

that unity again.” Absent the reference to Sept. 11, the closing paragraphs could just as easily have climaxed a speech announcing a campaign against global warming.

Ronald Reagan would have done it differently. He would have told a story. It might not have been a true story, but it would have had resonance. He might have found, or created, a grieving spouse—a young investment banker whose wife had died in the World Trade Center—who enlisted immediately after the attacks ... and then gave his life, heroically, defending a school for girls in Kandahar. Reagan would have inspired tears, outrage, passion, a rush to recruiting centers across the nation.

Of course, it is possible that purple prose in the service of patriotic gore has become an anachronism in an era when it is possible to witness the insane carnage caused by crudely constructed roadside bombs each night on the evening news. There are those, especially in the Democratic Party, who find such romanticism delusional and obscene; it rankles particularly when applied to a questionable war. But the romance of the fight, the band-of-brothers bond, the ethos of ultimate sacrifice is at the heart of military culture. If a President wants to send young people off to war, he must buy into that culture. It is not enough to construct the best argument—or the best policy—in a bad situation, as this President has done.

And that is the high drama that has been unfolding this autumn: the struggles of a highly intelligent, dispassionate man to find a rationale for a mission that is crucial but slightly crazy, a decision that will define his presidency.

“I am painfully aware that this is politically unpopular,” the President said earlier that day over lunch with a group of columnists in the White House library, an elegant little room in the basement of the mansion. “It’s least popular in my own party. But that’s not how I make decisions.” There was little apparent anguish as the President said that. He was calm, as always; a compelling presence, but resolutely normal, as always. (The combination of charisma and lack of pretense is his most attractive, if inexplicable,

An Escalating Commitment

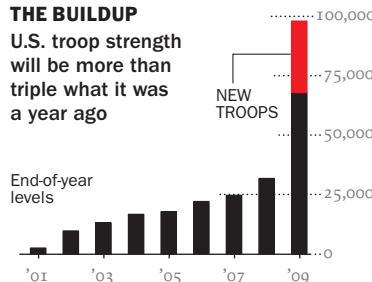
The Administration is accelerating plans to send 30,000 reinforcements to the war zone—but also says U.S. troops will start withdrawing by July 2011

TROOP COUNT IN AFGHANISTAN



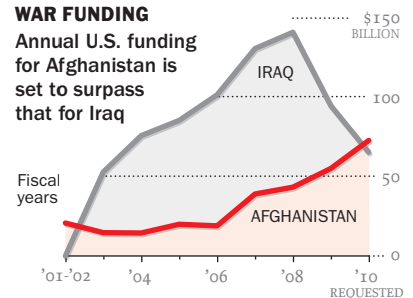
THE BUILDUP

U.S. troop strength will be more than triple what it was a year ago



WAR FUNDING

Annual U.S. funding for Afghanistan is set to surpass that for Iraq



Sources: White House; Department of Defense; Congressional Research Service

personal attribute.) His defense of the policy he had constructed after months of deliberation—a complex, slightly contradictory contraption of a policy—was solid but not entirely convincing.

He dealt fluently with the toughest of questions: the push-me, pull-you issue of sending in 30,000 more troops only to start withdrawing them in July 2011, less than a year after they all arrive. The troops—as many as were involved in the Iraq surge, though in a much smaller war—are being sent to stun the enemy, to turn back recent Taliban advances, especially in Kandahar province, the heartland of the insurgency. But why limit the force of the blow by announcing the date you will begin the withdrawal? “Why wouldn’t they wait you out?” asked David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*.

It was a question the President was

expecting. He said he rejected that argument “because if you follow the logic ... then you would never leave. Right? Essentially you’d be signing on to have Afghanistan as a protectorate of the United States indefinitely.” And the time limit, he suggested, might give him leverage over Hamid Karzai, the recalcitrant Afghan leader: “In my discussion with President Karzai yesterday,” Obama said, “I was able to articulate to him exactly what he’s going to need to do over the next two years to be prepared for this transition.”

I asked him what instructions he had given the military to make the next 30,000 troops more effective than the 21,000 troops he sent last March, whose presence didn’t seem to improve the situation on the ground at all. “Look, the fact that there were increased casualties this year I think is to be expected from