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Obama is a master of ambivalence

By [Michael Gerson](#),

Since the beginning of his swift political rise, Barack Obama has fashioned himself a unique historical figure. With his latest [speech on Afghanistan](#), he has finally become one.

What other American president has employed a public argument so transparently political — the need to “rebuild our infrastructure” and “find new and clean sources of energy” — to explain his choices as commander in chief? What other president has deployed the words “fidelity” and “unwavering belief” — citing examples of military tenacity and courage — to announce a policy of premature retreat? What other president has more dramatically claimed “a position of strength” while more effectively conveying an impression of weakness?

There is a boldness to this rhetorical approach, which might better be called shamelessness.

President Obama has honored his own ambivalence — in a manner consistent with his general election strategy — by asserting the preeminence of one portion of the Afghan mission: counterterrorism activities against al-Qaeda. The [killing of Osama bin Laden](#) thus achieves, or nearly achieves, the Afghan conflict’s most important objective.

But by reluctantly agreeing to the Afghan surge in 2009, Obama accepted two strategic goals: counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. American commanders regarded these objectives as inseparable. Continued Taliban control over large portions of Afghanistan, in their view, would empower terrorist organizations and complicate American interests in Pakistan and the region.

Whatever the divisions within the administration — which spilled out in leaks more like dam breaks — the mission accepted by the military was relatively clear. Lieutenant colonels I talked to on the ground wanted two or three fighting seasons to dominate Taliban strongholds in Kandahar and Helmand provinces and expand operations to problem areas in the east, giving the Afghan army and police time and space to develop their capabilities. This would require as many American troops as possible through 2014, when a decisive transition to Afghan leadership would take place. Afghan authorities could then, hopefully, prevent a takeover of their government, protect key cities and establish decent political structures.

This was not, in Obama’s straw-man description, a desire “to make Afghanistan a perfect place.” It was a realistic attempt to rescue a positive but flawed outcome from a difficult war.

Obama’s meandering leadership in the Afghan war is difficult even to summarize. In 2009, against

considerable pressure, he made an effective counterinsurgency campaign possible by announcing [a surge of 30,000 troops](#). He immediately complicated that strategy by setting a July 2011 deadline for the beginning of withdrawal — signaling that American resolve was temporary and that it might be possible for enemies to outwait the onslaught. But Obama minimized the confusion by making his drawdown schedule conditional on circumstances in Afghanistan.

The surge he ordered came to full strength only last August. American forces quickly gained control of key areas in the Taliban heartland — causing the enemy to fight for territory it once securely held. Now, with less than a year in full effect, Obama is “fully recovering the surge” by next summer, apparently without conditions. “Recovering” is an inspired euphemism, avoiding the need for “withdrawing.” He is using the success of a military strategy to justify letting up on a reeling enemy.

This may or may not be fatal to the military’s counterinsurgency strategy, but it certainly undermines it. Can there be any doubt that by 8:16 p.m. Eastern time on Wednesday our enemies in Afghanistan were relieved, our allies disheartened and the undecided encouraged to play both sides of the conflict?

Obama is riffing on an uncertain trumpet. The surge is a success — and to be ended with its work half-done. America’s mission in Afghanistan is vital to our national interests — and too costly for a tired, preoccupied nation. “It is time to focus on nation-building here at home,” Obama says, in a line that would be trite and cynical at a campaign rally. In a wartime presidential address, it is beyond precedent and belief. A president provides for the common defense *and* promotes the general welfare, instead of positing a dangerous choice between the two.

Given the difficulty of the undertaking, the weariness of Americans and the erosion of support in both parties, it would take exceptional leadership to achieve a good outcome in Afghanistan. Even limping across the 2014 deadline will require some positive effort of persuasion. For years, our conflicted president has been largely silent in this task. His words were worse.

michaelgerson@washpost.com

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