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Ending the war in Afghanistan

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U.S. Army soldiers from Delta Company, a part of Task Force 1-66, patrol in the village of Gul Kalacheh in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan Sept. 19. (CNS photo/Oleg Popov, Reuters)

COMMENTARY

The strategy for ending the U.S. war in Afghanistan is unfolding.

An intense military campaign to force the Taliban to negotiate is taking place. Operations to control the situation in the nearby mountains of Pakistan have started. President Obama wants to end the war by the end of his first term.

The popular opposition and lack of enthusiasm for the U. S. engagement in Afghanistan is similar to three other major post-World War II military involvements: Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq.

The United States no longer wins wars; that ended with World War II. Settlements are now negotiated with the goal of protecting U.S. interests. These were to a degree, accomplished in Korea and Vietnam. In the case of Iraq, it is still debatable.

Afghanistan might imitate the geo-political factors that terminated the fighting in Korea. In the election year of 1952 there was a highly attractive candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who sensed the opportune time for ending the struggle. Will similar factors come in to play in the election year of 2012?

In the Korean War there were 53,686 U.S. military casualties plus 92,134 wounded. In Vietnam there were 58,209 casualties; 153,303 wounded. In regard to the Iraq War there were 4,404 casualties; 31,839

wounded. Currently in Afghanistan, the number of casualties is 1,135 and 6,141 wounded.

It should be noted that these numbers account for U.S. military personnel and do not include the numbers of local peoples who have suffered greatly. There is growing "inside Washington" discussion that U.S. leadership is seeking a settlement that ensures Afghanistan will not serve as a sanctuary for anti-U.S. terrorist operations.

Will U.S. leadership emerge that can, like Dwight Eisenhower in 1952-53, put together the factors that will allow the war to end while preserving minimum U.S. interest?

Background: No more unconditional surrenders

As it became apparent in the spring of 1945 that Hitler's Germany was losing the Second World War, various attempts to negotiate an end to that war were unsuccessful. The Vatican and other neutral sources that were prepared to participate in negotiating a settlement were completely rebuffed by the Allied leadership.

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The Franklin Roosevelt principle of unconditional surrender was continued by President Truman. Later, in the spring of 1945 when the Japanese ambassador to the Vatican indicated to Pope Pius XII that Japan was "ready to talk," the American response was clear and immediate: "Only unconditional surrender."

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought about the unconditional surrender of the Japanese Empire on Sept. 2, 1945, on the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

The ending of World War II in 1945 was the last time a militarily engaged United States witnessed the traditional ending of a war. Only eight years later in 1953, General Eisenhower, aware the American people were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with U.S. involvement in Korea, initiated the process for ending that conflict.

In the election campaign of the fall of 1952 Eisenhower's opponent was Governor Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee for president. Supporting Governor Stevenson in the election was President Harry Truman, a Democrat, who was completing his term of office.

Truman publicly criticized and even asked Eisenhower what he would do to solve the Korean War dilemma. Eisenhower was very clear in his five word answer. His "I will go to Korea" was the key that turned the election in his direction. He knew the American people did not want a long and costly war.

Once in office, President Eisenhower, who retained the affectionate nickname of "Ike," was the leader with the right plan needed at that moment. The hero of World War II, popular with millions of American soldiers for his common guy approach, guided Americans through the complicated conclusion of the Korean War. He did it in the "Eisenhower Way."

It should be noted that after Eisenhower ended the Korean War, not one American military member was killed in military action in the remaining seven and one-half years of his presidency.

The Vietnam War

The U.S. involvement in Vietnam was incremental.

By the early 1970s Vietnam became a major political challenge. The American people were not unified in their commitment to this war. With the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam and the resignation of President Nixon in 1974 -- with Vice President Ford, not elected by the American people, succeeding as president on Aug. 9, 1974 -- it was apparent that the United States needed to find a solution to exiting the Vietnam War with dignity. Few were advocating absolute victory or unconditional surrender.

When the violence ended in May 1975, it was a solution that the American leadership sought. We avoided any appearance of surrender. After Korea, Vietnam was the second major U.S. experience in a "limited war" where the U.S. did not seek absolute victory over an enemy.

Panama, Grenada, and The Faulkland Islands

Unilateral military operations where the United States was a clear victor have taken place since Korea. In some ways they reflect major police operations rather than war engagements. The U.S. invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 are two examples. The Falkland Islands in 1982, where the U.K. fought a 72 day war and Argentina surrendered, is another example.

But in major commitments, the United States, since Korea, has fought "limited engagements." This is the current political reality. In our opinion it is the trend for the future.

The opinion polls are clear; there is an absence of strong support for the war in Afghanistan. Contrarily, there is no great drive for a withdrawal.

The top leadership of the United States understands the Afghan war is a "limited engagement" for a specific purpose. With two years left in the term of President Obama, what are the possibilities of a settlement?

First of all, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who quarterbacked the talks leading to the Dayton Peace Accord which ended the Bosnian War in 1995, is working on this immediate challenge. Also directly at the scene in Afghanistan is General David Petraeus. He is a highly respected military leader who is also a geo-politician. He has a clear grasp of strategy and an excellent record of developing relations with colleagues based on trust.

Will Korea 1952 be repeated in Afghanistan 2012? It was possible in 1952 because a highly credible figure, Dwight D. Eisenhower, took the lead, "went to Korea", and initiated the process of halting the conflict in Korea with dignity. In our opinion, similar factors are present in the Afghanistan situation. Needed now is the will to end a "limited engagement", which simultaneously meets U.S. needs for protecting U.S. interests.

Afghanistan was a complex mystery for the British in the 19th century and for the Soviets in the 20th century. Both empires, at the height of their respective power, were unsuccessful because they sought total military victory. The United States is not making that mistake now.

Other factors in the current situation include Hamid Karzai, the American-sponsored leader in Kabul; Mullah Omar, the War Leader in Kandahar; and terrorist leader Bin Laden, someplace between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The key leadership needed to spearhead the procedure of cessation in Afghanistan is the President of the United States.

Do we now have the leadership and the circumstances that will make an ending of the war in Afghanistan possible?

President Eisenhower in 1952-53 had the resolve and also the trust of the American people. Does President Obama have the determination and, equally important, the trust of the American people necessary to usher us through the complex steps of terminating an increasingly unpopular war in a manner in which U.S. interests are protected?

If the Afghan war situation is not resolved by the summer of 2012 as the American people prepare for their November 2012 presidential elections, they might respond to a new leadership that, as in the case of Eisenhower, they trust.

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