

AFGHANISTAN, VIETNAM, AND OBAMA

By Nick Gier

Addressing the Veterans of Foreign Wars on August 17, President Obama warned that "those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans."

At one time I agreed with Obama, and I supported the invasion of Afghanistan. It was an anti-terrorism campaign and the target was clear: the militants who had planned and executed the 9/11 attacks.

Turning away from this goal and committing major military assets to Iraq, President George Bush failed to capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora and later conceded that he didn't care where bin Laden was. Saddam Hussein, who was never a threat to us, now became Bush's target.

There is a \$25 million reward for bin Laden, but he is still at large across the border in Northwestern Pakistan. Most of the Taliban are Pashtuns, a war-like tribe that the British divided artificially between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and it is a mortal sin for them to break a code of honor called *Pashtunwali*. William A Pashtun explains that Pashtuns are duty bound "to protect anyone that they have agreed to give sanctuary," and no amount of money will tempt them to dishonor themselves.

For at least eight years the war in Afghanistan has been an anti-insurgency campaign, but the Taliban are stronger than ever, now staging attacks in the North where none have occurred before. In 2003 the Taliban controlled 30 of 364 districts; now they rule in 164. The Afghani intelligence indicates that thousands of foreign fighters have entered the country to join the Taliban.

According to Gen. David Petraeus' anti-insurgency manual, 640,000 troops would theoretically be required to pacify 34 million Afghans. Seven years ago, the U.S. had only 5,000 troops in Afghanistan and the current deployment is 68,000. The Pentagon is now asking President Obama to send an additional 45,000 troops. With the 35,000 NATO forces already there, the total would be 148,000, the largest military presence in Afghan history.

During the Soviet occupation of 1979-1989, the highest troop strength was 118,000 in 1985. The Soviets prosecuted the war indiscriminately (in the same way that some conservatives want us to run our wars), but they were forced out by Islamic

militants heavily supplied by the CIA. The Soviets suffered 13,310 dead and 35,478, and it was one of the reasons for the demise of the Soviet Union.

In the 1980s the person in charge of funneling aid to Afghan militants was Robert Gates, now Obama's Secretary of Defense. President Ronald Reagan praised these brutal fighters as the Afghan "moral equivalents of America's founding fathers," and one of those groups is part of what is called the Taliban.

The Soviet war pushed millions of Afghan refugees into Northwestern Pakistan, where thousands of young male orphans, devoid of normal family ties, were schooled in the oppressive doctrines of Islamic fundamentalism. When they returned to Afghanistan, many of them became the core leaders of Taliban.

A number of prominent commentators are comparing the bleak situation in Afghanistan with the Vietnam War. Last month former GOP Senator Chuck Hagel and Purple Heart veteran from Vietnam wrote: "In Vietnam, we kept feeding more men, material, and money into a corrupt government as our leaders continued to deceive themselves and the American people." Military historian Max Hastings states that "our Afghans may prove no more viable than were our Vietnamese, the Saigon regime."

The parallels are indeed instructive. Just as the Soviets failed in Afghanistan, so did we and the French lose badly in Vietnam. The combined French and American deaths were 136,740 while 1.5 million Communist soldiers died. Civilian deaths for both wars are estimated at a staggering 3.75 million people. Tens of millions of innocents around the world were sacrificed in the madness of the Cold War.

At the 1953 Battle of Dien Bien Phu Communist insurgent use of captured U.S. artillery—dismantled and transported on mules and bicycles—was decisive in forcing the French out of Vietnam. Today corrupt Afghan officials are selling U.S. weapons to the Taliban.

In Vietnam we supported Ngo Dinh Diem, a dictator so corrupt that the CIA finally had to arrange for his assassination. Our misunderstanding of the strong nationalist aspect of Vietnamese Communism meant that the Viet Cong, even with their repressive measures, were still able to maintain the allegiance of most of the Vietnamese people.

The more troops we sent to Vietnam (535,000 at their height and sufficient for counter-insurgency theory), the more Viet Cong we produced, and tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars came bicycling down the Ho Chi Minh trail to support them. Frank Rich notes that just "as the porous border of neighboring North Vietnam provided

sanctuary and facilitated support to our enemy then, so Pakistan serves our enemy today."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is a corrupt leader who has surrounded himself with some of the most unsavory men in Afghanistan. It has been alleged that his own brother and his vice-presidential candidate are involved in the opium trade.

The recent election, which initially showed Karzai winning 54 percent of the vote, was riddled with fraud. Because he spoke too frankly about this, Peter Galbraith, second in charge of a UN electoral committee, has been fired and four other members have resigned in protest. Even the Kai Eide, the man who fired Galbraith, now admits that there was been "widespread fraud."

The U.S. justified the Vietnam War with the policy of containing Communism in Asia. The infamous "domino theory" was that if Vietnam fell, then all of the countries in Southeast Asia would turn Communist. Continued stable governments in Thailand and Burma disproved this theory, but Cambodia did come under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, but only because the U.S. bombed the country and forced the neutral Prince Sihanouk into the hands of the Communist Chinese. Ironically, it was the Communist Vietnamese government that finally forced the murderous Khmer Rouge into the jungles whence they came.

Iran and the countries north of Afghanistan are in no danger from the Taliban or Al Qaeda, but both are active in Pakistan. The Pakistani army has finally taken the Taliban threat seriously and has been successful in driving them out of the Swat Valley north of the capital Islamabad.

The Pakistani army is now preparing for a drive through South Waziristan where the Taliban and Al Qaeda are the strongest. In a move that has surprised everyone, the Taliban have preempted that campaign by storming Pakistan's Pentagon in Rawalpindi, killing 20 soldiers and holding 42 hostages for 22 hours. The Taliban also took responsibility for five attacks in four areas that killed 146 people in the last two weeks.

Obama's has declared that the Taliban is no longer a threat to U.S. interests but Al Qaeda still is. This may be a signal that he is ready to negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan and focus his efforts on Al Qaeda. But U.S. intelligence estimates that there are only 100 Al Qaeda fighters left in Afghanistan. Already in February of this year the Pentagon announced that Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan had been "decimated" and that a "complete Al Qaeda defeat" was imminent. Furthermore, the

U.S. Treasury Department has announced that while the Taliban are well funded Al Qaeda "is in its weakest financial condition in several years and that its influence is waning."

In the news sources since February I've counted at least 25 Al Qaeda leaders and commanders killed by missiles from drone aircraft. During the first four months of this year those same attacks have left 687 civilians dead, causing more anger that will fuel recruitment for militant fighters.

For every Al Qaeda operative killed it is estimated that 50 civilians die. David Kilcullen once served as an advisor to Gen. Petraeus, and he warned a congressional panel that the drone attacks "are deeply aggravating to the population. And they've given rise to a feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists. The current path that we are on is causing the Pakistani government to lose control over its own population."

This would be a disaster far worse than losing Afghanistan to the Taliban. Pakistan has produced 70-90 nuclear warheads and it has missiles capable of carrying them thousands of miles. Israel is of course very worried about these weapons falling into the hands of Islamic militants. The storage places of these weapons are far more secure than the army headquarters in Rawalpindi, but Israeli professor Gerald Steinberg believes that "Pakistan's weapons are less secure today than they were five years ago." The stakes are far higher in Pakistan than in Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan is costing the U.S. \$2.6 billion a month and the casualties are mounting. The total number of U.S. soldiers who have died in Afghanistan is 872, and this year the number killed there exceeded those in Iraq: 242 vs. 128.

Obama's best strategy would be to negotiate a power sharing agreement with the Taliban in Afghanistan and do everything possible to make sure that Pakistan does not fall to Islamic fundamentalists. Obama's goal should be the containment of the Taliban in both countries and a plan that would destroy Al Qaeda with minimal civilian casualties.

In his column Senator Hagel asks Obama to review a taped conversation between President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Richard Russell. In it Johnson admits that the U.S. could not win in Vietnam, but he was determined not to be the first American president to lose a war.

The year was 1964 and the U.S. had lost 401 soldiers, but the next year Johnson escalated a war that led to a humiliating defeat 11 years later. A strong majority of American people have a similar view of Afghanistan: 65 percent in a recent poll believed that we would leave Afghanistan without winning the war.

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