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Are we deluding ourselves about Afghanistan?

By Daniel L. Davis

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Over the past month, a veritable who's who of American opinion makers have been on the major television networks and in the most prestigious print media strongly reinforcing the notion that America's mission in Afghanistan is "on track." To be sure, they admit, there are "challenges" and "rough patches," but the overall trajectory of the war is going according to the timelines laid out in the 2010 Lisbon Agreement. With so much star power locked virtually arm in arm, there are few who would publicly contend with such a group; most accept their stance without challenge.

But regardless of the titles, positions and resumes they cumulatively possess, if the evidence on the ground does not support their theory, it must be challenged. I contend the evidence overwhelmingly argues that our Afghan strategy has failed, continues to fail, and, absent a major course correction, will end in failure.

When the fundamentals of this war are examined, it doesn't take long for common sense to kick in. With it comes the recognition that absent major change, we are very likely to suffer a strategic defeat by the end of 2014. Here are a few pertinent facts and hard questions:

It strains credulity to suggest that what we were unable to accomplish in the first 11 years of war (creating a self-sufficient Afghan National Security Force, or ANSF) we will do over the next

two years, with tens of thousands fewer troops and less than half the training budget, which has dropped from \$11 billion to \$5 billion in a single year. Further, who will provide the logistics for the Afghan troops we're leaving behind? Who will provide the trucks and repair their vehicles, who will supply the fuel and provide spare parts, as well as ammunition, water, food, intelligence support, artillery support, attack jet support, helicopter gunship support, medical evacuation, and medical support – all of which ISAF currently provides, at least in part?

- Pakistan's borders remain an ungoverned conduit for support of the insurgency, and evidence suggests they will remain so.
- There is no functioning economy in Afghanistan – much less one that could attain self-sufficiency in just the next few years.
- The Afghan government at virtually every level remains corrupt and barely lacks the capacity to provide basic services.
- By any honest assessment, the various factions of the Taliban insurgency remain a formidable and viable force.

Further, while the aim of America's population-centric counterinsurgency is to protect the people, every year of the surge saw a new high-water mark for Afghan people killed, the United Nations reports. Although many U.S. pundits are quick to point out that, according to U.N. estimates, upwards of 77 percent of the civilian casualties were caused by the Taliban, it doesn't matter to the people who did the dying. All the survivors know is that the most powerful military alliance in the world couldn't protect them.

It is therefore not surprising that the most recent Asia Foundation poll revealed in 2011 that 76 percent of Afghan people said they would have "some level of fear" traveling from one part of the country to another and encountered – not Taliban – but U.S. and other coalition forces.

After more than a decade of warfare, we have to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that we have lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

Still, even at this 11th hour there are ways the mission could be salvaged. There is, for example, broad consensus among a number of key constituencies for a cease-fire. The best chance for a viable and lasting end to the war could be conducted in the absence of fighting, not during it.

However, until or unless we change our self-defeating propensity to characterize everything as we wish it to be rather than how it is, even the most brilliant plan would have little chance of success.

It is impossible to reconcile the upbeat and optimistic statements made by many of America's best known opinion makers with the view that we are headed to a strategic defeat, which I and many others have expressed. It is imperative that the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate hold comprehensive and open hearings. In late February, several members of the House

sent a formal request to the speaker of the House and the Senate minority leader asking for hearings, but thus far their request has been met with silence.

The American public needs to know which of the divergent views of what is happening in Afghanistan is accurate. If the optimistic views shared by many public figures are right, the U.S. public should strongly rally around them. But if my views and those conveyed by so many others are right, we must contemplate fundamental and immediate changes.

Our vital national interests are at stake. So are the lives and limbs of potentially thousands of Americans, and likely a greater number of Afghan people. We owe it to them to be sure we get this right.