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## Obama must call off this folly before Afghanistan becomes his Vietnam

By Simon Jenkins  
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**Senseless slaughter and anti-western hysteria are all America and Britain's billions have paid for in a counterproductive war**

If good intentions ever paved a road to hell, they are doing so in Afghanistan. History rarely declares when folly turns to disaster, but it does so now. Barack Obama and his amanuensis, Gordon Brown, are uncannily repeating the route taken by American leaders in Vietnam from 1963 to 1975. Galbraith once said that the best thing about the Great Depression was that it warned against another. Does the same apply to Vietnam?

Vietnam began with Kennedy's noble 1963 intervention, to keep the communist menace at bay and thus make the world safe for democracy. That is what George Bush and Tony Blair said of - terrorism and Afghanistan. Vietnam escalated as the Diem regime in Saigon failed to contain Vietcong aggression and was deposed with American collusion. By 1965, despite Congress scepticism, American advisers, then planes, then ground forces were deployed. Allies were begged to join but few agreed – and not Britain.

The presence of Americans on Asian soil turned a local insurgency into a regional crusade. Foreign aid rallied to the Vietcong cause to resist what was seen as a neo-imperialist invasion. The hard-pressed Americans resorted to ever more extensive bombing, deep inside neighbouring countries, despite evidence that it was ineffective and politically counterproductive.

No amount of superior firepower could quell a peasant army that came and went by night and could terrorise or merge into the local population. Tales of American atrocities rolled in each month. The army counted success not in territory held but in enemy dead. A desperate attempt to

"train and equip" a new Vietnamese army made it as corrupt as it was unreliable. Billions of dollars were wasted. A treaty with the Vietcong in 1973 did little to hide the humiliation of eventual defeat.

Every one of these steps is being re-enacted in Afghanistan. Every sane observer, even serving generals and diplomats, admit that "we are not winning" and show no sign of doing so. The head of the British army, Sir Richard Dannatt, remarked recently on the "mistakes" of Iraq as metaphor for Afghanistan. He has been supported by warnings from his officers on the ground.

Last year's denial of reinforcements to Helmand is an open secret. Ever since the then defence secretary, John Reid, issued his 2006 "London diktats", described in a recent British Army Review as "casual, naive and a comprehensive failure", intelligence warnings of Taliban strength have been ignored. The army proceeded with a policy of disrupting the opium trade, neglecting hearts and minds and using US air power against "blind" targets. All have proved potent weapons in the Taliban armoury.

Generals are entitled to plead for more resources and yet claim that victory is just round the corner, even when they know it is not. They must lead men into battle. A heavier guilt lies with liberal apologists for this war on both sides of the Atlantic who continue to invent excuses for its failure and offer glib preconditions for victory.

A classic is a long editorial in Monday's New York Times, congratulating Barack Obama on "sending more troops to the fight" but claiming that there were still not enough. In addition there were too many corrupt politicians, too many drugs, too many weapons in the wrong hands, too small a local army, too few police and not enough "trainers". The place was damnably unlike Connecticut.

Strategy, declared the sages of Manhattan, should be "to confront the Taliban head on", as if this had not been tried before. Afghanistan needed "a functioning army and national police that can hold back the insurgents". The way to achieve victory was for the Pentagon, already spending a stupefying \$60bn in Afghanistan, to spend a further \$20bn – increasing the size of the Afghan army from 90,000 to 250,000. This was because ordinary Afghans "must begin to trust their own government".

These lines might have been written in 1972 by General Westmoreland in his Saigon bunker. The New York Times has clearly never seen the Afghan army, or police, in action. Eight years of training costing \$15bn have been near useless, when men simply decline to fight except to defend their homes. Any Afghan pundit will attest that training a Pashtun to fight a Pashtun is a waste of money, while training a Tajik to the same end is a waste of time. Since the Pentagon - originally armed and trained the Taliban to fight the Soviets, this must be the first war where it has trained both sides.

Neither the Pentagon nor the British Ministry of Defence will win Afghanistan through firepower. The strategy of "hearts and minds plus" cannot be realistic, turning Afghanistan into a vast and indefinite barracks with hundreds of thousands of western soldiers sitting atop a colonial Babel of administrators and professionals. It will never be secure. It offers Afghanistan a promise

only of relentless war, one that Afghans outside Kabul know that warlords, drug cartels and Taliban sympathisers are winning.

The 2001 policy of invading, capturing Osama bin Laden and ridding the region of terrorist bases has been tested to destruction and failed. Strategy is reduced to the senseless slaughter of hundreds of young western soldiers and thousands of Afghans. Troops are being sent out because Labour ministers lack the guts to admit that Blair's bid to quell the Islamist menace by force of arms was crazy. They parrot the line that they are making "the streets of London safe", but they know they are doing the opposite.

Vietnam destroyed two presidents, Johnson and Nixon, and destroyed the global confidence of a generation of young Americans. Afghanistan – obscenely dubbed the "good war" – could do the same. There will soon be 68,000 American troops in that country, making a mockery of Donald Rumsfeld's 2001 tactic of hit and run, which at least had the virtue of coherence.

This is set fair to be a war of awful proportions, cockpit for the feared clash of civilisations. Each new foreign battalion taps more cash for the Taliban from the Gulf. Each new massacre from the air recruits more youths from the madrasas. The sheer counterproductivity of the war has been devastatingly analysed by David Kilcullen, adviser to Obama's key general – David Petraeus – no less.

Obama is trapped by past policy mistakes as were Kennedy and Johnson, cheered by an offstage chorus crying, "if only" and "not enough" and "just one more surge". He and Petraeus have to find a means and a language to disengage from Afghanistan, to allow the anti-western hysteria of the Muslim world – which the west has done so much to foster – now to cool. It is hard to imagine a greater tragedy than for the most exciting American president in a generation to be led by a senseless intervention into a repeat of America's greatest postwar debacle.

As for British politicians, they seek a proxy for their negligence in Afghanistan by staging a show trial of their negligence in Iraq. Why do they fiddle while Helmand burns? Might they at least ask how they can spend £40bn a year on defence yet watch a mere 8,000 troops on their one active front having to be rescued by Americans?