

Neo-Cons Get Warm and Fuzzy Over “War President”

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U.S. President Barack Obama’s plan for a 30,000-troop surge and a troop withdrawal timeline beginning in 18 months has caught criticism from both Democrat and Republican lawmakers.

But a small group of hawkish foreign policy experts – who have lobbied the White House since August to escalate U.S. involvement in Afghanistan – are christening Obama the new “War President”.

The response to Obama’s Tuesday night speech at the West Point Military Academy has largely been less than enthusiastic, with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle finding plenty in the administration’s Afghanistan plan that fails to live up to their expectations. Republicans have hammered the White House on Obama’s decision to begin a drawdown of U.S. forces in 18 months, while Democrats largely expressed ambivalence or dismay over the administration’s willingness to commit 30,000 more soldiers to a war seen by many as unwinnable and costly at a time when the U.S. economy is barely in recovery from the global financial crisis.

The White House’s rollout of the 30,000 troop surge did little to convince an already sceptical Congress, but foreign policy hawks who have accused the president of “dithering” in making a decision on Afghanistan are praising the administration’s willingness to make the “tough” commitment to escalate the U.S. commitment in the war in Afghanistan.

Indeed, their approval of the White House’s decision to commit 30,000 troops is the culmination of a campaign led by the newly formed Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI).

FPI held its first event in March, titled “Afghanistan: Planning for Success”, and a second event in September – “Advancing and Defending Democracy” – which focused on counterinsurgency in combating the Taliban and al Qaeda.

The newly formed group is headed up by the Weekly Standard’s editor Bill Kristol; foreign policy adviser to the McCain presidential campaign Robert Kagan; and former policy adviser in the George W. Bush administration Dan Senor.

Kagan and Kristol were also co-founders and directors of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a number of whose 1997 charter members, including the elder Cheney, former Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, and their two top aides I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby and Paul Wolfowitz, respectively, played key roles in promoting the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Bush’s other first-term policies when the hawks exercised their greatest influence.

The core leadership of FPI has waged their campaign in countless editorials and columns published in The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and the Weekly Standard.

These articles have often been highly critical, at times suggesting that Obama's unwillingness to give General Stanley McChrystal the 20,000 to 40,000 troops requested in his September report to Defence Secretary Robert Gates amounted to "dithering" and projected U.S. weakness to the Taliban, al Qaeda, and U.S. allies in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Senor described himself as, "pleasantly surprised" and "quite encouraged by the president's decision" in a Republican National Committee sponsored conference call.

"It seems to me that Obama deserves even more credit for courage than Bush did, for he has risked much more. By the time Bush decided to support the surge in Iraq in early 2007, his presidency was over and discredited, brought down in large part by his own disastrous decision not to send the right number of troops in 2003, 2004, 2005 or 2006," wrote Kagan in The Washington Post on Wednesday.

"Obama has had to make this decision with most of his presidency still ahead of him. Bush had nothing to lose. Obama could lose everything," Kagan concluded.

The theme of heralding Obama as a stoic decision-maker in the face of an administration and Congress that seek to "manage American decline" - as Kagan wrote - was also echoed by Bill Kristol in The Washington Post on Wednesday.

"By mid-2010, Obama will have more than doubled the number of American troops in Afghanistan since he became president; he will have empowered his general, Stanley McChrystal, to fight the war pretty much as he thinks necessary in order to win; and he will have retroactively, as it were, acknowledged that he and his party were wrong about the Iraq surge in 2007 - after all, the rationale for this surge is identical to Bush's, and the hope is for a similar success. He will also have embraced the use of military force as a key instrument of national power," wrote Kristol.

The heralding of Obama as "A War President" - which was the title of Kristol's article in The Washington Post - is a striking change of tone from some of the same pundits who were vociferously attacking the administration for every major policy initiative as recently as last week.

"Just what is Barack Obama as president making of our American destiny? The answer, increasingly obvious, is...a hash. It's worse than most of us expected. His dithering on Afghanistan is deplorable, his appeasing of Iran disgraceful, his trying to heap new burdens on a struggling economy destructive. Add to this his sending Khalid Sheikh Mohammed for a circus-like court trial," wrote Kristol in the Nov. 23 edition of the Weekly Standard.

"The next three years are going to be long and difficult ones for our economy, our military and our country," he wrote.

The hawkish Wall Street Journal editorial board - which on Sep. 10 suggested that Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize because he sees the U.S. "as weaker than it was and the rest of the planet as stronger", and on Sep. 18 described the administration's decision to scrap a missile defence agreement with Poland and the Czech Republic as following "Mr. Obama's

trend of courting adversaries while smacking allies” – also exhibited a noticeable change in tone in praising the White House’s decision to surge troop levels.

“We support Mr. Obama’s decision, and this national effort, notwithstanding our concerns about the determination of the president and his party to see it through. Now that he’s committed, so is the country, and one of our abiding principles is that nations should never start (much less escalate) wars they don’t intend to win,” said the Journal’s editorial board on Wednesday.

The board’s qualified endorsement of the White House’s war plan seems to reflect both the Republican concerns that Obama may use the 18-month deadline as an excuse to withdraw from Afghanistan before the Taliban and al Qaeda are defeated and foreign policy hawks – such as those at FPI – who are pleased with the administration’s decision to commit more fully to the war in Afghanistan.

Hawks, such as Kagan and Kristol, may have to argue in 18 months for an extension of the withdrawal deadline but in similarly worded statements they both expressed confidence that this would not be a problem.

“If we and our Afghan allied partners are succeeding [by July 2011], the timing [of the withdrawal] may make sense. If we aren’t it won’t. It will not be any easier for Obama to embrace defeat in 18 months than it is today,” wrote Kagan in the Washington Post in response to concerns about the timeline for withdrawal.

“[T]he July 2011 date also buys Obama time. It enables him to push off pressure to begin withdrawing, or to rethink the basic strategy, for 18 months. We’ve come pretty far from all the talk about off ramps at three or six-month intervals in 2010 that we were hearing just a little while ago,” Kristol wrote on the Weekly Standard’s blog on Tuesday.

For hawks like Kristol, Kagan and Senor who have been calling for a surge in U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan since August, Obama’s announcement on Tuesday night was a high-point in their campaign of op-ed’s, column’s and conference’s to push the Obama White House in the direction of an escalation in Afghanistan.

Kristol concluded his blog post on a confident note.

“In a way, Obama is now saying: We’re surging and fighting for the next 18 months; see you in July 2011. That’s about as good as we’re going to get.”

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