Obama stuck in a story of war and war

'I'm inheriting a world that could blow up any minute," Barack Obama declared after he took office, "and I will have some powerful but limited and dubious tools to keep it from happening."

He was right, big time. At home, the US President has had to restore an economy on the brink of collapse, then try to stimulate consumer demand, reduce unemployment and assist near-bankrupt municipalities and state governments.

He's had to frame the issues in the context of Republican, Tea Party and radio and TV "trash talker" denunciations of him as a tax-happy spendthrift socialist, indifferent to trillion-dollar deficits, who may be a closet Muslim, born in another country.

In foreign policy, Obama has looked, often in vain, for an exit strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, initiatives to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, a path to peace in the Middle East and better ways to fight terrorism.
On November 2, American voters used the mid-term elections to deliver a verdict of historic proportions on Obama's first two years. Republicans took control of the House of Representatives, gaining more than 60 seats, and came close to winning a majority in the Senate.

As if in anticipation of this stinging rebuke, Bob Woodward's Obama's Wars and Tariq Ali's The Obama Syndrome delineate the daunting challenges the President faces, and remind us how "limited and dubious" his options really are.

Ali, a writer, filmmaker and editor of New Left Review, stokes the disillusionment of a generation of idealistic young Americans who hoped Obama's election signalled a reversal of "the turbo-charged thrust of corporate power at home" and "the imperial juggernaut abroad".

With the "I told you so" ferocity of an ideological purist, Ali contends Obama is neither a good man in a bad world nor a progressive leader.

He's a talented, articulate machine politician, a "messenger-servant" to the country's corporations. "To talk of betrayal is foolish for nothing has been betrayed but one's own illusions."

Peppered with praise of the Black Panthers and Castro's Cuba, The Obama Syndrome is a radical rant that will not convince anyone who doesn't already believe that all American presidents do the bidding of predatory capitalists.

Nonetheless, it testifies to the growing disenchantment with Obama on the political Left in the US, and to the possibility that they'll sit on their hands in 2012 if, in the wake of the mid-term elections, he reaches out to the Right.

In domestic policy, Ali writes, Obama is "the master of the sympathetic gesture", who allows insurance company lobbyists to write a healthcare bill and investment bankers to regulate themselves, and then argues that better options (such as spending more on education and less on the military) just aren't feasible.

In foreign policy, Ali dismisses Obama as an "inventive apparition" of "the world's only imperial state", not all that different from George W. Bush, except for "the diplomatic mood music". In the Middle East, the President is committed to a solution "Israelis can live with, and Palestinians can die in". His policy on Iran, which is surrounded by nuclear nations and has every reason to fear for its safety, is hypocritical. With Afghanistan, Obama supports the Karzai government, a corrupt Western implant which, left to its own devices "would disintegrate overnight". Obama supports rendition -- "torture by proxy" -- and, Ali predicts, he is preparing to escalate the war on terror by intervening in Yemen.

In contrast, Obama's War's, far less polemical than Ali's book, provides potent and persuasive documentation of "the bad hand" Obama has been dealt. Drawing on internal memos, classified documents and interviews with key players, including the President, Woodward has crafted an intimate, in-depth account of Obama's decision to commit an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan.

The policy, he reveals, was hammered out amid bitter bureaucratic in-fighting and genuine disagreements. The US generals, for example, were contemptuous of "the water bugs", Obama's White House advisers, because they were "too interested" in measuring the short-term political impact of his policies.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Woodward suggests, tended to hang back until he figured out which way the President was leaning "and then jump that way". Karl Eikenberry, a retired three-star general appointed ambassador to Afghanistan, remained unconvinced that Hamid Karzai would ever be a reliable partner for the US. And Vice-President Joseph Biden challenged the fundamental assumption of many of his colleagues that "as goes Afghanistan, so goes Pakistan", and proposed a counter-terrorism strategy that might deter al-Qa'ida from returning to Afghanistan through human intelligence, control of Afghan airspace, Special Forces based at Bagram and Kandahar and 3000 elite CIA operatives. Woodward's intention, it appears, is to depict an administration at war with itself. He's right, of course, but then again policy-making in the Obama White House may be not be much messier than it was for Bill Clinton and Bush. Far more important, it seems to me, is the reality, endorsed in essence by every civilian and military adviser, that there are no good policy options for the US in Afghanistan. Withdrawing American forces, Obama emphasised, would result in the return of the Taliban and, in all likelihood, al-Qa'ida. It would invite Republicans to skewer him as weak on national security and the war on terror.
An open-ended, perpetual commitment of combat troops, of course, had unacceptable political, financial and geo-political costs.

The short-term increase in troops, with a phased withdrawal beginning in 2011, as well as the Biden plan, would work only if four key goals, none of them rated as likely by the joint chiefs of staff, were realised: that the Taliban threat would be degraded to "manageable"; Afghan forces could secure the gains from "the surge"; the sanctuaries in Pakistan could be significantly reduced or eliminated; and the Karzai government could stabilise the country.

Given this analysis, Woodward told Obama that someone had suggested his book should be called No Exit. Obama disagreed, insisting there would be a moment in which the combat function of the US in Afghanistan would have ceased. But, Woodward says, he "did not say when that might be".

Since the publication of Obama's Wars, the news from Afghanistan has grown worse. And a series of bombings in Baghdad, aimed at Shi'ites as well as Sunnis, has served as a reminder that Iraq still might descend into a bloody civil war. The US could lose two wars on Obama's watch. What's more, the American economy remains anemic and the President no longer has the support he needs in congress to stimulate it.

The mood in the White House seems subdued. Obama has called on Americans to put political polarisation behind them and, no doubt, is trying to figure out the best blend of conciliation and confrontation to help him regain the initiative and regain the confidence of voters.

It's much too early to count him out. Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton staged comebacks after significant setbacks in mid-term elections. But, at the moment, the most powerful man in the world doesn't seem all that powerful.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University in New York.*