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# As Time Passes, the Goals in Afghanistan Shrink

By **MARK MAZZETTI**

WASHINGTON

NINE years ago, after an American-led invasion of [Afghanistan](#) had dispatched the [Taliban](#) from Kabul within weeks, the idea of remaking a tangled mess like Afghanistan didn't seem, to some, so far-fetched.

Nine months ago, when [President Obama](#) addressed a group of cadets at [West Point](#), little of that early optimism about what was achievable in Afghanistan remained. And yet there was fresh hope that a new strategy and 30,000 additional troops might help wrest momentum away from the Taliban and bolster support for President [Hamid Karzai's](#) fragile government.

Now, it seems that American goals are becoming narrower still, with time dwindling before a military withdrawal is to begin next year, and frustration mounting at the war's costs and at rampant corruption in the Karzai government.

At the center of debate in Washington is a simple question: At this point, what can the United States really hope to achieve in Afghanistan?

The question will shape every decision the administration makes about Afghanistan, from the pace of the military drawdown to whether anticorruption efforts are either embraced as essential or dismissed as "mission creep."

The testing ground informing these decisions right now is the critical city of Kandahar; there, American hopes rest on a long-delayed push into Afghanistan's second city and the birthplace of the Taliban. Some liken that offensive to a "Hail Mary" pass, with the Taliban still entrenched throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan and a program to persuade Taliban soldiers to lay down arms and be "reintegrated" into Afghan society having achieved little so far.

Gen. **David Petraeus**, the top commander in Afghanistan, has said the strategy relies on fighting Talib forces while building up local and tribal institutions that can be strengthened once enemy fighters are cleared from the city.

Legitimate local government is impossible, his argument goes, without security. And legitimacy is essential for maintaining long-term security. Or, as the military's Counterinsurgency Field Manual puts it: "Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate."

But carrying out the plan in Kandahar, where President Karzai's half-brother is a powerful official, involves an unholy bargain: working with some of the same power brokers in the south whose predatory corruption, American officials say, has turned Afghans away from the Karzai government and toward the Taliban.

If counterinsurgency doctrine dictates that wars are won and lost by building credible government, is any level of corruption tolerable? Is General Petraeus, counterinsurgency theory's high priest, committing blasphemy by letting his forces act as if some corruption is permissible?

Some defense officials and experts on counterinsurgency reply that the practitioners of the military doctrine are simply, if belatedly, recognizing the realities of the Afghan war.

Without the luxury of time, they argue, there is a better chance of success in working with imperfect figures who are available, rather than searching at this late date for more honest leaders for the local and national governments.

"We've sort of backed ourselves into a corner by putting effective governance at the forefront," said **Andrew Exum**, a retired Army officer, now at the Center for a New American Security, who was a civilian adviser to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the former commander in Afghanistan. "Unless you are prepared to stay in Afghanistan with high troop levels for at least a decade, then an overt campaign to tackle corruption is a big mistake."

Others argue that the administration, because of limited time and patience, has effectively abandoned the core concept of counterinsurgency doctrine in Afghanistan but won't admit it.

**Gilles Dorransoro**, an Afghanistan expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says recent anticorruption efforts, like the arrests of top officials in Kabul by the Afghan government's Major Crimes Task Force and Sensitive Investigative Unit, are, in

effect, a sideshow. He says a more important goal for Americans, if they want a lasting peace after their troops leave, is to build credible government institutions in and around Kandahar. “If we don’t really make an effort in Kandahar, where we’ve put all of our bets,” he said, “what are we doing trying to put some Karzai adviser in jail in Kabul?”

On Friday, at a news conference, even President Obama seemed to be wrestling with the legitimacy issue. He cited the risks for America’s reputation when some of its officials berate Afghans for corruption even as the United States bankrolls some officials suspected of corruption.

“If we are saying publicly” that cracking down on corruption is important, the president said, “then our actions have to match up across the board. But it is a challenging environment in which to do that.”

As the White House plans a comprehensive review of its Afghanistan strategy in December, administration officials are now struggling to find numerical measures of progress — what the Pentagon calls “metrics” — to help guide the anticipated American drawdown.

Some of the president’s advisers warn that trying to measure success in the anticorruption campaign could resemble judging progress in Vietnam by enemy body counts. Will victory in Afghanistan be closer with each aide to President Karzai who is hauled off to jail?

Others, perhaps wishfully, see recent events in Iraq as reason for hope in Afghanistan. They point out that violence in Iraq has stayed low even as Iraqi officials squabble for months, unable to form a government — evidence, they say, that insurgencies don’t necessarily gain strength amid political chaos.

The night that President Obama declared an end to combat operations in Iraq, he likened his current strategy in Afghanistan to President Bush’s Iraq “surge.” He stressed that the extra forces are there to “break the Taliban’s momentum” and “provide space” for Afghans to build up government institutions.

For now, his administration is banking on the “Hail Mary” in Kandahar to knock the Taliban back on their heels and build momentum toward “reintegration.” That goal may seem modest, but Washington seems to have little appetite now for trying to re-engineer life in Afghanistan.

And, as much as some in Washington would like to, is there any point in fantasizing about life without Hamid Karzai? Earlier this year, the administration dropped a tough-love

approach in favor of praising him (at least publicly), a posture that makes it easier to move toward unwinding American involvement in Afghanistan.

After all, President Karzai is slated to be in power for another four years.

At least right now, that's farther into the future than officials in Washington care to look.