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Political Solution in Afghanistan Possible, but Not by Going Down Current Path

By William Pfaff

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It would be a great service to the American nation if Barack Obama would tell us what he himself thinks the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan are about. To capture Osama bin Laden? There have been eight years in which to capture bin Laden and it's not been done yet, and there seems no reason to think that anything important would change if the thousands of Marines now scheduled for Afghanistan did capture him. What did it change to capture and execute Saddam Hussein in Iraq?

Gen. Stanley McChrystal says the Taliban are winning. Does the president think he can have a military solution – or a political solution? The latter is not impossible.

Is the war meant to defeat the Taliban? Why? What business is it of the United States to determine who runs Afghanistan, when the Afghan nation has absolutely no ability, interest, or capacity to do harm to the United States or to any of the NATO countries?

The Bush administration put Hamid Karzai into the Afghan presidency because he was a compliant figure Americans could work with. He was a Pathan, an Americanized Pathan, and Pathans (also known as Pashtuns) are the ethnic majority in Afghanistan. As the U.S. had worked with the hostile Northern Alliance, and other ethnically hostile warlords, to defeat the Taliban government, itself composed of Pathans, it seemed prudent to put one of them in charge. This was too clever by half. Washington should have left it to the Afghans to decide.

Washington manipulated the Loya Jirga (national assembly of regional and tribal leaders) called in June 2002, so as to put Karzai in office. This was despite the will of the majority of the assembly to bring back the former royal family, and the ex-king, as non-partisan and traditionally legitimate influences in the country's affairs.

By acting as it did, the Bush administration robbed Karzai of legitimacy, making him a foreign puppet. That, and his own inadequacies, are responsible for the weakness and corruption of his government, which may be fatal to it in the national elections scheduled to take place Aug. 20.

Moreover, since the Karzai government was set up in 2001, northern Pakistan has largely been purged of Pathans – as well as of those Taliban religious fundamentalists inside the Pathan community who dominated the country until the Americans came, and who now are making their bid to return to power, despite the fact that the cruelty of their previous practices seem widely to have discredited them.

Carlo Cristofori, who was secretary of the International Committee for Solidarity with the Afghan Resistance, says this purge has been an almost completely unreported aspect of the situation, and a dangerous one. (The committee was set up by members of the European Parliament at the time of the Soviet invasion, in 1979.)

"It is sufficient to take a look at a map of the insurgency to see that it is practically the same as an ethnic map of the Pashtun areas (including the Pashtun areas of Pakistan). This is why throwing more military forces into the cauldron, and killing more Pashtuns" – and American and NATO soldiers – "is not the best solution – and it is hardly a freedom and self-determination solution."

President Barack Obama is likely to be influenced by a quite different report prepared for him by an interagency U.S. policy review earlier this year. The review's chairman, Bruce Riedel, has just published in Washington's *National Interest* magazine (July-August) what seems to this reader a near-hysterical [analysis](#) of the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation, warning of a Taliban conquest of nuclear-armed Pakistan that would pose "the most serious threat to the United States since the end of the cold war." Hillary Clinton calls Pakistan "a mortal danger" to global security.

The coolest head in the regional policy debate since 2001 has been the University of Michigan historian Juan Cole, who comments that what we are hearing now is "doomsday rhetoric about this region [which] is hardly new. It's at least 100 years old."

His view is the commonsense one that the struggle in Pakistan-Afghanistan is essentially over local matters of great import to the Pathans, and to their neighbors, and of very little consequence for anyone else – least of all the NATO countries and the U.S. The warning that if we don't fight them there we will have to fight them at home, as recently voiced by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, can only be called a pathetic fantasy.

The advice of Carlos Cristofori is to convoke a new Loya Jirga as soon as possible, possibly including surviving members of the royal family (the king himself is dead), and within a republican rather than monarchical framework. Such a meeting is the traditional method for settling political issues among the ethnic communities of Afghanistan.

The Pathans have to be restored to their proportional weight in the meeting, and the U.S. and NATO must scrupulously avoid manipulating the affair, and firmly defend what the Afghans decide. Then there might be some hope that the foreign troops could go home, to leave the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan to work out their own fortunes, or misfortunes, as always in the past.

