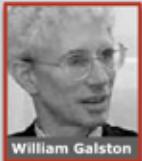


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The Democratic Strategist is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a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

The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

THE  
**DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST**  
**STRATEGY MEMO**

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OBAMA'S AFGHAN PLAN FACE A DIFFICULT  
DECISION – THEY CAN CATEGORICALLY  
REJECT AND OPPOSE THE ADMINISTRATION  
OR PLAY A ROLE IN THE EMERGING  
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By JAMES VEGA

**TDS STRATEGY MEMO – DEMOCRATS WHO DISAGREE WITH OBAMA’S AFGHAN PLAN FACE A DIFFICULT DECISION – THEY CAN CATEGORICALLY REJECT AND OPPOSE THE ADMINISTRATION OR PLAY A ROLE IN THE EMERGING STRUGGLE BETWEEN THOSE WHO SEEK A POLITICAL SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT AND A MILITARY ONE.**

By James Vega

The plan President Obama laid out last week for Afghanistan has confronted anti-war Democrats with a profoundly difficult strategic choice – one that will have far-reaching implications not only for Afghanistan but for America as well.

The first option is to conclude that Obama is either a helpless or a willing captive of the pentagon and to dismiss his entire administration as hopelessly and irrevocably committed to militarism. The second is to view the Obama administration as instead the arena where a strategic debate between the advocates of a political solution and a purely military one is now going on and to attempt to influence that key strategic decision.

For many anti-war Democrats there is a powerful temptation to embrace the first alternative. After all, on the surface there seems little difference between the views of Obama and his generals. Compared with the clear and disciplined agreement among Obama's cabinet members in favor of sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, any slight disagreements over the details seems trivial.

Disappointed Democrats can point to evidence to support this view. **A Dec 7th Washington Post analysis<sup>1</sup>** entitled “McChrystal’s Afghanistan plan stays mainly intact” begins by saying that McChrystal “will return to Kabul to implement a war strategy that is largely unchanged after a three month-long white house review of the conflict... the new approach does not order McChrystal to wage the war in a fundamentally different way from what he outlined in an assessment he sent the White House in late August.”

This would seem quite conclusive, but, it is, in fact, not the complete picture. Obama actually did modify McChrystal’s original plan in four significant ways. To see this, it is necessary to clearly describe several key elements of a standard counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.

1. The enemy – called the “insurgents” in COIN – are broadly defined as any people or groups actively opposed to a “host government” that is supported by the U.S. In the case of Afghanistan, the leading COIN strategists define the enemy as any and all of the seven quite distinct groups that comprise the Taliban as well as a variety of other forces influenced by jihadist Islam or who oppose U.S. troops on nationalistic grounds.
2. The mission is defined in purely military terms. The enemy must be defeated and his will to resist broken. The goal is victory, not a political compromise.
3. A counterinsurgency campaign’s basic strategy is not simply to defend static positions or train soldiers but to create stable governments, deliver services, build new institutions and promote pro-western development. A COIN campaign is said to be a failure if it does not win the support and loyalty of the population for the U.S. supported “host government”.

4. The timetable is long-term and open-ended. Historically a few counterinsurgency campaigns have been successfully concluded in 8-14 years while a larger number dragged on for decades. COIN advocates realize that long, indecisive wars are deeply unpopular so they usually define the timetable as simply "as long as it takes" or "until victory" rather than defining any specific number of years or decades.

General McChrystal's August memo actually incorporated all four of these elements, but none remained in the final plan. With the help of Joe Biden, Obama was able to modify these basic principles in four key ways:

1. In Obama's plan the enemy is narrowly defined as Al Qaeda rather than the Taliban. The Taliban is seen to represent a direct threat to the United States only if and when they threaten to take over the central government in Afghanistan and decide to allow Al Qaeda to operate freely once again.
2. In Obama's approach the goal is viewed as a political settlement that includes the Taliban to some extent rather than a total military victory. Although this outcome was only suggested rather than explicitly stated in Obama's major address, this revision of a classic counterinsurgency mission was officially signaled to the press by the Administration back in October. As [an Oct 8th AP report](#)<sup>2</sup> noted "Bowing to the reality the Taliban is too ingrained in Afghanistan's culture to be entirely defeated, the administration is prepared to accept some Taliban role in parts of Afghanistan... That could mean paving the way for Taliban members willing to renounce violence to participate in the central government... It might even mean ceding some areas of the country to the Taliban."
3. In Obama's plan "nation building" is explicitly rejected. The mission he defined does not include the goal of reshaping Afghan society or imposing Western values.
4. The campaign is planned for a fixed and limited time – the 18 month deadline Obama announced in his speech may be flexible, but a somewhat longer 3-4 year time frame is clearly seen as a major deadline for observing meaningful progress by Obama's key military and civilian advisors.

On the surface, these revisions to a conventional COIN campaign can seem relatively secondary -- particularly after they were gradually modified and hedged during the course of congressional testimony. But the fact is that they actually impose profound constraints on any full-scale COIN operation. It is, in fact, not possible to do a classic full-scale COIN campaign within these limitations. This is especially true in regard to the time limitation involved. U.S. troops simply cannot hope to successfully train troops, crush the enemy, build institutions and significantly alter the attitudes of the population in three or four years. Realistically, a COIN campaign in Afghanistan is at the very least an eight to ten year operation.

This is why conservatives and Republicans are howling so intensely in outrage – calling Obama's plan "a surrender surge" and "defeat through strength" and his speech "words of cowardice" and "shallow and hypocritical vacillation". They are distressed not only about Obama's imposition of a timetable or deadline but also his lack of full and clear support for complete and unqualified military "victory". The intensity of their attacks illustrates their deep concern that – given the careful way Obama has defined and limited the campaign – the open-ended, "full-throttle" counterinsurgency program they favor could easily be replaced by a politically negotiated settlement.

Support for a no-holds-barred counterinsurgency campaign is essentially universal among conservatives and Republicans. The most prominent national advocates of this perspective are Dick Cheney and John McCain but they are undergirded by virtually every Republican in congress and the entire conservative organizational and political infrastructure as well as by a vast number of columnists and commentators ranging from well known figures like Charles Krauthammer and Michael Gerson to Bush-era retreads like Eliot Abrams and Oliver North and of course every commentator and guest on the right-wing media outlets like *Fox*, *The Washington Times* and *New York Post*.

To build support for the full-scale COIN campaign they desire, in the coming debate the advocates of this position will use four key propaganda tactics:

- They will continually insist on redefining the enemy as the Taliban rather than just Al Qaeda.
- They will insist that the U.S. must seek no objective less than total “victory” – and that victory requires completely crushing and demoralizing the Taliban, rather than making any deals with them.
- They will insist that Obama actually endorsed a classic COIN campaign in his speech and that any such campaign requires winning the support and loyalty of the Afghan people. This then provides the basis for demanding a long-term US presence to support institution-building and the inculcation of pro-western values.
- They will emphatically insist that establishing deadlines or timetables of any kind necessarily reflects weakness and lack of resolution and does nothing except embolden the enemy.

Most important, they will actively attack and try to undermine any efforts to achieve negotiated political solutions in Afghanistan.

Yet the reality is that, even with the new infusion of troops, a campaign seeking to apply a conventional counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan is very unlikely to succeed. Although Obama’s plan is based on a careful review of the military and intelligence communities’ best data and projections, a very wide range of positive developments will all have to occur simultaneously in order for conditions in the country to significantly improve. A significantly more likely scenario is that training Afghan troops will prove much slower and more difficult than anticipated, that the ethnic Pashtun people of eastern and southern Afghanistan will not be easily won over and turn en masse against the Taliban, that the Karzai government will forcefully resist any significant reform and that – while US troops will maintain control over key cities and other major geographic objectives without great difficulty – guerilla fighters will continue to ambush supply convoys, attack small outposts and forward bases and plant bombs on highways, producing a continual stream of US casualties.

This pessimistic view of the future is the dominant one among independent journalists who report on conditions “on the ground” in Afghanistan. An article by Nir Rosen in the *Boston Review*<sup>3</sup> provides an unusually in-depth description of the current situation – a situation which in all probability will be essentially unchanged two or four years from now.

The unavoidable conclusion is that the only realistic alternative is to seek a negotiated political solution with the Pashtun population of Afghanistan, including the Taliban and the other major

ethnic Pashtun militia groups are currently without genuine political representation and consequently oppose the Karzai government. This rather than any Appomattox-like formal surrender or complete collapse of the Taliban, is what “peace” in Afghanistan will look like and what many anti-war Democrats will recognize as the most practical approach to ending the war.

In order to work toward this objective, however, anti-war Democrats will have to come to terms with Obama and his administration. Robert Dreyfuss, the highly knowledgeable observer of the Muslim world who writes for the Nation magazine expresses exactly the right way to approach this in a recent piece, saying on the one hand that he is not giving Obama a “free pass” for his decision to escalate but at the same time advocating a constructive engagement with the internal debate within the administration. **As he says:**<sup>4</sup>

“Doves will have to work hard to guarantee that Obama seeks a political settlement, negotiations with the insurgents (including the odious Taliban). They will have to work hard to persuade the president not to go down the path of escalating the war still further into Pakistan. And they will have to work hard to convince Obama not to swallow whole the ubiquitous counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine that McChrystal and company advocate.”

Equally, in responding to Obama’s plan, MoveOn carefully distinguished between the range of opinions its members held regarding Obama’s decision and the fact that, as they said: “Nearly all MoveOn members agree that we must have a clear military exit strategy with a firm timeline so we can end the war quickly”

On the other hand, Gary Willis, writing in the New York Review of Books<sup>5</sup>, provided a good example of the opposite, “Obama be damned” approach:

“If we had wanted Bush’s wars, and contractors, and corruption, we could have voted for John McCain. At least we would have seen our foe facing us, not felt him at our back as we now do... I cannot vote for any Republican. But Obama will not get another penny from me or another word of praise after this betrayal.”

The frustration and disillusion expressed in this response is understandable but the hard fact is that cries of betrayal of this kind, threats to walk away and statements that there is no difference between Obama and his generals or the Republicans can only lead to marginalization. Such views leave the field open for counterinsurgency advocates to argue their position within the administration without any meaningful opposition from anti-war Democrats.

During the next 18 months there will be tremendous battle within the administration between those demanding total “victory” and those supporting a political solution in Afghanistan. Anti-war Dems need to be active participants in this struggle in order to help to shift the balance toward the latter. They will contribute nothing to the debate by sitting on the sidelines.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/06/AR2009120602377.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/08/obama-to-accept-taliban-i\\_n\\_314506.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/08/obama-to-accept-taliban-i_n_314506.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR35.1/rosen.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/dreyfuss/503295>

<sup>5</sup> <http://blogs.nybooks.com/post/265874686/afghanistan-the-betrayal>