

Afghanistan: US Policy at the Crossroads

Featured Presenter: Norman Solomon, journalist, author, and Executive Director, The Institute for Public Accuracy Journalist Norman Solomon – author of *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Are Spinning Us to Death and Made Love, Got War: Close Encounters With America's Warfare State* will reflect on his recent visit to Afghanistan and engage students in conversation about possible directions for US policy in the region.

Guiding Questions

- What is the situation on the ground in Afghanistan currently?
- What strategic interests does the U.S. have in Afghanistan -- and is our policy serving those interests?
- What impact is current US policy having on citizens of Afghanistan?
- What possible future courses could the US take at this juncture?

Published on Monday, September 14, 2009 by C-SPAN

Norman Solomon on Afghanistan
<http://www.commondreams.org/video/2009/09/14>

Norman Solomon, Institute for Public Accuracy, Exec. Dir., discusses Afghanistan, including the recent election, the war and U.S. policy towards the country.



Published on Tuesday, August 18, 2009 by CommonDreams.org

Why Afghans Have No Hope in This Week's Vote

by Malalai Joya

Like millions of Afghans, I have no hope in the results of this week's election. In a country ruled by warlords, occupation forces, Taliban insurgency, drug money and guns, no one can expect a legitimate or fair vote.

Among the people on the street, a common sentiment is, 'Everything has already been decided by the U.S. and NATO, and the real winner has already been picked by the White House and Pentagon.' Although there are a total of 41 candidates running for president, the vast majority of them are well known faces responsible for the current disastrous situation in Afghanistan.

Hamid Karzai has cemented alliances with brutal warlords and fundamentalists in order to maintain his position. Although our Constitution forbids war criminals from running for office, he has named two notorious militia commanders as his vice-presidential running mates – Qasim Fahim, who was, at the time of the 2001 invasion, the warlord who headed up the Northern Alliance, and Karim Khalili. The election commission did not reject them or a number of others accused of many crimes, and so the list of candidates also includes former Russian puppets and a former Taliban commander.

Karzai has also continued to absolutely betray the women of Afghanistan. Even after massive international outcry and brave protesters taking to the streets of Kabul, Karzai has implemented the infamous law targeting Shia women. He had initially promised to review the most egregious clauses, but in the end it was passed with few amendments, leaving the barbaric anti-women statements untouched. As Human Rights Watch recently said, "Karzai has made an unthinkable deal to sell Afghan women out in return for the support of fundamentalists in the August 20 election."

Deals have been made with countless fundamentalists in Karzai's maneuvering to stay in power. For example, pro-Iranian extremist Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, who has been accused of war crimes, has been promised five cabinet positions for his party, and so he has told the media he's backing Karzai. A deal has even been done with the dreaded warlord Rashid Dostum – who has returned from exile in Turkey to campaign for Karzai – and many other such terrorists. Rather than democracy, what we have in Afghanistan today are back room deals amongst discredited warlords.

The two main contenders to Karzai's continued rule, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah, do not offer any change; both are former cabinet ministers in this discredited regime and neither has a real, broad footing amongst the people. Abdullah has run a high profile campaign, in part due to the backing

and financial support he receives from Iran's fundamentalist regime. Abdullah and some of the Northern Alliance commanders supporting him have threatened unrest if he loses the vote, raising fears of a return to the rampant violence and killing that marked the civil war years of 1992 to 1996. All of the major candidates' speeches and policies are very similar. They make the same sweet-sounding promises, but we are not fooled. Afghans remember how Karzai abandoned his campaign pledges after winning the 2004 vote.

We Afghans know that this election will change nothing and it is only part of a show of democracy put on by and for the West, to legitimize its future puppet in Afghanistan. It seems we are doomed to see the continuation of this failed, mafia-like corrupt government for another term.

The people of Afghanistan are fed up with the rampant corruption of Karzai's "narco-state" government – his own brother, Wali Karzai, has been linked to drug trafficking in Kandahar Province – and the escalating war waged by NATO. In May of this year, U.S. air strikes killed approximately 150 civilians in my native province, Farah. More than ever, Afghans are faced with powerful internal enemies – fundamentalist warlords and their Taliban brothers-in-creed – and the external enemies occupying the country.

Democracy will never come to Afghanistan through the barrel of a gun, or from the cluster bombs dropped by foreign forces. The struggle will be long and difficult, but the values of real democracy, human rights and women's rights will only be won by the Afghan people themselves.

So do not be fooled by this façade of democracy. Your governments in the West that claim to be bringing democracy to Afghanistan ignore public opinion in their own countries, where growing numbers are against the war. President Obama in particular needs to understand that the change Afghans believe in does not include more troops and a ramped up war.

If the populations of Afghanistan and the NATO countries were able to vote on this military occupation it could not continue indefinitely, and peace would finally be within reach.

Malalai Joya was the youngest Member of the Afghan Parliament elected in the 2005 elections. Her memoir, *A Woman Among Warlords* (Scribner), will be published this October.

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Published on Wednesday, August 26, 2009 by [CommonDreams.org](#)

The Afghanistan Gap: Press vs. Public

by **Norman Solomon**

This month, a lot of media stories have compared President Johnson's war in Vietnam and President Obama's war in Afghanistan. The comparisons are often valid, but a key parallel rarely gets mentioned -- the media's insistent support for the war even after most of the public has turned against it.

This omission relies on the mythology that the U.S. news media functioned as tough critics of the Vietnam War in real time, a fairy tale so widespread that it routinely masquerades as truth. In fact, overall, the default position of the corporate media is to bond with war policymakers in Washington -- insisting for the longest time that the war must go on.

In early 1968, after several years of massive escalation of the Vietnam War, the Boston Globe conducted a survey of 39 major U.S. daily newspapers and found that not a single one had editorialized in favor of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. While millions of Americans were actively demanding an immediate pullout, such a concept was still viewed as extremely unrealistic by the editorial boards of big daily papers -- including the liberal New York Times and Washington Post.

A similar pattern took shape during Washington's protracted war in Iraq. Year after year, the editorial positions of major dailies have been much more supportive of the U.S. war effort than the American public.

In mid-spring 2004, a Wall Street Journal/NBC poll was showing that "one in four Americans say troops should leave Iraq as soon as possible and another 30 percent say they should come home within 18 months." But as usual, when it came to rejection of staying the war course, the media establishment lagged way behind the populace.

Despite sometimes-withering media criticism of the Bush administration's foreign policy, all of the sizable newspapers steered clear of calling for withdrawal. Many favored sending in even more troops. On May 7, 2004, Editor & Publisher headlined a column by the magazine's editor, Greg Mitchell, this way: "When Will the First Major Newspaper Call for a Pullout in Iraq?"

Today, the gap between mainline big media and the grassroots is just as wide. Top policymakers for what has become Obama's Afghanistan war can find their assumptions mirrored in the editorials of the nation's mighty newspapers -- at the same time that opinion polls are showing a dramatic trend against the war.

While a recent ABC News-Washington Post poll found that 51 percent of the public says the war in Afghanistan isn't worth fighting, the savants who determine big media's editorial positions insist on staying the course.

Recycled from the repetition-compulsion department, a spate of new hand-wringing editorials has bemoaned the shortcomings of Washington's allied leader in the occupied country. Of course the edifying pitch includes the assertion that the Afghan government and its armed forces must get their act together. (Good help is hard to find.)

"President Obama has rightfully defined success in Afghanistan as essential to America's struggle against Al Qaeda," the New York Times editorialized on Aug. 21. Yet Al Qaeda, according to expert assessments, is scarcely present in Afghanistan any more. There are dozens of countries where that terrorist group or other ones could be said to have a much larger presence. Does that mean the U.S. government should be prepared to wage war in all of those countries?

Paragraph after paragraph of the editorial proclaimed what must be done to win the war. It was all boilerplate stuff of the sort that has littered the editorial pages of countless newspapers for many years during one protracted war after another -- in Vietnam, in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

When congressional leaders and top administration officials read such editorials, they can take comfort in finding reaffirmed support for their insistence on funding more and more war. If only public opinion would cooperate, there'd be no political problem.

But, increasingly, public opinion is not cooperating. While the media establishment and the political establishment appear to belong to the same pro-war affinity group, the public is shifting to the other side of a widening credibility gap.

In a word, the problem -- and the threat for the press and the state -- can be summed up as democracy.

Now, one of the pivotal questions is what "liberal" and "progressive" online organizations will do in the coming months. Many are led by people who privately understand that Obama's war escalation is on track for cascading catastrophes. But they do not want to antagonize the leading Democrats in Washington, who contend that more war in Afghanistan is the only viable political course. Will that undue deference to the Obama administration continue, despite the growing evidence of disaster and the sinking poll numbers for the war?

A cautionary note for those who assume that the impacts of public opinion will put a brake on the accelerating U.S. war in Afghanistan: That assumption is based on a misunderstanding of how the USA's warfare state really functions.

Under the headline "Someone Tell the President the War Is Over," the New York Times columnist Frank Rich wrote: "A president can't stay the course when his own citizens (let alone his own allies) won't stay with him." That was way back in August 2005.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/14/opinion/14rich.html>

(The next day, I wrote a piece headlined "Someone Tell Frank Rich the War Is Not Over.") <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0815-24.htm>

The war on Vietnam persisted for several horrific years after the polls were showing that most Americans disapproved. The momentum of a large-scale and protracted U.S. war of military occupation is massive and cataclysmic after the engine has really been gunned.

That's one of the most chilling parallels between the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The news media are part of the deadly process. So are the politicians who remain hitched to some expedient calculus. And so are we, to the extent that we go along with the conventional wisdom of the warfare state.

Norman Solomon is the author of many books including "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," which has been adapted into a documentary film. For more information, go to: www.normansolomon.com

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Published on Thursday, October 1, 2009 by CommonDreams.org

Starting Another Year of War in Afghanistan

by Norman Solomon

October 2009 has begun with the New York Times reporting that "the president, vice president and an array of cabinet secretaries, intelligence chiefs, generals, diplomats and advisers gathered in a windowless basement room of the White House for three hours on Wednesday to chart a new course in Afghanistan."

As this month begins the ninth year of the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan, "windowless" seems to be an apt metaphor. The structure of thought and the range of options being debated in Washington's high places are notably insular. The "new course" will be a permutation of the present course.

While certainty is lacking, steely resolve is evident. An unspoken mantra remains in effect: When in doubt, keep killing. The knotty question is: Exactly who and how?

News accounts are filled with stories about options that mix "counterinsurgency" with "counterterrorism." The thicker the jargon in Washington, the louder the erudite tunes from the latest best and brightest -- whistling past graveyards, to be filled by people far away.

In the White House, there's no indication of a pane that's facing the pain in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, where the U.S. government continues to bring gifts: a dollar's worth of warfare for a dime's worth of everything else.

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The letter was neatly printed with a blue pen. "I've been fed up and damaged," it said. "My hope is that from you and all entrepreneurs and all who have compassion, I respectfully ask you to help me for God's sake. I'm downtrodden. I hope you understand my situation."

The situation, living in a squalid camp for refugees in Kabul, was desperate. "I am Sayed Ali -- from Geresh district of Helmand province."

Moments after handing me the letter, he grabbed it out of my hands. A controlled rage flooded his voice. Pashto words cascaded, and a translator tried to keep up.

Sayed Ali said that he'd given other letters to officials and nothing changed. Month after month in this forsaken camp, little more than ditches and improvised tents.

Two weeks later, in mid-September, I met with a few staffers and members of Congress; some of the most progressive on Capitol Hill. But when I talked about the refugees I saw in Kabul -- many of them

homeless because of U.S. bombing in southern Afghanistan -- the discussion couldn't seem to get anywhere.

In the air was an unspoken message: Desperate refugees are routine in war. That's the way it is.

Washington doesn't recognize Sayed Ali, with his suffering and his smoldering rage, or other Afghans in similar predicaments. An unspoken calculus in Washington figures that we owe them next to nothing. It's a matter of priorities, you know.

Yes, there are plenty of photo ops and news reports on U.S. aid projects, happening in tandem with Army and Marines military maneuvers. But what's budgeted to help rebuild Afghanistan is paltry compared to what's spent on making war there.

"We proclaim moral principles when justifying our actions, but we wreak havoc and destruction on a backward, ancient world we do not understand," retired U.S. Army colonel and author Douglas Macgregor wrote in Defense News on September 28. He added: "Our troops are not anthropologists or sociologists, they are soldiers and Marines who have been sent to impose America's will on backward societies. The result is mutual hatred -- not everywhere, but in enough places to feed what American military leaders like to call an 'insurgency' . . ."

U.S. media and politics are now awash in talk about getting smarter and shrewder in Afghanistan. The idea of setting a country right while waging war is a popular Washington fantasy. What it has to do with reality is another matter.

"I don't want any foreigners building roads or big buildings for me when I am cleaning blood from my home," a shopkeeper in Helmand province, Haji Dawood Khan, told a Financial Times reporter in late September. The newspaper quoted a businessman from Kandahar province, Mohammad Karigar, who said: "The more foreign troops there are, the more people will hate them."

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In Washington, few politicians or journalists mention that 90 percent of the U.S. government's current spending in Afghanistan is for military operations.

There was plenty of money to pay for bombing Sayed Ali's neighborhood in Helmand province, but there's no money to ease his current desperation.

Sayed Ali is speaking for countless other people: "I respectfully ask you to help me for God's sake."

More than eight months have passed since the inaugural speech when Barack Obama told foreign leaders: "Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy." And so President Obama will be judged.

Norman Solomon, executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, is the author of many books including "**War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death** ." He is co-chair of the national Healthcare NOT Warfare campaign. For video of his recent appearances on "Democracy Now" and C-SPAN's "Washington Journal," go to: **www.normansolomon.com**

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Sam Sedaei

International Civil Resistance Trainer, Producer, International Affairs Contributor

Posted: October 7, 2009 06:59 PM

The United States Must Stay in Afghanistan

Shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center, President Bush began strikes on Taliban targets in Afghanistan and began a military operation to root out the radical group. But before nearly finishing the task at hand, neo-conservatives (some of whom had established the Project for the New American Century and had previously tried to push President Clinton into war with Iraq) renewed their effort to make a case based on faulty intelligence for Iraq. The effort led to a poorly thought out unilateral invasion that cost the U.S. billions of dollars, thousands of Iraqi and American deaths and tens of allies.

President Obama ran with the promise that he would bring the Iraq war to an end and refocus our attention to fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda, who were our real adversaries. The promise made sense, had international appeal and gained the strong support of Democrats, independents and some Republicans, who voted to send him to The White House with a 7% advantage over his war veteran Republican opponent, Senator McCain.

But as it sometimes happens, we have begun to see some flip-flopping taking place following the election. The difference is that this time, it is not the politician, now President Obama, who is doing the flipping, but some of the very people who so faithfully supported him and his position on Afghanistan. As President Obama is getting ready to live up to his promise, renew American efforts in Afghanistan and make a number of critical decisions regarding an increase of troops, an ever-growing chorus of liberals is pressuring him to abandon Afghanistan and withdraw without any regards to what will happen next. These individuals make a number of unpersuasive arguments, from generic anti-war platitudes to faulty comparisons with other unsuccessful wars.

One of those overused comparisons has been with Afghanistan's war with the Soviets in the 1980s and the fact that the Soviets were unable to root out the Taliban after 9 years of fighting. But the Soviets' war with the Taliban was fundamentally different than ours.

First, Soviets' main objective was quite narrow: to support the Marxist government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan against the Taliban. They did not focus on defending the population, helping to educate and build schools or support development and trade. The American policy under President Obama is fundamentally different and more comprehensive. While President Bush saw Afghanistan as mostly a military project, President Obama has a comprehensive policy that goes far beyond just the military operations.

Secondly, the Taliban were in a stronger military position during their war with the Soviets because they garnered full American support. As soon as they began their war, President Carter authorized the CIA to begin a massive propaganda effort against the Marxists, making the Afghan government unpopular and Taliban popular. And shortly after President Reagan was sworn into office, the United States began training and arming the Taliban. Of course the Taliban were able to fight the Soviets more ably with the strong help of a super power like the United States. But the Taliban now have no state sponsors, putting them in a much weaker position.

And the third major difference between the Soviet's war with Afghanistan and current American efforts -- which also makes comparisons with Vietnam irrelevant -- is that while Afghans may have felt ambivalent or supportive of the Taliban in the 1980s, they are now deeply unpopular in all parts of the country. Afghans have now had the chance to live under a Taliban regime and remember the brutalities and carry the scars. Because of this experience, Afghans by and large were ecstatic to see the Taliban go and deeply fear their comeback now. This reality also makes American initiatives in Afghanistan much more popular than those of the Soviets. The same issue of popularity makes comparisons with Vietnam irrelevant (where Viet Cong was very popular and had the state sponsorship of the Soviet Union against the United States, leading to the American failure for some of the same reasons that the Soviets failed in Afghanistan).

It is true that we are not going to bring true democracy to any country. Those who believe Iraq is a full-fledged liberal democracy now should expect major cases of corruption, rigging of various elections, insurgency and inter-ethnic and inter-sect violence in the coming years. Democracy will only survive and flourish in a country if a critical mass in that country has evolved through the necessary stages that would allow them to understand the value of democracy as the system that can best serve their collective and common interests.

However, if there is one country where this rule does not apply in the short run, it's Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an extremely tribal country that lacks the most basic infrastructural elements that would enable its people to get educated about not just mathematics and biology, but nationalism, government and all the different ways in which they can take control of their own destiny. As long as they lack those necessary elements, they will not be able to evolve and embrace democracy and reject the extremism of the Taliban. The United States and NATO are now in the unique position to help modernize Afghanistan enough so that the population can have a reliable window to the rest of the world, raising their social consciousness and seeing how they, too, can live in a free, advanced and respected country. Only one aspect of the project should involve the military; others should include helping the Afghans shift their economy from opium to other areas, build schools and opening up the country to foreign companies that are willing to invest and bring communication technologies such as cell phones, satellite dishes and the internet to all parts of the country

Some may admit that there is an advantage in a comprehensive NATO strategy in Afghanistan, but still question why the U.S. should be the one to take leadership of this modernization project. For three reasons:

1. Leaving Afghanistan may be a comfortable position to take in the short-run, but will lead to the immediate rise of the Taliban and a guaranteed safe haven for Al Qaeda. It is not so much the camps in dirt that provide Al Qaeda with the ability to attack the U.S., but the fact that whereas they are now spending most of their resources to fight NATO troops, a safe haven will free up those resources that they can then use to train and equip individuals in the United States.
2. If the United States sees itself responsible to stop genocide in places like Darfur, it must also do what it can to prevent them from happening in the first place. Leaving Afghanistan will lead to a surge of violence on the part of Taliban against those Afghans who will defy their rule. Belief in the notion that Afghans should determine their own future grossly simplifies reality in Afghanistan with the false assumption that Afghans have choices. If the U.S. leaves, there will be no choices. Talibans have the guns and brutality, and they will kill, imprison and torture whoever questions them.
3. The United States was responsible for strengthening and even perhaps the eventual rule of the Taliban following their war with the Soviets. This policy led to a long dark period of repression, torture and killing in Afghanistan. For that, we now owe it to Afghans to do what we can to help them build their own country. The United States cannot intervene in other countries to the detriment of those countries and then withdraw at exactly the time when the people that we have done harm with our policies need us the most.

As President Obama begins to consider sending more troops to Afghanistan, he should know that we can neither kill the Taliban out of existence through an exclusively military policy or withdraw and pretend the future of Afghanistan will not directly impact our national security in the long-run. We must stay in Afghanistan and begin pursuing a comprehensive strategy that speeds up the process of opening up the country's economy to foreign investments in telecommunications and technology, education and infrastructure. If our policy is truly comprehensive, then the presence of American military and NATO should be considered a necessary component in that strategy to protect the population and hold the Taliban out of the cities while Afghans have the chance to build their own country.

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August 23, 2009

Could Afghanistan Become Obama's Vietnam?

By [PETER BAKER](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) had not even taken office before supporters were etching his likeness onto Mount Rushmore as another [Abraham Lincoln](#) or the second coming of [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#).

Yet what if they got the wrong predecessor? What if Mr. Obama is fated to be another [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) instead?

To be sure, such historical analogies are overly simplistic and fatally flawed, if only because each presidency is distinct in its own way. But the L.B.J. model — a president who aspired to reshape America at home while fighting a losing war abroad — is one that haunts Mr. Obama's White House as it seeks to salvage [Afghanistan](#) while enacting an expansive domestic program.

In this summer of discontent for Mr. Obama, as the heady early days give way to the grinding battle for elusive goals, he looks ahead to an uncertain future not only for his legislative agenda but for what has indisputably become his war. Last week's elections in Afghanistan played out at the same time as the debate over health care heated up in Washington, producing one of those split-screen moments that could not help but remind some of Mr. Johnson's struggles to build a Great Society while fighting in Vietnam.

"The analogy of Lyndon Johnson suggests itself very profoundly," said David M. Kennedy, the [Stanford University](#) historian. Mr. Obama, he said, must avoid letting Afghanistan shadow his presidency as Vietnam did Mr. Johnson's. "He needs to worry about the outcome of that intervention and policy and how it could spill over into everything else he wants to accomplish."

By several accounts, that risk weighs on Mr. Obama these days. Mr. Kennedy was among a group of historians who had dinner with Mr. Obama at the White House earlier this summer where the president expressed concern that Afghanistan could yet hijack his presidency. Although Mr. Kennedy said he could not discuss the off-the-record conversation, others in the room said Mr. Obama acknowledged the L.B.J. risk.

"He said he has a problem," said one person who attended that dinner at the end of June,

insisting on anonymity to share private discussions. "This is not just something he can turn his back on and walk away from. But it's an issue he understands could be a danger to his administration."

Another person there was [Robert Caro](#), the L.B.J. biographer who was struck that Mr. Johnson made some of his most fateful decisions about Vietnam in the same dining room. "All I could think of when I was sitting there and this subject came up was the setting," he said. "You had such an awareness of how things can go wrong."

Without quoting what the president said, Mr. Caro said it was clear Mr. Obama understood that precedent. "Any president with a grasp of history — and it seems to me President Obama has a deep understanding of history — would have to be very aware of what happened in another war to derail a great domestic agenda," he said.

Afghanistan, of course, is not exactly Vietnam. At its peak, the United States had about 500,000 troops in Vietnam, compared with about 68,000 now set for Afghanistan, and most of those fighting in the 1960s were draftees as opposed to volunteer soldiers. Vietnam, therefore, reached deeper into American society, touching more homes and involving more unwilling participants. But the politics of the two seem to evoke comparisons.

Just as Mr. Johnson believed he had no choice but to fight in Vietnam to contain communism, Mr. Obama last week portrayed Afghanistan as the bulwark against international terrorism. "This is not a war of choice," he told the Veterans of Foreign Wars at their convention in Phoenix. "This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the [Taliban](#) insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which [Al Qaeda](#) would plot to kill more Americans."

But while many Americans once shared that view, polls suggest that conviction is fading nearly eight years into the war. The share of Americans who said the war in Afghanistan was worth fighting slipped below 50 percent in a survey released last week by The Washington Post and ABC News. A July poll by the New York Times and CBS News showed that 57 percent of Americans think things are going badly for the United States in Afghanistan, compared with 33 percent who think they are going well.

That growing disenchantment in the countryside is increasingly mirrored in Washington, where liberals in Congress are speaking out more vocally against the Afghan war and newspapers are filled with more columns questioning America's involvement. The cover of the latest Economist is headlined "Afghanistan: The Growing Threat of Failure."

[Richard N. Haass](#), a former Bush administration official turned critic, [wrote in The New York Times last week](#) that what he once considered a war of necessity has become a war of choice.

While he still supports it, he argued that there are now alternatives to a large-scale troop presence, like [drone attacks](#) on suspected terrorists, more development aid and expanded training of Afghan police and soldiers.

His former boss, [George W. Bush](#), learned first-hand how political capital can slip away when an overseas war loses popular backing. With Iraq in flames, Mr. Bush found little support for his second-term domestic agenda of overhauling [Social Security](#) and liberalizing [immigration](#) laws. L.B.J. managed to create [Medicare](#) and enact landmark civil rights legislation but some historians have argued that the Great Society ultimately stalled because of Vietnam.

Mr. Obama has launched a new strategy intended to turn Afghanistan around, sending an additional 21,000 troops, installing a new commander, promising more civilian reconstruction help, shifting to more protection of the population and building up Afghan security forces. It is a strategy that some who study Afghanistan believe could make a difference.

But even some who agree worry that time is running out at home, particularly if the strategy does not produce results quickly. Success is so hard to imagine that [Richard Holbrooke](#), Mr. Obama's special representative for Afghanistan, this month came up with this definition: "We'll know it when we see it."

The consequences of failure go beyond just Afghanistan. Next door is its volatile neighbor Pakistan, armed with nuclear weapons and already seething with radical anti-American elements.

"It could all go belly up and we could run out of public support," said Ronald E. Neumann, a former ambassador to Afghanistan and now president of the American Academy of Diplomacy. "The immediate danger is we don't explain to Americans how long things take. I certainly get questions like, 'Is the new strategy turning things around? Is the civilian surge working?' We're not going to even get all of those people on the ground for months."

Others are not so sure that the new strategy will make a difference regardless of how much time it is given. No matter who is eventually declared the winner of last week's election in Afghanistan, the government there remains so plagued by corruption and inefficiency that it has limited legitimacy with the Afghan public. Just as America was frustrated with successive South Vietnamese governments, it has grown sour on Afghanistan's leaders with little obvious recourse.

Lt. Col. Douglas A. Ollivant, a retired [Army](#) officer who worked on Iraq on the [National Security Council](#) staff first for Mr. Bush and then for Mr. Obama, said Afghanistan may be "several orders of magnitude" harder. It has none of the infrastructure, education and natural resources of Iraq, he noted, nor is the political leadership as aligned in its goals with those of America's leadership.

"We're in a place where we don't have good options and that's what everyone is struggling with,"

Colonel Ollivant said. "Sticking it out seems to be a 10-year project and I'm not sure we have the political capital and financial capital to do that. Yet withdrawing, the cost of that seems awfully high as well. So we have the wolf by the ear."

And as L.B.J. discovered, the wolf has sharp teeth.

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