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What are U.S. goals in Afghanistan?

By HELEN THOMAS
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WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama is making a big mistake in escalating U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan where he already has acknowledged he doesn't believe victory is possible.

We should ask: What are we doing there seven years after the 9/11 attacks by the al-Qaida network? Historically, the country has lacked a strong central government and has been governed by locally strong tribal leaders and warlords.

Al-Qaida was able to take advantage of this loose structure and turn Afghanistan into the plotting ground for the terrorists who struck the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York.

But what are our goals there in 2009?

While the U.S. is supposed to wind down its presence in Iraq in 19 months (rather than the 16 months promised by Obama on the campaign trail), the president has ordered a military buildup in Afghanistan to more than 50,000 troops, both from the U.S. and other NATO members.

He would leave 50,000 Americans in Iraq to cope with the resistance there. Such was the folly of President George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq after his hawkish neoconservative advisers told him we would triumph in a few weeks.

To this day none of Bush's reasons for attacking Iraq have held up to examination. There were no weapons of mass destruction, no Iraqi ties to al-Qaida and no threat to the United States.

There have been no apologies from Bush or his cohorts.

When Obama visited Afghanistan last summer as a presidential candidate, he joined several other senators in a get-tough statement that said: "We need a great sense of urgency because the threat from the Taliban and al-Qaida is growing and we must act. We need determination because it will take time to prevail. But with the right strategy and the resources to back it up, we will get the job done."

What exactly is the job that he says needs to get done? What is the U.S. exit strategy? Does anyone in power remember the lessons we were supposed to have learned from Vietnam?

Afghanistan is known as the "graveyard of empires" because of the repeated failure of invaders over the centuries to achieve their goals in that rugged country.

U.S. prowling around in Afghanistan hasn't aroused anti-war protests as did the March 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. I am puzzled about this. It seems to me we are leaping out of the frying pan into the fire!

American public aversion to our military adventures in Afghanistan has been fueled by our shock at the toll that U.S. planes and aerial drones have inflicted on Afghan civilians.

There have been indications that Obama may start diplomatic overtures to the Taliban at a time when the human and financial costs of the two wars are wearing down the U.S. as it struggles with an economic depression that has no end in sight.

According to White House press secretary Robert Gibbs, the president is evaluating the situation in Afghanistan.

Obama would do well to study the trajectory that took us into the Vietnam War and the terrible price we paid there. We lost the war and fled by helicopters from Saigon.

Both Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon thought that they could win in Vietnam, but they were brought down as much by the American people -- who rebelled against the war -- as they were by the North Vietnamese.

Obama could go deeper in history and check out President Dwight D. Eisenhower's career for a lesson on how to end a war.

When running for the White House in 1952, when the American public was growing frustrated about the long U.S. involvement in the Korean War, Eisenhower told voters: "I shall go to Korea."

And he did. The Korean War ended in a standoff in 1953 -- much to the relief of the American people.

Despite some ensuing skirmishes in the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas, a truce has endured ever since.

During the 2008 campaign, Obama indicated that he was willing to speak to all parties in the military or diplomatic disputes we were involved in. He was criticized for his plan for outreach to the militants in Afghanistan.

But there is no alternative.

Sooner or later American presidents should learn that people will always fight for their country against a foreign invader. And peace should be the only goal.