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Pacifying Afghanistan: a dangerous dream

Does President Obama realize the difficulty of the task faced by America's young men and women there?

Walter Rodgers

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If Gen. Stanley McChrystal prevails in persuading President Obama to insert more US troops in Afghanistan, do Americans understand the difficulty of the task they'd face?

Do they understand that even more of our young men and women would be charged with pacifying a savage mountainous land the size of Texas? One where nearly every male older than 8 stands willing to die in the fight against foreign occupiers?

Even McChrystal doesn't guarantee victory over Taliban insurgents, let alone predict how many decades would be required to win.

"Decades" is a long time for an American public that watched its troops beat back both Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in just four years. Americans turned against the war in Vietnam as the years wore on. The war in Afghanistan is now in Year 8.

As a reporter I have been to Afghanistan, twice with Soviet troops in the mid-1980s and several times in 2001 and 2002 with the Americans. One thing Afghans do well is fight to the death.

I recall a grizzled mujahideen warrior telling me of his admiration for the skill and bravery of Soviet troops. He was wearing a brass hammer and sickle belt buckle taken from a Russian soldier. He asked me if I thought "there was any hope" for his country.

"No" I replied. "Afghanistan is ever at war with itself and is awash in guns."

Fingering his graying beard, clutching his Kalashnikov rifle, the warrior said sadly, "In Afghanistan, a man's business has a lot to do with killing other people."

It's not much of an exaggeration to say that the Afghan countryside is frozen in a time warp. The clock seemingly stopped 700 years ago. It's a nation in name only. For much of his presidency, Hamid Karzai has been little more than mayor of Kabul.

The August election was declared a fraud by international observers, but theft in Afghanistan is not confined to polling places. Corruption is a national disease.

An Afghan doctor told me that medical students are notorious for robbing graves, removing bones for academic study. Often, they bribe the village elder to look the other way. There's also a profit to be made digging up burial shawls and reselling them.

Most educated Afghans have fled, leaving the population in a state of medieval-era illiteracy. Pro-war figures in the US talk about reaching benchmarks for democratic progress, such as the presidential elections this year, which, after considerable dispute, resulted in President Karzai's reelection. But ballots monitored by US troops and international observers don't mean much in a society where so many struggle to sign their own name.

Everything is negotiable for a price there – except loyalty between fundamentalists. Prepubescent girls are bought as brides for between \$500 and \$7,000. Yet Osama bin Laden managed to escape US forces largely because Washington naively thought the almighty dollar would compel Afghan tribesman to sell out a Muslim brother.

Washington's chief purpose for staying the course is to keep terrorists from returning and reestablishing bases in Afghanistan. These fears do not stand the test of reason. Al Qaeda already has hotbeds of sympathizers in Karachi, Pakistan; Marseilles, France; Yemen; in British mosques; and perhaps in the Detroit suburbs, as well.

History offers few examples of advanced cultures transforming primitive ones; mostly conquering forces just subsume them. After the Soviet loss in Afghanistan, a Russian analysis estimated it would have required 750,000 to one million troops to pacify and occupy that country. McChrystal thinks he can do it with just over 100,000?

Mr. Obama surely realizes that after more than 30 years of nearly continuous war, Afghanistan is a failed state. Short of half a million troops, the US will not be putting Humpty Dumpty together again. Adding another 40,000 US troops, as McChrystal wants to do, would probably just plunge Afghanistan's tribes into further chaos and suffering.

US generals pushing for more troops need to publicly acknowledge certain realities. First, that Afghanistan is unlike any challenge Washington has ever taken on. Second, that what's happening there is in many respects a civil war. Third, that indigenous resistance is likely to grow, not diminish, as the US presence intensifies.

Afghanistan's emergence into modernity must come from internal reform of its own religious and cultural traditions, not from an American diktat. Perhaps the best thing the US can do for Afghans is to withdraw. The precedent is there: Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia.

Obama should consider having a private chat with Matthew Hoh, a former combat Marine Corps officer in Iraq who later served the State Department in Afghanistan. Mr. Hoh resigned recently because he came to believe that increasing troop levels is wrong. Speaking to The Washington Post, Hoh urged Americans to call their member of Congress and say, "Listen, I don't think this thing is right."