

Escaping from the Swamp

December 2009

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There is something fascinating in watching a creature as powerful as a fully grown bear that has been caught in a swamp slowly sinking into the mud, every move it makes in its effort to free itself only causing it to sink deeper until finally and inevitably it loses the battle and disappears, its unseen body just one more victim of the unmerciful elements.

I am reminded of this image by the recent announcements by various senior members of the US government as it tries ever more desperately to extricate itself from the swamp that is Afghanistan, each new announcement only highlighting further the desperate mess that it is in, and the fact that there is no actual policy or strategy that will allow it to depart the country with any semblance of respect or dignity.



It has now been eight years since the US started its 'Global War on Terror' with air strikes on Afghanistan, a war which was a direct result of the 9/11 attacks. At that time, the Americans under President George W. Bush had two clear and, as far as they were concerned, simple aims: to capture or kill Osama bin Laden, and to ensure that Al Qaeda would be destroyed as a group.

The situation now is that they are embroiled in a counter-insurgency operation on a national scale, unsure of who their allies are, with no clear 'end position', and certainly no clear and agreed strategy for achieving that. To put it in the simplest of terms, President Kharzai, whom the American put into power in the first place and have supported ever since, is running a corrupt and ineffective government (it is widely recognised that every

important post in Afghanistan is for sale, from government ministers to local police chiefs, and that Kharzai's brother is the person who you need to see - and make a deal with - if you want to get anything done), and clearly and openly fixed the last election by stuffing local ballot boxes.

If the original vision laid out by the US and UK governments was one of a western-style democracy, where there would be freedom of speech, individual rights, equality for women and education for all, there is now a clearer understanding that Afghanistan will not so easily be converted to a western country, and the present vision is one where our leaders are pointing out that there has to be 'respect for local customs and traditions' - code for 'let's get the hell out and leave them to it'.

The Americans, on the other hand, are caught in a two-pronged dilemma. Firstly, they have clearly stated that the 'success' of Afghanistan will be based on the ability to create a national security structure that will allow Afghanistan to take responsibility for its own national security (ie running the country, and preventing the Taliban from controlling various regions, which would in turn mean that the government would have no influence there). Unfortunately, this has absolutely no chance of succeeding, as (unlike in Iraq, where this model was first developed) there is not the level of trained and professional people who could take responsibility for the security of their own region, and would be able to think or act in a way which has any semblance of connection to what we think of as appropriate to a national police / security institution. The fact that the training time has been dropped from ten weeks to three weeks, and that these people are then sent out to 'patrol' and set up 'checkpoints', gives extra meaning to the statements by senior military leaders who say that actually the Afghanistan security forces will not be in a position to take responsibility for their own operations anytime soon.

The second dilemma that US is facing is that it is now clear to them (as it was clear many years ago to most people who understand the region) that there will have to be some arrangement made with the Taliban, and that there is no longer any point in seeing what the Americans (and others) are doing in Afghanistan as a 'war' that can be 'won'. It gives an indication of the scale of disagreement amongst the Americans themselves when people at the level of General Stanley McChrystal (head of UN forces in Afghanistan), US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, present US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry all have completely different, and opposing, assessments of what needs to be done and how it should be achieved.

As the main ally of the US, Britain is deeply involved in this issue, and it is clear from statements made by the Prime Minister and other senior members of the Cabinet, that although they are extremely frustrated with the situation, they have no other policy than 'support the US'. The feeling is that the country still supports the government in its policy of maintaining a British military presence as a significant part of the US-led forces, but it is also clear that at some stage the public sentiment will turn against the government, and it will be interesting to see then how matters will unroll.

Wars are always easier to get into than get out of, and counter-insurgency operations even more so. The US and British governments are in a mess of their own making, and from here there seems no solution that will allow them to extricate themselves and regain the safety of solid ground. The question is only how much longer they will have the strength to continue the struggle, and what cost that will have for the people on the ground.



