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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Wrong Force for the 'Right War'

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BARACK OBAMA and John McCain have plenty of disagreements, but one thing they are united on is promising a troop surge in Afghanistan. Senator McCain wants to move troops to Afghanistan from the Middle East, conditional on continued progress in Iraq. Senator Obama goes much further, arguing that we should have sent last year's surge to Afghanistan, not Iraq, that Afghanistan is the "central front" and that we must rebuild Afghanistan from the bottom up along the lines of the Marshall Plan.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is on board, too. He has endorsed a \$20 billion plan to increase substantially the size of Afghanistan's army, as well as the role and numbers of Western troops there to aid it. Polls show that nearly 60 percent of Americans agree with the idea of an Afghan surge. A recent Time magazine cover anointed the fighting there as "The Right War."

But what are the real prospects for turning fractious, impoverished Afghanistan into an orderly and prosperous nation and a potential ally of the United States? What true American interests are being insufficiently advanced or defended in its remote deserts and mountains? And even if these interests are really so broad, are they deliverable at an acceptable price? The answers to these questions put the wisdom of an Afghan surge into great question.

Destroying the Taliban regime after 9/11 was just and rational. And it was done in an effective and proportionate manner: over just six weeks in late 2001, with several hundred American special operatives on the ground, American air support and our allies in the Northern Alliance.

Since then, however, the mission has grown. Today there are 71,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan, yet things are getting ever worse. There were 10 times as many armed attacks on international troops and civilian contractors in 2007 as there were in 2004. Every other measure of violence, from roadside bombs to suicide bombers, is also up dramatically. Our principal ally at the beginning of the war, the Northern Alliance, controlled more of the country at the end of 2001 than President Hamid Karzai, our current principal ally, effectively controls today.

The United States must certainly punish those who attack it and those who give sanctuary to such people. This is why the Afghan war has always had popular support. But our initial goals — dethroning the Taliban and disrupting Al Qaeda — have been as thoroughly accomplished as is possible given the porous frontier that Afghanistan shares with Pakistan.

Thus the creeping mission in Afghanistan has fed on a perception of four further American interests: the

denial of sanctuary to global terrorists; the projection of American power in a sensitive part of the world; support for modernity in the global struggle for the Muslim mind; and cutting heroin exports. Each needs careful reconsideration.

Denying sanctuary to terrorists — in Afghanistan and everywhere else — is undoubtedly an American interest of the first order. Accomplishing it, however, requires neither the conquest of large swathes of Afghan territory nor a troop surge there — nor even maintaining the number of troops NATO has in Afghanistan today. Counterterrorism is not about occupation. It centers on combining intelligence with specialized military capabilities.

While the Taliban is certainly regaining strength, it could provide Al Qaeda with a true safe harbor only if its troops retake Kabul. But they have little hope of returning to power as long as we train the Afghan Army, support an Afghan state generously in other ways and maintain our intelligence and surgical strike capacities.

Besides, even if the Taliban were to return to power and give Al Qaeda the sorts of safe havens it enjoyed in Afghanistan in 2001, this would probably make little difference in America's security. Rory Stewart, a former British foreign ministry official in Afghanistan and Iraq who now manages a nongovernmental group in Kabul, argues that the existence there of "Quantico-style" terrorist facilities teaching primitive insurgency infantry tactics had little to do with 9/11. "You don't need to go to Afghanistan to learn how to use a box cutter," Stewart has told me. "And Afghanistan is not a good place for flight school."

One could argue that the key Al Qaeda training for 9/11 occurred not in the Taliban's Afghanistan but in Jeb Bush's Florida. And in terms of terrorist planning, 9/11 would have been better avoided with an occupation of Hamburg, where most of the essential plotting for the attack occurred.

In any case, American counterterrorism interests in Afghanistan appear to argue for something far more restrained than our current commitment there, maybe 20,000 Western troops maximum. In the long run, it needs to be seen as the remote, poor and ungovernable country it is, albeit one with a history of ties to Al Qaeda and located next door to Osama bin Laden's current base of operations, Pakistan. Still, a very light American presence operating through embassies and aid organizations should be able to collect the intelligence needed to allow special forces to eliminate terrorist threats as they appear.

So much for counterterrorism. What about the second reason given for expanding our presence: projecting American power in an unstable area? Yes, maintaining a substantial armed presence in a corner of the world that borders Pakistan and Iran (and, barely, China) is undoubtedly valuable. But all that is needed to achieve this is an airfield at our disposal, enough special forces troops nearby to achieve limited military goals and a complaisant government in Kabul. Besides, it is unclear why Afghanistan is the necessary partner in this; the United States already has safer, less expensive and strategically more important basing arrangements elsewhere in inner Asia, as in Uzbekistan and Mongolia.

As for the broader struggle toward a modern and healthy Islam, Afghanistan's global importance is negligible. It is a backwater of the Muslim faith. The Prophet Muhammad and his successors did not conquer or proclaim there. No great Islamic civilization, such as the Baghdad caliphate, was based there. Unlike Iraq, no great saints of Shiism were martyred or buried there. Defeating Wahhabist Sunnism in its Taliban variant is of very little symbolic value.

The last argument for expanding this Afghan war — stopping the poppy growing — is equally weak. Neither presidential candidate has mentioned heroin use as a pressing domestic issue, and there is even less reason it should be a major international one. In any case, our demand for heroin is not the fault of the Afghan peasants who would take the financial hit for our interdiction efforts. Liberal democracies cannot win counterinsurgencies against the wills of local populations, and denying a livelihood to the poor farmers of southern and eastern Afghanistan is no way to persuade Afghans to our side.

For those who remain unconvinced that anything short of ambitiously remaking Afghanistan would imperil America's basic interests, here's the big question: What sort of commitment are you willing to make? Dan McNeil, the American general who was NATO's top commander in Afghanistan until he left in June, said shortly before concluding his tour that according to current American counterinsurgency doctrine, a successful occupation of Afghanistan, which is larger, more complex, more populous and very much less governable than Iraq, would require 400,000 troops.

How many of them would be killed? Except for the initial invasion and the isolated flare-ups in places like Falluja in 2005, Iraq has not been a "hot" war, but a slow-running insurgency. Were we to attempt to pacify all of Afghanistan, on the other hand, however, it would be nothing but heat, as Russia and Britain before us have discovered to their great cost. We're already seeing higher death rates for our troops in Afghanistan than in Iraq. Episodes like the successful escape by more than 1,000 prisoners from a jail in Kandahar in June, or the overrunning of an American outpost by militants near Wanat in July, in which nine Americans were killed and 15 were wounded, have never occurred in Iraq.

The invasion of Afghanistan was a great tactical success and the correct strategic move. Yet since then it seems as if the United States has been trying to turn the conflict into the Vietnam War of the early 21st century. Escalating in Afghanistan to "must-win" status means, according to General McNeil's estimate, deploying three times as many troops as were sent to Iraq at the height of the surge. If Americans really believe — as Senator Obama in particular argues — that Afghanistan is the right war and a place appropriate for Iraq-style nation-building, then they must understand both the cost involved and the remote likelihood of success.

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