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Guns Won't Win the Afghan War

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Neither the current bombing campaign nor the deployment of American ground forces to Afghanistan offers good military options for dealing with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. A better approach would emphasize ground-level diplomacy, with open wallets, among Pashtun leaders in central and southern Afghanistan, the fullest use of Pakistani intelligence and influence, and selective military actions. The moment for dramatic demonstration of American military power has passed. Our resolve must now be expressed through many careful steps, or we will never achieve the victory we seek against Al Qaeda.

American airpower is of limited use because there are few valuable targets to strike in an impoverished country like Afghanistan. Taliban ground forces are hard to locate and destroy from the air because, in the absence of a formidable ground opponent, they can easily disperse. Furthermore, the inevitable civilian casualties caused by the air assault are solidifying Taliban support within Afghanistan and eroding support elsewhere for the American cause. Britain's defense minister, Geoff Hoon, recently warned that public opinion in Britain, America's most loyal ally, is turning against the war because of the bombing campaign. This will only worsen in the coming winter as refugees die from cold and starvation and the American air war is blamed.

Nor is the Northern Alliance likely to deliver victory. It is despised by many Afghans (and Pakistan), and the Taliban outnumber it by about three to one. Alliance soldiers are poorly led, trained and equipped. Despite recent talk about how the Northern Alliance would capture Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul, it has launched no major offensives. Indeed, the Alliance may be losing ground to the Taliban, even with American air support.

The bleak prospects have led some to call for deploying large contingents of American ground forces. Senator John McCain has advocated this strongly. But the Bush administration will only make a bad situation worse if it follows the senator's advice.

For starters, it is not clear how the United States would get a large army into land-locked Afghanistan any time soon. Some light infantry troops could be flown into Uzbekistan or makeshift airfields in Afghanistan. But mechanized forces, which are essential for gaining military superiority, would have to be moved across either Pakistan or Russia and

Uzbekistan to reach Afghanistan. It seems unlikely that any of these states will agree to such an arrangement, which would be a logistical nightmare in any case.

The United States would also run the risk that China and Iran, both of which are suspicious of Washington's motives and share borders with Afghanistan, would try to undermine the war effort out of fear that a victory might mean a permanent American military presence on their borders.

Even if logistical and diplomatic problems can be overcome and ground forces are deployed in Afghanistan, our problem is not solved. The American expeditionary force would easily rout the Taliban in a conventional war -- which is why there would not be one. The Taliban would launch a guerrilla resistance from the countryside. It is unlikely that the United States could win this armed struggle at any reasonable cost. Afghanistan is ideally suited for guerrilla warfare, as the Soviets discovered in the 1980's.

If history is any guide, most Afghans would oppose an American invasion and fight the foreign occupiers, probably with substantial help from "freedom fighters" from around the Arab and Islamic world. Finally, to stand any chance of winning the guerrilla war the United States would have to employ brutal tactics, further alienating support within and outside the Muslim world just when we would most need it to destroy the far-flung Al Qaeda.

Afghanistan is four times the size of South Vietnam, 60 times the size of Kosovo. Victory in Afghanistan would probably require at least 500,000 troops. (The initial peacekeeping deployment in Kosovo was 50,000 troops.) Such a large force would be needed in Afghanistan because the United States would have to control most of the countryside as well as the major towns and cities. Otherwise the Taliban and Al Qaeda would be free to operate in those areas outside American control.

In short, it makes little sense to continue the current bombing campaign or to send American ground forces into Afghanistan. The best available strategy for the United States is to use the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins in mid-November, as an excuse to halt the bombing campaign and pursue a different strategy. Specifically, the Bush administration should rely on bribery, covert action, dissemination of the American message by radio to Afghans and increased humanitarian aid, particularly to refugees, to break apart the Taliban and replace it with a regime that does not support Al Qaeda. The key to undoing the Taliban is to sow dissension within its ranks by offering carrots -- bribes and positions in a new government -- to elements that might defect. American policymakers should enlist Pakistan's assistance in this effort, and they should also work with the various factions in Afghanistan to create a framework for a broad coalition government.

The principal target is Al Qaeda, and the United States should not rest until it has destroyed that terrorist organization. Removing the Taliban from power, and discouraging states like Somalia and Sudan from taking in Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists, are major steps in that direction. But probably the most important

ingredient in the war against Al Qaeda is good intelligence, which will allow the United States to locate the terrorists and strike at them with deadly force when the time is right -- and to locate, protect and reward those who come to the American side. The Bush administration should devote abundant resources to improving America's intelligence capabilities and to buying information on the terrorists from other governments.

Americans must face a hard reality: massive military force is not a winning weapon against these enemies. It makes the problem worse. In contrast, a strategy that emphasizes clever diplomacy, intelligence-gathering, and carefully selected military strikes might produce success eventually if we pursue it with patience and tenacity.

This is not terribly heartening. But it is the least bad alternative at the moment, and international politics is often about choosing among lousy alternatives.