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In Afghanistan, making fragile progress

By Michael Gerson

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For me, the Koran-burning in Afghanistan brought back memories of the horrible morning at the White House when photos of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison surfaced. This is not to argue that an act of negligence at Bagram Air Base is morally comparable to the grinning barbarity of military police at Abu Ghraib. It is only to empathize with an administration facing events that aren't its fault but that are its problem.

The pie chart of an American military operation is dominated by honor and excellence, with a sliver of incompetence and abuse. The sliver can make a lot of news. In these cases, the president's role is to serve the interests of the nation and the troops under his command. If those interests are best secured by an apology, there is no dishonor in it.

The Taliban have naturally exploited America's trash-dump blunder. Domestic critics of President Obama, and opponents of the Afghan war, have attempted to do the same. Newt Gingrich, with typical enraged incoherence, occupied both camps. He charged that Obama, by his apology, had "surrendered" — and then proceeded to urge American surrender. "If Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, doesn't feel like apologizing," said Gingrich, "then we should say goodbye and good luck, we don't need to be here risking our lives and wasting our money on somebody who doesn't care."

Gingrich would shape U.S. grand strategy in a fit of personal pique with a foreign leader. It is the type of Republican foreign policy attack that makes Obama look like Metternich.

More serious critics of the war contend that the Afghan reaction to the Koran-burning incident — including the treacherous killing of American officers — indicates a doomed counterinsurgency campaign. Afghan hearts and minds, they argue, are beyond winning.

The frustration is understandable, but the case is overstated. The current crisis, says Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, is “far more than a blip, but less than a catastrophe.” According to O’Hanlon, the United States is consistently more popular in Afghanistan than elsewhere in the Islamic world. Betrayal by Afghan soldiers and officials is disturbing and damaging but not generalized or dramatically growing. Many Afghans fear a hurried U.S. departure far more than they resent America’s presence. And Karzai’s reaction to the Koran incident has been measured, particularly when compared with past tantrums.

Obama’s Afghan strategy — including a large troop surge and expanded training and mentoring of Afghan forces — is more successful than some credit. In the south — the Taliban homeland — insurgents have been deprived of sanctuaries and weapons caches. Violence in that region was down by a third in 2011, compared with the previous year. About 300,000 Afghan soldiers and police are deployed across the country. More than half of U.S. military forces engage in joint operations with their Afghan counterparts. While conditions in Afghanistan’s north and west have deteriorated the past few years — complicating the work of relief organizations — the overall levels of violence are not severe. The east, in contrast, has serious and growing challenges.

Gains in Afghanistan are not as dramatic as those in Iraq circa 2008. But they provide a reasonable hope that security responsibilities can be gradually shifted to Afghan forces by 2014, with American troops playing a supportive (but still substantial) role.

The Obama administration has earned some criticism. It has an alarming tendency to undermine its own strategy. Early on, administration officials engaged in the concerted alienation of Karzai, who became convinced that U.S. complaints about corruption were really attempts to undercut him. Influence and leverage were squandered. More recently, Obama’s decision to quicken the pace of troop withdrawal — against the advice of his commanders — has damaged military prospects, particularly in the east. It is difficult to see how troop density in that region will ever be sufficient for counterinsurgency success.

Because progress is mixed and fragile, the American endgame will be crucial. It won’t be possible for U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan precipitously, as Obama left Iraq after a failed negotiation over status of forces. The absence of a strong security partnership between America and the Afghan government following 2014, says O’Hanlon, would be “potentially fatal.” Afghanistan could again become a haven for extremist groups that attack America and India and further destabilize a nuclear Pakistan.

An endless commitment in Afghanistan is not an option. But the choice between a hasty retreat and a patient drawdown will matter greatly.