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Afghan Half Measures Are Costing Full Lives

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We recently saw the tragic death of 30 brave Americans fighting in the nearly forgotten Afghanistan war, a conflict with no prospect for positive outcomes and a weak, hardly defensible strategy that pits the optimism of hope above the reality of experience.

While each death is tragic, so many at one time bring home the full measure of sacrifice by our men and women in uniform and the families they leave behind. Worse, in talking off the record with military and intelligence professionals, it becomes clear there are little if any gains to be made by staying just a year or two more, and nothing in Afghanistan is worth losing any more American lives.

To be clear, the use of force for self-defense and national security is necessary and appropriate, and we were right to go into Afghanistan forcefully after the Taliban shielded Osama bin Laden following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

But the facts on the ground have changed. Terrorism has diminished as the No. 1 security threat, and the previously localized terrorism threat has metastasized across the globe. Afghanistan is no longer the sole or even most important base of terrorist operations. When the facts change, so must the strategy.

Our current war policy reflects political, not strategic, thinking. In a Faustian bargain of tragic proportions, we have decided to leave, to pull out, to come home ... but not yet. While we've clearly stated we have no serious intention of pacifying or democratizing Afghanistan, rightly recognizing those as impossible tasks, we've also decided to hope that somehow 500 to 750 more days will mean local security and political forces will magically rise up and develop into effective institutions of self-governance.

This compromise is a wager by both sides of the American political aisle. Democrats hope that if we stay past the next U.S. election the administration won't look weak on defense; some in the Republican leadership hope that if we hang on, somehow things will get better enough to be worth the costs.

We are witnessing the triumph of American optimism over the harsh reality of experience. And not just our experience, but the experiences of multiple empires across many centuries. Afghanistan is not just ungoverned, it is ungovernable. Tribal fealties trump any pretense of nationalism. Our presence inflames regional moderates even as it fuels the anger and suspicions of the Pakistanis and distracts us from having a freer hand in simmering areas like Yemen, Somalia and Iran.

Yes, we have seen some successes. First, we struck with blinding speed and destroyed al-Qaida and Taliban military targets. Next, with the memories of

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the Taliban atrocities so fresh in Afghan minds that we were a welcomed alternative, we established temporary peace by buying off chieftains, letting them keep their forces under control.

Now, however, we are fighting there to establish a lasting central government - on behalf of a corrupt central figure, the much maligned Hamid Karzai. At the same time, fear of Western occupation and purported U.S. atrocities, such as errant missiles and civilian deaths, are fresh in Afghan minds while Taliban-imposed scars fade.

There is also the argument that we must stay to honor the sacrifices of those who have fallen. If we planned to stay the course and transform Afghanistan that argument might hold water. But we have already decided to leave; the only issue is how many more days and how many more dead.

More gravestones will not make the blood already spilt any more or less precious. And because we are leaving soon (though not just yet), those Afghans who have been helping us are already imperiled and others who might have helped have understandably chosen not to.

We have a policy of half-measures, and yet we require of our troops and their families what President Lincoln termed in the Gettysburg Address as "the last full measure of devotion." The approach we are currently taking is not just wrong, it is absurdly so.

The great strength of democracy is the ability of the will of the people to be heard. Yet somehow, we've gone astray when it comes to Afghanistan. We the people don't understand or choose to ignore the costs, challenges and any purported potential rewards, and yet our elected representatives mostly choose to just change the subject.

Our leaders have not been leading, they have been positioning for electoral gains. Shame on them, and shame on us for letting that happen.

The simple fact is this: Without a reasonable chance at a reasonably good outcome, there is no reason for any more U.S. deaths. The use of force in defense of our national interests is a just and noble undertaking. But the ends must justify the means, and here the ends are worth much less than the costs of continuing this particular fight.

It is unacceptable that while we, the American people, ask our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines and their families to pay their last full measure of devotion, we are only willing to meet that sacrifice with political half-measures.

Let's have the debate, let's be honest about the certain costs and any potential benefits of staying any longer, and then let's bring them home. Nothing would honor the treasured fallen souls more than a realistic evaluation of where we are and how best to proceed.

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