For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

Next in Afghanistan: Learning From Our Mistakes Adil E. Shamoo and Bonnie Bricker, November 24, 2009

As our nation waits for a presidential decision on our direction in Afghanistan, Americans have also had time to reflect on our Afghanistan policy. No longer are we in Afghanistan for the clear mission of removing al-Qaida bases; many of those have moved on to Pakistan. Instead, what was once perceived as a decisively clear action has become morally murky eight years later.
We have ventured down this murky path for many good reasons. It was easy for al-Qaida to hide in Afghanistan due to the rule of the like-minded Taliban. The tribal culture, remote regions and non-existent central rule created ample opportunities for cover. The isolated Afghan people, suffering from poor to non-existent education and extreme poverty, provided fertile ground for easy corruption, coercion, and recruitment into sympathetic assistance for al-Qaida. Shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan, it became apparent that our mission was more complex than initially realized. We overthrew the Taliban in 2002 with a few hundred Special Forces and a few thousand paramilitary CIA operatives. Yet as we approach 2010, we are trying to determine if tens of thousands troops added to 62,000 current troops will make a difference in Afghanistan.

In this most difficult period of reflection, the administration must clearly define US goals in Afghanistan. Often referred to as the "burial ground of empires", Afghanistan's history, culture and complexities demand a realistic approach. The following goals provide the broad outline for a policy that can continue to provide increased security for our nation while improving the status of the Afghan people.

At the time of our initial invasion in 2002, our goal was the elimination of terrorist bases from which attacks to US soil were planned and practiced. This should continue to be a primary goal. Our involvement with the governance of Afghanistan has also demonstrated the importance of a stable, secure and *sovereign* nation for the Afghan people. In order to help Afghans rebuild their nation we must help to reconstruct areas decimated by the continued conflict. And finally, in order to help our anti-terrorism efforts, it will be important for Afghans to be generally pro-American or at least receptive to our involvement.

In order to enlist the Afghan people to our side, it will be essential to understand the cultural context, helping the Afghans to build their country's infrastructure according to their specific needs. We must also be willing to cooperate with the U.N. and recruit Afghanistan's neighbors to help us in this endeavor. Finally, a long range plan must be developed for education and training of Afghans so that Afghans are able to address their many areas of need with less outside intervention.

In order to accomplish these goals our actions must lose their moral murkiness in favor of

moral clarity. The current regime of Hamid Karzai has been notably corrupt; this wide-scale corruption remains an impediment to the progress of the government and the populace. We must make it clear that the American people will not support and fund a corrupt regime. If necessary, our funding can be given to non-governmental organizations in order to by-pass a corrupt governmental infrastructure.

We have failed many times over in our recent actions in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan. The misery inflicted by our mistakes can never be rectified. But regardless of the past, we still must stand clear-eyed to face the future. We Americans pride ourselves on our high-minded ideals. Now is the time to show the world that these ideals are not merely words. In order for Afghans to embrace a new order, we must be ready to do the same.

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