

Your war questions answered: Why is Obama getting a pass on Afghanistan troop increases?

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A Don't panic! special update: What is the U.S. mission in Afghanistan?

Dear reader(s),

In recent days, I've experienced a surprising emotion: nostalgia for the Bush era.

It's not nostalgia for his administration's catastrophic pairing of cronyism and incompetence.

It's not nostalgia for his "kinda-drunk John Wayne with a speech impediment" public speaking style.

Nor is it nostalgia for the way Bush turned great words like "liberty" and "democracy" into jingoistic mantras, or the fact that he so sullied the word "freedom" that the people rebuilding the World Trade Center have rejected the name Freedom Tower because it sounds too obnoxious.

Nope.

I'm nostalgic for focused anger and healthy skepticism directed at the White House.

Not the millionaire faux-populist anger of people like Glenn Beck, Lou Dobbs or the "I want him to fail, because I care more about Republicans than I do my country" anger of Rush Limbaugh.

I'm concerned that some of Obama's Bush-like policy initiatives are getting a free pass from the press and public simply because Obama isn't Bush.

Most recently, I'm puzzled by Obama's recently announced Afghanistan initiative, and the largely non-critical public response. Obama's Afghanistan war aim, he says, is "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future."

By fall, Obama says the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan will increase from 38,000 to 68,000. That number may increase by an additional 10,000 next year. The bulk of the new troops will be dispatched to Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. Taliban forces use Pakistan as a safe haven from which to launch attacks into Afghanistan. The hope is to have many of

the new troops in place in time for Afghanistan's fighting season (i.e. anytime it isn't brutally cold) and soon enough to thwart Taliban efforts to disrupt Afghan elections scheduled for August.

And apparently Afghanistan's army and police forces still need a lot of training, even after three decades of non-stop war. (You'd think they'd have figured out this conflict thing by now.) To help, Obama has ordered 4,000 troops from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division to tutor Afghanistan's police and soldiers. Obama wants Afghanistan to have 134,000 soldiers and 82,000 cops. I wonder if Krispy Kreme is selling franchise rights in Kabul.

At the same time the U.S. is trying to muscle-up Afghanistan's central government, it's also doing kinda the opposite — funding and arming local militias. The Associated Press reports a U.S.-armed and paid militia is already operating in Wardak Province. Their goal: to protect the villages from Taliban fighters.

To summarize: the Obama plan in Afghanistan is to send in more troops, train the army and police, and give village boys guns and cash in exchange for fighting on our side for while.

If that sounds exactly like Bush's so-called surge strategy in Iraq, that's because it pretty much is.

That shouldn't surprise. The Pentagon is still run by Bush's Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, and the U.S. military's top general in Afghanistan is former Iraqi Surging General David Petraeus. If you're one of the people who thinks the Bush surge in Iraq has been a huge success, then you're probably pleased with Obama's Afghanistan agenda.

If, however, you believe the Iraqi surge was a short-term patch to a long-term problem, you may have second thoughts. The news out of Iraq in recent weeks suggests sectarian violence is once again on the rise as Sunni and Shi'ite forces jockey in preparation for a U.S. troop drawdown.

Doubling-down on the Afghans with no obvious exit strategy is troublingly Bush-like to me.

Defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda is in every sane person's best interest. But it's also an exceedingly vague war aim. It's so vague, in fact, that it suggests the possibility of endless war. To paraphrase my friend John McCain, endless war is not change I can believe in.

It's certainly not the change I voted for.

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