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Why die for Karzai?

Does U.S. support for the Afghan president really make sense?

By Tom Hayden

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Fifty-nine Americans died in October fighting to protect the corrupt Afghan electoral process that resulted in a second five-year term for Hamid Karzai. Since July and the run-up to the August election, 195 Americans were killed and more than 1,000 were wounded, a higher casualty rate than during the 2007 military "surge" in Iraq. A principal purpose cited by President Obama for sending 17,000 more combat troops to Afghanistan earlier this year was to protect the election, which, according to most observers, Karzai stole.

Has it occurred to anyone in the White House national security circles or the pundit class that these recent American deaths were wasteful and immoral? That sending Americans to die for an unpopular regime of warlords, landlords, drug dealers and CIA assets (Karzai's brother) is impossible to justify? And that rather than admitting the mistake, the president and his advisors are preparing to compound it?

I suspect that part of the U.S. unhappiness with Karzai has nothing to do with his well-known incompetence and corruption. After all, with Afghanistan's economy almost entirely dependent on heroin, how could the government not resemble a mafia state? What worries the Pentagon even more is that Karzai, in response to Afghan public opinion, may want to negotiate with the Taliban before the Pentagon can turn the tide of war.

Semi-secret peace talks with the Taliban, supported by the Karzai government, were reported in May. During the campaign, peace talks were the top issue among voters, with Karzai depicted as "the most vocal candidate" calling for talks with the Taliban, according to the New York Times.

Perhaps his campaign promise of peace talks was only a ploy to win votes, but that also is a measure of Afghan public opinion.

There were signs that the Afghan Taliban leadership was interested in a peace process too. An April task force led by Washington insiders Thomas Pickering and Barnett Rubin noted that "the [Taliban] Quetta shura is showing signs of willingness to distance itself from Al Qaeda and seek a political settlement."

A back-channel, U.S.-blessed Saudi diplomatic initiative in December reported a negotiating proposal from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar demanding, among other things, a new power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, including Karzai; a timetable for U.S. withdrawal; replacing NATO forces with peacekeepers from Islamic countries; and a role for the insurgents in the reconstituted Afghan security forces. On Sept. 19, Omar issued a statement of assurance that the Taliban, "as a responsible force, will not extend its hand to cause jeopardy to others" -- words interpreted by a British intelligence officer as a willingness to separate itself from Al Qaeda.

U.S. officials haven't exactly leaped to pursue these feelers. The reason is pure power politics. The United States and NATO apparently want to negotiate only from a position of strength. "Reconciliation is important, but not now," said one Western official in August. "It's not going to happen until the insurgency is weaker and the government is stronger." Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton claimed her readiness "to welcome anyone supporting the Taliban who renounces Al Qaeda, lays down their arms and is willing to participate in the free and open society that is enshrined in the Afghan Constitution." She was calling for a surrender, not the opening of a conflict-resolution process. The U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Anne W. Patterson, ratcheted up the war rhetoric last month by asserting that if the Pakistani army failed to eliminate Omar, the U.S. would.

It is plain to me that the United States seeks to gain the military upper hand with more troops, thus strengthening a negotiating position, while at the same time curbing Karzai's desire to enter talks with his Afghan adversaries. Portrayed as weak, Karzai in fact may be too much of a nationalist for the Pentagon's taste.

Negotiating with the Taliban would be distasteful, but how many more American soldiers will die while trying to achieve this upper hand? The Pentagon forecasts two years of harsh combat in Afghanistan alone, which at current rates could mean an additional 1,000 American dead and 8,000 wounded. For each American boot on the ground, there will be an equivalent increase in roadside bombs, according to a U.S. agency called the Pentagon Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization. Meanwhile, Afghanistan is running taxpayers about \$3.6 billion a month.

The Al Qaeda strategy of overextending our military and exhausting our economy seems to be on schedule. With Al Qaeda relocated to Pakistan, the Pentagon now is fighting Afghan insurgents -- who hate foreign invaders -- on the hypothetical grounds that Al Qaeda will someday return to Kandahar. Elsewhere, national security strategists such as Britain's Peter

Neumann claim "broad agreement" that Europe is actually the nerve center for global jihad. One is tempted to respond that NATO should invade Europe instead of Afghanistan, but this is not a laughing matter.

Al Qaeda is a real threat, but the threat only worsens as Western powers rampage through Muslim countries. Defense against Al Qaeda is a legitimate mission, but not where the tactics being used feed a desire for indiscriminate revenge among millions of people with nothing to lose.

This is the "march of folly" once predicted by historian Barbara Tuchman. And it requires an exit strategy, not a deepening quagmire. In 1989, German essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote of the need for a "new kind of hero," not one who spills blood to save a reputation but one brilliant at withdrawing from untenable situations of their own making.

"It was Clausewitz," wrote Enzensberger, "who showed that retreat is the most difficult of all operations. That applies in politics as well. . . . It goes without saying that the protagonist risks his life with every step he takes on this path."