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THE HILL'S Congress Blog

Where lawmakers come to blog

The Big Question, Sept. 22: Will more troops be sent to Afghanistan? Should they?

By Tony Romm - 09/22/09 04:25 PM ET

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Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) said:

I'm not sure. The president seems to be avoiding this issue. The two biggest issues right now are the economy and Afghanistan and the president seems to be interested in dealing with other areas.

We have not seen the report from Gen. McChrystal. Seeing what the president with the missile defense program, which was essentially voiding the deal, I'm really not sure what will happen.

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) said:

That's a question that doesn't lend itself to a one word answer.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) said:

Well, I don't think we can afford to fail in Afghanistan. I think we should heed the advice of our commanders there, Gen. McChrystal, Gen. Petraeus for two reasons. One, we can't afford Pakistan becoming destabilized and a failed state. And second, we can't afford to have another safe haven for terrorists.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) said:

If there is a direct relationship between Americans being killed there now and there not being enough troops there to support them, then definitely more troops should be sent.

Now remember, that you got to establish that relationship. I haven't had a briefing. Last week, you know they had this briefing and I didn't go to it. So I don't have a basis for answering the question yet.

[I won't have a full answer] until I get done with healthcare. But anyway, just so you know there's that connection between, if there's a relationship between the number of troops dying today in Afghanistan and the fact that they're dying that there's not enough support there for them. Then I think it's just being not fair to the people who are putting their life on the line.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) said:

My nightmare is that the United States gets caught up in the kind of

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quagmire that they got into in Vietnam and in Iraq. So I would be very strongly opposed to sending more to Afghanistan.

We need a real national debate. We need it on the floor of the Senate and on the House as to what our goals are in Afghanistan, which have clearly changed over the last number of years, and what our exit strategy is. Just to get dragged into sending more and more troops for some nebulous goals is something I am extremely uncomfortable with.

I'm not into speculation [if it will happen or not].

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said:

We obviously need a significant troop increase in keeping with the recommendations of General McChrystal and General Petraeus. To delay that decision and to tell the general that we don't want him to send his recommendations, when we have young Americans in harm's way, is really remarkable.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at [The Cato Institute](#), said:

As outlined in a new Cato study, [Escaping the "Graveyard of Empires": A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan](#), the United States should narrow its objectives in the region and decrease troop levels as soon as possible.

The United States has drifted into an amorphous nation building mission with unlimited scope and unlimited duration. Our [objective must be narrowed](#) to disrupting al Qaeda. To accomplish that goal, America does not need to transform Afghanistan into a stable, modern, democratic society with a strong central government in Kabul, nor does it require the U.S. military to pacify and forcibly democratize the entire country. Today, we can target al Qaeda where they do emerge via airstrikes and covert raids.

The group poses a manageable security problem, not an existential threat to America. Yet, as I mention here, policymakers tend to conflate al Qaeda with indigenous Pashtun-dominated militias. America's security, however, will not be at risk even if an oppressive regime takes over a contiguous fraction of Afghan territory; if the Taliban were to provide sanctuary to al Qaeda once again, it would be easier to strike at the group within Afghanistan than in neighboring, nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Beltway orthodoxy tells us that America's security depends on rebuilding failed states, but that logic ignores the fact that terrorists can move to governed spaces. Rather than setting up in weak, ungoverned states, enemies can flourish in strong states because these countries have formally recognized governments with the sovereignty to reject foreign interference in their domestic affairs. This is one reason why terrorists find sanctuary across the border in Pakistan. [Note: 9/11 was planned in many other countries, Germany and the United States included].

Committing still more U.S. personnel to Afghanistan undermines the already weak authority of Afghan leaders, interferes with our ability to deal with other security challenges, and [pulls us deeper into a bloody and protracted guerilla war](#) with no end in sight.

Brent Budowsky, [Pundits blog](#) contributor, said:

More troops will be sent to Afghanistan, the issues are how many, when, and what the policy they support will be. The advice I have offered is: first, push hard for a coalition government including Karzai, Abdullah and others with a major anti-corruption offensive. Second, within 2 weeks the President should announce a coherent, bipartisan strategy that is clear and understandable to the public. Third, then give General McChrystal whatever troops he needs for the stated policy to succeed, with a full review of results in 6 months.

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Terence Kane, [Pundits blog](#) contributor, said:

There are, in fact already more troops on their way to Afghanistan, that's because not all of the 21,000 troops President Obama sent after he was inaugurated have arrived yet. Not only are the troops still arriving, but also as Joe Klein points out in his recent column, they are likely arriving in the wrong province. The still-arriving troops should give us pause to consider, what realistically are our capabilities in Afghanistan, one of the poorest, weakest, and corrupt countries in the world?

Our commitment in Afghanistan is largely limited to preventing Al-Qaeda from carrying out attacks outside of the country and destabilizing Pakistan. Given our limited capabilities to enact change in Afghanistan and our narrow security goals, it seems unlikely that more troops are needed to meet that goal. It's possible that more troops are need for a short period of time to allow the military to adjust its strategy, but we can cannot and should not continue indefinitely on a nation-building exercise in Afghanistan.

John Feehery, [Pundits blog](#) contributor, said:

For Obama, this is a tough one. His political base (joined by increasingly more Americans) wants out of Afghanistan and they certainly don't want more troops there. His generals put him in a tough spot by leaking the memo. Now, if he decides not to put in more troops, and things turn out poorly, he gets the blame. If he decides put in more troops and things turn out poorly, he still gets the blame.

The only thing that really should matter is its ultimate effectiveness. Does it make Americans safer? Does it serve our strategic interests? Does it help stabilize the region, especially Pakistan?

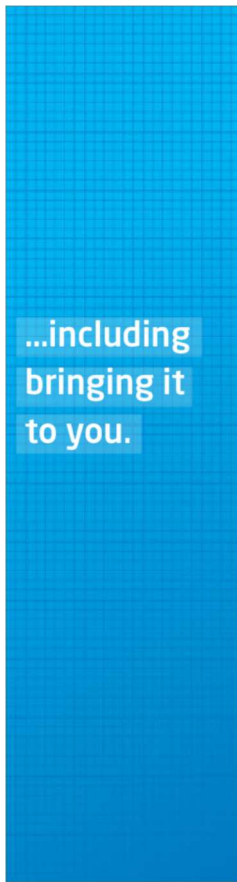
More importantly, the President needs to lead. He can't put his finger in the air to see which way the political winds blow. The world is watching to see if he will be a decisive leader or if he can be pushed around by an uncertain public.

Bernie Quigley, [Pundits blog](#) contributor, said:

Obama entered into a scenario that was never clearly planed or defined and had meandered out of control. From that point he only two options: Declare victory and turn around or a full-scale invasion into Afghanistan. It is now a problem without a solution. What has evolved here is a Jimmy Carter situation. Those who dislike us wish for an agreeable President who would obscure the lines between us and them. It is a mistake to do this in a period of actual combat and any stealthy commander in opposition would see the advantage in propaganda and on the field. It can only continue now to meander, which is to the advantage of the Taliban. They appear, like General Giap in Vietnam, to be winning against the American giant. It fortifies them and their status gets a giant boost throughout the youthful Islamic world. This situation could well turn out like the hostage taking of Americans in the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini during the Carter administration. That situation did not resolve itself until the threat of a stronger President approached. Reagan then, this time possibly Mitt Romney.

Bill Press, [Pundits blog](#) contributor, said:

President Obama is between a rock and a hard place on this one. If he doesn't send more troops, he'll be accused by the right of being soft on terrorism. If he does send more troops, he'll be accused by the left of just following the same policies as George W. Bush. This is Barack Obama's "LBJ Moment." The decision he makes on Afghanistan will determine if he's remembered for delivering revolutionary changes in health care or leading America into another unwinnable war.



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