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Bring my son, and everyone else's, home from Afghanistan

How long should we as a nation continue to sacrifice blood and treasure for what is clearly a losing proposition?

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My soldier son called last month to wish his mother and me a happy Thanksgiving. My iPhone buzzed and there he was, sitting in a gun tower, his smiling face bathed in gauzy infrared light, an M249 machine gun propped at the ready behind him. For security reasons, we didn't talk about his location. It could've been Afghanistan, Iraq or Kuwait. He's spent the better part of this year serving in all three.

His infantry company will soon be rotated back to the United States after a one-year deployment. Because he's an officer, he'll probably be among those on the last plane out. We're hoping it'll be by Christmas. My son would like to be home for the holidays, of course, but his biggest concern is getting back before the start of postseason play in the NFL. He's warned me, however, that the mysteries of Army upper management may mean we are both disappointed about the timing of his return. And so the clock ticks. Slowly.

During my son's tour of duty — his first overseas assignment — the number of U.S. dead in Afghanistan climbed past 2,000, while the total wounded surpassed 18,000. That's about 500 fewer Americans killed and nearly three times the number wounded during the Vietnam War's Tet Offensive in 1968. Certainly, Vietnam was a much different engagement than the one in Afghanistan, which has gone on for more than 11 years, but the casualty figures from both, in my estimation, raise the same question:

How long should we as a nation continue to sacrifice blood and treasure for what is clearly a losing proposition?

While Tet was by no means a victory for North Vietnam, the offensive demonstrated to the American public that the communist forces were still capable of waging war on a broad scale, contrary to Pentagon assurances that the enemy had been nearly beaten into surrender. Tet disabused many Americans of the notion that the war was winnable and helped spur the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia five years later.

In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, the Pentagon routinely claims that American-led combat power has measurably degraded the enemy's capacity to fight. Still, that enemy continues to wage war effectively. Witness the rising phenomenon of what the Defense Department refers to as "green on blue" shootings — Taliban sympathizers within the Afghan military and police turning their weapons on NATO military trainers. In 2007, there were two such insider attacks, resulting in two deaths. This year, 58 of the nearly 400 coalition military personnel who died in Afghanistan, including 35 Americans, were felled in such attacks.

These incidents don't often make the daily news cycle anymore. But they are far more important than lurid insights into the extramarital dalliances of generals. There are still about 67,000 U.S. soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines deployed in Afghanistan, alongside 37,000 military personnel from other coalition member nations. The White House has said it intends to keep thousands of U.S. troops in Afghanistan more or less indefinitely, both to help train Afghan forces and to carry out counter-terrorism operations, long after NATO's mission in Afghanistan formally concludes at the end of 2014.

But what is to be gained by stationing so many troops in Afghanistan after 2014? In fact, why not leave now?

In 2001, American forces invaded Afghanistan with the goal of hunting down 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden and toppling the Taliban government, which had allowed Bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist network safe haven. Bin Laden is now fish food, courtesy of SEAL Team 6, and what remains of his inner circle is on the run, thanks chiefly to CIA and Air Force drone strikes in the remote tribal regions of neighboring Pakistan. Logic suggests that ground forces should be stationed there instead of in Afghanistan, but that won't happen any time soon. Pakistan, our "ally" in the fight against international terrorism, wouldn't allow it.

Washington's goal from the start has been to train Afghans to the point that they can stand up alone against the Taliban. No question, some units among the 337,000 soldiers and police who compose Afghanistan's National Security Forces are up to the task. But, after more than a decade of intense drilling, many other units remain woefully, almost comically, unprepared. At what point does the problem become Afghanistan's and not ours?

It's hard to see how the United States can help much in the current climate. Joint operations have had to be significantly curtailed because of the rise in green-on-blue shootings. Indeed, Americans stationed at bases that also house Afghan military or paramilitary are now required to

carry their weapons with them at all times; at night, they sleep under the watchful guard of other, fully armed Americans.

Realistically, objectively, what future is there in a partnership like that?

About five years ago, I read a book by an Islamic scholar, Rory Stewart, who decided he'd become the first tourist to walk across a post-Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Relying on his wits, knowledge of Muslim customs and the kindnesses of strangers, Stewart trekked for a month from village to village. His "The Places in Between" proved a remarkable travelogue, if for no other reason than it underscored just how primitive and disconnected much of Afghanistan really is. Loyalties rarely extend beyond the village, the tribe and Allah.

Given those realities, the idea of instilling in the Afghan people anything resembling American-style, flag-waving, defend-the-homeland nationalism is almost laughable. It would be laughable were it not for the fact that more than 2,000 brave Americans have died trying to change things. How many more have to die before enough is enough?

I want my son home. I want to watch him eat a barbecued tri-tip burrito with guacamole from his favorite restaurant, the kind he's been craving for nearly a year, the kind you can't get in an Army MRE packet. I want to see him open holiday presents. I want to watch football with him. Most of all, I don't want to lie awake anymore, staring at the ceiling, wondering if he's still alive.

I don't want him to go back to Afghanistan. I don't want anyone's son or daughter to have to go back.

It's no longer worth it.