

November 16, 2009

Today we explore at length the decision making process regarding force levels in Afghanistan. This foolishness has taken so long, card carrying liberals like David Broder and Doyle McManus are fed up. We elected this sophomoric president and now we watch as he apparently thinks there is some perfect decision. There isn't. There are only less bad choices. The important thing is we make sure no country allows al-Qaeda to set up shop again.

We start with an illustration by Gary Schmitt in American.com who notes that after the 9/11 attack we asked Afghanistan to turn over bin Laden. (Remember Bush; "You're either with us or with the terrorists.") They refused. So on October 7th we started airstrikes and on November 14th Kabul fell to our forces. That took 64 days. Obama got McChrystal's request August 30th. That was 78 days ago; and six or seven years since Obama and the Dems began telling us we were ignoring the war of necessity in Afghanistan. Makes you long for "the Decider."

Sarah Palin's book is upon us. Telegraph, UK's Toby Harnden, who has recently become a favorite, has amusing and perceptive thoughts about her future role.

Obama wants to be the anti-Bush president. Unfortunately Obama is succeeding in one instance, as evidenced by [Gary Schmitt's post](#) in the American.com.

A friend from overseas emailed me to note that it was a span of 65 days between when the World Trade Center towers fell in New York on 9/11 and Kabul fell to American and coalition forces on 11/14. And between the attacks on 9/11 and the start of airstrikes against Kabul on 10/7, less than a month. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of American and allied forces in Afghanistan, delivered his Afghanistan strategy to President Obama on 8/30 this year and President Obama has yet to make a decision. That's 73 days and counting. Maybe there is something to being "the decider" after all.

[Jennifer Rubin](#) comments on the news that the ambassador to Afghanistan is against troop buildup, and Obama is giving this some thought.

Are we back to square one, or is someone in the Obami camp simply trying to gum up the works? Maybe the president would like some more research. Maybe another round of meetings. Who knows? The process seems to have taken on a life of its own, and the president appears unwilling to make a decision, any decision.

Certainly even the most die-hard defenders of the president must be appalled. This is no way to run a war. We are close to a decision. No we aren't. Gen. Stanley McChrystal will get his men. Oh, maybe not. It is hard to recall a more excruciating decision-making process.

And yet we are told, "The White House has chafed under criticism from Republicans and some outside critics that Obama is dragging his feet to make a decision." They seem blissfully unaware that the Obami are becoming a ludicrous spectacle, a cringe-inducing display of equivocation. So maybe they'll take a few more weeks. Consider some more options. Have some more meetings. And what about the troops who are in the field, week after week, awaiting a strategy and support? Oh yes, them. Well, the president can't be rushed.

NRO staff posted [Krauthammer's comments](#) about Afghanistan.

...And the other uncertainty is about Obama's commitment himself. The issue is: If he takes this long, and if he gives all these excuses — which you talked about just a moment ago, about how we may not have a partner in Afghanistan, we may not have a partner in Pakistan — you're expressing doubts about our allies in the region, and you're implying that somehow this is a kind of social work, that the reason that we're at war is to bolster these allies.

It's protection of the American homeland. It's what Petraeus had talked about — keeping out al-Qaeda and preventing the regrouping of al-Qaeda and their allies. It's our war, and it's in the name of our security.

If the president expresses all of this uncertainty and takes this long in agonizing, you got to wonder, is his heart in it? He has to make a speech after his decision to demonstrate that he really is committed to success in this, because all of this delay and these excuses about Afghan/Pakistani partners gives the impression of an administration that will be looking for an excuse of a certain point of withdrawing or pulling back.

In [Contentions](#), [Max Boot](#) had this reaction to the possibility of more extended reviews.

This quote from an unnamed White House official, [reported in today's New York Times](#), filled me with dread:

"I'm not saying that we'll be in a perpetual state of review, but the time the president has taken so far should signal to people that he will not hesitate to take a hard look at things and question assumptions if things are not moving in the right direction," a senior White House official said.

Please, please say it ain't so — that we won't see another review like the present one for a long, long time. Bad enough that the White House has been ostentatiously and publicly reviewing all options in Afghanistan since August — for the second time this year! — while efforts to win the war are effectively put on hold. Worse is the possibility that we could see another such process as soon as next year.

Every president reacts, I suppose, to the perceived mistakes of his predecessors. George W. Bush thought that Bill Clinton was too professorial and vowed not to hold any of the aimless, grad-school-type chat sessions that were a hallmark of the Clinton decision-making process. Bush styled himself as the decider-in-chief and placed a premium on reaching decisions with a minimum of hand-wringing or second thoughts. The result was, as we know, some terrible decisions — especially in Iraq between 2003 and 2007. So now Obama, reacting to what he perceives as the lack of thought and debate that characterized decision-making in the Bush White House, is going too far in the other direction by publicizing every permutation of his Afghanistan thought process, and letting his subordinates suggest that the second-guessing and questioning will never stop.

Obviously it's a good thing to be thoughtful and reflective and to take all factors into account before reaching a decision. But at some point the commander in chief has to say, "Enough! I've reached my decision, and now I'm going to give my commanders time and room to carry out the plan." President Obama has not yet reached that point, and as the quote from his unnamed aide suggests, he may never reach that point. If he doesn't, he will be doing terrible damage to our war effort. Success in war requires determination and will above all — even more than resources. If the commander in chief does not convey the determination to prevail, no matter what setbacks may arise, then the commitment of extra resources will not be all that effective because our enemies will be encouraged to think that they can simply wait us out and expect our will to snap at some point not too far in the future.

In the [Corner](#), [Rich Lowry](#) thinks that the Procrastinator in Chief needs to decide on the big picture and leave the details to the generals.

At this point, Obama needs to settle for a "dumb" Afghan strategy. He's clearly trying to be too cute and clever, and micro-managing aspects of the military campaign that are beneath his pay-grade. If he believes success in [Afghanistan](#) is important and a counter-insurgency campaign is the best way to achieve it, he should give McChrystal the troops he says he needs (actually, he should probably give him more if possible, to reduce the risk of failure). This business of examining the troop numbers province-by-province, and devising various "off ramps," and parsing out what troop commitment will best pressure Karzai is a foolish attempt at an impossible exactitude. No plan so finely tuned from on high is going to survive its first contact with reality. Obama needs a "dumb" approach — figure out the basic strategy, resource it, and leave it at that. If it's a successful strategy, most of the other things will probably follow — the off ramps, the welcome effect on Karzai, etc. This is not to say the implementation of the strategy shouldn't be savvy and adaptive. But that's for his generals. Obama just needs to make the simple — if not easy — decision and provide the political leadership to back it up. The world is waiting.

And in another post in [Contentions](#), [Peter Wehner](#) makes some important points about the Afghanistan indecision.

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President Obama not only needs to make a decision soon; once he does, assuming he does, we face the logistical challenges of getting the troops in place. Precious time has already been lost. If after all the time that's been lost, Obama is now jettisoning all the options he has been presented with, including the McChrystal option, then what we are witnessing is extraordinarily irresponsible. Sometimes you can lose a war by not choosing. And that is the path we may well be on right now, if media reports are correct. ...

[Jamie Fly](#) also posts about Afghanistan indecision in the [Corner](#), and ends with an e-mail from a veteran.

As a retired Air Force Chief Master Sergeant emailed to me after reading one of my Corner posts:

Our service members are dying and the president is dithering. I have been in the military while a president dithered or failed to make a tough decision, it is eviscerating, and a rot settles in. "[Commander in Chief](#)" is not just a fancy title. The president is the ultimate officer and like any poor officer his failure to make tough decisions is seen as a weakness by his NCOs and men. Morale, that most fragile base of any good military unit suffers immediately. When our officers are fearful and indecisive, we become fearful and indecisive.

NCOs find reasons not to patrol or to avoid high-risk areas, Convoys are diverted to avoid possible confrontation, our allies desert us and the advantage is ceded to the enemy.

And this happens quickly, weeks are all that's left to keep the advantage in Afghanistan. After a certain point in time "mission weariness" begins to settle in and the edge is lost on our weapon and almost impossible to regain. Quite frankly I fear that the time to make a difference is quickly slipping away and even if he eventually approves the fully levy of Gen McChrystal's request the momentum may have been permanently lost.

Now it's the liberal's turn to lose patience. Time to back McChrystal, says [David Broder](#).

...In all this dithering, it's easy to forget a few fundamentals. Why are we in Afghanistan? Not because of its own claim on us but because the Taliban rulers welcomed the al-Qaeda plotters who hatched the destruction of Sept. 11, 2001. The Taliban also oppressed its own people, especially women, but we sent troops because Afghanistan was the hide-out for the terrorists who attacked our country.

We knew that governing Afghanistan would never be easy. It had resisted outside forces through the ages, and its geography, tribal structure, absence of a democratic tradition and poverty all argued that once we went in, it would be hard to get out. ...

...That imperative is reinforced by the presence of Pakistan, a shaky nuclear-armed power across a porous mountain border. If the Taliban comes back in Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda cells already in Pakistan will operate even more freely -- and nuclear weapons could fall into the most dangerous hands.

Given all of this, I don't see how Obama can refuse to back up the commander he picked and the strategy he is recommending. It may not work if the country truly is ungovernable. But I think we have to gamble that security will bring political progress -- as it has done in Iraq. ...

[Jennifer Rubin](#) picks up another from the Washington Post.

Jackson Diehl points out that the decision on an Afghanistan-war policy isn't really as difficult as the Iraq challenge that George W. Bush faced when "there was no clear way forward." For one thing, there was no precedent of an Iraq surge precedent to look at. But Obama has plenty of data, the experience of Iraq, and the best military team ever to wrestle with such issue already in place. For all the whining and protestations from the Obami that this is such a hard decision, it really isn't. Diehl observes: ...

And now [Doyle McManus](#) from the LA Times.

... the battle in Washington is causing real problems for U.S. foreign policy, beginning with mixed messages to both allies and adversaries.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates described the dilemma succinctly last week: "How do we signal resolve -- and at the same time signal to the Afghans and the American people that this isn't an open-ended commitment?"

The long debate has made Obama look indecisive and uncertain -- because he has been. And the leaks of conflicting positions have given his critics ammunition for the postmortem debate over any decision he makes. If Obama chooses to go small, hawks will accuse him of ignoring the advice of his own military commander, Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who asked for 40,000 additional troops. If he goes big, doves will accuse him of ignoring the advice of Ambassador Eikenberry, who said the additional troops wouldn't do much good.

When he ran for president, "no drama Obama" prided himself on a campaign organization that never aired internal disputes and always closed ranks in common cause. Not in this process, which has turned into a very un-Obamalike battle of leaks and counterleaks. This much transparency, alas, creates a problem: Washingtonians love to keep track of winners and losers. A well-managed process gives losers a chance to lick their wounds in private, without suffering public damage to their reputations. This one is more likely to end in public recriminations. ...

[Rick Richman](#) is back with more commentary on the bit parts that world events play in the Obama epic.

President Obama's decision to send a video of himself to Berlin on the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which he said that "few would have foreseen [on that day in 1989] that . . . their American ally would be led by a man of African descent," is not the first time he assigned that world-historical event a bit part in his own saga. The Wall also played a walk-on role in his election-night victory speech, included in a long litany of "Yes We Can" paragraphs ("A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination"). He mentioned it in his Berlin citizens-of-the-world speech, attributing the fall to the world standing as one.

Benjamin Kerstein has [written](#) an eloquent reminder that the fall of Communism was not the result of the world standing as one, but of the long and often despairing efforts of certain people to fight a future to which much of the world was resigned:

This anniversary, this triumph, this vindication, does not belong to all of us. It belongs to the anti-communists of all countries and all parties who fought for it, sometimes at great cost to reputation, family, friendship, sanity, and often life and limb. ...

Some, like Solzhenitsyn, Natan Sharansky, and many, many others, had to face prison, expulsion, harassment, and the constant threat of death in order to make their plight known to the world. ...

... "Tear down this wall" has entered the lexicon of great presidential utterances, but the president who uttered it went unmentioned this week by President Obama. Undoubtedly, as huge numbers of people rushed to freedom 20 years ago, few of them would have foreseen that Obama would become president of the United States. Even fewer would have foreseen that one day an American president would decline to join his fellow heads of state in Berlin to celebrate what happened that day.

In the [Boston Phoenix](#), [Steven Stark](#) writes that Obama has already peaked.

...Obama still doesn't seem to grasp that the collective Election Night reverie is over, and that now we are waiting for him to lead us in real time. Sure, a little bit of hubris was probably inevitable, but it led Obama to conclude, despite what he said back then, that the historic election had been about him. When in the end, as always, it was about us.

That night began to reveal an unfortunate truth: having reached a pinnacle on the day he was elected, Obama's popularity and relationship with the American people had nowhere to go but down. ...

...Something similar was bound to happen with Obama. Some figures grow during their time in the presidency; others diminish. Obama's path was pre-ordained: unless he was able to achieve significant political victories immediately, he was destined to become — at least for a while — the incredible shrinking president. ...

...Now that we, as a nation, have awakened from our post-election, post-racial dream state, we've begun to notice that our president may not be much interested in being a chief "executive," given that he's never run anything before or expressed the slightest inclination to do so. He has big ideas, to be sure, but that's only a small part of the job. The hard, nitty-gritty labor of figuring out how government can actually work better — the operative word is "governing" — seems to hold no appeal for him. ...

Now for a change of pace. One of our favorites, [Toby Harnden](#), thinks the proper role for Sarah in the coming years is to replace Oprah.

...Perhaps there'll be another vacancy in 2012 that might suit Mrs Palin.

In three years, it might well be time for Oprah Winfrey to move on. Her role as his biggest celebrity cheerleader last year already seems a teeny bit embarrassing and Obamamania will be as old hat as Smurfs and Rubik's Cubes by then.

There is, though, someone who would be Oprah's perfect successor. She's got the fame, the huge book deals and, love her or hate her, she is an object of fascination for every American. We'll see this week that she makes compulsive viewing while holding forth from that sofa.

I can see the bumper stickers now: "Time for O to go - Sarah Palin in 2012."

The Enterprise Blog

[Obama Is No 'Decider'](#)

by Gary Schmitt

A friend from overseas emailed me to note that it was a span of 65 days between when the World Trade Center towers fell in New York on 9/11 and Kabul fell to American and coalition forces on 11/14. And between the attacks on 9/11 and the start of airstrikes against Kabul on 10/7, less than a month. General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of American and allied forces in Afghanistan, delivered his Afghanistan strategy to President Obama on 8/30 this year and President Obama has yet to make a decision. That's 73 days and counting. Maybe there is something to being "the decider" after all.

Contentions

[The Seminar Drags On](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

Just when we thought the White House seminars were winding down, we get [this report](#):

That stance comes in the midst of forceful reservations about a possible troop buildup from the U.S. ambassador in Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, according to a second top administration official.

President Barack Obama does not plan to accept any of the Afghanistan war options presented by his national security team, pushing instead for revisions to clarify how and when U.S. troops would turn over responsibility to the Afghan government, a senior administration official said Wednesday.

Are we back to square one, or is someone in the Obami camp simply trying to gum up the works? Maybe the president would like some more research. Maybe another round of meetings. Who knows? The process seems to have taken on a life of its own, and the president appears unwilling to make a decision, any decision.

Certainly even the most die-hard defenders of the president must be appalled. This is no way to run a war. We are close to a decision. No we aren't. Gen. Stanley McChrystal will get his men. Oh, maybe not. It is hard to recall a more excruciating decision-making process.

And yet we are told, "The White House has chafed under criticism from Republicans and some outside critics that Obama is dragging his feet to make a decision." They seem blissfully unaware that the Obami are becoming a ludicrous spectacle, a cringe-inducing display of equivocation. So maybe they'll take a few more weeks. Consider some more options. Have some more meetings. And what about the troops who are in the field, week after week, awaiting a strategy and support? Oh yes, them. Well, the president can't be rushed.

The Corner

[Krauthammer's Take](#) [NRO Staff]

From last night's *Fox News All-Stars*.

On the administration's commitment to the [war in Afghanistan](#):

He [Obama] has to sell it, and I think the delay has made his task a lot harder. The delay has put our allies in some doubt.

That's not just the NATO allies, Canadians and others who are talking about withdrawing in a couple of years. It is the Afghans who have chosen our side and have to wonder — in the end, will [the United States](#) withdraw and leave them hanging?

And the other uncertainty is about Obama's commitment himself. The issue is: If he takes this long, and if he gives all these excuses — which you talked about just a moment ago, about how we may not have a partner in Afghanistan, we may not have a partner in Pakistan — you're expressing doubts about our allies in the region, and you're implying that somehow this is a kind of social work, that the reason that we're at war is to bolster these allies.

It's protection of the American homeland. It's what Petraeus had talked about — keeping out al-Qaeda and preventing the regrouping of al-Qaeda and their allies. It's our war, and it's in the name of our security.

If the president expresses all of this uncertainty and takes this long in agonizing, you got to wonder, is his heart in it? He has to make a speech after his decision to demonstrate that he really is committed to success in this, because all of this delay and these excuses about Afghan/Pakistani partners gives the impression of an administration that will be looking for an excuse of a certain point of withdrawing or pulling back.

Contentions

[Don't Wait for Obama to Make Up His Mind About Making Up His Mind](#)

by Max Boot

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"I'm not saying that we'll be in a perpetual state of review, but the time the president has taken so far should signal to people that he will not hesitate to take a hard look at things and question assumptions if things are not moving in the right direction," a senior White House official said.

Please, please say it ain't so — that we won't see another review like the present one for a long, long time. Bad enough that the White House has been ostentatiously and publicly reviewing all options in Afghanistan since August — for the second time this year! — while efforts to win the war are effectively put on hold. Worse is the possibility that we could see another such process as soon as next year.

Every president reacts, I suppose, to the perceived mistakes of his predecessors. George W. Bush thought that Bill Clinton was too professorial and vowed not to hold any of the aimless, grad-school-type chat sessions that were a hallmark of the Clinton decision-making process. Bush styled himself as the decider-in-chief and placed a premium on reaching decisions with a minimum of hand-wringing or second thoughts. The result was, as we know, some terrible decisions — especially in Iraq between 2003 and 2007. So now Obama, reacting to what he perceives as the lack of thought and debate that characterized decision-making in the Bush White House, is going too far in the other direction by publicizing every permutation of his Afghanistan thought process, and letting his subordinates suggest that the second-guessing and questioning will never stop.

Obviously it's a good thing to be thoughtful and reflective and to take all factors into account before reaching a decision. But at some point the commander in chief has to say, "Enough! I've reached my decision, and now I'm going to give my commanders time and room to carry out the plan." President Obama has not yet reached that point, and as the quote from his unnamed aide suggests, he may never reach that point. If he doesn't, he will be doing terrible damage to our war effort. Success in war requires determination and will above all — even more than resources. If the commander in chief does not convey the determination to prevail, no matter what setbacks may arise, then the commitment of extra resources will not be all that effective because our enemies will be encouraged to think that they can simply wait us out and expect our will to snap at some point not too far in the future.

The Corner

[For a 'Dumb' Afghanistan Strategy](#) [Rich Lowry]

At this point, Obama needs to settle for a "dumb" Afghan strategy. He's clearly trying to be too cute and clever, and micro-managing aspects of the military campaign that are beneath his pay-grade. If he believes success in [Afghanistan](#) is important and a counter-insurgency campaign is the best way to achieve it, he should give McChrystal the troops he says he needs (actually, he should probably give him more if possible, to reduce the risk of failure). This business of examining the troop numbers province-by-province, and devising various "off ramps," and parsing out what troop commitment will best pressure Karzai is a foolish attempt at an impossible exactitude. No plan so finely tuned from on high is going to survive its first contact with reality. Obama needs a "dumb" approach — figure out the basic strategy, resource it, and leave it at that. If it's a successful strategy, most of the other things will probably follow — the off ramps, the welcome effect on Karzai, etc. This is not to say the implementation of the strategy shouldn't be savvy and adaptive. But that's for his generals. Obama just needs to make the simple — if not easy — decision and provide the political leadership to back it up. The world is waiting.

Contentions

[Obama's Extraordinary Irresponsibility](#)

by Peter Wehner

I wanted to follow up on the comments by [Jennifer](#) and [Max](#) regarding President Obama's seeming inability to make a decision on General McChrystal's request for more troops in Afghanistan. To put things in context: the McChrystal report was sent to the Obama administration at the end of August. McChrystal was emphatic in his [66-page request](#): "Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) — while Afghan security capacity matures — risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible."

According to our commanding general in Afghanistan, then, we have a window of 12 months to regain the initiative or we risk losing the war. We are now approaching the middle of November — two and a half months after McChrystal's request — and based on media reports, President Obama does not plan to accept any of the Afghanistan war options presented by his national-security team. If true — and I know

from my time in the White House that what is reported sometimes reflects, rather than the thinking of the president, the views of aides trying to influence a decision via public leaks — this is both stunning and reckless. As one person pointed out to me, the same president who wants to ram through health-care legislation, despite the fact that we don't face a health-care emergency, seems unable to settle on a hugely consequential, time-sensitive decision in the midst of a war.

I have not begrudged President Obama the time to carefully think through a decision on Afghanistan — but this is ridiculous. This issue should have been front and center for the administration the moment it was clear Obama won the presidency. He has already presented (in March) his “new” strategy for Afghanistan. The fact that he wants to revisit his decision may be understandable, except for the fact that his foot-dragging is now harming us. Sometimes presidents are forced to make decisions based on external events and pressing outside needs. “The public life of every political figure is a continual struggle to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance,” Henry Kissinger wrote in the first volume of his memoirs, *White House Years*. Governing the nation does not afford you the luxuries you have when conducting a college seminar.

President Obama not only needs to make a decision soon; once he does, assuming he does, we face the logistical challenges of getting the troops in place. Precious time has already been lost. If after all the time that's been lost, Obama is now jettisoning all the options he has been presented with, including the McChrystal option, then what we are witnessing is extraordinarily irresponsible. Sometimes you can lose a war by not choosing. And that is the path we may well be on right now, if media reports are correct.

President Obama needs to get a grip on this process soon. Decisions need to be made and a war needs to be won.

The Corner

'Commander in Chief' Is Not Just a Fancy Title [Jamie M. Fly]

You could get whiplash watching the Afghanistan debate underway within the Obama administration. One day, it looks like the president has decided to send the majority of the additional troops requested by [Gen. Stanley McChrystal](#), and then the next day we are told that there is yet another meeting of the National Security Council to discuss new options.

The administration is so desperate to show that they aren't just listening to the commanders in theater that even the leakers seem confused about how many options are on the table. Is it three, is it four, or is it five? Then, just when it appears that the president is about to make a decision, months after [General McChrystal's](#) assessment landed on his desk, we're told that he may need more time to mull it over.

The conventional wisdom was that the president would announce his decision prior to his departure for Asia on Thursday, that shifted to the week before Thanksgiving, and now today's *New York Times* states that “it was possible that he could announce his decision in the three days before Thanksgiving . . . but that an announcement in the first week of December seemed more likely.”

Even if the president eventually sends a significant number of additional troops and allows General McChrystal to implement a counterinsurgency strategy, this painfully drawn out process has had negative consequences and does not bode well for the future U.S. commitment in Afghanistan. As a retired Air Force Chief Master Sergeant emailed to me after reading one of my Corner posts:

Our service members are dying and the president is dithering. I have been in the military while a president dithered or failed to make a tough decision, it is eviscerating, and a rot settles in. “[Commander in Chief](#)” is not just a fancy title. The president is the ultimate officer and like any poor officer his failure to make tough decisions is seen as a weakness by his NCOs and men. Morale, that most fragile base of any good military unit suffers immediately. When our officers are fearful and indecisive, we become fearful and indecisive.

NCOs find reasons not to patrol or to avoid high-risk areas, Convoys are diverted to avoid possible confrontation, our allies desert us and the advantage is ceded to the enemy.

And this happen quickly, weeks are all that's left to keep the advantage in Afghanistan. After a certain point in time "mission weariness" begins to settle in and the edge is lost on our weapon and almost impossible to regain. Quite frankly I fear that the time to make a difference is quickly slipping away and even if he eventually approves the fully levy of Gen McChrystal's request the momentum may have been permanently lost.

Jamie M. Fly is executive director of the Foreign Policy Initiative.

Washington Post **Enough Afghan debate**

by David S. Broder

The more President Obama examines our options in Afghanistan, the less he likes the choices he sees. But, as the old saying goes, to govern is to choose -- and he has stretched the internal debate to the breaking point.

It is evident from the length of this deliberative process and from the flood of leaks that have emerged from Kabul and Washington that the perfect course of action does not exist. Given that reality, the urgent necessity is to make a decision -- whether or not it is right.

The cost of indecision is growing every day. Americans, our allies who have contributed their own troops to the struggle against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and the Afghans and their government are waiting impatiently, while the challenge is getting worse.

When Obama became commander in chief, his course of action seemed clear. He was bent on early withdrawal from Iraq and an increase in resources and emphasis on winning in Afghanistan -- the struggle he repeatedly called "a war of necessity."

He sent 21,000 more troops to hold it together through the Afghan election and named two generals, Stanley McChrystal to run the war and the retired Karl Eikenberry to manage the politics and reconstruction from the ambassador's office in Kabul.

McChrystal came up with a new plan of battle, emphasizing protection of population centers and requiring as many as 40,000 more troops. Eikenberry, we now know, balked, giving voice to the widespread fear that Hamid Karzai, the carry-over winner of the election that the ambassador helped arrange, was too weak and corrupt to govern the country effectively, even with an enlarged American force keeping order.

Their disagreement was echoed and amplified throughout the Obama administration. The secretaries of defense and state came down on McChrystal's side; the vice president and many on the White House political staff with Eikenberry.

The president, notwithstanding his earlier rhetoric and actions, has hesitated to resolve the issue. Obama needs to remember what Clark Clifford, one of Harry Truman's closest advisers, said: that the president "believed that even a wrong decision was better than no decision at all."

While Obama deliberates, his party in Congress shows increasing reluctance to make an all-out commitment to the war effort. The chairmen of two key Senate committees, Foreign Relations and Armed Services, are arguing for retraining Afghan troops -- if they can even be found -- and turning over more of the burden of fighting to them.

Meantime, events in Afghanistan support McChrystal's prediction that delay in expanding the U.S. troop commitment will almost certainly lead to gains for the Taliban and greater risk for U.S. and allied troops.

In all this dithering, it's easy to forget a few fundamentals. Why are we in Afghanistan? Not because of its own claim on us but because the Taliban rulers welcomed the al-Qaeda plotters who hatched the destruction of Sept. 11, 2001. The Taliban also oppressed its own people, especially women, but we sent troops because Afghanistan was the hide-out for the terrorists who attacked our country.

We knew that governing Afghanistan would never be easy. It had resisted outside forces through the ages, and its geography, tribal structure, absence of a democratic tradition and poverty all argued that once we went in, it would be hard to get out.

But George W. Bush said -- and Obama seemed to agree -- that withdrawal was not an option.

That imperative is reinforced by the presence of Pakistan, a shaky nuclear-armed power across a porous mountain border. If the Taliban comes back in Afghanistan, the al-Qaeda cells already in Pakistan will operate even more freely -- and nuclear weapons could fall into the most dangerous hands.

Given all of this, I don't see how Obama can refuse to back up the commander he picked and the strategy he is recommending. It may not work if the country truly is ungovernable. But I think we have to gamble that security will bring political progress -- as it has done in Iraq.

Obama did not believe that could happen there. But given what he inherited, and given what he has done so far, I think he has no choice but to play out that hand. If we can't afford to lose, then play to win.

Contentions

[Get On with It](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

[Jackson Diehl](#) points out that the decision on an Afghanistan-war policy isn't really as difficult as the Iraq challenge that George W. Bush faced when "there was no clear way forward." For one thing, there was no precedent of an Iraq surge precedent to look at. But Obama has plenty of data, the experience of Iraq, and the best military team ever to wrestle with such issue already in place. For all the whining and protestations from the Obami that this is such a hard decision, it really isn't. Diehl observes:

On Afghanistan, in contrast, there is unanimity in the Pentagon and considerable agreement in Congress and among the NATO allies. The consensus says that Afghanistan cannot be abandoned anytime soon; that efforts to build up the Afghan army and strengthen both national and local governance must be redoubled; that U.S. forces must aim to ensure security for the Afghan population, at least in the country's biggest cities. Almost everyone agrees that accomplishing all those aims will require at least some additional American and NATO troops.

And really, are we to believe that Obama knows that the "right" number is 34,500 troops and not 40,000? We are down to quibbling about specific numbers, a matter on which the president possesses no particular expertise or insight. One comes away with the sense that either Obama's arrogance knows no bounds (he alone can determine the precise number of troops) or he is incapable of firm decision-making and oblivious to his being perceived as a vacillator. As Diehl notes: "It's an image that risks undermining any commitment Obama eventually makes. In the end, it's not enough for a president to be seen as having thought through a decision to send more troops to war. Enemies, allies and the country also need to be convinced that he believes in it." Right now, it's hard to discern what Obama believes.

LA Times

Obama must rethink rethinking Afghanistan

His strategy deliberations are starting to look like dangerous indecision.

by Doyle McManus

Barack Obama is in danger of giving deliberation a bad name.

The decision about whether to send thousands more troops to Afghanistan was never going to be easy, but events -- and a collision of egos in Kabul -- have conspired to make it even harder.

Obama was right to insist on a full review of whether U.S. interests are better served by expanding the American military footprint in Afghanistan or shrinking it.

But now, two months into his second "comprehensive policy review," after eight Cabinet-level meetings and several slipped target dates, the president still hasn't made up his mind.

In George W. Bush, we had a president who shot first and asked questions later. In Barack Obama, we have a president who asks the right questions but hesitates to pull the trigger.

Three weeks ago, former Vice President Dick Cheney accused Obama of "dithering." At the time, the charge sounded premature and partisan -- but now some of Obama's own supporters have begun to wonder whether Cheney was right.

Last week, the president's indecision became even more apparent after White House aides let it be known that he was asking the military for more "exit strategies" -- what one official called "off-ramps" -- in case things go badly.

Those questions came after Obama's ambassador in Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, sent two eleventh-hour memos questioning one of the basic premises of the war: whether the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai could ever reform itself enough to make success feasible.

At the end of the week, officials said the president and his advisors weren't seriously considering reducing U.S. troop strength; they are still converging on a narrow range of options that would send tens of thousands of additional troops. The debate, instead, is over how to define the mission -- and how to build those "exit ramps" without undercutting it.

Those are hard questions to answer -- harder still when a policy debate lasts for months and becomes public. These aren't just style points; the battle in Washington is causing real problems for U.S. foreign policy, beginning with mixed messages to both allies and adversaries.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates described the dilemma succinctly last week: "How do we signal resolve -- and at the same time signal to the Afghans and the American people that this isn't an open-ended commitment?"

The long debate has made Obama look indecisive and uncertain -- because he has been. And the leaks of conflicting positions have given his critics ammunition for the postmortem debate over any decision he makes. If Obama chooses to go small, hawks will accuse him of ignoring the advice of his own military commander, Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who asked for 40,000 additional troops. If he goes big, doves will accuse him of ignoring the advice of Ambassador Eikenberry, who said the additional troops wouldn't do much good.

When he ran for president, "no drama Obama" prided himself on a campaign organization that never aired internal disputes and always closed ranks in common cause. Not in this process, which has turned into a very un-Obamalike battle of leaks and counterleaks. This much transparency, alas, creates a problem:

Washingtonians love to keep track of winners and losers. A well-managed process gives losers a chance to lick their wounds in private, without suffering public damage to their reputations. This one is more likely to end in public recriminations.

The debate has frayed relationships between the military officers who proposed the Afghan escalation and the civilian politicians (Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel) who run the White House. White House officials were irritated when McChrystal's strategy proposal leaked in October, seeing it as an attempt by the military to box Obama in.

The public friction between McChrystal and Eikenberry, himself a retired general, has now complicated things further. One of the keys to U.S. success in Iraq was the seamless partnership between military commander David H. Petraeus and civilian Ambassador Ryan Crocker. In Afghanistan, in contrast, the two top U.S. officials on the ground have repeatedly butted heads -- a situation that has much of Washington speculating whether, once Obama makes his decision, one of them will have to go.

No president should commit troops to a war if he's not satisfied that the strategy is sound. No general should be given troops unless the premises of his strategy have been questioned. As Obama noted, he'd rather make a good decision than a fast one.

Obama needed to reassure the American public -- especially his own Democratic Party -- that he had considered every alternative before deciding to escalate this unpromising war. That's one reason all these White House sessions have -- unusually -- been publicized in advance, photographed and described to reporters.

At this point, Obama appears to be hesitating for reasons of both substance and politics. Last spring, he could hope for an Afghan government run by someone other than Karzai; now that hope is gone. He has read the history of the Vietnam War, so he's worried about getting in deeper without an off-ramp in case things go bad. He doesn't think he can sell escalation to skeptical Democrats without that off-ramp.

Eliot Cohen, a military historian who worked in the George W. Bush administration (and who supports sending more troops), described the dilemma this way: "If he goes ahead with this decision, he's basically going to be a war president." That means devoting more budget money -- and even more important, more of his own time and political capital -- to waging the war. It could also mean paring back his domestic agenda, already slowed by economic and political adversity. It's no wonder he's hesitating.

But in the end, he still has to make a choice. When Obama launched this review of his strategy in Afghanistan, it was a good thing. But the longer it goes on, the more costly it becomes.

Contentions

What Few Would Have Foreseen

by Rick Richman

President Obama's decision to send a video of himself to Berlin on the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which he said that "few would have foreseen [on that day in 1989] that . . . their American ally would be led by a man of African descent," is not the first time he assigned that world-historical event a bit part in his own saga. The Wall also played a walk-on role in his election-night victory speech, included in a long litany of "Yes We Can" paragraphs ("A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination"). He mentioned it in his Berlin citizens-of-the-world speech, attributing the fall to the world standing as one.

Benjamin Kerstein has [written](#) an eloquent reminder that the fall of Communism was not the result of the world standing as one, but of the long and often despairing efforts of certain people to fight a future to which much of the world was resigned:

This anniversary, this triumph, this vindication, does not belong to all of us. It belongs to the anti-communists of all countries and all parties who fought for it, sometimes at great cost to reputation, family, friendship, sanity, and often life and limb. ...

Some, like Solzhenitsyn, Natan Sharansky, and many, many others, had to face prison, expulsion, harassment, and the constant threat of death in order to make their plight known to the world. ...

[The Hungarian and Czech uprisings were] ignored as the march of history supposedly passed them by ... until the wall came down, and even the most dedicated apologists had to admit that the Czechs, the Hungarians, and their supporters had been the wave of the future all along.

In America, presidents of both parties pressed policies on their fellow citizens designed to keep the world standing as two. Richard Nixon brought forth "détente." Jimmy Carter lectured us about our "inordinate fear of communism." When Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union an "evil empire," elite opinion considered it unforgivably rude.

"Tear down this wall" has entered the lexicon of great presidential utterances, but the president who uttered it went unmentioned this week by President Obama. Undoubtedly, as huge numbers of people rushed to freedom 20 years ago, few of them would have foreseen that Obama would become president of the United States. Even fewer would have foreseen that one day an American president would decline to join his fellow heads of state in Berlin to celebrate what happened that day.

Boston Phoenix

Has Obama peaked? Yes, he has.

Yes, he made history. Unfortunately, it's all downhill from there.

by Steven Stark



To listen to some pundits, Barack Obama's public image began taking a serious beating when the off-year election returns came in a week ago. Or maybe it was the undeserved Nobel Prize, his approach to the war in Afghanistan, or when he revved up his pursuit of national health-care reform.

But the pundits, as usual, are wrong. In reality, Obama peaked the night he was *elected*.

That astonishing evening was both a blessing and a curse for our 44th president. As the first African-American elected to the Oval Office, Obama made the history books in indelible fashion, generating an uplifting sense of national pride and renewal along the way.

That alone is more than many presidents accomplish in a lifetime. But that achievement— if that's what you want to call it — came a very long year ago, before he was even president. The 10 months since he took the oath of office have been a letdown, even to most of his supporters.

Obama still doesn't seem to grasp that the collective Election Night reverie is over, and that now we are waiting for him to lead us in real time. Sure, a little bit of hubris was probably inevitable, but it led Obama to conclude, despite what he said back then, that the historic election had been about him. When in the end, as always, it was about us.

That night began to reveal an unfortunate truth: having reached a pinnacle on the day he was elected, Obama's popularity and relationship with the American people had nowhere to go but down. That's a difficult adjustment to make, and is reminiscent of the apocryphal story about the obsessed fan and her friends who worshipped and followed the Rolling Stones. One night, the fan finally got to spend the evening with Mick Jagger. After she emerged from the hotel the next morning, her friends asked her how it went.

"Well," she said, "he was alright. But he's no Mick Jagger."

Something similar was bound to happen with Obama. Some figures grow during their time in the presidency; others diminish. Obama's path was pre-ordained: unless he was able to achieve significant political victories immediately, he was destined to become — at least for a while — the incredible shrinking president.

It hasn't helped matters that Obama is the first president to serve in the post-Internet age. For a while, the mainstream media — what little of it is left, anyway — gave Obama a virtual free ride. Even as they have become more skeptical, however, they've been drowned out by the increasingly loud faithful on both sides who reflexively praise or trash him.

Who knows what to believe or how to figure out equilibrium anymore? The press used to be a check on presidents, but no longer. In the current Balkanized media environment, it's possible for Obama to read glowing reports from the adulatory left about his performance — regardless of how badly he screws up — while automatically discrediting the opposition press. As a logical result of this situation, he's become both overconfident and unable to figure out what the vast middle of the electorate really wants. In a nutshell, that's the quandary Obama has faced to this point — though he doesn't seem to know it.

Rookie mistakes

This isn't to say that Obama hasn't also made the understandable mistakes that rookies always commit. Like most who are new to the big leagues, Obama hasn't spent enough time in public life to befriend the right people. As a result, he relies too heavily on the folks who got him where he is — whether from the campaign or Chicago — when he really needs advisors who see the world differently than he does, and are willing tell him what he doesn't want to hear.

In terms of practical leadership, then, Obama has let Congress take the lead (which, if he were an effective leader, he wouldn't allow to happen), even though *its* approval ratings are some 30 points below *his*. Worse, when it comes to finding "experts" to solve our national crises, he has relied on all the usual, conventional suspects, such as Tim Geithner and Larry Summers — even though they're the sort of people who helped get us into this economic mess in the first place. Having bought into a solution to the financial crisis that

centered around bailing out Wall Street — essentially a continuation of the Bush policy, despite what the Tea Partiers think — he's left himself open to a populist insurgency that poses the biggest threat to his political success. It's no surprise that Main Street no longer trusts Obama— it never will.

Another rookie mistake of Obama's is his belief that, in order to wrest control back from adversity, he must repeat what he did as a successful candidate. In his case, that means making endless public appearances, delivering the same speeches, and attacking his political enemies with the talking points of the day. But Obama isn't in Kansas or anymore. Or, more to the point, Illinois.

Put simply, Obama has misread his mandate. Perhaps he thought he was elevated to pass health care — they loved it in Iowa! — but in fact it was the *economic* crisis that got him elected, is now our national preoccupation, and will be the solution of which (or lack of one) that determines whether he's re-elected.

Obama seems to have forgotten all the stuff he proclaimed in the campaign about a new type of non-divisive presidency, even though that promise of bipartisanship was the facet of his candidacy that appealed the most to independents. Of course, the Republicans have made bipartisanship difficult. But *he* was the one in the campaign who claimed he could deal in a new way with those across the aisle — in contrast with his primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, who once called that opposition "the vast right-wing conspiracy."

Obama further miscalculated what a president actually does and is expected to do in a constitutionally weak office. When it comes to the economy in an interdependent world, there's not a whole lot under his office's control.

Now that we, as a nation, have awakened from our post-election, post-racial dream state, we've begun to notice that our president may not be much interested in being a chief "executive," given that he's never run anything before or expressed the slightest inclination to do so. He has big ideas, to be sure, but that's only a small part of the job. The hard, nitty-gritty labor of figuring out how government can actually work better — the operative word is "governing" — seems to hold no appeal for him.

Put another way, where are our flu shots? It's worth recalling that, in what seems a lifetime ago, it was Clinton — not Obama — who promised to be ready on Day One.

Even giving speeches is overrated, especially in a media universe so oversaturated that the president can't get nearly the mass audience he could just a generation ago, when there were only three networks and no Internet. The bully pulpit has become a megaphone, and not a very large one at that.

The question now is whether Obama can learn and change. It's not an easy one to answer. Yes, all presidents have to grow in office to prosper. Many of the challenges Obama faces — to say goodbye to most of his old friends or recalibrate his political antenna — have been ably surmounted by others with less talent and far less brains. But brains are overrated in the presidency: just look at the politically successful Ronald Reagan and the unsuccessful Jimmy Carter.

Besides, what Obama needs to do requires more of a psychological transformation than an intellectual one. The milestone-minded, transformative nature of his candidacy can never be replicated or matched — you can only be elected the first African-American once. He needs to come down from his mountaintop because, in this country, only the faithful appreciate a president who consistently makes us listen to him, rather than the other way around.

So far, the signs aren't good. In his quest to surpass what he's done before and reprise his role as the nation's Moses, Obama appears to be on the verge of an "historic" remake of one-sixth of the American economy, namely health care — despite the fact that a solid majority of Americans oppose the change. Whatever the merits, pushing for major societal change without bringing society along is a guarantee of prolonged strife, and is as unprecedented in its own way as his election was. It is — dare we say it? — very George W. Bush-like in its disregard of the popular will; meaning that, in the ultimate irony, history may pair these two as mirror reflections of one another.

Obama was the ideal leader to help us reach a watershed moment and cross a racial threshold. Unexpectedly for him — and for us — *that* was the easy part.

Telegraph, UK

[Sarah Palin should succeed O in 2012 - Oprah, that is, not Obama](#)

Sarah Palin may be back in vogue but the Republicans should leave her to the television talk shows.

by Toby Harnden



There's little doubt that Mrs Palin is in dire need of a political re-launch

The [Sarah Palin](#) show is back in town. Hot on the shelves are two books about her, written by three authors who look as if they're still in their teens. Then there's the former Alaska governor's own, ghosted, book *Going Rogue*, out this week and being leaked strategically via the [Drudge Report](#) website.

She's taped an appearance with Oprah Winfrey, clips of which are already being teased before the full broadcast on Monday, and gushed on Facebook that the talk show diva's "audience was full of warm, energised and (no doubt) curious viewers", Oh, and there'll be a book tour beginning in Grand Rapids, Michigan on Wednesday which will take her to 13 cities, 11 of which just happen to be in battleground states that will decide the 2012 election.

There's little doubt that Mrs Palin is in dire need of a political re-launch. While the 2008 presidential campaign rocketed her from obscurity to stardom, it was brutal baptism of fire. Senator John McCain rolled the dice when he chose her as his running mate and neither he nor his staff seemed comfortable with the decision.

After a *tour de force* of a speech at the Republican convention in St Paul, Minnesota in August, Mrs Palin crashed and burned in interviews with the network anchors Katie Couric and Charlie Gibson. Then the parody of her on *Saturday Night Live* sealed it.

Before and since the McCain-Palin was defeated, there have been bitter recriminations between Mrs Palin and the McCain camp, with claim and counter-claim flying about everything from her wardrobe to her desire to give a concession speech.

Then she resigned as Alaska governor with 18 months of her four-year term still to run, giving a rambling speech in which she railed against the media and political dirty tricks but gave no coherent reason for quitting.

Throughout, there's been a soap opera sub-plot involving Levi Johnston, the father of her 19-year-old daughter Bristol's son. Now a regular on the talk show circuit dishing purported Palin dirt, Johnston's latest publicity gambit is to pose nude for *Playgirl* and accept a porn award at a New York ceremony that featured a woman dressed as a giant vagina.

All this, of course, is fodder for much hilarity at Mrs Palin's expense.

Ever since last summer, there's been a strain of commentary about her that has been condescending, dismissive and even vengeful. The persistent smear that Bristol Palin is the mother of Mrs Palin's Down's Syndrome baby Trig is just the most extreme example.

The hatred of Mrs Palin by the east and west coast elites - to whom her very accent is an affront - is not shared by most American voters. But polling shows that the former vice-presidential candidate has some serious problems on her hands if she is to pursue her presumed ambition of winning the presidency in 2012.

A recent Gallup survey found that 63 percent of voters would not seriously consider her for the presidency next time around. She remains very popular among Republicans but among independents - who will decide the next election - her favourability rating is just 41 percent.

This is not snooty elitism - it's based on the perception that Mrs Palin's track record is thin and that while she has real star quality her political prescriptions are vague. Sound familiar? That may have worked for [Barack Obama](#) in 2008 but Americans are likely to want much more substance next time around.

On the pre-released tapes on Oprah, however, Mrs Palin performed superbly - relaxed, unpretentious and funny. She even joked good-naturedly about having Levi over for Thanksgiving dinner.

Republicans have just edged ahead of Democrats in the polls and Mr Obama is suddenly looking as if he might be just a one-term President. But Mrs Palin is unlikely to become the candidate who can oust the man Oprah anointed as "the One".

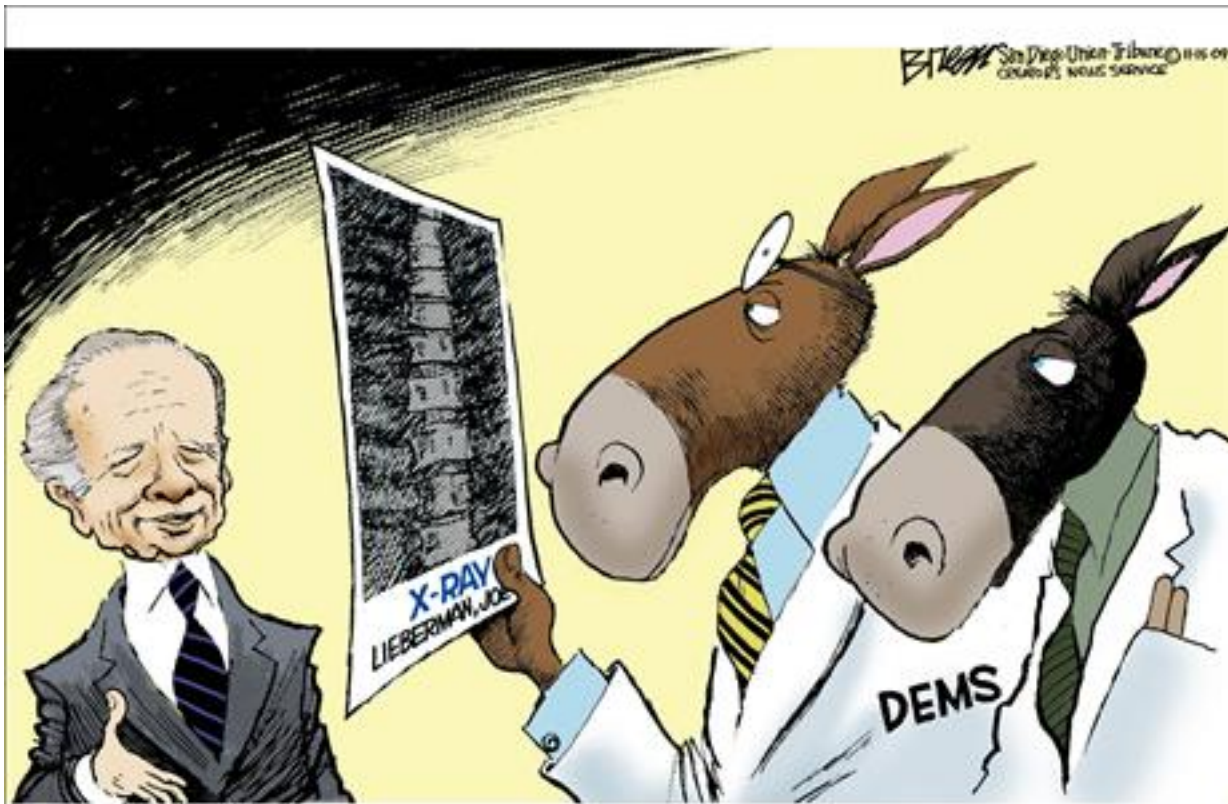
Perhaps there'll be another vacancy in 2012 that might suit Mrs Palin.

In three years, it might well be time for Oprah Winfrey to move on. Her role as his biggest celebrity cheerleader last year already seems a teeny bit embarrassing and Obamamania will be as old hat as Smurfs and Rubik's Cubes by then.

There is, though, someone who would be Oprah's perfect successor. She's got the fame, the huge book deals and, love her or hate her, she is an object of fascination for every American. We'll see this week that she makes compulsive viewing while holding forth from that sofa.

I can see the bumper stickers now: "Time for O to go - Sarah Palin in 2012."

Dist. by Wash. Post Writers Group
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"AS YOU CAN SEE, I HAVE A PRE-EXISTING CONDITION KNOWN AS A SPINE."

