

The Afghanistan Quagmire

By Alan Caruba

In November 2008, I wrote of Afghanistan, "Having lived through the long years of the war in Vietnam, I can tell you that Afghanistan looks and smells like Vietnam. It is the classic wrong war in the wrong place."

I still think the U.S. should leave. I don't like having to pack up and abandon Afghanistan to its fate, but Afghanistan's fate has been fought over for centuries and, in the modern era, it has defied any invasion or intrusion into its affairs.

It is in a very bad neighborhood that includes Russia, Iran, and the worst basket case of all, Pakistan. The Afghans and Pakistanis mutually despise each other.

When someone like Adm. Mike Mullen, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says that the situation in Afghanistan has been "deteriorating" over the past few years and that the "Taliban insurgency has gotten more sophisticated", as he did on August 23, you better pay attention.

More importantly, the White House had better pay attention. The Admiral is trying to send it a message. He said, for example, he was "extremely concerned" about the recent bombings in Iraq. Speaking on CNN's 'State of the Nation', it was no secret that the man overseeing the greatest military on Earth was warning that it is ill-equipped to deal with insurgencies short of the massive infusion of manpower.

We tried that in Vietnam. It didn't work. The former Soviets tried that in Afghanistan. It didn't work. The invasions were successful in turning both places into slaughterhouses. History cries out against foreign engagement in this feeble excuse for a nation.

The U.S. justification for the waging of war is because 9/11 was planned there. It is a fallacy. The next attack on America can be planned anywhere. Al Qaeda does not need Afghanistan to do that.

Specifically, the last general charged with succeeding in Afghanistan asked for and was denied 10,000 more troops. Then he was replaced.

All during the long years of the war in Vietnam, Americans were told that another increase of troops would turn the tide, but we know now what the White House knew then; there was no indigenous enthusiasm for the South Vietnamese generals and even less for the Americans. Both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon knew we could not win a war there and some 57,000 American dead is their ugly legacy.

We have been in Afghanistan since 9/11 when we enjoyed an initial success chasing out the Taliban and al Qaeda. That was accomplished, not by a massive U.S. troop infusion, but by hiring its northern tribes who were opposed to the Taliban, intruders from across the border in Pakistan, in combination with our extraordinary air power. Earlier, during the years of the Soviet invasion, the U.S. provided massive amounts of money and weapons to Afghan tribes, some which were led by notorious drug lords.

The Taliban are back. The Afghans are tired of American troops in their midst and you can largely dismiss the smaller numbers of troops from “coalition” nations because they are window-dressing. This does not diminish the casualties they have sustained, but it does acknowledge their very reluctant participation.

Long ago, the British learned that Afghanistan is a place where empires go to die.

Virtually every military expert agrees that Afghanistan is the last place on Earth for a modern army to wage war and that includes every NATO general. It no doubt includes the Russians whose invasion ultimately brought down the former Soviet Union. That whole game was part of the larger Cold War.

Afghanistan never was much of a “nation” though it was relatively calm when Afghan dynasties ruled from around the 1700s into the last century. In terms of foreign policy, the U.S. had largely ignored Afghanistan for decades.

The notion that democracy as practiced in the West can be transplanted there is farcical though some previous Afghan regimes had made progress to free women from Islamic subjugation. Efforts toward modernization have always been painfully slow there.

Since the 1700s the primary export from Afghanistan has been heroin and it remains so today. Other than growing poppies, there’s not much that passes for an economy there. It doesn’t matter who’s elected because the business of Afghanistan is opium. American troops will not alter that.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan has been going on since 2001, but Americans dislike long wars. We fought a long one and a wrong one in Vietnam. They serve no purpose. Our military exists to kill people and smash things. Nation building is not one of its skill sets, nor should it be.

Right now Americans are distracted by the battles over the hideous healthcare reform bill and Cap-and-Trade. Americans rightfully fear that those in control of our government are deliberately bankrupting the nation. In increasing numbers they have concluded that electing Obama president was a very bad idea.

It is unfortunate that we measure wars by the number of casualties, but they will continue in Afghanistan and, when Americans at last turn their collective attention to them, the pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan will mount.

I confess that the strategic reasons for being there defy my understanding, other than its proximity to Pakistan. It sounds to me like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs wants to leave and for very good reasons that date back at least three centuries and longer.

The war on terror will go on until we kill as many of the leadership of al Qaeda as possible. When it becomes too lethal to join al Qaeda, its members will go back to herding goats. It is a war that can and should be fought covertly and as viciously as possible.

Alan Caruba writes a daily post at <http://factsnotfantasy.blogspot.com>. A business and science writer, he is the founder of The National Anxiety Center.

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