Justifying sacrifice: Barack Obama and the selling and ending of the war in Afghanistan

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Just a month after entering office, US President Barack Obama spoke at the US Marine Corps base at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. His remarks focused on his plans to 'responsibly' end the war in Iraq and to deepen the commitment of the United States to the fight against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. One of the key motifs that Obama used in his speech was that of 'sacrifice'—the need for all Americans to continue the age-old tradition of paying a price for the freedoms they enjoy. As he told the audience of US Marines: 'The consequences of war are dire, the sacrifices immeasurable. You know because you have seen those sacrifices. You have lived them. And we all honor them.' He then characterized this notion of sacrifice for one's country as being part of a long tradition that was responsible for the very existence of the United States and an essential guarantor of its domestic freedom:

> Each of you has your own story. And that story is now a part of the history of the United States of America—a nation that exists only because free men and women have bled for it from the beaches of Normandy to the deserts of Anbar; from the mountains of Korea to the streets of Kandahar. You teach us that the price of freedom is great. Your sacrifice should challenge all of us—every single American—to ask what we can do to be better citizens.[1]

In order to 'sell' the renewed effort to bring the Afghanistan campaign to 'a successful conclusion', Obama has drawn heavily on the idea of 'sacrifice' by emphasizing in his rhetorical defence of the commitment of further US troops that the protection of the United States and its interests against further terrorist attacks compels America to bear the burden of sacrifice that continuing the war entails. While drawing on much of the same rhetorical base as his predecessor in justifying the war against the threat of international terrorism, Obama has been more willing than George W. Bush to confront symbolically the human cost of the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Where the Bush administration had restricted the publication even of photographs of homecoming coffins, for

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[1] Barack Obama, 'Responsibly ending the war in Iraq', Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, 27 Feb. 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-ndash-responsibly-ending-war-iraq, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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example, Obama visited Dover Air Base in Delaware to salute the flag-draped caskets containing America's war dead and built a sustained public campaign to emphasize the need for sacrifice in the face of what continue to be perceived as grave threats to US security.

This article explores this symbolic engagement with the sacrifices being made in the name of keeping the United States 'safe' from terrorism, considers how successfully this approach resonates with the US public and elite opinion-shapers, analyses the sustainability of underlying public support for a continued effort to combat the threat of terrorism and to 'get the job done' in Afghanistan, and considers how such an approach has developed as Obama has sought to fulfil his goal of drawing the US intervention to a close. It argues that by emphasizing sacrifice as a central justifying principle, the Obama administration has understood well the so-called 'Vietnam syndrome'—the deeply held set of criteria for the use of force that was developed by US policy-makers after the Vietnam War to assist with questions about how and when to intervene militarily without getting embroiled in a long-term quagmire, and that also pinpoints the conditions under which popular and elite support can be sustained. The article also argues, however, that there are major risks involved in justifying the continued commitment to Afghanistan using the central principle of the sacrifices being necessary and worthwhile. While Obama's ultimate objective is to extract the United States from the decade-long war in Afghanistan, he has risked creating a 'sacrifice trap', whereby the more emphasis is placed on the sacrifices being made, the more necessary it becomes to demonstrate outcomes that make those sacrifices worthwhile, thus making it more difficult to withdraw without what is widely perceived as a victory. It is shown that Obama's rhetoric shifted in 2011 to allow for a relatively rapid drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan while still suggesting that the sacrifices made have been justified.

Obama's rhetoric of 'sacrifice'

President Barack Obama's first words after taking the oath of office during his inauguration on 20 January 2009 were: 'My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you've bestowed, mindful of the *sacrifices* borne by our ancestors.'[2] Obama used his inaugural address as a clarion call to all Americans to recall the sacrifices made by Americans of the past and to remind his fellow citizens that the nation, and indeed the world, needed them again to bear such sacrifices: 'Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions, greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction. This is the journey we continue today.'[3]

[2] Barack Obama, 'Inaugural address', 20 Jan. 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address, accessed 2 Aug. 2012 (emphasis added).
[3] Obama, 'Inaugural address'.

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In countless speeches since then, Obama has used the rhetoric of sacrifice to call on Americans to accept tough policies on the economy and in national security. In the latter area, he has given particularly heavy emphasis to the necessity of sacrifice in order for the United States to combat the perceived threats from international terrorism and especially to justify continuing and initially deepening the war in Afghanistan.

'What is our purpose in Afghanistan? After so many years, [Americans] ask, why do our men and women still fight and die there?' These are the core questions that Barack Obama sought to answer in March 2009 when he announced his administration's comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The President's answer was clear and unequivocal: that the war in Afghanistan and the neighbouring regions of Pakistan was designed to prevent Al-Qaeda from being able to perpetrate further terrorist attacks against targets in the United States or wherever else US interests were at stake. Failure to do so, Obama warned, would mean that 'that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can'. The need to deepen the war in Afghanistan was an absolute imperative that went to the heart of US security, in contrast to the war in Iraq, which Obama portrayed as a misplaced distraction from the real war on terror against Al-Qaeda. At various points in this speech, Obama emphasized that 'great sacrifices' had been made in pursuit of the objectives in Afghanistan—by US and coalition troops, by US civilians, and by Afghans who had 'suffered and sacrificed for their future'. He drew his argument to a close by reminding his audience that while 'the sacrifices have been enormous', yet they were justified, owing to the conflict having been thrust upon the United States by Al-Qaeda's actions on 11 September 2001. Obama gave a resounding vote of confidence in the righteousness of the American cause by declaring that 'all Americans are awed by the service of our own men and women in uniform, who've borne a burden as great as any other generation's. They and their families embody the example of selfless sacrifice.'[4]

Obama's reliance on the notion of sacrifice fits with a long tradition of US presidents, policy-makers and opinion-formers drawing on the idea. It is an approach that tends to resonate strongly with American audiences because it is rooted deep within American political culture. In his classic essay on American civil religion, Robert Bellah argued that the notion of sacrifice and rebirth has been synonymous with US historical and political development. With the Civil War experience and the deaths of thousands of Americans, including the 'martyred president' Abraham Lincoln, Bellah argues, 'the theme of sacrifice was indelibly written into the civil religion'.[5] Arguably, this occurred most powerfully in Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address', which has since passed into the canon of American political culture. Speaking of the thousands of Americans from North and South who had lost their lives on the battlefield before which he stood, Lincoln declared that they had died 'that the nation might live' and resolved to prosecute the war to a successful

[4] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President on a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, March 27, 2009', The White House Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[5] Robert Bellah, 'Civil religion in America', *Daedalus* 96: 1, Winter 1967, p. 11.

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end such that 'these dead shall not have died in vain'.[6] The spirit of sacrifice has been further institutionalized and ritualized in the annual commemoration of Memorial Day, as well as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, and in the fundamental importance given to Arlington National Cemetery and the numerous memorials to America's wars, and to Lincoln himself, on the National Mall in Washington DC and elsewhere across the country. It is actually during times of war, however, that the appeal to sacrifice can be given the greatest resonance politically: 'When our soldiers are actually dying, it becomes possible to consecrate the struggle further by invoking the great theme of sacrifice.'[7] Other presidents and policy-makers have drawn effectively on this theme in ways that have added to the strength of the sacrifice motif in the political canon—not least John F. Kennedy, who declared in his inaugural address that the US would 'pay any price, bear any burden … in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty'.

So when Obama uses the rhetoric of sacrifice in his speeches, he is drawing on a notion that has deep cultural resonance. As he made especially clear in his speech announcing the deployment of 30,000 further troops to Afghanistan in December 2009, the rationale for the continuing war in Afghanistan is that it continues to be the front line in the war against international terrorism; that those responsible for the attacks of 11 September 2001 and those who would perpetrate further attacks on the United States are being held at bay by the US military action in Afghanistan; and that the sacrifices being made by US troops there are absolutely essential and justified in order to protect the US public at home. He declared: 'This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat.' He emphasized the 'service and sacrifice' of generations of Americans and stressed that the US had 'borne a special burden in world affairs' to ensure global security. He argued strongly that today's US armed forces 'are part of an unbroken line of sacrifice that has made government of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality on this Earth'.[8]

Obama and sacrifice: the war dead

The Obama administration has not had only rhetorical recourse to the notion of sacrifice. It has departed from the Bush administration in a far greater willingness to confront the human cost of the wars in Afghanistan and also Iraq. Symbolically, the main example of this change in emphasis was the decision taken in February 2009 to lift the ban on media coverage of coffins containing the war dead from

[6] Abraham Lincoln, draft of the Gettysburg Address: Nicolay copy. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington DC: American Memory Project, [2000–02]), reproduced at http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=36&page=transcript, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[7] Bellah, 'Civil religion', p. 15.

[8] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in address to the nation on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, December 1, 2009', The White House Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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Afghanistan and Iraq being repatriated at Dover Air Base. The Bush administration had strictly enforced the ban that had been in place since the Gulf War in 1991. At that time Dick Cheney, George H. W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, had instigated the ban on any media photography or filming of the flag-draped coffins after an incident embarrassing to the White House following the 1989 Panama invasion. Bush was seen 'sparring and joking with reporters' in split-screen television images as the coffins of dead US soldiers were being carried from an aircraft by the honour guard. Bush requested that the White House be warned when split screens would be used in future, but the networks refused, leading the administration to impose the ban in February 1991.[9]

The ban stood for 18 years, but it was not until the Bush administration embarked on its invasion of Iraq that it was fully enforced. During the Clinton administration, although the ban remained officially in place, the President appeared several times saluting the coffins of troops returning from military campaigns he had ordered and the media were given access to the honour guard ceremonies. But as the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, the Pentagon issued a directive reinforcing the ban on all news coverage of 'deceased military personnel returning to or departing from' air bases.[10]

The ban on the filming and photography of repatriation ceremonies came to light in April 2004 when the *Seattle Times* published on its front page a photograph of flag-draped caskets in the hold of a military cargo plane. The military contractor who had sent the photo to the newspaper, Tami Silico, lost her job as a result, but further photos of coffins arriving at Dover Air Base were then published by the website 'The Memory Hole' following a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit. The more the administration tried to uphold the ban, the more it came to be regarded by opponents of the war as 'a symbol of the Bush administration's deliberate manipulation and suppression of the truth regarding Iraq'. These critics believed that 'if only the American people could see Iraq's true consequences … they would turn against the administration and demand change'.[11]

Following various failed attempts to have the ban overturned during the Bush presidency, the Obama administration moved quickly to review and then lift the ban in February 2009. Critics of Bush's policy argued that allowing the returning caskets of the US war dead to be shown on television, in newspapers and on the internet would do exactly what the Obama administration intended it to do—to demonstrate to the American people the real human cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the sacrifices that were being made on their behalf. Ralph Begleiter, a CNN reporter who had filed a Freedom of Information request against the ban, argued: 'This reversal of two decades of policy is an important and welcome milestone for the American people. This decision restores to its rightful,

[9] Elisabeth Bumiller, 'Defense chief lifts ban on pictures of coffins', *New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/washington/27coffins.html, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[10] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, 'Senate backs ban on photos of G.I. coffins', *New York Times*, 22 June 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/22/us/senate-backs-ban-on-photos-of-gi-coffins.html, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[11] Alexander Belenky, 'Photographing America's war dead', guardian.co.uk, 27 Feb. 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/feb/27/obama-dover-coffins-photographs-iraq, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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honorable place the immense value of the sacrifice American troops make on behalf of their nation.'[12] Jon Soltz, the chairman of VoteVets.org, a veterans' anti-Iraq war group claiming a membership of 15,000 military families, welcomed the decision, partly because they claimed other events in the annual calendar designed to recall the sacrifices made by the nation's military had simply become excuses for civilians to have a day off work. Memorial Day, he suggested, was now simply seen by most Americans as an opportunity to 'go to the beach and cook hot dogs in the backyard'. He believed, however, that allowing media coverage of the dead returning from Iraq and Afghanistan would establish 'a way for Americans to see and honor the sacrifice of our fallen when it occurs. It's something our public should be aware of.'[13] 'There has never been a greater disconnect between those who serve in harm's way and those back home,' said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. 'All too often, the sacrifices of our military are hidden from view.'[14]

In October 2009, Obama ensured that the human costs of the war for the US military were no longer 'hidden from view' when he did what his predecessor had never done and visited the Dover Air Base in Delaware to salute the coffins of dead American soldiers returning from Afghanistan. One of the mourning families gave permission for their son's casket to be filmed coming off the transport aircraft and a small media entourage were able to film and photograph the honour guard ceremony for the first time in almost 20 years. Obama's critics on the right, including Rush Limbaugh, accused him of trying callously to score political points and claimed that a tearful Bush and Cheney had visited the airport privately many times—a story which was proved untrue. When he escalated the US commitment to Afghanistan at the end of 2009, Obama demonstrated that he understood the 'enormous cost in lives and resources' being expended by the United States, its military and their families. He drew attention to the fact that he not only wrote letters of condolence and visited the wounded, as his predecessor had, but also that he had attended the return of 'the flag-draped caskets of 18 Americans' at Dover. 'I see firsthand the terrible wages of war,' he declared, 'so, no, I do not make this decision lightly.'[15]

Sacrifice for the US

Obama's emphasis on sacrifice both rhetorically and symbolically has tended to privilege the sacrifices being made by Americans over those of others. His rhetorical justifications for his Afghan campaign have also revealed a particular hierarchy of who is intended to benefit from the sacrifices being made. The war in Afghanistan is designed to bring stability and security to that country, but the primary reason

[12] 'Obama administration lifts blanket ban on media coverage of the return of fallen soldiers', press release, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington DC, 26 Feb. 2009, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20090226/index.htm, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[13] Quoted in Bumiller, 'Defense chief lifts ban on pictures of coffins'.

[14] Quoted in Anne Gearan, 'Pentagon to allow photos of returning war dead', *Huffington Post*, 26 Feb. 2009.

[15] Obama, 'Remarks by the President in address to the nation on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

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why this objective is being pursued by the Obama administration has always been much more to do with the perceived safety and security of the American public than it has with the welfare and future of the Afghan people themselves. Obama admitted as much in his address announcing his renewed strategy for the war, just two months into his presidency: 'As President, my greatest responsibility is to protect the American people. We are not in Afghanistan to control that country or to dictate its future. We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists.'[16] The order of concern was apparent in this speech and across further pronouncements on the AFPAK (Afghanistan/Pakistan) strategy: the primary concern was whether the policy was continuing to weaken Al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters in order to minimize the threat against, first and foremost, the US homeland and US interests globally, and second the territory and interests of its allies internationally, while the Afghan population's fate has seemed of only tertiary concern. Obama was even clearer about the primacy of American interests when he made his deployment of 30,000 more troops in December 2009: 'If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home tomorrow.'[17]

Although Obama has often insisted that complete US withdrawal is contingent on the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, it is apparent that his rationale for continuing the war and drawing it to what he perceives as a successful conclusion for the United States is based far more on a consideration of US national security than on any sense of long-term commitment to the Afghan people. The emphasis has been very much on the Afghan government and security forces taking over full responsibility for the country's safety and stability as soon as they possibly can. In December 2009, Obama made clear that the decision to increase significantly the number of US troops committed to Afghanistan was being taken to 'allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces, and allow us to begin the transfer of forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011'. The US would continue to advise and assist but, he insisted, 'it will be clear to the Afghan government—and, more importantly, to the Afghan people—that they will ultimately be responsible for their own country'. He was adamant that he would not heed calls from some quarters for 'a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort—one that would commit us to a nation-building project of up to a decade. I reject this course because it sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests.' Obama understood that the US public would not accept continued sacrifice in pursuit of building a sustainable and strong Afghan society, but they would continue to give fundamental support to an effort that reinforced US security and therefore served US interests. 'It must be clear', he concluded, 'that Afghans will have to

[16] Obama, 'Remarks by the President on a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan'.
[17] Obama, 'Remarks by the President in address to the nation on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.

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take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan. As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests … because the nation that I'm most interested in building is our own.'[18]

Obama and the Vietnam syndrome

Obama's use of the language of sacrifice to underpin his strategy for Afghanistan suggests that he understands the Vietnam syndrome particularly well. Indeed, he would appear to have a more sophisticated view than often prevails in policy-making circles of what the legacy of Vietnam means in terms of the US public's sensitivity towards casualties and their willingness to continue supporting certain conflicts even as the number of Americans being killed or wounded is rising. In light of the Vietnam War, the conventional wisdom seems to hold that there is a simple correlation between the number of US combat deaths and the level of opposition to US involvement in a conflict. The main reason why the Vietnam War became so unpopular domestically, and thus became unsustainable, however, was not simply the high casualty rate. The key lesson of the Vietnam War is rather more complex. It is that US public support for a long-term military commitment abroad cannot be sustained unless the objectives remain compelling, clear and attainable; there is demonstrable progress in achieving those objectives; and the costs in terms of lives and materiel are kept to an acceptable level given the objectives and the rationale for US involvement. In other words, the costs of the war—essentially, the sacrifices being made—must be considered worthy of the cause at stake. The main reason for opposition to the war in Vietnam was not the level of casualties alone, but the growing belief that the war was not worth the sacrifices being made. Americans have demonstrated in a wide range of conflicts that they are willing to suffer much higher casualty rates than those sustained in Vietnam if they judge the cause to be worthwhile. This was certainly true in the Second World War, still commonly viewed in the United States as the 'good war', but it was also the case during other conflicts with high casualty rates that were less unambiguously well supported, such as the Korean War, where the visibility and impact of the substantial opposition to the war was tempered by the strength of the Cold War consensus. Opposition to the war in Vietnam solidified as the objectives became unclear over time and an increasing credibility gap developed between the progress US officials said was being made and the realities on the ground. By this time, significant political fissures were also appearing in the Cold War consensus, which meant the original arguments for the intervention seemed less compelling. The longer the war continued, the less imperative the original objectives appeared, and the less willing the US populace became to continue to make the sacrifices necessary to pursue those objectives.[19] A similar process occurred during the Iraq War. It was not simply that the US public could not tolerate the numbers of dead soldiers

[18] Obama, 'Remarks by the President in address to the nation on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.
[19] See Trevor McCrisken, *American exceptionalism and the legacy of Vietnam* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

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being announced each week. It was more that the rationale for those casualties became less and less convincing as the war continued.

Barack Obama and his advisers seem to have understood well the nature of opposition to US interventions. Obama deliberately constructed a rhetoric around his policy of continuing the war in Afghanistan while bringing a close to the war in Iraq that drew on a nuanced comprehension of how the US public and elites viewed the use of force and its utility in the so-called 'war on terror'. Public opinion polls soon after 11 September 2001 had shown that the US public would bear high costs in pursuit of the war on Al-Qaeda. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll in late October 2001 found that 61 per cent of the US public believed the war in Afghanistan 'would be worth it' even if 'several thousand American troops lose their lives'.[20] According to R. W. Apple, Jr, the results of the poll revealed the nature of post-9/11 attitudes towards the use of force: 'Clearly, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, with the horrific loss of American lives they entailed, would give any United States decision to dispatch ground forces a kind of moral imperative that American involvement in Vietnam lacked.'[21] On becoming president, Obama appears to have shared this conclusion, calculating that the attacks of 11 September 2001 still resonated strongly with the US public, that despite the experience of Iraq there remained an appetite for taking the fight to Al-Qaeda and its leadership, including Osama bin Laden, and that sacrificing further American lives in Afghanistan would still be deemed 'worth it' if it achieved the objective of keeping the United States and its interests safer.

Sustainability

Perhaps the biggest question is whether Obama's rhetoric of sacrifice in Afghanistan has proved effective. Since the earliest months of Obama's presidency, popular news magazines, academic journals and television pundits have decried the state of the US intervention. As early as February 2009, *Newsweek* magazine, for example, asked whether Afghanistan was 'Obama's Vietnam', a question that by the year's end was being answered affirmatively in the journal *Foreign Policy*.[22] By March 2012, citing growing domestic public opposition to the war, *The Nation* declared that it was 'time to get out of Afghanistan'.[23] Yet these and countless other examples tell only part of the story of where US opinion on the war in Afghanistan lies. It would appear from the claims made in these articles that the American public is war-weary and no longer accepts that the war is worthy of the sacrifices being made. Certainly there is much evidence from public opinion

[20] 'CBS News/*New York Times* poll, Oct. 25–28, 2001', The Polling Report, http://www.pollingreport.com/terror9.htm, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[21] R. W. Apple, Jr, 'News analysis: Afghanistan as Vietnam', *New York Times*, 31 Oct. 2001, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/international/asia/31ASSE.html, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[22] 'Obama's Vietnam: how to salvage Afghanistan', *Newsweek*, 9 Feb. 2009; Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, 'Obama's indecent interval: despite the U.S. President's pleas to the contrary, the war in Afghanistan looks more like Vietnam than ever', *Foreign Policy*, 10 Dec. 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/10/sorry_obama_afghanistans_your_vietnam?page=full, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[23] 'Time to get out of Afghanistan', *The Nation*, 2 April 2012, http://www.thenation.com/article/166832/time-get-out-afghanistan#, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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polls that majorities of Americans believe the war effort to be failing and are keen for US troops to withdraw. However, this is far from the whole picture. There is further evidence that suggests that fundamentally the President's claims are still in line with underlying public opinion: that his argument that the sacrifices being made on their behalf in Afghanistan are worth it is still accepted, and that they continue to believe that the war is meeting the goal of protecting them from further terrorist attacks.

Consistently over time, the Gallup Organization asks two key questions about US military interventions abroad. The first question measures the US public's assessment of how well or badly the intervention is going for the United States. The second question asks whether the original intervention was a mistake or not. In conflicts such as those in Vietnam and Iraq, answers to both these questions became increasingly negative as the fighting lengthened, objectives seemed to become out of reach, the reasons for intervention appeared less compelling and no obvious exit strategy was apparent. Support for the Iraq War collapsed relatively quickly on both Gallup's measures. As early as September 2003, 52 per cent of Americans believed the war in Iraq was going moderately or very badly.[24] Between half and two-thirds shared that view until the full effects of the troop surge were being felt in the autumn of 2008 and opinion became relatively more favourable.[25] More significantly, though, almost as quickly as opinion turned on how well the war was going for the United States, by June 2004 majority opinion in the United States had tipped towards the conclusion that the Bush administration had 'made a mistake' in sending troops to Iraq in the first place.[26] Opinion fluctuated a little over the next couple of years, with some mild recovery of confidence in some months, but from October 2006 onwards majority opinion firmly believed that the US invasion of Iraq had been a mistake despite the relative success of the surge and the eventual withdrawal of all US troops under Obama.[27]

Public opinion on Afghanistan, in terms of the fundamental underlying support for the war's rationale, has been markedly different. In Gallup's polls on Afghanistan the 'How is the war going?' figures have dropped away steadily as Obama has been in the White House, but response to the 'Was it a mistake?' question has remained relatively strong, with a majority continuing to believe that the decision to send US troops to fight in Afghanistan was not a mistake in the first place. The number of Americans thinking it was not a mistake has generally

[24] Lydia Saad and Frank Newport, 'Americans grow more doubtful about Iraq War', Gallup News Service, 23 Sept. 2003, http://www.gallup.com/poll/9328/Americans-Grow-More-Doubtful-About-Iraq-War.aspx, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[25] 'Iraq: in general, how would you say things are going for the U.S. in Iraq -- [ROTATED: very well, moderately well, moderately badly, (or) very badly]?', Gallup Poll, http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx, accessed 2 Aug. 2012. The word 'rotated' is included in the question because the possible answers were rotated, listing 'very badly' first in one poll, 'very well' first in another, etc.

[26] 'Poll: sending troops to Iraq a mistake', CNN Politics, 25 June 2004, http://articles.cnn.com/2004-06-24/politics/poll.iraq_1_poll-respondents-tie-among-likely-voters-presumptive-democratic-presidential-nominee?_s=PM:ALLPOLITICS, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[27] 'Iraq: in view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?', Gallup Poll, http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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remained around 60 per cent from early in Obama's presidency, dipping to a slim majority of 52 per cent in late July 2010 as the fighting intensified, but rising again to 60 per cent or thereabouts each time Gallup has asked the question since. In March 2012, for example, Gallup found that 59 per cent of Americans 'still believe going into Afghanistan was the right thing to do', which they observed was 'essentially unchanged from the 62 per cent in a December 2009 *USA Today*/ Gallup poll, conducted after President Obama outlined his strategy for the war'. Gallup also discovered that majority opinion that the United States had done the right thing in invading Afghanistan went across political allegiances, Republicans being the most convinced with almost three-quarters maintaining that intervention was justifiable.[28]

It is true that a majority of the US public has been critical of the way things are going in Afghanistan and of Obama's handling of the war; but the saving grace for the President's strategy and the reason his rhetoric still holds resonance is that a significant majority, almost two-thirds of the population, still maintain that the war was worth fighting in the first place, even if they are dissatisfied with the way it has progressed. There is evidence to suggest that they also accept Obama's argument that the war has been fulfilling the main stated objective of combating Al-Qaeda and protecting the United States from further terrorist attacks. Despite increased casualties during Obama's presidency, US voters have stated by a 58 per cent to 33 per cent margin that 'eliminating the threat of terrorists operating from Afghanistan is a goal for which American troops should fight and possibly die'.[29] Gallup has found that the US public also retains a relatively high concern that too rapid a withdrawal from the conflict might 'lead to increased terrorism by making Afghanistan a safe haven for terrorists again', with 58 per cent saying they are still very or somewhat worried by this possibility. Only 15 per cent say that they are 'very worried' that 'keeping US troops in Afghanistan makes the US more vulnerable to terrorist attacks'.[30]

As Obama gradually draws down the Afghanistan campaign, then, he can be relatively confident that fundamentally the US public remains convinced that the war was worth fighting and that it is fulfilling the main objective of reducing US vulnerability to further terrorist attacks. Essentially, his continued assertion that the sacrifices being made in Afghanistan are worth it continues to resonate with a significant majority of the US public. Obama is clearly aware of the impact that his rhetorical justification for the war is having on public opinion. As he told US troops at Bagram airbase during a surprise visit in March 2010: 'We have seen a huge increase in support stateside because people understand the kinds of sacrifices that you guys are making.'[31]

[28] Jeffrey M. Jones, 'In US, half say US should speed up Afghanistan withdrawal', Gallup Poll, 15 March 2012, http://www.gallup.com/poll/153260/Half-Say-Speed-Afghanistan-Withdrawal.aspx, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[29] 'US voters say Afghanistan is no Vietnam', Quinnipiac University National Poll, 9 Sept. 2010, http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1295.xml?ReleaseID=1496, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

[30] Jones, 'In US, half say US should speed up Afghanistan withdrawal'.

[31] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President to the troops', Clamshell, Bagram Airfield, 28 March 2010, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-troops, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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The risks of the 'sacrifice trap'

Obama's emphasis on the sacrifices being made in Afghanistan is a risky strategy, however. His open acknowledgement of the loss and sacrifice being made by American troops in this campaign may have the opposite effect to that which the administration intends. It could, in fact, fuel the arguments of those opposed to his strategy of gradual withdrawal and entrench the opinions of those who believe the war is not actually worth the costs being paid. This could play out in a number of ways. Majorities may begin to conclude that the sacrifices are too great, the number of people believing the war a mistake could increase rapidly, and the clamour for a speedier withdrawal could grow precipitously in ways that would be damaging politically for Obama as he seeks a second term and potentially damaging to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan itself.

Alternatively, the sacrifice justification for Obama's escalation and then gradual drawdown of the US effort in Afghanistan might create a 'sacrifice trap',[32] whereby the increased emphasis on the sacrifices being paid by US personnel and their families generates an imperative to remain in Afghanistan for 'as long as it takes' to bring about a conclusion to the war that does in fact justify all the lives and material lost. Joel Brockner and Jeffrey Rubin describe this entrapment as 'a decision making process whereby individuals escalate their commitment to a previously chosen, though failing, course of action in order to justify or "make good on" prior investments'.[33]

There are many reasons why, psychologically, humans are drawn to continue investing in situations once they have made considerable sacrifices in pursuit of particular goals, but most fundamental, according to Brockner and Rubin, is that 'there is an important shift in the decision makers' definition of their involvement in the entrapment situation as their degree of commitment escalates'.[34] There are usually clear initial reasons for committing to a course of action. In Obama's case, he believed wholeheartedly that George W. Bush had been correct in identifying Al-Qaeda as the primary threat to US security after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He also agreed that terrorism must be combated internationally; but where Obama departed from his predecessor was that he viewed Bush's war in Iraq to have been an unnecessary distraction from the true war on terror in Afghanistan.[35] Obama was convinced that the sacrifice worth making was in the direct battle with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the case of the sacrifice trap, however, the original rational reasons for the commitment become less important as motivating factors than the 'emotional' involvement of having committed so deeply to the conflict and having sacrificed so much blood and toil. The risk then becomes that even as the engagement begins to unravel or

[32] See Kenneth E. Boulding, 'Pathologies of defense', *Journal of Peace Research* 21: 2, 1984, pp. 105–6.
[33] Joel Brockner and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Entrapment in escalating conflicts: a social psychological analysis* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985), p. 5.
[34] Brockner and Rubin, *Entrapment*, p. 5.
[35] See Trevor McCrisken, 'Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice', *International Affairs* 87: 4, July 2011, pp. 781–801.

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fail, decision-makers feel increasingly compelled to 'continue investing in order to justify the appropriateness of already sunk costs'.[36]

The risk for Obama, then, is that by placing such heavy rhetorical emphasis on the sacrifices that are continuing to be made in Afghanistan, he makes it increasingly difficult for the United States to meet his declared intention to withdraw all US troops by 2014 unless he is able to demonstrate effectively that the withdrawal is not an admission of failure. He needs to convince the public that US goals have been achieved in Afghanistan and that all the sacrifices that he has admitted to so openly have not been in vain. As Michelle Maiese has observed, 'it is often politically unacceptable for leaders to admit they have made a mistake and that the sacrifices made have achieved nothing'. It is not only leaders themselves who feel this sacrifice trap, but also those members of the public who have been most directly affected: 'People who actually make the sacrifices are also understandably reluctant to admit that they have served no useful purpose and that [the conflict] should be abandoned. For example, it is far easier to believe that your son was killed in a noble crusade, rather than a stupid blunder.'[37] Such beliefs are often strong among families of veterans, particularly from Vietnam and Iraq, but are also strengthened across large swathes of the population when leaders continue to argue that a war is in pursuit of what continues to be a compelling objective—in this case, to assist in the prevention of future Al-Qaeda attacks against the United States. The pressure is on Obama, therefore, to deliver an acceptable end to the war and not to be drawn back into continuing the war indefinitely. Obama may be well placed to avoid the sacrifice trap because he has the advantage of not being the leader who made the original commitment to the war in Afghanistan. Admittedly, he has been a staunch advocate of the effort there and committed a good deal in resources and lives, but his strategy has always been to find a way out of the conflict that avoids the perception of defeat in order to give meaning to all the sacrifices made.

Over the past two years, Obama has shifted his rhetoric as he has outlined in greater detail the plan to withdraw all US and NATO troops by 2014 and hand over all security responsibility to the Afghan government. Obama's argument is that the US objectives in Afghanistan have almost all been achieved, therefore giving worth to the sacrifices made and enabling the United States to draw its combat role to a close. After signing an agreement on the future relationship between the United States and Afghanistan in May 2012, for example, Obama argued that 'over the last three years, the tide has turned' in the war. He declared:

> We broke the Taliban's momentum. We've built strong Afghan security forces. We devastated al Qaeda's leadership, taking out over 20 of their top 30 leaders. And one year ago, from a base here in Afghanistan, our troops launched the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. The goal that I set to defeat al Qaeda and deny it a chance to rebuild—is now within our reach.

[36] Brockner and Rubin, *Entrapment*, p. 5.

[37] Michelle Maiese, 'Entrapment', in Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, eds, *Beyond intractability* (Boulder, CO: Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, 2004), http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/sacrifice-trap, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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The sacrifice motif remains very much a part of this continued rhetorical affirmation of the war effort in Afghanistan, although the emphasis has moved towards a declaration of success that confirms Obama's faith in the justifications he gave for deepening the war and suggests that the sacrifices that have been made were indeed worth it. The President still sounds a note of caution that the war has two years to run before the US withdrawal is complete, but in doing so he again calls on the idea of sacrifice, warning that 'the enormous sacrifices of our men and women are not over'. Obama is now determined, however, that the US will 'complete its mission and end the war in Afghanistan'.[38]

The sacrifice trap may yet be sprung in Afghanistan. Obama's claim to be successfully moving towards a conclusion to the campaign remains vulnerable to significant events both in the field and on the home front. The key component of Obama's argument that the war is worth completing is that the effort in Afghanistan has kept the United States safe from further terrorist attack and that Al-Qaeda is close to being destroyed. This argument could collapse completely if there were a significant terrorist attack against a US target, particularly one in the United States itself. The result could certainly be a demand for immediate withdrawal; but it is also possible that a proven Al-Qaeda connection to any attack would result in calls for a military response against those responsible that could cause Obama to re-intensify the campaign against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In such circumstances it could become necessary for the United States to remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014 before conditions were such that Obama or his successor could claim that the sacrifices made had not been in vain and that the stated US objectives had finally been achieved. Other scenarios might bring about a similar conclusion within Washington that the 2014 timeline for withdrawal needs to be extended. A significant reversal of fortunes on the ground in Afghanistan might lead to a new assessment that the US commitment needs to continue if the objective of enabling a secure Afghanistan to consolidate and stabilize is to be fulfilled and if Al-Qaeda is to be denied the opportunity to re-establish a base of operations in the region from which it can renew its campaign against US targets.

The future of the Afghan campaign is somewhat contingent on electoral outcomes in the United States in November 2012. Obama's Republican challenger for the presidency, Mitt Romney, has given relatively little indication of how his Afghanistan policy would unfold should he win the White House. If anything, he appears more likely to allow slippage in the timetable for withdrawal. He seems to be in broad agreement with Obama's approach, but he believes the continued presence of US forces in Afghanistan should ultimately be based on 'the counsel of military commanders'. In an interview with ABC News on 29 July 2012, he confirmed that he supports the 2014 target for withdrawal but disagrees with the plan to 'order 23,000 troops out by September 30' this year, fearing that this could

[38] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama in address to the nation from Afghanistan', Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, 1 May 2012, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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complicate the prospects of the security situation stabilizing over the next twelve months. He has made clear that he is 'leaving open the possibility of keeping combat troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014'. Should Romney become president, he appears likely to continue to push for an outcome in Afghanistan that is favourable to US interests and can be perceived as justifying the commitment that has been maintained since 2001.[39]

Obama is determined to demonstrate that US objectives can be achieved in order to give meaning and value to all the sacrifices that have been made over the last decade of war. His strategy may yet fail. The war in Afghanistan could drag on for some time yet, American involvement could end without a satisfactory sense of objectives having been achieved, and the US public may well conclude that all the time, effort and lives spent have not been worth it. For all his efforts to tap into deeply held public sentiment about the necessity of sacrifice in American life, Obama may seriously misjudge the limits of American tolerance and find his presidency marked by failure in Afghanistan.

[39] 'Mitt Romney Afghanistan policy details emerge', *Huffington Post*, 29 July 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/29/mitt-romney-afghanistan_n_1716669.html, accessed 2 Aug. 2012.

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