OBAMA IS LOST IN THE AFGHAN QUAGMIRE

In a poorly crafted speech tepidly delivered, President Barack Hussein Obama announced last week (6/22) 10,000 of the 33,000 additional troops he sent to Afghanistan will be withdrawn before the end of the year, the remainder of the surge force by September 2012.

Because winters in Afghanistan are so brutal, the Taliban fights mostly in summer. Setting a withdrawal deadline in the middle of the fighting season makes no military sense, said retired Lt. Gen. David Barno, a former commander in Afghanistan who is now a fellow at a liberal think tank.

Mr. Obama thinks it makes political sense. He wants those troops home before the presidential election campaign heats up after Labor Day.

"If there is anyone who can make the excellent idea of reversing the Afghan surge sound like a bad one, it's our president," said Ann Marlowe of the Hudson Institute, who described the speech as "more or less a concession of defeat."

"Part of Obama's alleged political mastery is that he believes he can make opposites cohere simply by uttering them," said Ms. Marlowe, who's spent months embedded with U.S. troops.

"Americans no longer believe in nation building in Afghanistan and do believe we have struck a major blow at al Qaeda by killing bin Laden. So just string those ideas together and ignore the massive waste of American money and lives that occurred on Obama's watch."

Perhaps because the president's decision is so blatantly political, perhaps because it is so timid (there still will be 68,000 American troops in Afghanistan after September, 2012), it has pleased neither those Americans who want to withdraw (56 percent, according to a Pew poll released the day before Mr. Obama's speech), nor those who want to persevere to victory.

There are reasons for timidity. All his military leaders are unhappy with the president's decision. But none are unhappy enough to resign in protest, which likely would happen if the drawdown were steeper. And because the pre-surge numbers of troops will be left in place, there's little likelihood the Taliban could make him look bad by scoring a major success before the 2012 elections.

But "the drawdown is too deep and quick if (Mr. Obama) wants to leave something lasting in Afghanistan other than the blood of soldiers and Marines," said Jim Chiavelli, who worked there as a civilian in 2005-2006.

And "it's too shallow and slow if our intent is just to get out," he said. "Putting too few troops in harm's way is bringing a knife to a gunfight."

The surge has produced undeniable gains. "Our enemies here are being monkey stomped," said

Michael Yon, a former Special Forces soldier turned war correspondent. Premature withdrawal of the surge troops threatens those gains.

Still, all the surge has produced is stalemate. The Taliban gets crushed whenever it goes up against our soldiers and Marines. But we cannot utterly defeat the Taliban, because it is based in Pakistan, where it is protected by the Pakistani military and its spy agency (Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI).

Maintaining the stalemate requires many U.S. troops, indefinitely. The Afghan army and police have neither the ability nor the inclination to fight the Taliban by themselves. Few expect the Afghans to acquire either by 2014, when President Obama said all U.S. troops will be withdrawn.

We proved in Vietnam you can win all the battles, and still lose the war. We may be demonstrating that again in Afghanistan.

Still, neoconservatives think we can prevail if we give the mission more time. But there won't be more time. All President Obama wants to do is postpone defeat until after the 2012 election.

U.S. casualties are up 500 percent since Mr. Obama's troop surge began. Those servicemen and women died in vain. More will if our leaders don't face up to facts they've been doing their best to ignore.

"Two U.S. administrations, Republican and Democrat, have thrown away time, blood and treasure while the Afghan government has grown more shamelessly and virulently corrupt," Mr. Chiavelli said. "And across a long, porous border Pakistan plays its own game, taking U.S. money while hiding al Qaeda [and Taliban] leaders."

"We have no hope of eliminating all the bad guys," he said, unless we invade Pakistan - which he doesn't think we'd ever do. "The situation now is so muddled and ugly that some Afghans passionately argue the West and the Talibs must be in cahoots."

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