

Obama Slow-Walks Afghan Defeat

Like George W. Bush's Iraq War, the Afghan conflict appears grinding toward an American defeat. However, President Obama doesn't want the voters to recognize that fact until after Election 2012 to avoid getting the blame so he is stretching out the war at the cost of more American lives, writes Independent Institute's Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

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No one needs to tell the public that politicians are slick, and the ones who get elected are the oiliest.

President Barack Obama, in a recent speech announcing the phased withdraw of 33,000 U.S. "surge" forces from Afghanistan by September 2012, told the country that the United States had largely achieved its goals in Afghanistan and that "we are starting this drawdown from a position of strength."

The public could be forgiven for missing the real message: "We've lost the war, but we are declaring victory anyway and getting out."

The reality of withdrawing 33,000 of about 100,000 troops in that country is that the President's "counterinsurgency" strategy, the U.S. clearing areas of Taliban forces until "good government" can take hold and the Afghan forces are competent enough to take over, has failed.

The strategy was designed to achieve battlefield gains that would not eradicate the Taliban but cause the group to come to the negotiating table. Although the Taliban is negotiating, it is not doing so seriously because it knows it is winning the war.

If it were losing, more Taliban would be defecting to the Afghan government; so far, only 1,700 out of between 25,000 and 40,000 insurgents have done so.

Superior U.S. forces have cleared some areas of the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, traditionally Taliban strongholds, but they only have an illegitimate, corrupt Afghan government and incompetent Afghan security forces to hand them over to.

Yet it is still nearly impossible to drive safely from the capital of Kabul to Kandahar. Furthermore, the Taliban merely lies low in those two provinces until the U.S. leaves, or they move to other parts of the country where American forces are much more sparse.

The Taliban in eastern Afghanistan, which have more links to al-Qaeda than those in the south but who have enjoyed less U.S. attention, can withdraw to sanctuaries in Pakistan.

The U.S. and NATO have never had enough forces in Afghanistan to run an effective counterinsurgency strategy.

And if the insurgents are not losing, they are winning. Time is on their side, because it's their country and they can simply outwait the United States, which the insurgents know will eventually withdraw.

Since according to counterinsurgency expert William R. Polk, guerrilla warfare is 80 percent political, 15 percent administrative, and only 5 percent military, the U.S.-sponsored corrupt and illegitimate Afghan government is a major albatross around America's neck.

Also, even after Afghan security forces have been trained for almost a decade, they are incapable of securing Afghanistan on their own.

Yet if there hasn't been a terrorist threat from Afghanistan for seven to eight years, as the Obama administration maintains, then why did we need the "surge" and 18-month counterinsurgency strategy in the first place, and why can't troops come home faster?

The answer is that the withdrawal timetable is not based on military considerations but on electoral politics.

Instead of going against the Taliban during the next fighting season, those 33,000 troops already will have been withdrawn or will be packing to leave Afghanistan by September 2012.

Thus, with an eye toward the November 2012 presidential election, Obama can say that the "surge" is over, that it was a success, and that all "surge" forces have been withdrawn.

But if the withdrawal table is political, why not claim the same victory and remove all 100,000 U.S. troops to satisfy a war-weary public?

Richard Nixon faced the same dilemma presiding over the lost Vietnam War. In 1971, he wanted to withdraw U.S. forces from South Vietnam until Henry Kissinger reminded him that the place would likely fall apart in 1972, the year Nixon was up for reelection.

To avoid this scenario, Nixon unconscionably delayed a peace settlement until 1973, thus trading more wasted American lives for his reelection.

Obama appears to be up to the same thing.

A phased withdrawal of 33,000 U.S. troops before the election will push back at Republican candidates' demands for more rapid withdrawal and signal to the conflict-fatigued American public that he is solving the problem, while leaving 70,000 forces to make sure the country doesn't collapse before that election. (That will help Obama avoid other Republican charges that he "lost" the war in Afghanistan.)

Again, American lives will be needlessly lost so that a slick politician can look his best at election time.

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Bachmann Flunks History, Again

Rep. Michele Bachman, a rising Republican presidential aspirant, is notorious for bungling key facts of U.S. history like starting the Revolutionary War in New Hampshire but she also misses key points about Canada's more robust economy. It benefited from strong banking regulation and single-payer health insurance, Michael Winship notes.

By Michael Winship

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Travel, they say, improves the mind, a notion once rightly castigated in song by the late, great Noel Coward. It's "an irritating platitude," he wrote, "which frankly, *entre nous*, is far from ever true."

And yet there is *some* truth to it, although sailing on a celebratory birthday cruise up the Canadian Maritimes and along the St. Lawrence River, as I have been with friends these last few days, had the potential to confirm Sartre's belief that hell is other people.

Add to that qualms instilled by my girlfriend Pat's semi-serious theory that frequent outbreaks of food poisoning on cruise ships actually may be the result

of chemical and biological warfare testing by the government.

Think about it – boat passengers are the perfect research targets, confined in a relatively small space, unsuspecting, isolated from the rest of the population. Why not lob a little concentrated *E. coli* in their direction and see what happens?

In truth, it may rank close to the belief that tornadoes would cease to exist if there were no trailer parks for them to tear up, but so be it. Throughout our voyage, company remained unhellish and untouched by gastroenteritis – or worse.

In any case, one of the mind-broadening advantages of travel is to read the local papers – if you can find them these days – and learn what's on the mind of people in the places you land on. Sometimes their interests are highly parochial; sometimes they strongly reflect our own.

On Canada's Prince Edward Island (PEI), locals were obsessing over the imminent visit to the island of Prince William and Kate Middleton.

In the brief time we were there, townspeople of the provincial capital Charlottetown frantically repainted crosswalks, mowed lawns, clipped hedges and polished anything that didn't move, all in anticipation of the royal arrival.

Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, even reported that in advance of the visit a fishery museum not too far from Charlottetown had gotten hold of two rare blue lobsters.

"We were going to name [one lobster] Blue Boy, but then we got thinking why not honor these special guests coming to PEI," a local known around the island as the Bearded Skipper told the paper. "Not everyone can see the royal couple but they can come to the museum and touch Will and Kate."

Curtsying, no doubt, as they approach with bibs and bowls of melted butter.

Other news was more serious and familiar. Discrimination against Muslims in Toronto. Flooding in the province of Manitoba out west mirrored flooding of the Missouri River in the American Midwest.

Canada's declining postal service was back in action after several rotating job actions by labor across the country were followed by a lockout – a conservative government going after unionized civil service workers, just like home.

Unemployment was at its lowest in more than two years... Say that again?

The U.S. rate rose to 9.1 percent in May from 9.0 percent in April, with release of the June numbers due this Friday.

But as per a June 10 dispatch from Reuters, “The unemployment rate in Canada fell to the lowest level since January 2009 in May as the number of jobs increased by 22,300, an island of healthy data in a sea of recent figures showing tepid North American economic growth.

“Statistics Canada reported on Friday that the jobless rate dropped from 7.6 percent in April to 7.4 percent in May, a number last seen when Canada was falling into recession at the start of 2009.”

Republican presidential candidate Michele Bachmann celebrated the news with a tweet: “Lesson in economic recovery: Consider Canada. No stimulus & unemployment is 20% lower than US.”

But Rep. Bachmann misinterprets Canada’s history as thoroughly as she mangles America’s.

Eric Kleefeld of the progressive website *Talking Points Memo* wrote, “The absolute fact of the matter is that Canada undertook a thorough stimulus program under Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party – one that was relatively smaller than the one here, but given the apples and oranges situation of having different economic needs, it was still a very considerable one.”

The amount was \$40 billion, Canadian. Adjusting for conversion, relative purchasing power, per-capita GDP, and the much larger population of the United States – we have almost ten times as many people – this was roughly equivalent to a stimulus of over US \$360 billion – less than half the Obama stimulus, but the recession did not hit Canada as badly as it crippled the U.S.

Why? Resurgence in demand for Canadian gas, oil and other minerals, for one thing (including asbestos – Canada just blocked again the listing of chrysotile asbestos fibers as a hazardous chemical under the UN’s Rotterdam Convention)

But also, as Kleefeld notes, “One reason for Canada’s resilience was having years of *strict banking regulations*, which fostered a more stable financial system.”

He cites an *Economist* article from May 2010:

“Jim Flaherty, the finance minister, attributes Canada’s strong performance to its ‘boring’ financial system. Prodded by tight regulation, the banks were much more conservative in their lending than their American counterparts.

“Those that did dabble in subprime loans were able to withdraw quickly. This prudence kept a lid on house prices while those in America were soaring, but it paid off when the bust hit.”

Note that the banking regulations predate the rule of conservative Prime Minister Harper and that last year the six biggest Canadian banks still managed to rake in \$20 billion in profits.

This may come as a bit of a shock to Bachmann, who has included complete repeal of our barely year-old, Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act as part of her presidential campaign platform.

In her capacity as a representative from Minnesota, one assumes that Rep. Bachmann has traveled more than once to our northern neighbor. Still, a return visit might not only improve the mind but also help her brush up on Canadian history.

On the other hand, the shock of finding out that Canada has a single-payer, government-run health care program might cause her to implode.

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