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OCTOBER 07, 2009

The Value of Propaganda



Secretary Gates is **reportedly** worried about what an American draw down in Afghanistan would do to al Qaeda's spin machine:

Speaking alongside Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a George Washington University forum moderated by CNN's Christiane Amanpour and GWU professor Frank Sesno, Gates plead agnosticism as to whether al-Qaeda would move its headquarters from Pakistan to Afghanistan but said "what's more important than that, in my view, is the message that it sends that empowers al Qaeda."

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, Gates said, represents the "modern epicenter of jihad." A place "where the Mujahedeen defeated the other superpower," and in his estimation of the Taliban's thinking, "they now have the opportunity to defeat a second superpower."

Defining al-Qaeda as both an ideology and an organization, Gates said their ability to successfully "challenge not only the United States, but NATO — 42 nations and so on" on such a symbolically important battlefield would represent "a hugely empowering message" for an organization whose narrative has suffered much in the eight years since 9/11.

Justin Logan **is not convinced**:

That is to say, Gates is being a bit too postmodern for my tastes here. We have interests. We should make clear that we will defend them. Then, we should defend them. But to say that we're so concerned about lending al Qaeda a propaganda victory that we can't leave Afghanistan is a bridge too far. There will always be somebody to declare victory for al Qaeda, whether we leave Afghanistan next year or 20 years from now. Staying until you feel comfortable no one can claim a moral victory as we depart is a recipe for staying forever.

A good point, but I wonder about this. If I've read my Justin Logan **correctly in the past**, he's very concerned about al Qaeda propaganda - at least the propaganda that singles out U.S. policy in the Middle East as a major driver of Islamic terrorism. If we're going to be

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solicitous of that propaganda message, why overlook the one Gates fears?

(AP Photos)

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