

## Obama's War

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, OCT 12 2010

Bob Woodward's new book, *Obama's Wars*, chronicles the President's effort to fashion a policy for the Afghanistan War. It describes the agonizingly slow process composed of high level government reviews, meetings and reports that culminated with President's decision in late 2009 to add 30,000 more American troops to the conflict this year and begin withdrawals in July 2011. It is a sad tale of ambivalence and contradiction. The President, who found it easy in the election campaign to argue that Afghanistan, not Iraq, was the right war, struggles with the realization that he has trapped himself by making too much of Afghanistan. Many of his advisors tell him that the solution to stability in Afghanistan is stability in Pakistan, but there is no solution to stability in Pakistan, at least one that the United States prefers and can engineer.

Afghanistan is a place burdened by years of war, deep ethnic conflicts, widespread illiteracy and corruption, the opium trade, difficult terrain, and a long porous border with Pakistan. The American military has ways of coping with all of these obstacles but one. The military's professionalism and access to America's great wealth builds a can-do attitude that sees Afghanistan as a resource problem. With more troops and more development assistance, they say, we can turn things around. The military's desired number is 80,000 more troops (in addition to the nearly 100,000 NATO and US troops already committed or in place), but they are willing to settle for 30-40,000 for a tempered effort that emphasizes training Afghan soldiers and police. They just need five or six more years and they will have enough Afghan security forces trained to reduce US troop levels to the point perhaps where the Obama administration came in. There is no talk of leaving. To the contrary, the military's expectation is that we will be in Afghanistan for decades to come.

But there is no solution offered for what to do with Pakistan, a nation with nuclear weapons, seven times the population of Afghanistan, an obsession with India, unfathomable domestic politics, its hands deep into the Afghan insurgency, providing sanctuaries for America's sworn enemies, and that controls the most important military supply routes for US forces in Afghanistan. Likely there is more to it than Woodward knows or reveals. There are surely threats to make, friendships to call upon, bribes to offer, and technologies to employ. Pakistan is mostly left as the elephant in the room.

It becomes clear early on in the process that President Obama wants out of Afghanistan. He feared being boxed in by the military. He doubts that the Democrats will stay the course much longer, and worries that his domestic agenda will be curtailed by the Afghanistan War. In Woodward's account, the President never fails to remind everyone involved in the discussions of the war's huge financial cost which he sees as part of its human toll, dollars diverted from programs needed in fixing America. The July 2011 drawdown start is his way of forcing the military to understand that it is not a blank check that he is offering.

Almost immediately after the plan was announced, senior defense officials and military officers started to qualify the significance of July 2011. It was not a firm date to begin withdrawals or one that meant to indicate that US troop numbers would change dramatically after that month or even in the next year. Rather it was a chance again to assess conditions. If the Afghan security forces were making important progress then security responsibility for some select districts or maybe just some villages could be turned over to them, but only with important progress. Just as Obama feared, the US military saw the US commitment as much more open ended than did the President. For Obama, the troop increase was kicking the Afghanistan War termination decision down the road 18 months. He is not going to

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risk running for reelection in 2012 with the war looking large and endless. For the US military, however, the surge was a step toward regaining the initiative in the South and eventually eliminating the possibility of the Taliban controlling any significant part of Afghanistan.

Obama can force the issue. He appoints all the key officials. General McChrystal, the Commander in Afghanistan, blotted his paper and is gone. General Jones, the National Security Advisor, has just been replaced. Secretary of Defense Gates has said that he is leaving after the beginning of the New Year, and Admiral Mullin, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, is scheduled to be replaced next year. Only General Petraeus, the new commander in Afghanistan will be around for the July review. And although Petraeus is very popular, no American general wins in a fight with the president. The military may have a preferred outcome for Afghanistan, but it will be Obama's choice whether or not the nation pays the required price for the outcome. It is indeed Obama's war.

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## About the author:

**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.