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Year ahead: Afghanistan

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Quotable

Matthew Hoh is a former Marine Corps captain who served in combat in Iraq. He recently resigned a Foreign Service position in Afghanistan.

- "The people we are fighting, for the most part, in Afghanistan are fighting us because they do not want to be occupied by either a foreign army or a central government force."

- "Since 9/11, al-Qaida has evolved and no longer will tie itself to a political state or geographical boundaries. They have turned into an ideological cloud that exists on the Internet and recruits worldwide."

Source: *Washington Post Web chat.*

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Graveyard of Empires for the Cato Institute.

The authors suggest limited goals:

- Attack the portion of the drug trade affiliated with insurgents.

- Train Afghan forces to handle their own security and set clear benchmarks so they don't become dependent on coalition forces. The key is to deny terrorists a sanctuary. That can be done with something far short of nation-building.

This might be a strategy that fits into President Barack Obama's tendency to see both sides of an issue. He approved an increase of troops, but with a limited timeline.

Stalemate, with few American casualties, may be the best we can hope for.

Stalemate is the most likely result of the war in Afghanistan.

Gen. David Petraeus, head of the military's Central Command, was quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* as saying the war in Afghanistan won't wind down soon.

How could it? There aren't enough troops in the United States military to conduct counterinsurgency in every town and village there.

"It is going to require sustained, substantial commitment in a way that we will not need to provide in Iraq," he said.

And that will require a long-term commitment.

The American people provided that as part of a Cold War after World War II. And we have maintained a standoff in Korea for over 50 years.

The American people seem to get it. A majority, 57 percent, predict a stalemate, while 29 percent predict victory and 12 percent predict defeat.

Best role

In Afghanistan, the best role of American troops would be as trainers and advisers rather than combatants.

A complication is the stability of Pakistan, a nuclear power that shares a border with Afghanistan. If the war in Afghanistan destabilizes Pakistan, we don't want a nuclear power at risk.

Meanwhile, the BBC reports that most in Pakistan don't want a return of the Taliban.

Only 8 percent think the Taliban will return to power, while 84 percent say the Taliban are weak in their areas.

But the people, used to violence, are increasingly disillusioned about the future.

"The Afghan people emerge from these surveys as patient and stoical, but depressed about the short-term future," the BBC reported on its Web site.

Another worry is that 50 percent say that corruption in the government has increased.

Setting goals

A clear victory is unlikely.

Victory would require a transformation of Afghanistan's economy, one based on the opium drug trade. And it would require cleaning up a culture of corruption.

"Although Afghanistan has endured successive waves of Persian, Greek, Arab, Turk, Mongol, British and Soviet invaders, no occupying power has ever successfully conquered it," writes Malou Innocent and Ted Galen Carpenter in *Escaping the*

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