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President Obama: Why Are We In Afghanistan?

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Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele recently [said](#) the unthinkable: Afghanistan is "a war of Obama's choosing." Steele's remarks triggered a verbal slugfest between neocon proponents of endless war, such as William Kristol, and Iraq hawks turned Afghanistan doves, such as Ann Coulter.

Michael Steele was right. President Barack Obama could have started afresh in Afghanistan. But he chose to make the war his own, twice escalating the number of troops.

For what purpose? Baker Spring of the Heritage Foundation declared: to "defend the vital interests of the United States."

What vital interests?

The original justification for war long ago disappeared. Al-Qaeda has relocated to Pakistan. Today, [says](#) CIA Director Leon Panetta, "At most, we're looking at 50 to 100, maybe less" Taliban operatives in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, John Bolton [argues](#) that the Taliban and al-Qaeda must be defeated lest they "reconquer Afghanistan and make it a base for international terrorism." However,

the Taliban leadership, which appeared unhappy that its guests brought the wrath of Washington down upon them back in 2001, likely would avoid a repeat performance.

In any case, al-Qaeda and other terrorists don't need Afghanistan to plan their operations. Pakistan's northwest has proved to be a hospitable home. Somalia and Yemen also offer sanctuaries. Other failed or semi-failed states could similarly host terrorists.

It's hard to fathom another reason for staying. Would withdrawal harm U.S. credibility? Perhaps. But a disappointing withdrawal is likely at some point. The longer Washington stays, the greater will be its loss of face.

The *Economist* magazine [worries](#) about "a civil war that might suck in the local powers, including Iran, Pakistan, India and Russia," which would eventually "end up harming America too: it always does." Yet whatever the U.S. does, these powers continue vying for influence, perhaps violently. Washington would be better off not involved.

Of course, leaving Afghanistan a better place is a worthy objective -- the *Economist* even calls it "a duty" after having "invaded their country" -- but is not easily achieved through outside military intervention. Civilian dead in Afghanistan may run 10,000. The majority of these deaths were caused by the Taliban, but as fighting grows more intense more civilians will be killed, injured, or maimed.

And Americans are directly responsible for many deaths. Gen. Stanley McChrystal [complained](#) in March: "We've shot an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force." Tens of thousands of Afghans have fled to Pakistan and up to 320,000 have been [displaced](#) within their own nation.

There are still Afghans who hope to create a liberal society. In fact, prior to the ouster of the king in 1973, Afghanistan was a relatively stable and peaceful land. Alas, that Afghanistan is gone. Like Humpty Dumpty, there's no way to put it back together again -- at least, not in a reasonable amount of time at a reasonable cost.

Washington already has been at war in Afghanistan for nearly nine years. Yet after America's sacrifice of more than a thousand lives and expenditure of some \$345 billion, the country remains a wreck. Gen. David Petraeus points to increased child immunizations and cell phone use, but those measures mean little in terms of Afghanistan's political future.

In June Gen. McChrystal, then commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, briefed NATO members. He [indicated](#) that just five of 116 areas were rated "secure." In only five of 122 districts was the government assessed as exercising full authority.

Taliban attacks are up. The Afghanistan Rights Monitor [recorded](#) 1200 violent incidents in June, the highest monthly total since early 2002. The group complained that "the insurgency has become more resilient, multi-structured and deadly." When I visited in

May allied personnel warned that many of the areas in which they operated have become much more dangerous. A NATO spokesman recently admitted: "I don't think anyone would say we're winning."

Still, John Nagl of the Center for a New American Security contends that the conflict is winnable "because for the first time the coalition fighting there has the right strategy and the resources to begin to implement it, because the Taliban are losing their sanctuaries in Pakistan and because the Afghan government and the security forces are growing in capability and numbers."

Yet there's less here than meets the eye. First, allied manpower remains inadequate. Traditional counter-insurgency doctrine suggests the necessity of deploying more than 600,000 troops, which would mean quintupling current force levels.

The answer won't come from Islamabad. John Bolton, for one, wishes Pakistan to take an active role in "the grim, relentless crushing of the Taliban and al-Qaeda." But the Pakistani military has no interest in participating in such a mission. Only at great cost has Islamabad managed to wrest some territory away from the Pakistani Taliban, and it has done so because these forces are seen as a threat to the Pakistani state.

Not so the Afghan Taliban, a tool of the Pakistani military for more than a decade. Islamabad has played a double game since America's intervention, aiding the Pashtun Taliban forces. Gen. McChrystal warned of Pakistan's failure "to curb insurgent support." One Westerner working with the Afghan government was even blunter, telling me: "Pakistan is in a state of undeclared war with NATO and Afghanistan. No one knows what to do."

Nor is salvation likely to come from an increasing number of Afghan security personnel. A recent report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction noted that the U.S. had spent \$27 billion so far on training the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Only 23 percent of the ANA and 12 percent of the ANP were rated in the top of four categories, meaning they were capable of independent action.

Even these numbers overstate the forces' capabilities. SIGAR [cited](#) "significant levels of regression, or backsliding, in the capability levels of fielded army and police units." Police instructors call them "illiterate, corrupt, and trigger-happy." On my recent trip one Afghan complained that sending in the ANP is the best way to turn people into Taliban.

The ANA has a better reputation, but the *Daily Telegraph* [reported](#) that "Many NATO troops have hair-raising stories of careless young Afghan soldiers accidentally firing their weapons, including rocket launchers," as well as of Afghan troops declaring that they are ending their patrol since it is lunchtime. Ironically, one of the Army's advantages is that it is deployed away from people, not among them, so its failings have less direct impact on the civilian population.

Then there is the Afghan government. Contrary to Vice President Joe Biden's claim, the U.S. is involved in nation-building. In the 2007 counter-insurgency manual, Gen. David Petraeus [wrote](#): "Soldiers and Mariners are expected to be nation-builders as well as warriors." Moreover, "They must be prepared to help re-establish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services. They must be able to facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law."

All of these require a viable Afghan government. However, such a government does not exist.

The Taliban is not particularly popular. Rather, in many areas the government is less popular. Tom Ricks of the *Washington Post* [notes](#): "Our biggest single problem in Afghanistan is not the Taliban. They are a consequence of our problem. Our problem in Afghanistan is the Kabul government."

The Karzai regime is noted more for corruption than competence. The *Los Angeles Times* [writes](#) of "a cabal of Afghan hustlers who have milked connections to high government officials to earn illicit fortunes." They have turned Afghanistan's capital into a vampire city, in which the elite live off of drug or Western money. I asked a long-time associate of President Karzai about allegations of corruption; he responded that no Afghan politician could long survive without "taking care of" his family and friends.

The Afghanistan Rights Monitor worries: "It will take a miracle to win the war against the insurgents and restore a viable peace in Afghanistan with the existing Afghan leadership and government." The country "lacks the basic prerequisites for a sustainable peace--a legitimate, competent and independent government and leadership."

The daunting challenge facing the U.S. is evident from operations in both Marja and Kandahar. The town of Marja was a Taliban sanctuary targeted by the U.S. military in February. The *Washington Post* reported in June: "Firefights between insurgents and security forces occur daily, resulting in more Marine fatalities and casualties over the past month than in the first month of the operation." In May Gen. McChrystal complained of the perception that Marja had become "a bleeding ulcer." There simply is no "government-in-a-box" for Kabul to deliver as planned.

Even super-hawks Frederick and Kimberly Kagan acknowledge that Marja was "an area that supported insurgents precisely because it saw the central government as threatening and predatory." The allied operation has gone poorly because of "The incapacity of the Afghan government to deliver either justice or basic services to its people." The Kagans argue that U.S. forces have achieved more important military objectives. But those goals ultimately remain secondary to political progress.

There seems little reason to be optimistic about the chances of the far larger operation planned for Kandahar. The military campaign has been put off from June and support for the Taliban remains worrisomely strong. Moreover, the insurgents have been carrying out a campaign of assassination against Afghans friendly to the allies.

Again, success will depend on effective local governance. Yet *Los Angeles Times* reporter David Zucchino [writes](#): "Development projects have been modest and plagued by insurgent attacks or threats against Afghan workers. Residents complain of shakedowns by Afghan police. Many U.S. troops say they don't fully trust their nominal allies in the Afghan police or army, who are scheduled to take responsibility for security by next summer." Brutal, corrupt, and inefficient government rule is worse than brutal, less corrupt, and less inefficient Taliban control for many Afghans. "If anybody thinks Kandahar will be solved this year," one top military officer [told](#) the *New York Times*, "they are kidding themselves."

President Obama appears ready to abandon his promise to begin troop withdrawals next July, but time is not on his side. A poll in May [found](#) that 52 percent of Americans did not believe the war was worth fighting. With the Europeans also looking for the exits, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [declared](#) at the June NATO summit: "All of us, for our publics, are going to have to show by the end of the year that our strategy is on the track, making some headway."

Last December President Obama [told](#) West Point cadets "As your commander in chief, I owe you a mission that is clearly defined and worthy of your service." Alas, Washington is pursuing the wrong objective in the wrong place. America's critical interests are to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming an al-Qaeda training ground and avoid destabilizing next-door nuclear-armed Pakistan.

The first has been achieved, and could be maintained through a negotiated withdrawal with the Taliban -- which likely would prefer not to be deposed again -- backed by air/drone strikes and Special Forces intervention if necessary. The second would be best served by deescalating the conflict, which is a major source of instability in Pakistan.

Failing to "win" would be bad. But carrying on in a war not worth fighting would be worse. As Tony Blankley observes: "What is not inevitable is the number of American (and allied) troops who must die before failure becomes inevitable."

The Obama administration should focus on protecting Americans from terrorism. It should leave nation-building in Afghanistan to the Afghan people.