

## Afghanistan Now?

-Sean M. Maloney, PhD

The rumblings and whispers have already started. The momentum is predictably building into a hue and cry: The United States is losing the war in Afghanistan! Afghanistan is another Vietnam! If we can't succeed in Afghanistan, we can't succeed in Iraq! Iraq is another Vietnam! These may appear to be the deranged ramblings of those nostalgic for the cultural distortion we call the 1960s. They are, however, also the dangerously simplistic arguments put forth by those who think they can politically profit from a perceived failure of American policy in Afghanistan.

Put the tie dye away and stop pretending Bush is Nixon. The problem for those trying to compare Afghanistan with Vietnam is that there are very clear, definable American objectives in Afghanistan: there were none established by the Kennedy or Johnson administrations in Vietnam. Nor were military forces able to adjust to that ambiguity. American-led coalition forces serving in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) explicitly and unambiguously understand that the mission is to destroy Al Qaeda, prevent Afghanistan from being used as a sanctuary for global terrorism, prevent the re-emergence of anti-coalition forces and to assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

The other problem encountered by the critics is that those clear and definable objectives are, in fact, being met. Al Qaeda's base and training system, its stockpiles of weapons and other resources, as well as its protective Taliban shield have been destroyed. Indeed, Al Qaeda has re-based itself in Somalia, driven out of Afghanistan by Afghani, American, Canadian, British, New Zealand, German, Italian, Romanian and some fifteen other

ENDURING FREEDOM coalition members. This was accomplished in less than two years with a coalition force that never exceeded two brigades in the field, with fewer than 200 casualties. Compare that to the Soviet effort against the Mudjahhedin: nine years, eight or more divisions, 28 000 dead and no success.

‘Aha!’ the critics proclaim: ‘There are still Taliban elements in Afghanistan! The Taliban are re-emerging in force! They’ll take the country over again!’ More scaremongering. What exactly was the Taliban? It was essentially a Pakistani supported movement working through the ethnically Pashtun tribes which dominated Afghanistan through sheer numbers, capitalizing on the horrendously high levels of illiteracy. Yes, there are elements in the Pashtun population that still are animated by the delusions of Mullah Omar. Yes they still conduct acts of violence against OEF and Afghani forces on a limited scale in southern Afghanistan. These renegades do not, however, exert power over the non-Pashtuns and the Pakistani government does not provide overt support to them. Where three or more have gathered in Mullah Omar’s name, JDAMS is there. OEF forces and their allies have in almost every case responded to and even pre-empted enemy action: Operation VALIANT STRIKE, conducted in March 2003, produced a record high level of weapons seizures, including incredibly lethal Russian thermobaric munitions used so effectively in Chechnya. The remnants of the Taliban have limited political power, and none of that is in the major cities. Indeed, members of the Taliban are viewed as traitors within key segments of the Pashtun tribal population, particularly in Kandahar province.

The education system, incidentally, is considered a point of main effort by governors allied with OEF. Schools have been reconstructed, former teachers have been sought out and employed. It is not perfect and it will take time, but it is a real measure of change. And the kids love it. They want to learn something other than the Koran and will always make a writing motion with

their hands as you pass by on patrol because they want more pens and note pads. Equality: yes, there are still Burqua-draped women wandering around, usually by choice. But there are also female police officers in Kandahar.

The critics are quick to jump on the reconstruction issue. After all, we should have completely re-built Afghanistan's nearly non-existent infrastructure within eighteen months, right? It is a little more complicated than that. Sure, the United States could step in with contracted construction companies and have the whole place paved like California before sundown. Then the United States would stand accused of 'cultural imperialism', interfering with Afghani society and would have to contend with the usual brick a bats thrown by those in the 'development community.' The critics must understand that there have to be Afghani solutions to Afghani problems. Afghanis must rebuild Afghanistan, and ultimately Afghanis must defend Afghanistan: American policy recognizes these factors. This mentality did not exist during the early years of Vietnam. The American advisory effort sought to impose American military structures, doctrine and organization on the ARVN. In the case of Afghanistan, the emergent Afghan National Army leadership debates force structure issues with its Canadian, American and British advisors- and does it successfully.

The real enemy is the feigned impatience by those critical of efforts in Afghanistan and their distorted sense of what can be reasonably accomplished. It is high time we jettisoned instant gratification as a principle measure of success. There can be no doubt: there are many, many pitfalls in Afghanistan for American policy. There will be debates on the allocation of resources and what the priorities are. There will be in-fighting amongst clans and tribes, perhaps governors and warlords. The concept of Western-style democracy, judicial system and economy will not be operable in the near future, if ever. Taliban remnants will seek to exploit all of this. A zero defect effort is, as the critics know, impossible. But the conditions for success in the

ENDURING FREEDOM mission in Afghanistan have been set. It is a question of where we go from here. No more Vietnams? I'm all for that.