

# Outside View: Vietnam 1963 and Afghanistan 2010

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HELSINKI, Finland, Feb. 11 (UPI) -- According to a strategic assessment of security operations in Afghanistan prepared by U.S. Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey (Ret.) on Dec 9, 2009, the Taliban believe they are winning.

Additionally, the Afghan people do not know whether the current government or the Taliban will prevail. The population, particularly the majority Pashtuns, are hedging their bets. Most Afghans are dismayed by the injustice and corruption of the central government, in particular, the Afghan National Police, McCaffrey said.

Such observations follow closely those of U.S. Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal in his Aug. 30, 2009, report: "Many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating. We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans -- in both their government -- and the international community -- that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents. Further, a perception that our resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align with us against the insurgents."

The National Intelligence Estimate 53-63 "Prospects in South Vietnam" submitted by the director of Central Intelligence and dated April 17, 1963, contains the following paragraph:

"South Vietnam was and remains highly vulnerable to rural terrorism and guerrilla warfare. Its people have no tradition of loyalty to a government in Saigon. The Vietnamese peasant has always accommodated himself to whatever force was the best able to protect or to punish him -- or offer him a vision, however illusionary, of a better life. The 'government' meant the local officials with whom he was in contact, many of whom tended to be ineffective and often venal. Various forms of minor corruption and petty bureaucratic tyranny have long been rife in the provinces and the offenders were seldom disciplined by their superiors. Most peasants are primarily interested in peace and do not care who wins the military victories. Security is significant to the peasant largely in terms of how it affects him personally."

According to McCaffrey's report, the Taliban are politically rejected by nearly the entire non-Pashtun population and command support of only 6 percent even among their brother Pashtuns. Nevertheless, the Taliban are believed to have organized shadow governments in 33 of 34 Afghan provinces under the umbrella of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a blend of ethnic groups, languages, tribes and clans that have traditionally provided religious, social and cultural identity and, often in history, an alternative to a central government.

In contrast to the United States, the Taliban have gained a better understanding of Afghan tribes, the relationships among tribes and their bases of local authority and legitimacy. The Taliban have succeeded both by undermining and leveraging Afghan tribal structures and grievances.

As stated in 1963: "The Communist effort in South Vietnam is essentially one of political subversion in which extensive military activity plays a predominant role. The primary aim of the Communists is to secure the support of the rural population -- support buttressed, where possible, by positive loyalty. By various forms of military and terrorist action, they endeavor to cow the recalcitrant, demonstrate that the government cannot protect its adherents, and create a general atmosphere of insecurity."

According to NIE 53-63, Viet Cong regulars numbered 24,000-25,000. They were armed with light infantry weapons but were a disciplined, well-trained and a superbly led force. The Viet Cong regulars were supplemented by up to 100,000 semi-trained local militias. An important factor contributing to their success was an effective intelligence system. Viet Cong agents, informants and sympathizers infiltrated virtually every level of the South Vietnamese government and military.

In 1963, the South Vietnamese military consisted of 200,000 army personnel, 75,000 in the Civil Guard and a Self Defense Force of about 100,000, all of which were responsible for internal security and counterinsurgency operations.

The Kabul Military Training Center reports that the Afghan National Army numbers about 92,000 soldiers. The Afghan National Police consists of 92,000 personnel.

McChrystal, NATO and U.S. commander in Afghanistan, admits that the Afghan national army and the Afghan national police are not sufficiently effective to take ownership of Afghanistan's security. He has recommended that the ANA accelerate growth to a new level of 134,000 by fall 2010, with required additional growth to 240,000. McChrystal has also requested ANP growth to a total strength of at least 160,000.

According to McCaffrey, the United States and its allies are unlikely to achieve the political and military goals in the 18 months as set out by President Barack Obama when he announced his troop surge of 30,000 additional U.S. forces. McCaffrey noted that "this will inevitably become a 3-to-10 year strategy to build a viable Afghan state with their own security force that can allow us to withdraw. It may well cost us an additional \$300 billion and we are likely to suffer thousands more U.S. casualties."

Ten years after NIE 53-63 was published, the United States finally left South Vietnam.

(Lawrence Sellin, Ph.D., is a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve and a veteran of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army or government.)

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