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## "Peace with Honour" is Another Way of Saying Defeat

By Peter Worthington

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Regardless of one's outlook, it's pretty hard to see anything emerging from Afghanistan or the Middle East that doesn't represent defeat for America's foreign and military policy.

Afghanistan today is mindful of Vietnam when the U.S. decided to quit the war and sacrifice the South to the North. It tried to camouflage defeat by declaring "peace with honour."

Afghanistan hasn't reached that stage...yet. But Iraq, now that U.S. combat troops have mostly gone, seems to be disintegrating into sectarian warfare.

One of the signs of unease -- if not panic -- about Afghanistan, is the hullabaloo over videotapes (taken a year ago) of Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban, killed in fighting.

No question that urinating on enemy dead is offensive, and shouldn't be tolerated. What it reveals is weakness in command -- of platoon officers and NCOs. But it is not a war crime. The bodies are dead. War crimes or torture involve the living.

U.S. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta apologizing to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, is absurd. What's Karzai got to do with the Taliban -- other than being their intended victim?

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saying the incident might disrupt peace negotiations with the

Taliban is rubbish. "Peace negotiations" is a euphemism for surrender ... admission of failure ... a war abandoned, if not lost.

One can remember the fuss when Canadian snipers in Afghanistan were accused of mocking and amputating the fingers of Taliban they killed -- sort of keepsake trophies. This accusation went nowhere, but was a reminder that snipers have their own foibles.

In WWII, in the Pacific, New Guinea tribes got a bonus for delivering the ears of Japanese soldiers they killed. Similar things happened in the Vietnam war.

These four marines laughing and urinating on dead Talib fighters is not Abu Ghraib, or anything close to what the Taliban and Al Qaida do to living victims. The offenders committed misdemeanors; their immediate superiors should perhaps be reprimanded. It was an "incident," not an "atrociousity." Forget it.

Officially-expressed views of post-combat Afghanistan are disquietingly mindful of the early days of the Vietnam war: I first went to Vietnam as a reporter in 1962-63 and accompanied American troops on helicopter raids into the Mekong delta, landing at hamlets, sometimes encountering hostile fire, but mostly not.

American commanders and brass were insisting the war would be won the following year. The "following year" never arrived. American soldiers owned the country during daylight, the Viet Cong took over at night.

It was almost an epiphany to suddenly realize that contrary to high-level declarations, the war was not being won, and would not be won so long as South Vietnam was surrounded by enemies -- Cambodia, China, North Vietnam, Laos.

Right now in Afghanistan, commanders exude cautious optimism that reconstruction and training the Afghan National Army (ANA) and police can assure peace and security when NATO and foreign troops depart in 2014.

There are no guarantees, but this is the hope. It's hard to share the optimism.

Like South Vietnam, Afghanistan is flanked by enemies -- Iran and Pakistan. Generally, Afghan people don't want the Taliban in charge. They've had that, and hated it. But the Taliban are poised to return, even though they've been clobbered every time they tangled with Canadian, British, or American troops in combat.

While the Taliban have been curbed in Afghanistan, they've flourished in neighboring Pakistan. As NATO withdraws from fighting roles in Afghanistan, Taliban insurgency has risen. The parallel with Vietnam is valid -- enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries provide fighters as the Western presence declines.

The U.S. is aware of this, but fears alienating Pakistan -- at best, a lukewarm, erratic ally. It worries about Pakistan succumbing to China's blandishments.

So what if China and Pakistan become chummy? Both have nuclear weapons, both are paranoid, each is suspicious and resentful of the other. Potential disagreement looms the more each knows of the other's ambitions.

Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan has been reduced from a battle group of some 3,000 troops, to around 1,000 -- now moved from the front lines of Kandahar to a training and reconstruction role in Kabul.

On the positive side, Canadians point to new schools, open to girls, with hopes that by the time Canadians pull out, literacy will have risen from 10 per cent to 50 per cent. Although Canadians have been training Afghan soldiers since 2004, a "new" program is underway.

Security in Afghanistan hinges on its army, which is due to number about 350,000. If it's a moderately disciplined army with battle skills and improved education (literacy), it may persuade the Afghan people not to rely only on the Taliban. What's unknown is whether the "warrior spirit" of Afghans can be molded into disciplined and reliable soldiers.

American prestige is at a low ebb these days, as parts of the world rebel against those in charge. A case can be made that America erred by going to war so casually.

The Iraq war was unnecessary and poorly handled. Removing Saddam Hussein would have changed the dynamics, without disbanding the army and causing civil strife between Sunni and Shiite Arabs -- with Iran agitating from the sidelines.

President George Bush's declared war against terrorism after 9/11 was bound to fail. "Terrorism" is a tactic, not a definable opponent or enemy. How can a war be fought against a "tactic?" One can only fight those who resort to the tactic.

In Afghanistan, conventional battles resulted in Taliban defeats. So IEDs and roadside bombs were used -- terror tactics.

The rallying cry of the "Arab Spring" rebellions in the Middle East -- Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria -- is for democracy. America and the West (including Canada) seem to think an expressed desire for "democracy" will result in democracy, when none of these countries has ever experienced "democracy."

In Libya's case, we collaborated with the rebels -- trusting their rhetoric for democracy. Egypt too. But what seems to be in ascendancy in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya is the Muslim Brotherhood -- the very antithesis of democracy and freedom.

It's uncertain our political leaders even see this turn of events.

Mistakes of the past loom for the future.