
Jeffrey Sachs: The Surrealism of the Afghan Surge

Tom Friedman's column today (*New York Times*, December 6, 2009) is surreal. He approvingly recounts an interview of JFK with Walter Cronkite on the need for reform in Vietnam as the key to success in Vietnam, making an analogy to Afghanistan. Cronkite asked Kennedy whether the war can be won. Eerily, Kennedy responded «With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can.» Friedman, however, fails to tell the reader the punch line. The interview was given on September 2, 1963. On November 1, 1963, a CIA-backed coup removed the President of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, who was then assassinated by the Vietnamese coup leaders. Kennedy was sickened by the assassination, especially in light of the fact that Diem's death resulted directly from a coup that the US Government had actively supported.

President Barack Obama risks leading the US deeper into the same kind of nightmare as Vietnam, with the same profound misconceptions and arrogance of the US military and the CIA. It just requires a glance at the picture on p. A29 of Sunday's *New York Times* to see how absurd the US decision-making process really is. Among the people in the room briefing the president, there isn't a single person with deep non-military knowledge of either Afghanistan or Pakistan. We see plenty of generals and politicians but nobody who knows about the people, culture, economy, climate, agronomy, extreme poverty, and traditions of the people themselves.

The surge is poorly conceived. The idea that Afghanistan needs just one short 18-month push to achieve stability defies the basic circumstances and history of the country. The country is impoverished, drought-stricken, heroin-infested, arms-laden, and infrastructure-deficient. Even Defense Secretary

Gates noted that the actual deployment of the extra US troops would take considerable time because of the lack of proper roads and other infrastructure. Well, yes indeed. Perhaps that helps to explain the rampant poverty, the relative success of high-value-per-unit-weight crops such as poppy and heroin, and the scale of the challenges facing a country that has been enmeshed in war for thirty straight years and that was poor long before that.

The framing of Afghanistan's governance problems with the simplistic gloss of «corruption» is yet another trivialization of reality, exceeded only by the idea that Afghan President Hamid Karzai can and will turn off corruption at will, and notably in response to US pressure. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was on the mark when he questioned the ability of Washington, itself in an era of rampant corruption, to clean up corruption elsewhere. A worthy role for Richard Holbrooke, now the special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, would be to root out flagrant financial mismanagement at the staff of AIG, where Holbrooke had served on the Board during the buildup of the recent financial bubble. The war industry itself, replete with powerful corporations like Fluor and DynCorp that receive billions of dollars in no-bid Pentagon contracts, are also a likely part of the Washington political momentum.

The fact of the matter is that Afghanistan is in urgent need of the basics for survival in one of the poorest countries on Earth -- seeds, fertilizer, roads, power, schools, and clinics -- much more than it is in the need of another 30,000 troops or added military contractors. Development aid directed to Afghanistan's communities, through the UN, could stabilize Afghanistan far more effectively at one-fifth

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to one-tenth the cost of the coming \$100 billion or so per year that will be spent on this military debacle. Yet such support is not forthcoming. Obama has barely acknowledged that General McChrystal's report spoke of winning the support of the population through socio-economic development and «immediate economic and quality of life improvements in accordance with Afghan priorities.» As Friedman reports, Obama has disdained «nation-building» as «mission creep,» thereby disappointingly echoing the Bush administration.

In fact, the US Government's long-standing disdain is for the Afghan people themselves, since there has been not the slightest effort for decades to think through their real needs and wants. As in Vietnam, this mission is all about us. And as in Vietnam, the US escalation has the possibility of causing much broader destabilization in Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Perhaps, as [Bill Moyers powerfully demonstrated](#) about Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War buildup, the current momentum for escalation may reside in the president's fear of right-wing attacks if he shows «weakness» by denying the generals' request for more troops. Tellingly, and disastrously, Johnson knew that escalation in Vietnam would not succeed yet he saw no alternative to escalation because he feared a perception that he was weak vis-à-vis the communist threat.

If we are to countenance this failed policy, at least let's put the surge to a vote. Rather than adding the costs of the surge to our soaring national debt, Congress should be pressed to raise taxes or cut other spending (health care? education? unemployment compensation?) to pay for it. Would the American people really want to pay an added \$30-\$40 billion for an expanded war, with identified tax increases or budget cuts? I doubt it. Congress, it's time to take a vote.

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