

## Afghanistan: A war without end, or rationale

By Eugene Robinson  
Friday, October 1, 2010

Could somebody please remind me just what it is that we're achieving in Afghanistan? Don't all speak at once. No, I mean what *good* things we're accomplishing. Anybody? Hello?

The more we learn about the war -- both from the battlefield and from the White House -- the more depressing it all becomes. The portrait that emerges is of a failing military campaign whose course is being determined by momentum, not by logic. Everyone seems to appreciate this fact, but no one is willing to stop the madness. So on we go.

For me, the most striking revelation from uber-journalist Bob Woodward's new book, "Obama's Wars," is the extent to which the officials who are planning and prosecuting this war recognize how unlikely it is to end well.

Begin with President Obama. He campaigned on the position that the United States should end the war in Iraq so that more attention and resources could be focused on Afghanistan, which he subsequently has called a "war of necessity." Once in office, he quickly approved an urgent Pentagon request for 21,000 additional troops. But before making any further commitments, he sensibly ordered a comprehensive review of the war's goals, strategy and prospects. Fine so far.

But then, according to Woodward's account, the president looked at the two major options that were being presented, decided they wouldn't work and proceeded to devise a strategy of his own. The generals wanted 40,000 additional troops to pursue an all-out counterinsurgency program based on winning the goodwill and allegiance of the Afghan people. Skeptics, led by Vice President Biden, argued for a "hybrid" option -- essentially, a counterterrorism strategy of destroying al-Qaeda -- that would require just 20,000 added troops.

By that point, you will note, the issue had become how sharply to escalate the war -- not whether to escalate at all.

Obama was deeply concerned about the costs, both human and financial, of an open-ended military commitment. Dissatisfied with the way the Pentagon was trying to manipulate the discussion, the president took it on himself to author a six-page "terms sheet" that Woodward describes as a "lawyerly compromise." He capped the increase at 30,000, replacing the word "counterinsurgency" with the new mantra of "target, train and transfer," and decreed that the troops sent in this limited surge would begin to come home in July 2011. All this was supposed to eliminate any "wiggle room."

But the Pentagon wiggles better than the dancers at what is euphemistically called a "gentlemen's club." Almost immediately, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the brass

began telling anyone who would listen that next July is just a date to begin a withdrawal - perhaps of relatively few troops, and only if "conditions" allowed. Woodward quotes Gen. David Petraeus, Obama's commander in Afghanistan, as saying privately, "You have to recognize also that I don't think you win this war. . . . This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives."

Can anyone explain how that differs from the open-ended commitment that Obama claims to have rejected? I thought not.

This jumble of contradictions might make sense if we were accomplishing something. But the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai is as erratic and corrupt as ever, the Taliban remains robust and has expanded its sphere of operations, and even the most optimistic supporters of the war see whatever progress we have made as limited and fragile. Hawks criticize the president for setting his deadline -- telling the enemy, in effect, to just wait us out -- but if you assume that U.S. troops will ever leave, the specific date is irrelevant. It's the enemy's homeland, not ours.

But this war is only tangentially about Afghanistan. The real problem is nuclear-armed Pakistan, our supposed ally, which has played a double game -- accepting billions of dollars from the United States to fight terrorism while giving clandestine advice and support to the Taliban and tolerating the presence of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Pakistan's civilian government is weak; its military establishment calls the shots; and its national security focus is on India, not Afghanistan or the threat of international terrorism.

"We need to make clear to people that the cancer is in Pakistan." Obama said during his war-strategy review, according to Woodward's book. But if the purpose of this war is really to influence events in Pakistan, we're not doing a very good job.

One last question: Isn't it time for another strategy review?

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