

Afghanistan: Heads You Lose, Tails You Lose

Written by Immanuel Wallerstein

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IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, NOV 2 2009

The war in Afghanistan is a war in which whatever the United States does now, or that President Obama does now, both the United States and Obama will lose. The country and its president are in a situation of perfect lockjaw.

Consider the basic situation. The Afghan government in Kabul has no legitimacy with the majority of the Afghan people. It also has no army worthy of the name. It also has no financial base. There is almost no military or personal security anywhere. It is faced with a guerilla opposition, the Taliban, who control half the country and who have grown steadily stronger since the Taliban government was overthrown by a foreign (largely United States) invasion in 2002. The *New York Times* reports that the Taliban "are running a sophisticated financial network to pay for their insurgent operations," which American officials are struggling, unsuccessfully, to cut off.

Pres. Hamid Karzai was reelected recently in a manifestly falsified election. The U.S. government was ready to swallow this because Karzai is the only major politician who is ethnically a Pashtun, the base of the Taliban support. He is therefore the only one who can even hope to enter into a political arrangement with some or all of the Taliban. The United States was embarrassed publicly into recognizing the electoral fraud and was pressured to put pressure on Karzai to accept a run-off second round election. Karzai will undoubtedly win the run-off. His political position, post-election, will be very weak.

The major U.S. political ally in the region, Pakistan, is clearly collusive with the Taliban – in large part to ensure its own internal survival. The U.S. military commander, General Stanley McChrystal, insists he needs 40,000 more troops right away, or it will be too late to win the war in Afghanistan. It seems unlikely he will get the full number of these troops, or fast enough, to meet his implicit deadline. There are many military figures who doubt that he is right in arguing that his 40,000 more troops, even if they arrive right away, will make the difference.

It doesn't seem very daring to suggest that the United States will have to withdraw from Afghanistan at some point. Who will really come to power in Afghanistan at that point is a very open question. There may well be civil war for a long time.

Within the United States, opinion about the "lost" war will be extremely divided. It seems clear that the Republican right is preparing the charge of a treacherous sell-out by the Democrats in general, and Obama in particular. Gen. McChrystal may well be their candidate for president, if not in 2012 then in 2016.

Obama will get no credit for anything he does. If he gives full backing immediately to McChrystal's requests, he will still be accused by the Republicans of having done it too late. At the same time, he will have angered deeply at least half, if not more, of those who voted for him in 2008.

The war in Afghanistan has become Obama's war. When the United States 'loses' that war, it will be Obama who will be charged with having 'lost' it. Even if he gets a health bill of some kind passed (possible), and even if the U.S. and world economic situation improves in the next several years (doubtful), the war in Afghanistan will still loom largest as the single most important element in judging his presidency.

Could Obama reverse this situation by moving dramatically in another direction – towards a rapid political deal with

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the Taliban and full withdrawal? Aside from the fact that there is no public evidence that he is seriously contemplating doing this, there is not yet the degree of public support within the United States to make this a feasible political option for him. He doesn't even have the necessary degree of support within his own administration for such a dramatic shift.

So the United States and Obama shall stumble on, for a year or two, while the general military and political situation deteriorates. For the United States and for Obama, it is heads we lose, tails we lose.

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