



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

December 13, 2009

## Legislator Sees Echoes of Vietnam in Afghan War

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — [David R. Obey](#) has served in Congress since [Barack Obama](#) was in grade school. He does not waste time with pleasantries, and he does not mince words. So when [President Obama](#) called Representative Obey recently to talk about [Afghanistan](#), the congressman raised a topic sure to make the young commander in chief uncomfortable: Vietnam.

"I came here in '69, and I determined that I would give Nixon a year to see what he could do, because he had inherited the war, so I bit my tongue for a year," Mr. Obey said, recounting how he reminded the current president of the mistakes of that earlier war. "I said the same thing with Obama."

In fact, Mr. Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat, did not wait quite a year — Mr. Obama has been in office just 11 months. And his is not an isolated complaint. As the third-most senior member of the House, Mr. Obey gives voice to what Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) calls the "serious unrest" in her caucus over Mr. Obama's troop buildup plan for Afghanistan. And as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, which controls how tax money is spent, he is in a position to constrain the president through the power of the purse.

With the president estimating that the buildup will cost \$30 billion, Mr. Obey is proposing a "war surtax." The idea is unlikely to pass, but it is already reminding the nation of the high cost of an increasingly unpopular war. At the White House, officials are bracing for the president's first real battle with fellow Democrats.

"We have some work to do," conceded Rob Nabors, a former top aide to Mr. Obey who is now the deputy director of the White House [Office of Management and Budget](#). "Other people talk about forcing the administration to jump through hoops. Mr. Obey is not going to force us to jump through hoops, but he is going to force us to confront some of the most uncomfortable questions having to do with Afghanistan, and he'll force us to do it in a very public setting."

The debate could get its first real airing on Capitol Hill this week, when Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) appear before members of the appropriations panel to testify on the new Afghanistan strategy and its cost. The hearing will be led by Representative [John P. Murtha](#), a Pennsylvania Democrat who, like Mr. Obey, supports a war tax.

"Obama is going to have to do a real sales job," said Steve Elmendorf, a Democratic lobbyist who spent years as a senior aide on Capitol Hill. "You have people who are uncomfortable with the policy, and people who are uncomfortable with how to pay for it. And Obey, as chairman of the committee that holds the purse strings, is uncomfortable with both."

At 71, Mr. Obey (pronounced OH-bee), who represents the rural northwest corner of Wisconsin, is something of a character on Capitol Hill. With a beard and bifocals, he has the slightly rumpled look of the college professor he once aspired to be. (He was pursuing a graduate degree in Russian studies when he left academia for politics.) When he is animated, as is often the case, he tends to squint and lace his conversation with mild profanity, as in, "I am damn tired of a situation in which only military families are asked to pay any price whatsoever for this war."

Even his friends call him prickly, and he is prone to scuffles with colleagues. Once, Mr. Obey so irritated [Tom DeLay](#), the former House Republican leader, that Mr. DeLay shoved him. "Pushing me," Mr. Obey said wryly, "is not the worst thing Tom DeLay ever did for this institution."

He relaxes by playing the harmonica (he is in a band called the Capitol Offenses); his rendition of "Amazing Grace" at a friend's funeral "had everybody in tears," said Gov. James E. Doyle of Wisconsin. His aides are fiercely loyal. "People around him put up with his peculiarities," said Scott Lilly, who spent nearly 30 years with Mr. Obey, "because they really do like him."

In Congress, Mr. Obey has spent decades championing federal spending on health, education and social programs, an agenda rooted in his Catholic faith, which, he has said, demands that he try to "make this an equal society for everybody." A campaign poster of [Franklin Roosevelt](#) — "my hero," he says — looks over his shoulder in his sun-streaked Capitol office, where a window offers testimony to his power: a view of the Washington monument.

"The main thing for Obey is his longstanding commitment to the domestic policies that he cares about, especially when the competition for the money is a war he disagrees with," said David Canon, a professor of political science at the [University of Wisconsin](#).

So at a time when Congress "has been lectured ad nauseam" about paying for a health care overhaul without raising the deficit, Mr. Obey says the same standard must be applied to the war. He knows he will have difficulty getting his surtax passed; Ms. Pelosi opposes it. But he will have little trouble getting Democrats to scrutinize the president's war budget request.

"His questions are very similar to those within our caucus: Do we have credible partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan? What is the mission? What's the risk?" said Representative Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat and member of the House leadership. She sees the surtax as Mr. Obey's way of forcing the nation to think about "shared sacrifice," adding, "He's a smart, savvy legislator."

But Mr. Obey is also a loyal Democrat, which puts him in a ticklish position. Before he proposed the surtax, he called Mr. Nabors to give the president a heads-up. That resulted in the president's call. Mr. Obey used the conversation to ask the president if he had seen a documentary by the public television journalist [Bill Moyers](#) featuring archival audiotapes of President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) wrestling with escalating the Vietnam War.

"It is stunning," he remembers telling Mr. Obama, "to listen to Johnson talk to Dick Russell, the conservative old wise head in the Senate from Georgia — it is terrible, gut-wrenching to listen to them both say, 'Well, we know this is damn near a fool's errand, but we don't have any choice.'"

If Mr. Obama objected, he did not say. But in a speech at [West Point](#) outlining his Afghanistan strategy, he

pointedly rejected the Vietnam analogy, saying it “depends on a false reading of history.”

Mr. Obey came away from the speech unconvinced that Mr. Obama’s strategy could succeed — not because he doubts the president, he said, but because he has little faith in the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. After 40 years in Congress, a career that has spanned eight presidents, he is not about to quit asking questions now.

“I didn’t come here to be [Richard Nixon](#)’s congressman, Reagan’s congressman, Obama’s congressman,” Mr. Obey said. “I’m here representing the Seventh District of Wisconsin.”

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)