

Obama's surge plan disappoints some on the left: "We were promised fundamental change"

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Activist and author Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners* magazine, noted sadly that 17,000 people had signed a petition to the White House in late November asking President Obama to lead a different kind of "surge" in Afghanistan that relied more on diplomacy and humanitarian assistance than on military escalation.

"We were promised fundamental change in the direction of U.S. policy around the world, and this isn't it," Wallis said in a statement after hearing the president's speech December 1 that called for a troop increase of about 30,000 and set July 2011 as a target date for the start of military withdrawal.

The new top executive for the United Church of Christ, Geoffrey A. Black, had a similar reaction to Obama's nationally televised speech to West Point cadets. Black also expressed concern for U.S. military families, saying in a statement that the escalation "asks far too much of our already strained military forces at this time."

Though the president's pledge to begin a drawdown of forces in 2011 is promising, said Black, the administration should change its strategy from "winning the war" with military force to "finishing the job" through expanded development programs and diplomacy.

In testimony at Senate and House hearings December 2, Obama administration officials provided more assessments of possible scenarios in Afghanistan for lawmakers.

"Failure in Afghanistan would mean a Taliban takeover of much, if not most, of the country and likely a renewed civil war," said Defense Secretary Robert Gates. He described the military increase as "an extended surge of 18-24 months," suggesting that troop levels would drop to their current numbers, or fewer, after two years.

Wallis, in his statement, said the U.S. emphasis on the eight-year-old war is still in the wrong place. "Our nation's growing skepticism about this war is well founded," he said. "May God save us from our well-intentioned mistakes."