

Losing in Afghanistan

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

Last week, the House of Representatives voted 215-210 for \$33 billion to fund Barack Obama's troop increase in Afghanistan. But there was considerable opposition to giving the President a blank check. One hundred sixty-two House members supported an amendment that would have tied the funding to a withdrawal timetable. One hundred members voted for another amendment that would have rejected the \$33 billion for the 30,000 new troops already on their way to Afghanistan; that amendment would have required that the money be spent to redeploy our troops out of Afghanistan. Democrats voting for the second amendment included House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and nine Republicans. Both amendments failed to pass.

The new appropriation is in addition to the \$130 billion Congress has already approved for Iraq and Afghanistan this year. And the 2010 Pentagon budget is \$693 billion, more than all other discretionary spending programs combined.

Our economic crisis is directly tied to the cost of the war. We are in desperate need of money for education and health care. The \$1 million per year it costs to maintain a single soldier in Afghanistan could pay for 20 green jobs.

Not only is the war bankrupting us, it has come at a tragic cost in lives. June was the deadliest month for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. In addition to the 1,149 American soldiers killed in Afghanistan, untold numbers of Afghan civilians have died from the war – untold because the Defense Department refuses to maintain statistics of anyone except U.S. personnel. After all, Donald Rumsfeld quipped in 2005, “death has a tendency to encourage a depressing view of war.”

There are other “depressing” aspects of this war as well. As Gen. Stanley McChrystal reported just days before he got the axe, there is a “resilient and growing insurgency” with high levels of violence and corruption within the Karzai government. McChrystal's remarks were considered “off message” by the White House, which was also irked by the general's criticisms of Obama officials in a Rolling Stone article. McChrystal believes that you can't kill your way out of Afghanistan. “The Russians killed 1 million Afghans and that didn't work.”

He and his successor, Gen. David Petraeus, likely disagree on the need to prevent civilian casualties (known as “Civ Cas”). McChrystal instituted some of the most stringent rules of engagement the U.S. military has had in a war zone: “Patrol only in areas that you are reasonably certain that you will not have to defend yourselves with lethal force.” Commanders cannot fire on buildings or other places if they have reason to believe civilians might be present unless their own forces are in imminent danger of being overrun. And they must end engagements and withdraw rather than risk harming noncombatants. McChrystal knows that for every innocent person you kill, you create new enemies; he calls it “insurgent

math.” According to the Los Angeles Times, McChrystal “was credited with bringing about a substantial drop in the proportion of civilian casualties suffered at the hands of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force and its Afghan allies.”

While testifying in Congress before he was confirmed to take McChrystal’s place, Petraeus told senators that some U.S. soldiers had complained about the former’s rules of engagement aimed at preventing civilian casualties.

According to the Rolling Stone article, Obama capitulated to McChrystal’s insistence that more troops were needed in Afghanistan. In his December 1 speech at West Point, the article says, “the president laid out all the reasons why fighting the war in Afghanistan is a bad idea: It’s expensive; we’re in an economic crisis; a decade-long commitment would sap American power; Al Qaeda has shifted its base of operations to Pakistan. Then,” the article continued, “without ever using the words ‘victory’ or ‘win,’ Obama announced that he would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, almost as many as McChrystal had requested.”

Both Obama and Petraeus no longer speak of “victory” over the Taliban; they both hold open the possibility of settlement with the Taliban. Indeed, Maj. Gen. Bill Mayville, chief of operations for McChrystal, told Rolling Stone, “It’s not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win.”

The majority of Americans now oppose the war in Afghanistan. Fareed Zakaria had some harsh words for the war on his CNN show, saying that “the whole enterprise in Afghanistan feels disproportionate, a very expensive solution to what is turning out to be a small but real problem.” Noting that CIA director Leon Panetta admitted that the number of Al Qaeda left in Afghanistan may be 50 to 100, Zakaria asked, “why are we fighting a major war” there? “Last month alone there were more than 100 NATO troops killed in Afghanistan,” he said. “That’s more than one allied death for each living Al Qaeda member in the country in just one month.” Citing estimates that the war will cost more than \$100 billion in 2010 alone, Zakaria observed, “That’s a billion dollars for every member of Al Qaeda thought to be living in Afghanistan in one year.” He queried, “Why are we investing so much time, energy, and effort when Al Qaeda is so weak?” And Zakaria responded to the argument that we should continue fighting the Taliban because they are allied with Al Qaeda by saying, “this would be like fighting Italy in World War II after Hitler’s regime had collapsed and Berlin was in flames just because Italy had been allied with Germany.”

There is also division in the Republican ranks over the war. Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele made some gutsy comments about the war in Afghanistan, saying it is not winnable and calling it a “war of Obama’s choosing.” (Even though George W. Bush first invaded Afghanistan, Obama made the escalation of U.S. involvement a centerpiece of his campaign.) Steele said that if Obama is “such a student of history, has he not understood that, you know, that’s the one thing you don’t do, is engage in a land war in Afghanistan? Everyone who has tried, over 1,000 years of history, has failed.” Interestingly, Republicans Lindsey Graham and John McCain slammed Steele and jumped to Obama’s defense. Rep. Ron Paul, however, agreed with Steele, saying, “Michael Steele has it right, and Republicans should stick by him.”

Obama will likely persist with his failed war. He appears to be stumbling along the same path that Lyndon Johnson followed. Johnson lost his vision for a “Great Society” when he

became convinced that his legacy depended on winning the Vietnam War. It appears that Obama has similarly lost his way.

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