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Afghanistan: Quagmire scenario gets closer to reality

by Scott Taylor
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With President Barack Obama's official consent to a troop surge in Afghanistan, the White House spin doctors did their best to re-assure a war-weary American public that this war won't devolve into another Vietnam fiasco.

Of course, there are still a number of American diehards who refuse to concede that the Vietnam conflict was a defeat for America. I kid you not.

I once had an irate caller berate me for even suggesting that lessons in counter-insurgency could be learned from the disastrous U.S. campaign in Southeast Asia.

"One and a half million dead Vietnamese to just 50,000 American soldiers killed. How do those numbers add up to a military defeat in your (expletive deleted) brain?"

In response, I reversed the question and asked him how he could ignore the graphic images of the United States navy pushing helicopters into the sea to make room for desperate refugees on their flight deck, the sight of frantic South Vietnamese bureaucrats clinging to the landing gear of the last U.S. Twin Huey helicopter to lift off from the U.S. embassy in Saigon and the fact that this former national capital was subsequently renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the victorious communists?

The caller's reply is unprintable in this column, but in summary, it involved a graphic description of my family lineage, followed by a dial tone.

Leaving alone the touchy subject of Vietnam, I am curious as to why so few pundits care to make the direct comparison of the Soviets' disaster in Afghanistan to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's current fiasco in the same country.

For those who may have forgotten, when U.S. forces first invaded Afghanistan in 2001, their intention was to topple the governing Taliban for providing safe haven to Osama bin Laden and to apprehend the al-Qaida leader so that he could be brought to justice for masterminding the 9-11 attacks.

The first of those objectives was achieved in short order, with only about 1,000 U.S. special forces troops and American air power required to assist the Afghan Northern Alliance warlords in defeating the Taliban. Bin Laden, however, proved elusive but that will remain the subject of a future column.

In the wake of the Taliban's collapse, the George W. Bush administration made it clear that they were not going to repeat the Soviets' mistakes, and that American troops would not become an occupation force.

The major difference in their stated approach was that the U.S. — and later NATO — forces were going to make a minimal footprint in Afghanistan. The international troop deployments, including Canada's contingent, were only supposed to stabilize the country in support of the interim-appointed government of President Hamid Karzai until elections could be conducted and the Afghan army had established itself.

The timeline to complete all that was 2005. As events unfolded, the American plan unravelled. Elections were held in 2004, but Karzai's democratic mandate did nothing to increase his authority throughout the country. With his administration rife with corrupt former warlords, the Karzai government was as impotent as it was reviled by the citizenry.

Furthermore, to extend the central Kabul authority into the provinces to initiate reconstruction, U.S. and NATO forces had to significantly boost their troop levels in 2006.

As with the Soviets, at that juncture, NATO still maintained the establishment of an Afghan National Army would be key to any successful exit strategy. During their occupation, the Soviets had trained and equipped about 150,000 reluctant and underpaid Afghan conscripts, whereas NATO intends to eventually recruit 150,000 Afghan volunteer soldiers with the lure of comparatively lavish paycheques.

Unfortunately, the abysmal fighting capability of the volunteers pretty much matches that of the pathetic Soviet-conscripted Afghan units.

As the Taliban insurgency gained strength and spread their influence throughout more regions of Afghanistan, the incompetency of the Afghan army has forced the U.S. and NATO to once again boost troop levels.

The latest announced surge of 30,000 U.S. troops over the next six months will bring the American forces in Afghanistan to about 100,000, and the smaller incremental increases from their allies will bring the total number of NATO soldiers to about 50,000.

For those keeping track of the ironies, this combined figure of 150,000 international troops is almost identical to the number of soldiers deployed by the Soviets during their occupation.

Furthermore, the stated strategic redirection of President Obama includes the inherent admission that democracy is dead in Afghanistan.

Citing the corruption of the Karzai government, the new plan calls for a focus on managing the reconstruction of Afghanistan at a grassroots level rather than attempting to rely upon any Kabul authority.

By giving up on Karzai and assuming the complete security responsibility, it is impossible for the U.S. to deny that they have become a de facto occupation force in Afghanistan.

Obama has made it clear that this is a war that America cannot afford to lose and, like the Soviets before them, it may yet prove to be a war they cannot afford (literally) to win.

A quagmire indeed. Giggity giggity.