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The New York Time

The Afghanistan Abyss

By **Nicholas D. Kristof**

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President Obama has already dispatched an additional 21,000 American troops to Afghanistan and soon will decide whether to send thousands more. That would be a fateful decision for his presidency, and a group of former intelligence officials and other experts is now reluctantly going public to warn that more troops would be a historic mistake.

The group's concern — dead right, in my view — is that sending more American troops into ethnic Pashtun areas in the Afghan south may only galvanize local people to back the Taliban in repelling the infidels.

“Our policy makers do not understand that the very presence of our forces in the Pashtun areas is the problem,” the group said in a statement to me. “The more troops we put in, the greater the opposition. We do not mitigate the opposition by increasing troop levels, but rather we increase the opposition and prove to the Pashtuns that the Taliban are correct.

“The basic ignorance by our leadership is going to cause the deaths of many fine American troops with no positive outcome,” the statement said.

The group includes Howard Hart, a former Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Pakistan; David Miller, a former ambassador and National Security Council official; William J. Olson, a counterinsurgency scholar at the National Defense University; and another C.I.A. veteran who does not want his name published but who spent 12 years in the region, was station chief in Kabul at the time the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and later headed the C.I.A.'s Counterterrorism Center.

“We share a concern that the country is driving over a cliff,” Mr. Miller said.

Mr. Hart, who helped organize the anti-Soviet insurgency in the 1980s, cautions that Americans just don’t understand the toughness, determination and fighting skills of the Pashtun tribes. He adds that if the U.S. escalates the war, the result will be radicalization of Pashtuns in Pakistan and further instability there — possibly even the collapse of Pakistan.

These experts are not people who crave publicity; I had to persuade them to go public with their concerns. And their views are widely shared among others who also know Afghanistan well.

“We’ve bitten off more than we can chew; we’re setting ourselves up for failure,” said Rory Stewart, a former British diplomat who teaches at Harvard when he is not running a large aid program in Afghanistan. Mr. Stewart describes the American military strategy in Afghanistan as “nonsense.”

I’m writing about these concerns because I share them. I’m also troubled because officials in Washington seem to make decisions based on a simplistic caricature of the Taliban that doesn’t match what I’ve found in my reporting trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Among the Pashtuns, the population is not neatly divisible into “Taliban” or “non-Taliban.” Rather, the Pashtuns are torn by complex aspirations and fears.

Many Pashtuns I’ve interviewed are appalled by the Taliban’s periodic brutality and think they are too extreme; they think they’re a little nuts. But these Pashtuns also admire the Taliban’s personal honesty and religious piety, a contrast to the corruption of so many officials around President Hamid Karzai.

Some Taliban are hard-core ideologues, but many join the fight because friends or elders suggest it, because they are avenging the deaths of relatives in previous fighting, because it’s a way to earn money, or because they want to expel the infidels from their land — particularly because the foreigners haven’t brought the roads, bridges and irrigation projects that had been anticipated.

Frankly, if a bunch of foreign Muslim troops in turbans showed up in my hometown in rural Oregon, searching our homes without bringing any obvious benefit, then we might all take to the hills with our deer rifles as well.

In fairness, the American military has hugely improved its sensitivity, and some commanders in the field have been superb in building trust with Afghans. That works. But all commanders can’t be superb, and over all, our increased presence makes Pashtuns more likely to see us as alien occupiers.

That may be why the troop increase this year hasn’t calmed things. Instead, 2009 is already the bloodiest year for American troops in Afghanistan — with four months left to go.

The solution is neither to pull out of Afghanistan nor to double down. Rather, we need to continue our presence with a lighter military footprint, limited to training the Afghan forces and helping them hold major cities, and ensuring that Al Qaeda does not regroup. We must also invest more in education and agriculture development, for that is a way over time to peel Pashtuns away from the Taliban.

This would be a muddled, imperfect strategy with frustratingly modest goals, but it would be sustainable politically and militarily. And it does not require heavy investments of American and Afghan blood.