

War in Afghanistan could Doom Obama Presidency

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We hope for Barack Obama to have all the success in the world. And given his smarts — he seems far and away the smartest president-elect in the last 45 years — he should although, as one person put it to me, people hope for so much from him that there conceivably could be no way he will not disappoint and begin to catch tremendous flak, even early on. Yet one nonetheless hopes he will be tremendously successful.

There are, however, a few things about which he should be very careful, in the interest of both himself and the nation. To me, foremost among them is the possibility of war in Afghanistan. Obama has said we should get out of Iraq, but fight in Afghanistan. If he really believes that instead of just having said it for campaign purposes, and if he really does it, then his presidency is already doomed.

Neither Alexander the Great, nor the British nor the Russians succeeded there. The British once sent out a column of what — 20 or 25 thousand troops? — of whom I think two returned (that's two as in two, not as in two thousand). The Russians had, I think, about 150,000 men there and lost what, about 14,000 dead, despite modern weapons, if I remember correctly? There is something about the countryside, the people, the mindset that does not admit of victory by invaders.

We found out in Viet Nam and Iraq that we cannot accomplish our imperial military aims any better than the British, the French (in Algeria and Indo China) or the Russians could. And we already have learned in Afghanistan that we cannot convert that opium growing, warlord-ridden nation into a democracy that focuses on other things. If Obama were to fight a war in Afghanistan, his Presidency would be as good as over. Huge numbers of us who supported him, and have hopes for him, will leave him and begin assailing him.

I have mentioned at other times that war has destroyed five presidencies in the last 90 years, those of Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and George W. Bush. History says it will destroy Obama's too if he really meant it when he said he will fight in Afghanistan, that graveyard for empires.

And, when one thinks about it, why fight in Afghanistan?

Initially we fought there because its government, the Taliban, had harbored Al Qaeda.

So we decided to depose the Taliban instead of simply destroying Al Qaeda's camps — a very questionable decision, if one that was at least understandable given the temper of the time. But in the long run it didn't work. The Taliban are back. The opium is back. The warlords continue. And when they have to, Al Qaeda personnel simply go into Pakistan. To think we are going to change the situation (without the commitment of at least what — a

million men? 1.5 million men?) defies both recent history and long term history since Alexander the Great. Even if we were to commit a million men, Al Qaeda will simply go to Pakistan. And then what will we do — invade Pakistan? Not to mention that our military actions and our actions against prisoners are our opponents' finest recruiting tools and thereby promote endless war.

Better to try to achieve peace, use humint to locate enemies, and, if and when necessary, destroy enemy camps or bases with all that vaunted high tech military stuff like predators and guided bombs.

One can only pray that a smart guy like Obama sees the light on this and does not fight a war in Afghanistan. Otherwise one will in future have to write that war destroyed the presidencies of Wilson, Truman, Johnson, Nixon, Bush and Obama.

There is another, lesser matter that I think Obama should be careful about. It is being said that, to some extent, he is filling his transition team and administration with persons from the Clinton Administration. (It would be harsh to call them retreads, would it not?) There are obvious reasons for this: experience and keeping peace within the Democratic Party are two of them. When Carter failed to do this in 1976, his administration foundered, partly for lack of experience. But if Obama goes too far with this, he is going to create bitter enmity among so many who had much to do with his success and who will be very put off by a second coming of Clintonia.

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