

The Washington Post

This will not end well

By George F. Will
Thursday, December 3, 2009

A traveler asks a farmer how to get to a particular village. The farmer replies, "If I were you, I wouldn't start from here." Barack Obama, who asked to be president, nevertheless deserves sympathy for having to start where America is in Afghanistan.

But after 11 months of graceless disparagements of the 43rd president, the 44th acts as though he is the first president whose predecessor bequeathed a problematic world. And Obama's second new Afghanistan policy in less than nine months strikingly resembles his predecessor's plan for Iraq, which was: As Iraq's security forces stand up, U.S. forces will stand down.

Having vowed to "[finish the job](#)," [Obama revealed Tuesday](#) that he thinks the job in Afghanistan is to get out of Afghanistan. This is an unserious policy.

Obama's surge will [bring to 51,000](#) his Afghanistan escalation since March. Supposedly this will buy time for Afghan forces to become adequate. But it is not intended to buy much time: Although the war is in its 98th month, Obama's "Mission Accomplished" banner will be unfurled 19 months from now -- when Afghanistan's security forces supposedly will be self-sufficient. He must know this will not happen.

In [a spate](#) of [mid-November interviews](#) -- while participating in the president's protracted rethinking of policy -- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described America's Afghanistan goal(s) somewhat differently. They are "to defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies" because "al-Qaeda and the other extremists are part of a syndicate of terror, with al-Qaeda still being an inspiration, a funder, a trainer, an equipper and director of a lot of what goes on." And: "We want to do everything we can to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda." And: "We want to get the people who attacked us." And: "We want to get al-Qaeda." And: "We are in Afghanistan because we cannot permit the return of a staging platform for terrorists."

But al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan do not number in the tens of thousands, or even thousands. Or perhaps even hundreds. Although "the people who attacked us" were al-Qaeda, the threat that justifies today's escalation is, Clinton says, a "syndicate of terror" of which al-Qaeda is just an important part. But is Afghanistan central to the syndicate?

George W. Bush waged preventive war in Iraq regarding (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction. Obama is waging preventive war in Afghanistan to prevent it from again becoming "a staging

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platform for terrorists," which Somalia, Yemen or other sovereignty near-vacuums also could become. To prevent the "staging platform" scenario, U.S. forces might have to be engaged in Afghanistan for decades before its government can prevent that by itself.

Before Tuesday, the administration had said (through White House spokesman Robert Gibbs) that U.S. forces will not be there "[another eight or nine years](#)." Tuesday, the Taliban heard a distant U.S. trumpet sounding withdrawal beginning in 19 months. Also hearing it were Afghans who must decide whether to bet their lives on the Americans, who will begin striking their tents in July 2011, or on the Taliban, who are not going home, because they are at home.

Many Democrats, who think the \$787 billion stimulus was too small and want another one (but by another name), are flinching from the \$30 billion one-year cost of the Afghan surge. Considering that the GM and GMAC bailouts (\$63 billion) are five times bigger than Afghanistan's gross domestic product (\$12 billion), Democrats seem to be selective worriers about deficits. Of course, their real worry is how to wriggle out of their endorsement of the "necessary" war in Afghanistan, which was a merely tactical endorsement intended to disparage the "war of choice" in Iraq.

The president's party will not support his new policy, his budget will not accommodate it, our overstretched and worn-down military will be hard-pressed to execute it, and Americans' patience will not be commensurate with Afghanistan's limitless demands for it. This will not end well.

A case can be made for a serious -- meaning larger and more protracted -- surge. A better case can be made for a radically reduced investment of resources and prestige in that forlorn country. Obama has not made a convincing case for his tentative surgelet.

George Orwell said that the quickest way to end a war is to lose it. But Obama's halfhearted embrace of a half-baked nonstrategy -- briefly feinting toward the Taliban (or al-Qaeda, or a "syndicate of terror") while lunging for the exit ramp -- makes a protracted loss probable.

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