

Speech by John McCain, 15 July 2008

Comprehensive strategy for victory in Afghanistan

I'm here today to discuss with you several issues that worry you and most Americans, our slumping economy, job loss, rising gas and food prices, and what we need to do to get our economy growing again, create jobs and reduce our dangerous dependence on foreign oil. But there is another urgent issue I want to address before I take your questions, which I know concerns you because brave Americans are risking their lives right now to deal with it.

Over the last year, Senator Obama and I were part of a great debate about the war in Iraq. Both of us agreed the Bush administration had pursued a failed strategy there and that we had to change course. Where Senator Obama and I disagreed, fundamentally, was what course we should take. I called for a comprehensive new strategy - a surge of troops and counter-insurgency to win the war. Senator Obama disagreed. He opposed the surge, predicted it would increase sectarian violence, and called for our troops to retreat as quickly as possible.

Today we know Senator Obama was wrong. The surge has succeeded. And because of its success, the next president will inherit a situation in Iraq in which America's enemies are on the run, and our soldiers are beginning to come home. Senator Obama is departing soon on a trip abroad that will include a fact-finding mission to Iraq and Afghanistan. And I note that he is speaking today about his plans for Iraq and Afghanistan before he has even left, before he has talked to General Petraeus, before he has seen the progress in Iraq, and before he has set foot in Afghanistan for the first time. In my experience, fact-finding missions usually work best the other way around: first you assess the facts on the ground then you present a new strategy.

Although the situation in Iraq is much improved, another test awaits whoever wins this election: the war in Afghanistan. The status quo is not acceptable. Security in Afghanistan has deteriorated, and our enemies are on the offensive. From the moment the next president walks into the Oval Office, he will face critical decisions about Afghanistan.

Senator Obama will tell you we can't win in Afghanistan without losing in Iraq. In fact, he has it exactly backwards. It is precisely the success of the surge in Iraq that shows us the way to succeed in Afghanistan. It is by applying the tried and true principles of counter-insurgency used in the surge - which Senator Obama opposed - that we will win in Afghanistan. With the right strategy and the right forces, we can succeed in both Iraq and Afghanistan. I know how to win wars. And if I'm elected President, I will turn around the war in Afghanistan, just as we have turned around the war in Iraq, with a comprehensive strategy for victory.

That strategy will have several components. Our commanders on the ground in Afghanistan say that they need at least three additional brigades. Thanks to the success of the surge, these forces are becoming available, and our commanders in Afghanistan must get them. But sending more forces, by itself, is not enough to prevail. In the 18 months that Senator Obama has been campaigning for the presidency, the number of Nato forces in Afghanistan has already almost doubled - from 33,000 in January 2007 to about 53,000 today. Yet security has still deteriorated. What we need in Afghanistan is exactly what Gen Petraeus brought to Iraq: a nationwide civil-military campaign plan that is focused on providing security for the population. Today no such integrated plan exists. When I am commander-in-chief, it will.

There are, of course, many differences between Afghanistan and Iraq, which any plan must account for. But, as in Iraq, the centre of gravity is the security of the population. The good news is that our soldiers have begun to apply the lessons of Iraq to Afghanistan - especially in eastern Afghanistan, where US forces are concentrated. These efforts, however, are too piecemeal; the work of innovative local commanders, rather than a strategy for the entire country. In particular, the US needs to re-engage deeper in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban heartland.

One of the reasons there is no comprehensive campaign plan for Afghanistan is because we have violated one of the cardinal rules of any military operation: unity of command. Today there are no less than three different American military combatant commands operating in Afghanistan, as well as Nato, some of whose members have national restrictions on where their troops can go and what they can do. This is no way to run a war. The top commander in Afghanistan needs to be just that: the supreme commander of all coalition forces. As commander-in-chief, I will work with our allies to ensure unity of command.

A successful counter-insurgency requires more than military force. It requires all instruments of our national power, and that military and civilian leaders work together, at all levels, under a joint plan. Too often in Afghanistan this is not happening. And we need to build the same kind of civil-military partnership that Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have forged in Iraq, supported by the best talent in the US government and the resources necessary to prevail. Unity of command is also a principle I will bring to Washington. Too often, even as American soldiers and diplomats co-operate in the field, their superiors back home have been squabbling. Last year, the Bush administration appointed a war tsar, responsible for both Iraq and Afghanistan. This was a step in the right direction. But Afghanistan is sufficiently important that a separate Afghanistan tsar is needed. I will appoint a highly-respected national security leader, based in the White House and reporting directly to the president, whose sole mission will be to ensure we bring the war in Afghanistan to a successful end.

Everyone knows the United States increased the number of its soldiers in Iraq last year. What's less well known is that the Iraqis surged with us, adding over 100,000 security forces to their ranks. It's time for the Afghans to do the same. The Afghan army is already a great success story: a multi-ethnic, battle-tested fighting force. The problem is it's too small, with a projected strength of only 80,000 troops. For years, the Afghans have been telling us they need a bigger army, and they are right. We need to at least double the size of the Afghan army to 160,000 troops. The costs of this increase, however, should not be borne by American taxpayers alone. Insecurity in Afghanistan is the world's problem, and the world should share the costs. We must work with our allies to establish an international trust fund to provide long-term financing for the Afghan army.

We also need to increase our non-military assistance to the Afghan government, with a multi-front plan for strengthening its institutions, the rule of law, and the economy in order to provide a sustainable alternative to the drug trade. Getting control of narcotics trafficking is central to our efforts in Afghanistan. Alternative crops must be able to get to market and traffickers must be arrested and prosecuted by enhanced Special Courts. We should agree on specific governance and development benchmarks with the Afghan government then work with them closely to ensure they are met.

Just as we have worked over the past 18 months to stabilise Iraq by bringing together its neighbours, this kind of diplomacy is just as important for Afghanistan. The violence there has many causes, but chief among them is the fact that Afghanistan is treated by some regional powers a chessboard on which to pursue their own ambitions. I will appoint a special presidential envoy to address disputes between Afghanistan and its neighbours. Our goal must be to turn Afghanistan from a theatre for regional rivalries into a commons for regional co-operation.

A special focus of our regional strategy must be Pakistan, where terrorists today enjoy sanctuary. This must end. We must strengthen local tribes in the border areas who are willing to fight the foreign terrorists there - the strategy used successfully in Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq. We must convince Pakistanis that this is their war as much as it is ours. And we must empower the new civilian government of Pakistan to defeat radicalism with greater support for development, health, and education. Senator Obama has spoken in public about taking unilateral military action in Pakistan. In trying to sound tough, he has made it harder for the people whose support we most need to provide it. I will not bluster, and I will not make idle threats. But understand this: when I am commander-in-chief, there will be nowhere the terrorists can run, and nowhere they can hide.

In wartime, judgment and experience matter. In a time of war, the commander-in-chief doesn't get a learning curve. If I have that privilege, I will bring to the job many years of military and political experience; experience that gave me the judgment necessary to make the right call in Iraq a year and

half ago. I supported the surge because I believed it was our only realistic chance to reverse the disaster our previous strategy had caused, and the right thing to do for our country. And although events have proven me right, my position wasn't popular at the time, and I risked my own political ambitions when I took it. When I tell you, I will put our country's interests - your interests - before party; before any special interest; before my own interests, every hour of every day I'm in office, you can believe me. Because for my entire adult life, in war and peace, nothing has ever been more important to me than the security and well-being of the country I love. Thank you.