

## Elements of a US Strategy toward Afghanistan

### I. *Fundamental Objectives:*

The United States has four fundamental objectives in its involvement in Afghan affairs:

*The first objective* is the creation of a stable, reasonably secure and peaceful state so that withdrawal will not constitute a base for anti-American activities;

*The second objective* is to end as rapidly as feasible the enormous drain on American resources now being expended in the Afghan conflict;

*The third objective* is to prevent a “blow back” of the Afghan conflict that might constitute or appear to constitute a major failure and so encourage anti-American actions in other, particularly Islamic, areas; and

*The fourth objective* is to prevent contamination of American institutions and laws by activities begun in Afghanistan including the effects of large-scale money laundering and the destabilizing of the American system of law, justice and opposition to torture.

II. *Accomplishment of these objectives* is obviously a complex project, involving as it does actions not only in Afghanistan but in neighboring regions and indeed even more broadly. But steps toward accomplishment of it can and must be undertaken as rapidly as feasible. Moreover, accomplishment depends in part on the actions and/or inactions of others although to a degree they can be influenced by American policies and programs.

III. *The first step toward accomplishment* of the objectives is a realistic evaluation of the current situation, trends, assets and weaknesses not only in Afghanistan but also in neighboring Pakistan, India, Iran the Central Asian republics. Here I will discuss only those of Afghanistan, but the others must be borne in mind; and the capacities of the United States and its NATO allies to affect developments in these areas must be considered.

1) in Afghanistan the situation is neither all black nor all white:

#### On the positive side:

a) Although severely weakened by decades of occupation and civil war, Afghanistan does have an impressive “social contract,” that is to say, a general consensus on relationships among the citizens, without which no society can function.

Most of Afghanistan’s 22,000 or so villages adjudicate local affairs through gatherings known (according to the area) as *jirga*, *shuras* or *ulus*. These gatherings are not, in the American sense of the word, institutions but “occasions.” They are evoked when some pressing issue cannot be resolved by a local headman or a respected religious figure or when two or more families disagree. These groups, which closely resemble centuries-old American Algonquin Indian procedures, are the closest thing Afghanistan has to participatory democracy.

While the typical Afghan village is autonomous, village councils form the lowest layer of a sort of pyramid of “legitimation.” Above them districts and tribes also form assemblies and these in turn feed into an over-arching national “occasion” known as a *loya jirga*. The *loya jirga* does not come

into being by election and is not a governing body. Rather, it might be roughly compared to the assembly that drafted the American Constitution. It is an gathering of people respected in their communities, selected by consensus rather than election. Its task is to set out a general direction of policy.

b) Afghanistan is not the formless collection of warring tribes the British and the Russians thought it to be. It has three overlapping sets of belief or custom that give it the toughness of character that ultimately defeated both the British and the Russians. The first of these is religion. While the country is divided between the two major sects of Islam, Sunnism and Shiism, its people uniformly regard themselves as Muslim. As believed and practiced, Islam in Afghanistan is distinctive; it is tempered by pre- or non-Islamic custom which, in the Pashtun areas is known as the *Pashtunwali* but in its essentials spans the country. So a sense of the "way" -- of what is right and proper -- is the second element binding the country together despite vast distances and severe geographical inhibitions to movement. The third shared belief is that the country and all of its inhabitants have been grievously harmed, generation after generation, by foreigners. This sense of injury has united them in what to us appears xenophobia but to them is the basis of nationalism. While this appears, and under the current circumstances, is an inhibition to American actions, it offers a positive element for the future of the country.

c) There does seem to be a genuine dislike, indeed fear, of the Taliban even in Pashtun areas and certainly is evident in the areas of the other minorities. How much this is tempered by respect for the Taliban as the only effective native force is debatable. There has been considerable progress in the creation of Afghan security forces. Kabul city is today almost completely "secured" (at least against the Taliban) by Afghan police, at the cost, obviously, of turning the city into a collection of fortresses and the streets into an endless array of check points. But, Afghanistan is a country of villages and the war is a rural war. The writ of the government does not run widely outside of Kabul even in non Taliban areas.

On the negative side,

a) the much advertised Marja campaign was a failure. Counterinsurgency theory calls for a ratio of troops to inhabitants of about 1:50; in the Marja campaign, the ratio rose to 1:2 and the "government in a box" proved undeliverable. Using classic guerrilla tactics, the insurgents put up a partial resistance and then faded away, but returned when they had the opportunity and infiltrated the community, largely and quickly re-establishing their former position.

b) Afghan perception of these events did not initiate but did accentuate a hedging of bets by the Afghan governing elite on whom accomplishment of the basic objectives in Afghanistan must depend. Many and perhaps most of the governing elite have been or are engaged in preparing their safe havens abroad, moving families, acquiring dual citizenship and shipping enormous (relative to Afghan resources and individual wealth) amounts of money to foreign banks. A repetition of the failure of Marja in the Kandahar campaign would certainly accentuate the drift among the key members of the ruling elite.

c) Meanwhile, President Karzai, before we know the results of the Kandahar campaign, and whether or not he is personally involved in this preparedness to "jump ship," has been trying to find a means prospectively to protect his position and that of his regime by some form of accommodation with the Taliban.

---

c) Corruption runs from the very top of the Afghan regime to the very bottom of the society. Almost nothing happens without a bribe. The UN estimated earlier this year that as much as a

quarter of the gross domestic product of the country -- and nearly half of the salary of an ordinary citizen -- is paid out in bribes or protection money. Whether or not these figures are accurate, they are based on interviews with 7,600 Afghans in 12 provincial capitals. So politically they are significant. What is perhaps even more significant is that even Afghans associated with America contrast government and power elite corruption with that in areas under Taliban control where, they believe, there is no corruption.

d) There is no security of property. Even government property is routinely seized by warlords and for the average citizen to own property is to endanger himself and his family. The constitution and the existing laws are not operative. Consequently, the average citizen at best seeks to avoid government and at worst fears or hates it.

e) There is a pervasive sense of despair. In part, but only in part, this is a result of a crippling level of unemployment (in some areas up to 50%) and poverty. Afghans have lived with poverty and disruption of their lives for time beyond the experience of those living today. But today, the statistics are truly astonishing to us and dispiriting to them. They have suffered through virtually continuous war for 30 years. Many are wounded or sick, with some even on the brink of starvation. More than one in three subsists on the equivalent of less than 45 cents a day, almost one in two lives below the locally designated poverty line and more than one in two preschool children is stunted because of malnutrition. They are the lucky ones; one in five dies before the age of 5.

Obviously, the Afghans need help, so Americans think they should welcome our efforts to aid them. But this is only sporadically and/or regionally true. It is, obviously more true in areas where fewer Pashtuns live and where the Taliban is least operative. In the south, it is more common. There, in the aftermath of its campaign, USAID offered to employ virtually the entire adult population of Marja, some 10,000 people. Unquestionably such efforts do persuade some of the people for some of the time. But not all or permanently. In Marja, only 1,200 people signed up for the jobs AID offered.

f) The attitude toward America and Americans is an aspect of the national Afghan attitude toward foreigners. Nation-wide, independent observers have found that a large part of the Afghan population does not want Americans, even aid workers providing beneficial services, here. There is considerable if impressionistic evidence that "civic action," even when American offered benefits are accepted by Afghans, is not creating an environment favorable to improving Afghan-American relations. It appears to be largely opportunistic. This also was the experience of the Russians who engaged in a large scale and comparable civic action program during their decade of occupation. Moreover, even those who want to participate in American projects are fairly easily dissuaded by the insurgents.

g) Support for the insurgents arises in part from Afghan anger over their long exposure to foreign (British, Russian and now American) control or occupation. It is also due to Taliban organizational effectiveness and a sensitive and wide-ranging intelligence. Actions demonstrate that the Taliban have the ability to identify and neutralize pro-American Afghans and are believed to have infiltrated all organs of the central regime.

h) Certainly in the Pashtun areas but also even among the minority community areas, there is evident respect for the Taliban as the only Afghan organization fully opposed to foreign domination. Among the Tajiks, for example, the Taliban have significant support.

i) Militarily, of course, American troops win all the battles. But our forces are caught, as in other insurgencies they have been, in a conflict of tactics: if it is to be effective in military terms, it is often self-defeating politically. To catch an insurgent thought to be hiding in a village house, a patrol,

usually now a Special Operations force, must search even those parts of the house regarded by the inhabitants as *haram* (forbidden) territory. Whether or not the soldiers catch the suspect, they almost certainly make enemies of the household and its neighbors. And, using distant forms of warfare, particularly missiles fired from drones, has unavoidably resulted in civilian casualties with the same effect. More subtly, the drone has created a sense of almost-medieval dread of unseen, diabolic powers which, obviously, fix an image of America. Finally, the practice of “taking out” Taliban leaders has not stopped the flow of new recruits. Arguably what it has done is more dangerous for the future: the targeted men are now relatively elderly and their removal has opened the way for younger and probably more radical insurgents with less experience and less balance. This probably will intensify fighting and will make ultimate negotiations more difficult.

j) Counterinsurgency did not work in Vietnam and opinions differ on its results in Iraq. In any case, Iraq is very different from Afghanistan, and it is not working here. Not only the Afghans, but nearly everyone in all cultures and all political systems has a deep aversion to foreigners on his land. As far as we know, this feeling goes back to the very beginning of our species because, simply put, we are territorial animals. Dedication to the protection of homeland permeates history from the earliest times. And the sentiment has never died out. Today we call it nationalism. Nationalism in various guises is the most powerful political idea of our times. Protecting land, culture, religion and people from foreigners is the central issue in insurgency. The former head of the Pakistani intelligence service, who has had unparalleled experience with the Taliban over many years, advised us that the Afghan insurgents see themselves as “... freedom fighters fighting for their country and fighting for their faith.” We agreed with this description when Afghan insurgents were fighting the Russians; now, when many of the same people are fighting us, we see them only as terrorists.

k) Afghanistan is the most dedicated of the Islamic countries. While it is divided between the two major sects, Sunnism and Shiism, it permeates all aspects of Afghan life. The Sunni sect, particularly, is shaped by three currents: Afghan cultural traditions, the *salafiyah* or “puritan” tide of thought that grew in reaction to European imperialism and colonialism and the educational experience of the refugees in Pakistan. While we can separate these analytically, the Afghans see their confluence as the “real” or correct Islam. Sunnis are wholly dedicated to it; Shiis, while deriving some of their current attitudes from different sources and experiences, are not less dedicated to Islam. Both communities tend to equate American actions in Afghanistan with an attack on their religion. Anti-Muslim sentiments in America, as reported in the Afghan press and discussed from the pulpits, is taken as bearing out this opinion. President Obama’s Cairo speech on multiculturalism was an important deterrent to this belief, but it is of fading effectiveness.

The Taliban derive respect for their religious dedication (even apparently among the Shiis there is respect for the Sunni Taliban as true Muslims) and are able to depict themselves as true Muslims who oppose the foreign anti-Muslim Americans.

l) Historically, Afghanistan has always had a relatively weak central government with a large degree of regional autonomy. American political actions have gone against this historical precedent, accentuating the creation of a strong central government, while at the same time holding serious reservations about the integrity, capacity and durability of current central government

Militarily and economically, however, the US has emphasized the provinces. After all, the war it is fighting is a rural war. And to fight that war, the US Army has inadvertently undermined the central government. Economically, this trend is also clear. Some months ago, some 92% of American

aid bypassed the central government; today approximately 80% of all US aid and military subventions go directly into the hands of local authorities or warlords.<sup>1</sup>

m) Warlords come in various varieties. The more powerful control whole provinces or ethnic communities. For example, "Marshal" Abdul Rashid Dostam parlayed his Jauzjani militia into control of most of the Uzbek community and area.

But many "power brokers" control only neighborhoods or stretches of roads. One who was discussed in *The Washington Post* earlier this month has only 40 gunmen and controls only about 4 square miles. Another, was described in *The New York Times* this month as "an illiterate former highway patrol commander [who] has grown stronger than the government of Oruzgan Province, not only supplanting its role in providing security but usurping its other functions, his rivals say, like appointing public employees and doling out government largess...allegedly, his operations take in about \$2.5 million a month by charging \$1,200 for each NATO cargo truck to which it gives safe passage." Groups like this are found all over Afghanistan and in the aggregate the payoff to them is huge. A Congressional investigation entitled "Warlord, Inc., Extortion and Corruption Along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan," published in June this year, showed that to implement a \$2.16 billion transport contract the US military is paying tens of millions of dollars to warlords, corrupt public officials and (indirectly) the Taliban.

More important from a policy perspective than the money is that is that the American army, the Special Forces and the CIA have associated themselves with, and often paid, warlords to ensure safe passage of its supply convoys and/or to gather intelligence and fight insurgents. As General Petraeus recently told his staff, "Remember, we are who we fund." Since these warlords are generally at least corrupt and usually are brutal, the association of them with America has undoubtedly been a major asset for the Taliban.

---

2) As I have said, I will not here discuss Pakistan in detail, but it obviously is playing and will play a major role in Pashtun/Taliban affairs. Its population contains about double the number of Pashtuns as are found in Afghanistan. They were "artificially" separated by the British in 1893 with a new 1,600 mile-long frontier. The British intent was to weaken the tribesmen. Periodically, the Pashtuns have made attempts to reunite themselves and always have moved more or less freely across the Durand Line. Since the capital of Pakistan is about as close to the frontier as Hartford is to New York, Pakistan has a strategic interest in Afghan affairs that transcends, but incorporates, politics, ethnicity and religion.

Pakistan's policy, regardless of the nature of its regime, will also be shaped by Islam. This contributes to a deep emotional and military involvement in the fate of Kashmir. And, since most of Kashmir has been under a harsh military occupation for over half a century, now effected by a 700,000 man Indian army, Pakistan's fixation on Kashmir both weakens the Pakistani state and forms a part of the basis for hostility to and fear of India. I have discussed the triangle of India-Kashmir-Pakistan elsewhere, but it is too complex to squeeze into this small paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an echo of Vietnam where to avoid aid being stolen by venal officials, aid was delivered by American officials direct to villagers. The aid got through but the effect was to show the villagers that they had no native government. So when Americans withdrew, there were neither effective South Vietnamese institutions nor public loyalty to prevent the take-over of the Viet Minh.

3) As I have also said, I will not here discuss Iran in detail, but, like Pakistan, Iran impacts upon Afghan politics, ethnic relations and economy. If the American problems with Iran could be resolved, Iran could be a major help in bringing about an end to the current war and probably could prevent a return to the civil war of the 1990s. It helped to overthrow the Taliban government following the US invasion in October 2001; since it has been a supporter of the Karzai regime. Moreover, it has waged what is perhaps the world's largest (and most costly) campaign against drug smuggling. Finally, as a neighbor of Afghanistan, it cannot be excluded from Afghan affairs.

4) I also will not discuss the Central Asian (formerly Soviet) Central Asian republics with whose people, as with the Pakistanis, many Afghans have close ethnic and emotional ties. One thing, however, I will mention is that numbers of Uzbeks and other others have joined in the Afghan insurgency. This is also true of some Caucasians, particularly the Çeçens. The Russian are worried about their impact on their fellow citizens if or when they return home. Since Tsarist times, the Russians have worried about the spread of Islam – formerly known as “Panislamism” -- among their conquered minorities, so, in a meeting with the Russian ambassador, I was not surprised to hear him say that containing or preventing the spread of fundamentalism, *salafiyah* under its various names, remains a major Russian concern. It is for this reason that current Russian policy opposes the Taliban and favors America involvement in Afghanistan.

The Russian ambassador, who had personally served three tours in Afghanistan, stated that under no circumstances would Russia send forces into Afghanistan again.

5) Among the United States's NATO allies, opposition to the war is growing. Governments are increasingly caught between their desire to go along with American policy on the one hand and on the other concern about their financial problems and strong and growing public opposition to the war. This has already resulted in the fall of a Dutch government and the decision of other European states to withdraw their small contingents. Predictably, the war will shortly be almost entirely an American venture.

6) Within the United States support for the war is rapidly declining. According to an AP-GfK poll published on August 21, only 38 percent now say they support President Obama's “expanded war effort in Afghanistan” — that is a drop from 46 percent in March. However, nothing like the demonstrations that marked the Vietnam era have so far occurred. This is primarily because there is no draft. Until recently, the media has been generally favorable to the war, particularly among those outlets influenced by the neoconservative movement, Southern conservative groups and the Republican Party. Such opposition as exists is primarily among the supporters of the Obama administration.

However, there is a growing perception among business leaders and public affairs groups that the expenditures on the war endanger the American economy. The most recent study of American industrial competitiveness indicated that basic infrastructure has been allowed to deteriorate to a level that undercuts American competitiveness in the world market and will require an investment of over \$1.5 trillion to put America back into a competitive condition. Moreover, American borrowing abroad, accelerated during the Bush administration, has reached what many economists believe is an unsustainable level. Finally, domestically, the demands to halt the loss of houses and jobs and the enactment of the new public health bill are making or will make demands that no American administration can refuse. Facing elections, the Congress is already showing the effects. As stories of waste and corruption in Afghanistan have surfaced, some Congressmen are running for cover. This trend will certainly accelerate in the months to come.

A sign of this recent change, particularly notable in the last month, are statements by people who previously had encouraged American involvement in Afghanistan. While the number is growing, particularly prominent among them, because of the identity of the author, was an article in *Newsweek* by the current president of the Council on Foreign Relations who was a senior official during the Bush administration. The article was entitled "We can't win and it isn't worth it."

#### IV *Steps toward withdrawal*

The US will ultimately have to withdrawal so the issues are not whether but when and under what circumstances. Looking back at insurgencies I have studied and those in which I have been somewhat involved, I think the most important task is to set a clear program of what one wishes to accomplish and then prepare well in advance the groundwork for the events; failure to do this presents what could be a frantic, last-minute rush in which the aims and objectives so long and expensively sought are lost. So here is the sequence that I believe makes the most sense and provides the maximum insurance against failure.

##### *First step:*

Set a clear, firm, unequivocal and reasonably proximate date for withdrawal.

What can be said to fault this approach?

The Taliban will be encouraged to wait us out, knowing that at a certain date, they can advance and take over the country.

But this presupposes that the Taliban are uninformed about American and European politics and the growing opposition to the continued occupation. They know that we will have to leave sometime in the relatively near future; and their strategy is to hurry up the process. The chances are that they believe that the time span between what they can make us do and what we would do by ourselves is fairly short. Consequently, more precisely and less ambiguously setting a date is not likely to substantially affect Taliban policy.

Nor is it likely to have any serious effect on the "power elite." They are already moving their assets and families out of the country and acquiring dual nationality.

So why do it?

The reason is that it would have a major positive effect primarily on those people who live where the war is being fought: the villagers in the rural areas. For them and for the urban lower classes, it would change the "political psychology" of the war. Let me explain:

At the present time, Afghans regard aid programs, even by non-governmental organizations, in the terms proclaimed by General David Petraeus: "money is my most important ammunition..." So, if a bridge is built, a school opened, even a clinic set up, it is regarded as a military tactic. That is what the Viet Minh also understood and that is why they set out to destroy the entire civil order of the South Vietnamese government in the late 1950s when they murdered even doctors, nurses and teachers. That is what the Taliban are doing today. We are shocked and disgusted, but their tactics are those insurgents have employed everywhere.

So, if we believe it is to our interest to move Afghanistan toward a degree of security, self-sufficiency and less hatred of us, we need to change the context of our activities: that is, we need to

disconnect combat from programs to benefit the people. The crucial first move in this process is setting a date.

Why?

If a firm date in the reasonably near term is believed, then the Afghans can feel that their principal, shared objective has been achieved: we have agreed to leave. It is not precisely that we have *left* but that we have agreed in a believable and reasonably near-term proclamation, to leave. At that point, the construction of a clinic, a school or a farm-to-market road will no longer be seen as a tactic used to dominate them. Then these things begin to take on a new meaning.

At that point, village *shuras, jirgas* or *ulus* will see, or will rapidly begin to see, these things as intrinsically valuable. They will want them for themselves and for their fellow villagers. Particularly if much of the aid can be given to them unobtrusively by USAID, through NGOs and/or through the UN, there will be a rush to join the development process, each of Afghanistan's 22,000 villages on its own.

Will the Taliban not continue to do as it is doing now to thwart this process by killing the aid workers and those who accept their help or cooperate with them?

It is probable that they will try. However, if they do, they will lose the support they now enjoy from the villagers. In this new context:

They will be seen to be operating *against public desires and needs* and *now no longer justified by opposition to foreign domination*. In short, their cause will have become redundant and their opposition to beneficial activities will be clearly seen to be unpatriotic and anti-social.

Thus, to adapt the famous description of Mao Zedong, the village "water" that now supports the insurgent "fish" will dry up. The villagers will see that the Taliban are not catering to their needs and that their fight is no longer for a cause since the battle is won.

*Second Step:*

Just as the villagers will begin to see their interests in a new light, so will people living in the town and cities.

This is in part because as in almost all Asian countries the cities are extensions of the rural areas (rather than the reverse). Then genuine aid projects, as distinct from such projects as the building of the Bagram airbase, will take on a new meaning. Particularly if projects are done with local labor and with emphasis on labor-intensive methods, a new sense of pride and ownership will grow.

This new "political psychology" will also begin to affect the central government bureaucracy and the security forces. The sense that Afghanistan has arisen from the ashes of 30 years of war is precisely the elixir that they need to drink.

During this period, training of the security forces, particularly the police force, should go forward with all deliberate speed. What is significant is that even that will be accomplished in a new context: the "political psychology" is all important. We should remember that the South Vietnamese had one of the world's most powerful armies, on paper, but it lacked the will to defend its regime. It is not so much numbers or equipment that count, although of course they are important, as psychology. Changing this context would invigorate and upgrade the current push to provide the central government with the means to survive.

Even the now blatantly corrupt power elite will begin to rethink their possible flight. A few at first and then others will begin to see less reason to leave and they will see new – and increasingly safe – opportunities here. As they begin to bring their families and at least some of their money back, this will have a ripple effect throughout the society.

Most important of all, Afghanistan's most precious asset, its trained and educated people, will begin to return. They too will at first come only in small numbers, but as they take stock of the changed political climate, more will follow. Even today, a sense of nostalgia and patriotism are strong lures; if added to them is a sense of the new hope, a corner will have been turned.

*Third Step:*

America should encourage the growth of a quasi-military formation like our Corps of Engineers.

This would have two important effects. The first is that this group could undertake some of the major infrastructure projects upon which a revitalized economy could grow. The second is that through its judicious use, the central government could reward those communities that cooperate in nation-building projects (roads, bridges, dams, etc.). This would tend to enhance the power and prestige of the central government.

At that point, events in Afghanistan will have reached a point at which America can safely speed up the process, already begun, to withdraw troops.

*Fourth Step: political negotiation:*

No one believes that either side in the civil war can win by military means alone. Nor does any sensible person think that a stable situation can be created by trying to exclude the Taliban. Negotiations are allegedly already in process. Certainly President Karzai has said he is trying to get them going. Obviously, he wants to save his regime (and his life), and he sees that the present course cannot be sustained.

The United States apparently is not now engaged in such attempts at negotiation and should probably not attempt to get involved. But it should not oppose them as it is now doing. The most important block to negotiations is the "joint prioritized effects list" (JPEL) which names virtually the entire Taliban leadership, at least 2,000 men, and authorizes their assassination. The group entrusted with this task is a unit known as "Task Force 373" of the Special Forces (aka "Special Ops"). Quite apart from the legality and public perception of this group (which operates like the Soviet *Spetsnaz* did in the 1980s) is that it makes negotiation virtually impossible: since the list is secret, no Talib can know whether or not he is on it and may, therefore, be murdered or imprisoned if he comes forward to meet with an Afghan government negotiator even in a third country.

As I was told by the former Taliban minister of defense, this is an absolute block and one that can be removed only by the United States.

On their side, the Taliban now have little incentive to negotiate. The right tactics for them have been described in a Kenyan fable as the flea versus the lion; the flea bites and jumps away. The lion swats and sometimes kills the flea. But there are many fleas. Lions don't defeat fleas. So the Taliban will "bite" and jump away. They feel that time, numbers and faith are on their side.

It is precisely to change this context that I have laid out a program to alter the political psychology of the contest. In this altered circumstance -- when Afghans perceive that they do not any

longer *need* the Taliban to secure Afghan independence and that the Taliban have become a hindrance to the development of a better standard of life -- that the Taliban will be driven to negotiations.

*Shape of the Afghanistan of the postwar era:*

Americans are unlikely to be able to set the format of the future Afghanistan, but we can encourage certain elements and discourage others. This is what it seems to me to be the best that we could hope for:

1) *A coherent nation-state.* No responsible Afghan, even in the midst of the civil war, favored the break up of the country. To balkanize Afghanistan would be to create a disaster. This is because, first, Afghanistan's ethnic communities are mingled. Predictably, the splitting of the country into pieces would set off a panic flight which would create millions of refugees; second, the several pieces would be too weak to sustain themselves and would invite intervention by the neighboring countries (Iran in the west, Pakistan in the south, perhaps China in the east and one or other of the central Asian republics in the north); third, even without external intervention, almost certainly, the states would fight one another as in the 1990s; and in this circumstance, it is probable that the Taliban would take over the entire country and engage in a bloody repression.

2) *A relatively strong central government in control of foreign affairs.* That would give it control over foreign aid which, for the foreseeable future, will be the dominant factor in the economy. Such control would enable the central government to allocate aid projects among the provinces and so exercise a considerable influence over their policies. The central government should also have a small but mobile military force with which to defend itself. This should probably include a monopoly of air power and heavy weapons. As I have suggested, it would be beneficial if it also had a sort of Corps of Engineers with which it could carry out or assist the provinces in carrying out the infrastructure projects that will be necessary to enable the economy to revive. The central area, a sort of federal district, should also contain the major national educational institutions. Particularly the university with such associated professional schools as a medical training college, perhaps associated with one or other American university medical school and a foundation (acting as the Rockefeller Foundation did in China) will attract potential leaders from the provinces and help to integrate the country.

3) *The provinces must be accorded large degree of cultural autonomy.* That is the historical legacy of the country and is required because of the ethnic and religious diversity of its society. The probably seven provinces would coalesce approximately on ethnic and religious grounds. All the inhabitants would be Afghan citizens and would be able to move freely among the provinces. There would be a single currency and economy, but certain aspects of their lives, particularly religion and customary law, would be local. Villages would continue to be largely self-governing under their *jirgas*, *ulus*, and *shuras*. However, if the process I envisage for the federal district works, the regions will gradually move toward a central consensus under a constitution approved by the traditional Afghan authority, the *Loya Jirga*.

4) *Such a state will over time evolve toward an Afghan version of participatory democracy.* Afghans will begin to see that while they control their affairs, as they will certainly insist on doing, they will find it in their interest to move away from violence toward a more secure way of life and away from restrictive and retrograde customs toward a freer way of life.

In this process, which we can encourage, I see their – and our -- best way forward. Indeed, without it, I see years of futile and violently-opposed occupation which is beyond the financial capability and political will of our country to sustain. And, even if sustained, will endanger other of the basic American national objectives which I have set out in the first paragraph, including the

preservation of our own cultural and political heritage from damage by the practices that have grown in this war.

In conclusion, after nine years of strenuous efforts, vast expenditure of resources, enormous losses of people, both Afghans and Americans, I think this policy would be a major benefit to our nation and should be undertaken urgently.

William R. Polk  
Kabul, August 22, 2010

William R. Polk was appointed the Member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia by President Kennedy in 1961. In 1962, he made a 2,000 mile trip throughout Afghanistan wrote the first US national policy paper on the country. After government service he became Professor of History at the University of Chicago, established its Center for Middle Eastern Studies and subsequently became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. He is the author of some 15 books, including *Understanding Iraq*, *Understanding Iran* and *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism and Guerrilla Warfare*. This paper was written at the request of US Ambassador to Afghanistan, General Karl Eikenberry.