



Obama's Exit Strategy

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If actions speak louder than words, President Obama is cutting America free of George Bush's wars and coming home.

For his bottom line Tuesday night was that all U.S. forces will be out of Iraq by mid-2011 and the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan will, on that date, begin to get smaller and smaller.

Yet the gap between the magnitude of the crisis he described and the action he is taking is the Grand Canyon.

Listing the stakes in Afghanistan, Obama might have been FDR in a fireside chat about America's war against a Japanese empire that had just smashed the fleet at Pearl Harbor, seized the Philippines, Guam and Wake, and was moving on Midway.

Consider the apocalyptic rhetoric:

"As commander in chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest ..."

"If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake ..."

"For what is at stake is not simply a test of NATO's credibility, what's at stake is the security of our allies, and the common security of the world."

After that preamble, one might expect the announcement of massive U.S. air strikes on some rogue nation. Yet what was the action decided upon? "I ... will send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home."

To secure America and the world, not 5 percent of the Army and Marine Corps will be surged into Afghanistan for 18 months -- then they will start home.

Let us put that in perspective.

During the Korean War, we had a third of a million men fighting. In 1969, we had half a million troops in Vietnam. But in Afghanistan, where the security of the world is at stake, Obama is topping out at 100,000 troops and will start drawing them down in July 2011.

"Of course, this burden is not ours alone to bear. This is not just America's war," said Obama. But if the burden is not ours alone to bear, where is everybody else?

Apparently, the Japanese, Chinese, Russians, Indians and Arabs do not believe their security is imperiled, because we are doing all the heavy lifting, economically and militarily.

The contradictions in Obama's speech are jarring.

He says the new U.S. troops are to "train competent Afghan Security Forces and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight. And they will help to create the conditions for the United States to transfer responsibility to the Afghans."

Thus, we are going to train the Afghan army and police so that, in 18 months, they can take over the fighting in a war where the security of the United States and the whole world is in the balance?

Moreover, the commitment is not open-ended, but conditional. "It will be clear to the Afghan government -- and ... the Afghan people -- that they will ultimately be responsible for their own country. ... The days of providing a blank check are over."

Most Americans will agree the time is at hand for Afghans to take responsibility for their own country. But, if the stakes are what the president says, can we entrust a war to preserve our vital national interests and security to an Afghan army no one thinks will be able, in 18 months, to defeat a Taliban that has pushed a U.S.-NATO coalition to the brink of defeat?

At West Point, Obama did not hearken back to Gen. MacArthur's dictum -- "War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war, there is no substitute for victory" -- but to Dwight D. Eisenhower's, that we must maintain a balance between defense and domestic programs.

Obama was not citing the Eisenhower of Normandy but President Eisenhower, who ended Korea by truce, refused to intervene in Indochina, did nothing to halt Nikita Khrushchev's crushing of the Hungarian revolution, ordered the British, French and Israelis out of Suez, and presided over eight years of peace and prosperity, while building up America's might and getting in lots of golf at Burning Tree.

Not a bad president. Not a bad model.

How can we reconcile Obama's end-times rhetoric about the stakes imperiled with an 18-month surge of just 30,000 troops?

Stanley McChrystal won the argument over troops. But Obama, in his heart, does not want to fight Bush's "Long War." He wants to end it. Obama is not LBJ plunging into the big muddy. He is Nixon coming out, while giving an embattled ally a fighting chance to save itself.

In four years, Nixon was out of Vietnam. In 18 months, Obama says we will be out of Iraq with a steadily diminishing presence in Afghanistan.

What we heard Tuesday night was the drum roll of an exit strategy.

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