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The Afghanistan War: Grim Milestones and Ominous Trends

By Dorian de Wind

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Milestones are significant events in our personal lives, in projects and in war and peace.

Generally we celebrate those milestones but sometimes they come to symbolize sad and grim stages -- especially in war -- and they become milestones that we mourn and even fear.

Just a little over two months ago, on June 13, we mourned the tragic milestone of Marine Cpl. Taylor J. Baune being the 2,000th American to die in support of Operation Enduring Freedom -- the Bush administration's chosen name for a war intended to "drive [the terrorists] out and bring them to justice." A goal which -- with the deaths of Osama bin Laden and most of his henchmen -- I believe has been accomplished.

On August 21, the New York Times highlighted the lives and, sadly, the deaths of the 1,990th and the 2,000th American service members to die in the Afghanistan War.

The 1,990th casualty is Lance Corporal Buckley, a Marine who, on August 10, was shot by "a man who appears to have been a member of the Afghan forces they were training."

A week later, with the death of Army Specialist James A. Justice, the United States military reached 2,000 dead in the nearly 11-year-old conflict, according to the Times.

Why the difference in the "milestones" of June and August?

The Times explains that this latest milestone is based on its analysis of Department of Defense records: "The calculation by the Times includes deaths not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan and other nations where American forces are directly involved in aiding the war."

But whether the 2,000th military death in Afghanistan or in Operation Enduring Freedom occurred last week or two months ago, the tragedy lies in the numbers and in the trends.

As the Times points out:

- While nearly nine years passed before we reached the first 1,000 dead in the war, the second 1,000 came just 27 months later... In that "second wave of 1,000 deaths," according to the Times' analysis, "three out of four were white, nine out of 10 were enlisted service members, and one out of two died in either Kandahar Province or Helmand Province in Taliban-dominated southern Afghanistan. Their average age was 26."
- I.E.D.s have remained a leading cause of death and injury, since at least 2008, along with small-arms fire.

But the most disturbing and, in my opinion, the most infuriating trend has been the fact that U.S. and other coalition forces in Afghanistan are being killed and injured in increasing numbers by the very same Afghan security forces -- soldiers and police -- who we are helping, training and fighting alongside, supposedly against a common enemy.

Back in January of this year, this problem was already serious. We wrote about it here.

A Wall Street Journal article then asked, and answered, "In the American war against the Taliban, on whose side are the Afghan police? For many U.S. soldiers serving in the insurgent heartland, the answer is: both."

The Salt Lake Tribune reported:

U.S. and other coalition forces [in Afghanistan] are being killed in increasing numbers by the very Afghan soldiers they fight alongside and train, in attacks motivated by deep-seated animosity between the supposedly allied forces, according to U.S. and Afghan officers and a classified coalition report obtained by the New York Times.

A decade into the war in Afghanistan, the report makes clear that these killings have become the most visible symptom of a far deeper ailment plaguing the war effort: the contempt each side holds for the other, never mind the Taliban. The ill will and mistrust run deep among civilians and militaries on both sides, raising questions about what future role the United States and its allies can expect to play in Afghanistan.

Already back in 2009, a Marine Corps guidebook, "Afghanistan, Operational Culture for Deploying Personnel," written for our troops serving or preparing to serve in Afghanistan, warned them of corruption among Afghan officers and such corruption being especially "endemic" in the police.

In its August 21 article, the Times only broaches this issue in a somewhat ambiguous way:

But this year, a new threat emerged: attacks by Afghans dressed in the uniforms of Afghan security forces. In just the past two weeks, at least nine Americans have been killed in such insider attacks, and for the year to date, at least 39 non-Afghan troops, most of them American, have been killed by men dressed as members of the Afghan security forces, the most since the war began.

Ambiguous because of the choice of words, "Afghans dressed in the uniforms of Afghan security forces" and "men dressed as members of the Afghan security forces."

Similarly, in describing the 1,990th casualty, Marine Lance Corporal Buckley, the Times attributes his death to "a man who appears to have been a member of the Afghan forces they were training." (Emphasis mine)

In an August 21 article covering the overnight attack at Bagram Airfield that damaged a coalition helicopter and Gen. Dempsey's C-17 transport plane, the Wall Street Journal is more to the point:

So far this year, Afghan police or soldiers have been responsible for roughly one out of every eight killings of coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.

At least 38 international troops, mostly Americans, have died at the hands of Afghan colleagues so far this year, with 10 U.S. forces killed in such attacks in the past two weeks alone. Five of those deaths were U.S. Special Operations Forces.

Note that the Journal does not say, "Afghans dressed as members of Afghans security forces," but rather "Afghan police or soldiers."

The Journal goes on to describe measures our troops are taking to protect themselves from the Afghan troops they are training and helping, including having "guardian angels" who "have a round in their chambers at all times, ready to shoot if Afghan security forces turn their weapons on members of the U.S.-led coalition."

And here is another "trend" according to the Journal, a trend that could make the next grim milestone -- the 3,000th U.S. casualty -- arrive even faster than the one we just "achieved":

But insider attacks continue to rise and coalition forces expect the upward trend to persist as the international coalition trains more Afghan security forces, expecting to reach a peak of 352,000 personnel by this fall.

In an August 21 article, the Baltimore Sun also warns:

The increasing frequency of attacks on U.S. and NATO troops by members of the Afghan security forces they are supposed to be helping has reached the point where American commanders are rightly concerned that the mistrust engendered by such incidents threatens to interfere with the completion of their mission.

That has prompted a shift in policy that may or may not work, but in any case it underscores the reality that the sooner our troops get out of Afghanistan the better off we'll be.

The article provides the numbers and trends of this "so-called green-on-blue violence," some of the measures being taken by coalition troops and ominously concludes:

No one expects that situation to improve any time soon, and it may get worse. This is a time for the U.S. to rethink exactly why we need to keep such a large ground force in Afghanistan for another two years. Unless there's a realistic prospect of accomplishing substantially more in the next 24 months than we've been able to accomplish over the last 10 years, perhaps we've already done all that is realistically possible there and it's time to consider speeding up the timetable for bringing all the troops home.

Finally, in the aforementioned article, the New York Times quotes the mother of Lance Corporal Buckley, who was killed "possibly at the hand of a purported ally," saying, "Our forces shouldn't be there. It should be over. It's done. No more."