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Afghanistan, the Unwinnable War

Posted By Patrick J. Buchanan

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"Taliban Are Winning: U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Warns of Rising Casualties." Thus ran the startling headline on the front-page of *The Wall Street Journal*. The lead paragraph ran thus:

"The Taliban have gained the upper hand in Afghanistan, the top American commander there said, forcing the U.S. to change its strategy in the eight-year-old conflict by increasing the number of troops in heavily populated areas like the volatile southern city of Kandahar, the insurgency's spiritual home."

Source for the story: Gen. Stanley McChrystal himself.

The general's spokesman in Kabul was swift to separate him from that headline and lead. They "go too far," he said: The general does not believe the Taliban are winning or "gaining the upper hand."

Nevertheless, in the eighth year of America's war, the newly arrived field commander concedes that U.S. casualties, now at record levels, will continue to be high or go higher, and that our primary mission is no longer to run down and kill Taliban but to defend the Afghan population.

What went wrong?

Though U.S. force levels are higher than ever, the U.S. military situation is worse than ever. Though President Karzai is expected to win re-election, he is regarded as the ineffectual head of a corrupt regime. Though we have trained an Afghan army and police force of 220,000, twice that number are now needed. The Taliban are operating not only in the east, but in the north and west, and are taking control of the capital of the south, Kandahar.

NATO's response to Obama's request for more troops has been pathetic.

Europeans want to draw down the troops already sent. And Western opinion has soured on the war.

A poll commissioned by *The Independent* found 52 percent of Britons wanting to pull out and 58 percent believing the war is "unwinnable."

U.S. polls, too, have turned upside down.

A CBS-*New York Times* survey in late July found 33 percent saying the war was going well and 57 percent saying it was going badly or very badly. In a CNN poll in early August, Americans, by 54 percent to 41 percent, said they oppose the Afghan war that almost all Americans favored after 9-11 and Obama said in 2008 was the right war for America to fight.

The president is now approaching a decision that may prove as fateful for him and his country as was the one made by Lyndon Johnson to send the Marines ashore at Da Nang in December 1965.

Obama confronts a two-part question:

If, after eight years of fighting, the Taliban is stronger, more capable and closer to victory than it has ever been, what will it cost in additional U.S. troops, casualties, years and billions to turn this around? And what is so vital to us in that wilderness land worth another eight years of fighting, bleeding and dying, other than averting the humiliation of another American defeat?

From Secretary Gates to Gen. Petraeus, U.S. military and political leaders have been unanimous that the Afghan war does not lend itself to a military victory. Unfortunately, the Taliban does seem to believe in a military victory and triumphal return to power, and imposing upon the United States the same kind of defeat their fathers imposed upon the Soviet Union.

Whatever we may say of them, Taliban fighters have shown a greater willingness to die for a country free of us Americans than our Afghan allies have shown to die for the future we Americans envision for them.

In days, McChrystal is to provide the president with an assessment of what will be required for America to prevail.

Almost surely, the general's answer will be that success will require thousands more U.S. troops, billions more dollars, many more years of casualties. And if Obama yet believes this is a war of necessity we cannot lose, and he must soldier on, his decision will sunder his party and country, and put at risk his presidency.

If he refuses to deepen the U.S. commitment, it is hard to see how the United States can avoid what is at best a bloody stalemate.

But if he chooses to cut America's losses and get out, Obama risks a strategic debacle that will have our enemies rejoicing and open him up to the charge that he, the first African-American president, lost the war that America began as retribution for 9/11 and fought to prevent a second 9/11.

Had we gone into Afghanistan in 2001, knocked over the Taliban, driven out al-Qaeda and departed, we would not be facing what we do today.

But we were seduced by the prospect of converting a backward tribal nation of 25 million, which has resisted every empire to set foot on its inhospitable soil, into a shining new democracy that would be a model for the Islamic world.

Now, whatever Obama decides, we shall pay a hellish price for the hubris of the nation-builders.