

Editorial

Politics of the Absurd

Barack Obama resembles George Bush more and more with each passing day. Bush was notorious, when faced with a dilemma, for spouting absurdities. A word was even coined to describe them – “Bushisms”. While Obama is undoubtedly much more intelligent than Bush, this only results in his absurdities being slightly more sophisticated than those of Bush.

When he announced his decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, Obama resorted to a number of sophisticated Bushisms. The first was the claim that failure to win the war in Afghanistan would cause irreparable damage to U.S. and European national interests. This is patently absurd. If the future of the western world depends on conquering the people of Afghanistan, a small and poverty-stricken nation with no ability to do any significant harm outside its own borders, then the

Commentary

Obama Escalates War Against Afghanistan

On November 30, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that he was authorizing the dispatch of 30,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan. Obama claimed that U.S. “national interests” could not afford failure in Afghanistan. At the same time he promised that troop withdrawals would begin in 2011 on an unconditional basis. Of course, the promise of unconditional troop withdrawals contradicts the claim that failure is unacceptable, but most commentators dismissed it as a sop to those within his own party who are opposed to the continuation of the war against Afghanistan.

Obama also demanded that NATO send 5,000 to 10,000 more troops to Afghanistan and NATO was quick to respond. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that the spirit of multilateralism demanded that NATO countries step up their commitment, as well, and within days

western world is far weaker than even the most optimistic Marxist may hope.

The notion that the U.S., Britain, Canada and a “holy alliance” of European countries can conquer Afghanistan is equally absurd. Many have tried, but none has ever succeeded. Alexander the Great, at the height of his power, was forced to concede that Afghanistan was impossible to rule. His losses there to continual revolts contributed significantly to stopping the expansion of the Macedonian empire and to its eventual decline and fall. The powerful Persian empire also never succeeded in conquering Afghanistan. Nor did the Mogul empire. The British, at the peak of their imperial power, invaded Afghanistan three times – 1839, 1878 and 1921 – and were humiliated and driven out each time. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and were

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various NATO and non-NATO countries had pledged another 7,000 troops. If the promised soldiers actually arrive in Afghanistan it will push the number of occupation troops to almost 150,000, even more than the Soviet Union had there in the 1980s.

Obama’s announcement exposes the sham promise that his administration would change the direction set by the Bush administration. Not only has Obama continued the war in Iraq, he has escalated the war in Afghanistan. It is also clear that he has extended the war into Pakistan and that the increased troops are, in part, to expand the U.S. forays into Pakistani territory.

The response of NATO also exposes the true nature of the multilateralism espoused by numerous European governments and social democratic parties. Multilateralism is often presented as a rein on U.S. imperialist aggression, if not actually a form of “anti-

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defeated by 1989. They lost up to 50,000 soldiers and the defeat played a significant role in the collapse of the USSR. The U.S. and its allies have now been in Afghanistan for over eight years and are no closer to defeating the Afghan people than they were eight years ago. The experience of all invaders of Afghanistan has been the same – invading Afghanistan is easy, but leaving it alive is much more difficult. So, for Obama to think that sending 30,000 or even 100,000 more troops will bring victory is the height of self-delusion and absurdity.

One of the “goals” claimed by Obama in announcing the most recent troop surge was the destruction of Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan. After eight years of supposedly pursuing that goal, not only has the U.S. failed to destroy Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but its policies have led to the establishment of Al Qaeda networks in Iraq, Indonesia and, apparently, in many countries of Europe. So, it is absurd to claim that the destruction of Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan will eliminate the threat of terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Europe. In fact, it is far more likely to have the opposite effect, assuming it can even be accomplished.

Finally, there is the ultimate piece of absurdity in Obama’s announcement, his declaration of a 2011 timetable for the beginning of the withdrawal of U.S.

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imperialism”. Those who make such claims define imperialism as a set of militaristic policies in general and the policies of the Bush administration in particular. They refuse to acknowledge that imperialism is an inherent feature of monopoly capitalism and that it is a system, not a policy. Some go so far as to claim that the only imperialist country today is the United States.

Lenin described imperialism as a system of states colluding and contending for global hegemony. It is a system dominated by a handful of big powers but including numerous other smaller states, including the puppet states in the colonial and neo-colonial countries. Rasmussen’s comments show that multilateralism is neither anti-imperialist nor anti-U.S. imperialist. Rather, it is an arrangement within the imperialist system of states that determines which states will be at the table to divide up the spoils. However, multilateralism still recognizes the U.S. as the leading and dominant power within this

troops. On the one hand Obama claimed that the war must be won at all costs and on the other hand he declared that, win or lose, the troops would start coming home in 2011. He can’t have it both ways. Most observers have concluded that the promise of a troop withdrawal was simply a lie to appease the anti-war component of his supporters. But, that too is absurd. Those Democrats speaking against the war in Afghanistan who are not serious and are simply political opportunists do not need to be lied to in order to guarantee their support. Those who are serious in their opposition to the war are not likely to be taken in by transparent lies.

Obama’s resorting to absurdities to justify U.S. imperialist foreign policy demonstrates that the politics of absurdity is not a feature of low intelligence and incompetence. Rather, it is a by-product of the clash between the interests of the imperialists and the interests of the people. Obama could, instead, tell the truth to the American and world’s people – that the war in Afghanistan has nothing to do with terrorism or security or democracy and everything to do with geopolitics and the desire of a declining empire to seize control of strategic energy resources. But then support for the war amongst the American people would drop from 45 percent to somewhere in the single digits, so Obama is forced, like Bush, to resort to lies and absurdities to justify the unjustifiable.

arrangement and does nothing to blunt the aggressiveness of the U.S. On the contrary, after Bush’s disastrous attempt to go it alone, U.S. imperialism has now concluded that a multilateral approach is indispensable in order for it to maintain its dominant position within the imperialist system of states, despite its declining economic power.

Finally, Obama’s announcement exposes the illusions of those on the “left” and within the anti-war movement that Obama is somehow “better” than Bush. Obama is better than Bush only from the perspective of the imperialists. The U.S. imperialists are happy that Obama has succeeded in patching over some of the contradictions with its European allies, while the European imperialists are happy that they have been allowed back at the trough. However, can it be said that Obama is better than Bush from the perspective of the people of Afghanistan or from the perspective of the people of Pakistan? Hardly.

Harper's Visit to China

Stephen Harper's four-day visit to China, which began on December 2, got off to a bad start as he was chided by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao for not visiting China sooner. Harper's sanctimonious preaching to China about "human rights" was also blunted by the revelation just days before the visit that his government had ignored warnings from its top intelligence officer in Afghanistan about the torture of detainees transferred by the Canadian Armed Forces to Afghan authorities. In the end, Harper was relatively quiet about human rights and the Chinese government rewarded Harper's visit with some trade concessions on tourism, pork and canola, making it clear just who is in the driver's seat of Canada-China relations these days.

China is currently Canada's second largest trading partner, next to the U.S. and China recently surpassed Canada as the largest trading partner of the U.S. Furthermore, despite repeated claims to the contrary, the American economy is in deep trouble, with 10 percent unemployment rates and millions of mortgages in default. As a result, Canadian exporters are in equally deep trouble and are looking for alternate markets. China, while also hurt by the economic crisis, is one of the few countries whose

economy is still expanding and is a growing destination for Canadian exports of energy and natural resources. Clearly, both Harper's visit and the dropping of his usual Cold War rhetoric were the result of pressure from Canadian business interests to try to further penetrate the Chinese markets. Despite Harper's numerous protests to the contrary, he apparently will do anything for "the almighty dollar".

While China's human rights record is hardly stellar and its attitude towards its national minorities is no more enlightened than the U.S. and numerous European countries, Harper is hardly qualified to instruct it. Quite apart from the colonial attitude of the Harper government towards Canada's aboriginal peoples, an attitude it shares with all previous governments, the Harper government has distinguished itself as one of the governments least concerned about the human and civil rights of its own citizens. It has continued the previous liberal government's policy of rendition of Canadian citizens to other countries to be tortured. It handed over prisoners to Afghan authorities knowing that they were likely being tortured, blocked efforts by the International Red Cross to check on their wellbeing

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Defence of the Nation Becomes Government Policy in Lebanon

On November 26, 2009, the new government of Lebanon issued a policy declaration stating that Lebanon would fight for the liberation of the lands still occupied by Israel and would defend Lebanon and its territorial waters.

This policy declaration would be unremarkable if it had come from almost any other government in the world. After all defending the country from external enemies is the first order of business of any sovereign government at least rhetorically. In Lebanon however, this statement represents a profound change. It comes as a result of significant developments in the power structure in Lebanon since 2006 when Israel launched its sixth war in Lebanon.

The Policy Statement by the new Government of the Republic of Lebanon reads in part:

It is the right of the Lebanese people, Army and the Resistance to liberate the Shebaa Farms, the Kfar Shuba Hills and the northern part of the village of Ghajar as well as to defend Lebanon and its territorial waters in the face of any enemy by all available and legal means."

The implication of the statement is that resistance to Israeli aggression and to its continued occupation of parts of southern Lebanon is now government policy. The mention of the "Resistance" in the statement however is even more significant. Resistance to Israel in the past has not been led by the Lebanese government or its armed forces. Rather any real resistance to Israeli aggression has been

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and lied to parliament about the whole affair. It is one of the few governments in the world which refuses to protect its citizens charged with offenses in other countries and the only western country that did not request the U.S. government to release its citizens being held and tortured in Guantanamo. At the same time, the Harper government has been quick to come to the defence of Canadian companies operating abroad that are violating the human rights of the citizens of those countries, poisoning their environments and murdering trade union officials.

In addition, the Harper government has not said a

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organized and led by Hezbollah. The inclusion of the Resistance with the army signals that Hezbollah, its fighters and its arms are now an official and legitimate part of Lebanese defense forces. This marks a profound change in official policy which until now has been aimed at disarming Hezbollah and removing it as the only effective force of opposition to continued Israeli aggression against the people and territory of Lebanon.

This turn of events is a blow to U.S., Saudi Arabian and Israeli plans in Lebanon. These countries had been trying to engineer a government in Beirut that would be compatible with their interests in the region.

Israel invaded Lebanon in the summer of 2006 on the pretext that Hezbollah had kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. The real reason for the attack, which had been prepared long in advance, was to destroy Hezbollah militarily and to undermine its support among the population in southern Lebanon. Israel failed to destroy Hezbollah but did do a tremendous amount of damage to the infrastructure in the area all the way to the southern districts of Beirut. This is a normal Israeli tactic based on the theory that if you kill large numbers of civilians, destroy their homes, businesses and livelihoods they will blame the people that brought the destruction down on their heads, in this case Hezbollah. The same theory was applied to Gaza and Hamas last December and January.

Elections in Lebanon in 2005 had established Hezbollah and its allies as the second largest bloc in the Lebanese parliament with 35 of 112 seats and two cabinet posts. Hezbollah was also the only

word about the human rights abuses of tens of thousands of people by the U.S. in Iraq, Afghanistan and various other countries. It said nothing about Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, choosing to condemn the victims instead. It did not criticize the coup in Honduras, even after U.S. President Obama indicated that it would be acceptable to do so. In other words, Harper maintains a blatant double standard on the issue of human rights, choosing to criticize countries, such as China, which he views as rivals to U.S. hegemony, while remaining silent on the human rights abuses of those he views as allies.

organized force that was actively resisting Israel. It was Hezbollah's efforts that pushed the Israeli army out of southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah's history of staunch opposition to Israeli aggression has earned it no friends in the Israeli or U.S. governments. However, they have been unable to destroy it by force of arms or to weaken its support within the population in southern Lebanon.

The Lebanese elections held this year were reported as a defeat for Hezbollah. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia backed a coalition of parties led by Saad al Hariri. Hariri became the prime minister but the new government was only able to establish itself through a coalition which includes Hezbollah and its allies. The November 26 statement linking the army and the resistance in the struggle to liberate and defend Lebanon is an indication that the latest U.S./Saudi/Israeli plan to marginalize Hezbollah and the resistance struggle that it represents has failed.

Modern Communism

**Bulletin of the Manitoba Regional Committee
of the Communist Party of Canada
(Marxist-Leninist)
Editor: Ken Kaltornyk**

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