



Hollow Victory

According to the Republicans, the United States is once again at the crossroads of losing another critical war because of feckless Democrats. Only this time it's Afghanistan.

BY JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER | NOVEMBER 2, 2009



The conventional wisdom among most Republicans is that while the United States had serious difficulty in Vietnam during the early years, by the early 1970s things were turning around, and victory was on the verge. Unfortunately, the craven Democrats in Congress bowed to widespread anti-war sentiment and forced the Ford administration to end almost all support to South Vietnam, allowing the North Vietnamese to win the war in 1975. In the GOP version of the story, this decision was a disastrous mistake.

There has been a lot of talk lately about what the Vietnam War tells us about Afghanistan. According to the Republicans, the United States is once again at the crossroads of losing another critical war because of feckless Democrats, only this time in Afghanistan. They contend that while, yes, the United States has mismanaged the war over the past eight years, Washington has now found a formidable military leader in General Stanley McChrystal. He knows how to defeat the Taliban *and* keep al Qaeda out of Afghanistan. However, the major obstacle he faces isn't in Afghanistan, it's here at home: the American public is war-weary and the Democrats -- who control both Congress and the White House -- have no enthusiasm for the greater sacrifices that General McChrystal recommends.

This narrative is unconvincing for at least two reasons. First, the United States was not close to victory in Vietnam by the early 1970s, because the South Vietnamese army could not stand on its own. This was manifestly apparent in 1971 when that army invaded Laos and was badly chewed up by North Vietnamese ground forces. To stand any chance of holding off Hanoi's offensives, the South Vietnamese army needed massive amounts of American airpower, which effectively meant that the U.S. military would have to continue fighting in Vietnam indefinitely just to maintain a stalemate. That hardly qualifies as being on "the brink" of victory.

In Afghanistan, there is little reason to think that the United States can decisively defeat the Taliban, mainly because they can melt into the countryside or go to Pakistan whenever they are outgunned, returning to fight another day (just as they did after the initial U.S. victory in 2001). Furthermore, the Karzai regime, corrupt and incompetent, stands little chance of ever truly being able to rule the country and keep the Taliban at bay, which means that the American military will have to stay there to do the job for many years to come.

But even if success *was* at hand in Vietnam and the United States *could* in the near future win quickly in Afghanistan, there is a second and more important flaw in the Republican narrative: Victory is inconsequential.

The United States suffered a clear defeat when South Vietnam collapsed in 1975, but it hardly affected America's position in the global balance of power. The domino theory proved unfounded; instead, communist Vietnam invaded communist Cambodia in 1978 and one year later Hanoi was at war with communist China. More importantly, losing in Vietnam had no adverse effects on America's competition with the Soviet Union. Indeed, 14 years after Saigon fell, the Cold War ended and the United States emerged as the most powerful state on the planet.

The real tragedy of Vietnam is not that the United States lost, but that it became involved in the first place. It pains me to say this as someone who served in the American military from 1965 to 1975, but the anti-war movement was right: It did not matter to U.S. security whether North Vietnam conquered the south and unified that country under communist rule. More than 58,000 American soldiers and more than 2 million Vietnamese died in an unnecessary and foolish war.

A similar logic applies today with regard to Afghanistan. The Republicans and General McChrystal claim that it is absolutely necessary to win the war in Afghanistan for the simple reason that a Taliban victory will allow al Qaeda to re-establish a sanctuary in Afghanistan. And we all know what happened the last time Osama bin Laden was free to scheme and plot against the United States from Afghanistan: September 11. The fatal flaw in this argument is that al Qaeda has a sanctuary next door in Pakistan from which it has been operating since it was driven out of Afghanistan in Dec. 2001. It does not need a sanctuary in Afghanistan. Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who helped General McChrystal formulate his strategy for Afghanistan, recently told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Pakistan is "superior in important ways to Afghanistan" because it is "richer and far better connected to the outside world than is primitive, land-locked Afghanistan with its minimal communications and transportation systems."

But what if the Pakistani army eliminates al Qaeda's sanctuary in western Pakistan? Isn't its current offensive in South Waziristan a major step toward that end? Unfortunately, no. Pakistan has no intention of rolling up al Qaeda, in good part because it does not have the capability to police those areas where the terrorists are hiding. The offensive in South Waziristan is not even aimed at the Afghan Taliban, much less at al Qaeda. This means that al Qaeda will have a sanctuary in Pakistan no matter what happens in Afghanistan, which means that the American military cannot win a meaningful victory there.

In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, it simply does not matter whether the United States wins or loses. It makes no sense for the Obama administration to expend more blood and treasure to vanquish the Taliban. The United States should accept defeat and immediately begin to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan.

Of course, President Obama will never do such a thing. Instead, he will increase the American commitment to Afghanistan, just as Lyndon Johnson did in Vietnam in 1965. The driving force in both cases is domestic politics. Johnson felt that he had to escalate the fight in Vietnam because otherwise the Republicans would lambaste him for "losing Vietnam," the same way they accused President Harry Truman of "losing China" in the late 1940s.

Obama and his fellow Democrats know full well that if the United States walks away from Afghanistan now, the Republicans will accuse them of capitulating to terrorism and undermining our security. And this charge will be leveled at them for decades to come, harming Democrats at the polls come election time. The Democrats have no intention of letting that happen.

The United States is in Afghanistan for the long haul. As was the case in Vietnam, more American soldiers and many more civilians are going to die in Afghanistan. And for no good reason.

John Mearsheimer, a West Point graduate, is a political science professor at the University of Chicago.