

December 2, 2009

This is the print preview: [Back to normal view](#) »

### Malou Innocent

Foreign Policy Analyst at the Cato Institute

Posted: December 2, 2009 12:49 AM

## A Costly Mistake

Last night, President Barack Obama said he will deploy another 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. But he has ordered that the troop increase come with a built-in exit strategy. I am reminded of a statement made during the conflict in Vietnam by a young John Kerry to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

"How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

The mistake made in Vietnam--as in Afghanistan--is the erroneous assumption proffered by our political and military elite that these countries constitute a vital U.S. national security interest. Policymakers forget that al Qaeda attacked America on 9/11, and unless Pakistan makes a corresponding effort to go after the al Qaeda sanctuary on their side of the border then America's massive and tremendously costly nation-building campaign in Afghanistan is pointless.

After all, in Pakistan's latest offensive in South Waziristan it is clear that their military has no intention of going after the original Afghan Taliban, much less al Qaeda. Pakistan has very different objectives in Afghanistan. This means stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan--however it is defined--will not be achieved until Islamabad realizes that its future security does not lie in covertly funding Islamist proxies. This is an issue that must be resolved diplomatically, not militarily. And any dialogue would have to address India's increasing influence in Afghanistan, which Pakistan has always viewed as its backyard. It appears (at least to this author) that U.S. policymakers cannot offer any array of inducements sufficient enough to persuade Pakistan to relinquish support for proxies with whom they have associated for the past 30 years. We should be asking "Why should they?" at least according to their own decision making calculus. Moreover, while U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's restive tribal areas have killed a number of high-value al Qaeda operatives, they have also reinforced al Qaeda's Pashtun base of support and further radicalized the very jihadist forces America seeks to defeat.

As for the issue at hand, the aimless mission in Afghanistan, Carlo Ungaro, a former Italian diplomat who spent sixteen years serving in Afghanistan, questions whether a centralized presidential republic is a feasible system for the country. But the diplomat also brings up several more interesting observations:

"As I observed over my 16 years in the country, the Afghans are a patient people: it took almost *ninety* years for them to convince the British that any attempt permanently to occupy the country would be futile, and they also fought the Soviet invasion for almost a decade...*Whether or not there were also covert reasons* to encourage the United States and at least some of its

NATO allies into extending the Afghan operation from a simple surgical strike against Al Qaida [sic] into a 'regime change' venture *is open to conjecture*, and constitutes one of those subjects seldom approached by international commentators [emphasis mine]."

Whether the rationale for prolonging the operation is to expunge al Qaeda, gain greater ease of access to Central Asia's energy reserves, or improve the fate of the Afghan people, Americans don't seem to buy it. A substantial portion of the American public is against sending more troops, the overwhelming majority of Democrats in Congress are against sending more troops, and a number of prominent conservatives are against sending more troops. Why? Partly because these patriotic Americans realize that our brave and highly-dedicated soldiers are not trained to be nation builders or policemen. But these critics also recognize, in lieu of the current economic recession, that the Taliban and al Qaeda cannot destroy the United States, but our own reckless spending can. As the Independent Forum notes:

"The US is running a \$1.4 trillion budget deficit...US national debt has now surpassed the \$12 trillion mark...The Afghanistan War has already cost about \$250 billion and is steadily climbing...[and] since Obama was elected, the US Dollar has lost about 10% of its value, and is approaching its all-time record low set back in early 2008. Since 2002, the US Dollar has plummeted by about 37%."

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of our present war, aside from the lack of clearly defined and achievable objectives, is the lack of public support at home. As General Fred Weyand, the last U.S. commander in Vietnam, told Pulitzer prize-winning author Stanley Karnow:

"The American army is really a people's army in the sense that it belongs to the American people. ... When the army is committed the American people are committed; when the American people lose their commitment, it is futile to try to keep the army committed."

Morale within the all-volunteer military will decline if public support at home continues to wane. Unlike some analysts in Washington, D.C., I vehemently disagreed with those who called Afghanistan "Obama's War." But today I can no longer defend that position. If Obama's second surge into Afghanistan is similar to the one made in Iraq--that is, a rapid infusion of U.S. troops followed by a painfully slow withdrawal--then, as the young John Kerry alluded to more than thirty years ago, our president is asking thousands of young men and women in uniform to sacrifice their lives for an occupation that not even he fully accepts and has already labeled a mistake.

Our security is not at stake in Afghanistan. As the president's national security adviser, General James Jones, noted in October, "the al Qaeda presence [in Afghanistan] is very diminished. The maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in the country, no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies." We don't need 130,000 soldiers to chase down 100 al Qaeda fighters. And as Paul Pillar, the National Intelligence Office for the Middle East between 2000 and 2005 notes, the preparations most important to the September 11, 2001 attacks "took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States."

Not only is remaining in Afghanistan not a precondition for keeping America safe, but prolonging our occupation is likely to tarnish America's reputation, undermine its security, and erode its economic well-being more than would a cost-effective policy limited to targeting al Qaeda. We must ask ourselves: How many more U.S. and NATO soldiers will lose their lives for Afghanistan's unpopular and ineffectual central government? How many hundreds of billions of dollars of borrowed treasure will American taxpayers be asked to spend? What is the

real strategic goal of remaining in Afghanistan? And are policymakers being honest when they say that this is for the people of Afghanistan or the need to defeat al Qaeda? Given the ever diminishing justifications for continuing the war, it really makes you wonder.

### **Books By Malou Innocent**

**Follow Malou Innocent on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/IndianBrownAle](http://www.twitter.com/IndianBrownAle)**