

Heritage Lectures

No. 1139

Delivered December 15, 2009



Published by The Heritage Foundation

December 17, 2009

Winning the War in Afghanistan

The Honorable John S. McCain

Abstract: *America has a narrow window of opportunity in which to show clear signs of progress to a skeptical and war-weary public. In the next 18 months, with a properly resourced counterinsurgency strategy, we can reverse the momentum of the insurgency. We can create conditions for the vast majority of insurgents to lay down their arms and reintegrate peacefully into Afghan society. We can train greater numbers of more capable, battle-tested Afghan Security Forces to lead the fight, in time, against a degraded enemy. We can isolate al-Qaeda and target their fighters more effectively. And we can create the time and space for Afghan leaders, with our support and pressure, to reform their government, to crack down on corruption, and to build a nation that will never again serve as a base for attacks against America and our allies.*

It is a real pleasure to be back among my friends at The Heritage Foundation. I want to thank you all for giving me this opportunity to speak with you today.

By my recollection, the last time I spoke at Heritage, I talked about what I call the “generational theft” that is the practice of earmarks in our budget. Well, guess how I spent my weekend? On an omnibus appropriations bill larded with tons of pork-barrel spending. \$30,000 to study Woodstock: I imagine further research was needed because no one remembers what happened the first time around. And then there’s my favorite: \$2.6 million to support surgical operations in space—just in case the Klingons attack, I guess. It would be funny if it weren’t so corrupt.

Talking Points

- We have an opportunity to build a bipartisan consensus in support of a vital national security priority: defeating al-Qaeda and its allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- In the next 18 months, with a properly resourced counterinsurgency strategy, we can create conditions for the vast majority of insurgents to lay down their arms and reintegrate into Afghan society.
- We can train greater numbers of more capable, battle-tested Afghan Security Forces to lead the fight against a degraded enemy.
- We can isolate al-Qaeda and target their fighters more effectively.
- We can create the time and space for Afghan leaders, with our support, to reform their government, crack down on corruption, and build a nation that will never again serve as a base for attacks against America and our allies.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1139.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Whether it's earmarks or some other issue, my approach to policy is the same as it's always been: I call things like I see them. Where I see decisions that I disagree with, I offer criticism. I can be passionate in my opposition, but I always try to ensure that it is loyal, civil, and constructive opposition. That said, when I see policy decisions that are right and worthy of praise, whether they are made by Democrats or Republicans, I do not hesitate to support them on their merits.

One of those decisions is the President's plan for Afghanistan. I think he made the right choice: to affirm a counterinsurgency strategy and to resource it properly, including a surge of 30,000 troops. Though I would have preferred that General McChrystal receive all of the U.S. forces he had requested, I have spoken with our civilian and military leaders. I think this policy can succeed, and I think it deserves robust public support, both from Democrats and Republicans.

My main concern, as you know, is the President's decision to begin withdrawing our forces in July 2011, regardless of conditions on the ground. We've

Our enemies will use this July 2011 date [for the beginning of American troop withdrawals] to undermine and intimidate our partners.

discussed this issue a lot over the past two weeks in congressional testimony with Secretaries Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates, Admiral Mike Mullen, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, and General Stanley McChrystal. I appreciate their efforts to try to clarify the meaning of this decision. I understand that this date marks the beginning of a process, that the pace of our drawdown will be conditions-based, and that large numbers of U.S. combat troops will likely remain in Afghanistan long after July 2011.

Sending the Wrong Signal

Still, the fundamental problem remains: We have announced a date, divorced from conditions on the ground, when we will start to withdraw our troops. It doesn't matter whether we call it a "cliff" or a "ramp" or anything else. It's still an exit sign.

Though the nature of our commitment to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and their region will change over time, our commitment to their success will endure.

- It sends the wrong signal to our friends, who fear—and not without reason—that the United States will abandon them before they can defend and sustain themselves.
- It sends the wrong signal to our enemies, who will use this July 2011 date to undermine and intimidate our partners.
- And it sends the wrong signal to all in the region who are now hedging their bets—Pakistani generals reluctant to cut ties with the Taliban or Afghan civilians who ask our troops, "Are you staying this time?"

On this issue, the Administration and I will have to agree to disagree. It matters immensely what signals we send. That is why I was very pleased to see that Secretary Gates, when he visited Kabul last week, delivered the strong message that "We are in this thing to win." I couldn't agree more.

I've been critical of the President during the past several months, but that is behind us. Our focus now must be on succeeding in Afghanistan. And the fact is, we now have the right mission. We now have the right leadership. And we now have a request for sufficient resources to succeed.

So our friends can know that we will support them. Our enemies can know that we will defeat them. And all can know that we are committed to the long-term success of Afghanistan and Pakistan as stable states that can govern themselves, secure themselves, and sustain their own development. Though the nature of our commitment to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and their region will change over time, our commitment to their success will endure.

A Window of Opportunity

We now have a narrow window of time in which to show clear signs of progress to a rightly skeptical and war-weary American public, and I believe we can do this. In the next 18 months, with a properly

resourced counterinsurgency strategy, we can reverse the momentum of the insurgency. We can create conditions for the vast majority of insurgents to lay down their arms and reintegrate peacefully into Afghan society. We can train greater numbers of more capable, battle-tested Afghan Security Forces to lead the fight, in time, against a degraded enemy. We can isolate al-Qaeda and target their fighters more effectively. And we can create the time and space for Afghan leaders, with our support and pressure, to reform their government, to crack down on corruption, and to build a nation that will never again serve as a base for attacks against America and our allies.

Now, I know there are many who take issue with this last point—who doubt that the Afghan government, in particular President Hamid Karzai, will be able to get its act together, to become more capable and legitimate. I think the Afghans can do better and must do better, but it all depends on increased security.

The Lesson of Iraq

Here I think we can learn a lesson from Iraq: When we started the surge in early 2007, Iraq did not just have a corrupt government; it had a collapsed government. Sectarian militias and terrorists had the advantage, and Iraqis who sought a better, decent alternative had little power.

The surge changed that. We protected Iraqi populations. We degraded the insurgency and the death squads. We strengthened and emboldened Iraqis who wanted better for their country. Together, we restored basic security, and that created openings for responsible Iraqis to strengthen and reform their government while marginalizing the extremists in their midst.

The restoration of basic security led to political progress, not the other way around, and there is no reason why our surge of forces into Afghanistan cannot create a similar dynamic there. At present, Afghan leaders feel they are losing control of their country, and they are. As a result, they are reluctant to take on and make enemies of corrupt officials, powerful warlords, or even insurgents—any of whom could be running Afghanistan in a few years if current trends persist. This is just self-preservation.

When it comes to increasing the legitimacy of the Afghan government—the definition of sustainable success in any counterinsurgency—military force is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

However, if we change the context, if we weaken the enemies of Afghanistan and strengthen our friends, it will create an opportunity for Afghan leaders to make different decisions, better decisions. Consider: Three years ago, many people in this town were saying, “If only we had a Karzai for Iraq.” Now many of those same people are saying, “If only we had a Maliki for Afghanistan.”

Achieving Sustainable Success

Things can change, and we have a lot of influence to bring that change about, but this won't happen by itself. Nor can the military do it alone. When it comes to increasing the legitimacy of the Afghan government—which is the definition of sustainable success in any counterinsurgency—military force is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We also need a civilian strategy, a political strategy, and it must be integrated into a joint civil–military campaign plan that spells out how our troops, our diplomats, and our development professionals will all work together with Afghan officials, security forces, and local populations to “clear, hold and build”—to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold that ground securely, and to help Afghans build political and economic institutions that they can sustain and defend themselves with less and less of our assistance. That is how we define success.

In addition to a joint civil–military campaign plan for Afghanistan, we also need to craft a diplomatic framework to ensure that the country emerges as a source of regional cooperation and integration.

In addition to a joint civil–military campaign plan for Afghanistan, we also need to craft a regional strategy around it—a diplomatic framework to reinforce success within Afghanistan and to ensure that the country emerges not as a field of regional com-

petition and proxy battles, but rather as a source of regional cooperation and integration. No one disputes that Afghanistan's neighbors will have influence in Afghanistan. The real question is, what kind of influence? External influence that adds to Afghanistan's success and security should be encouraged, while external influence that only destabilizes the country must be checked and countered. The United States is the only actor in the region with the strength, the stake, and the good relations with all the other powers to broker this kind of regional cooperation.

Just as our civilian strategy must turn military gains into political progress within Afghanistan, our regional strategy must turn military gains into diplomatic leverage outside the country. We must demonstrate to Afghanistan's neighbors—many of which are now hedging their bets and playing both sides of the fence—that the government of Afghanistan will prevail, that the insurgency will lose, and that to back the Taliban in this fight will only result in regional isolation, growing weakness, and deepening insecurity for states in the region.

In all that we do, our goal must be the restoration of Afghan sovereignty and [ensuring] that Afghanistan never again serves as a base for terrorist attacks against America and our allies.

In all that we do, our goal must be the restoration of Afghan sovereignty—to help Afghanistan emerge from three decades in which it was a pawn of regional powers and a battleground for their conflicts, to support Afghanistan in becoming better able to sustain and defend its own independence, and to ensure that Afghanistan never again serves

as a base for terrorist attacks against America and our allies.

Conclusion

We now have an opportunity to build a bipartisan consensus in support of a vital national security priority: defeating al-Qaeda and its violent extremist allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Americans need to know why winning this war is so essential to our

Americans need to know why winning this war is so essential to our country's security.

country's security. They need to know that things in Afghanistan will get worse before they get better—that, unfortunately, casualties will likely rise in the year to come—but that, ultimately, we can and we will succeed.

The President made the right decision on Afghanistan, but even that is not enough. Now he must fight for it. He must work to build bipartisan support for the war in Afghanistan, both among the public and in the Congress.

The President must lead this public campaign himself, but I will be an ally in this effort. I will work to get this policy the votes, the resources, and the time it needs to work. And I pledge to do everything I can to ensure that we win this war—not just end it, but win it.

—*The Honorable John S. McCain represents Arizona in the U.S. Senate, where he serves as Ranking Member on the Committee on Armed Services and member of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources; Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; and Committee on Indian Affairs.*