

STRATEGICALLY LOST IN AFGHANISTAN

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 16 2009

The Obama administration seems to be having big second thoughts about Afghanistan. President Obama in his election campaign promised to make Afghanistan the central front in our unnamed war. (The war was initially called the Global War on Terror and then the Long War by the US government; both titles are now officially forbidden by the new administration as being politically incorrect although no replacement has been offered.) The implication caught by all observers was that under President Obama Afghanistan would be getting many more American troops, much greater economic development assistance, and the full inter-agency press to win hearts and minds of Afghans for democratic government and political stability. But even before the administration took office the back tracking started. Some reinforcements were sent although not as many as first promised. Increased aid is planned, but it is slow to flow. The civilian surge is apparently mostly a mirage. What there have been are Afghanistan strategy reviews, one after another.

There was no visible push back to an increased effort in Afghanistan from the US military despite the public firing of General McKiernan. On the contrary, the military seemed ready to implement in Afghanistan what has become the much heralded Counter Insurgency (COIN) doctrine that General Petraeus helped devise and then applied in Iraq. General McKiernan was saying all the right things about the need to have a multi-faceted approach. More troops were needed, and he did say he wanted more, but he also acknowledged that military success was insufficient and could not occur until there was economic growth, improved governmental services, and less corruption.

Conditions on the ground have deteriorated since Obama was elected, but this was largely anticipated. The Taliban has made big gains in many places in Afghanistan, though most especially in the South where the NATO contribution was both too modest and too combat shy. There are too few well trained and equipped Afghani soldiers and police, a legacy of the Bush administration's under resourcing of the Afghan war. The Pakistan border region is a mess due mostly to failures of the Pakistan government to live up to its many promises. All of this though was to be solved in time with troop reinforcements, a much expanded training program, and an intensified diplomatic effort.

The arrival of McKiernan's replacement, General McChrystal, brought some changes in the use of coalition air power that is intended to reduce civilian casualties. These changes were described as part of the plan to win the hearts and minds of local populations that is said to be central to successful counter-insurgency campaigns, but they seemed as much directed to improving the re-election chances of Afghan President Karzai who had sought to bolster his standing by complaining loudly about the number of civilian deaths in several well-publicized incidents.

The casualties that likely had impact, however, were the escalating count of coalition forces deaths. IED attacks are up sharply, helping push coalition deaths to multiples of the Iraq war current toll and clearly affecting our NATO's allies' willingness to continue the fight. The British have refused to boost their numbers, the Canadians want out by

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2011, the Germans refuse to do combat operations, and the others largely see Afghanistan as worth only a token effort. More significantly, American morale has waned. Despite constant talk in the media about the likely need for decades of involvement, Secretary Gates admits that military progress has to be visible within a year or two for the mission to hold public support. And no one in or out of the Obama administration seems sure at all about what to do with the cultivation of poppies that is the core of the Afghan economy and the culture of corruption that appears to pervade Afghan society.

Suddenly the “failed policies” of Rumsfeld and Bush are starting to look good again. There is growing wonder about the need, or better yet the capacity, to go much beyond keeping al Qaeda off balance and the Taliban out of Kabul and a few other Afghan cities. Afghanistan, Seth Jones reminds us in his new book, is known as the graveyard of empires. Perhaps for America it will be instead known as the graveyard of a misinformed campaign promise. The Obama pledge to remake Afghanistan may soon be ignored if not forgotten.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.