

February 1, 2009

The American left and the Dems have set a trap for themselves in Afghanistan. Some of our favorites explain how. Corner posts from [James Robbins](#) and [Kathryn Jean Lopez](#) explain some of the problems.

They were just for openers, [Victor Davis Hanson](#) goes into detail in World Affairs Journal. *... It is worth remembering that when the United States invaded Afghanistan on October 6, 2001, many on the left forecast immediate doom. The craggy peaks of the Hindu Kush were too high. The weather was too icy. With Ahmad Shah Massoud's assassination by al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance would surely not fight effectively. The same fate that had defeated both past British and Russian imperial occupiers lay in wait for us. New York Times writer R. W. Apple summed up such liberal unease—shortly before the rout of the Taliban—when he declared the first weeks of war in Afghanistan had already produced a hopeless Vietnam-like debacle.*

*But Afghanistan proved to be the quagmire that wasn't. The unexpectedly sudden defeat of the Taliban, coupled with the rapid establishment of an elected Karzai government, quieted anti-war opposition for a time—even as fleeing Islamic terrorists began regrouping with near impunity across the border in Pakistan. In the autumn of 2002, about a year after the Taliban's fall, success in Afghanistan was an attractive argument for more action, not more caution. Surprised by the quick victory of American arms in Afghanistan—but continually worried about being seen as soft on national security amid growing public support for ending the murderous regime of Saddam Hussein—a majority of Democratic congressmen and senators voted in October 2002, weeks before the midterm elections, to authorize a second war in Iraq. Few on the left wished to go on record opposing another successful military operation. ...*

*... then presidential candidate Barack Obama framed the issue in a debate with John McCain, "We took our eye off Afghanistan. We took our eye off the folks who perpetrated 9/11." The Democrats strange and twisted journey from supporting the war effort in Iraq, to wanting it immediately ended, while wishing for more fighting in Afghanistan—a war some on the left had once declared impossible to win in October 2001—was now complete.*

*Such an odyssey was again reflected in self-described anti-war and then senatorial candidate Barack Obama's July 27, 2004, comment on Iraq: "There's not that much difference between my position and George Bush's position at this stage." But later, on January 31, 2007, as a soon-to-be presidential candidate, and with news from the front now far worse and George Bush's poll ratings diving, Obama scorned the surge, which he claimed had "not worked," and pledged that all U.S. combat forces should be out of Iraq by March 31, 2008. He hammered that message throughout the summer and autumn of 2007: "The best way to protect our security and to pressure Iraq's leaders to resolve their civil war is to immediately begin to remove our combat troops. Not in six months or one year—now."*

*Such a move would probably have led to an American defeat and Iraqi genocide, as the country would have been effectively trisected into a Kurdish breakaway republic at war with Turkey, an Iranian rump protectorate of Shiites to the south, and a radical Sunni client state of Saudi Arabia—all in perennial terrorist wars with one another, fueled by religious hatred and Iraqi oil.*

*But anti-war candidate Obama protected himself against charges that he was ignoring the danger posed by Islamic terrorists by making even bolder promises that he would send another 7,000 troops to Afghanistan and invade Pakistan, if need be, in hot pursuit of al-Qaeda. It appeared that Obama, and others who supported his new bellicose calls, was not really against the idea of either surging troops or crossing national borders to hunt down insurgents per se; they were just opposed to doing all that in the politically incorrect Iraq theater, but for doing it in the properly sanctioned Afghanistan war. So President Bush was to be condemned not just for having been too warlike in Iraq, but now also for not being warlike enough in*

*Afghanistan.*

*In fact, there are a number of historical and practical reasons to doubt both the sincerity and the logic of the new liberal calls for escalation in Afghanistan—especially since it uncharacteristically committed the left to a renewed and difficult struggle against the Taliban that they may soon likewise disown. ...*

*... “Taking our eye off the ball,” and supposedly ignoring Afghanistan, were rather inexpensive ways of voicing partisan attacks on George Bush’s Iraq War. But now the Iraq War has been largely won (the number of U.S. soldiers who died in actual combat operations in Iraq in October 2008 was seven; more than forty Americans were murdered in Chicago each month on average in 2008). And after January 20, 2009, Commander-in-Chief Obama will have the responsibility for the costs and difficulties of the Afghan war he had been apparently eager to take on during the campaign against Senator John McCain. Consequently, we may well see president-elect Obama’s once promised hawkishness dissipate. After all, many liberal hawks figured that they could issue their war cries without ever being forced to hold the reins of governance with commensurate responsibility, or, by that the time they were given responsibility, the Afghan war would be over.*

*Vowing to do what it takes in the good war by leaving Iraq—infusing more troops into Afghanistan, and occasionally invading Pakistan—was for candidate Obama always a rhetorical stance that proved both his anti-Iraq War bona fides and his larger credibility on matters of national security. But President Obama and his mercurial supporters in Congress will soon face a rather embarrassing dilemma. Without the responsibilities of a commander-in-chief, he once demanded we should leave Iraq when leaving would have lost that war. But now, as commander-in-chief he will soon learn that a few thousand more troops will not guarantee lasting victory over the Taliban. And changing strategy from stealthy attacks by aerial drones in Pakistan to open ground incursions across the border risks widening rather than solving the conflict.*

*“Taking our eye off the ball” was always a dubious campaign talking point. Afghanistan was not the only “ball” in the global war against terror; we never took our eye off it; and we were always binocular. What we may well see instead is that those who wished more of an American commitment to Afghanistan as cover for their opposition to Iraq will now desert President Obama, as anti-war critics take their eye off a receding Iraq and focus it instead on an increasingly violent Afghanistan—especially given the sensational terrorist acts associated with the near-rogue state of Pakistan. In that case, President Obama may well have to revert to his earlier manifestation of candidate Obama, who campaigned on the notion that a surge of military forces into an apparent quagmire was little more than an unsophisticated act of desperation—in a complex landscape that required American forces to exit and to allow indigenous tribal folks to sort out their own affairs.*

**Abe Greenwald** with Afghanistan thoughts.

*The myth about George W. Bush having traded a successful campaign in Afghanistan for a neoconservative fantasy in Iraq is exploding. Despite his campaign promise to redirect the American military focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, President Obama is unlikely to do anything of the sort. As the A.P. reports, “Obama said he wants to add troops to turn back a resurgent Taliban, but he has not gone beyond the approximately 30,000 additional forces already under consideration by the previous administration.”*

*At the same time, the President has been receptive to Pentagon officials wary of the 16-month Iraq-withdrawal timetable outlined by Obama the candidate. On Wednesday, Obama made his first presidential visit to the Pentagon and met with Gen. Ray Odierno, who recommends a significantly slower drawdown. ...*

Before items on the stimulus package, [Ilya Somin in Volokh](#) posts on why the size of government matters.

*In his [inaugural address](#), President Obama said that "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works." This is a commonly heard argument in response to concerns about the growth of government. Who could possibly be against government when it "works"? Why not instead consider each proposed expansion of the state on a case by case basis, supporting those that "work" and opposing any that don't?*

*Taken seriously, this argument leads to the rejection of any systematic constraints on government power. Why should we have a general presumption against government regulation of speech or religion? Why not instead support censorship when it "works" by improving the marketplace of ideas, and oppose it when it doesn't? Think of all the misleading speech and religious charlatans that government regulation could potentially save us from! The answer, of course, is that government regulation of speech and religion has systematic dangers that are not unique to any one particular regulation. Given those systematic flaws, it makes sense to have a general presumption against it.*

*The same holds true for government intervention more generally, including in the economy. It too has systematic flaws that justify a presumption against it. Three of those flaws are particularly relevant to current policy debates. ...*

[David Brooks](#) has figured out the stimulus is a waste.

*... Wise heads are now trying to restore structure and safeguards to the enterprise. In testimony this week, Alice Rivlin, Bill Clinton's former budget director, raised the possibility of separating the temporary from the permanent measures and focusing independently on each. "A long-term investment program should not be put together hastily and lumped in with the anti-recession package," Rivlin testified. "The elements of the investment program must be carefully planned and will not create many jobs right away."*

*The best course is to return to the original Summers parameters — temporary, targeted and timely — thus making the stimulus cleaner and faster.*

*Strip out the permanent government programs. Many of them are worthy, but we can have that debate another day. Make the short-term stimulus bigger. Many liberal economists have been complaining it is too small, so replace the permanent programs with something like a big payroll tax cut, which would help the working class.*

*Add in a fiscal exit strategy so the whole thing is budget neutral over the medium term. Finally, coordinate the stimulus package with plans to shore up the housing and financial markets. Until those come to life, no amount of stimulus will do any good.*

*This recession is scary and complicated. It's insane to try to tackle it and dozens of other complicated problems, all in one piece of legislation. Leadership involves prioritizing. Those who try to do everything at once will end up with a sprawling, lobbyist-driven mess that does nothing well.*

[Yuval Levin](#) Corner posts on the stimulus.

*When they manage to unify the entire House Republican caucus with [David Brooks](#) and [Peggy Noonan](#), you know the Democrats have seriously botched something. And boy, they really have. The more you look at the stimulus bill the clearer it becomes that it is the Congressional Democrats, not the opponents of this bill, who have failed to see that we are in a genuine and exceptional crisis. They're working to use the moment as an opportunity to advance the same agenda they haven't been able to move (with good reason) for a decade and more, and in the process are showing that agenda to be what we always knew it was: a massively*

wasteful, reckless, profligate, slovenly, higgledy-piggledy mess of interest group troughs and technocratic fantasies devoid of any economic thinking or sense of proportion. ...

Same with [Adam Smith.org](#).

[Scrappleface](#) has kudos for Obama's tax collection scheme.

... "The president's plan is simple but ingenious," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, "He targets wealthy individuals who filed inaccurate tax forms, cheating the government out of tens of thousands of dollars. Then he just nominates them for cabinet positions. They suddenly see the error of their ways, and they cut checks for the full amount owed, plus interest." ...

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## The Corner

### [Thoughts on Afghanistan](#) [James S. Robbins]

The Democrats, and President Obama in particular, have backed themselves into a corner in Afghanistan. For several years the Afghan effort served as the rhetorical counterpoint to the war in Iraq; since they did not want to support "Bush's War," it gave them a convenient way to appear tough on something. Now that Iraq seems to be going into the win column (no thanks to them), and now that they are in the White House, Democrats have to come to grips with Afghanistan and live up to their rhetoric.

Afghanistan was a model of success for the "small footprint" war, and for good reasons, particularly our success in working with local forces and leveraging other elements of national power. We have to get back to that initial model and not believe, as the Soviets did (to their detriment) that heavy forces will solve all our problems.

Also important, and something Senator Lieberman recognizes, is that one has to be realistic about what can be achieved in Afghanistan. One must accept a certain level of ambiguity in that country. It will never be a western-style centralized democracy. The provinces will always be controlled by tribal and other local leaders. We will have to negotiate with them if we want to reach an acceptable level of stability. Some of these leaders will be former or current members of the Taliban movement, but we have to get over that and understand that in some cases we can make deals with them. (Indeed, some are already current elected members of parliament.) Afghanistan is not a country that is given to clear-cut, comprehensive, one-size-fits-all solutions. Unfortunately, our government, Democrats in particular, likes those kinds of solutions. They brief well. They appeal to the intellectual class. But that approach will fail in Afghanistan. If the plan seeks to centralize power in Kabul and build up from there, we will soon be facing the same quagmire that vexed the Soviet Union for a decade, until they threw up their hands and slouched back over the border.

## The Corner

### [Planning to Win](#) [Kathryn Jean Lopez]

[Michael Yon](#), who recently spent time in Afghanistan (not for the first time) responds from Jerusalem: Take all that, and be prepared to work for a century in Afghanistan. Afghanistan will not be a stable country ten years from now. Truly, be prepared for a century of commitment. Most comparisons to Iraq are false or completely inappropriate. Iraq is a relatively advanced country. To compare Iraq to Afghanistan is to compare the United States to Mexico. Vietnam is incredibly more advanced than Afghanistan. One of the poorest countries on earth, Nepal, is by comparison to Afghanistan an advanced country. We cannot allow ourselves to be deluded by the monumental task ahead in Afghanistan. Putting a man on the moon was simple by comparison.

Americans in 2003 thought that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were complementary theaters in the wider war on radical Islamic terrorism and the authoritarian Middle East regimes that aided and abetted it. The anti-Iraq War left agreed that the two fronts were connected—but in an antithetical, rather than a symbiotic, way. For them, the illegitimate, unilateral war in Iraq came at the expense of the lawful multilateral struggle in Afghanistan. Yet a brief review of the two wars not only suggests that such a view is mistaken, but also that it is disingenuous—especially the trope of damning the American effort in Iraq by claiming that, in addition to its other moral and strategic deficits, it caused us to “take our eye off” Afghanistan.

It is worth remembering that when the United States invaded Afghanistan on October 6, 2001, many on the left forecast immediate doom. The craggy peaks of the Hindu Kush were too high. The weather was too icy. With Ahmad Shah Massoud’s assassination by al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance would surely not fight effectively. The same fate that had defeated both past British and Russian imperial occupiers lay in wait for us. *New York Times* writer R. W. Apple summed up such liberal unease—shortly before the rout of the Taliban—when he declared the first weeks of war in Afghanistan had already produced a hopeless Vietnam-like debacle.

But Afghanistan proved to be the quagmire that wasn’t. The unexpectedly sudden defeat of the Taliban, coupled with the rapid establishment of an elected Karzai government, quieted anti-war opposition for a time—even as fleeing Islamic terrorists began regrouping with near impunity across the border in Pakistan. In the autumn of 2002, about a year after the Taliban’s fall, success in Afghanistan was an attractive argument for more action, not more caution. Surprised by the quick victory of American arms in Afghanistan—but continually worried about being seen as soft on national security amid growing public support for ending the murderous regime of Saddam Hussein—a majority of Democratic congressmen and senators voted in October 2002, weeks before the midterm elections, to authorize a second war in Iraq. Few on the left wished to go on record opposing another successful military operation. Indeed, given the success of the recent war against the Taliban, most envisioned an even easier time against the once-beaten and weakened Saddam Hussein.

At first, such hawkishness about the war against Saddam seemed a smart political move. After the three-week spectacular victory, more than 70 percent of Americans in April 2003 supported the so-far successful Iraqi war. President Bush’s own approval ratings soared—along with those of the politicians in Congress who had supported him. By mid-2004, however, the Iraqi insurrection gained critical mass. Terrorists began to kill hundreds of American soldiers. Shiite-Sunni infighting soured Americans on an apparently ungrateful and hopelessly savage Iraq, as what had once seemed a cakewalk turned into a bloody stalemate. The public began to turn on the messy American occupation, and especially its foremost proponent, President George W. Bush.

In response, a number of prominent Democratic senators—Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Diane Feinstein, John Kerry, and Harry Reid—who had once given ringing speeches about invading Iraq, now about-faced. They abruptly claimed that they had earlier only reluctantly authorized, not advocated, a war—one that had been illegitimately hyped to them through doctored and misleading intelligence.

As the 2006 elections neared, and Bush’s dismal approval ratings continued to reflect public unhappiness with the course of the war, most liberal congressional supporters of the Iraq War had finished their reversions to type, and reinvented themselves as principled and longstanding critics of the conflict. It was not surprising that they should do so, as U.S. losses mounted and many erstwhile pro-war pundits now assured the nation that the war was lost. Anti-war had always remained their default option. Few remembered that both the House and Senate had once authorized the invasion of Iraq on twenty-three writs that ranged from violations of United Nations-sanctioned no-fly zones, inspections, and 1991 armistice

accords, to oil-for-food skullduggery and genocide against the Iraqi people. Even fewer cared that, while WMD arsenals had not been found, the other original congressional premises for removing Saddam were still as valid at election time in 2006 as when they had been ratified in 2002.

A quandary arose: how could liberal Democrats both retain their national security credentials and yet at the same time cater to growing public disillusionment with Iraq? In response to that dilemma, a useful new narrative about the American occupation in Afghanistan emerged. As the exiled Taliban regrouped and began waging attacks from their sanctuaries in Pakistan, and the United States took greater losses in Iraq, Afghanistan slowly transmogrified into the “good” but now neglected war. Indeed, Afghanistan was to be contrasted with Iraq, increasingly dismissed as the unnecessary and “bad” conflict, where we were pinned down and diminished by Bush’s strategic incoherence, Cheney’s shilling for Halliburton, and the neoconservatives’ stealthily catering to Israel’s anti-Arab agendas. Newscasters grimly announced daily American fatalities in Iraq, but rarely in Afghanistan, whose violence remained on the back pages.

Where, liberal critics lamented, was the Iraqi version of the Afghan statesman Hamid Karzai or the legitimate NATO and United Nations presence in Iraq? And why—in the most disingenuous chapter of the new narrative crafted to prove liberal patriotic support for American military efforts abroad—were we in Iraq creating terrorists *ex nihilo*, when we could have ended them once and for all, had we gone all out and crushed a trapped Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora in December 2001 in Afghanistan?

The liberal mantra now declared that the unilateral, preemptive conflict in Iraq was not only unnecessary and lost, but, worse still, had siphoned off critical resources from the politically correct multilateral and legally justified war against the Taliban, who had, after all, helped to cause the September 11 terrorist attacks. Anti-war liberal Democrats had discovered the magic bullet: they could retain their national security credentials and avoid appearing soft on terrorism by lamenting that by being bogged down in Iraq we had become too complacent in Afghanistan. Or, as then presidential candidate Barack Obama framed the issue in a debate with John McCain, “We took our eye off Afghanistan. We took our eye off the folks who perpetrated 9/11.” The Democrats strange and twisted journey from supporting the war effort in Iraq, to wanting it immediately ended, while wishing for more fighting in Afghanistan—a war some on the left had once declared impossible to win in October 2001—was now complete.

Such an odyssey was again reflected in self-described anti-war and then senatorial candidate Barack Obama’s July 27, 2004, comment on Iraq: “There’s not that much difference between my position and George Bush’s position at this stage.” But later, on January 31, 2007, as a soon-to-be presidential candidate, and with news from the front now far worse and George Bush’s poll ratings diving, Obama scorned the surge, which he claimed had “not worked,” and pledged that all U.S. combat forces should be out of Iraq by March 31, 2008. He hammered that message throughout the summer and autumn of 2007: “The best way to protect our security and to pressure Iraq’s leaders to resolve their civil war is to immediately begin to remove our combat troops. Not in six months or one year—now.”

Such a move would probably have led to an American defeat and Iraqi genocide, as the country would have been effectively trisected into a Kurdish breakaway republic at war with Turkey, an Iranian rump protectorate of Shiites to the south, and a radical Sunni client state of Saudi Arabia—all in perennial terrorist wars with one another, fueled by religious hatred and Iraqi oil.

But anti-war candidate Obama protected himself against charges that he was ignoring the danger posed by Islamic terrorists by making even bolder promises that he would send another 7,000 troops to Afghanistan and invade Pakistan, if need be, in hot pursuit of al-Qaeda. It appeared that Obama, and others who supported his new bellicose calls, was not really against the idea of either surging troops or crossing national borders to hunt down insurgents *per se*; they were just opposed to doing all that in the politically incorrect Iraq theater, but for doing it in the properly sanctioned Afghanistan war. So President Bush was to be condemned not just for having been too warlike in Iraq, but now also for not being warlike enough in Afghanistan.

In fact, there are a number of historical and practical reasons to doubt both the sincerity and the logic of the

new liberal calls for escalation in Afghanistan—especially since it uncharacteristically committed the left to a renewed and difficult struggle against the Taliban that they may soon likewise disown.

First, the coalition of the willing that invaded Iraq was larger, both in aggregate size and the number of nations involved, than the few allied troops that initially joined us in Afghanistan. The United Nations sanction to go into Afghanistan was similar to the logic of invading Iraq to force compliance with UN resolutions that had been ignored by Saddam Hussein, from the corrupt oil-for-food program to violations concerning UN-sanctioned no-fly zones and inspections of Saddam's arsenals. U.S. allies like the British, Poles, and Australians who went to Iraq were also about the only serious fighters who showed up in Afghanistan, a war in which most NATO members, except for the Canadians, merely voted present without ever fully engaging the enemy on the battlefield. In the strict military sense, one might ask what did it matter that the Germans and Belgians, whose military protocols forbid real fighting against the Taliban, did not later join the United States to engage either the ex-Baathists or the jihadists in Iraq?

Second, the perpetrators of 9/11 were radical Muslim Arab terrorists. Although the Taliban harbored those who had planned the attacks, no Afghan had traveled to the United States to kill Americans. Saddam Hussein, while not responsible for the 9/11 attacks, nevertheless had been in a *de facto* war with the United States Air Force for twelve years in the no-fly zones over Iraq. He had also sheltered an array of terrorists, both secular killers from the 1980s such as Abu Nidal and Abu Abbas, and those with ties to radical Islamists and al-Qaeda, like Abdul Rahman Yasin, a suspect in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who arrived in Iraq in summer 2002, and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Islam ("Partisans of Islam") terrorists who were given apparent refuge by Saddam.

If the war on terror were to be truly global and waged primarily against both radical Muslim terrorists from the Arab Middle East who had a long history of killing Americans, and anti-American dictators who had given them sanctuary and support, then an argument could be made that Iraq was as much a legitimate target as Afghanistan. There was also the additional humanitarian consideration that the regime of Saddam Hussein had killed far more innocents than had the Taliban, started far more foreign wars, and had a far longer record of prior military conflict with the United States.

Third, while many in the anti-war movement made a facile distinction of Afghanistan as the necessary and correct war, and Iraq as the incorrect and unnecessary fight, the enemy saw few such differences. In a series of communiqués, both of al-Qaeda's self-appointed leaders, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden, soon boasted that Iraq had become the central front in their global war against the United States. Bin Laden, for example, in 2004 warned:

*The most important and serious issue today for the whole world is this Third World War, which the Crusader-Zionist coalition began against the Islamic nation. It is raging in the land of the two rivers. The world's millstone and pillar is in Baghdad, the capital of the caliphate. The whole world is watching this war and the two adversaries; the Islamic nation, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. It is either victory and glory or misery and humiliation. The nation today has a very rare opportunity to come out of the subservience and enslavement to the West and to smash the chains with which the Crusaders have fettered it.*

A year later, Zawahiri, in his now infamous letter to al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, wrote: *I want to be the first to congratulate you for what God has blessed you with in terms of fighting battle in the heart of the Islamic world, which was formerly the field for major battles in Islam's history, and what is now the place for the greatest battle of Islam in this era.*

Apparently, al-Qaeda thought killing a few thousand American soldiers in Iraq and causing the United States to flee in panic might weaken our resistance in Afghanistan and indeed cause us to lose the war elsewhere. The only mystery is why we, in turn, did not accept the reverse principle—that killing several thousand terrorists in Iraq and creating a constitutional state there harmed the cause of kindred jihadists worldwide, and especially those like Zawahiri and bin Laden in hiding along the Afghanistan border.

In short, almost no one—certainly not anti-war American liberals who had become almost as obsessed with "Bush's war" in Iraq as they claimed Bush himself was—asked whether the enemy was incorrect in thinking Iraq had become the central battleground between the West and its enemies. Were international jihadists

*not* foregoing travel to Afghanistan instead to fight and die in Iraq? Was the global prestige of al-Qaeda *not* on trial in Iraq? And were ripples from the American presence in Iraq—whether the promise to surrender WMD arsenals offered us spontaneously by Libyan strongman Muammar al-Gaddafi (December 2003), the house arrest of Pakistan nuclear proliferator Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan (February 2004), or the exit of Syria from Lebanon (April 2005)—*not* likely fallout from the American removal of the Hussein regime?

Nor did many critics of the Iraq War ponder another nagging question: if nuclear Pakistan, our reluctant ally, were to be considered off limits for large American ground forces in tracking down Osama bin Laden and attacking al-Qaeda jihadists in areas such as Waziristan, where else were Western forces to fight and defeat global radical Islamists if not in the free-fire zone of Iraq?

In addition, as radical Islamic insurgents began losing fighters in Iraq, various Pew Global Attitudes polls of Middle East popular sentiment revealed a drastic decline in approval ratings for the tactic of suicide bombing (a fall ranging in 2007 from 25 to 40 points in various Middle East countries). Those findings mirrored earlier declines in the popularity of Osama bin Laden himself, whose approval ratings by 2005 were below 50 percent in almost every country in the Middle East. Similarly, few in September 2001 had believed that the United States homeland would have remained free from another major terrorist attack emanating from the Middle East for the next seven years—an unforeseen development, but one at least in part likely attributable to the terrible losses suffered by radical Islamists in Iraq. It would not be too much to conclude, therefore, that rather than *creating* enemies there, we have been engaging enemies that already existed and fighting them on a battlefield of our choice rather than theirs.

Fourth, when had the United States ever shied away from fighting two wars at once? We fought Japan, Germany, and Italy simultaneously, even though there was no evidence that Germany or Italy was responsible, or even knew in advance, of the Pearl Harbor attacks, or that there was ever much military cooperation between the racist German Nazi regime and the Japanese racial and cultural imperialists. The United States blocked the Red Army from entering Western Europe as it fought over two million North Korean and Chinese communist ground troops on the Korean peninsula. In fact, our forefathers not only assumed that a mobilized America could wage multifarious global wars, but also learned that victory in one theater could enhance efforts even in a far distant other. Therefore, given such knowledge of U.S. military history, why would anyone think the effort in Iraq necessarily came at the expense of Afghanistan, rather than symbiotically enhancing our efforts there, by killing transient jihadists and gaining valuable insight into the art of counterinsurgency warfare?

Fifth, liberal braggadocio about leaving Iraq to regroup assets for an escalation in Afghanistan was also predicated on a misreading of the relative difficulty of the two theaters. By 2005, when the new hard line narrative on Afghanistan had gained credence among liberal politicians, anti-Iraq War critics assumed Iraq was lost, but that the NATO effort in Afghanistan, in contrast, was simply stalled and in need of a transference of manpower and materiel from Iraq. But both assumptions to varying degrees were flawed.

Iraq—with secular traditions, plentiful oil, rich, level farmland, a far better educated populace, and an accessible port—was always the less difficult challenge in fostering postbellum constitutional government. The difficulty in Afghanistan, moreover, was not necessarily the result of a shortage of U.S. troops due to the focus on Iraq. Instead the challenge was the nearly insolvable problem of bringing modern government to medieval warring factions, encouraging economic development among a largely illiterate population, which had traditionally earned cash by supplying most of the world's raw heroin and by doing so supported the growth of anti-Western warlords, and stopping cross-border Taliban incursions by violating the sovereignty of an unstable, authoritarian, Islamic, and nuclear "allied" Pakistan. These were complex problems more likely helped than hindered by the expertise and tactics learned in the war in Iraq.

Indeed, the liberal braggadocio on Afghanistan—wholly untethered to any real, concrete tactical plans or responsibility for its possible consequences—has amounted to a kind of empty self-dramatization. Senator Obama may have on occasion boasted about invading Pakistan—"If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won't act, we will"—but in fact, the United States already is hitting targets in Pakistan, albeit not to loud public boasts about such risky actions. Our ability to



shoot missiles at terrorist enclaves in Pakistan from Predator drones—operations that violate Pakistani airspace—is, in fact, predicated on our own promises of discretion.

Sixth, such liberal chest-pounding about Afghanistan was also predicated on the assumption that the war there would remain static. Iraq was irretrievably lost, the liberals believed, but Afghanistan was more or less deadlocked and therefore capable of being positively affected by a little strategic tinkering. But once conditions on the ground in Anbar Province radically changed, and the “bad” Iraq quieted while the “good” Afghanistan began to heat up, anti-war critics began to get a sense of the dilemma they now faced—having to escalate, as promised, the Afghan war and win it rather quickly once their largely rhetorical demand for a transference of the manpower and financial resources improperly diverted to the misadventure in Iraq had been met.

This political dilemma again was not new. Liberal Democrats in the summer and autumn of 2002 had sounded tough and aggressive about the looming Iraq war, as long as the perception of quick and easy victory was likely, and someone else (Commander-in-Chief George Bush) took the major responsibility for the conduct of the war should it become difficult and unpopular. Something similar was happening now with Afghanistan.

“Taking our eye off the ball,” and supposedly ignoring Afghanistan, were rather inexpensive ways of voicing partisan attacks on George Bush’s Iraq War. But now the Iraq War has been largely won (the number of U.S. soldiers who died in actual combat operations in Iraq in October 2008 was seven; more than forty Americans were murdered in Chicago each month on average in 2008). And after January 20, 2009, Commander-in-Chief Obama will have the responsibility for the costs and difficulties of the Afghan war he had been apparently eager to take on during the campaign against Senator John McCain. Consequently, we may well see president-elect Obama’s once promised hawkishness dissipate. After all, many liberal hawks figured that they could issue their war cries without ever being forced to hold the reins of governance with commensurate responsibility, or, by that the time they were given responsibility, the Afghan war would be over.

Vowing to do what it takes in the good war by leaving Iraq—infusing more troops into Afghanistan, and occasionally invading Pakistan—was for candidate Obama always a rhetorical stance that proved both his anti-Iraq War *bona fides* and his larger credibility on matters of national security. But President Obama and his mercurial supporters in Congress will soon face a rather embarrassing dilemma. Without the responsibilities of a commander-in-chief, he once demanded we should leave Iraq when leaving would have lost that war. But now, as commander-in-chief he will soon learn that a few thousand more troops will *not* guarantee lasting victory over the Taliban. And changing strategy from stealthy attacks by aerial drones in Pakistan to open ground incursions across the border risks widening rather than solving the conflict.

“Taking our eye off the ball” was always a dubious campaign talking point. Afghanistan was not the only “ball” in the global war against terror; we never took our eye off it; and we were always binocular. What we may well see instead is that those who wished more of an American commitment to Afghanistan as cover for their opposition to Iraq will now desert President Obama, as anti-war critics take their eye off a receding Iraq and focus it instead on an increasingly violent Afghanistan—especially given the sensational terrorist acts associated with the near-rogue state of Pakistan. In that case, President Obama may well have to revert to his earlier manifestation of candidate Obama, who campaigned on the notion that a surge of military forces into an apparent quagmire was little more than an unsophisticated act of desperation—in a complex landscape that required American forces to exit and to allow indigenous tribal folks to sort out their own affairs.

*Victor Davis Hanson is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the author, most recently, of A War Like No Other: How the Spartans and Athenians Fought the Peloponnesian War.*

## Contentions

### Re-Dropping the Ball?

by Abe Greenwald

The myth about George W. Bush having traded a successful campaign in Afghanistan for a neoconservative fantasy in Iraq is exploding. Despite his campaign promise to redirect the American military focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, President Obama is unlikely to do anything of the sort. As the A.P. [reports](#), "Obama said he wants to add troops to turn back a resurgent Taliban, but he has not gone beyond the approximately 30,000 additional forces already under consideration by the previous administration."

At the same time, the President has been receptive to Pentagon officials wary of the 16-month Iraq-withdrawal timetable outlined by Obama the candidate. On Wednesday, Obama made his first presidential visit to the Pentagon and met with Gen. Ray Odierno, who recommends a significantly slower drawdown. The *New York Times* [reports](#), "The White House indicated that Mr. Obama was open to alternatives to his 16-month time frame and emphasized that security was an important factor in his decision." Today in Iraq — land of the supposed quagmire, the fiasco, and the new Vietnam — Iraqis voted in extraordinarily peaceful provincial elections.

Where does this leave the question — demagogued by Democrats in two U.S. presidential elections - of the Bush administration's fatal shift in focus from Afghanistan to Iraq?

The American operation in Afghanistan accomplished some of its immediate goals - deposing the Taliban regime and destroying al Qaeda's safe haven — within the first weeks of its prosecution. The hunting down of al Qaeda members continues to this day. The long-term goal of establishing a reasonably stable — *governable* — Afghanistan was always bound to be the work of decades.

Three years into the job, Afghans voted for their first ever democratically elected president. Five years in, they had their first elected parliament. Seven years in, signs of budding democracy continue to appear - even as the threats of tribal warfare, narco-terrorism and jihad grow.

As in Iraq, it seems the U.S. will end up fighting more than one war in Afghanistan. George W. Bush did not "drop the ball." The most immediate American interest was served by the quick toppling of the Taliban government and by putting al Qaeda on the run. As was done in Iraq, the U.S. must devise a workable strategy for the next phase of fighting in Afghanistan. This means a recalibration of expectations on the part of the war's proponents, but also some reconciliation among skeptics. A few propositions must be taken in combination: Perseverance in Iraq led to victory; a radical change in strategy was the key; Afghanistan, for all its chaos, is a more hopeful country today than it was in 2001; Afghanistan must not become a terrorist safe haven again; and a simple shift in focus from one country to another was never the answer. This remains the long war.

## Volokh Conspiracy

### Why the Size of Government Matters

by Ilya Somin

In his [inaugural address](#), President Obama said that "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works." This is a commonly heard argument in response to concerns about the growth of government. Who could possibly be against government when it "works"? Why not instead consider each proposed expansion of the state on a case by case basis, supporting those that "work" and opposing any that don't?

Taken seriously, this argument leads to the rejection of any systematic constraints on government power. Why should we have a general presumption against government regulation of speech or religion? Why not instead support censorship when it "works" by improving the marketplace of ideas, and oppose it when it doesn't? Think of all the misleading speech and religious charlatans that government regulation could potentially save us from! The answer, of course, is that government regulation of speech and religion has systematic dangers that are not unique to any one particular regulation. Given those systematic flaws, it makes sense to have a general presumption against it.

The same holds true for government intervention more generally, including in the economy. It too has systematic flaws that justify a presumption against it. Three of those flaws are particularly relevant to current policy debates.

First, government officials have poor incentives relative to the private sector. Because the resources they spend are not their own money, they are more likely to waste them or divert them to favored interest groups. These poor incentives are visible in almost every major government spending bill, where large amounts of money are spent on porkbarrel projects and the like. The current stimulus bill is no exception, with its handouts for a variety of interest groups.

Second, as I have often emphasized in [my academic work](#) and on this blog, the quality of government policy is severely compromised by widespread voter ignorance. The majority of voters [know very little about public policy](#) and [make poor use of the information they do have](#). Voter ignorance and irrationality are [perfectly rational, because the chance that any one voter's knowledge will make a difference is infinitesimally small](#). Still, they routinely result in voters supporting flawed policies and doing a poor job of evaluating the performance of elected officials. For example, they [blame politicians for bad weather](#), and routinely support protectionism despite the overwhelming evidence against it. The dangers of voter ignorance are likely to increase as government grows. The bigger government gets, the more of it there is for voters to monitor, and the more difficult it will be for them to have even a superficial knowledge of all its functions.

Third, even relatively well-informed voters and well-intentioned government officials will often lack the information they need to allocate resources more effectively than the market would in their place. As F.A. Hayek argued in his classic essay, ["The Use of Knowledge in Society,"](#) government planners lack the kind of information that the price system routinely provides to market participants. Thus, they usually have no way of knowing whether the projects they want to spend tax money on will yield benefits that outweigh their costs.

These systematic shortcomings of government are particularly dangerous in times of crisis, like the present. Given widespread voter ignorance and their own perverse incentives, government officials [often use crises to justify harmful expansions of government power by selling them as emergency measures](#) - even if they have little or no real connection to the emergency in question. This is why White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel [says that "\[y\]ou never want a serious crisis to go to waste" because it is "an opportunity to do things you could not do before."](#)

The current spending bill before Congress is no exception. It is being marketed as a "stimulus." [Yet only 8% of the new spending will occur this year, and only 41% in the next two years](#) - too late to provide stimulus while the recession is still ongoing. This suggests that most of the new spending isn't really about stimulus and has more to do with other policy priorities that are being misleadingly sold as emergency measures.

These points don't prove that *all* government interventions are undesirable. It is possible for them to be outweighed by other considerations in any given case. They do, however, show that there is reason for systematic concern about the size of government, and for a strong but not insuperable presumption against its expansion. In the same way, we have good reason for a presumption against government regulation of speech and religion, even though that presumption cannot be absolute. We can, for example, ban shouting "fire" in a crowded theater, yet still have a general rule against censorship.

To put it in Obama's terms, our society will "work" a lot better if we can prevent government from getting too big. And that requires paying a lot more attention to the state's rapidly expanding waistline than the president wants us to.

**NY Times**

## **Cleaner and Faster**

by David Brooks

Throughout 2008, Larry Summers, the Harvard economist, built the case for a big but surgical stimulus package. Summers warned that a "poorly provided fiscal stimulus can have worse side effects than the disease that is to be cured." So his proposal had three clear guidelines.

First, the stimulus should be timely. The money should go out "almost immediately." Second, it should be targeted. It should help low- and middle-income people. Third, it should be temporary. Stimulus measures should not raise the deficits "beyond a short horizon of a year or at most two."

Summers was proposing bold action, but his concept came with safeguards: focus on the task at hand, prevent the usual Washington splurge and limit long-term fiscal damage.

Now Barack Obama is president, and Summers has become a top economic adviser. Yet the stimulus approach that has emerged on Capitol Hill abandoned the Summers parameters.

In a fateful decision, Democratic leaders merged the temporary stimulus measure with their permanent domestic agenda — including big increases for Pell Grants, alternative energy subsidies and health and entitlement spending. The resulting package is part temporary and part permanent, part timely and part untimely, part targeted and part untargeted.

It's easy to see why Democrats decided to do this. They could rush through permanent policies they believe in. Plus, they could pay for them with borrowed money. By putting a little of everything in the stimulus package, they avoid the pay-as-you-go rules that might otherwise apply to recurring costs.

But they've created a sprawling, undisciplined smorgasbord, which has spun off a series of unintended consequences. First, by trying to do everything all at once, the bill does nothing well. The money spent on long-term domestic programs means there may not be enough to jolt the economy now (about \$290 billion in spending is pushed off into 2011 and later). The money spent on stimulus, meanwhile, means there's not enough to truly reform domestic programs like health technology, schools and infrastructure. The measure mostly pumps more money into old arrangements.

Second, by pumping so much money through government programs, the bill unleashes a tidal wave on state governments. A governor with a few-hundred-million-dollar shortfall will suddenly have to administer an additional \$4 billion or \$5 billion. That money will be corrosive both when washing in, and when it disappears in a few years time.

Third, the muddle assures ideological confrontation. A stimulus package was always going to be controversial, because economists differ widely about whether or how a stimulus can work. But this bill also permanently alters the role of the federal government, thus guaranteeing a polarizing brawl at the very start of the Obama presidency.

Fourth, Summers's warnings about deficits have been put aside. There is no fiscal exit strategy. Instead, permanent spending commitments are entailed with no permanent funding stream to pay for them.

Fifth, new government expenditures on complex matters are being designed on a hasty, reckless timetable. As readers may know, the policy I am most passionate about is pre-K education. Yet I fervently hope that the Head Start expansion is dropped from this bill. A slapdash and shambolic expansion could discredit the whole idea.

Wise heads are now trying to restore structure and safeguards to the enterprise. In testimony this week, Alice Rivlin, Bill Clinton's former budget director, raised the possibility of separating the temporary from the permanent measures and focusing independently on each. "A long-term investment program should not be put together hastily and lumped in with the anti-recession package," Rivlin testified. "The elements of the investment program must be carefully planned and will not create many jobs right away."

The best course is to return to the original Summers parameters — temporary, targeted and timely — thus making the stimulus cleaner and faster.

Strip out the permanent government programs. Many of them are worthy, but we can have that debate another day. Make the short-term stimulus bigger. Many liberal economists have been complaining it is too small, so replace the permanent programs with something like a big payroll tax cut, which would help the working class.

Add in a fiscal exit strategy so the whole thing is budget neutral over the medium term. Finally, coordinate the stimulus package with plans to shore up the housing and financial markets. Until those come to life, no amount of stimulus will do any good.

This recession is scary and complicated. It's insane to try to tackle it and dozens of other complicated problems, all in one piece of legislation. Leadership involves prioritizing. Those who try to do everything at once will end up with a sprawling, lobbyist-driven mess that does nothing well.

## The Corner

### [Presidential Influence](#) [Yuval Levin]

When President Obama went up to Capitol Hill earlier this week to meet with Republicans, I thought to myself that it must mean his legislative affairs team has a respectable number of Republicans in the bag and they want to build on it and attribute whatever Republican votes they get to the president's effective advocacy. That's how the White House legislative staff tends to work, in any White House: when the team has done its job, they send the boss up to "lobby" so he can get the credit. In dealing with Congress, much like in global diplomacy, you generally don't send the president himself on a high visibility mission that could plausibly fail completely.

But then it turned out that not a single Republican actually voted for the bill. After Obama spent a good bit of time with the Republican caucus, and then invited some key members to the White House for drinks, no one at all among the House GOP voted with him, and even a few House Democrats voted against him. That either means something happened during the day yesterday to move the more squishy Republicans to oppose the bill, or (more likely) the White House never had any votes in the bag and sent the president on a futile mission, needlessly wasting and diminishing his personal capital. Very odd.

## The Corner

### [Conservative Unity](#) [Yuval Levin]

When they manage to unify the entire House Republican caucus with [David Brooks](#) and [Peggy Noonan](#), you know the Democrats have seriously botched something. And boy, they really have. The more you look at the stimulus bill the clearer it becomes that it is the Congressional Democrats, not the opponents of this bill, who have failed to see that we are in a genuine and exceptional crisis. They're working to use the moment as an

opportunity to advance the same agenda they haven't been able to move (with good reason) for a decade and more, and in the process are showing that agenda to be what we always knew it was: a massively wasteful, reckless, profligate, slovenly, higgledy-piggledy mess of interest group troughs and technocratic fantasies devoid of any economic thinking or sense of proportion.

In a way, the present crisis really does present an opportunity for the Democrats, as several of their leaders have said. But it's an opportunity to show they are *not* the caricature their political opponents seek to draw: that they can govern responsibly and rise to a great national challenge. If they show that, given the failures and losses of the Republicans in recent years, they might really cement a durable majority. Instead, they have begun to show that they are exactly the caricature, and worse. The Democrats on the Hill have somehow managed to begin the age of Obama by putting forward their ugliest side first and in a big way. It can't be what Obama wanted, and it sure isn't what the country needs. But it looks like it's what we are going to get. The Democrats will probably pay some political price for the way they have begun things: a price in reduced public openness to their further moves (like their health care reform), and in a reenergized opposition. But the biggest price will be the price we all pay for the wretched excess of this soon-to-be law and others to follow.

The challenge for conservatives is not just to oppose this—that's important but it's the easy part—but to offer another way over the coming months and years that is plainly more responsible and sensible. It can only be offered in speech; Republicans have little real power in Washington now. But if it is well conceived and ably offered, it could both help to curb the worst excesses of what the Democrats seem to have in mind, and help to reconnect conservatives with the problems of the day, not just in this crisis but beyond. It remains to be seen if we're up to it.

**Adam Smith.org**  
**[The handout package](#)**  
by Steve Bettison

In the *WSJ* yesterday was an enlightening [article](#) that listed most of what is in the \$825bn stimulus package that passed through Congress. Here are the handouts, there's:

- \$66 billion more for education
- \$54 billion will go to federal programs that the Office of Management and Budget or the Government Accountability Office have already criticized as "ineffective" or unable to pass basic financial audits
- \$40 billion for broadband and electric grid development, airports and clean water projects that are arguably worthwhile priorities
- \$30 billion, or less than 5% of the spending in the bill, is for fixing bridges or other highway projects
- \$8 billion renewable energy funding
- \$7 billion for modernizing federal buildings and facilities
- \$6 billion mass transit
- \$2.4 billion for carbon-capture demonstration projects
- \$2 billion for child-care subsidies
- \$1 billion for Amtrak, the federal railroad that hasn't turned a profit in 40 years
- \$650 million (on top of the billions already doled out) to pay for digital TV conversion coupons
- \$600 million more for the federal government to buy new cars
- \$400 million for global-warming research
- \$150 million The Smithsonian is targeted to receive
- \$50 million for that great engine of job creation, the National Endowment for the Arts

\$252 billion is for income-transfer payments (cash or benefits to individuals for doing nothing at all)

- \$81 billion for Medicaid,

- \$36 billion for expanded unemployment benefits,
- \$20 billion for food stamps
- \$83 billion for the earned income credit for people who don't pay income tax

...\$20 billion for business tax cuts

Depressingly the *WSJ* can only see, “\$90 billion out of \$825 billion, or about 12 cents of every \$1, is for something that can plausibly be considered a growth stimulus.”

This is a list that damns the US to a long and rocky road to recovery. But there will be many in the US who will be able to furnish their pockets with the creative wealth of the hard working, and most of those voted for change. This is their reward.

## Scrappleface

### Obama Plan Has Already Boosted IRS Tax Collections

by Scott Ott

In office less than two weeks, President Barack Obama has already increased tax receipts at the U.S. Treasury with an innovative plan to get tax-dodgers to pay up, in full, immediately.

“The president’s plan is simple but ingenious,” said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs, “He targets wealthy individuals who filed inaccurate tax forms, cheating the government out of tens of thousands of dollars. Then he just nominates them for cabinet positions. They suddenly see the error of their ways, and they cut checks for the full amount owed, plus interest.”

In the month of January alone, Mr. Obama has forced [Timothy Geithner](#), former president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, to cough up \$43,000 he owed the IRS, and former [Sen. Tom Daschle](#) to pay off his \$128,000 tax obligation. Mr. Geithner will put his tax-paying experience to good use, overseeing the IRS as Secretary of the Treasury. Mr. Daschle hopes his recently-good behavior will garner Senate confirmation as the next Secretary of the Health and Human Services.

“With the IRS underfunded as it is,” said Mr. Gibbs, “this collection method is much more efficient than dispatching field agents. Arresting these men, or compelling them to pay penalties would take years, and make them feel bad about themselves. The president’s method not only gets more money to the government to help our economy, but provides a self-esteem boost by giving these wealthy men important-sounding titles.”

The Obama administration will reportedly expand the program by creating hundreds, perhaps thousands, of additional cabinet posts, available to any rich person willing to “fess up and settle up” with the IRS.





# The Bipartisan Stimulus Plan



