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Afghanistan: War of Choice Not Necessity

by Sheldon Richman

January 7, 2011

In December President Barack Obama received his annual assessment of the war in Afghanistan, then reported to the American people that the mission is “on track” and troops would begin to withdraw next July. But the semi-upbeat assessment was less than persuasive because, as the *Washington Post* reported, “The overview of the long-awaited report contained no specifics or data to back up its conclusions. The actual assessment document is classified and will not be made public.”

In other words, if we are to believe the president, we have to take him on faith. But even Obama noted during a media briefing, “the gains we’ve made are fragile and reversible.”

Yet that is way too optimistic. As University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole writes in “Top Ten Myths about Afghanistan, 2010,” “A recent National Intelligence Estimate by 16 intelligence agencies found no progress. It warned that large swathes of the country were at risk of falling to the Taliban and that they still had safe havens in Pakistan, with the Pakistani government complicit.”

Casualties, including civilian, were higher last year than the year before.

In August 2009 Obama declared before the Veterans of Foreign Wars, “This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity.” Is that true? It is useful to take a look back to 2001–02.

Anand Ghopal, who has covered Afghanistan for both the *Wall Street Journal* and *Christian Science Monitor*, reports that after the Taliban government fell in Kabul in 2001, members of the ruling group, resigned to Afghanistan's new situation, expressed a willingness to surrender to U.S. forces. The surrendering Taliban leaders offered not to participate in politics if the new government would not arrest them. "But [but U.S.-picked leader Hamid] Karzai and other government officials ignored the overture — largely due to pressures from the United States and the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's erstwhile enemy," Ghopal added. The surrendering Taliban were subject to "widespread intimidation and harassment.... Many of the signatories of the letter [offering surrender] were to become leading figures in the insurgency."

Thus the resistance was largely of the U.S. government's own making. It was surely made more robust by the brutal treatment. "The alienation of leading former Taliban commanders in Kandahar would become a key motivating factor in sparking the insurgency there. Kandahar's governor, Gul Agha Sherzai, had initially taken a conciliatory attitude toward former Taliban figures. But his close ties with U.S. special forces, who often posted rewards for top Taliban leaders, as well as isolated attacks against the government and the possibility of exploiting his position for financial gain, eventually led to a retaliatory approach," Ghopal wrote. "These commanders targeted men formerly associated with the Taliban, often torturing them in secret prisons, according to numerous tribal elders, government officials, and Taliban members."

Many of the former Taliban escaped to Pakistan, but even after insurgency activities they were still open to making peace with the American-backed Karzai regime. "But lack of political will by the central government in Kabul and *opposition from some sections of the U.S. leadership* meant that such approaches were ultimately ignored," Ghopal wrote (emphasis added). Repeated subsequent peace overtures were also rebuffed.

That is startling information. U.S. forces have been in Afghanistan longer than the Soviet Union was. Between October 2001 and mid-December 2010, nearly 2,200 U.S.-led coalition troops have been killed in the invasion and occupation. Of those, 1,361 were American. Using various estimates, Wikipedia calculates that 14,643–34,240 civilians have died directly and indirectly because of the war. Most of those people would be alive today if the Taliban offer of surrender and peace had been accepted.

Today virtually no al-Qaeda operate in Afghanistan, and U.S./NATO forces are mostly fighting warlords who were allies during the Soviet invasion. Staying even one more day is immoral — and criminal.

Obama is wrong. Afghanistan was and *is* a war of choice.