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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Stretching Out an Ugly Struggle

By GRAHAM E. FULLER

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Many decades ago as a fledgling C.I.A. officer in the field, I was naïvely convinced that if the facts were reported back to Washington correctly, everything else would take care of itself in policymaking. The first loss of innocence comes with the harsh recognition that “all politics are local” and that overseas realities bear only a partial relationship to foreign-policy formulation back home.

So in looking at President Obama’s new policy directions for Afghanistan, what goes down in Washington politics far outweighs analyses of local conditions.

I had hoped that Obama would level with the American people that the war in Afghanistan is not being won, indeed is not winnable within any practicable framework. But such an admission — however accurate — would sign the political death warrant of a president to be portrayed as having snatched defeat out of the jaws of “victory.”

The “objective” situation in Afghanistan remains a mess. Senior commanders acknowledge that we are not now winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan; indeed, we never can, and certainly not at gunpoint. Most Pashtuns will never accept a U.S. plan for Afghanistan’s future. The non-Pashtuns — Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, etc. — naturally welcome any outside support in what is a virtual civil war.

America has inadvertently ended up choosing sides in this war. U.S. forces are perceived by large numbers of Afghans as an occupying army inflicting large civilian casualties. The struggle has now metastasized into Pakistan — with even higher stakes.

Obama’s policies would seem an unsatisfying compromise among contending arguments. Thirty thousand more troops are less than called for and will not turn the tide; arguably they present more American targets for attack.

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They will heighten traditional xenophobia against foreigners traipsing through Pashtun villages and homes. It is a fool's errand to persuade the locals in Pashtun territory that the Taliban are the enemy and the U.S. is their friend. Whatever mixed feelings Pashtuns have toward the Taliban, they know the Taliban will be among them long after Washington tires with this mission.

The strategy of the Bush era envisioned Afghanistan as a vital imperial outpost in a post-Soviet dream world. That world vision is gone — except to a few Washington diehards who haven't grasped the new emerging global architectures of power, economics, prestige and influence.

The Taliban will inevitably figure significantly in the governance of almost any future Afghanistan, like it or not. Future Taliban leaders, once rid of foreign occupation, will have little incentive to support global jihadi schemes — they never really have by choice. The Taliban inherited Osama bin Laden as a poison pill from the past when they came to power in 1996 and have learned a bitter lesson about what it means to lend state support to a prominent terrorist group.

The Taliban with a voice in power will have every incentive to welcome foreign money and expertise into the country, including the Pashtun regions —as long as it is not part of a Western strategic package.

An austere Islamic regime is not the ideal outcome for Afghanistan, but it is by far the most realistic. To reverse ground realities and achieve a markedly different outcome is not in the cards and will pose Obama with the same dilemma next year.

Meanwhile, Pakistan will never be willing or able to solve Washington's Afghanistan dilemma. Pakistan's own stability has been brought to the brink by U.S. demands that it solve America's self-created problem in Afghanistan. Pakistan will eventually be forced to resolve Afghanistan itself — but only after the U.S. has gone, and only by making a pact with Taliban forces both inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan itself.

Washington will not accept that for now, but it will be forced to fairly soon. Maybe the Pakistanis can root out bin Laden, but meanwhile, Al Qaeda has extended its autonomous franchises around the world, and terrorists can train and plan almost anywhere in the world; they do not need Afghanistan.

By now, as in so many other elements of the Global War on Terror, the U.S. has become more part of the problem than part of the solution. We are sending troops to defend troops that themselves constitute an affront to Afghan nationalism. Only expeditious American withdrawal from Afghanistan will prevent exacerbation of the problem.

Afghans must themselves face the complex mechanics of internal struggle and reconciliation. They have done so over long periods of their history.



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The ultimate outcome is of greater strategic consequence to Pakistan, Russia, China, Iran, India and others in the region than to the United States.

Europe and Canada have lost all stomach for this mission that is now promoted primarily in terms of “saving NATO” for future (and obsolescent) “out of area” struggles in a world in which Western strategic preferences can no longer predominate.

In a counterbalance to the mini-surge, Obama wisely establishes a date for genuine withdrawal in 2011. The surge may just be worth it if it enables Obama to put the U.S. military and Kabul on notice that time is quickly running out to demonstrate genuine political and military progress.

So the ugly struggle continues with little prospect for genuine improvement. There are no good choices. Obama has only kicked the can down the road.

Only with immense luck will his real goal — creation of the minimally acceptable terms for an American withdrawal — come into sight, providing a tiny fig leaf to mask what will essentially constitute a strategic American failure that was inherent nearly from the beginning in America’s global military response to the challenge of 9/11.

*Graham E. Fuller is a former C.I.A. station chief in Kabul and a former vice-chairman of the C.I.A.’s National Intelligence Council. He is author of numerous books on the Middle East, including “The Future of Political Islam.”*

*Tribune Media Services*

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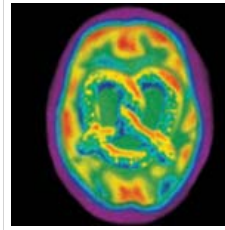
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