

"BITE ME" GOT IT RIGHT

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, AUG 7 2010

"Bite me" is the dismissive nickname that General McChrystal's staff officers gave Vice President Joseph Biden, admittedly a frequent subject of mockery in the US because of his many gaffs and his desperate attempts to regain a long lost youthful appearance via hair plugs, facelifts and the like. Vice President Biden had staked out a position of caution in the great 2009 debate over US strategy for Afghanistan that stood in strong contrast with the strategy that Generals McChrystal and Petraeus advocated and that President Obama ultimately came to endorse. The endorsed strategy is a counter-insurgency doctrine sanctioned effort that requires the US (and its slowly dwindling coalition) to create a secure and popular supported national government for Afghanistan in order to deny al Qaeda and its allies a base for their operations. Although now fully on board with his president's policy, Biden had sought to limit the presence of US and coalition forces in Afghanistan by offering a so called Anti-terrorism Strategy that would have relied on bribes to regional warlords, special operations forces, and Predator strikes to hunt down al Qaeda.

Barely six months into the implementation effort and before all the surge troops are in place, domestic US support for the President's strategy is collapsing. A majority of House Democrats, members of the president's own political party, voted to require the irreversible withdrawal of US forces starting in mid 2011, a date that the President had only proposed as a beginning of a potential withdrawal. A significant number of these Democrats then sought to cut off funding for maintaining US troops in Afghanistan. Pundits have been running away from the cause, often ignoring their own previous endorsements of the President's strategy. The appointment of the popular General Petraeus as General McChrystal's replacement in Afghanistan has not much to stem the belief that the Afghan effort is doomed to failure because of Afghani government corruption, rising casualties, reluctant coalition partners (the Netherlands just left, Canada is going next year, Germany is wavering), a duplicitous Pakistan, and a very tired American military.

Obama picked the wrong strategy. For all the criticism leveled at the Bush administration for neglecting Afghanistan (under resourcing Afghanistan is the bureaucratic terminology), American ambitions for Afghanistan were quite moderate until Obama saw the need to find a war that he liked. The fear of creating a big footprint in a land known for resisting outsiders had kept the American military presence modest and primarily focused on chasing al Qaeda and Taliban elements. NATO and others were later persuaded to do development work in Afghanistan, perhaps as penitence for ignoring US pleas for assistance in Iraq. But with the Taliban and al Qaeda finding sanctuary in Pakistan, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. The Taliban has reasserted itself in many parts of the country while the government in Kabul has been lost in a web of corruption and lies.

Candidate Obama, having differentiated himself from his most serious rival for his party's nomination by denouncing the misbegotten war in Iraq, found his commander in chief qualifications as the champion of a real effort for the good war in Afghanistan. Republicans wanted both wars pursued vigorously, preferring always foreign policy at the center of national politics. And the US military had convinced itself by then that it had at last found the long lost formula for winning counter-insurgencies. This was the combination of political calculation and doctrinal hubris that led to an overpromising for the war in Afghanistan, reconfirmed in the policy reviews conducted by the Obama administration before and after it took office. We are committed now to bringing security to Afghanistan via the creation of a stable, popular, and effective government, one that can meet the needs of its people and keep extremists from using the country as a base from which to attack us.

It is unfortunately a policy based on a fundamental contradiction. We say we are never going to abandon

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Afghanistan and Pakistan again, as we supposedly did after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, but we are also planning to begin withdrawing from Afghanistan in July 2011. We say that we need to set a deadline for beginning our withdrawal so that the Afghans will have the incentive to assume the burden of securing their own country, but we fear that the realization that we are actually leaving will give incentive for Afghans to make an independent deal with the Taliban who are definitely not leaving. Unless the Afghans think we really intend to leave, they have little reason to do the heavy soldiering required to secure the country. But for some Afghans a continuing American military presence provides both protection and financial gain. They are in no rush to prove they can maintain security on their own. The abandonment that came after the Soviet defeat was precisely the fiscal and military disengagement that appropriately comes when security objectives are achieved. If we had stayed, we would have been replacing the Soviets who had wanted long term influence in Afghanistan and actually lived next door. The Afghans and Pakistanis know that we are never going to be their neighbors even if we pledge our everlasting friendship. We are leaving we say, but we are not leaving. We are there to stay we say, but we are not staying.

Thus, President Obama's strategy promises to keep Afghanistan al Qaeda free by transforming the nation's government into an effective and responsive entity, tolerant of a continuing although undefined American presence, but unwilling to allow radical Islam a foothold even if it is of a domestic origin. It may not be possible to do this with Pakistan's cooperation, but it is surely impossible without such cooperation. Attempts to influence Pakistan's policies, however, risk destabilizing a not very stable nuclear power. Given the regional topography, the local ethnic mix, the many hostile neighbors, and the distance from American shores, one can hardly imagine a more ambitious project than trying to restructure Afghanistan. No matter how much you believe in the counter-insurgency best practice doctrine, you must have doubts about the chances for its success in the Afghan context.

I suspect that these doubts are rampant now within the Obama administration. President George Bush's mantra was "stay the course" as Iraq changed from a quick victory to a long nightmare. He may one day be vindicated, but we still do not know, seven years into the conflict, whether or not Iraq will survive whole and the sacrifices of American and allied forces were necessary. President Obama will likely not be staying the course in Afghanistan. He faces growing dissatisfaction within his own party over the escalation in Afghanistan, and a deeply held among many Republicans that nation building, even relabeled as counter-insurgency best practices, is not the American military's intended task. Obama administration officials constantly say the policy in Afghanistan has not changed, but you can hear the doubts in their voices. Unlike Bush, Obama abandons friends and policies when pushed hard. I think President Obama's strategy will indeed change, morphing into something close to the terrorist hunting strategy that his vice president favored although Bite Me himself will only flash his bleached teeth smile and never say I told you so.

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.