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What Napoleon Can Teach Obama About Guerrilla Warfare

By Sheldon Filger

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For nearly eight years, the United States has been engaged in a low-intensity conflict of high stakes in Afghanistan. Prior to 9/11, this impoverished, mountainous nation was regarded by Washington as an anachronistic backwater, ceasing to be a strategically important entity since the withdrawal of the Soviet Union's army of occupation, followed soon after by the demise of that former superpower. It was only with the realization that the Taliban regime in Kabul had furnished a non-state actor, Al-Qaeda, with an operational base for planning the onslaught that killed thousands of Americans in New York City, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania that U.S. geopolitical calculations involving South Asia were transformed.

Ironically, even after 9/11, the Bush administration still considered Afghanistan somewhat of a backwater theatre of operations, choosing to mount its major military effort in Iraq, a country that did not attack America. For most of the last eight years, the battle against a resurgent Taliban has been fought by a small contingent of U.S. troops, reinforced by a dozen or more NATO allies involving a multitude of microscopic deployments, each with its own unique rules of engagement. The opposition to the Islamist forces in Afghanistan can best be described as a multi-headed hydra mounted on a small body. Military specialists, especially those with expertise on counterinsurgency and partisan warfare, would not be surprised at the current negative character of the war in Afghanistan, which has spilled over into Pakistan, in the process destabilizing that nuclear-armed state.

President Barack Obama has long been opposed to the military adventure in Iraq, on the grounds that it had dangerously distracted the United States from focusing on crushing Al-Qaeda and its allies in Afghanistan. History has already validated Obama's assessment on what the correct priority should have been for the U.S. armed forces. The question now facing Obama and his

administration is what strategy to pursue in Afghanistan. The fragments that have emerged so far seem to indicate two trends: modestly reinforce the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan, while linking the Taliban and Al-Qaeda presence in neighboring Pakistan to the overall theater of operations.

Will President Obama's approach on Afghanistan prove more efficacious than that of George W. Bush? The lessons of history raise doubts that deserve serious reflection. The United States has not had a stellar record in winning wars against determined insurgents fighting a fierce guerrilla war. Vietnam is a conspicuous reminder that even hundreds of thousands of American troops, backed by massive technical means and a powerful airforce, cannot guarantee victory.

There is a voice from the distant past who has something to say that is highly relevant to the military challenges facing the U.S. military in Afghanistan. The Swiss military theoretician, Antoine Henri Jomini, served as a senior staff officer in Napoleon's army during the Peninsular War. This brutal conflict, fought on the Iberian Peninsula, began with the occupation of Spain by the French army. The population revolted, leading to a savage conflict that gave rise to the term "guerrilla war." The British sent a small but well disciplined professional army to aid the Spanish insurgents, under the command of the Duke of Wellington. In five years the combined army of Spanish guerrillas and British regular troops utterly defeated the French. Napoleon's defeat in the Peninsular War, combined with his forced retreat from Russia, brought about his ultimate downfall.

When writing his seminal work, Art of War, Jomini applied the lessons he had learned during the Peninsular War to form general principals and doctrine on guerrilla and insurgent conflicts. The principals he laid down align with the American experience in Afghanistan with chilling relevance.

"When the people are supported by a considerable nucleus of disciplined troops, the difficulties are particularly great," wrote Jomini. "The invader has only an army, whereas his adversaries have both an army and a people in arms, making means of resistance out of everything and with each individual conspiring against the common enemy."

With centuries of virtually uninterrupted warfare, including a brutal Soviet occupation that the Afghans successfully resisted, a large component of the country's male population is well trained in small arms tactics, making expert use of their land's barren and mountainous terrain. Just as Wellington's troops added stiffening to the ranks of the Spanish guerrilla fighters, there exists a large corps of veteran fighters, including commanders, that multiplies the effectiveness of the younger insurgents joining the ranks of the Taliban in sufficient numbers to extend the conflict indefinitely.

Jomini provides a description of what he learned about insurgencies in the Peninsular War, lessons that are applicable two centuries later in the mountains of Afghanistan:

These obstacles become almost insurmountable when the country is difficult. Each armed inhabitant knows the smallest paths and their connections; he finds everywhere a relative or friend who aids him. The commanders also know the country and, learning immediately the

slightest movement on the part of the invader, can adopt the best measures to defeat his projects. The enemy, without information of their movements and not in a condition to reconnoiter, having no resource but in his bayonets and certain of safety only in the concentration of his columns, is like a blind man. His combinations are failures. When, after the most carefully concerted movements and the most rapid and fatiguing marches he thinks he is about to accomplish his aim and deal a terrible blow, he finds no signs of the enemy but his campfires. So while, like Don Quixote, he is attacking windmills, his adversary is on his line of communications, destroys the detachments left to guard it, surprises his convoys and his depots, and carries on a war so disastrous for the invader that he must inevitably yield after a time.

Unless President Barack Obama restores the military draft, raises an army of several hundred thousand soldiers to occupy and guard every vital installation in Afghanistan, and convinces the American people that they must sustain such a massive occupation for possibly decades, and accept substantial casualties and massively increased military expenditures, he will lack the means to challenge the insurgency in a decisive manner. As commander in chief, therefore, Obama is faced with two choices. He either maintains the status quo with slightly more troops, which will mean only prolonged stalemate. Or he can refocus U.S. objectives on the limited goal of ensuring Afghanistan never again allows its territory to be used as a base to attack the United States.

The first choice only promises a higher list of dead and maimed Americans, and frightful expenditures at a time of profound economic and financial crisis. The latter choice opens up the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the conflict, leading to the attainment of U.S. national security objectives without the permanent occupation of a land historically hostile to all foreign armies.