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## Why Are We in Afghanistan – Still?

by Tom Gallagher

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You have to wonder what it might take to get the man in the White House to acknowledge just how absurd the current U.S. military effort in Afghanistan has become. Would the president of Afghanistan himself telling us to start getting our troops out do it? Nah. How about the leader of the last country to send its army there telling us "Victory is impossible in Afghanistan"? Nope. Finding out that some of the guards who protect NATO bases were Taliban -- but the top Taliban guy we'd been negotiating with actually wasn't? Neither. A Hollywood agent might push this story as farce. But it's real life and that qualifies it as tragedy.

Given that candidate Obama was so widely seen as a man of "new thinking," one to deliver the country from tired old debates and morasses, one hoped President Obama would listen hard to what Mikhail Gorbachev had to say about the damage that a fruitless nine-years-plus war in Afghanistan can do to a country. But if so, no evidence yet.

It probably didn't help that the former President of the former Soviet Union was also impolitic enough to add that "We had hoped America would abide by the agreement that we reached that Afghanistan should be a neutral, democratic country, that would have good relations with its neighbours and with both the US and the USSR. The Americans always said they supported this,

but at the same time they were training militants -- the same ones who today are terrorising Afghanistan and more and more of Pakistan."

Well, you know how policy makers in Washington hate being lectured on history -- when you're in the White House, you don't read history, you make it. Besides, by now we've been in Afghanistan longer than the Soviets were anyhow - so why should we listen to them?

So far as Hamid Karzai's statement goes, the most remarkable aspect might not be the Afghan President actually telling the U.S. "the time has come to reduce military operations," but just how little attention his remarks drew. This is, after all, a man who owes his very political existence to the U.S. invasion. At the very least it seems fair to say that the American newsmedia would have given a lot more play to remarks like his had they come from the head of the Afghan "puppet" regime back in the days when the Soviet Union was the occupying power. Of course, you could argue they are being nothing but realistic in giving Karzai short shrift since everybody knows the president of Afghanistan does not call the shots (literally) in his own country.

Karzai's problem might be that he's taking American intelligence reports too seriously: When CIA director Leon Panetta was asked earlier this year to assess Al Qaeda's strength in Afghanistan -- the prime justification for sending 97,000 U.S. and 48,800 other foreign troops there -- he put it at "maybe 50 to 100, maybe less." You can see then how Karzai might get to saying that the U.S. was still in his country because "they like to conduct this thing that they call the war on terror, which we don't call that anymore in Afghanistan. Because in my opinion and in the opinion of the absolute majority of the Afghan people, the war on terror cannot be conducted in Afghanistan because that isn't here. It is somewhere else. We are only reaping the consequences of it here."

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

And then besides the troops, there's the additional 26,000 private security employees there, 90 percent of whom work for the U.S., directly or indirectly. Some of them even provide security for the U.S. military. And some of them also appear to work directly or indirectly for the Taliban as well.

By now we're mostly past the initial surprise of learning that someone else besides the American military would be providing its security -- it used to be considered pretty much what they *did*, after all. So the nation appeared to pretty much take it in stride when it learned that in one case our leaner, meaner, partly privatized military had contracted with two Afghans it knew only as Mr. White and Mr. Pink -- monikers taken from characters in the Quentin Tarrantino movie *Reservoir Dogs* -- to provide security for an American military base.

The real life Mr. White and Mr. Pink had a falling out, though, and Mr. Pink killed Mr. White, at which point he lined up with the Taliban for protection against Mr. White's outraged relatives. The U.S. military decided to keep him on, however, notwithstanding his new alliance with the principal force fighting the U.S. and its allies.

But while Mr. Pink unfortunately turned out to have Taliban connections, Mullah Mansour unfortunately did not -- or at least the guy who said he was Mullah Mansour didn't have quite the connections our side thought he did.

Talks involving the U.S., the Karzai government and the Taliban were officially secret, although U.S. General David Petraeus had actually publicly proclaimed their existence as evidence of the pressure the Taliban was feeling due to his forces' recent increased military success. After all, the talks were going particularly well in that the three-man Taliban delegation was demanding neither withdrawal of foreign forces nor a share of government power -- things the Taliban had always insisted on in the past. The White House even prevailed upon the New York Times to withhold the identity of the man leading the delegation -- Mansour, widely assumed to be the Taliban's number two man -- so as not to jeopardize them -- until it was discovered that it wasn't actually Mansour in the negotiations.

To be fair, we don't actually know that the individual who led the talks on the Taliban side doesn't have connections with the organization. After the fraud was revealed, all one anonymous diplomat seemed to know for sure was "It's not him. And we gave him a lot of money." Call him Mr. Blue, maybe. Names out of *Reservoir Dogs*; plot out of *Clueless*.

#### AND WE'RE THERE , WHY?

At this point, it seems hard to resist the conclusion that we are in Afghanistan simply because we *have been* there. If it made sense to be there last year, or nine years ago, then it must still make sense to be there now, since we obviously still haven't won.

The good news, however, is that there is a straightforward solution -- withdraw outside troops, as Karzai and Gorbachev suggest, and deal with what emerges. Yes, the results may not be to our liking. But is there anything else we could possibly do that would enhance the Taliban's popularity more than providing them the leading role in resisting yet another outside invasion of Afghanistan -- as we are currently doing? Besides, the powers in Washington have already acknowledged that this is precisely the outcome they anticipate. In the words of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "The Taliban, we recognize, are part of the political fabric of Afghanistan at this point."

So why not just get on with it? So far as Congress goes, the House of Representatives already has legislation in place to bring the war to a prompt end: H. R. 6045, filed by Barbara Lee (D - CA), would restrict the use of "funds for operations of the Armed Forces in Afghanistan" to "purposes of providing for the safe and orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan of all members of the Armed Forces and Department of Defense contractor personnel." The Senate still needs someone to step forward to file a parallel bill, but when it comes to the White House, the route to ending the war is simplest of all -- the President can just stop it.

And the chances of that happening? Well, obviously neither the current White House nor Pentagon leadership wants to admit that not only can't the U.S. win this war, but at this point it's

hard to realistically imagine what "winning" a war in Afghanistan would even look like. What they do know is that facing reality would surely mean being denounced as defeatists. So lives will continue to be lost, amazing amounts of money squandered (it costs about a million dollars to maintain an American soldier for a year in Afghanistan), but face must be saved.

Back when he was running, Barack Obama used to say "We are the change we have been waiting for."

Unfortunately, when it comes to Afghanistan, he does not count as one of the "we," so the "we" who remain can expect no help from that quarter. Since it appears that the president is moved neither by the advice of foreign leaders, the logic of the situation, nor the feelings of his own base (Democrats oppose his Afghanistan policy by a 62-33 margin according to a November Quinnipiac poll), the only possibility for changing course lies in altering the domestic political equation, that is to say turning the status quo into a negative and making support for immediate withdrawal a positive. And in the case of a sitting first term president, the most direct- and perhaps only way to do that seems to be a 2012 primary challenge.