

Obama + Afghanistan = Bush + Iraq = Johnson + Vietnam?

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Barack Obama owes a great deal of his success in last year's Democratic primaries to being the only major candidate consistently in opposition to the Iraq war. This differentiated him from the other two major candidates, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, both of whom had initially supported the war. In 2008, opposition to the Iraq war became necessary to win the support of at least some of the Democratic Party's liberal anti-war base; without as much, the nomination would have been almost impossible to win.

But as a young, left-of-center, first-term senator with very little foreign policy experience, Obama was in danger of being battered by charges of weakness or of being unwilling to assert American power. Which meant that during the campaign, Obama had to prove that he was tough and not too dovish, which is what led him to his position on Afghanistan.

Talking tough on Afghanistan gave him the political space to maintain his position against continued US involvement in Iraq, especially during a general election campaign against a hawkish John McCain who, an enthusiastic supporter of the surge in Iraq. At least, this is what many of Obama's supporters hoped during the campaign.

And yet Obama has already shown in his presidency that his views on Afghanistan are more than just a campaign tactic. The easy thing for Obama would have been to lump Afghanistan in with Iraq as failed Bush policies and instead begin a slow — some might say too slow — pullback of troops in Afghanistan, similar to that in Iraq. And yet it seems that Obama's assessment of national security concerns made this option less appealing. Obama's reward for this approach is that Afghanistan may do for Obama what Iraq did for Bush, what Vietnam did for Johnson, what Afghanistan itself did for the Soviet Union, or whatever other analogy you like.

The debate about whether or not we should exit Afghanistan is growing louder. The recent election in Afghanistan has made the argument for staying in Afghanistan even more difficult to sell. After all, during the Bush presidency, we managed several decent elections in Iraq which seemed to have been a lot better than the one we just had in Afghanistan. If Afghanistan can't even conduct an election on par with those in Iraq, so the argument could go, how can we ever expect success there? This is an overly simplified argument, but it is still relevant.

By 2008 and 2009, Iraq was an easier question for an American president than many had thought it would be the Obama administration's scaled withdrawal of troops there is not

radically different than what we might have expected had President Bush — that is, the chastened post-2006 version — remained in office.

Afghanistan is different. There is less of a consensus among the public. For the moment, it is also less of a focus to the broader public, but that too may change over time. Obama remains in a tough place. Calling for a withdrawal from Afghanistan will make Obama look inconsistent and will give credence to his domestic opponents who claim that he is weak. And yet last week's elections have made it harder to sell the American people on the notion that victory is possible in Afghanistan, even if it is.