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The Nation

An Open Letter to President Obama

William R. Polk

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Dear Mr. President,

Although we were separated by more than a decade, we lived a few steps apart in Hyde Park and were both professors at the University of Chicago. There I established the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and was also president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Before going to Chicago, during the Kennedy administration I was the member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East and Central Asia. A Democrat, I was an early supporter of yours. So I hope you will accept the following analysis and proposals as being from a friend as well as a person with considerable experience on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In recent events I see an opportunity to accomplish American objectives while avoiding a course of action that could derail plans for your presidency, just as the Vietnam War ruined the presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

According to press accounts, you are being told that America can win the war against the Taliban by employing overwhelming military power. Just like President Johnson's generals, yours keep asking for more troops. You are also being told that we can multiply our power with counterinsurgency tactics. Having made a detailed study (laid out in my book *Violent Politics*) of a dozen insurgencies, ranging from the American Revolution to Afghanistan, and fought by the British, French, Germans and Russians in America, Europe, Africa and Asia, I doubt that you are being well advised. When I was in government, we were told we could achieve victory in Vietnam by the same combination of force and counterinsurgency recommended by your advisers in Afghanistan. But as the editors of the Pentagon Papers concluded, the "attempt to translate the newly articulated theory of counter-insurgency into operational reality.... [through] a mixture of military, social, psychological, economic and

political measures.... [were] marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally."

What actually brought all the insurgencies, including the one in Vietnam, to a halt was the withdrawal of the foreigners. Some foreigners left in defeat, but others left in ways that achieved their most important objectives. I believe you have an opportunity to achieve America's important objectives in Afghanistan.

In Vietnam we never understood the Vietnamese and were defeated; so here I lay out the essential features of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir and then show how they set the context for a successful policy. I begin with Pakistan.

Pakistan has long been obsessed with Kashmir, frightened of India and favorably inclined toward its Pashtun ethnic minority. To help Pashtun "freedom fighters" in the 1979-89 war against the Soviet Union, we funneled billions of dollars into Pakistan. Opposition to the Soviet Union was our motivation, but Pakistan had a different motivation: to protect Islam. This necessarily involved it not only in Afghanistan but also in Kashmir. Since Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, is about as close to the Indian-held capital of Kashmir, Srinagar, and to the Khyber Pass, which leads into Afghanistan, as New York is to Hartford, both Afghanistan and Kashmir appear to the Pakistanis to be nearly domestic issues.

Kashmir is one of those legacies of the age of imperialism that still blight international relations. Today's problem was created in 1846, when the British sold Kashmir and its Muslim population to a Hindu who became its maharaja. Cruel and rapacious, he and his descendants were bitterly hated by Kashmiris. When the British were leaving South Asia in 1947, they assumed that because the people were mainly Muslim, Kashmir would be folded into what became Pakistan. But the maharaja opted for India. Despite a promise from Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister-designate of India, to Lord Louis Mountbatten, then viceroy of India, that a plebiscite would be held to ascertain the wishes of the Kashmiris, it has never been held. Ever since, the Indians have occupied Kashmir with half a million troops as a conquered enemy country. Under Indian rule, thousands of Kashmiris have been imprisoned, hundreds "disappeared" and almost everyone afflicted by lesser tyrannies. In shorthand terms, Kashmir is the Palestine of Central/South Asia. Pakistan and India have fought three wars and innumerable bloody engagements over Kashmir. The drain on the resources of both India and Pakistan has been immense. In part because of the destabilizing effects of this conflict, Pakistan has never developed a durable, coherent government. The only really solid Pakistani organization is the army. Civilian governments have been marked by massive corruption, ineptitude and fragility.

There are many reasons for Pakistan's problems, but one stands out: it is an amalgam of ethnic/cultural nations. The British ruled the Punjab and Sind directly, but sought merely to divide and weaken the Pashtuns. That was the purpose of the Durand Line, which they drew in 1893 along the mountainous frontier. The effect of the line is that today about 25 million Pashtuns live in Pakistan and roughly 14 million live in Afghanistan. The Pashtuns wanted to form an independent nation-state in 1947 but were prevented from doing so. Until its recent military campaign against the Taliban in Swat, the Pakistanis made little attempt to integrate the Pashtuns, but because of them Pakistan has always been deeply affected by Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has always baffled foreign invaders. After three attempts from 1842 to 1919 to rule it, the British gave up; at the end of a decade of costly war, the Russians did as well.

Neither understood the complex social and political makeup of the country. Without doing so, we cannot hope to accomplish our objectives, so let me highlight the main points.

When I first went to Afghanistan, in 1962, to prepare a US National Policy Paper, I found a good analogy for the land and the society to be a rocky hill sliced by gullies and covered by 20,000 Ping-Pong balls. The balls represented the autonomous village-states. Politically and economically divided, they shared a common adherence to a blend of primitive Islam and even more primitive tribal custom (varying throughout the country but known in the south as Pashtunwali). During their occupation, the Russians crushed many Ping-Pong balls, but they could not defeat enough of them to win. At any given time, roughly 80 percent of the country remained outside Russian control; so the Russians won all the battles but lost the war. Afghanistan became the graveyard of the Soviet Union.

The brutal Soviet occupation shattered the Afghan social structure. Nearly one in ten Afghans was killed or died, and more than 5 million fled the country. Living wretchedly in refugee camps, mainly in Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of young Afghan men were "reshaped." Like the biblical Children of Israel after forty years in the wilderness, these Afghans emerged very different from their fathers. The new generation kept their stern code of belief, but they lost touch with the humanizing aspects of growing up in families. Living apart from mothers and sisters, many of the young men, mostly Pashtuns, were incorporated into male-only madrassas in which they were housed, fed, armed and radicalized. They emerged as the foot soldiers of the Taliban.

When they were in power, the Taliban enforced an ugly, repressive regime, but it was no worse than some other regimes in Asia and Africa. And, as we can observe, societies and regimes evolve. Look at what has happened in postwar Vietnam. No one in my time in government could have guessed that the Communist regime would evolve into a relatively open and indeed capitalistic society. In Afghanistan there are signs, still faint to be sure, that while the stern code remains intact, at least the Taliban leadership is beginning to modify its program. As I will point out, we can encourage this trend.

But as insurgents, the Taliban remain formidable foes. Our chances of defeating them are poor. Indeed, some independent observers believe they are becoming more popular while we are becoming less popular. They, and many non-Taliban Afghans, regard us, as they regarded the Russians, as foreign, anti-Muslim invaders. Moreover, they see that the government we are backing is corrupt and rapacious. Observers report that it is deeply involved in the drug trade, stealing aid money and even selling US-supplied arms to the Taliban (as the South Vietnamese government did to the Vietcong). Moreover, it is ineffective: its writ hardly runs outside Kabul. Most of the country is in the hands of brutal, predatory warlords. The Karzai government will not last long after our withdrawal--that was the fate of the Soviet puppet government there and of our puppet government in Saigon. Forced to choose between the warlords and the Taliban, Afghans are likely to choose the Taliban. As Gen. Stanley McChrystal has said, "Key groups have become nostalgic for the security and justice Taliban rule provided." Thus, we are courting long-term strategic defeat.

Even in the tactical short run, I believe, trying to defeat the Taliban is not in America's interest. The harder we try, the more likely terrorism will be to increase and spread. As the history of every insurgency demonstrates, the more foreign boots there are on the ground and the harder the foreigners fight, the more hatred they engender. Substituting drone attacks for

ground combat is no solution. Having been bombed from the air, I can attest that it is more infuriating than a ground attack.

Our principal objection to the Taliban is that it has given Osama bin Laden and his immediate entourage a base of operations. The two groups, however, are very different: the Taliban are a national political organization, anchored in Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, while Al Qaeda is a loose alliance of dissidents from many countries, united only by their belief that their legitimate aims of ethnic/national self-determination and religious culture are being denied.

For us, the overlap of the two groups comes when we try to get the Taliban to surrender Osama. We have offered what to poor tribesmen is an astronomical reward for him "dead or alive." This ploy has failed. In the Afghan code of Pashtunwali, to fail to protect someone who has been given sanctuary (*melmastia*) is a mortal sin, so our attempts to get the Pashtuns to do this insults their sense of honor.

So what, realistically, can we do, and what can we not do? Let me be specific.

On the nuclear issue, Pakistan and India are locked together. The only effective course of action is precisely the one you've recommended: reduction of nuclear weapons everywhere, beginning with us and the Russians. Once momentum is established, we should be able to move toward regional arms control with security guarantees, economic incentives and revocation of the neoconservative-inspired first-strike doctrine. From having served on the crisis management committee during the Cuban missile crisis, I can attest that nuclear weapons anywhere are a danger to people everywhere. Your policy is literally vital to us all.

Regarding Al Qaeda, what is important to US security is not capturing Osama bin Laden but disabling him. That is achievable. Here's how: he now enjoys the protection of the Pashtuns. *Melmastia* is a sacred obligation, but the Pashtunwali is limited. Osama's Pashtun hosts can insist, with honor, on his stopping actions that endanger them. That could be a key element in a truce that either we or, preferably, Pakistan makes with the Taliban. From that necessary first step, we can move toward dealing with the motivations of the disparate components of Al Qaeda. Since terrorist attacks can be mounted from many places, the only effective long-term defense against them is to deal with their causes.

On the drug trade, it would be convenient if the Afghans solved our drug problem for us, but if we are realistic we must admit that drugs are ultimately *our* problem. Heroin is proof that market forces really do work. We can make minor adjustments, subsidizing the planting of other crops, buying up what is grown, engaging in defoliation, etc., but as long as people are willing to pay a high price for drugs, producers and distributors will supply them. To put our attempt to stop them in perspective, imagine a foreign invader trying to stop the French from producing wine. We cannot expect any Afghan government to solve our problem, but if we leave, the Taliban would probably again combat the drug trade, as they did in the 1990s.

On our occupation, we need to consider three issues. Does our presence lead toward a sustainable result after our withdrawal? Can the occupation be maintained without turning a large part of the Afghan population and others against us? And can we afford it? I think the answer to all three is no. Consider these factors:

First, it is rare that insurgencies end with the establishment of a regime favored by the occupier--that was the experience of the British and Russians in Afghanistan, the Americans in Vietnam, the French in Algeria. Governments acceptable to the foreign occupier may last a short while, but almost always, those who fought hardest against the foreigner take over when he leaves.

Second, US military intervention in Afghanistan has not only solidified the Taliban as an organization but has also created increasing public support for it. There is much evidence in Afghanistan, as there has been in every insurgency I have studied, that foreign soldiers increase rather than calm hostility. The British found that to be true even in the American Revolution (where the two sides were "cousins," shared the same religion and spoke the same language).

Third, the cost in casualties may not rise to the level of Vietnam or even Iraq, but the financial cost is unlikely to be less. My hunch is that the real cost to the US economy will be \$3 trillion to \$6 trillion, calculating overall, not just Congressional appropriations. So the Afghan campaign could derail your plans for America, as Vietnam derailed Johnson's Great Society.

On Afghan government reform, there is not much we can do. Corruption runs from top to bottom. As I witnessed in Vietnam, if a government wishes to steal itself to death, foreigners can't stop it. We had an opportunity in the 1960s to help a reforming Afghan government but failed to do so; indeed, we welcomed the man who overthrew it, Mohammed Daoud Khan, because he was anti-Communist. To be realistic, we must assume that even an elected Hamid Karzai will probably not last long after our army departs.

On the Pakistani government, there is even less we can do. There also, massive corruption begins at the top. President Asif Ali Zardari, who is described as "our man," is said to be disliked by the vast majority of Pakistanis and has a long record of mind-boggling dishonesty. I think Zardari's administration will be replaced fairly soon by a military government. If so, we must roll with the punch but try, modestly and unobtrusively, to help encourage the growth of compensating civic institutions.

On Kashmir, as with many world problems, the logical solution is probably not practical. If India and Pakistan could agree to hold a plebiscite, the Kashmiris would probably accept modestly enhanced autonomy under India. Neither Pakistan nor India wants an independent Kashmir, but the current situation is costly for both, so they have established a back channel to inch toward accommodation. We should stay out of this problem.

On Islam, you have set the only intelligent, humane course for our diverse world. The legacy of the neoconservatives and the Bush administration can be overcome, but it will take time for the marvelous speech you gave in Cairo to convince Muslims that we are willing to live with them in a multicultural world.

On getting started, we have been given what I think is a major new opportunity by the Pakistanis. The Taliban are, after all, Pashtuns, Muslims and either Afghans or Pakistanis, while we are none of these. Thus Pakistan can fight the Taliban more acceptably than we can, and because of its longstanding support of their movement, Pakistan can more easily bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. If we are smart, we will take advantage of its attack on the Taliban in Swat by backing out as quickly and as gracefully as possible. How to get out is

something former Senator George McGovern and I laid out in our book *Out of Iraq*, which with suitable changes can provide a template for Afghanistan. But as long as we are there, the war will continue, with disastrous consequences for all the things you want to do and we Americans need you to do. We must not follow Britain and Russia into Afghanistan's quicksand.