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September 15, 2009

Realists Warn Obama On Af/Pak Mission Creep, Over-Reach

By Steve Hynd

Via [Steve Clemons](#), who is a signatory along with folk like Robert Jervis, Christopher Preble, Andrew Bacevich, Michael Cohen, Bernard Finel, Ted Galen Carpenter and Col Douglas Macgregor who have been warning of a disastrous course towards escalation for some time now, here is a letter sent today by many realist foreign policy experts and scholars to President Obama. I'd like to be on record as agreeing with every word.

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

During your campaign for the Presidency, Americans around the country appreciated your skepticism of the rationales for the Iraq war. In 2002, you had warned that such an endeavor would yield "a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, and with unintended consequences." You pointed out the dangers of fighting such a war "without a clear rationale and without strong international support." As scholars of international relations and U.S. foreign policy, many of us issued similar warnings before the war, unfortunately to little avail.

Today, we are concerned that the war in Afghanistan is growing increasingly detached from considerations of length, cost, and consequences. Its rationale is becoming murkier and both domestic and international support for it is waning. Respectfully, we urge you to focus U.S. strategy more clearly on al Qaeda instead of expanding the mission into an ambitious experiment in state building.

First, our objectives in that country have grown overly ambitious. The current strategy centers on assembling a viable, compliant, modern state in Afghanistan--something that has never before existed. The history of U.S. state-building endeavors is not encouraging, and Afghanistan poses particular challenges. Engaging in competitive governance with the Taliban is a counterproductive strategy, pushing the Taliban and al Qaeda together instead of driving them apart. If we cannot leave Afghanistan until we have created an effective central government, we are likely to be there for decades, with no guarantee of success.

Second, the rationale of expanding the mission in order to prevent "safe havens" for al Qaeda from emerging is appealing but flawed. Afghanistan, even excluding the non-Pashto areas, is a large, geographically imposing country where it is probably impossible to ensure that no safe havens could exist. Searching for certainty that there are not and will not be safe havens in Afghanistan is quixotic and likely to be extremely costly. Even if some massive effort in that country were somehow able to prevent a safe haven there, dozens of other countries could easily serve the same purpose. Even well-governed modern democracies like Germany have inadvertently provided staging grounds for terrorists. A better strategy would focus on negotiations with moderate Taliban elements, regional diplomacy, and disrupting any large-scale al Qaeda operations that may emerge. Those are achievable goals.

Third, an expanded mission fails a simple cost/benefit test. In order to markedly improve our chances of victory--which Ambassador Richard Holbrooke can only promise "we'll know it when we see it"--we would need to make a decades-long commitment to creating a state in Afghanistan, and even in that case, success would be far from certain. As with all foreign policies, this enormous effort must be weighed against the opportunity costs. Money, troops, and other resources would be poured into Afghanistan at the

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