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Afghanistan defies military solution

by Colman McCarthy



Afghan boys watch Feb. 23 as U.S. soldiers stand guard during a patrol at Barabad village, Kunar Province, in eastern Afghanistan. (CNS/Reuters/Oleg Popov)

Tragic, pathetic and blood-soaked is the president's escalation of his war in Afghanistan. Congress, war-enabling but far from war-weary as long as body counts remain relatively low, is supplying the money. In June, the latest supplemental spending bill doles out \$100 billion-plus, enough to make it through the end of September. Then it will be more stay-the-course money.

In the fall, the number of soldiers posted in Afghanistan will have risen from the current 28,000 up to a projected 68,000.

In its eighth year, what George W. Bush commenced and Barack Obama expands has become America's second longest war. With no planned exits or deadlines, and only 31 Democrats having the spine to join Rep. Jim McGovern (D - Mass.) in voting no to the June bill, Afghanistan is likely to replace the Vietnam War in length. Toward the end of Bush's second term, frustrated field commanders were sending word back to Washington that they can't kill their way to victory. Obama's reply to that? His campaign mantra: "Yes, we can."

More troops and more air strikes will do it, he thinks. Firing Gen. David McKiernan as the top commander and sending in Gen. Stanley McChrystal will do it. Listening to defense secretary Robert Gates tell a Senate committee on June 9 that he has "more optimism about the future than I've had in a long time in Afghanistan" will do it. Ignoring the statement three days later of Gen. David Petraeus -- "There is no question that the situation has deteriorated" and that the violence in Afghanistan has reached the highest levels since the 2001 American invasion -- will do it.

Obama's delusion that his policies can defeat Taliban and al Qaeda fighters is understandable. America is the world's wealthiest country and its military is equipped with superior weapons and technology. Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed and poorest nations, life expectancy is 44 years, nearly 75 percent of the population is illiterate and per capita income is \$350. Taliban fighters, hiding in caves and moving around by foot or donkeys, have home-field advantage which is enough to make it a level field against the U.S. colossus.

That any large number of Afghan citizens appreciates the American presence -- protecting the natives from the Taliban -- is the grossest delusion of all. Bombs dropped by American fighter pilots have killed more than 200 civilians. The death-dealing from F-18 jets and B-1B bombers to impoverished villagers has been the shame of the American presence in Afghanistan.

It's been a five-step process: first the killing, then local people counting and burying their dead, then the Pentagon saying the numbers are overblown, then the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission verifies the toll, then the Pentagon stonewalls no longer and issues tepid statements of regret.

Time passes, air strikes continue and the slaughter of civilians goes on. In Vietnam, the strategy was "We had to destroy the village to save it." In Afghanistan: We have to kill civilians to save them. The loss of lives is matched by the loss of money. In June the Commission on Wartime Contracting, a federal agency, reported that more than \$13 billion has been squandered to waste and fraud in contracts to companies profiting from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The complexity of Afghanistan -- its poverty, culture, the yearning of its people to be free of violence whether from within or without -- defies any military solution. Only when Obama and his generals publicly apologize to Afghans, and Congress gives billions of dollars in reparations for the killing and destruction of the past eight years, will they come close to earning forgiveness.

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