

The Nation's Tom Hayden falsifies Obama's Afghanistan plan

By David Walsh
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On the *Nation* web site June 23, Tom Hayden, veteran of the 1960s protest movements and longtime Democratic Party operative, posted a dishonest and contemptible article about President Barack Obama's speech the night before on the war in Afghanistan.

Hayden makes entirely unwarranted claims about the so-called withdrawal plan and then attributes the "de-escalation" to pressure from a "peace movement" that is largely the product of his imagination.

Obama made his deceitful speech last Wednesday in the hope of assuaging and diverting growing opposition to the war, at least through the November 2012 elections, with his claims that the "tide of war is receding" and "the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance."

In reality, by the end of 2012, assuming Obama makes good on his promises, there will be twice the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan as there were when Obama took office. His administration has escalated the war, sharply increasing the levels of violence and misery as well as the bitter Afghan resistance.

No one should be fooled for an instant. The US military plans to drown the Afghan insurgency against the neocolonial occupation in rivers of blood.

Tom Hayden has a political history that now spans half a century. Born in Detroit in 1939 and a graduate of the University of Michigan, Hayden, while not precisely one of those individuals who is "famous for being famous," acquired a reputation decades ago for radicalism that is undeserved and which has hung about him far too long. In reality, if one examines Hayden's opinions and actions, he clearly belongs to the moderate flank of the Democratic Party.

He was a founding member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and a principal author of the "Port Huron Statement" in June 1962, the organization's initiating manifesto. No doubt the document reflected the increasing restiveness of students after the pervasive conformism and official anticommunism of the 1950s. However, its political impact was limited at the time; the statement's significance emerged more in historical retrospect, in the light of the student radicalization later in the decade.

A mix of influences can be found in the manifesto, which placed considerable emphasis on personal alienation and dissatisfaction, including existentialism and the left sociology of the C. Wright Mills (*The Power Elite*, 1956) variety. Hayden also articulated concerns similar to those outlined in Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) about the impossibility of resistance in America, claiming that "the dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely repel the energies of protest and reform, thus limiting human expectancies."

The 1962 statement might be considered one of the founding documents of identity politics. Inevitably linked to that was its insistence on the need to orient toward the Democratic Party. It called on "publicly disinherited groups"—which the document enumerated as "Negroes, peace protesters, labor unions, students, reform Democrats, and other liberals"—"to demand

a Democratic Party responsible to their interests."

The anticommunist Walter Reuther leadership of the United Auto Workers collaborated closely with Hayden and the other SDS founders, funding a range of activities, including the 1962 conference, held at the UAW summer camp in Port Huron, Michigan.

"SDS leaders, in return, did their best to shape a program that they believed would please the UAW. SDS's 1962 'Port Huron Statement,' for example, clearly reflected the UAW's influence." (*The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, Kevin Boyle)

The subsequent leftward turn of SDS (with the rise to prominence of Maoist and anarchist elements), as mass antiwar protests erupted in the late 1960s, went very much against Hayden's wishes. He was reluctantly drawn into the protest movement, eventually becoming one of the Chicago Seven, famously charged with conspiracy related to violence outside the 1968 Democratic Party convention.

Hayden returned to his natural home, Democratic Party electoral politics, in the mid-1970s, as the wave of radicalization subsided. After unsuccessfully contesting the 1976 Democratic primary in California against the sitting US senator, John Tunney, Hayden ran for and won a seat as a Democrat in the California State Assembly (1982-92) and later the state Senate (1992-2000). He has also been a candidate for mayor of Los Angeles and governor of California. The Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED), which he helped found in 1977 with his then-wife Jane Fonda, formed a close alliance with California's once and future governor, Jerry Brown.

Hayden, in short, personifies a certain strand of American middle-class left politics, by this time a fundamentally conservative and establishment strand.

In relation to Obama's Afghanistan policy, Hayden enters stage "left" to reinforce the illusions sown by the president and shore up support for the administration. His piece is aimed at smothering the outrage felt by those who believed candidate Obama's promises in 2008. Hayden's method of choice is to congratulate antiwar voters and activists on having supposedly forced the current administration's hand in "quicken" the Afghan withdrawal.

Thus, Hayden asserts that Obama "is responding to massive public pressure for rapid troop withdrawals from Afghanistan." He declares, "We have crossed the line into de-escalation."

The *Nation* journalist goes on to claim that the scheduled withdrawals by the end of 2012 (which, of course, can be vetoed or altered by the military) should make opponents of the war "feel a sense of gratification...about contributing to the vast upswelling of public opinion against Iraq and now Afghanistan... There is a magic about public opinion, which still matters despite the shadows of authoritarianism all around."

Hayden's cynical article is a succession of attempts to wear down popular skepticism and anger about Obama's Afghanistan policy.

He juggles with the numbers. A withdrawal of 33,000 troops is not so bad, he argues, although "Fifty thousand troops out by 2012 would have

de-escalated the American occupation by half, would have gone beyond ending the present surge and would have broken the back of those who believe in the endless war.” Whose surge? He neglects to mention that the current administration is responsible for the huge intensification of the conflict in the first place.

Nor does he note the basic duplicity of Obama’s speech. When he announced the “surge,” Obama implied that he was sending the additional troops in order to hasten the withdrawal, beginning in July 2011, of the 60,000 troops already in Afghanistan. Now he announces the withdrawal of just the additional 33,000 troops—by the end of 2012—and boasts that he is keeping his word!

Hayden lists his criteria for the success of social movements, which include “(1) gaining mastery of ideas, approaches, strategies and tactics; (2) having a tangible impact on the powers-that-be and public opinion; (3) making measurable gains towards their goals, based on a growing organizational capacity; (4) making everyday life better or more bearable; and (5) developing a sustaining movement culture and heritage.”

By those standards, the “peace movement” in America is a dismal failure. Indeed, it can hardly be said to even exist.

From a long-term perspective, the antiwar movement never recovered from the betrayals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, with the assistance of the likes of Hayden, subordinated anti-Vietnam War sentiment to the Democratic Party and steered it away from opposition to capitalism.

These “left” elements or their political descendants underwent a protracted decay, and by the 1980s and 1990s were entirely integrated into the Democratic Party, dressing up that imperialist party as a “people’s party.” Following 9/11 and the eruption of militarism under George W. Bush, the official antiwar alliance of liberals, Stalinists, pacifists, Greens and others in United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) and the ANSWER Coalition went into action. They acted with one purpose in mind, to ensure that opposition never went beyond the control of one wing or another of the Democratic Party.

The widespread opposition to the Iraq war was deprived of any perspective and once again channeled back into support for a Democrat in the White House, with the inevitable, disastrous results.

In the 2004, 2006 and 2008 election campaigns, organizations such as MoveOn.org and others helped paralyze public opinion, claiming that each successive Democratic presidential candidate or congressional slate would end the war and hold the Bush-Cheney crowd of war criminals accountable.

Hayden, the *Nation* editorial board and others celebrated the election of Obama, a right-wing figure of dubious political provenance, asserting that a new day had dawned in America. In this manner, they helped the US ruling elite carry out certain changes in foreign policy and prepare future bloodbaths.

While there is widespread antiwar sentiment in the US, there is no official antiwar movement. The protest movement against the Iraq war was short-lived. It finally collapsed after the election of Obama in 2008, but it had begun to fall apart in the wake of the Democrats’ success in the mid-term elections in 2006. The last major mobilization against the Iraq war occurred in Washington in January 2007, although tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans, and occupying troops, have died since that time.

The anti-Iraq War movement was wound up by the Democrats and their hangers-on once that party returned to power in Washington, because (a) the tactical shift in American foreign policy these elements desired [including the Afghanistan escalation] had been effected and (b) they had no interest in encouraging popular hostility to wars now being conducted by the Obama administration.

An interesting study carried out by two academics, Michael T. Heaney of the University of Michigan and Fabio Rojas of Indiana University, into the “demobilization of the antiwar movement” discusses the various

mechanisms through which “the relationship between the Democratic Party and the antiwar movement was essential in accounting for the demobilization of the antiwar movement between 2007 and 2009.”

Heaney and Rojas point to the “abandonment” of the antiwar movement by Democratic Party activists in 2009, which “led to the collapse of UFPJ, the movement’s largest and broadest coalition.” They explain: “The election of Barack Obama and the subsequent plunge in activist involvement was devastating to the financial base of the antiwar movement.” By the beginning of 2010, UFPJ, which had once maintained a budget of some \$500,000 a year, “was struggling to pay debts and maintain its website for \$6,000 per year.”

Hayden chooses to ignore the death of the “peace movement” (the official history of the UFPJ posted on its own web site ends in March 2008!) and goes on to congratulate various “peace activists” and “peace networks,” who have, in fact, worked assiduously to suppress resistance to the Obama administration, the Afghan war and imperialism.

A statement on the rump UFPJ web site posted prior to Obama’s June 22 speech argues, “There is common agreement from the likes of General Petraeus to Senator John Kerry that a political solution, not the military, is the answer to stability in Afghanistan.”

In his *Nation* piece, Hayden ends by thanking a long list of generally pro-establishment, Democratic Party-oriented outfits, including the Institute for Policy Studies, the Afghanistan Study Group, the New America Foundation, which “have battled inside the Beltway,” as well as the right-wing Center for American Progress and a succession of Democratic Party hacks and demagogues whose aid at critical moments has been indispensable in keeping the barbaric violence in Afghanistan going: John Kerry, Barbara Lee, Jim McGovern, Dennis Kucinich and Russ Feingold.

If this wretched crowd were actually responsible for ending the war in Afghanistan, or anywhere else, that old trick of turning water into wine would lose its glow.

Hayden is at his most pernicious when he labels rejection of Obama’s latest ploy on Afghanistan “negativity and alienation,” which is “infecting the discourse with unwarranted cynicism and undermining any sense of achievement.” This is meant to discredit a socialist exposure of Obama’s speech. Hayden plays once again to his audience of “peace activists,” urging his “[f]riends and, may I say, comrades” not to “disparage what your efforts have achieved... Instead, dwell on this simple fact: we the people pushed them back.”

What a colossal fraud! The layer that Hayden speaks for, the *Nation* crowd and the whole upper-middle class liberal and even “far” left, bought in to the legitimacy of the “war on terror” a decade ago. They may have distant memories of political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, but this is by now a thoroughly domesticated and tame political herd, distant from and hostile to “the people.”

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are products of the historic crisis of American capitalism. The US ruling elite is attempting to overcome its decline through global conquest and relentless attacks on the working population at home. Opposition to imperialist war under the present conditions will emerge only as a working class movement, consciously linked to the fight against the ongoing social devastation in the US.

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