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A Decade of War – for What?

By Patrick J. Buchanan

May 3, 2012

"My fellow Americans, we have traveled through more than a decade under the dark cloud of war," said Barack Obama from Bagram Air Base.

"Here in the predawn darkness, we can see the light of a new day on the horizon. The Iraq War is over. The number of troops in harm's way has been cut in half, and more will be coming home. ... The time of war began in Afghanistan, and this is where it will end."

Interesting comment, that last.

If "the time of war" is at an end, does that rule out U.S. military action in Syria or war on Iran?

Setting aside the 14,000-mile round trip to Afghanistan to do an end zone dance on the anniversary of Seal Team Six's dispatch of Osama bin Laden, Obama seems to have boxed in his Republican rivals.

His assurance that our wars are ending and our troops are coming home reflects the national will. And his partnership agreement with President Hamid Karzai and pledge that a U.S. force will remain to train the Afghan army and prevent al-Qaeda's return inoculates him against the charge that he is cutting and running.

Yet *The New York Times* was disappointed.

Obama had not said how the United States is to train the Afghan army to defeat the Taliban by 2014, nor how we can get Karzai to deal with the pervasive corruption and incompetence of his government.

Nor did Obama say how we can be certain al-Qaeda will not return when we depart.

The *Times* misses the point.

This speech was not designed to lay out a U.S. strategy for the next 12 years, but to get Barack Obama past the post in November.

And for that objective, the speech works.

No one knows what will happen when 23,000 more U.S. troops come home by Sept. 30, and all combat troops are out in 2014. The odds are that, after a "decent interval," like the one in Vietnam from 1973 to 1975, the Taliban will return to take vengeance on all who abandoned them, and Afghanistan will come again to resemble the land we invaded a decade ago.

Why is this probable?

First, because the Taliban have shown themselves to be, though fewer in number, a superior fighting force to the Afghan army. They have not needed foreigners to motivate, train, advise or lead them.

Nor have they needed foreign money to fight. Yet they have battled the best army in the world for a decade and repeatedly sacrificed their lives in suicide attacks.

How many Afghans on our side have launched suicide attacks?

Second, the Taliban are rooted in the Pashtun, the largest tribal group in Afghanistan, which constitutes half the population and is concentrated in the crucial south and east.

Third, they have a secure sanctuary in Pakistan.

Fourth, because, as we saw with the hysterical reaction to what U.S. troops thought was the routine burning of desecrated Qurans, Islam is the most powerful cultural and social force in the country. And the Taliban are the most deeply rooted in that faith.

Fifth, because nationalism is the most potent political current roiling nations from the Maghreb to Middle East to South Asia. And the Taliban have the causalities and credentials to prove they will fight forever to free their country of foreign influence.

A majority of Afghans surely wish the Taliban would not return, given the savagery of their previous rule and the desire of the Afghan people to be free to live their own lives according to their own interpretation of their faith.

Yet the Taliban have shown themselves willing to persist against huge odds, to fight and die in considerable numbers for the kind of country they wish to live in — and the kind of regime they wish to live under.

Our allies have not remotely matched their zeal.

"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history," said Mohandas Gandhi.

So, after a decade of war in Afghanistan, what have we accomplished, and at what cost? Some 2,000 U.S. dead, 16,000 wounded, hundreds of billions sunk, scores of thousands of Afghan dead. Al-Qaeda was driven out a decade ago but is now in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and Iraq.

The Taliban are gone from Kabul but may be coming back. And our hope of preserving what success we have had rests with Hamid Karzai.

"America has no designs beyond an end to al-Qaeda safe havens," said Obama in Bagram. "Our goal is not to build a country in America's image, or to eradicate every vestige of the Taliban."

But if those are our goals, had we not achieved them all by early 2002? What, then, were we fighting for — these 10 years?

If we had to do it all over again, would we?

The nation now seems not to think so. And the nation is right.