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Hamid Karzai and Memories of Indochina

By William Pfaff

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PARIS — The challenged present and prospective future president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, gave an interview Sept. 7 to the conservative French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, in which he declared that he "is not the puppet of the Americans."

He said the American press "attacks me because the Americans want me to be more docile." He should be more careful in what he says.

You might think the American voter would say, "If that's how you feel, you are welcome to defend your own country from the Taliban; we'll bring our troops home."

But it doesn't work that way. The United States is in Afghanistan for its own reasons. The Afghan president said what he did to encourage the U.S. to keep him their man in Kabul. If the Afghan people should decide that he's nothing more than an American puppet, they will get rid of him. But Washington will get rid of him, too, since he would have lost his plausibility, and hence his value.

He also understands that in a way Richard Holbrooke and the other Americans in charge of American policy are themselves Karzai's puppets. The United States is not in Afghanistan for the sake of the Afghans, so it needs Karzai. The Obama administration appears to have convinced itself that the Islamic radicals will take over Asia if the U.S. does not expand its war there.

But in the end it will all prove futile. A day or two before the Karzai interview, I received from an old friend a copy of letter I sent in July 1962. The friend thought I would like to see it again.

I wrote the letter in Phnom Penh in Cambodia — that lovely city, which I described in the letter as possessing "an air of tranquility I've never before experienced in an Asian city." Those were the happy days when Prince Norodom Sihanouk ruled Cambodia; the wars, the

bombings, and the American and Vietnamese invasions had not yet come; and the Khmer Rouge and the killing fields were unimaginable.

I had just been in Vietnam, traveling around the country. I had some book money and decided to spend part of it seeing Southeast Asia, which had always intrigued me.

At that time, the intransigent Catholic mandarin, Ngo Dinh Diem, was prime minister of South Vietnam. He was being criticized by the same Americans who had put him in power in 1954, after the French had exiled him to America as an inconvenient nationalist. The American criticism was that he was refusing to be a puppet, and because of the corruption he tolerated among the members of his family.

He had instructed his own provincial officials and military commanders to keep their American advisers isolated. (John Kennedy was then U.S. president, and America had only 12,000 advisers in Vietnam.) I visited a U.S. Special Forces team in the Central Highlands (I had been a Special Forces reservist in the 1950s) and the Marines near Da Nang. In my letter I said, "While the military look good, the U.S. political people here look very bad indeed — rigid, unimaginative, obsessed with 'communist timetables for the takeover of Asia.'"

The ambassador rejected the criticisms, and had made it plain that any official not working to "win with Diem" would be thrown out.

However the political assessment that made the most sense to me, I wrote, was that the communist Viet Cong's biggest asset was the American presence in Vietnam, small as it then was. "One of the few political assets of Diem is that he doesn't do all that the Americans tell him to do."

Barring large-scale American intervention, I wrote, "most people expect another military coup in Saigon — probably of 'young colonels,' and quite possibly neutralist in character. On the whole this probably would be the best conceivable outcome, and one would hope that the U.S. government is prepared to make the most of it."

I argued that "a neutralist government could probably get a settlement with the communist government in North Vietnam on pretty good terms, cutting the political ground out from under the (South Vietnamese communist) Viet Cong. The deal would probably be hopelessly artificial in character... But the present situation is really very desperate."

Asia, I wrote, is in a cultural as well as political revolution, and "the communists are enjoying benefits from it, but there is serious reason to doubt that they are going to be able to profit permanently from it."

The U.S. problem "is to maintain a power position and countervailing force in the area without being caught up into hopeless efforts to sweep back the revolutionary tide. This requires great choosiness in what we commit ourselves to, and willingness to disengage from pointless struggles."

At the time, talks were going on in Geneva to "neutralize" Laos.

This was agreed in midmonth. The North Vietnamese had also indicated a willingness to see a "neutral" government in South Vietnam. Probably this was not an offer in good faith; they

likely saw it merely as a way to block further U.S. intervention. In any case President Kennedy vetoed the idea, which nonetheless would have saved thousands of lives.

What actually happened was that the U.S. connived at the assassination of Diem in November 1963, and his replacement with a general thought more compliant (who didn't last long). John Kennedy was murdered less than a month after Diem. The U.S. intervened in a big way, and the Vietnam War lasted for another 12 years. The North Vietnamese communists won, inheriting a devastated country.

The communists didn't take over Asia. I wish that someone would tell all this to President Obama.