

Escalator In Chief

by Dan Jacoby

In the hours leading up to President Obama's formal announcement of his plan for how to deal with Afghanistan, I have decided that it is possible that he could convince me that his escalation of American involvement in that civil war is a good idea. Possible – but highly unlikely.

I understand the need to stop Al Qaeda from attacking us again, and the desire to establish stable, American-friendly governments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The problem is that the area known as Afghanistan has never had a stable, American-friendly government; even though we helped put the Taliban in power in 1995 they didn't like us very much. And while Pakistan is a nuclear power, so the need for at least a responsible government is even more urgent, it need not be American-friendly, so long as they have no desire to use their nuclear weapons against us.

And putting 100,000 American troops in Afghanistan, mostly near the Pakistani border where they will surely cross that line many, many times and kill many, many Pakistanis, is not the way to ensure that the Pakistani government won't hate us.

Since the end of World War II, American foreign policy has been intrusive, invasive, shortsighted, shallow and insipid; the result has been a constant backlash. Iran hates us because we helped restore the Shah and taught his secret police Nazi torture techniques. China hates us because we refused to recognize the Communist takeover for decades, and because we helped engineer a proxy war in Korea. Most of the so-called "third world" hates us because we supported European imperialists, because we support the IMF and the World Bank, and because we treat those countries like they are run by idiots.

And the Arab world hates us, in part because of our wholehearted support of Israel, but also in part because of our repeated, heavy-handed attempts to control their oil. Our invasion of Iraq was as much about control over the second-largest supply of oil in the world as anything else. Even the "Gulf War" was about oil, specifically some oil fields near the Kuwaiti border with Iraq.

Osama bin Laden decided to hate us because of the Gulf War. He had been an ally when we went into Afghanistan in 1979 to train the Mujahedin in the hope of luring the Soviet Union into a quagmire. The plan worked – sort of. The short-term result was the collapse of the Soviet Union (which probably would have collapsed anyway); the longer-term result was that we made a lot more enemies.

Our entire foreign policy now revolves around dealing with the backlash from decades of military intervention, support for dictators, and other stupid decisions.

Now we have to deal with the fact that after thirty years of strife in Afghanistan, caused by us, we are now the ones in the quagmire. What's more, a 2007 report from the U.S. Special Operations Command states that we could have achieved our goal of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden and the leaders of Al Qaeda in 2001, but the Bush administration failed to act. Even though CENTCOM didn't begin actual planning of the Iraqi invasion until January of 2002, George W. Bush was already concentrating on Iraq rather than Al Qaeda for several months before that – and he let bin Laden escape.

The question now is how we should proceed in a way that best reduces the terrorist threat to America. Since we got into this mess by being militaristic, invasive, and supportive of despotic and/or corrupt governments, it stands to reason that more militaristic, invasive methods in support of a corrupt government will not get us out of the mess. In other words, a surge will not work; we need to do something else.

The key lies in the general foreign policy President Obama has followed almost everywhere else. Have respect for others, allow them to find their own way, and work diplomatically to achieve our ends. In Afghanistan, that means we need to invite Afghanistan's neighbors – including Iran – to come up with solutions while spending our time and money in construction rather than destruction.

We need to build roads, power plants and power lines, schools, public buildings, and job training centers. We need to give them farm machinery and help them plant and harvest crops other than poppies. We need to give them trucks and build railroads – and we need to get the local “warlords” to support a growing peaceful economy. It will take years and cost billions of dollars, but the total cost to America will be far less than a troop buildup, not just in terms of dollars but – more importantly – in terms of American lives.

Now...

If President Obama can convince me that his troop buildup is a necessary first step toward an economic and social buildup in Afghanistan, then I'll support it. The problem, as George Carlin put it so well, is that “fighting for peace is like f---ing for virginity.”

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