

Malou Innocent: It's time to leave Afghanistan

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The mayhem unleashed after the burning of Qurans at a U.S. base outside of Kabul – intentional or not – has likely irreparably damaged the U.S. training mission in Afghanistan. Peace talks with the Taliban, a major policy shift for the insurgent movement, could be off the table, too. This is just the latest incident in the downward spiral of U.S.-Afghan relations. Washington's policy must now shift dramatically toward an expedited withdrawal. The "hearts and minds" campaign was never likely to succeed in a country that views the United States as guests who have overstayed their welcome.

Some political leaders and military commanders will argue that cooler heads must prevail and that a long-term strategy demands America's indefinite presence in Afghanistan. They will argue that any drawdown must be based on conditions on the ground. But conditions on the ground do not warrant staying the course, only for narrowing our mission and avoiding further tragedies.

Former four-star general Jack Keane, who has traveled to Afghanistan four times within the past 18 months, says of the outrage and rioting that America in fact has a good relationship with the Afghan people. "We've forged an unusually strong relationship with those people. We've done it based on the values of the American people and our sensitivities to their culture. That's what is so frustrating about this."

With all due respect, General Keane and other like-minded observers are wrong. The mission is a waste of money, effort and, most importantly, lives.

The former heads of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal (retired) and General David Petraeus, both emphasized the importance of winning the "hearts and minds" of Afghans by treating them and their culture with respect. They believed the most helpful indicator of progress on the ground and the integration of political and military strategy is the protection of Afghan civilians.

But according to a recent report by U.N. mission in Afghanistan, 2011 was the fifth straight year in which civilian casualties rose. Of course, last year insurgents were responsible for 77 percent of Afghan civilian deaths.

Despite this, after tripling the number of U.S. troops in that country – far fewer than the Pentagon asked for – President Obama made it America's mission to protect the Afghan people.

A decade into the conflict the Afghan government still remains incredibly weak, widely distrusted, and underrepresented in poorly secured areas of the country. The roughly 180,000-strong Afghan army, whose performance and effectiveness remains questionable, has an officer corps teeming with ethnic fissures and competing sub-national interests. Meanwhile, the Afghan police force has developed a reputation for desertion, illiteracy and rapaciousness. On top of limited and potentially unsustainable security improvements, the spiraling violence does not instill confidence in our victory. Too many U.S. government planners forget that for Afghans we are their guests, and it is their country. As I argued months ago, "Recent events in Afghanistan should be a wake-up call to how our 10-year occupation is actually being perceived. Rather than winning 'hearts and minds,' America's civilizing mission has become increasingly associated with a Western cultural invasion."

Many Afghans see outsiders constantly changing their mayors, their governors and their customs. They are told how to dress their women, what is culturally acceptable and what is culturally repugnant. Americans are infuriated when their politicians redistribute their taxes, yet they ignore how intrusive their own military and civilian planners have become to foreign peoples.

It's no surprise that a report published last May by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit concluded that negative sentiments about democracy emerge from "the stated distaste among respondents for 'Western culture' and the potential threat it poses to 'Afghan culture,' traditional norms or values, and an Islamic identity."

None of this should imply that the Quran burning or the grisly violence meted out against innocent people was justified. But the fact remains that America is widely scorned throughout the region – in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Rather than become Afghanistan's perpetual crutch, Washington must cut its losses. The war is fiscally irresponsible and wasteful of U.S. taxpayer dollars. Most importantly, no more American or Afghan lives should be lost in pursuit of a strategy that is not in America's national interest.