

# The pro-war Nation and Obama's Afghan escalation

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The *Nation* magazine, the American liberal-left publication, has responded to President Barack Obama's speech Tuesday night announcing the dispatch of an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan with a flurry of articles. The commentary is both an effort at damage control and a new attempt to mislead the US population and keep it within the bounds of the present political setup.

Obama's speech represents a turning point for the American intervention in the region and for the Obama administration itself. The government elected on the slogan of "change," with the assistance of "left" forces such as the *Nation*, has now fully revealed its warmongering character. The Afghan escalation will lead to massive destruction and death, new atrocities, new war crimes—all in pursuit of the US ruling elite's economic and political interests.

The *Nation* strongly endorsed Obama in the summer and fall of 2008. In July 2008, the magazine authored an open letter to the Democratic presidential candidate ("Change We Can Believe In"), eventually signed by a good many of America's liberal luminaries (including Phil Donahue, Barbara Ehrenreich, Jodie Evans of CodePink, Eric Foner, Eli Pariser of MoveOn.org, Norman Solomon, Studs Terkel, Gore Vidal, Howard Zinn and others). The letter declared:

"Your candidacy has inspired a wave of political enthusiasm like nothing seen in this country for decades. In your speeches, you have sketched out a vision of a better future—in which the United States sheds its warlike stance around the globe and focuses on diplomacy abroad and greater equality and freedom for its citizens at home—that has thrilled voters across the political spectrum."

Last October, on the eve of the election, an editorial in the *Nation* asserted that "American democracy finds itself at another crossroads, facing a new democratic vista. The choice between Barack Obama and John McCain could hardly be clearer."

Obama's December 1 speech and the openly militaristic and aggressive character of his policy, as well as its obvious continuity with Bush's policies, embarrass the *Nation* and place it in a discomfited political position. It has been exposed as an enabler of imperialist war and reaction.

In an even more troubling problem for the magazine's editors, ten months of an administration that has handed over billions to the banks while doing nothing for the jobless, and will now proceed with a major intensification of the neocolonial war in Central Asia, have produced disillusionment and disappointment within wide layers of the population. Inevitably, that mood will turn to open opposition.

It is above all the danger of a popular break with Obama and the Democrats that propels the *Nation's* editors and writers into print.

It would be wrong to characterize the *Nation* as antiwar in any

serious sense, or as an opponent of American imperialism. The magazine's leading articles on Tuesday's speech, by Katrina vanden Heuvel, Tom Hayden, John Nichols, Robert Dreyfuss and Robert Scheer, make no attempt to dissect Obama's lies and contradictions. They include no demand for an immediate withdrawal of American forces from the region. There is no mention of colonialism or American geopolitical interests. "Oil" and "energy" never appear among the more than 5,000 words in the articles.

The *Nation* writers express virtually no concern for the decades of suffering of the Afghan people as a result of US intervention. (Hayden makes the only reference to the human devastation, the perfunctory comment that "Civilian casualties are under-reported according to the UN mission in Afghanistan.") Kunduz, the scene of a recent massacre, and Bagram, the US base where torture and murder have been carried out, receive no mention. Remarkably, the only use of the word "torture" in the various pieces (in Nichols's article) is in the context of *Obama's* supposed inner anguish in attempting to placate proponents and opponents of sending additional troops.

The *Nation* treats the Afghan intervention much as the rest of the American mainstream media does, as either an appropriate or a misguided effort to defend US interests or make Afghanistan and the region "secure" and "stable." It is a thoroughly establishment organ.

Nichols (in "Obama Has Spoken—Now, Let's Have a Debate") calls Obama's speech a "carefully-constructed and nuanced call...for the extension of the US occupation of Afghanistan." He expresses his respectful disagreement with the decision to escalate and urges a debate in Congress.

In his comment ("Exit: 2011?"), Robert Dreyfuss, fresh from his service on behalf of US destabilization efforts in Iran, writes: "Having had lengthy discussions with many, perhaps most, of Obama's advisers on Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past two years, it's clear to me that those advisers believe passionately that vital US interests are at stake in that conflict." He too, however, begs to differ.

This extraordinary confession of closeness to top officials in the American state appears in an ostensibly "left-wing" publication. Dreyfuss unequivocally vouches for Obama: "He, and his team, aren't supporters of global, military hegemony by the United States."

Vanden Heuvel, the *Nation's* editor and publisher, who could barely control her rapture over Obama's victory last November, terms the Obama speech "a tragic moment—both for the nation and his presidency" (but not, apparently, for the people of Central Asia, who will by far suffer the most). By "tragic," she means—although she does not care to spell it out—that the escalation politically unmask Obama.

Liberal filmmaker Michael Moore, in his open letter to Obama

issued on the eve of the West Point speech, speaks somewhat more candidly, asserting that an escalation “will do the worst possible thing you could do—destroy the hopes and dreams so many millions have placed in you.”

In her *Nation* piece, vanden Heuvel writes of “a President we had high expectations for,” who is “escalating a war that may well deplete this country of the resources needed to rebuild its promise, while doing little to nothing to make us or the region more secure or stable.” But why did she and her editorial board have such “expectations,” why, in short, did they understand and foresee nothing?

Tom Hayden and Robert Scheer, veterans of the 1960s protest movements, play at more leftist stances. Hayden, a former Democratic state legislator in California, dramatically declares (in “Obama Announces Afghanistan Escalation”), “It’s time to strip the Obama sticker off my car,” before hastily reassuring his readers that he will support Obama in the 2012 election!

Scheer (“Afghanistan: Here We Go Again”) provides a history of US intervention in Afghanistan, including the role played by President Jimmy Carter, the latter’s national security adviser and current adviser to Obama, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Richard Holbrooke, “now Obama’s civilian point man on Afghanistan,” in fomenting and financing Islamic fundamentalism.

However, Scheer, the former editor of *Ramparts* magazine, draws no conclusions from the history, except to observe cynically, “So here we go again, selling firewater to the natives and calling it salvation.” What is the US doing in Afghanistan? He has no idea: “Thanks to the political opportunism of the current Commander-in-Chief the Afghanistan war is still without end or logical purpose.”

What do the *Nation*’s writers propose as a response to the Afghan escalation?

Vanden Heuvel bemoans the continuing grip of the “National Security State” and the lack of “countervailing voices or centers of power and authority to challenge the liberal hawks and interventionists.” She advocates, in all apparent seriousness, the establishment of a new think tank on “national security issues,” as well as the building of “a broad-based movement for change” of an unspecified character.

The favored solution of the various writers, in keeping with the *Nation*’s central task of reinforcing or resurrecting illusions in the Democratic Party, is the application of pressure on “progressive” Democratic members of Congress, with the aim of slowing down or blocking funding for the Afghanistan war.

Typically, Hayden places hope in “Representative Jim McGovern’s resolution favoring an exit strategy [that] has 100 co-sponsors and Rep. Barbara Lee’s tougher bill to prevent funding for escalation,” which now has 23 sponsors.

He continues: “Key political questions in the immediate future are whether Representative David Obey, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, will oppose Afghanistan funding without a surtax [sic] is only bluffing, and whether Senator Russ Feingold will step up with legislation for a withdrawal timetable.”

Nichols too depends on the “substantial Democratic discomfort with Obama’s plan to surge tens of thousands of additional troops” to Afghanistan, also mentioning Reps. McGovern and Obey, Senator Feingold and Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders. Nichols goes farther, however, holding out hope that far-right Republicans will bloc with the “antiwar” Democrats. He cites approvingly the positions of North Carolina Republican Walter Jones Jr., a self-described “Pat Buchanan American.”

There is hardly a more fantastical, futile policy than reliance on the Democrats (and Republicans) in Congress to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Obama’s decision to accelerate the latter conflict demonstrates once again, the Democratic Party is an imperialist party, devoted to the interests of the American corporate-financial oligarchy.

The *Nation* editorial board, composed of liberals, ex-leftists and opportunists of various stripes, expresses the interests of a section of the American upper-middle class. Their collective superficiality, self-delusion and impressionism have a social basis. The *Nation* writers speak for a highly privileged, complacent section of the population, largely insulated from the consequences, military and economic, of the Obama administration’s policies.

The American “left” to a prominent man or woman endorsed Obama in 2008, or greeted the victory of an African-American candidate with enthusiasm as a “historic” moment. Individuals with the reputation for opposition to the status quo, such as Moore, professors Zinn and Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and many others, lined up behind the Democratic candidate, misleading the American population.

Words and political endorsements have consequences. The *Nation* has thousands of readers, the individuals just referred to have a large audience. This “left” shares responsibility for Obama’s policies, including the bloody results of his decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan.

The escalation in Afghanistan vindicates the perspective of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party: uncompromising opposition to the Obama administration and the Democratic Party. We base ourselves on a class analysis of this administration and the Democrats.

The old “antiwar” movement has collapsed, as serious protest against the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia cuts across its support for Obama. Resistance to Obama’s wars can be based only on socialist opposition to imperialism as a global system and a turn to the working class, the only social force that can do away with the source of imperialist war and oppression.



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