



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

2009-12-10

Obama's Indecent Interval

Johnson, Thomas H.; Mason, M. Chris

Obama's Indecent Interval, with W. Chris Mason. Foreign Policy, December 10, 2009
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/50884>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

Obama's Indecent Interval

Despite the U.S. president's pleas to the contrary, the war in Afghanistan looks more like Vietnam than ever.

BY **THOMAS H. JOHNSON, M. CHRIS MASON**

DECEMBER 10, 2009

As German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once said, truth is ridiculed, then denied, and then "accepted as having been obvious to everyone from the beginning." So let's start with the obvious: There isn't the slightest possibility that the course laid out by Barack Obama in his **Dec. 1 speech** will halt or even slow the downward spiral toward defeat in Afghanistan. None. The U.S. president and his advisors labored for three months and brought forth old wine in bigger bottles. The speech contained not one single new idea or approach, nor offered any hint of new thinking about a conflict that everyone now agrees the United States is losing. Instead, the administration deliberated for 94 days to deliver essentially "more men, more money, try harder." It sounded ominously similar to Mikhail Gorbachev's "bloody wound" speech that led to a similar-sized, temporary Soviet troop surge in Afghanistan in 1986.

But the Soviet experience in Afghanistan isn't what everyone is comparing Obama's current predicament to; it's Vietnam. The president knows it, and part of his speech was a rebuttal of those comparisons. It was a valiant effort, but to no avail. Afghanistan is Vietnam all over again.

Trending Articles

Top News from Foreign Policy



Powered By

In his speech, the president offered three reasons why the two conflicts are different. And all are dead wrong. First, Obama noted that Afghanistan is being conducted by a "coalition" of 43 countries — as if war by committee would magically change the outcome (a throwback to former President George W. Bush's "Iraq coalition" mathematics). The truth is, outside of a handful of countries, it's basically a coalition of pacifists. In fact, more foreign troops fought alongside the United States in Vietnam than are now actually fighting with Americans today. Only nine countries in today's 43-country coalition have more than 1,000 personnel there; nine others have 10 (yes, not even a dozen people) — or fewer. And although Australia and New Zealand have sent a handful of excellent special operations troops to Afghanistan, only Britain, Canada, and France are providing significant forces willing to conduct conventional offensive military operations. That brings the coalition's combat-troop contribution to approximately 17,000. Most of the other 38 "partners" have strict rules prohibiting them from ever doing anything actually dangerous. Turkish troops, for example, never leave their firebase in Wardak province, according to U.S. personnel who monitor it.

In Vietnam, by contrast, there were six countries fighting with the United States. South Korea alone had three times more combat troops in that country (50,000) than the entire coalition has in Afghanistan today. The Philippines (10,500), Australia (7,600), New Zealand (500), Thailand (about 1,000), and Taiwan also had boots on the ground. So the idea that Afghanistan's coalition sets it apart doesn't hold water.

The president went on to assert that the Taliban are not popular in Afghanistan, whereas the Viet Cong represented a broadly popular nationalist movement with the support of a majority of the Vietnamese. But this is also wrong. Neither the Viet Cong then, nor the Taliban now, have ever enjoyed the popular support of more than 15 percent of the population, according to [Daniel Ellsberg](#), the senior Pentagon official who courageously leaked the Pentagon Papers revealing the military's endemic deceit in the Vietnam War.

The president's final argument, that Afghanistan is different because Vietnam never attacked American soil, is a red herring. History is overflowing with examples of just causes that have gone down in defeat. To suggest that the two conflicts will have different outcomes because the U.S. cause in Afghanistan is just (whereas, presumably from the speech, the war in Vietnam was not) is simply specious. The courses and outcomes of wars are determined by strategy, not the justness of causes or the courage of troops.

The reality on the ground is that Afghanistan is Vietnam redux. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's regime is an utterly illegitimate, incompetent kleptocracy. The Afghan National Army (ANA) — slotted to take over the conflict when the coalition pulls out — will not even be able to feed itself in five years, much less turn back the mounting Taliban tide. The U.S. Center for Army Lessons Learned determined by statistical analysis that the ANA will never grow larger than 100,000 men because nearly 30 percent either desert or fail to re-enlist each year. The ANA is disproportionately Tajik, drug use is a major problem, all recruits are illiterate, and last month the ANA reached only half its modest recruiting goal despite 40 percent unemployment nationwide. The American media, in its own regression to 1963, simply regurgitates Pentagon press releases that vastly inflate the actual size of the Afghan military, which is actually less than 60,000 men, just 32,000 of whom are combat troops.

The strategy's other component for dealing with the Taliban, "negotiating with moderates," is also ludicrous to anyone who is familiar with the insurgents. The Taliban are a virus. There is no one to negotiate with, and from their perspective, nothing to discuss. And the Taliban know they are winning. Meanwhile, commanding Gen. Stanley McChrystal's plan to secure the urban areas (rather than the rural countryside where the insurgency is actually metastasizing) is plagiarized from the famous never-written textbook, *How to Lose a War in Afghanistan*, authored jointly by Alexander the Great, the British Empire, and the Soviet Union.

Most critically of all, Pakistan's reaction to Obama's speech was to order its top military intelligence service, the ISI, to immediately begin rebuilding and strengthening covert ties to the Afghan Taliban in anticipation of their eventual return to power, according to a highly placed Pakistani official. There will be no more genuine cooperation from Pakistan (if there ever was).

And that is why the United States is now headed for certain defeat in Afghanistan. Obama's new "strategy" is no strategy at all. It is a cynical and politically motivated rehash of Iraq policy: Toss in a few more troops, throw together something resembling local security forces, buy off the enemies, and get the hell out before it all blows up. Even the dimmest bulb listening to the president's speech could not have missed the obvious link between the withdrawal date for combat troops from Iraq (2010), the date for beginning troop reductions in Afghanistan (2011), and the domestic U.S. election cycle.

So we are faced with a conundrum. Obama is one of the most intelligent men ever to hold the U.S. presidency. But no intelligent person could really believe that adding 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, a country four times larger than Vietnam, for a year or two, following the same game plan that has resulted in dismal failure there for the past eight years, could possibly have any impact on the outcome of the conflict.

Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes used to say that "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." The only conclusion one can reach from the president's speech, after eliminating the impossible, is that the administration has made a difficult but pragmatic decision: The war in Afghanistan is unwinnable, and the president's second term and progressive domestic agenda cannot be sacrificed to a lost cause the way that President Lyndon B. Johnson's was for Vietnam. The result of that calculation was what we heard on Dec. 1: platitudes about commitment and a just cause; historical amnesia; and a continuation of the exact same failed policies that got the United States into this mess back in 2001, concocted by the same ship of fools, many of whom are still providing remarkably bad advice to this administration.

We believe the president knows perfectly well that Afghanistan is Vietnam all over again, both domestically and, as we wrote in *Military Review* this month, in Kabul and out in the Afghan hills, where good men are bleeding and dying. And he's seeking the same cynical exit strategy that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did in 1968: negotiating the best possible second-place position and a "decent interval" between withdrawal and collapse. In office less than a year, the Obama administration has already been seduced by the old beltway calculus that sometimes a little wrong must be done to get re-elected and achieve a greater good.

YOU MAY LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY **TABOOLA**

25 STUNNING PRIVATE JETS OWNED BY CELEBRITIES

HISTORY GARAGE

SANTA CRUZ: THIS MEAL SERVICE IS CHEAPER THAN YOUR LOCAL STORE

HOME CHEF

I TRIED BLUE APRON AND HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED

BLUE APRON

CAMERA FOUND IN VIETNAM JUNGLE SHOWS NEVER BEFORE SEEN PHOTOS FROM THE WAR

CYBER-BREEZE

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

BY **TABOOLA**

THIS MAP SHOWS CHINA'S HILARIOUS STEREOTYPES OF EUROPE

WHAT RUSSIA COULD LOOK LIKE IN 2035, IF PUTIN GETS HIS WISH

5 THINGS THE PENTAGON ISN'T TELLING US ABOUT THE CHINESE MILITARY

MAPPED: CHINESE STEREOTYPES OF THE AMERICAS

A MAP OF CHINA, BY STEREOTYPE

THE DANGERS OF READING FOREIGN POLICY?: ARMY TOSSES INFANTRY BDE COMMANDER
