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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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NEW AFGHAN STRATEGY A "BETRAYAL" OF
THE DEMOCRATIC BASE – BUT IT'S NOT.
IT'S ACTUALLY A DECISIVE REJECTION OF
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BY *JAMES VEGA*

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By James Vega

When Obama presents his new strategy for Afghanistan in the next few days it is inevitable that many in the press will describe it as a profound betrayal of the Democratic "base". Obama will face fierce criticism from many progressive and anti-war Democrats who will consider his decision to significantly increase the number of troops as representing a complete capitulation to the military and Republican neoconservatives.

This reaction is understandable, but it is actually profoundly wrong. At the same time that Obama's plan will authorize additional troops, his new strategy already represents a powerful repudiation of the fundamental Bush/neoconservative strategy and a historic reassertion of civilian control over the military after 9/11.

For many Democrats – those who do not carefully follow the cloistered and jargon-filled "inside the beltway" debates over counter-terrorism and military strategy – this assertion will seem utterly and patently absurd – how can a decision that significantly increases troop levels in Afghanistan possibly also represent a challenge to a militaristic strategy?

In order to understand why this apparent paradox actually makes sense it is necessary to view the specific issue of Afghanistan in two larger contexts – the overall strategic debate about how to conduct the long-term "war on terror" and the proper relationship between the President and the military. The fundamental conflict that has been going on between, on the one hand, the Obama administration and the Republican/neoconservatives and the military on the other has actually been over these two larger strategic questions and not over the precise number of troops to send to Afghanistan. The size of the proposed troop increase in Afghanistan is only a single sub-issue within a much larger debate over what American military strategy and policy should be for the next ten, twenty and even fifty years.

On one side is the perspective that is variously called the Global War on Terror, World War IV or simply The Long War". It is widely shared among Republicans and neoconservatives and is supported by a major sector of the military establishment.

This view was codified in the period immediately after 9/11. Its central premise is that military operations aimed at hunting down individual terrorists and dismantling specific terrorist organizations are totally inadequate – indeed almost worthless – in dealing with the threat of global terrorism. It is only by fundamentally transforming the societies of the Muslim world – by introducing U.S. style political institutions and orienting their societies and economies toward the west and the global economy – that the roots of Islamic terrorism can be undermined.

This was the underlying basis on which the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq rather than maintain the focus on Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden. In the "Long War" perspective, if "regime change" and cultural transformation could be engineered in Iraq – and after that Iran – then more peripheral Muslim countries like Afghanistan would almost effortlessly fall into line.

In the initial plan for Iraq it was assumed that once Saddam Hussein was overthrown the people of Iraq would very quickly embrace western institutions and values with only minimal, top-level, direction from the occupation authorities. During the period from 2002-2004, in fact, the coalition authorities efforts were focused on building a massive network of military bases that were planned as a permanent hub for the projection of U.S. air and land forces over the entire region – and particularly as the launching pad for operations aimed at Iran.

By 2005, as Iraq continued to sink into chaos, it became clear that this “laissez-faire” military approach was not working and that a much more direct “hands-on” strategy was needed. The doctrine of “counterinsurgency” – an approach that had been employed by the British in India, China, Iraq, Afghanistan and Malaya, by the French in Algeria and by the U.S. in Vietnam and Central America -- was brought up to date in the “US Army-Marines Counterinsurgency Field Manual” and applied in the urban areas of Iraq.¹

As outlined in the Field Manual, a counterinsurgency strategy has two basic elements:

1. Heavy concentrations of troops must establish clear control over particular neighborhoods or areas.

In largely urban Iraq this involved building high concrete walls and barriers to separate ethnic neighborhoods and the establishment of elaborate systems of checkpoints, identity cards and frequent searches of vehicles and individuals. More recently in Afghanistan – in the small farming community of Nawa, for example² – it has involved constant foot patrols through the streets by U.S. troops – two patrols a day – by every single one of the 36 squads in the 1,100 man battalion.

2. U.S. forces must take major overall responsibility for managing the local economy and physical infrastructure of a particular area.

The Counterinsurgency Field Manual specifically lists four major objectives U.S. forces must try to provide (1) Security from intimidation, coercion, violence and crime; (2) Provision of basic economic needs, (3) Provision of essential services such as water, electricity, sanitation and medical care; (4) Sustainment of key social and cultural institutions.

Just within the category of “essential services”, the detailed list of the objectives needed for success is startling –

- criminals detained
- timely response to property fires
- water treatments plants functioning
- electrical plants open
- power lines intact
- all schools open, staffed, supplied

- roadways and bridges open
- hospitals and clinics open and staffed
- trash collected regularly
- sewage system operating

There are similarly detailed lists for security, governance and economic development.

Progressive Democratic critics of counterinsurgency doctrine have noted that for all practical purposes this two-pronged strategy is identical to that which was followed by British colonial forces in the period of the British Empire – and leading counterinsurgency advocates do not seriously disagree. In his book “The Accidental Guerrilla” , David Kilcullen, one of the major strategists behind current counterinsurgency thinking, describes the approach as a “temporary” form of colonialism and John Nagl – one of the three authors of the [Counterinsurgency Field Manual](#)³ -- wryly notes that the doctrine can reasonably be criticized as “neocolonialism dressed up in PowerPoint”.

But in one key respect modern counterinsurgency significantly differs from its colonial predecessors. In Britain during the period of the empire there was broad social consensus on the need to maintain large and permanent garrisons of British troops around the world and a willingness by the large majority of the British population to accept the massive expense and continuing flow of casualties that this entailed.

In America there is no such consensus and – although in seminars and conferences counterinsurgency theorists openly discuss the need for Americans to accept massive troop deployments and huge military expenditures for many decades to come – they and the largely Republican politicians who support this view do not try to openly and honestly convince the American people to support this long-range perspective. Rather, they tend to follow a more circumspect strategy. They define the overall mission of a counterinsurgency strategy in very broad and general terms – “shield the population from violence and coercion”, “create a vibrant economy, political participation and restored hope” – and then engage in a prolonged, essentially perpetual series of lobbying campaigns to gradually increase the number of troops as each partial troop infusion proves inadequate to achieve these near-utopian goals.

In the case of Afghanistan, by the time Obama was elected the leading counterinsurgency strategists were already quite [clear in stating](#)⁴ that a genuinely successful campaign to pacify the country would require at least 300,000 troops and would need to last for a period of 10 to 15 years.

The initial troop request given to Obama in March 2009, however, was only for 17,000 additional troops and lacked any clear acknowledgement that this number would be totally inadequate in the long run. On the other hand, the [statement of the mission](#)⁵ these troops were tasked with carrying out was breathtakingly ambitious – “Our counterinsurgency strategy must integrate population security with building effective local governance and economic development. We will establish the security needed to provide space and time for stabilization and reconstruction activities.”

In truth, there was not a single counterinsurgency expert in America who genuinely believed that this mission could actually be carried out with the number of additional troops requested. However, as David Kilcullen told David Ignatius⁶ at the time “we should use the extra 17,000 troops to stabilize the situation but delay the big decision about escalation until after Afghanistan’s presidential election in August.”

Circumstances in Afghanistan, however, changed for the worse. Even as the newly appointed commander Stanley McChrystal was preparing his own “commander’s assessment” of the situation – one that would argue that an additional 40,000 troops were needed immediately – and substantially more within 18 months – a series of military setbacks occurred in June and July and then in August the presidential elections were blatantly stolen, casting serious doubt on the possibility of stabilizing the country.

In response, Obama did something that the “Long-War” advocates had not anticipated. He announced a very public and very detailed top-to-bottom review of the entire strategy – gathering both his civilian and military advisors and consulting with a range of outside experts. His statements clearly suggested that this review would question every aspect of the strategy and might even significantly limit or redefine the mission itself.

Since the “Long War” advocates were accustomed to being able to define the mission of military operations and to choose the strategy within their closed community without any outside interference, this represented a profound threat.

Their response was to leak General McChrystal’s memo, essentially making his request for 40,000 troops and the open-ended mission he defined an official and public statement of the “Long War” position with which Obama would be forced to either agree or disagree. The Republican and neoconservative supporters of the “Long War” strategy then began a two-pronged campaign aimed at forcing Obama to accept the memo’s conclusions without change.

- First, they argued that (as John McCain **dramatically but inaccurately put it**⁷) “our entire military command supports this approach”. The implication was that, as a civilian, President Obama did not have the necessary expertise nor was it his proper role to second-guess the military experts. This was true not only in regard to specific tactics or operations, but in regard to the overall strategy and even the basic mission the military had defined for itself. In a wide range of editorials, commentaries and speeches Obama’s refusal to immediately sign-off on McChrystal’s strategy was treated as showing a disturbing and even sinister lack of deference and respect for the military.
- Second, the “Long War” advocates argued that there was simply not time for any careful review of our strategy and mission. A review was “wasting time”, “dithering”, “demoralizing the troops” “encouraging our enemies” and so on. The transparently partisan nature of these claims was evident to everyone who remembered that George W. Bush’s strategic review – the review that led to the “surge” – took over six months to complete, during which time not a single one of the same group of writers and politicians ever raised any similar objections.

The “Long War” advocates hoped that the chorus of attacks would essentially intimidate Obama into quickly endorsing the McChrystal assessment. But Obama refused to be stampeded. Instead, he responded in three ways

- First, he firmly insisted that it was not only his right but his “sacred constitutional duty” as commander in chief to review the strategies proposed by the military and particularly to evaluate and approve the mission that American troops were being asked to perform. To do this properly required evaluating if the proposed mission was realistic – which in turn required seriously examining everything from the likelihood of successfully training a new Afghan army to deciding how many cities and areas U.S. troops should try to protect.
- Second, Obama essentially “called the bluff” of the critics who predicted disaster if he did not cut short his review and immediately endorse the military proposal. He refused to cut short the process or apologize for taking the time to perform the task that was his responsibility.
- Third, Obama insisted on hearing from a wide range of experts including individuals outside his cabinet and who were opposed to the current strategy. He made it clear that he saw his obligation as being willing to listen openly to all points of view and not limiting his information to “yes-men” as the Bush administration had so dramatically done in formulating its strategy after 9/11.

In fact, Obama’s strategic review has already established four important precedents that will be of profound value for all future Democratic administrations.

1. The mission that is given to American troops is ultimately the responsibility of the President as Commander in Chief. It is not a strictly military decision that a President should be expected to automatically rubber-stamp.
2. The president has every right to review and evaluate the feasibility of missions proposed by the military – in as much scope and detail as he considers necessary – before approving them.
3. Strategic reviews should be managed to include a wide range of opinions and not just those of any one specific perspective.
4. Other than in cases of genuine and immediate crisis, claims that military plans must be approved without delay are groundless and can be ignored.

This represents a near-catastrophic blow to the basic Republican and neoconservative strategy for subtly dragging America into a decades-long “Long War”. In effect, they tried to stampede Obama into giving his generals the right not only to determine the tactics and strategy for Afghanistan but also to define the mission in any way they pleased – and he flatly said “no”. This is a major change in the relationship between a Democratic president and the military. The argument that a Democratic president is an incompetent civilian who is obliged to give the military a blank check to define its own mission is categorically rejected.

Based on current reports, Obama’s final decision will approve a significant increase in the number of troops – the exact number depending on the number of major cities to be covered and the degree of protection to be provided for the major road highways. For the many critics who believe that sending large numbers of additional U.S. troops may actually be counter-productive, this is a clear disappointment.

But it is also already clear that Obama’s strategy will do several other important things. It will establish specific criteria for success and failure. It will define the mission in a concrete and specific way that can be openly debated and revised. It will include an explicit “exit strategy” rather than an open-ended commitment.

Obama's specific plan for Afghanistan may turn out to be right or wrong – there are entirely reasonable and cogent arguments that a smaller military “footprint” could actually enhance our ability to achieve our ultimate objectives more than a larger one. But, in any case, the method Obama has used to reach his decision is one that has profoundly undermined the basic foundations of the strategy neoconservatives have been following to embroil America in a perpetual “Long War” – an endless series of open-ended, military campaigns that drag on for decades, constantly requiring more and more troops to achieve hopelessly vague and unquantifiable objectives of fundamental social and cultural transformation across the Muslim world.

In fact, years from now, Obama's strategic review this fall may be seen by historians as the moment when America first began to “step on the breaks” to slow the “Long War” and Progressive and anti-war Democrats should keep this clearly in mind as they express their understandable disappointment and frustration. The basic underlying struggle that has gone on this fall has not really been over the exact number of troops to send to Afghanistan but rather between the advocates of the open-ended “long war” and those who favored a carefully defined and limited mission. In this crucial and fundamental debate Obama clearly and forcefully embraced the second alternative.

1 <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>

2 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/21/AR2009102104144.html>

3 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587

4 <http://www.tnr.com/article/obama-vs-osama>

5 http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf

6 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/18/AR2009031802931.html>

7 <http://www.cnn.com/2009/OPINION/10/28/mccain.afghan.war/index.html>