



Truman National Security Project

Why can't Obama man up and make a decision? Either we stay or we go. What's so difficult about that?

The President has been taking his time. But I think the American people – not to mention the men and women we send in harm's way – deserve no less. We've been at war in Afghanistan for eight years and we're facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression for the exact same reason: the last Administration kept engaging in short-term thinking, and kept taking the easy way out. To get America back on track, we've got to resist the temptation to act first and ask questions later. By looking before he leaps, President Obama is putting American on the path to sustainable success in Afghanistan—without bankrupting America.

General McChrystal asked for 40,000 troops. Why isn't Obama listening to his generals? Why don't we just give McChrystal what he wants right now?

General McChrystal put it pretty well himself: "I don't think we have the luxury of going so fast we make the wrong decision." The good news is that Obama is listening to his generals; all of them. He's also listening to his diplomats on the ground, his development experts in country, his national security team and everyone else he needs to hear from to get a complete picture of what's going on in Afghanistan, and what we should do about it. If we pull the trigger, we better do it with our eyes open. And that's exactly what President Obama is working to accomplish.

Al Qaeda can pick up stakes and move somewhere else in the world, like Yemen or Somalia. So why is it so important for us to prevent them from gaining a foothold in Afghanistan? They'll just move!

Although al Qaeda can relocate to other countries, Afghanistan is the only place in the world where they have home court advantage. They've been there for years, they know the people, and they know the terrain. Moving headquarters from the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region to anywhere else in the world is possible. But it'd be like moving from a country where you speak the language to one where you don't. Just imagine how hard it would be to move your life and work to another country. Al Qaeda would prefer to stay in Afghanistan to avoid that same problem, and that's what makes Afghanistan special.

After this year's fraudulent elections, the Afghan people have no faith in their own government. Why should we fight and die to prop up a system they don't even believe in?

To say that Afghanistan's presidential election was a disappointment would be an understatement. To conclude that the Afghan people would prefer the Taliban would be a mistake. It would also be false, as polls show that 9 out of 10 Afghans are against the Taliban. We don't have to deliver paradise, we just have to deliver an improvement. And at the end of the day, we're not in this fight because we like Afghanistan's government. We're in the fight to make sure that the same folks who brought us 9/11 can't bring us a sequel. It's in our national interest to stop al Qaeda in Afghanistan so they don't attack once again.



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Pakistan is where the real threat is, so that's where we need to go.

Pakistan is a nuclear-armed, sovereign country with a people that are strongly anti-American—it makes no sense to even think of attacking within Pakistan, or even putting troops there in harms way. Thankfully, the Pakistani military is on the case. After years of seeing their main threat as India, bombings across their country have convinced them that al Qaeda is a threat to them. Now they're starting to chase down some of the terrorists in their own back yard. And thanks to US and allied forces in Afghanistan, those terrorists can't just cross the border and reset.

But if Pakistan is on the job, doesn't that mean we can afford to get out?

Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan works like a balloon – you need to push on both sides at once to pop it, and that's what we can now do. As long as Pakistan is pushing from the east, we need to push from the west. The longer and tighter we can squeeze that vice, the weaker al Qaeda and the Taliban will become. With its long history of tolerating terrorist groups, Pakistan could change its tune tomorrow. So we need to push while we can today.

We can get by in Afghanistan by focusing on the training of Afghans.

Absolutely. But you can't train if you don't have trainers. The Afghan Army packs a real punch these days – but its fist is still too small. Whichever strategy we choose, its main thrust will be providing forces to train the Afghan Army – which already goes on 90% of NATO's missions, and takes 60% of its missions alone. Meanwhile, those trainers need protection themselves – and we need some additional forces to ensure that the Taliban doesn't get stronger while we are training the Afghan Army to take over the job. So if we send more troops, that will be the reason why: to prepare the Afghan Army today, so we can bring our own men and women home soon.

Even if the Taliban came back to power in Afghanistan, it doesn't mean they'd harbor al Qaeda.

Even if I were a gambler, I wouldn't take those odds. After 9/11 we told the Taliban to hand over al Qaeda or face the consequences. They refused. And it's unlikely they'd behave any differently in the future. Taliban leader Mullah Omar has a daughter who is married to Osama bin Laden's son, while Jalaluddin Haqqani, another Taliban leader, is a longstanding friend of bin Laden. Then there's the cash and Kalashnikovs that al Qaeda brings to the table. And of course, they all want to impose a harsh brand of Islam on an unwilling population. So the Taliban deserve about as much confidence as a sub-prime mortgage. The promise that they can take over and al Qaeda won't return is just too good to be true.



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I understand that we have to destroy al Qaeda. What I don't get is all this talk about the Taliban and protecting the people of Afghanistan.

Yeah, that's something that people aren't explaining very well. It might sound funny, but in protecting the Afghan people we're actually protecting ourselves. If they think we're on our way out, they won't help us because they know the Taliban will come for their heads the day we leave. But if they know we're committed to helping Afghanistan get back on its feet – at the very least by training the Afghan Army to protect the Afghan people – then Afghans will stand up against the Taliban and al Qaeda. It's like the old saying: if the way to man's heart is through his stomach, the way to crushing al Qaeda is through the hearts of the Afghan people.

We've got Special Forces and we've got missiles. Why can't we just use those to attack al Qaeda? Why do we need large numbers of troops?

If we pull out and try to do things on the cheap, the Taliban will retake the countryside, and both the Afghan people and Pakistan will be forced to let them rule. And then we're back in a situation where al Qaeda can move freely and train another generation of terrorists. So we need our troops to stick around long enough to train the Afghan Army to take over the job. When they're secure, we're secure, and that's when we can bring our sons and daughters home.

How many billions of dollars have we spent in Afghanistan? This is costing way too much.

President Bush definitely squandered a lot of money and a lot of time in Afghanistan. We can't turn back the clock on that, but the cost of implementing a real strategy now is far less than the cost of handing al Qaeda and the Taliban a victory in Afghanistan. We last walked away from Afghanistan after the Soviets pulled out – and instead of spending a little bit on development aid to rebuild the country, we had to go back in for a full war just a decade later. Reality paints an unpleasant picture. Either we pay a lot now, or we pay a lot more later. For our security and our pocketbook, we need to make that investment now.

I've heard that some members of the Taliban might be willing to negotiate. Why not strike a bargain and get out? Sounds like a way to save American lives.

There are definitely some Taliban who are just in it for the money or because they want to keep Westerners out of their localities. Those are the kind of people we can pay off or peel away from the die-hards – just like we did in Iraq. But the die-hards aren't going anywhere. Plus, the Taliban isn't like an army, where everyone follows orders. It's many, many tribes, who make and break deals. And even if all the senior leaders said "let's make a deal," there's no reason to believe everyone would listen. So to the extent that we can pay off or peel away, we should. But a negotiated settlement is a pipe dream at best.



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Afghans view us as “occupiers” and want us to leave.

Afghans want us there to keep the peace – and they want us to leave because it’s their own country. These are genuine mixed feelings. But as women leaders in Afghanistan told Code Pink, they know that America is keeping them safe and they don’t want us to leave now. Ditto for the population as a whole. As dark as the days have gotten, a majority of Afghans still want us there; for now. What they really want is for us to help them get on their feet so they can take the fight to al Qaeda and the Taliban themselves. When that day comes, we’ll be as happy to leave as they’ll be happy to run their own affairs.

Afghanistan is the “graveyard of empires.”

Yes it is. So it’s a good thing we’re not trying to set up an empire. Unlike the British Empire or the Soviet Empire of yesteryear, we’re not in Afghanistan for power, glory, or a buffer zone. We’re there for a purpose: to disrupt al Qaeda so they can’t take up roost there again. And as soon as the Afghan Army is trained well enough to provide security on its own, we’ll be able to draw back.

It’s time to go. The American people are tired of this war.

They should be. After eight years of aimless fighting under the last administration, Americans have every reason to be fed up. President Bush led us into war without a plan, but now President Obama is working to lead us out of war with a clear strategy. That’s why he spent the last two months putting together an Afghan game plan complete with clear objectives, measurable goals, and a coherent rationale. He is finally giving the American people the explanation they deserve – and that is the measure by which we should judge him.

