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This blog is especially dedicated to unlikely Conservatives. However, I invite everyone, regardless of political orientation, to read and comment! I encourage people who are interested in American politics to test their theories in an open forum meant to inform and entertain. On Sunday, I post new essays, polls, or other thought provoking items that are intended to spur debate. Tell all your literate friends about Black and Red!

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Should the U.S. Increase the Number of Troops in Afghanistan?

Please select 1 answer.

Yes.

No.

I don't know.

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While We Sleep...

Monday, September 28, 2009

"Afghanistan: America's Second Forgotten War"

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"Afghanistan: America's Second Forgotten War" Or "America Chases Her Tail"

By: J. Thomas Hunter

President Barack Obama inherited two major theaters of war when he entered the White House. One, in Iraq, was largely resolved: the sadistic dictator, Saddam Hussein, was captured, tried, and hanged; police and military forces were deBaathified and converted from torture squads to stabilizing organizations; local and national government in Iraq learned how to conduct regular free and fair elections; and the American military's flexibility and ingenuity staunched American troop deaths and neutered terrorists' favorite plan of attack—the roadside bomb. Before (and since) Obama stepped into the White House Chicago streets proved deadlier than Fallujah's.



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e second theater of war—the oldest, in fact—has lingered in the balance. News of successes and failures in the Afghan conflict is privy only to those of us who know which dark corners to seek out for information. For most Americans the last time they heard about the war in Afghanistan we were carpet bombing Kandahar and the Taliban was on the run. So much has changed since then. President Obama and American military personnel know that sobering fact all too well.

When we returned after two decades to the untamed sands of Afghanistan the nation was a barbaric hellhole. The Taliban ruled with medieval cruelty. There was no central government. Al-Qaeda operated openly. The Afghan people were illiterate and had no prospects for a life fit to exist since the 13th Century. For almost a decade we have fought in Afghanistan and to date not much has changed. Though the Taliban and al-Qaeda are somewhat restricted from freely moving about the country, they still bog our troops down in days-long firefights and receive support, shelter and funding from wealthy sources within Pakistan.[1] While there are semblances of local and central government, they are impotent and festering with corruption. The literacy rate in Afghanistan remains low at 28.1% (only 12.6% for females).[2] The American President who campaigned on “change” must now change the strategy and direction of this vital component of the War of Terror.

Conservative Street Cred



Though Obama did not support the troop surge in Iraq, that strategy has, by all accounts, borne fruit. As a result, the president has been open to the military's prescription of increasing troop levels in Afghanistan. In February, President Obama said that “[this increase](#) [of 17,000 troops] [is necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan...](#)”[3] The additional soldiers will train Afghan army units, ebb the flow of Pakistani insurgents, set up bases of combat operation to facilitate quick responses to terrorist threats, and capture territories held by enemy combatants. Today, however, political pressures, as well as strategic calculations have made President Obama much more reticent of the idea. Determining what is the proper move forward is a life and death decision with grave ramifications for American security and for American foreign policy.

Rethinking our Goals in Afghanistan

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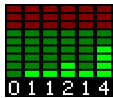
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When President Bush first committed American troops to Afghanistan the goal was to capture the dysfunctional nation from al-Qaeda and reshape it in a way that would discourage Islamic terrorist groups from using it as a base of operations. This meant disrupting al-Qaeda, toppling the Taliban, and strengthening government institutions, militias, and police forces so that Afghan citizens would be motivated to maintain stability and denounce, rather than harbor and assist, terrorists. Elite forces spearheaded the Afghanistan mission as two major shifts undermined their efforts. First, the Bush Administration diverted its attention and national resources from Afghanistan to Iraq. Second, the priorities changed so that nation-building was of the utmost importance. Navy SEALs and Army Rangers fought terrorists by day and drug dealers by night. Critics of this strategy argued that Afghanistan was becoming too reliant on a small number of troops maintaining stability in a nation with thousands of miles of undefended borders. Top military commanders agree, and had seemingly convinced President Obama to increase the troop presence to levels that would lift a great portion of Afghanistan's burden from the shoulders of special operations troops.

Other criticism, though, disparages the very idea of nation-building.



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, who bend the ear of the American political left and the American political right, vociferously urge America to completely rethink its strategy in the region. On the topic of nation-building, Malou Innocent and Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute wrote a commentary titled, "[U.S. Must Narrow Objectives in Afghanistan](#)", that calls to task the historical successes of the controversial undertaking.^[4] Innocent and Preble write, "It is, of course, unreasonable for any administration to guarantee success in times of war. Planning will always fall short of our expectations, and no one can reliably predict the future. But we should be especially wary of nation-building. In a study of seven nation-building projects carried out since the end of World War II, the RAND corporation concluded that only two, Germany and Japan, could be characterized as unalloyed successes -- a failure rate of 71 percent. The prospects in Afghanistan are worse. As the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated in an August 2009 report (.pdf), "Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is not a reconstruction project -- it is a construction project, starting almost from scratch in a country that will probably remain poverty-stricken no matter how much the U.S. and the



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international community accomplish in the coming years.” Innocent and Cato’s Ted Galen Carpenter, argue that the U.S. must severely limit its goals in Afghanistan. In a policy piece titled, “Escaping the Graveyard of Empires,” Innocent and Carpenter argue that “Washington needs to narrow its objectives to three critical tasks: Support, rather than supplant indigenous security efforts...Sustain intelligence operations in the region through aerial surveillance...[and] dial back an opium eradication policy to one that solely targets drug cartels...rather than one that targets all traffickers.”^[5] The ideal result, according to Innocent and Carpenter, is a significant withdrawal from Afghanistan. Innocent made this point in an article that appeared on the Huffington Post titled, “No More Troops for Afghanistan.”^[6]

The left wing think tank, The Center for American Progress, convened a summit of “faith experts” to discuss a path to victory in Afghanistan. At this summit, Senior Fellow, Brian Katulis, argued that the Afghan War cannot be said to hinge on the issue of adding or sustaining troop levels, but rather he suggested a vague “holistic” approach that, “strengthens governance and civil society, lessens violence and corruption, and increases economic development and regional security.”^[7]

The Heritage Foundation’s Lisa Curtis agrees with Katulis that troop



levels should be a secondary concern for the Obama Administration’s recalibration of the Afghanistan War policy. Instead, Curtis says, “the Obama Administration must figure out how it can increase its diplomatic leverage with Islamabad. It is mind-boggling that after...providing nearly \$15 billion in U.S. economic and military assistance to the country [Pakistan], the insurgency in southern Afghanistan is directed by Afghan Taliban leaders located in Pakistan that are “reportedly aided by some elements of Pakistan’s ISI”.^[8]

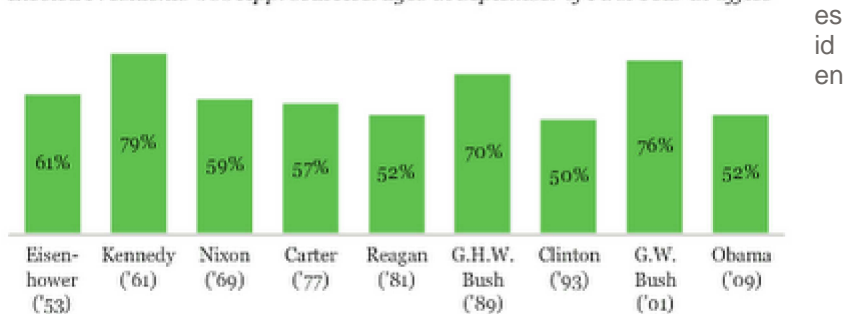
President Obama must sort through this array of contradictory strategies to make the most prudent choice. Thus far, the Obama Administration has adopted a cryptic strategy that some lawmakers have criticized as being too vague. While the Administration has

outlined goals such as "disrupting terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan," and "expanding Afghan forces and defeating the insurgency," these benchmarks are not as clearly defined as those of the Iraq War. Judging success by these measures, therefore becomes a ideological game of spin and perspective. American national security cannot rest on such uncertainty. Instead, President Obama should prioritize between disrupting the insurgency; a strategy that does not necessitate a troop surge, but threatens to sustain the war in perpetuity; and permanently stabilizing the country, a move that insists on a troop surge to be successful. The President understands, however, that his choice is not bereft of domestic political consequences.

To Surge or Not to Surge

Domestic support for a troop surge in Afghanistan is split at best. A Gallup survey released on September 25th shows that 50% of Americans oppose a troop surge while only 41% support it.^[9] Of the 50% who oppose the surge, 82% favor a total withdrawal rather than maintaining the status quo. Support for the surge varies by political orientation as well. 63% of Republicans favor the measure, while 62% of Democrats oppose it. Independents oppose the surge 54% to 38%. Gallup's Frank Newport interprets the political significance of this data properly, stating, "Should Obama turn down such a request, he risks the ire of Republicans and others who will most likely argue that he is ignoring the wishes of his commanders on the ground, and making a mistake that could result in an increased risk of terrorism, among other things. Should he agree to order more troops, he will go against the wishes of the broad U.S. population -- and, in particular, the rank-and-file of his own party, which at the moment is more opposed to than in favor of such an action." After seeing his approval numbers nosedive,

Elected Presidents' Job Approval Averages in September of First Year in Office



Historical Gallup Polls

GALLUP POLL

t Obama must surely be sensitive to his supporters' demands. Obama roared into office with high expectations, but is, thus far, achieving very limited success. Failure in Afghanistan would not only cripple Obama's reelection bid and legacy, but it would also hurt the Democrats' credentials on the issue of national security. Beyond the self-interested political calculations, Obama must weigh the strategic advantages and disadvantages of committing more troops to such a volatile conflict. This grave decision is compounded by Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper's, decision to withdraw all 2,500 Canadian troops from Afghanistan by 2011.^[10]

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nt and Carpenter propose a counterterrorism approach that replaces soldiers with technology. The virtues of aerial surveillance are reportedly evident in Iraq and Afghanistan already. ["Unmanned aerial vehicles surveil roads for improvised explosive devices, transmitting 16,000 hours of video each month."](#)^[11] Addressing what they call ["Dangerous Myth #1,"](#) Innocent and Carpenter insist that ["A U.S. Military Presence is \[not\] Needed to Defeat a Lethal al Qaeda and Taliban Threat."](#) Instead, the two advocate narrowing our objectives in Afghanistan in three critical ways—two of which directly challenge the construct that insists upon an increased troop presence. Firstly, ["at a fairly low cost, the United States can provide trainers and advisers for Afghan security forces."](#) Admittedly, according to Innocent and Carpenter, the training ["is unlikely to create a self-sustaining army or police force that can secure the country anytime in the near future,"](#) but neither policy analyst has faith that Afghanistan was ever capable of being civilized in the first place. Secondly, ["the United States should sustain intelligence operations in the region, through aerial surveillance..."](#) This view is an outlier—for once, it seems, conservative and liberal think tanks are in agreement with one another.

Michael O'Hanlon, of the Brookings Institution, and Bruce Riedel, of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, aim to refocus President Obama on his original plan to build up Afghanistan's army and police. ["This approach,"](#) they write, ["will take time and perhaps more resources."](#)^[12] The most contentious resource that O'Hanlon and Riedel propose is American troops. In their article that appeared in USA Today titled, ["Why We Can't Go Small In Afghanistan,"](#) the pair took dead aim at the theory promoted by libertarians like Innocent, Preble, and Carpenter, that suggests that stabilizing and ultimately winning in Afghanistan can be achieved by reducing our troop presence in the country. O'Hanlon and Riedel write, ["those who favor the counterterrorism option – as opposed to deeper engagement – imply that we can destroy al-Qaeda's core with a few U.S. special forces teams, modern intelligence fusion centers, cruise-missile-carrying ships and unmanned aerial vehicles of the type that recently killed Pakistani extremist leader Baitullah Mehsud...Pretty good—if it would work. Alas, it would not."](#) Deriding it as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's "light footprint" strategy, O'Hanlon and Riedel list three intelligence-related

reasons why a troop surge is necessary. First, the pair state that spy drones and satellite recon cannot track an enemy that has learned to operate without technology. Second, a drawdown would eliminate personnel and bases needed to operate the very unmanned technologies that "light footprint" advocates prescribe. Third, and finally, Afghans will lose contact with American soldiers who offer them protection from the barbarous Taliban in exchange for first-hand intelligence.

Prudence, Statesmanship, and Victory



Given the clear arguments and prescriptions from the various policy think tanks, President Obama has the tools necessary to make a sound decision. There is no guarantee that either strategy will breed victory, but there is a guarantee that either strategy will hurt support for the first-term President. Islamic terrorist groups thrive where prosperity and order are in short supply, therefore, I support a troop increase aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan. The libertarian foreign policy model begins with conclusions that I do not accept. For example, Innocent and Carpenter claim that ["For decades, the fear of America losing the world's respect after withdrawing from a conflict has been instrumental in selling the American public bad foreign policy."](#) The implication is that withdrawing from conflicts—especially from conflicts with ragtag rebels—does not send a signal of weakness to our enemies. In the Afghan theater especially it is important for America to keep our promise to the citizens who risked their lives to support us. These brave people will face certain death if we withdraw our troops. Surely, their deaths will serve as an example to future informants faced with the choice of siding with us or with an anti-American force. Removing troops from Afghanistan, or keeping troop levels the same, will fuel a perpetual war as al-Qaeda and the Taliban will continue to operate to this extent until we finally do leave the region. At worst, increasing the troop levels will result in a failed effort to tame the wild beast that is Afghanistan. We will join the "graveyard of empires" while avenging the deaths of American soldiers and civilians. Islamic terrorism *is* an existential threat. Losing


Afghanistan is a definite possibility, but fighting rather than retreating is the only way we can even attempt to turn this war around like we did in Iraq.

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