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Staying in Afghanistan is the wrong strategy

By: [Gene Healy](#)

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There were echoes of Bush-style “deciderism” in President Obama’s peremptory announcement of an Afghanistan troop “surge” in February.

Likewise, it was hard to miss the Iraq parallels in last week’s House vote for “emergency” funding to continue the nearly eight-year long Afghan war. Several skeptical Democrats switched their vote to “yes” at the last minute, citing loyalty to their party’s president. (The more things change&hellip.)

“Quagmire” probably isn’t the right metaphor for arid Afghanistan, but once again, we seem stuck in a costly, dangerous foreign adventure. And Obama’s strategy for success, such as it is, is heavy on the “hope,” light on the “change.”

At the outset of the Iraq War, Gen. David Petraeus famously asked an embedded reporter, "tell me how this ends." Last year, Petraeus inherited oversight of the Afghan war when he became head of U.S. Central Command.

And when the general testified about Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee recently, Sen. Jim Webb, D-VA, turned the question back on him.

Petraeus didn’t have a good answer. He spoke vaguely about the Afghans eventually "shoulder[ing] the responsibilities of their own security." Webb followed up: "When was the last time that Afghanistan had an actual functioning national army"? "More than 30 years ago," Petraeus admitted.

The Obama administration has no better answer, as is apparent from its recently released strategic review of operations in the “Af-Pak” region. The paper touts “realistic and achievable objectives.”

But how realistic is the administration’s call for “a dramatic increase in Afghan civilian expertise” that will--presto!--“create economic alternatives to the insurgency”? Or “breaking the link between narcotics and the insurgency?” That might be a tall order, given that Afghanistan produces 93 percent of the world’s opium crop--and little else.

Each year of the war brings greater violence than the last, with 2008 the deadliest yet for U.S. soldiers and

Afghan civilians. Civilian deaths dropped somewhat in 2009, but coalition casualties continue to rise--up 62 percent from last year.

Army chief of staff George Casey recently told reporters that the situation will get worse before it gets better, and that “anything you put [in Afghanistan] will be in there for a decade.”

No surprise there: Nation-building is extraordinarily hard. The good news is that it’s almost always unnecessary--and especially so in Afghanistan.

Gen. Colin Powell’s famous “Pottery Barn” principle--“you break it, you own it”--doesn’t apply in this case. We didn’t “break” Afghanistan. We went to war to disrupt Al Qaeda and demonstrate that no government could get away with sheltering a group that killed nearly 3,000 Americans--goals we achieved more than seven years ago.

If Al Qaeda operatives are foolish enough to set up new training camps in Afghanistan, we won’t need boots on the ground to destroy them. Thanks to advances in Unmanned Aerial Vehicle technology, we’re no longer limited to Clintonian gestures like lobbing cruise missiles at empty tents. Since 9/11 we’ve repeatedly used UAVs to kill Al Qaeda operatives in countries we’re not occupying, like Yemen and Pakistan.

The new, bipartisan conventional wisdom is that in order to fight Al Qaeda, we’ll have to keep fighting bloody counterinsurgencies in “failed states.” Why anyone believes that is a mystery.

Al Qaeda operates in some 60 countries worldwide, and launched its biggest strike from a “base” in Hamburg, Germany. Law enforcement and intelligence are key to fighting terrorism—occupying armies do more harm than good.

Recent events made that clear. Having pushed the Taliban over the Afghan border into Western Pakistan, we watched nervously last April as jihadists surged to within 60 miles of Islamabad.

The situation has dramatically improved since, but is giving Afghanistan a functional government--assuming that’s possible--worth destabilizing nuclear-armed Pakistan?

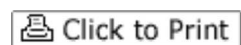
As Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-NY, fell behind Obama in the 2008 Democratic primaries, she complained that she had “a lifetime of experience,” while Obama had “a speech he made in 2002,” referring to the then-state-senator’s remarks at an antiwar rally in Chicago. But it was a smart speech about what Obama called “a dumb war,” and it was instrumental in winning him the nomination.

Afghanistan wasn’t a “dumb war” at the outset; unlike Iraq, it was a necessary war. But staying looks less and less wise every day.

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