

Afghanistan: Victory in Defeat

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There are many parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan. The recent American mayors' resolution to "bring our war \$\$ home" and Obama's announcement that troops are now being withdrawn are fresh reminders, but the story they tell is grim.

In Baltimore, the nation's mayors debated and passed a War Dollars Home Resolution at their annual meeting, the first time they have taken a stand on war since they passed a similar resolution in 1971, during the Vietnam war. The anti-war resolution even made the TV news, which has downplayed the fact that the majority of Americans have wanted an end to their illegal wars for years.

It is a moment flooded with nostalgia for those who cut their political teeth 40 years ago during the Vietnam war, though it is hard to even recognise the State of the Union 40 years on. The "War on Poverty" of LBJ has been replaced by a "war on terror". Today's America has a black president, yet is mired in recession, and promises only falling living standards, collapsing infrastructure, and more and more violations of civil rights.

Though Jewish Americans are still an essential part of today's much less flamboyant and less powerful anti-war movement, the pro-war movement is now loudly pro-Israel, unlike the earlier pro-warriors. This reflects the new times, where Israel is no longer just a naughty, temporary occupier of Palestinian land, but America's most devoted ally, a respected (or rather feared) imperialist in its own right, and a key player in orchestrating the US wars in the Middle East.

At the same time as the mayors called for an end to the endless wars, Congress censured Obama over his new undeclared war against Libya, now in its third month, though stopping short of denying him funds. Neither the mayoral nor congressional resolutions have any teeth. But, with his generals breathing down his neck, the astute Obama was able to use these two protests to protect his rear as he announced his plans to withdraw 33,000 troops from Afghanistan by September 2012, including 10,000 by the end of this year: "America, it is time to focus on nation-building here at home."

Obama's announcement brings to mind another parallel with Vietnam — Nixon's announcement in 1972 during his re-election campaign that "peace is at hand", that he too would wind down the war after negotiations with the enemy, provided that the people gave him his second term. He went on to win one of the largest majorities of any US president in 1972. After winning the election, he was able to convince Karzai (excuse me, Thieu-Ky) to agree to a deal with the Taliban (excuse me, the Communists), which culminated in a memorable evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon by helicopter in 1975, finally freeing Vietnam of its American occupiers. It was not a pretty "plan", but it worked.

Just as the majority of Americans by the late 1960s had turned against the war in southeast Asia even at the risk of “losing” Vietnam to the Communists, so 56 per cent of Americans today want an immediate pull-out from Afghanistan, though 56 per cent also predict there will be no stable government there and that the Taliban could well return to power. But, like 40 years ago, Americans have lost interest.

The parallel is not exact. Obama would have pulled out of Afghanistan in 2009 if the generals had let him. “Obama had to do this 18-month surge just to demonstrate, in effect, that it couldn’t be done,” Bob Woodward quotes an aide in *Obama’s Wars*. As expected, the surge was a spectacular failure, more like a surge of sitting ducks. Chief warrior Stanley McChrystal was fired in disgrace last year and his equally gung-ho replacement David Petraeus has been shunted off to the CIA, where he has already been told to continue the war by covert means. The remaining generals are furious but are putting on a brave face, with Hillary taking about “reaching out” to the Taliban, no doubt counting on winning their “hearts and minds”.

Obama, while disappointing those who expected him to slay the dragon, drive the moneychangers out of the temple, and bring peace on earth, is nonetheless a wily politician worthy of his predecessor Nixon. Like Nixon, he knows perfectly well that it’s time to move on and he’s playing to the crowd: “We are starting this drawdown from a position of strength,” he told Americans solemnly. This pretense and the assassination of Bin Laden will almost certainly give him a second term.

The drawdown is none too soon, as defections from the ranks of the coalition started last year with the Netherlands and are continuing, with Canada, German and Italy having deadlines (which, it’s true, shift depending on electoral strategies and US arm-twisting). Britain is already reducing its contingent and a delighted French President Nicolas Sarkozy immediately declared French troops would be home by next summer.

“The war is lost. Reaching out to the Taliban is in no way a demonstration of a ‘position of strength’, but a clear sign of America’s weakness,” writes commentator Boris Volkhonsky, though he admits Obama has handled a difficult problem well, calling his speech “an astute recognition of the fact”. Indeed, the only public criticism of Obama is coming from crackpots such as Senator John McCain who said that Obama is denying military commanders in Afghanistan the ability to finally defeat “a battered and broken enemy”. President Hamid Karzai described the announcement that American troops would depart as “a moment of happiness for Afghanistan”.

A major difference between Vietnam and Afghanistan is the plan to maintain bases in Afghanistan after pulling out. Afghanistan’s neighbours Russia (almost-neighbour), China, Iran, Pakistan — even the puppet government in Kabul — vow that this will not happen. As if on cue, Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad invited Karzai and Pakistan’s President Asif Ali Zardari to Tehran this week to a conference on terrorism and for one-on-one talks. Apart from US plans for Afghanistan, Zardari’s talks dealt with completing the Iran-Pakistan gas “Peace Pipeline” project, which is strongly opposed by the US. But the US should hardly be surprised at this budding friendship: the downside of the surge and assassination Bin Laden is that Pakistan can finally extricate itself from its deadly American embrace without any apologies.

As for Karzai, he sees the writing on the wall, and is eager to survive a few more years,

which means courting his neighbours to take the place of the hated Americans. All of them have indicated they will support him. His trip to Tehran should also come as no surprise. The US will almost certainly have to abandon its freshly paved military bases in the north of Afghanistan, prepared as part of the Bush-era “Blackwill plan” to split Afghanistan in two. This neocon fantasy would cede the south to the Taliban with the understanding that they can play at creating a “greater Pashtunistan” if they let the US keep the predominantly Tajik north. Neither Karzai nor Zardari will go along with this. Neither will China, Russia nor Iran. It is very unlikely the Taliban will either.

Iranian Defense Minister Ahmed Vahidi visited Kabul just last week and told Afghanistan’s Vice President Mohammed Fahim, “The great and brave nation of Afghanistan is capable of establishing its security in the best possible form without the interference of the trans-regional forces.” Signing a bilateral security cooperation agreement with his Iranian counterpart, Afghanistan’s Defence Minister Abdulrahim Wardak gushed, “We believe that joint defence and security cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan is very important for establishing peace and security in the region.”

The most important — and very disturbing — parallel between these American wars is in the perception and the reality of who “won”. The popular perception is that the US lost Vietnam and that it has lost in Afghanistan. But this is misleading, as the US achieved “victory in defeat” in both cases.

In the case of Vietnam, it destroyed any possibility of successful developing a strong socialist country as a catalyst in the non-imperial transformation of southeast Asia. Like Cuba’s Fidel, Ho Chi Minh was well-educated and highly respected by his people and — just as important — by both the Soviet and Chinese leaders. Without the US invasion of Vietnam, all of southeast Asia would most likely today be communist (in more than just name). The world would look very, very different.

Similarly, in the Middle East, the US, following Britain’s imperial lead in the Middle East, cultivated the passive and inward-looking Wahhabis and the anti-communist Saudi monarchy, who let the imperialists run roughshod over the region for over a century, all the time providing the West with precious oil. Together with Saudi Arabia, the empire undermined its secular challengers in Iran, Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya (still a work-in-progress), and the Islamist challengers in Algeria and post-revolutionary Iran, ensuring that they do not become models for the region — and threats to the empire.

Like Vietnam in 1975, Iraq and Afghanistan now lie in ruins. Egypt is fatally compromised after four decades of neoliberalism and rampant corruption under US tutelage. Iran’s Islamists have miraculously survived a decade of war with Iraq under US sponsorship, and two more decades of sanctions and subversion by the US, Israel and the gang, but the harsh, austere regime there is not much of a model for, say, Egypt with its Westernised elite and many intimate ties with the decadent West. Without the wars and subversion by the US (not to mention Israel), all of the Middle East would most likely today be united as a latter-day Islamic caliphate, sharing the oil wealth as Islam requires and telling the empire to go to hell.

So even if the helicopters have to evacuate Karzai and the last US diplomats from Kabul in the near future, the flag-wavers and their neocon henchmen can still celebrate “victory”; in a sense, they are right.

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