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Afghanistan: Recycling and Old Strategy

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U.S. military commander for Afghanistan General Stanley McCrystal [told](#) CBS's *60 Minutes* that the situation in Afghanistan is worsening. Asked if things are worse or better than he expected, he said in the television news show aired September 27: "They're probably a little worse.... In some areas the breadth of the violence, the geographic spread of violence ... are a little more than I would have gathered."

The assessment was perhaps a case of stating the obvious, since the [numbers of U.S. casualties have risen to the highest levels](#) in the eight-year-long war. McCrystal had gained notoriety last week for the leak to the *Washington Post* of his report to President Obama about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. The McCrystal report stressed that the U.S. government was on the verge of losing the conflict. "Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) — while Afghan security capacity matures — risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible," the report said.

McCrystal's "new" strategy is really an old strategy, according to top political officials in Washington, D.C., who support his efforts. Asked what victory in Afghanistan means on *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, Defense Secretary Robert Gates [told](#) Stephanopoulos that "we'll know it when we see it, and we see it in Iraq."

But if Iraq represents victory, why have there been [bombing attacks and deaths related to the insurgents every day](#) in that country? And why are U.S. soldiers still stationed in Iraq? More importantly, why are they still dying in IED bombings and firefights if “victory” has already been achieved? One would think that victory is a case of soldiers being sent home and out of harm's way. Not so to politicians in Washington.

On the other side of the political aisle, Republican Senator John McCain acknowledged that what McCrystal has proposed is not a new strategy. “We can implement this new strategy, which is really an old strategy called counterinsurgency, or get out,” McCain [told This Week](#).

McCrystal's strategy, as laid out in [his report](#) published by the *Washington Post*, is to:

1. Put U.S. soldiers in greater personal danger: “To gain accurate information and intelligence about the local environment,” McCrystal explains, “ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] must spend as much time as possible with the people and as little time as possible in armored vehicles or behind the walls of forward operating bases.” McCrystal says that he needs to put U.S. soldiers in greater harm. “Better force protection may be counterintuitive; it might come from less armor and less distance from the population.” McCrystal says that the U.S. must “change the operational culture of ISAF to focus upon protecting the Afghan people, understanding their environment, and building relationships with them.” What this means, he says, is that “Hard-earned credibility and face-to-face relationships, rather than close combat, will achieve success.” But that leaves an open question: How can heavily-armed foreigners who don't even know how to speak the native languages, such as Pashtun or Uzbek, build those close personal relationships of trust? If “security may not come from the barrel of a gun,” as McCrystal says, why is the military needed at all? When McCrystal writes that “ISAF will change its operating culture to pursue a counterinsurgency approach that puts the Afghan people first,” he sounds more like a social worker than a military general.

2. Increase the number of troops committed: “Our campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today,” McCrystal noted, “resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it... Success is not ensured by additional forces alone, but continued under-resourcing will likely cause failure.” The bottom line, McCrystal says, is that “ISAF requires more forces.”

3. Extend the length of U.S. commitment indefinitely: While most news organs noted that McCrystal's report means at least another five years of U.S. combat in Afghanistan, McCrystal didn't place any timetables on U.S. withdrawal. This, despite the fact that McCrystal acknowledges that Afghanistan has “an isolating geography and a natural aversion to foreign intervention further works against ISAF.” With a very public open-ended commitment to U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, it's reasonable to ask what kind of impact this will have on that Afghan national pride. Wouldn't any people — faced with an open-ended commitment of foreign troops on their soil — fight back indefinitely?

4. Increase foreign aid to Afghanistan: Under the heading of “Economic support for counterinsurgency” McCrystal makes an explicit call for the transfer of more wealth from the broken budget of the U.S. government and its people to Afghanistan. “The request for support from the Ministry of Finance for civilian technical assistance must be welcomed and met.” The call for more foreign aid gives yet one more indication that the U.S. military are being used as social workers rather than as soldiers in Afghanistan.

The [McCrystal report](#) notes that the Afghan situation is “a situation that defies simple solutions or quick fixes.” True enough, and he was clearly right when he wrote that “our conventional warfare culture is the problem, the Afghans must ultimately defeat the insurgency.”

In sum, McCrystal's basic strategy is the old Vietnam strategy to win their hearts and minds. But U.S. troops have already been fighting in Afghanistan for eight years, and the Afghan people (like all other people) have a “natural aversion to foreign intervention.” Why should the old strategy be any more successful now than in the past?

In his *This Week* interview, Senator McCain made it clear that he is convinced that the United States should implement the old strategy. However, he did raise the fundamental question: Will we get out now, or will we get out after hundreds or thousands more American soldiers have died?