



The War We're Winning: Afghans have voted for change, but it will come only if the U.S. stays the course

By General Barry R. McCaffrey, USA (Ret.)

Afghanistan is emerging from medieval chaos. The country is on the front end of creating an organized, law-based civil state.

During a visit to Afghanistan in August, I saw dramatic, positive changes from my last in-country visit in July 2004.

The Taliban era was a national nightmare for the Afghan people. Millions were driven into exile. Hundreds of thousands were murdered. Years of civil war following the expulsion of the Soviets destroyed the national infrastructure.

The Taliban succeeded in eliminating the last vestiges of hope among the Afghan people with a repressive extremism that ended justice, opportunities for women, communication with the international community, education, music and a free media.

President Hamid Karzai presides over a national government that commands 35 battalions of a newly raised Afghan National Army (ANA) and the beginnings of a national police force. The United Nations is involved in building democracy and conducting demining operations and social-reconstruction activities. A NATO (International Security Assistance Force) peacekeeping force of 10,000 troops is expanding its influence beyond its initial lodgment in Kabul and will take over nation-building efforts by the end of next summer. Finally, the economy is exploding with enormous enterprise throughout the country as individual families and tribes claw their way out of abject misery.

Kabul has its first traffic light, and cars are becoming commonplace. Road- and trail-improvement projects are extensive. Cranes and construction activities throughout the country are widespread, including not just foreign-financed mega-projects but also smaller, but equally significant, projects by thousands of families and small communities using home-baked bricks. These families are leaving caves and ruins, re-emerging into the rudiments of an organized society.

The Sept. 18 election, to vote for a lower house of parliament and councils in each of the country's 34 provinces, was of pivotal importance to creating a modern Afghanistan. These elections bring more than 500 elected officials from more than 6,000 candidates into provincial councils and the national legislature. The elections, although twice postponed, took place regardless of Taliban and foreign-fighter attempts to derail them, proving that the democratic momentum is unstoppable. Poll results were expected by Oct. 22, after this article went to press. It's apparent, however, that the Afghan people are desperate to put the violence and oppression of the past three decades behind them. They reject the past extremism of the Taliban and the cruelty and abuse of provincial warlords.

Nevertheless, we should anticipate that the September election will produce some unsavory winners. Many of the newly elected legislators will be linked to militia groups and have records of human-rights violations. Indeed, the terrible internal struggles that ripped apart Afghanistan for a decade will not end with the election; instead, they will continue primarily inside a poetical process rather than through armed struggle.

FIGHTING AND BUILDING:

Our military forces continue to play vital roles in every aspect of Afghanistan's reconstruction.

The competence of our troops is awe-inspiring. Most are on their second or third combat deployment. Some are on their fourth tour.

The dedication of this 20,000-person force continues unabated despite a significant increase in the intensity of combat and the demanding physical conditions of field operations. Army paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade and Marine infantry units operate in conjunction with highly skilled special operations forces throughout this nation of 26 million people.

Afghanistan remains a violent country in which Afghan security forces are not capable of providing the security needed by the emerging political system. The Taliban has again surged across the border, reinforced by youthful extremists from Pakistan. Foreign fighters equipped with modern communications, new field gear, mortars, rockets, heavy machine guns and improvised explosive devices (of Iraqi insurgent quality) are commonplace on the battlefield.

We have killed more than 700 Taliban since the election. Significantly, the enemy is capable of massing in 100-man units with supporting indirect fires. We're now in a tough new phase of the fight.

The U.S. combat units in Afghanistan are composed of some of the toughest troops I have encountered. The special operations units are extraordinary. We fight in small units at extended distances. We also provide security for the economic recovery efforts of the Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Agency for International Development and nongovernmental agencies.

Some infantry squads routinely find themselves as much as a 10-hour drive from their parent units. Fortunately, U.S. artillery and mortar coverage and the firepower of Air Force AC-130s have made a difference in our ability to operate with fewer casualties in this highly dispersed and dangerous environment.

The reaction of Afghans to our forces is noteworthy. This is a nation that, historically, has been hostile to outsiders. They devoured foreign occupiers, both British and Soviet. Because our troops are clearly aliens, from the perspective of the desperately impoverished Afghan population, it is astonishing that there is such widespread support and gratitude for them. Senior Afghan officials believe that more than 80 percent of the people support the U.S. and NATO military presence and understand its purpose is to give Afghanistan a future free from the savagery of past decades.

READY TO FIGHT:

The Afghan National Army is an important new factor in the nation's political development. By next summer, there will be more than 70 battalions in the field. U.S. Army and Marine embedded trainers have equipped, trained and rapidly deployed into the field with these units.

The ANA has a long way to go. There is little national command and control. There is almost no maintenance or logistics capability. But the Afghan military battalions are ready to fight. The Afghan people are thrilled at seeing their own army in the field and, for the first time in decades, not abusing the people. The Afghans are natural soldiers of immense personal courage.

The ANA, however, is a force with significant challenges. Its soldiers are equipped with Soviet junk; they need modern smallarms, not cast-off AK-47s. They need winter barracks if we expect them to stay in the mountains and on the frontier. The ANA also needs wheeled armored vehicles with contractor maintenance and logistics support. Finally, the ANA will require medium-lift helicopters to give it a mobility advantage over the Taliban if we expect to substantially draw down our forces in the next five years.

The bad news is that the Afghan National Police Force (ANP) will take another three to five years to fix. We lack the resources to bypass Germany (which has lead-nation responsibility for the ANP) and create a well equipped, competent nationwide law-enforcement agency with police stations, jails and a supporting court system. The police will be key to long-term success in the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan. They must create a domestic intelligence system, monitor the reintegration of the Taliban and enforce the laws of the central government. The toughest challenge will be to build a national network of police officers who have the trust of the tribes. Without effective local police, Afghanistan will remain a war zone forever.

THE HEROIN QUESTION:

Afghanistan is a giant narcotic state. Poppy fields reach as large as 20 by 60 miles. Production of an estimated 580 metric tons of pure heroin makes Afghanistan the dominant source of this drug: The country produces an estimated 87 percent of the world's supply.

A provincial governor was recently caught with more than 10 metric tons of heroin in his palace basement.

More than half the nation's gross national product comes from this illegal activity, which violates both Afghan and international law. The enormous production of opium fundamentally corrupts government with hundreds of millions of criminal dollars flowing to bribery, illegal arms, empowerment of local warlords and distorted economic development.

U.S., Afghan and international policy has failed on the drug issue. We are averting our eyes, hoping we can accomplish our mission and steal out of Afghanistan without facing this menace.

The British have the lead-nation role on the drug issue, but are limited by an underresourced strategy. A small and courageous drug enforcement agency presence (staffed with fewer officers than the counter-narcotics force of a medium-size U.S. city police department) is trying to build a modest Afghan counter-drug police force. Afghan leaders have restricted a competent U.S. eradication effort to reducing token poppy fields while ignoring the substantial crops of the powerful criminals.

But here, too, there is some good news. Karzai recognizes the danger and has initiated a national campaign to portray opium production as an affront to Islam and the Afghan people. And the U.S. State Department has succeeded in marshaling congressional resources to launch a serious anti-drug campaign following the Afghan elections. This campaign will include creating a substantial Afghan police mentoring, training and equipping effort.

The next 24 months will be decisive. The continued massive flow of heroin money to the warlords and into the international criminal community will suppress legitimate economic activity and generate increased addiction in the population, as well as among Afghan and foreign peacekeepers.

Our strategy must include an unrelenting commitment to aerial and manual poppy eradication and serious levels of U.S. and international support for alternative economic development.

We must also support a national campaign by Afghan political authorities to strip away the mask of legitimacy from criminal production of drugs. Without such a strategy, we risk disaster in our nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.

In the coming five years, steadfast commitment by the U.S. administration and Congress can create a law-based state in Afghanistan that is at peace with its neighbors, that governs with justice and that denies sanctuary to extremists.

The key to achieving this successful outcome lies primarily in the hands of the emergent Afghan leadership. We can only be a source of resources, ideas, encouragement and initial security to provide a platform for a successful outcome. Karzai and his ministers are struggling to overcome decades of foreign aggression and civil warfare that shattered the infrastructure, as well as the tribal cultural foundations of the country.

We are on track in Afghanistan because of the courage and sacrifice of the U.S. armed forces, supported by their CIA and State Department partners. But we, the American people, need to maintain our resolve. The mission in Afghanistan is achievable. •

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