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Gene Healy: It's Obama's war, all right

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
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Afghan insurgent attacks killed six U.S. soldiers Saturday, bringing the total to 1,171 -- and counting. Eight years after achieving our initial war aims, disrupting al Qaeda and punishing its Taliban protectors, we have 94,000 troops in-theater, chasing "50 to 100" Al Qaeda operatives, "maybe less," says President Obama's CIA director.

Good news, though: Construction of Kabul's 900,000-square-foot Police Training Center is "progressing according to plan." After \$27 billion spent, Afghan police are still "illiterate, corrupt, and trigger-happy," their instructors lament, but a spiffy new training complex can't hurt.

Enough. With American casualties mounting, it's clearer than ever that "Operation Enduring Freedom" has become a sickening waste of blood and treasure.

Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele caught grief recently for suggesting the war was doomed to fail.

Steele, who has offended everyone from pro-lifers to Rush Limbaugh fans, truly has the gift of gaffe. But he wasn't wrong to call Afghanistan a "war of Obama's choosing." A recent National Journal graphic shows that under the president's Afghan "surge," OEF deployments passed Iraq troop levels in "a strategic pivot point" earlier this year.

Obama, Steele suggested, had bought into the Democratic "script" that has prevailed since the 2004 Kerry campaign: Iraq's a distraction -- "the battle should really be in Afghanistan." Obama's escalation of that battle raises young John Kerry's question about Vietnam: How do you ask someone "to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

"Restrepo," an award-winning documentary featured last month at "Silverdocs," captures the Afghan war's tragic mix of heroism and futility. Director Sebastian Junger spent a year in the hostile Korengar Valley, embedded with an Army platoon whose soldiers, with night-vision goggles clipped to their Kevlar helmets, look like startroopers teleported in amongst toothless Afghan elders.

Hi-tech gear is no panacea, though: Members of the platoon fall in some of the war's bloodiest fighting. Grasping for a lasting achievement justifying that sacrifice, Capt. Dan Kearney points to OP Restrepo, a

firebase named after a fallen comrade, carved out amid hostile territory. (That base was abandoned in April.)

"We're gonna try to bring progress here," Kearney promises in a meeting with valley elders. We'll "flood this whole place with money." But when he doesn't get cooperation, Kearney erupts: "You're not understanding that I don't f**king care!"

Counterinsurgency is a frustrating business, demanding that soldiers win native loyalties by serving as community organizers. In Afghanistan today, "anti-corruption efforts are every bit as important as killing or capturing militants, if not more so," the New York Times reports.

This sounds depressingly familiar. Historian George C. Herring documented the yes-we-can spirit of LBJ-era nation-building in 1986's "America's Longest War" (alas, not our longest anymore). While "IBM 1430 computers were programmed to predict enemy attacks," teams "trained in propaganda and social services would go into the villages ... to build popular support for the government and undermine the Viet Cong," helping to "realiz[e] the dream of a Great Society in Asia, not just here at home," as Vice President Hubert Humphrey put it.

In his inaugural address, President Obama assailed "those who question the scale of our ambitions." For "ambitious scale," how's bringing stable government to a fractured, warlord-plagued country with 72 percent illiteracy? If Republicans are on board, they should drop all pretense of skepticism toward grand government plans. Next to this, stopping the oceans' rise should be a snap.

Yet even those who should know better, like Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., insist that Steele "needs to apologize to all the men and women who've been fighting in Afghanistan."

Those soldiers deserve an apology, all right -- but not from Steele.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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