undertaking. Thus Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, British ambassador to Afghanistan, reportedly told the deputy French ambassador to Kabul François Fitou in September 2008, "The foreign forces are ensuring the survival of a regime which would collapse without them . . . They are slowing down and complicating an eventual exit from the crisis, which will probably be dramatic... In the short term we should dissuade the American presidential candidates from getting more bogged down in Afghanistan . . . The American strategy is doomed to fail." These are observations by a top diplomat of the nation most deeply invested alongside the U.S. in the Afghan War. He proposed replacing president Karzai with "an acceptable dictator." The top British military commander in Afghanistan agrees; Brig. Mark Carleton-Smith stated in October, "We're not going to win this war."

Karzai himself has repeatedly protested the high civilian casualty rate as a result of U.S. bombing; has called for negotiations with the Taliban for an end to the insurgency, even (over U.S. objections) agreeing to insure Mullah Omar a safe-conduct should he agree to participate in talks in the country; and (although this has attracted little press attention) called for a firm deadline for foreign troops' withdrawal. "This war has gone on for seven years;" he observed in a statement last month, "the Afghans don't understand any more how come a little force like the Taliban can continue to exist, can continue to flourish, can continue to launch attacks."

While the supposedly sovereign leader of Afghanistan---this puppet who seems to chafe at his puppet role---is talking like this, Obama and what will soon be his generals are planning a drastic increase in foreign forces with no deadline for their withdrawal. (By the way: Afghanistan is

scheduled to hold a presidential election in October 2009, and Afghan-American neocon politician Zalmay Khalilzad, one-time UNOCAL executive, Afghan kingmaker in 2002, former ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the UN, may well be a candidate.)

Obama wants to “finish the job” in Afghanistan, a real war for oil in the guise of “the war on terror.” The unfinished job’s been easy so far, requiring only 629 U.S. troops’ lives (up 154 so far this year from 117 in 2007, 98 in 2006), and an additional 410 lives of allied troops. But the blood and treasure spilt in Afghanistan was a key factor in the collapse of the once-mighty Soviet Union. As Obama orders his troops into that graveyard, how will the empire, reeling from crises unprecedented in many decades, respond? As the candidate of change and hope becomes the commander in chief of an escalating expanding war, how will his antiwar supporters rethink their politics?

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