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Biggest State Party to Obama: Get Out of Afghanistan

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This week begins with a significant new straw in the political wind for President Obama to consider. The California Democratic Party has just sent him a formal and clear message: Stop making war in Afghanistan.

Overwhelmingly approved on Sunday by the California Democratic Party's 300-member statewide executive board, the resolution is titled "End the U.S. Occupation and Air War in Afghanistan."

The resolution supports "a timetable for withdrawal of our military personnel" and calls for "an end to the use of mercenary contractors as well as an end to air strikes that cause heavy civilian casualties." Advocating multiparty talks inside Afghanistan, the resolution also urges Obama "to oversee a redirection of our funding and resources to include an increase in humanitarian and developmental aid."

While Obama weighs Afghanistan policy options, the California Democratic Party's adoption of the resolution is the most tangible indicator yet that escalation of the U.S. war effort can only fuel opposition within the president's own party – opposition that has already begun to erode his political base.

Participating in a long-haul struggle for progressive principles inside the party, I co-authored the resolution with savvy longtime activists Karen Bernal of Sacramento and Marcy Winograd of Los Angeles.

Bernal, the chair of the state party's Progressive Caucus, said on Sunday night: "Today's vote formalized and amplified what had been, up to now, an unspoken but profoundly understood

reality – that there is no military solution in Afghanistan. What's more, the vote signified an acceptance of what is sure to be a continued and growing culture of resistance to current administration policies on the matter *within the party*. This is absolutely huge. Now, there can be no disputing the fact that the overwhelming majority of California Democrats are not only saying no to escalation, but no to our continued military presence in Afghanistan, period. The California Democratic Party has spoken, and we want the rest of the country to know."

Winograd, who is running hard as a grassroots candidate in a primary race against pro-war incumbent Rep. Jane Harman, had this to say: "We need progressives in every state Democratic Party to pass a similar resolution calling for an end to the U.S. occupation and air war in Afghanistan. Bring the veterans to the table, bring our young into the room, and demand an end to this occupation that only destabilizes the region. There is no military solution, only a diplomatic one that requires we cease our role as occupiers if we want our voices to be heard. Yes, this is about Afghanistan – but it's also about our role in the world at large. Do we want to be global occupiers seizing scarce resources, or global partners in shared prosperity? I would argue a partnership is not only the humane choice, but also the choice that grants us the greatest security."

Speaking to the resolutions committee of the state party on Saturday, former Marine corporal Rick Reyes movingly described his experiences as a warrior in Afghanistan that led him to question and then oppose what he now considers to be an illegitimate U.S. occupation of that country.

Another voice of disillusionment reached party delegates when Bernal distributed a copy of the recent resignation letter from senior U.S. diplomat Matthew Hoh, sent after five months of work on the ground in Afghanistan. "I find specious the reasons we ask for bloodshed and sacrifice from our young men and women in Afghanistan," he wrote. "If honest, our stated strategy of securing Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda resurgence or regrouping would require us to additionally invade and occupy western Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, etc. Our presence in Afghanistan has only increased destabilization and insurgency in Pakistan where we rightly fear a toppled or weakened Pakistani government may lose control of its nuclear weapons."

Hoh's letter added that "I do not believe any military force has ever been tasked with such a complex, opaque, and Sisyphean mission as the U.S. military has received in Afghanistan." And he wrote: "Thousands of our men and women have returned home with physical and mental wounds, some that will never heal or will only worsen with time. The dead return only in bodily form to be received by families who must be reassured their dead have sacrificed for a purpose worthy of futures lost, love vanished, and promised dreams unkept. I have lost confidence such assurances can anymore be made."

From their own vantage points, many of the California Democratic Party leaders who voted to approve the out-of-Afghanistan resolution on Nov. 15 have gone through a similar process. They've come to see the touted reasons for the U.S. war effort as specious, the mission as Sisyphean, and the consequences as profoundly unacceptable.

Sometime in the next few days, President Obama is likely to learn that the California Democratic Party has approved an official resolution titled "End the U.S. Occupation and Air War in Afghanistan." But will he really get the message?

