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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Keeping Afghanistan Safe From Democracy

By Robert Scheer

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The most idiotic thing being said about America's involvement in Afghanistan is that the best way to protect the 68,000 U.S. troops there now is by putting an additional 40,000 in harm's way.

People who argue for that plan clearly have not read Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal's report pushing for escalation. The general is as honest as he is wrong in laying out the purpose of this would-be expanded mission, which is to remold Afghanistan in a Western image by making U.S. troops far more vulnerable, rather than less so.

He is honest in arguing that American troops would have to be deployed throughout the rugged and otherwise inhospitable terrain of rural Afghanistan, entering intimately into the ways of local life so as to win the hearts and minds of a people who clearly wish we would not extend the favor. He is wrong in indicating, without providing any evidence to support the proposition, that this very costly and highly improbable quest to be the first foreign power to successfully model life in Afghanistan would be connected with defeating the al-Qaida terrorists.

As the president's top national security adviser has stated, there are fewer than 100 al-Qaida members left in Afghanistan and they have no capacity to launch attacks. These remnants of a foreign Arab force assembled by the U.S. to thwart the Soviets in their hapless effort to conquer Afghanistan are now alienated from the locally based insurgency.

As Matthew Hoh, the former Marine captain and foreign service officer in charge of the most contested area, said recently in his letter of resignation, we have stumbled into a 35-year-long civil war between rural people "who want to be left alone" and a corrupt urban government that the U.S. insists on backing. Hoh, who quit after a decade of service in Iraq and Afghanistan, wrote that he was resigning not because of the hardships of his assignment but rather because he no longer believed in its stated purpose:

“ ... [I]n the course of my five months of service in Afghanistan ... I have lost understanding and confidence in the strategic purposes of the United States’ presence in Afghanistan. ... To put simply: I fail to see the value or the worth in continued U.S. casualties or expenditures of resources in support of the Afghan government in what is, truly, a 35-year old civil war. ... Like the Soviets, we continue to secure and bolster a failing state, while encouraging an ideology and system of government unknown and unwanted by its people. ... I have observed that the bulk of the insurgency fights not for the white banner of the Taliban, but rather against the presence of foreign soldiers and taxes imposed by an unrepresentative government in Kabul.”

Just how unrepresentative was amply demonstrated in a very low-turnout election which the U.S.-backed candidate, Hamid Karzai, won after stealing one-third of the ballots he claimed for his victory, according to U.N. observers. In a message of congratulation to Karzai, President Barack Obama made reference to the need for reform and an end to the corruption that is endemic in the Karzai regime but then stated, “Although the process was messy, I am pleased to say that the final outcome was determined in accordance with Afghan law, which I think is very important.”

What law? A runoff was avoided only when Karzai refused to accede to his opponent’s demand for changes in the election commission that had stuffed the ballot boxes.

When Bob Schieffer of CBS said of the election “the thing was a fraud,” White House senior adviser David Axelrod had the arrogance to defend the rigged process as having “proceeded in the constitutional way.” Just what is it we are telling the world about our belief in the integrity of elections? It is no different from our having extolled those garbage elections that occurred with great regularity in Vietnam during the war there, a point made to great effect by Hoh:

“Our support for this kind of government, coupled with a misunderstanding of the insurgency’s true nature, reminds me horribly of our involvement with South Vietnam; an unpopular and corrupt government we backed at the expense of our Nation’s own internal peace, against an insurgency whose nationalism we arrogantly and ignorantly mistook as a rival to our own Cold War ideology.”

Obama must know the truth of those words and should heed them before he marches down the disastrous path pursued by another Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson—who, we now know from his White House telephone tapes, sacrificed the youth of this country in a war that he always knew never made sense.