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Get Out of Afghanistan

By Peter Orvetti
09/07/09

Friday will mark eight years since 2,974 people were killed in terrorist attacks on the United States. The best way for President Obama to mark the solemn anniversary would be for him to declare his intention to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

Obama, addressing the annual Veterans of Foreign Wars conference last month, said of Afghanistan, "This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans." Continuing to channel his predecessor, Obama said, "This is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people."

But September 2009 is not September 2001, and Afghanistan can no longer be called a war of necessity. Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations argues that so-called wars of necessity involve a threat to "vital national interests" as well as a "lack of viable alternatives to the use of military force to protect those interests." Eight years ago, that may have been the case in Afghanistan. Today it clearly is not.

The U.S. government's vague definition of "success" in Afghanistan entails the establishment of a strong democratic government friendly to the West and in control of most or all of the country's territory. As the farcical Afghan presidential elections prove, this is far from a reality. But even such "success" could be achieved, so what? The only true U.S. interest in Afghanistan is the reduction of future terrorist threats. No matter how stable the government in Kabul becomes, radicals will still find safe havens in the border regions, slipping in and out of Pakistan where their grassroots support is strong.

Last week, conservative columnist George Will penned an important column calling for U.S. withdrawal. "The war already is nearly 50 percent longer than the combined U.S. involvements in two world wars, and NATO assistance is reluctant and often risible," Will

wrote. He says Taliban forces "can evaporate and then return, confident that U.S. forces will forever be too few to hold gains." Counterinsurgency theory, Will warns, "indicates that, nationwide, Afghanistan would need hundreds of thousands of coalition troops, perhaps for a decade or more." As for the U.S. effort to end heroin production in a country where a major drug trafficker is about to be elected vice president, Will suggests it be dubbed "Operation Sisyphus."

U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal says he needs more troops to do his job, and if he really intends to do it, then he is absolutely right. McChrystal has been charged with creating a Switzerland out of a Somalia, taking a lawless failed state and turning it into a stable member of the community of nations. It cannot be done with the 21,000 troops Obama is adding to the 47,000 Americans already there. Britain's 9,000 troops may not stay much longer -- the war is vastly unpopular in the U.K., and as embattled Prime Minister Gordon Brown's relations with Obama get worse and worse, he will probably decide to pull them out in a last-ditch attempt to keep his party in power. That means even more American troops will be needed just to maintain the same level.

The war is not working. In his New York Times column Sunday, Nicholas Kristof wrote that a "group of former intelligence officials and other experts is now reluctantly going public to warn that more troops would be a historic mistake." The group, which includes former CIA station chiefs in both Afghanistan and Pakistan who helped organize the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen insurgency in the 1980s, warns, "The more troops we put in, the greater the opposition. We do not mitigate the opposition by increasing troop levels, but rather we increase the opposition and prove to the Pashtuns that the Taliban are correct. The basic ignorance by our leadership is going to cause the deaths of many fine American troops with no positive outcome."

Barack Obama does not want this "war of necessity." He wants to focus his presidency on domestic policy, not on a conflict that will make Iraq look like Granada. Continuing this unnecessary war does not keep Americans safe from future attack. Rather, it creates a recruitment opportunity for Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden, after all, got his start in that same Mujahedeen insurgency the CIA helped create. Obama can keep Americans safe and save lives by making the choice to end this war of choice.