
Obama Expands War, Slaps Peace Voters

Contributed by Jack A. Smith, Dissident Voice

The Obama Administration has engineered a triple setback for the U.S. peace movement and the millions of Americans who opposed the Bush Administration's unjust, illegal, immoral wars.

In the last two weeks of February, President Barack Obama — upon whom so many peace supporters had counted to change Washington's commitment to wars and militarism — delivered these three blows to his antiwar constituency:

1. By ordering 17,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan Feb. 17, President Obama is continuing and expanding George W. Bush's war. It's Obama's war now, and it's getting much bigger.
2. By declaring Feb. 27 that up to 50,000 U.S. soldiers would remain in Iraq after "combat brigades" departed, President Obama is continuing the war in a country that remains a tragic victim of the Bush Administration's aggression and which has taken the lives of over a million Iraqi civilians and has made refugees of 4.5 million people.
3. By announcing Feb. 26 that his projected 2010 Pentagon budget was to be even higher than budgets sought by the Bush Administration, President Obama was signaling that his commitment to the bloated U.S. war machine — even at a time of serious economic recession — was not to be questioned.

Whether or not Obama's actions will revive the peace movement is another matter. Antiwar activism during the election year was minimal. And now that a Democrat is in the White House it may be further reduced, since most peace backers voted for Obama. The movement's strength will be tested at the demonstrations in Washington, San

Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities on the sixth anniversary of the Iraq war March 21.

Two recent Washington Post/ABC News public opinion polls provide contradictory and disturbing results. In the January poll, 61% opposed any increase in U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan, and only 34% thought an increase was required. But a month later in the Feb. 26 poll, ABC News reported that "Nearly two-thirds of Americans [64%] support Barack Obama's decision to send 17,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan — despite substantial skepticism on whether the war there has been worth fighting." Only half the respondents in the new poll believed the war "was worth" fighting, yet a substantial majority backed the deployment.

The biggest support for Obama's move came from Republicans, 77%. Democrats, who had been the most opposed in January, were 63% in favor. About 60% of independents were in favor as well. Among those "strongly in favor" Republicans were 52% and Democrats, 35%. "Among liberal Democrats it's just 29%," ABC News revealed.

The additional 17,000 troops will bring U.S. forces up to 55,000 in Afghanistan. This is opposed by the people of Afghanistan. In a recent poll of Afghan opinion by ABC, BBC and ARD (the German news consortium), only 18% approved of sending more foreign troops, and 44% wanted the existing number lowered. The new troops will be added as combat brigades are transferred from Iraq. The Pentagon still wants another 13,000 at some point. In addition there are 23,000 troops from eight NATO countries, largely in non-combat assignments. Secretary of Defense Gates, with negligible success, has been pressuring NATO to send more troops.

Many peace groups were critical of Obama's Afghan surge. CODEPINK Women

for Peace declared Feb. 19 it "is heartbroken and discouraged by the deployment," saying it brought "a screeching halt to his rhetoric for change and moving our country in a new direction."

In a statement Feb. 28, the ANSWER antiwar coalition declared:

"President Obama decided not to challenge the [Bush Administration's] fundamental strategic orientation in the region. That explains why he kept the Bush team — Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Generals Petraeus and Odierno — on the job to oversee and manage the Iraq occupation. They will also manage the widening U.S. war in Afghanistan and the aerial assaults on Pakistan. There have been over 30 U.S. bombing attacks in Pakistan in the last two months."

On Feb. 18 the UFPJ coalition stated that "military escalation will only exacerbate the horrors that now plague the region and that this escalation is not the answer for Afghanistan and it is not in the interests of the United States."

One of the most descriptive critiques was from Justin Raimondo, the libertarian editor of Antiwar.com, who wrote in an article titled "The Silence of the Liberals": "Antiwar voters who cast their ballots for Obama have succeeded in rolling the stone all the way up a rather steep hill, only to see it fall down the other side — and we are right back where we started. The next hill is called Afghanistan, and beyond that is yet another: Pakistan."

Progressive war correspondent Patrick Cockburn, writing in The Independent (UK) Feb. 26, declared: "It is difficult to believe that the Obama administration is going to make as many crass errors as its predecessor The reinforced US military presence in Afghanistan risks provoking a backlash in which religion combines with nationalism to oppose foreign intervention."

At this stage there are 142,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and all but 50,000 or so will withdraw within 19 months, three months later than Obama pledged. In late February administration sources disclosed how many troops were scheduled to remain in Iraq, much to the consternation of Congressional Democratic leaders who were astonished by the high number. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid, joined by New York Sen. Charles Schumer, Washington State's Sen. Patty Murray, Wisconsin's Sen. Russell Feingold, among others, all expressed the view that the number was too high.

Sen. John McCain, the defeated Republican presidential aspirant, supported the size of the "residual" force. He said Feb. 27 that Obama's plan "can keep us on the right path in Iraq. I worry, however, about statements made by a number of our colleagues indicating that, for reasons wholly apart from the requirement to secure our aims in Iraq, we should aim at a troop presence much lower than 50,000."

All U.S. troops are supposed to leave Iraq before 2012 under the withdrawal arrangement between former President Bush and Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki that was approved a few months ago — but that's nearly three years from now and anything can happen.

Top American generals, led by Petraeus and Odierno, are known to believe that U.S. forces should remain in Iraq past Dec. 31, 2011. The arrangement can be changed if the Iraqi government "requests" that American forces remain, and this is entirely possible. A number of leading Iraqi politicians, well aware that they owe their power to Uncle Sam's intervention, are said to prefer a longer occupation. The overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people, of course, have opposed the American presence throughout Bush's, and now Obama's, war.

President Obama chose to make public his withdrawal plans during a

speech to 2,000 Marines at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, Feb. 27. He said the troops that remain in Iraq would be engaged in training, equipping and advising the Iraqi security forces, but administration sources indicated that some would engage in combat operations.

Obama lavishly praised the troops as he has done before. Last month, as he prepared to assume command of an Armed Forces engaged in two illegal wars foisted on the world by the neoconservative imperialists of the Bush Administration, Obama declared: "Our troops represent the best America has to offer," an unfortunate incentive to the growth of a warrior culture in America. And to his Marine audience Obama made the following remark that turns history on its head:

"We sent our troops to Iraq to do away with Saddam Hussein's regime — and you got the job done. We kept our troops in Iraq to help establish a sovereign government and you got the job done. And we will leave the Iraqi people with a hard-earned opportunity to live a better life — that is your achievement; that is the prospect that you have made possible." The ANSWER coalition correctly noted that Obama "made Bush's invasion sound like a liberating act and congratulated the troops."

We won't go into the real causes of the war and occupation here, but in terms of the "better life" given to the Iraqis, here's how Robert Dreyfuss describes the situation in Iraq today in the March 9 issue of *The Nation*: "Key political actors on all sides remain bolstered by paramilitary armies. Unemployment is vast, and basic services — electricity, water, trash collection, healthcare — are intermittent or nonexistent. The army and police are infiltrated by militias, and their loyalty is suspect. Baghdad is a bewildering maze of blast walls and sealed-off enclaves surrounding the fortress-like Green Zone, and the city is reeling from years of brutal ethnic cleansing. The provincial capitals are rife with intrigue, and many of them — Kirkuk, Mosul, Baquba and Basra, for instance — are perched at the brink of civil

strife. And the elections themselves, in which millions of voters were disenfranchised, were deeply flawed."

Life in pre-war Iraq was hard — U.S.-UN sanctions killed over a million people between 1991-2003 — but it was better than what has happened to that country during the devastating U.S. invasion and occupation.

The Obama Administration's provisional Pentagon budget for fiscal 2010, which starts Oct. 1, was included in a 10-year general budget projection released by the White House Feb. 26. This preliminary war budget (a complete proposal will be made in April) increases "defense" spending by 4% over Bush's budget for 2009.

In addition, President Obama is requesting a supplementary appropriation of \$75.5 billion to finance the three wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and "on terrorism" until the end of September this year, and \$130 billion "to support ongoing overseas contingency operations, while increasing efforts in Afghanistan and drawing down troops from Iraq responsibly." Including the war costs, defense spending amounts to \$664 billion, \$10 billion more than 2009. These figures, however, are totally misleading — not in the allocations just listed but in the war money that is hidden in other sectors of the budget. All told, the war budget exceeds \$1 trillion in 2010.

Despite unlimited financing, the Pentagon has lost the war in Iraq. When the world's greatest military juggernaut is fought to a stalemate by an erratic irregular force of perhaps 20,000 effectives, it is a defeat that cannot be covered up — at least by history — through a cosmetic "surge" consisting of equal parts violence and bribery. But the Obama Administration seems committed to a clear victory in Afghanistan (as were the British and Russians of previous eras, much to their chagrin). In the Department of Defense budget proposal the monies

are to facilitate "achieving U.S. objectives in Afghanistan," and those objectives of necessity include wiping out the military humiliation in Iraq.

Some of the war budget will go toward increasing the Army and Marines troop strength by a total of 90,000 new recruits. Recruitment, for the first time in years, has been successful in the last few months because of the recession. So many young people cannot find jobs that they are lining up to join the military. The budget also includes another pay increase for the Armed Forces, of about 3%.

Eventually, Obama is going to make the gesture of nominally reducing the overstuffed military budget, mainly concentrating on cutting some of the obsolete Cold War-type big-ticket items. He had been expected to do so upon taking office, but evidently saw the need to prove his militarist credentials to the Pentagon, Congressional Republicans, and the pro-war sector of American opinion. In time he will have to make some cuts, probably explaining it is a concession to the staggering economy.

Since taking office, President Obama has shown the back of his hand to the U.S. antiwar movement, which consists in large majority of Democratic Party voters. Expanding the Afghan war, keeping troops many years longer in Iraq, and increasing war spending is exactly what those voters didn't want. It's certainly not the "change" they believed in.

If the Obama supporters who genuinely opposed Bush's wars now become silent or reduce their antiwar activities because a Democrat is in the White House, our peace movement, and the humanitarian cause it represents — already weakened since the "surge" — is headed for very difficult times indeed. And without that movement the political pressure for peace will quickly dissipate.

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