

Testimony of General Wesley K. Clark (ret.) to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on U. S. strategy in Afghanistan and how that affects strategy in Iraq.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on these important questions of national strategy and military endeavor in Afghanistan.

I must acknowledge first that I am greatly in sympathy with our military commanders, and especially General McChrystal, who has asked for more troops. No doubt he needs them to provide security for the population, to train the Afghan forces, and to impede and constrain Taliban reinforcement and replenishment along the porous border with Pakistan. Were I in his position, I would undoubtedly have asked for more troops, too. But this is not the principal question we should be addressing today, however great the outcry demanding some specific number of reinforcements.

Rather, we should be addressing the purpose of our engagement there, our specific mission, the strategy, and its requirements for success in diplomatic, political economic and military terms. Only after these have been adequately defined should we turn to the specifics of things like troop levels.

The legacy of Vietnam looms large over these discussions. I recall from the early and mid 1960's similar issues in our escalating presence in Southeast Asia - the same pleading for more troops, the diplomatic constraints hindering cross-border operations to get at the source and sustainment of that conflict, the careful - and in retrospect misguided efforts - to balance military needs, strategic concerns outside of Vietnam, and political support in the United States.

In that case we did it mostly wrong. When we could have used decisive military means we were self-deterred. When we piece-meal and gradually reinforced we lost public support, and when we finally attempted to use decisive force, it was too late.

Every conflict is different. Afghanistan is not Vietnam. But we must nevertheless learn from our experiences. There are worrisome similarities in both conflicts, including a local government that lacks legitimacy, and of course, the bureaucracies and politics of military escalation and diminishing US public support are little changed across forty years.

In Afghanistan, what is our purpose? Not to defeat Al-Qaeda, for they are not largely there. Not to create a functioning, Western-style democracy, for that is clearly beyond our means in a nation 90% illiterate imbued with wholly different values. Something less.

We seek in Afghanistan nothing more than to prevent the emergence of a terrorist state that would physically harbor Al Qaeda and use its diplomatic and legal authorities as weapons against the very international system of which it is a member. These are minimalist objectives. They could be met by diplomacy, by promoting economic development and regional economic integration, by acting through regional allies, and, if necessary, by our direct threat, by preemptive strikes and limited incursions. We can also defend against threats here at home, as we have learned since 9/11.

In principle, our purpose there does not require us to reconstruct the Afghan state, any more than we are reconstructing Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, or other locations where terrorists are or have found shelter. And therefore we have no inherent need to fight a comprehensive, counter-insurgent war there to do so.

The war in Afghanistan should have been declared over when we broke the back of the Taliban force and drove the Taliban from power. We failed, however, to capture or eliminate Osama bin Ladin in the process. He and the senior leadership of Al Qaeda, believed to be located in Pakistan, remain a threat.

Now, together with our NATO allies, we have almost 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. Any abrupt reversal of existing US policy, including the abandonment of Hamid Karzai and his government, and the prompt withdrawal of US forces might have serious adverse consequences far beyond Afghanistan. Al Qaeda would claim credit, terrorist recruitment would surge, subversion within the states allied and friendly with us would intensify, the stability of democracy in neighboring Pakistan could be further undercut, and US power and prestige might be seen to wane.

On the other hand, the longer we stay, and the larger our force, the more resistance and resentment that we create, by our disruptive influence, by the casualties we inflict deliberately and accidentally. We are a foreign element there in a culture which doesn't tolerate diversity. However appealing it is to us to say, we won't quit, this mistakes American will as the potential weakness, whereas in actuality it is the strength of our resolution, our persistence and determination which cause difficulties in the region. There is an Islamic revival underway, a struggle to cope with the spiritual impact of modernization and globalism, and that revival draws energy from the antagonism our presence creates. We need to find our way out, seizing credit for such successes as can be achieved, for the region is better dealt with from a distance than with our presence, and especially not with military presence. .

The approach I would recommend is focused on an exit strategy. The best exit would be after the take down of the top Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan. This is an objective about which discussion has been publicly suppressed, and it probably should remain so. But I hope it will be foremost in the minds of the Administration.

In the meantime, in Afghanistan, our exit strategy must be built around four factors: attempting to reduce the level of violence by seeking a political amelioration of the conflict. Greater assistance to the government of Pakistan in dealing with the Al Qaeda and Taliban remaining in Pakistan, economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and developing a more capable security structure for the Afghans.

Details:

- incentives must be provided to create a more representative, more legitimate government. These incentives could be framed around individual leaders, specific structural changes, or economic

development opportunities. They can be positive or negative. President Karzai should take the lead in this process. US military reinforcements or withdrawals may factor in as inducements to various parties. Additional troops in the context of such a strategy are not unreasonable, (and we should also be discussing vastly enhanced economic development advice and assistance). But, we must be unmistakably clear on an endstate, and as this process of political engagement moves forward, it may even be desirable to establish a firm exit date by which we will end the US and NATO mission. We may need to reconstruct outside presence underneath a UN umbrella with a very limited US government advisory and assistance mission.

- Pakistan should be leased the additional military hardware and provided the access to intelligence and intelligence collection systems as well as given appropriate incentives to deal with al Qaeda and the Taliban threat there and to strengthen security along its Afghan border. At the same time, the US should undertake a focused Pakistani economic development effort, and take credit for it publicly. And more must be done directly against the Al Qaeda leadership.

- Afghan economic development should be promoted in the agricultural sector through providing an enhanced market for Afghan crops. The goal would be to outbid farmer's returns from growing poppies. In addition Afghanistan is wealthy in minerals and hydrocarbons. The US should encourage the development of these resources, and should also promote the long-discussed gas pipeline connecting India and Pakistan with Central Asian gas resources.

- additional Afghan forces must be organized, equipped and trained, but primarily they should be built on a militia model able to provide local, static security for the population as a complement to the police, with the existing Army enabled to provide a mobile reserve. A long term commitment to their logistics and intelligence needs will be required.

These measures are neither simple nor easy. There is no guarantee of success. In matters of strategy, there are only two kinds of plans, those that might work and those that won't work. This approach might work.

But it is important to face the reality of the situation at this point: much has already been accomplished: our obligations are limited; there will never be a complete and wholly satisfactory solution, and we must focus on meeting our own - the US and NATO's - security needs. And the real security need in the region now is to reduce the continuing threat of Al Qaeda, reportedly located principally in Pakistan. It is their decisive defeat that we must seek.