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Afghanistan for Dummies

Posted By [Ray McGovern](#)

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I'm going to ask for my money back. I've seen this Afghanistan movie before. The first time, Vietnam was in the title.

As in an early scene from the Vietnam version, U.S. military officials are surprised to discover that the insurgents in Afghanistan are stronger than previously realized.

And our protagonist, Gen. Westmoreland — sorry, I mean McChrystal — sees the situation as serious but salvageable. As Westmoreland did with President Lyndon Johnson, McChrystal is preparing to tell President Barack Obama that thousands of more troops are needed to achieve the U.S. objective — whatever that happens to be.

As in Vietnam, uncertainty about objectives and how to measure success persist in Afghanistan. Never has this come through more clearly than in the fuzzy remarks of "Af-Pak" super-envoy Richard Holbrooke who has purview over Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On Aug. 12 at the Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C., think tank, Holbrooke tried to clarify how the Obama administration would gauge success in Afghanistan.

John Podesta, the center's president who was President Bill Clinton's chief of staff and served as head of Obama's transition team, waxed eloquent not only about his friend Holbrooke but Holbrooke's team; really spectacular, impressive, multidisciplinary, interagency, truly exceptional were some of the bouquets thrown at team members.

Holbrooke said his Af-Pak squad is "the best team" he'd ever worked with, adding that "Hillary" — the Secretary of State whose last name is Clinton — personally approved "every member."

It may indeed be a good team but that doesn't change the fact that it appears to be on a fool's errand. Each member has considerable expertise to offer, but no one knows where they're headed.

The whole thing reminds me of the old saw: If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. (Or you might say Holbrooke's team finds itself in a dark place peering into the distance looking for a light at the end of the tunnel.)

Pressing for Answers

To his credit, Podesta kept trying to get a clear answer from Holbrooke about the overall objective in Afghanistan, as well as seeking some metrics to judge progress:

"There is increasing concern here at home and in allied capitals abroad about the cost of winning in Afghanistan, and to what end-goals we should aspire ... I hope to focus on ... our objectives in Afghanistan and how we measure progress."

Holbrooke was as smooth — and vacuous — as Gen. William Westmoreland and his briefers were in Saigon:

"We know the difference with input and output, and what you are seeing here is input ... the payoff is still to come. We have to produce results, and we understand that."

"And we're not here today to tell you we're winning or we're losing. We're not here today to say we're optimistic or pessimistic. We're here to tell you that we're in this fight in a different way with a determination to succeed."

In an apparent attempt to get Podesta to stop asking about objectives and how to measure success, Holbrooke tossed a bouquet back at the Center for American Progress for doing "an extraordinary job of becoming a critical center for our efforts."

For those who may have missed it, Podesta's Center surprised many, including me, by endorsing Obama's non-strategy of throwing more troops at the problem in Afghanistan. (The charitable explanation is that there is something in the water here in Washington; less charitably, the Center may have feared losing its place at Obama's table.)

Holbrooke's flattery, though, did not deter Podesta, who kept insisting on some kind of cogent answer about objectives and metrics.

Podesta: "From the perspective of the American people, how do you define clear objectives of what you're trying to succeed as outputs with the inputs that you just talked about?"

Holbrooke: "A very key question, John, which you're alluding to is, of course, if our objective is to defeat, destroy, dismantle al-Qaeda, and they're primarily in Pakistan, why are we doing so much in Afghanistan? ... if you abandon the struggle in Afghanistan, you will suffer against al-Qaeda as well. But we have to be clear on what our national interests are here...."

*"The specific goal you ask, John, — is really hard for me to address in specific terms. But I would say this about defining success in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the simplest sense, the Supreme Court test for another issue, **we'll know it when we see it.**" (Emphasis added.)*

Holbrooke almost chokes on the words as they proceed out of his mouth, and then takes a very visible gulp of air. Up until this point, Podesta has been bravely suppressing any outward sign of frustration with Holbrooke's malnourishing comments on U.S. objectives and measures of success.

After the "we'll know it when we see it" remark, Podesta pauses for a few seconds and looks at Holbrooke — as if to say, and that's it? Then, like a high school teacher ready to move on to the next ill-prepared student, Podesta utters a curt "okay."

"Know It When You See It"

The Supreme Court test involving "know it when you see it" refers to a phrase used by former Justice Potter Stewart 45 years ago. Frustrated at not being able to define pornography in an obscenity case, he gave up and fell back on the "know it when you see it" formulation.

The same phrase was used by a similarly frustrated official, former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in December 2002, just three months before the U.S.-U.K. attack on Iraq. Unable to come up with any specific evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, but determined to rebut Saddam Hussein's claims that he had none, Wolfowitz quipped, "It's like the judge said about pornography. I can't define it, but I will know it when I see it."

How is it that we let people get away with that kind of rubbish when it means people — Iraqis, Afghanis, as well as Americans — are going to get killed and maimed?

But Holbrooke's "we'll know-it-when-we-see-it" measure of success is just the latest sign that the Obama administration has been playing the Af-Pak strategy by ear. The President himself seems generally aware of this, given his readiness to give wide latitude, not clear instructions, to Holbrooke and the generals.

An early hint of the disarray came on March 27, a little more than two months into his presidency, when Obama showed up a half-hour late to the press conference at which he announced a "comprehensive, new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan."

No explanation was given for his lateness, which required TV talking heads to reach new heights of vapidly for a full 30 minutes. I ventured [a guess at the time](#) that his instincts were telling him he was about to do something he would regret.

It soon became apparent that Obama's 60-day Afghan policy review lacked specificity on strategy. The President tried to make up for that with lofty rhetoric — kudos to the alliterative speechwriter who coined the catchy phrase "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda."

More important, the President also took pains to assure us that: "Going forward, we will not blindly stay the course." Rather, he promised there will be "metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable."

(Yet the key "metric" appears to be what Holbrooke blurted out on Aug. 12, "we'll know it when we see it.")

The Wrong Man

In Holbrooke, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have picked a loser. It is bad enough that he does not seem to have a clue about how to measure success toward U.S. objectives — or, at least, cannot articulate them, even before a friendly audience.

Perhaps Secretary Clinton and President Obama were also unaware of his well-deserved reputation for logical inconsistencies, not to mention the delight he takes in bullying foreign officials — the more senior the person, the better.

A former Foreign Service officer who worked on the Balkans confided that he believes Holbrooke actually prolonged the Yugoslav civil war for several years by pushing a policy of covert military support for the Muslim side.

It should come as no surprise, then, if Holbrooke ends up playing a role in deepening the Af-Pak quagmire, if only by adopting a belligerent attitude towards the Pashtuns and also the Pakistani government — not to mention rival U.S. officials.

In sum, Holbrooke will probably prove more hindrance than help in working out a sensible U.S. strategy and objectives. Worse, he is not likely to serve as a much-needed counterweight to the generals, who may well succeed in persuading Obama to give them still more troops for an unwinnable war.

George Will Favors Pullout

Surprisingly, one of the new voices urging a troop drawdown in Afghanistan is conservative columnist George Will, who showed his human side in an op-ed appearing Tuesday in the *Washington Post*, "[Time to Get Out of Afghanistan](#)."

Will starts and ends the piece with references to a young Marine who had just lost two buddies. To his credit, Will avoids the customary quote from the poet Horace — "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" ("How sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country") or anything like it.

Will says, in effect, that syrupy sentiments and faux appeals to patriotism do not apply in present circumstances. He would probably be the last to draw this connection, but he has begun to sound like Cindy Sheehan, who has been trying for over four years to get George Bush to explain to her the "noble cause" for which her son Casey died in Iraq.

Will ends his article with a heartfelt appeal for substantial troop reductions now, "before more American valor...is squandered."

Kristol Clear

On Wednesday, the neoconservative editors of the *Post* compiled a series of rebuttals to Will's column in a section entitled "Where Will Got It Wrong," including a lengthy excerpt from a blog post by leading neocon theorist William Kristol, who attacks Will for sentimentality when "it would be better to base a major change in our national security strategy on arguments."

Not surprisingly, given his enthusiastic support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Kristol advocates "a surge of several brigades of American forces" in Afghanistan and a determination "to support a strategy, and to provide the necessary resources, for victory."

Alongside Kristol's blog post was [an op-ed](#) by *Post* columnist David Ignatius, another enthusiastic supporter of the Iraq War. (Like so many of his neoconservative colleagues who are such fans of war, Ignatius never wore the uniform. His writings do not show any awareness of what was going on in Vietnam as he pursued his studies at Harvard.)

Regarding Afghanistan, Ignatius concludes that "this may be one of those messy situations where the best course is to both shoot and talk – a strategy based on the idea that we can bolster our friends and bloody our enemies enough that, somewhere down the road, we can cut a deal."

You may recall that President Johnson followed a similar strategy of trying to bomb his Vietnamese enemies to the bargaining table. Worked like a charm, as is well known.

Counting the tragedy in Iraq – as well as the one in Vietnam – this is the third time I've seen this movie.