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In Afghanistan and at home, we're being driven off a cliff

Ron Smith

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Football fans have been quite taken by a recurring segment on ESPN's "NFL Countdown Show" called "C'mon man." Inspired by former wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson, botched plays from NFL action are highlighted, with the players involved being targeted for the "C'mon man" admonition.

It's funny stuff. But when President Barack Obama, after weeks of indecision, prepares to tell the nation in a prime time address that tens of thousands of more troops are going to be sent into the endless war in Afghanistan, it's not so funny. It's depressing. It's revealing. It's a decidedly serious "C'mon man" moment.

Perhaps as soon as Tuesday, the president will explain best he can why tens of thousands of additional American soldiers and Marines are needed to pursue a war soon to pass Vietnam as the longest in our history. Some of our war fighters will be in their fourth or fifth tour of duty in combat zones. The cost of the war there could top a trillion dollars over the next 10 years, yet virtually all the generals and admirals and think tank armchair warriors have concluded that a military solution isn't possible.

President Obama says this is a war we must win. Retired Army Col. Andrew J. Bacevich, a professor of international relations and history at Boston University, who has written widely on military power and its limitations, says it's a war we cannot win.

In a piece earlier this year in Commonweal, Mr. Bacevich wrote, "Liberals may have interpreted Obama's campaign pledge to ramp up the U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan as calculated to insulate himself from the charge of being a national-security wimp. Events have exposed that interpretation as incorrect. It turns out - apparently - that the

president genuinely views this remote, landlocked, primitive Central Asian country as a vital U.S. security interest."

He suggests that if moral considerations are at the heart of our foreign policy, as many war proponents insist - if it's nation building that motivates us - we should fix, say, Mexico, which is of far greater importance to us than faraway Afghanistan.

So what can be expected to be achieved? There are murmurings about staying until a stable national government is in place in Kabul and the Afghans themselves are able to guarantee their own security. But we know there has never been a stable central government in that backward land. It's a tribal society, largely rural and famous for its ferocity and fearlessness, for a refusal to tolerate foreign occupation. Ask the Russians.

It's always a mistake to presume certain knowledge of the future. We can only guess at how events play out over time. Think, however, of what the ancient Chinese sage Sun Tzu said about how "no nation has ever benefited from a long war."

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that longtime American diplomat and former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said on television that the Afghanistan experience is shaping up as startlingly similar to what happened to us in Vietnam; that it looks like a quagmire, yet he sees the way to avoid being mired yet again.

Trying to understand this determination to stay the course no matter how unlikely the prospect of success, it might help to turn to a quip from one expert on Afghanistan, Rory Stewart, who heads the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard and has been consulted by several members of the Obama administration on what to do there. He has testified before Congress on Afghan policies, but wonders how much affect he's having.

As quoted in Matthew Yglesias' blog, Mr. Stewart says, "It's like they're coming in and saying to you, 'I'm going to drive my car off a cliff. Should I or should I not wear a seat belt?' And you say, 'I don't think you should drive your car off the cliff.' And they say, 'No, no, that bit's already been decided - the question is whether to wear a seat belt.' And you say, 'Well, you might as well wear a seat belt.' And then they say, 'We've consulted with policy expert Rory Stewart and he says ...'"

It seems insane, doesn't it? We're deep in a debt pit and digging ourselves in ever deeper, soothed by the conceit that America is too big to fail, even though all previous world hegemony has in the end failed. We think of ourselves as an exception to that historical record, but chances are we're not.

President Obama made the war in Afghanistan his war. The anti-war people are silent because he's their man. Leading Democrats in the House are proposing a "surtax" on income to be used for paying the mounting costs of battling insurgents on the other side of the world. And we're reduced to shouting "C'mon man" as we are driven over that cliff.

