

Afghanistan: The Big Picture

By Dr. Hasan Zillur Rahim

One of the profound paradoxes of life is that the average person can see through an issue with a clarity that eludes the best and the brightest.

Such is the case with deploying more troops to Afghanistan. What exactly is the strategic importance of Afghanistan to the United States at this time? The Soviet empire has collapsed, so there is no question of any contest for supremacy there. A reminder for Iran to behave and for Pakistan to crack down on the Taliban? Questionable. To stop Al-Qaeda from returning to that graveyard of empires? What a laugh!

Yet our leaders and military commanders continue to act as if saving Afghanistan from Osama Bin Laden and warring warlords will translate into making the world safe for democracy.

What would happen if America were to withdraw from Afghanistan or reduce its footprint? Tom Friedman of the New York Times offers this analysis: "In the Middle East, all politics happens the morning after the morning after. Be patient. Yes, the morning after we shrink down in Afghanistan, the Taliban will celebrate, Pakistan will quake and Bin Laden will issue an exultant video. And the morning after the morning after, the Taliban factions will start fighting each other, the Pakistani Army will have to destroy their Taliban, or be destroyed by them, Afghanistan's warlords will carve up the country ..."

Judging from nationwide polls, this seems to be how many Americans feel. Yet President Obama is weighing requests by his top military commanders to send more troops and deepen America's involvement in Afghanistan. Given his penchant for consensus, the president will probably not send as many troops as requested but overall, America is likely to prolong the war there. Note that by 2010, America will have been in Afghanistan longer than the Soviets were in their catastrophic attempt to bring the country under their control.

Consider another perspective by Nicholas Kristof, also a columnist for the New York Times. "One of the most compelling arguments against more troops rests on this stunning trade-off: For the cost of a single additional soldier stationed in Afghanistan for one year, we could build roughly 20 schools there. It is hard to do the calculation precisely, but for the cost of 40,000 troops over a few years – well, we could just about turn every Afghan into a Ph.D."

Kristof also notes that "Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, has now built 39 schools in Afghanistan and 92 in Pakistan — and not one has been burned down or closed."

So there you have it. But an "expert" may say, "Well, these guys are not on the ground. They are armchair generals, as most of you are, so you really don't understand the complexity and that's why you offer these simplistic solutions."

Not quite. Consider Matthew Hoh, the Foreign Service officer and former marine captain, who resigned from a civilian post in Afghanistan this week in protest against the U.S. policy. We can't win, he said in his resignation letter, and our presence is only fueling the insurgency. "I have doubts and reservations about our current strategy and planned future strategy, but my resignation is based not upon how we are pursuing this war, but why and to what end."

Indeed, why and to what end? The stark truth: There is none. Yet the cost in lives and wasted resources in Afghanistan are beyond calculation.

And democracy? Impartial observers have confirmed that Hamid Karzai stole the recent election and that his brother has been on CIA's payroll all along. "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!"

We return, then, to the paradox: How is it that the smartest brains cannot see the forest for the trees, particularly when their claim to fame is that that's precisely where they tower above you and me?

Is it because power and an inflated sense of self blind one to the obvious? Can it be because they think that the fate of the world depends on them and that their

decisions today will change the course of history tomorrow? Or is it because they are such believers in technological superiority and manifest destiny that they have become immune to history's lessons?

Humility and a sense of the big picture seem to be missing from our leaders and commanders. The solution: heed the wisdom of the average citizen, do not be goaded into prolonging a war by the exhortations of rabid right-wingers, and know that history keeps its own timetable, oblivious to the might and machinery of mere mortals.