

[By Neal Goswami, Bennington Banner](#)

Vermont's congressional delegation remains doubtful of a troop buildup in Afghanistan, despite efforts by President Barack Obama to lay out a new path to victory in an address to the American people.

On Tuesday night, the president was hoping to sell a new strategy to a wary public and to members of his own political party that calls for an additional 30,000 troops in Afghanistan. Democrats in Congress, including Sen. Patrick Leahy and Rep. Peter Welch, appear to be standing firm in their opposition.

Rep. Welch, D-Vt., credited the president for undergoing "the right analysis," but said he "came to the wrong conclusion." The president carefully reviewed the security situation in Afghanistan, and correctly stated the impact of neighboring Pakistan to creating a stable situation in Afghanistan, Welch said. But additional troops is not the answer, according to Welch, who was part of a congressional trip to Pakistan last month.

"I do disagree with the president's decision to send more troops," Welch said in a telephone interview shortly before the address.

Congress will not face a vote on funding the war in Afghanistan for at least six months, but Welch said he is unlikely to support it when the issues is taken up in the U.S. House.

"It's hard for me to imagine me voting for funds when I am against the decision," he said. "If we were voting today my vote would be no. It's hard for me to see where that would change."

Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, was among a group of lawmakers briefed by the president Tuesday at the White House on the new military strategy. He, too, is skeptical, laying blame on the previous Bush administration for blunders in Afghanistan that have made success seemingly out of reach.

"Inherited" war

"The president inherited a faltering strategy in Afghanistan that has failed so massively that at this point there are no good answers. He deserves great credit for putting our policy through a tough and thorough review and for listening to other perspectives, and he deserves full and fair consideration of his plan by Congress and the American people," Leahy said. "At this point, I am not convinced that the hole dug earlier by a thousand bad decisions can be paved over at all."

The president's new strategy could directly impact about 1,400 soldiers in the Vermont National Guard who were already set to deploy to Afghanistan in the next month or so. Vermont National Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Lloyd Goodrow said Tuesday afternoon that Guard officials had not received revamped orders regarding the mission, but that could change.

"We will carefully study the president's comments and directives and make any adjustments that are appropriate based on the president's strategy," Goodrow said.

The deployment of Vermont troops to the war zone is more reason to tread carefully, Welch said. He questioned the country's ability to sustain the president's strategy of increasing the military footprint of the U.S. -- in financial cost and in the loss of American lives. It is expected to cost about \$1 million a year per soldier to fight the war.

"The question I have is, is it sustainable? Can we sustain it militarily and can we sustain it financially? I have my doubts," Welch said. "The cost for the 1,400 [Vermont troops] is going to be \$1.4 billion. Just think about Vermont's needs at the moment. We all know what challenging economic times these are for people."

Leahy said Congress -- and the American public -- must carefully review the costs. "Is it worth putting our soldiers' lives on the line, at a million dollars a troop, as our economy continues to struggle here at home?" he said.

Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders questioned why other powerful nations are not joining the fight. "Why are American taxpayers and our brave soldiers bearing almost all the burden in what should be an international effort? Where are Europe, Russia, China and the rest of the world?" Sanders said. "My nightmare is that we may get caught in a quagmire situation from which there will be no successful exit."

Bennington resident Sally Goodrich, who along with her husband, Don, lost a son in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said she supports the president's decision. Sending 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan was the only reasonable option the president faced, she said.

"I'm not willing to give up or to give over to the Taliban these villages and villagers who are in my thoughts constantly," Goodrich said.

Her son Peter was aboard United Airlines flight 175, the second plane to strike the World Trade Center. Since his death, Goodrich and her husband have taken an active role in reshaping Afghanistan, starting the Peter M. Goodrich Memorial Foundation, which has constructed two schools in the fledgling country. The first, a 26-room K-8 school in the province of Logar, was conveyed to the government of Afghanistan in April 2006.

Goodrich, who last visited Afghanistan in April, said a buildup of troops could help stabilize the country and allow more time for Afghan national forces to seize control and help protect the Afghan people she and others have worked hard to support.

"In general, I am a supporter of increased troops in Afghanistan. Their security situation is bad. It has impacted both the schools that we have built," she said. "In the brief time that we have been involved in Afghanistan we have seen a rapid decline in security."

"My American friends who are working there have not left the country. The Afghans who I have come to respect are still there and I think if we did anything less than a troop increase we would be pulling out the rug from under them," Goodrich said.

Increasing troop levels may not prove to be successful, Goodrich said. In fact, Goodrich said she remains "apprehensive" of success. But not sending troops will almost certainly have negative consequences, she said.

"I know that the absence of an increase will result in a bad outcome," Goodrich said. "The idea of walking away at this point or not following through would ... eventually lead to civil conflict."

Welch said the U.S. should focus its attention on the tribal areas of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan where al-Qaida terrorists have sought refuge. Welch said the focus should be on eradicating al-Qaida members who are "the real threat to America."

"They're the real threat because they're the ones that want to cause harm to America," he said.

The U.S. has a "legitimate right" to take action against al-Qaida "where we find them," Welch said. U.S. policy should be to use the best available means, including aerial drones and special forces, to contain the threat.