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Ten Years Gone

by Stanton S. Coerr

You must see to it that your fighting man knows the reason for your intervention here, reasons that touch him personally, in order for him to be able to accept the sacrifices demanded of him.

-Jean Larteguy, French analyst of Dien Bien Phu, speaking in Vietnam to Henry Cabot Lodge, 1963

In Afghanistan, there is no road for the American war...there is only the path we make by moving forward. We have, however, moved down a path like this once before. President Barack Obama is proceeding in Afghanistan in 2011 by pushing down the same national strategic path John F. Kennedy took fifty years earlier when he began main force intervention into Vietnam, and we are headed for the same failures. In providing neither coherent overall foreign policy nor a crisp and specific national strategic endstate for the campaign in Afghanistan Obama, like Kennedy before him, leaves foreign policy to military officers on the ground to invent as they go.

As in Vietnam, the war in Afghanistan was lost before it was begun: it is lost because it cannot be won. Again our massive and superior military force is losing a campaign to a tough insurgent force. Again we are spending tens of billions overseas, and collapsing under our own weight in the field. Again our strength is being used against us. And again, by providing military answers to political questions, we are in quicksand in the developing world.

The New Face

The elections of 1960 and of 2008 were each won with a promise of turning inward. Americans were eager to work on civil rights in the first election, and on health care, jobs and the economy in the latter. Both elections generated excitement and a sense of page-turning following the ascendancy of fresh faces, Jack Kennedy and Barack Obama: handsome young big-city Democrat Senators with attractive young wives and two adorable small children replacing grey, staid incumbent two-term representatives of the Republican establishment.

The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy represented – and is still remembered as – America's pivoting away from mid-century mass mobilization and societal total war against totalitarian and imperialist peer (and even superior) enemies. America's New Frontier would mean quieter military-only intervention into much smaller, much more winnable brushfire proxy wars, in which Communists would be met in their theater and on their terms, but in which the technologically superior Americans would doubtless triumph. Our foreign interventions would be subcontracted to small teams of quiet, intense professional military men. A half-century later, Barack Obama was a *tabula rasa* onto which was written a similar policy repudiation of major theater war, and a similar predisposition for military answers to political, cultural and religious questions.

Each young President arrived in Washington with something to prove to the national security establishment. Jack Kennedy, though himself a decorated war veteran, followed into the Oval Office perhaps the most prominent military officer of the century, the five-star general who had freed the world from tyranny. Barack Obama had no military background and campaigned on domestic issues, and thus was viewed, as was his predecessor New Democrat in the Oval Office, with suspicion by the uniformed leadership as well as national security establishment in Washington. In both cases, the Democrat foreign policy elite, out of Washington for eight years, returned from pasture led by their foreign policy hawks and ready to pursue – or, in Barack Obama’s case, expand – military campaigns overseas. Each President established immediately a phalanx of general and flag officers and hawks, both to insulate themselves against charges of naiveté and to execute interventionist military ideas.

In both cases, these interventions led America deeper into military adventures in an alien culture. Jack Kennedy doubled down on the small advisory effort begun by Eisenhower in Indochina, while Obama surged 30,000 more Americans into the campaign in Afghanistan. Our young men were sent into countries far away and unfamiliar with and to the modern world, those countries clinging to centuries-old rural economies at the bottom of the ladder of state success, speaking a difficult and obscure language shared by no one in the American national security establishment or the active military. We sent our people to these countries to defeat ideas – Communism or terrorism – by killing people.

Neither President brought with him a coherent national security strategy, and thus each leader’s *defense policy* defaulted upward, becoming his *foreign policy*, rather than its proper place as a subordinate subset of such an overarching vision. The next step followed: if defense policy was *de facto* foreign policy, then to defense policy makers – those generals and loyal hawks – devolved responsibility for managing America in the world.

This Time It’s Different

And you will swear as you enter Vegas/ That you’re not a gambling man...

-Steely Dan, “Do It Again”, 1973

The national security teams around Kennedy and Obama each promised new solutions to old problems, and insisted to both the people and to themselves that this time things would be different. For Kennedy, things would be different because of two military innovations: the establishment of the Green Berets, and the expansion of battlefield use of the helicopter. For Obama’s team, things would be different because of one field commander brilliant above all others: David Petraeus, the embodiment of the can-do team-playing military intellectual, able to fix whatever was broken wherever it might be.

For both teams it was a focus on counterinsurgency that held sway. In neither Vietnam nor Afghanistan did the American people particularly care about the country to which their sons were sent to fight. Major force-on-force theater wars (Korea in 1953 and Iraq in 2003) were seven years past. Those conventional campaigns taught these young Presidents that the military, an organization of professionals literally sworn to risk their lives and go where the President so directed, was a problem-solving hedge against bad bets in foreign affairs. When Walt Rostow insisted in 1961 that “(w)e are not saving this military capability for the junior prom” he spoke the truth no one else dared say aloud. The military, for both the Kennedy and Obama White Houses, was viewed as the answer, no matter the question.

The Only War We've Got

Any military campaign must begin with a national strategic endstate, which in turn must fall beneath to a coherent global foreign policy. The endstate for a campaign is a goal, expressly delineated by the President, to which the whole of government will strive and to which military means will be subordinated. An example might be the World War II allied powers' overarching goal of complete German surrender, captured in the slogan "Defeat Germany First", of focusing limited resources on the European theater of war prior to focusing on the Pacific campaign against Japan. President Lincoln in 1861, in another example, never wavered from a clear national strategic endstate of holding the Union together, and he fired generals who did not move swiftly enough to that end.

National strategic endstate then dictates theater strategy, which can be thought of as a goal at the four-star and ambassador level. Then come endstates at the lower levels – "down the stars", so to speak - with the three-star or operational level of war dictating to subordinate commanders all the way down to the battalion – or tactical - level what victory will look like. The three-star level of war, the operational level in theater, links the goals of the President with the actions of riflemen in the field. It is in this way that all at war know how it will end.

In neither Vietnam nor Afghanistan was a national strategic endstate articulated. The theater commander was therefore unable to articulate his intermediate objectives. In their turn, down the stars subordinate generals and younger officers were set adrift. This is how a large war devolves to uncoordinated actions at the tactical level. If precise policy does not come down, so too can tactical action go up, with young soldiers and Marines making decisions which in the vacuum above them can resonate in the White House.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, the United States was from the beginning on a negative linear function, with success varying inversely with military size and strength. The lessons of the last conventional war not only do not apply...they are turned inside out. In those conventional force-on-force campaigns in Korea and Iraq, more force meant more success. The more boots we put on the ground in insurgent campaigns, the farther behind we fall. American troops are not saviors, but targets. In countries which value honor above all else, such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, killing one enemy fighter creates several more, and thus the coin of the conventional military realm – dead enemy – is proven valueless.

The Agency of Final Disappointment

The key to any successful counterinsurgency effort is pairing with, supporting, and then leaving behind a credible government with a competent army and police force. The focus of effort must be the local government's delivering able governance to the polity. In both wars, the United States sought a credible local partner, and failed. In Vietnam and Afghanistan, as the French and Soviets respectively had done unsuccessfully in wars past, the Americans both installed a corrupt regime and backed a nepotic provincial governance system.

The American instinct for control of a country is a Napoleonic central government, no matter the local culture or tradition. This system in the local dialectic, though, serves not as firm and steady unity of command, but as a vehicle for delivery of graft and a source of political prize and favor, with appointments to governorships handed out to friends and warlords allied with the

regime. In both countries, provinces were actually invented, carved out of others, as plums for family friends. In Saigon and Kabul, ruling families presented themselves to the Americans as the only hope. In reality, the Diem regime was, and the Karzai regime is, a corrupt, aloof elite, well-traveled around the world but out of touch with the people of the country.

In Saigon, the Diem mandarin installed – and later brutally uninstalled - by the Kennedy administration was from the north of Vietnam, Catholic, highly educated during exile in Paris and spoke French in the royal court. This was in sharp contrast to the Vietnamese people, primarily subsistence-level farmers and fishermen in the south of the country, who were Buddhist and spoke Vietnamese. As it was in Vietnam, the Afghan working classes are illiterate and live a hand-to-mouth existence, here as nomadic herders or subsistence farmers. In Kabul today, the Karzai regime, taking what they view as rightful place on the throne, seems not to see – or ignores - that an Afghan's first loyalty is to tribe, second to region, with no loyalty to a central government or even the idea of an Afghanistan.

In both cases, rulers were completely uninterested in the daily tribulations of the life of the illiterate peasants they would control. In Ngo Dinh Diem's case, the regime did not even speak the language or worship the same gods as the people he ruled. In both cases, narcotics trafficking serves as a way of life for the brother of the leader, with heroin another revenue stream to add to illicit and monopolistic kleptocracy. The Nhu regime added to its ills prostitution and money laundering along with the appalling Madame Nhu, while the brother of the last Afghan ruler made it out of the country with a mysterious \$52 million in US currency in his luggage. Peasant classes experience government through local satrapies, a source of anger, fear and disappointment. Local interactions with a government representative are shot through with extortion, threats, intimidation, usury, incompetence and corruption both petty and serious.

Neither regime set foot outside the capital (or often even outside the presidential compound) without a stage-managed event, civilian control and heavy security. Neither controlled the country; neither, for that matter, even truly controlled the capital city. Neither government could at any point account for location of the billions in American aid suddenly sloshing through their tiny and unstable economies. Both employed the best of their soldiers as a praetorian guard, not focused outward on external threats or looking to take on internal guerrillas, but rather focusing inward on protecting the regime from its own military.

Local government propped up, Americans then take the next step, setting up *project* and *program* solutions to *people* and *political* problems. Americans are terrible at solving religious disputes, but we are great at engineering. If we cannot measure output, the reasoning goes, we must measure input. Thus are American headlines, whether in 1961 or 2011, invariably focused around *building something* – a bridge, a road, a hospital, a school- while the enemy operates in the shadows, comes at night, taxes the villages and controls the people. It never occurs to Americans that if bridges between 3000-year-old villages a mile apart do not exist, as Peter Galbraith has pointed out, there is a reason.

Centers of Gravity

The American center of gravity in the Vietnam War was the American *people*. The American center of gravity in the Afghan war is the American *system*. Both centers of gravity were objectives of enemy forces: Ho Chi Minh, General Giap and bin Laden understood the American people better than we perhaps understand ourselves. Giap killed our men until we

capitulated, correctly estimating that Americans will only take so many dead young men before self-interest outweighs vague ideas of making the world better. Bin Laden forced us to spend trillions of dollars and thousands of casualties, and his posthumous successors in al Qaeda and followers in the Taliban will continue such a strategy until we withdraw.

The enemy's center of gravity, in both cases, is the will of the insurgent force. Western forces are unable to change or negate the narrative of the authentic native. Americans are deeply uncomfortable with this, with a system with no metrics, no measurement of success, so they invent such metrics whether or not they fit the situation. Thus arose the horror of McNamara's body count as a way to determine good battalion commanders and to measure success, and to its concomitant and predictable result of lying up and down the chain of command. The circle has been squared under American commanders in Afghanistan, who judge success by *civilians not killed* in the course of daily events in Afghanistan. These metrics are flip sides of the same gruesome coin, and they do not address the center of the enemy's strength.

Soldiery

With the Vietnamese or Afghan officers of real talent and courage focused in protecting the leader (or due to sheer competence and leadership skill viewed by the regime as threats themselves), the average soldier's lot falls to the second-string officer class rife with low-level criminality and striving to overcome aloof disdain of its generals. The generals in both wars ran satrapies, abusive to and dismissive of their troops, simply waiting out the Americans who they knew would someday leave the country, trying to curry favor with the president of the country (or his brother.) They do not share in the sacrifices of their soldiers; one South Vietnamese general pointed out that the whole point of being an officer is not having to live in the field. Self-preservation is far more important than winning. ANA generals echo the ARVN of a half-century earlier, negotiating no-fighting back-channel deals with the enemy, agreeing to look the other way when necessary or working actively and quietly for the other side. Both wars have exasperated American military men with the concept of a "fighting season," wherein war stops while both sides agree to either bring in crops or wait out terrible weather.

This average soldier in both the Army of the Republic of Vietnam of fifty years ago and in the Afghan National Army of today is a conscript either de facto or de jure, fleeing a wasteland of poverty and low-level corruption in the countryside. These young men are either dragooned into service or reaching for their only way out of poverty – a distinction without a difference. Such a young soldier has never before been in a city, never ridden in a vehicle, and does not speak the language of or come from the same tribe as his own officers. He was, when drafted, illiterate, innumerate and incapable of following the most basic of orders due to either incompetence or self-preservation.

These soldiers are ripe for threat or bribery from his ostensible enemy, who is likely from his village and knows this young man and his family. This inchoate army has loyalty to the Americans by necessity, but is tied to the opponents by religion, ethnicity, tribe, family, clan or language. As an endemic problem to a field force, rampant desertion is superseded only by the individual soldier's instinct to break and run at the first threat of mortality at the hands of a faceless, remorseless and determined enemy. Thus does an army decay from the inside out. Soldiers like these are America's allies. More to the point: they are our only ticket out, the only hope for withdrawal is our desperate belief that the native army will someday stand and fight on its own.

A strange triangle is established in such a situation. First-rate American military forces, Army and Marine Corps advisors, trainers and conventional infantry units are at one corner. A tough, seasoned and dedicated opponent, the Viet Cong or the Taliban, are at another. At the third is the incompetent government army which the Americans must build and train, and while so doing they must protect from certain destruction at the hands of the opponent. These three forces are tied by blood.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, American forces in the field after several years began to see American weapons in the hands of enemy dead. These were either sold to them by America's ostensible allies, abandoned on the battlefield by those same terrified and incompetent soldiers, or taken during raids overrunning isolated hard outposts – French-era forts across South Vietnam; ANA bases in Afghanistan - built to support a centralized Napoleonic command structure in what should have been an inherently dispersed, decentralized running war. This is what happens when opponents fight two different campaigns across the same battlefield.

The Men Who Come in the Night

One old man in the Korengal Valley thought the American soldiers were actually Russians who had simply stayed after the Soviet Army pulled out in 1989.

-Sebastian Junger *War* 2010

The burned-out hulls of French vehicles provided a sobering image for even the most gung-ho guys in the brigade. Like our predecessors, we were called "long noses" by the Vietnamese. It was not unheard of for the Viets to actually mistake us for them, thinking we had returned to reimpose French rule.

-Colonel David Hackworth *About Face* 1989

In contrast to America's allies, enemy forces in Vietnam were and Afghanistan are willing to fight and die for belief and honor, and this grit and determination make them impossible to destroy. Militarily, the Viet Minh, Viet Cong, North Vietnamese Army, Taliban and Al Qaeda are the very embodiment of tough, seasoned veteran field warriors, physically strong and stoic, well-trained and motivated by a cause greater than themselves. They were led by bold and brilliant fighters who knew how to fight superpowers and had defeated one before. Giap knew that the Americans, like the French, could be beaten on the battlefield, while bin Laden knew that like the Soviets the Americans could be bled to death by a thousand cuts.

Their men viewed themselves not as soldiers, but as warriors and defenders of greater honor, driven by the desire for something better for their country. Whether this was a united Vietnam, or a Khorasan in which all Muslims would live under the words of the Prophet, such driving, compelling desire will always outweigh the mercenary instincts of those he fights – those to whom the United States are allied. Insurgents in campaigns like these are the authentic nationalists – in such a way that Castro or Che, for instance, drew the people in with talk of a greater Cuba. The insurgent trails the whiff of authenticity and romance: the young man living off the land, willing to die for cause and country. A Taliban fighter, though extremist in his views, is Pashtun, deeply pious in Islam, an Afghan likely from a village near where he operates, and speaking Pashto. A Viet Cong operator wanted to unite his country, and he too was often from the area in which he worked and brought with him intuitive understanding of the flow of rural life. Though fully capable of terror and murder in the dark, his message of national unity

had resonance with the average Vietnamese. If that did not resonate, threats and murder certainly did. Either way, the Viet Cong like the Taliban controlled the countryside, and thus they controlled the country.

In each campaign, the insurgent succeeded because he had a sanctuary. In Vietnam, this was a physical area to rest, refit and resupply, with the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia providing a lifeline of supplies from North to South. In Afghanistan, the sanctuary is a physical one within the country itself, with its untold thousands of mountain defiles and caves; a physical one in the FATA and inside Pakistan; and a moral and mental one in the Afghan villages, with the population hiding these combatants either through sympathy or fear. Sanctuary means that these guerrilla forces can move swiftly, literally light on their feet for not having to carry rations and ammunition with them, and figuratively agile and supported emotionally and spiritually by brothers in arms. Sanctuary also has deeper meaning: *by not having one place which they value above another, the insurgent does not provide a center of gravity which a conventional force could attack.*

In contrast, Americans stand out against the physical and popular terrain. They provide nothing *but* physical objects to attack: men, trucks, airplanes, fortresses in the desert or outposts in ridgelines. Where the insurgent is swift and quiet, Americans are large, imposing, armored, names and country literally stitched onto their clothing and painted on their equipment. The insurgent vaporizes after an attack; the American is an object against which the villagers and the insurgents can unite.

The insurgent, backed with lethal force and control of the night, employs terror and persuasion as the means to a larger end of unifying the country and imposing his will. Americans make promises, spend money and build bridges. The Americans want to leave; the insurgent is staying until he dies, or succeeds to unify and rule. This makes him unstoppable.

Endgame

By day there is government. By night it's the Taliban.

-Haji Mohammed Hassan, tribal elder, Marjah

Against these insurgents, Americans do what they do best: they fight a military campaign, cycling through aircraft squadrons and infantry battalions one after the other year upon year. Without a narrative to guide him, without a cause for which he fights, the young American in the field simply soldiers, fighting when he must, uncertain why he is there. The generals, too, are intellectually adrift. They know the enemy is evil, and they can kill him but they cannot address the root cause of the struggle in which he is engaged. No one could tell generals in Vietnam, nor can they tell them in Kabul, what winning looks like. In a fluid insurgent campaign there is nothing to hit, no single man to kill, no city to take to cause the enemy pain from which he cannot recover. He can defeat the force, but not the cause for which they fight. The Viet Cong and the Taliban are prototype insurgent forces: tough, smart and devoted to their cause. Their use of sanctuary gives them respite from the battlefield, making them impossible to destroy, giving the conventional force no target to match their paradigm of what war should be. The bad guy has no center of gravity. No center of gravity means no military objective.

No military objective down at the business end of war, combined with no national strategic endstate at the high end, means American officers in the middle must make up the war as they go. Our national failure in Vietnam was an object lesson in what happens when field generals are forced to use military means for political ends. The same is happening today in Afghanistan, ten years gone from the beginning of that campaign. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, has no road. We cannot know when we have won, but we will know when we have lost.

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