

Editorial: Leaked documents renew war debate

Congress should use this moment to focus on war's objectives.

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TWO VIEWS ON THE WAR

"The hope is we can work with Afghan and Pakistani leaders and over time prevail. It's a very iffy proposition, and it relates more to our interest in trying to keep Al-Qaida under control than in trying to win a war in Afghanistan and somehow think we can transform the country into something it will never be."

J. BRIAN ATWOOD, dean, University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs

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"Many times this administration has been very candid about the difficulties, but never before have we seen the disorganization of this war effort, the lack of understanding of who our enemies and allies are, the lack of coordination between different departments and agencies. This is definitely a devastating leak."

MALOU INNOCENT, foreign policy analyst, the Cato Institute

The recently leaked top-secret documents on the war in Afghanistan may not be the Pentagon Papers, but like the leak that sunk public confidence during the Vietnam War, the archive of 92,000 military field reports reveals a far bleaker assessment of the war than the official portrayal Americans have been given.

The official version was none too optimistic. But the new documents amplify long-held concerns over the direction of the Afghan conflict, and over the role our ostensible ally Pakistan is playing. They come closer to confirming suspicions that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency has rogue elements that are aiding and abetting the Taliban, the very enemy that troops from NATO and the Afghan and Pakistan central governments are fighting -- and dying -- to defeat.

Even the impact of high-tech warfare in an ancient land now appears more double-edged than before. The Predator Drones used to kill insurgents in Pakistan appear less reliable than we were led to believe. And the Taliban has successfully used heat-seeking missiles

against coalition forces, eerily echoing the American-supplied Stinger missiles that Afghans used to turn the tide in their war against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Among the key questions we raised as President Obama deliberated his Afghan strategy late last year was whether America possessed a reliable Afghan partner to deliver the "hold" end of the Pentagon's "clear and hold" counterinsurgency strategy. It is now clearer than ever that Afghan President Hamid Karzai is unworthy, as corrosive corruption and an inability or unwillingness to accelerate preparations of an Afghan army and police force continue to plague the effort.

What's more, with the WikiLeaks release, whispers about Pakistan's unreliability should turn into shouts, too.

It is time, in short, to turn up the volume on the debate back home and to make it a truly bipartisan one. Neither party should reflexively support a war policy -- not to protect the president, and not to project unquestioning backing of the Pentagon. The bumper sticker ethos of "Support our troops" must be replaced with a mature moral debate about whether the national interest truly requires many more Americans to die in Afghanistan.

And if the troops must be there, do we really have the right strategy and the will to see it through?

Congress had a chance this week during the debate in the House over a war-financing bill worth almost \$59 billion. The measure passed, and because it matched a previously passed Senate version, President Obama will soon sign it into law. Unfortunately, the bill was initially bogged down by debates over domestic spending, which obscured the badly needed focus on Afghanistan. House Republican Leader John Boehner claimed the delay created "more uncertainty for our troops in the field, more uncertainty for the Pentagon, and it's all unnecessary."

To the contrary, a real debate is exactly what's necessary. No rational actor on the political stage will deny that our forces needed equipment. Nor should the administration or others distract with attacks on the media, be it new (WikiLeaks) or old (New York Times, which analyzed and published the leaked documents). The focus needs to be on what victory looks like, and on whether it can be achieved with impossibly difficult partners.

June was the deadliest month yet for NATO forces. It may get worse with the planned offensive in Kandahar. Our troops have been intrepid. Citizens and Congress should be just as brave in challenging every assumption about a war we are not winning.