

Obama to Confront Limits of America's Overstretched Military*

By Anna Mulrine

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With progress in Iraq still precarious and the war in Afghanistan growing ever more violent, the American military remains overburdened and, U.S. officials repeatedly point out, dangerously overstretched. Troops are also exhausted, after back-to-back tours that are leaving a growing number of military families in shambles.

It's hardly an alluring recruiting scenario. But top U.S. military leaders warn that if the Pentagon is to continue to meet its responsibilities around the world, it will need more troops.

"You can't do what we've been asked to do with the number of people we have," Undersecretary of the Army Nelson Ford noted in a recent interview, driving home what has long been conventional wisdom within the halls of the Pentagon: Shortages in the military ranks will be one of the chief national security challenges of the Barack Obama administration.

Indeed, those demands will likely only grow greater under Obama's watch, particularly after his anticipated approval of plans to send 30,000 additional forces to Afghanistan. There, troops will not only be called upon to fight hard against increasingly sophisticated Taliban forces, but they will also need to put expert-level logisticians in place to figure out how to supply this influx of soldiers and marines—what amounts to a doubling of current U.S. force levels.

And even as troops leave Iraq for Afghanistan on the heels of greater stability in Baghdad, the U.S. military will need considerable forces to support the Iraqi military, including supply specialists, aviators, and intelligence officers. "As the [brigade combat teams] draw down, it means you have more people

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spread thin,” Ford noted. “You need more logistics, more aviation, controls, and communication.

“You can see a point,” he added, “where it’s going to be very difficult to cope.”

This comes as little surprise to the Pentagon, which is well underway with a plan to grow the ranks of the Army by 65,000 soldiers by next year, bringing active duty forces to a total of 547,000. The Marine Corps plans to add 27,000 to its ranks, growing to 202,000 by 2011. It’s worth noting that the Pentagon recently accelerated those plans—originally the increase was slated to be complete by 2012, rather than the current goal of 2010—in the face of dire demand.

Such growth is expensive. Last year, the Pentagon asked for \$15 billion to add 7,000 soldiers and \$5 billion to add 5,000 marines to the ranks of the Corps. Separately, the Department of Defense requested an additional \$11 billion to cover the costs of retaining, training, and recruiting its forces.

The area of retention is perhaps the greatest staffing concern of top military officials. Troops are tired. Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank, noted in a recent article that 27 percent of soldiers who had completed three or four tours in Iraq showed signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, according to a 2008 survey, versus 12 percent after one tour and 18 percent after two. The figures could be aided by more rest time between tours—at least 18 to 24 months—but it will likely be at least three years, according to top military officials, before troops get more than a year to rest between deployments.

Recruiting, too, has been a considerable challenge for the all-volunteer military engaged in two tough wars. When the Army fell short of its recruiting goals in 2005, it raised the maximum recruiting age to 42 years old, and added sign-up bonuses as high as \$40,000. It also began enlisting more recruits with general equivalency degrees rather than high school diplomas. Just over 70 percent of new recruits had high school diplomas in 2007, for example, a 25-year low. Moral waivers for new recruits with criminal histories are also on the rise, nearly doubling from 860 waivers for marines and soldiers convicted of felonies in 2007, up by 400 from 2006. The Pentagon argues that these are modest figures relative to the size of the force, and that 97 percent of Marine Corps recruits in 2008 had high school diplomas.

Even as the military grows, however, top officials are warning that the Pentagon will need still more troops. Ford recently said that the Army will need an additional 30,000 soldiers to fulfill its duties, not only in Iraq and Afghanistan but around the world. Others have noted that U.S. military commands in the North and in Korea are also clamoring for more soldiers. So, too, is the new U.S. Africa Command. Then there are the demands of cyberwarfare, which will need more staff, say officials, after some recent crippling cyberattacks on U.S. computer systems at the Pentagon and at U.S. bases abroad.

As if all these challenges were not enough, the Pentagon instituted new training requirements in December that will require troops to receive instruction in how to do “full spectrum combat.” This means, in military parlance, drills in a host of old-school battle scenarios such as, for example, traditional tank wars. Soldiers have spent the last few years focused on counterinsurgency operations, much to the consternation of some who warn that America might one day be drawn into a land battle with another world power. But it already looks like the implementation of that new doctrine will have to be tabled for the next three years, say top military officials, because it will be at least that long before troops have 18 to 24 months between tours, the amount of time required for such training.

The news for military manning isn't all bad, however. The outlook for recruiting is growing steadily sunnier in the wake of the implosion of the U.S. economy, which has been a boon for military recruiters. “We do benefit when things look less positive in civil society,” said David Chu, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. Fiscal year 2008, which ended in September, was the best in five years for the Department of Defense. Top officials remain only cautiously optimistic, however. “Military recruiting is always a challenge,” says Curt Gilroy, accession policy director for Defense, “regardless of what the unemployment rate is.”

Afghanistan: “Graveyard of Empires”?

Editor's Introduction

Toward the end of 2009, public debate centered not on whether the United States should *reduce* its military presence in Afghanistan, but rather whether President Barack Obama should institute a troop “surge,” a strategy similar to the one his predecessor, George W. Bush, had used two years earlier to quell violence in Iraq. On December 1, 2009, Obama announced that, over a period of six months, he would send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. This strategy came in response to what Obama called a “deteriorating” situation: the ousted Taliban regime was regaining strength, and al-Qaeda terrorists continued to take refuge in the mountainous region along the Pakistani border. To underscore the urgency of the mission, Obama also set a timeline for withdrawal, indicating that troops would begin coming home 18 months after the start of the surge.

Obama’s plan drew mixed reactions. While many Americans had viewed the Afghanistan conflict as “the good war”—a campaign aimed at punishing the regime that had harbored Osama bin Laden and his fellow 9/11 plotters—mounting casualties and lack of progress were leading some to question the mission. The war’s harshest critics argued that Afghanistan would never be stabilized, and that this notorious “graveyard of empires,” a vast stretch of land that neither British nor Soviet invaders had been able to conquer, was destined to backslide into chaos.

In light of Obama’s decision to proceed with the new strategy, the articles in this chapter present arguments for and against increased troop deployment in Afghanistan. The selections also consider how the U.S. military, regardless of troop level, should conduct operations in the embattled Asian nation. While some contend that force is needed to defeat the Taliban and affirm the legitimacy of President Hamid Karzai’s American-backed government, others advocate working with the Afghan people and providing them with the education and basic services they so desperately need.

In the first selection, “The American Awakening,” Dexter Filkins claims the Taliban’s resurgence was inevitable, since American forces never presented the Afghan people with a viable alternative government. Filkins writes that efforts to replicate the successful Iraqi surge and “Awakening”—the process by which Sunni insurgents turned on al-Qaeda fighters—are unlikely to

pan out, given the “deeply atomized” nature of Afghanistan’s population. Filkins concludes that the United States’ best strategy involves gaining the support of low-level Taliban commanders and “local militiamen” and convincing them to cooperate with the fledgling government. “But all this is not very likely,” he writes, “at least not yet.”

In “Debating Afghanistan” Paul R. Pillar, director of graduate studies at Georgetown University’s Security Studies Program, argues that the United States has little to gain from fighting in Afghanistan, since few al-Qaeda operatives remain in the country. Center for a New American Security president John Nagl takes the opposite position, stressing in his response the importance of defeating the Taliban and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a “safe haven” for terrorists.

The author of “Obama Doesn’t Make a Case for More Troops,” the next selection, accuses the president of failing “to make a compelling case that an escalation in Afghanistan is vital to core U.S. national interests.” The writer posits that winning a guerilla war against the Taliban would take longer than 18 months, and that it ultimately wouldn’t be worth the effort, since the most dangerous al-Qaeda terrorists are now based in neighboring Pakistan.

The *Commonweal* editors behind the subsequent article, “Obama’s Surge,” take a slightly more positive view of the president’s plan, calling it “plausible,” in the sense that it’s modeled after what proved to be an effective strategy in Iraq. Even so, the authors call for “political, not merely military solutions” to the many problems facing Afghanistan, expressing skepticism that 18 months will be enough time to turn things around.

The following selection, “The West Can Encourage Legitimacy and Accountability,” finds Aziz Hakimi outlining a four-part plan for winning in Afghanistan. Eschewing military solutions, Hakimi insists the United States needs to promote reconciliation among the nation’s warring factions, reform government institutions, provide development aid for citizens, and foster collaboration between civil society groups.

In the final piece, “The Slog of War,” Nir Rosen recounts his experiences in Afghanistan, revealing the challenges of counterinsurgency, or COIN, one strategy for defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda. COIN involves winning the trust of locals and using nonviolent means to weaken the influence of insurgents. Some military officials argue that successful COIN operations require more time and resources than the United States is willing to commit.

The American Awakening*

By Dexter Filkins
The New Republic, March 1, 2010

In The Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan

By Seth G. Jones

(W.W. Norton, 414 pp., \$27.95)

I.

With the war in Afghanistan hanging in the balance, it is useful, if a little sad, to recall just how complete the American-led victory was in the autumn of 2001. By December, the Taliban had vanished from Kabul, Kandahar, and much of the countryside. Afghans celebrated by flinging their turbans and dancing in the streets. They dug up TV sets, wrapped in plastic, from hiding places in their gardens. In Mullah Omar's hometown of Sangesar, the locals broke into his madrassa and tore out the door frames for firewood. Among ordinary Afghans, there was a genuine sense of deliverance. The world, which had abandoned them more than a decade before, was coming back.

What a difference eight years makes. Today the Taliban are fighting more vigorously and in more places than at any point since they fled the capital. They are governing, too, with sharia courts and "shadow" administrators, in large parts of the Pashtun heartland in the south and the east. American soldiers are dying faster than ever: twice as many were killed in 2009 as in 2008. Perhaps most disturbing, the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai has revealed itself to be a hollow shell, incapable of doing much of anything save rigging elections. The center is giving way.

The catastrophic reversal in Afghanistan has many fathers, but all the many failures can be boiled down to two: a lack of resources, which might have been used to build enduring Afghan institutions; and a conviction, until recently, that time was on our side. In the crucial years from 2002 to 2006,

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as the fledgling Afghan government hobbled along, the Americans—by this I mean officials in the Bush administration in Washington, for the soldiers and the diplomats in the field were perfectly aware of the dangers—carried on without the slightest sense of urgency. In time, the thinking in Washington went, Afghan democracy and the Afghan state would take hold, and the Taliban would wither away.

Today, in the gloomy winter of 2010, American policy has been almost entirely reversed. For the first time since the war began, the White House is devoting its full attention—and the necessary men and matériel—to drive back the Taliban and create an effective Afghan army and state. The thirty thousand new troops being dispatched by President Obama will bring the American total to around 100,000. Obama has also ordered a crash effort to train and equip 400,000 Afghan soldiers and police, in addition to a novel plan to organize tens of thousands of local militiamen. The U.S. military, meanwhile, has learned from its disastrous early mistakes and reinvented itself. In the villages, American soldiers are carrying out a sophisticated strategy that relegates the killing of insurgents to the lowest tier.

And that brings us to the question of time. The most startling line in Obama's speech at West Point in December was its invocation of an eighteen-month timeline for the maximum deployment of American troops. After that, he said, they would begin to come home. The president announced an escalation and a de-escalation in the same speech. You have the resources now, he seemed to say, but your time is short. In the days that followed, his aides qualified the president's pledge—it's "not a cliff, it's a ramp," Jim Jones, the national security advisor, said. And so it probably would be. But the fact remains that with those crucial sentences, Obama bared his intentions, and even his soul. He does not want to be in Afghanistan. His heart is not in it. To be sure, he is proceeding with the escalation, and his heart may yet change, but it is difficult to imagine that the Taliban—and the Pakistanis—have not concluded that the Americans will soon be gone.

After eight years, some Americans may be forgiven for forgetting why the United States went to Afghanistan in the first place. It is important to begin the analysis at the beginning. We invaded Afghanistan following the attacks on September 11, so as to destroy the Taliban and the Al Qaeda leaders and cadres who had taken refuge there. And we succeeded, at least initially. Al Qaeda was all but decapitated. (In December 2001, I walked through several abandoned Al Qaeda safe houses in Kabul.) The Taliban were dead or dispersed. It was the follow-through that proved disastrous.

Seth G. Jones's book provides a vivid sense of just how paltry and misguided the American effort has been. Jones—a scholar at the RAND Corporation and a consultant to the American command in Kabul—chronicles, year by year, the principal American and NATO failures over the course of the war. Reading *In the Graveyard of Empires* is an experience in dramatic irony: you know the glorious beginning, you know the dismal present; so you watch

the American-led project in Afghanistan unravel with a tightened stomach and clenched teeth. But if we are ever to redeem the Afghan venture—and the consequences of failure seem catastrophic—*In the Graveyard of Empires* will help to show what might still be done to build something enduring in Afghanistan and finally allow the U.S. to go home.

What Jones demonstrates so persuasively—and what many of Obama's homebound critics have often missed—is that for the past eight years, the trouble in Afghanistan has been less the presence of American and Western troops than their absence. This, and their utter failure to build any sort of institutions that might take their place. It was these two factors, more than any others, that made possible the return of the Taliban. Owing to the pathetic resources devoted to the endeavor, the Americans and NATO were never able to protect the Afghan people—not from crime, not from corrupt officials, not from insurgents. The government and the security forces they built and trained were never able to do it for them. The Taliban, which Jones acutely describes as "a complex adaptive system," brought itself back to life and flowed into the breach.

From the beginning, the Bush administration justified the "light footprint" as a way of not stoking Afghan nationalism—despite the overwhelming evidence that ordinary Afghans thirsted for foreign help in the wake of the Taliban's collapse. Their country, after all, was totally destroyed, with no means of repairing itself. As the Taliban regrouped, the Americans and NATO found themselves mounting operations to clear villages and towns of Taliban fighters, only to leave and watch them return. Then the American and NATO troops would go in again. "Mowing the grass," Jones called it. The result was that ordinary Afghans typically encountered American or NATO troops only during military sweeps. And in the early years those American troops were every bit as heavy-handed as their countrymen in Iraq—and the air strikes they called in were even worse. The result was a deep mistrust of the American and NATO militaries, and a growing unwillingness to confront the Taliban.

But the more shocking sin—the inexcusable one—was the failure to build even the rudiments of an enduring Afghan state, one that could provide security for its people and deliver basic public services such as health care and roads. (It is also worth mentioning, to those hankering for an American withdrawal, that a viable Afghan army and police force would likely be the only thing that could prevent a repeat of the horrific civil war that engulfed the country in 1990s.) A functioning Afghan state, as Jones makes painfully clear, might well have gained the allegiance of the Afghan people, even the Pashtuns in the south. What the Afghans got instead was a pathetic principality in Kabul with virtually no capacity to deliver anything outside the city limits.

The central administration that existed in Kabul quickly evolved into a criminal enterprise, siphoning tens of millions of Western dollars and, later,