



# Avoiding Disaster in Afghanistan

by Stefan Halper

**A**FGHANISTAN IS A LAND MINE. If not handled properly, it will blow a hole in the Obama presidency before the midterm elections. Peering down the barrel of the Afghan war, Yogi Berra would have said, "Don't make the wrong mistake."

With Iraq consuming 4,000 American lives, 33,000 wounded thus far, and costs estimated between \$1.5 and \$3 trillion, U.S. taxpayers must ask precisely how homeland security is linked to Afghanistan, and if, indeed, they must gird themselves for another war of choice with more loss of American life and fortune while the nation confronts such pressing needs at home.

Barack Obama assumed office with 79 percent of Americans optimistic about his administration, including 59 percent of those who voted for John McCain. It was a moment like few others in modern times: the nation's nerve endings are raw after eight years of hope and reversals on the bloody fields of Iraq and Afghanistan; controversy surrounds Bush administration policies on civil liberties, executive power and spending; we are shocked by the sharp global disapproval of things American; and our economy is in near freefall.

To be fair, George W. Bush has seen us through seven years without further terrorism at home—an important achievement. But the price of suppressing risk at home and abroad is heavy, and the picture for 2009 is not pretty.

Our hopes now rest with an untested president for the vision, determination, and agility that will surely be needed going forward. Analysts are correct when they say Obama has moved to the "center";

one assumes he understands this is not the time for adventure or risk or expenditure on anything but the critical need to restart the economy and maintain the nation's security. But does he?

Last October Obama said, "The trends across the board are not going in the right direction. Make no mistake: we are confronting an urgent crisis in Afghanistan, and we have to act. It's time to heed the call from General McKiernan and others for more troops. That's why I'd send at least two or three additional combat brigades to Afghanistan."

Since the election Obama and his new choice for chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Michael Mullen, have proposed to increase U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan by 35,000. He would redeploy soldiers being withdrawn from Iraq and hopes to persuade the Europeans to provide additional NATO troops. Present plans also call for discussions with the more approachable Taliban elements, outreach programs that emphasize reconciliation and cooperation with tribal elders, and providing local leaders funds to help protect roads, bridges, cell phone towers, and food shipments.

Yet U.S. and British NATO officers returning from their tours of duty are nearly unanimous in saying the Taliban have consolidated their position, that they have the momentum, that things are going in the wrong direction. Troop shortages and a failure to find common ground with local leaders have brought little progress. Despite promises, we have rarely followed up to provide water and electricity to battle-scarred villages, leaving tribesmen alienated and reliant on the Taliban. This has been

made worse by our opium eradication program that destroys the cash crop most farmers rely upon to survive.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

**T**ALIBAN RULE IN KABUL WAS BROKEN seven years ago in a lightning 22-day U.S. strike whose ferocity and effectiveness stunned military staffs from Moscow to Beijing to Tehran. Today, however, the Taliban controls all but the capital in this “graveyard of empires” nearly the size of Texas. It’s a violent tribal society rooted in Islamic fundamentalism, with 27 percent literacy, 40 percent unemployment, and 80 political parties.

Founded in 1747 when Ahmad Shah Durrani unified the Pashtun tribes, this land of the Khyber Pass, celebrated by Rudyard Kipling, has not been conquered since Alexander the Great. Hoping to maintain a buffer between British India and Russia, Afghan tribesmen held their ground in 1842 to slaughter a British expeditionary force of some 15,000 men—leaving one man to escape and relate the grotesque horrors of the battle. Then 147 years later, the USSR, bled white over 10 years, was defeated by the *mujahideen* with help from CIA-supplied Stinger missiles. And today the story remains the same: determined Islamist fighters with al Qaeda assistance, based in the border tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, have fought the NATO coalition to a standstill. Hamid Karzai, known in-country, as the “President of Kabul,” has made little progress in democratizing the country, while U.S. and UK casualties in 2008 were the highest since the 2001 invasion.

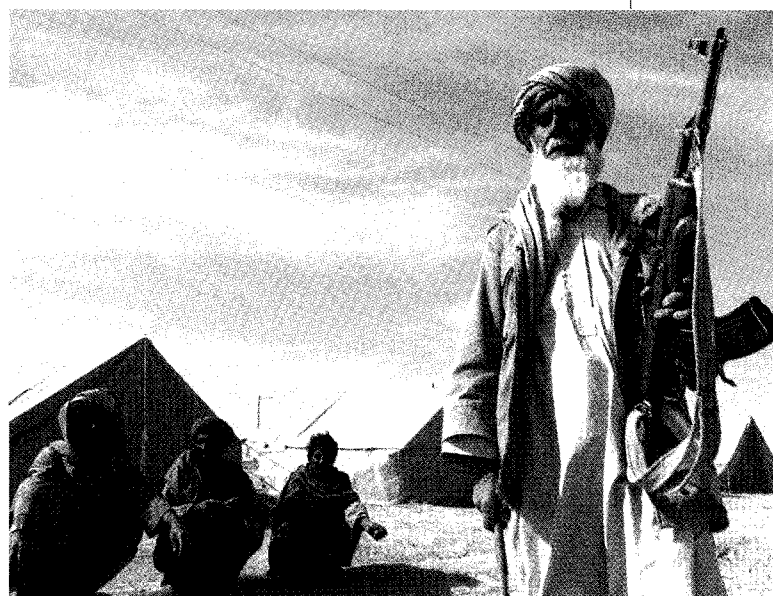
## SOME HARD QUESTIONS

**A**S THE NEW ADMINISTRATION urges its reluctant British, Canadian, Dutch, and German allies to commit additional troops to the Afghan effort, the time has come for a few hard questions.

First, what, exactly, is the U.S. national interest in Afghanistan?

Second, what, exactly, is the objective in Afghanistan: Is it to bring democratic governance to this vast, disconnected tribal system? Is it to pacify one province after another in hopes of bringing stability? Is it, as analyst Andrew Bacevich says, simply to assure that terrorist forces intent on attacking the U.S. do not assemble there?

Third, is there any example in history of an outside power either subduing Afghanistan or modifying its tribal structure or values?



Fourth, can the American people be persuaded that stabilizing or transforming Afghanistan is worth the price in blood and fortune?

Fifth, what is the exit strategy? What constitutes success?

There are no agreed answers to these questions within the U.S. government or among the NATO partners. In my conversations with Admiral Mullen, the head of the Afghan program at Voice of America, and a recent assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs, I found no agreement on the objective of our Afghan policy, no agreement on what we can or should spend or on an exit strategy. Nor is there agreement on whether Afghanistan is a stand-alone problem. It may be that the Afghan situation cannot be addressed without addressing an increasingly dysfunctional government in Pakistan.

There is no mystery as to what is at stake here. Simple math indicates the administration’s commitment to restarting the U.S. economy means we cannot undertake another war costing billions, if not trillions of dollars. Moreover, the military is overstretched, which means we lack the manpower to apply overwhelming force at critical times and places. Nor would we have the manpower to respond to emergencies in other parts of the world were we heavily committed in Afghanistan.

But most of all, there is no public desire, no stomach, among the American people for another war of choice. Twice in the past half-century we have undertaken substantial military efforts abroad without sufficient public support and both, Vietnam and

Iraq, have, in effect distorted and then destroyed the presidencies at the time.

The vast majority of Americans believe it is time to heal ourselves. Curiously, one asks why Barack Obama, given his public commitment to job creation, health care, and education, regulatory, and financial reform—is not among them.

## THE WAY FORWARD

**F**IRST, WE MUST DETERMINE IF Afghanistan is a stand-alone problem, then define our objectives and gain broad public support for whatever approach we take both in the U.S. and among our NATO allies. Failure to achieve this will bring political disaster to the Obama administration, compromise NATO, and continue the stalemate in Afghanistan

Second, accept the lessons of history. Afghanistan is known as the “graveyard of empires” for a reason. Conquest has been attempted through the ages but has not succeeded in the Christian era. Today limited funds and an overstretched military

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impose choices. We are not able to mount a sustained military effort in Afghanistan unless we choose to neglect today’s pressing domestic economic requirements, or intend to assume heavy additional tax burdens or place additional crushing debt on future generations.

Given these conditions, a two-dimensional approach may make sense: first, accept that the objective is to deny the Taliban and al Qaeda a base in Afghanistan from which to strike the U.S. or its interests. Second, accept that separating the Taliban from opium revenues strikes at its ability to obtain weaponry. Then combine “soft” and “hard power” to use what Harvard professor Joseph Nye calls “smart power” to achieve this by addressing the opium issue and the Taliban/al Qaeda threat together.

Progress on the opium issue was made last June when the Group of Eight foreign ministers met in

Japan and created a coordinating body to oversee the provision of some \$4 billion in aid to the tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their purpose is to improve police and military training and anti-drug trafficking programs. The anti-drug trafficking program is modeled on the Nixon-Kissinger program in Turkey that used product licensing to encourage Turkish farmers to sell their illegal opium crops to pharmaceutical companies to make legal medicine. This program would encourage Afghan farmers to sell their opium produce to an NGO that would pay them the same or more than they would get from the Taliban. The NGO would then sell it to hospitals worldwide to help address the global shortage in morphine. Clearly, this would cost less than fighting the Taliban and it would have the effect of cutting off the revenue the Taliban use to purchase weapons. (Moreover, there is some indication Tehran would be sympathetic to such an initiative that might provide the platform for expanded discussions to, eventually, include nuclear issues.)

Secondly, the Taliban and al Qaeda could be denied bases and training facilities by fully deploying the highly mobile strike capacity created by the U.S. military over the past decade. Continuing, and unpredictable, strikes by these forces would make Taliban/al Qaeda attack planning difficult if not impossible. Such U.S./NATO units would be deployed with the acknowledgment of Kabul and Pakistani authorities where necessary, and would avoid: (1) the greater cost of deploying large number of troops to permanent bases in-country, (2) tensions with our allies over troop commitments, (3) the need to generate broad public support for yet another “war.”

Suppressing the Taliban and separating it from its main source of financial support would render tribal authorities more approachable by the Karzai government. Finally, this approach accepts that neither we nor our allies fully understand the technology of nation building—and that this is not a nation-building effort—but we are prepared to join the international community in providing humanitarian assistance and stabilization measures at the request of the Kabul government. ❧

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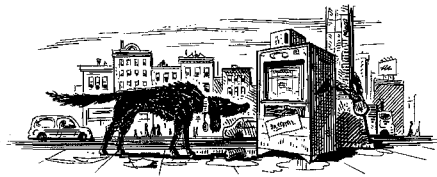
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# The Honeymooners

by James Taranto

**B**ARACK OBAMA RAN FOR PRESIDENT promising to win back the respect of “the world,” which George W. Bush has alienated. So the big question is this: how long after Obama’s inauguration will it take before “the world” begins to sour on him—begins to suspect that he is one of us, not one of them?

The answer is minus 16 days.

On Sunday, January 4, the website of London’s *Guardian* published a column by Simon Tisdall faulting Obama for failing to side with Hamas in its war against Israel:

Obama has remained wholly silent during the Gaza crisis. His aides say he is following established protocol that the US has only one president at a time....

But evidence is mounting that Obama is already losing ground among key Arab and Muslim audiences that cannot understand why, given his promise of change, he has not spoken out. Arab commentators and editorialists say there is growing disappointment at Obama’s detachment—and that his failure to distance himself from George Bush’s strongly pro-Israeli stance is encouraging the belief that he either shares Bush’s bias or simply does not care.

The Al-Jazeera satellite television station recently broadcast footage of Obama on holiday in Hawaii, wearing shorts and playing golf, juxtaposed with scenes of bloodshed and mayhem in Gaza. Its report criticising “the deafening silence from the Obama team” suggested Obama is losing a battle of perceptions among Muslims that he may not realise has even begun.

Back home, however, the press was still pro-Obama—and giddily so. Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* got into the mood in his January 14 column:

This 47-year-old man of mixed race, whose very name—O-Ba-Ma—has the three-syllable universality of a child’s lullaby, has always had something of the providential about him, a global figure who looks more like the guy at the local bodega than the guys on dollar bills. That’s the magic.

Two days earlier, Mike Lupica of New York’s *Daily News* spoke ruth to power:

He does not get sworn in as the 44th President for another eight days, but it is as if Barack Obama, the only one who can get us out of this mess, is running the country already. Because they have already started in on him.

It is still business as usual in Washington at a time when our economy, a direct result of business as usual, feels like the real terrorist threat these days.

Obama is a new beginning at a time we need a new beginning as much as we have in nearly 80 years. We finally have a President we want to believe in, a President who again feels like the smartest guy in the room.

Yet, before the game even begins, he sees what he will be up against...

So sweet was Obama’s honeymoon that on January 4, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Carol