

August 31, 2009

Dear Ron,

Thank you for sending me the August 27, 2009 article "Combat Patrols Afghanistan" by Mr. Bing West, who I understand is a filmmaker and who was recently "embedded" with US soldiers in Afghanistan. From this experience, he offers his view of the war and our policy. To summarize, he says, "More senior-level attention must be paid to inflicting severe enemy losses in firefight and to arresting the Taliban, so that their morale and networks are broken...[we] need also to design concepts that bring more lethality to the ground battlefield. We're pumping billions in UAVs. Surely we can find technologies and techniques for the grunt." I assume that what he will portray in his film (of which he provides a 30-second "teaser" in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN2Qk2Tbzo8>) is summed up in what he writes. So, while I have not seen his film, I am moved to comment since film is a very powerful medium and when focused on combat is very popular.

What he writes is interesting, but like our policy on Afghanistan, it misses the point.

The point is that Afghanistan is a country with its own, very different, mores and structure. The traditional rulers and its largest community are Pashtun, and, whether we like it or not, the Taliban is their only effective political-military wing. The Taliban have many characteristics we don't like, but they are natives who are anchored in the deeply venerated religion (a rather primitive form of Islam) and the social/cultural code (known in the south as the *Pashtunwali* but with variations governing the lives of all the Afghans). To fight them is to fight Afghanistan. And that is a fight we cannot win.

When I first went to Afghanistan in 1962 to write a US National Policy paper, I hit on an image to bring out the major characteristics of the country: it was like a rocky hill, cut by deep gullies, on which were scattered some 20,000 ping pong balls. The balls represented the autonomous village-states. These communities were united with others by religion and custom but ran their own affairs and were largely autarkic. What the Russians later found was that while they could (and did) smash many balls and chased away the population of thousands of others, they could never find a way to negotiate the end of the war. At any given time, even with the commitment of large military forces enjoying rapid mobility, much like ours, they never controlled more than about 20% of the country and while they won most of the battles they were unable to win the war.

Despite a decade of fighting, with the loss of about 15,000 soldiers, the Russians pulled out in 1989; by then the war in Afghanistan had virtually destroyed the Soviet Union. Theirs was not a wholly new experience. The British had led the

way, fighting wars with the Afghans in 1842, 1878-1880 and 1919, losing about as many Englishmen and British Indian soldiers as the Russians did, before giving up.

The current senior Russian official, Zamir N. Kabulov, who has been there for nearly 30 years, has remarked that we Americans have repeated all their mistakes and are now making new ones “for which we [the Russians] do not own the copyright.”

We are trying to smash the Taliban with force, as Mr. West points out, while keeping our casualties down. He does not discuss it, but we are also attempting to split the Taliban leadership and to divide the Taliban from the Afghan people. A key element in this program is to work through a native government of our choice.

These policies call forth comparison with Vietnam. There we tried and failed to split the Viet Minh leadership, attempting to find “moderates” with whom we could deal and who would turn against the hardliners. We also made continuous, enormous efforts to sever relations between the Viet Minh and the general population (“strategic hamlets,” etc.). And we worked through a native government of our choice. Actually, we had a greater chance of success there than in Afghanistan because the ideology of the Viet Minh, Communism, was foreign to a large part of the population whereas in Afghanistan Islam and the cultural code are “native.”

Our tactics were, of course, what we learned to call “counterinsurgency.” Listen to what the most extensive and detailed official account of the war, *The Pentagon Papers*, has to say about it: “the attempt to translate the newly articulated theory of counterinsurgency into operational reality [through] a mixture of military, social, psychological, economic and political measures...[was] marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally.”

That is essentially the policy that General David Petraeus has resurrected or reinvented and General Stanley McCrystal is attempting to implement.

In 1963, while a Member of the Policy Planning Council, I gave a talk to the US National War College predicting that we would lose the war in Vietnam. In my analysis, I divided the challenge we faced into three parts (political, administrative and military) and in “1960s think,” I assigned to each a percentage of importance. I then put those categories in a historical perspective. I think it is germane today to Afghanistan so I summarize it briefly here: the political component accounted for about 80% and in Vietnam it had been won by the Viet Minh by the late 1940s. As President Eisenhower observed, Ho Chi Minh could have won a free election even in the South. To the administrative element I assigned 15%. By the end of the 1950s, the Viet Minh had destroyed the

administration of the South, killing large numbers of officials, policemen, teachers, and even doctors, so that no taxes could be collected, no messages delivered, no services provided, and no movement made even by South Vietnamese soldiers after dark. The remaining 5%, the military engagement, was what we fought over for the next decade. We had grabbed the short end of the lever. I was sure in 1963 that we would lose. Counterinsurgency and even large-scale combat were effectively irrelevant.

Apply this to Afghanistan: we cannot exercise much if any influence on the political or cultural nature of the country. Neither the British nor the Russians could either. The Afghans uniformly hate foreign intrusion, always have, and do today. So we are concentrating on administration and warfare.

On administration, we have drawn up a laundry list (as Congress required) of the check points of our success. There have been some successes, not many, but some. However, they are ephemeral. As soon as our troops pull out, the Taliban, like the Viet Minh, overturn what has been created or at least encouraged.

Richard Oppel, Jr. fleshed this situation out for one Afghan province in *The New York Times* on August 23, 2009. The governor of Khan Neshin told him he had “no body of advisers to help run the area, no doctors to provide health care, no teachers, no professionals to do much of anything. About all he says he does have are police officers who steal and a small group of Afghan soldiers who say they are here for ‘vacation.’”

It may be better in some areas, but it is certainly worse in others. To stick to my percentage evaluation, give our activities on “nation building,” generously, half of my estimate or 8%.

So that leaves the military about whom Mr. West writes. With superior firepower, we will win all the significant engagements. In the nature of guerrilla warfare, the insurgents will fade away when they cannot win. But they will come back. And today, reports suggest that all we hold is where at any given moment we are on the ground in force. This was our experience in Vietnam and the Russian experience in Afghanistan. So, again generously, let us give our military effort 3%.

That means the odds against us are about ten to one.

Consider also that the former South Vietnam and current Afghan governments are similar in key respects: they are hated and feared by the population. The corruption of the South Vietnamese government was monumental. Officials stole aid money and even the food we were trying to give their people; the equipment and arms we gave them to fight the Viet Minh they sold to the Viet Minh; and they left the dangerous jobs to us. A member of the interagency task force I then

headed, a Marine Corps Colonel (who later became a Lt. General), remarked to me that his experience as operations chief of a division was that if the South Vietnamese army learned of American plans, the Marines were sure to run into an ambush.

Compare Afghanistan: the government we condoned and effectively installed is deeply involved in the drug traffic, sells offices in the police, army and civil service, decides law cases by the size of bribes, steals everything its officials touch, and even has been caught selling our arms and ammunition to the Taliban. Everything is for sale. The reelection of Hamid Karzai was not a travesty; it was a joke. The result (as in Iran) was announced before the votes were counted. Even the ink used to mark voters and ballots turned out to fade. And the Karzai government has, like the Vietnamese government, almost no effect outside of downtown Kabul. Our troops find that Afghan soldiers keep as far out of danger as possible; many even go over to the Taliban. As in Vietnam, our opponents, aided by the local population, “own the night.”

What is different from Vietnam in Afghanistan is the presence of the warlords. They are hated and feared universally, and they virtually control the government. Karzai had to call back the notorious Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum to win, if that is what he did, his election and now has made him effectively co-ruler. Worse, the warlords are associated in the public mind with us. They are the Taliban’s greatest asset. Even people who hate the Taliban prefer them to the warlords. Not the most subtle or diplomatic man in the world, Richard Holbrooke apparently engaged in a shouting match three days ago with Karzai over the role of the warlords and the blatant fraud of the elections. (For those who remember former Vice President Henry Cabot Lodge’s dealings with the Ngo Dinh, it was Vietnam *redux!*)

So what does the future hold? President Obama says we must win. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates says we must stay there “a few years.” The senior British commander-designate, General Sir David Richards, put a number on it: 40 years. (That, incidentally, was the number Neoconservative James Woolsey came up with for our worldwide Crusade, so I suppose it translates into what *The Economist* called “the path desired by the Neoconservatives, permanent, unending war.”) But, the well-informed British ambassador, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, wrote a few months ago in a leaked memorandum that the war was already lost. The Spaniards are about to withdraw; a remarkable photographic collection (carreterasafganistan.pps) shows why: even without considering the Taliban, they could not cope with Afghan terrain. Canada has put a terminal date on its involvement and both the Germans and Norwegians are “wobbling.”

My calculation, amateurish as it may be but based on more professional calculations on the Iraq campaign, is that the Afghan war will cost the American economy (not just the Congressional allocations of a hundred or so billion dollars

a year) between \$3 and \$6 trillion dollars or a quarter to a half of our GDP, making much of President Obama's domestic plan impossible. In short, Afghanistan is on the way to becoming as politically fatal for him as Vietnam was for Lyndon Johnson.

Despite this, President Obama has decided to "stay the course" and has sought to justify his decision by proclaiming that Afghanistan is the fountain-head of terrorism. Terrorists based there will attack America. This is wrong in two senses:

First, terrorism will be promoted rather than contained by our military action in Afghanistan (especially as our campaigns have spilled over into Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq and potentially could include Iran). More "boots on the ground" is a recipe for increased danger.

Second, terrorists do not need Afghanistan for their work. It is a poor launching pad, remote and poorly served by communications and transport. The men who carried out the attacks in the September 2001 were based in Europe. And, future terrorists could attack from anywhere. Even "winning" in Afghanistan would not stop but almost certainly would incite them.

Despite our long experience with it, dating back to our own revolution (as I have shown in my book *The Birth of America*), we have not understood the nature and cause of terrorism: in a few words, terrorism is the weapon of the weak and they will use it when it is the only means they have to attempt to redress what they regard as wrongs. This story has been repeated over the last two centuries in various parts of South America as well as in Ireland, Spain, Yugoslavia, Greece, Italy, France, Palestine, Turkey, South Africa, Kenya, India, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, China and Russia (as I document in my book *Violent Politics*). When we approve of the terrorists' aims we call them Freedom Fighters, but the only difference between terrorists and freedom fighters is our attitude toward their objectives, not their means of action.

We also confuse the Taliban and al-Qaida, but they are very different from one another: the Taliban, as I have said, is a national political organization, indeed a government in *internal* exile, based on the traditional leadership and largest community of Afghanistan, while al-Qaida is a loose amalgam of men and women from all over the world who act on their own; it is not an organization and lacks central command. Usama bin Ladin is not their general but their guru. Their issues vary but, in general, they arise from the ragged, violent heritage of (mostly but not entirely Western) imperialism.

So what to do about these things:

- 1) we must get out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible with as little damage to us and the Afghans as is possible. I have (separately)

identified a way to do this. We have what may be a fleeting opportunity right now to do it quickly and cleanly.

2) We will have to continue to take reasonable police action against and to collect information on hostile groups. But no amount of police or especially military action will give us complete protection. Moreover, use of these means is dangerous to our own society and to our political and legal system. We must tread the fine line that divides “security” from “tyranny.” Doing so is now and will continue to be one of the major domestic challenges for Americans. The danger of failure is great and the cost of failure would be horrible. Forty years of warfare, as the Neoconservatives advocate and the generals tell us the war in Afghanistan will require, will probably not defeat *them* but it certainly could destroy what we most cherish.

3) Consequently, the long term policy we need is one that will address issues that empower terrorists. We cannot “solve” or even ameliorate all of them. (For example, there is little or nothing we can do about the Chinese imperialist and colonialist policies against Tibet or the Uigurs in Xinjiang/Sinkiang/Chinese Turkestan.) But we can help to reach accommodations on a number of others and smooth the path toward national conciliation. We should make these actions a basic thrust of our national defense policy. Wisely carried into effect, it is our best route to security over the longer term.

4) I do not believe what happens to Usama bin Ladin is a “vital” issue for us. Chasing him makes good press but, in fact, he is little more than a symbol. However, if we decide that he must be immobilized, I have identified a way to accomplish this within the context of the Afghan *Pashtunwali’s* code of *melmastia* (roughly, “sanctuary”). What we have tried to do, capture or kill him by offering the Pashtuns huge bribes, has so far at least failed; attempting it has antagonized the Pashtuns because it is taken as an insult to their code of honor; but there is a way we can render him harmless which is what even those who believe him to be a major danger should desire.

5) We must educate our people to understand and accept the fact that our little globe is multicultural. The more we try to force other peoples to recast themselves in our mold, as the Neoconservatives have tried to make us do, the more enemies we make and the greater danger we create. Indeed, even trying to do so is both beyond our means and also is destructive of the very things that we should cherish. We should aim instead to turn President Obama’s June 2009 speech in Cairo into real policy. I have also elsewhere sketched out some of the steps we could take in this direction.

My own experience with Afghanistan, as I have mentioned, goes back almost half a century. My involvement in Vietnam was fleeting but benefitted from close contact with the major players and access to everything America could find out. And my study of insurgency, guerrilla warfare and terrorism has been exhaustive and is on record in my book *Violent Politics*. You will perhaps forgive me for looking somewhat askance at the instant experts who provide us -- and worse our President -- with "winning" formulas that have failed every time they were tried. It may make good cinema, but Mr. West's portrayal is the most recent in a long sequence of such beguiling efforts.

Odysseus was right to tie himself to the mast and stop up the ears of his crew when the sirens sang...just off the rocks.

Sincerely,

Bill