

# Hamid Karzai and America's Vietnam mistake

Amid growing debate about whether the United States should stay in Afghanistan, one issue of agreement is that Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, is both the central figure in the war and its weakest link.

Recent embarrassing controversies between Karzai and Washington — including a move this month by the Afghan leader to hinder U.S.-backed anti-corruption investigations in Kabul — reveal a troubling pattern in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. leaders have a tendency to hail flawed foreign leaders as the saviors of their countries, only to publicly disparage them later for not meeting America's lofty expectations.

In dealing with the erratic and unreliable Karzai, Washington is replicating the pattern of exaltation and subsequent blame-shifting it followed five decades ago with South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem. That episode produced famously disastrous results.

In October 1954, President Eisenhower wrote a letter to Diem stressing the goal of "developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression." To leaders in Washington, backing South Vietnam was deemed critical to preventing the expansion of communism. And in Diem, they thought they had the man to do the job.

Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Walter Robertson proclaimed in a 1956 speech: "Asia has given us in President Diem another great figure, and the entire free world has become richer for his example of determination and moral fortitude." Sen. Jacob Javits, R-N.Y., hailed Diem as "one of the real heroes of the free world."

By the end of the 1950s, however, U.S. officials were growing concerned about Diem's autocratic political style and nepotism. Worse, support for Diem's government among the Vietnamese people was eroding.

President Kennedy inherited that dilemma. Pledging in his inaugural address to "support any friend, oppose any foe" to ensure the success of liberty, the new president was determined to take a strong stand in Vietnam. But Diem's mounting unpopularity and ineffectiveness posed a major problem for U.S. policy.

Fast-forward five decades, and Washington encounters an eerily similar situation in Afghanistan. Just as success in South Vietnam was deemed essential to blunt the communist threat, success in Afghanistan is deemed crucial to the war against terrorism. And once again America is linked to a deeply flawed leader with whom U.S. officials have become disillusioned.

As in the case of Diem, U.S. policymakers initially lavished praise on Karzai. In 2002, the newly installed Afghan leader was an honored guest at the State of the Union address, and in 2004, President George W. Bush spoke of Karzai as a man of "honor, courage and skill" and pledged America's "ironclad commitment" to help his country succeed.

But also as in the case of Diem, allegations of corruption and Karzai's apparent contempt for democratic norms - and his growing domestic unpopularity - have reached the point that U.S.

officials are reacting with anger. In November 2009, Karl W. Eikenberry, U.S. ambassador to Kabul, bluntly warned his superiors that Karzai "is not an adequate strategic partner."

There is little doubt that if Washington could find a more credible replacement, it would dump Karzai. But perhaps the lesson of the Diem experience has induced caution. In 1963, the Kennedy administration gave a wink and a nod to the South Vietnamese military to stage a coup against Diem. But Diem's ouster (and killing) merely caused the already shaky U.S. mission in Vietnam to become even more untenable. U.S. leaders probably fear a similar result in Afghanistan if they encourage Karzai's opponents to remove him.

American policymakers need to overcome some deeply ingrained counterproductive habits. Not only do policymakers tend to overestimate the strategic importance of small Third World countries to U.S. national security, they also see foreign political clients through the prism of American ideals. Ngo Dinh Diem was never a genuine democrat, much less a "hero" of the free world. He was a garden-variety, corrupt autocrat.

The same appears to be true of Hamid Karzai. Policymakers are frustrated because he has not fulfilled Western expectations, but those expectations were always completely detached from the realities of Afghanistan. American leaders need to learn that if they don't want to get down in the muck with highly imperfect foreign clients, the U.S. needs to be far more selective about the places - and the reasons - it intervenes.