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A quagmire for Obama

By Derrick Z. Jackson
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IT IS almost as if yesterday's death of Robert McNamara was a warning to President Obama. The defense secretary for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson during the Vietnam War passed away at 93, with his legacy forever tarnished by the conflict that claimed 58,000 American soldiers and more than 3 million Vietnamese. McNamara would finally say, in his 1995 memoir "Retrospect": "We were wrong. We were terribly wrong."

With no small irony, Obama won the White House by running to a noticeable degree against McNamara's legacy, in the form of President Bush's invasion of Iraq, an invasion launched on false pretenses, false promises of quick victory, and no strategy for prolonged chaos. On the campaign trail, Obama invoked the great code word of Vietnam, criticizing Republican rival John McCain with, "So far, all he's done is follow George Bush into the quagmire of Iraq."

But questions are emerging as to whether Obama is slipping slowly into his own quagmire, in another guerrilla war. Obama is taking combat troops out of Iraq, but increasing them in Afghanistan, with questions arising as to whether there is a concrete end to our involvement. The 21,000 troops that Obama is adding brings the total of troops in Afghanistan to 68,000. The Washington Post reported last week that one senior military officer believes that a successful counterinsurgency to root out the Taliban will require more than 100,000 soldiers. The Post reported that Marine Brigadier General Lawrence Nicholson said he was "a little light" in troop strength in a meeting with national security adviser James Jones.

The official stance of the Obama administration is that it will be stingy with additional troops. Obama told Newsweek in May that "My strong view is that we are not going to succeed simply by piling on more and more troops. The Soviets tried that; it didn't work out too well for them. The British tried it; it didn't work. We have to see our military action in the context of a broader effort to stabilize security in the country."

At the same time, the Obama administration is awaiting a midsummer assessment from Afghanistan commander Stanley McChrystal. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen said in another Post story that he told McChrystal “there are no preconditions” to the assessment. “In this assessment you come back and ask for what you need.”

The assessment is getting more complicated as Afghanistan, by most accounts, appears to not be moving as fast as it should to build its own security force. Yet, anti-US resentment is building in Afghanistan after air strikes and firefights in which American forces are killing many innocent civilians. The US military said that in one incident in May, 26 civilians were killed, but local human rights groups and officials said the death toll was much higher, between 86 and 140. A United Nations report found that the killing of 828 civilians by US and Afghan forces last year is not all that far behind the 1,160 civilian deaths attributed to Taliban.

That makes it a very tricky moment. Two-thirds of the civilian deaths caused by the US were from air strikes. Reducing air strikes invariably means a longer-term effort on the ground. McChrystal admitted as much in June when he said: “Traditionally, American forces are designed for conventional, high-intensity combat. In my mind what we’ve really got to do is make a cultural shift.”

It also means the temptation to call for more troops. In a conflict where definitions of stability, let alone victory, are a fleeting thing, one of the most important moments in this first year of the Obama administration will be to take the hardest look possible at any assessment beyond the 68,000 troops in Afghanistan. A New York Times story last week reported a district council leader in Helmand Province as saying, “People are hostages of the Taliban, but they look at the coalition also as the enemy because they have not seen anything good from them in seven or eight years.” That terrible tension is straight out of the legacy of Robert McNamara.