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Dear Colleagues and Friends,

On June 24, the *International Herald Tribune* published an editorial from its parent, *The New York Times*, entitled “Obama’s Decision.” Both the attribution – printing in the two newspapers which ensures that the editorial will reach both directly and through subsidiary reprinting almost every “decision maker” in the world – and the date – just before the appointment of David Petraeus to succeed Stanley McChrystal – are significant. They could have suggested a momentary lull in which basic questions on the Afghan war might have been reconsidered.

That did not happen. The President made clear his belief that the strategy of the war was sound and his commitment to continue it even if the general responsible for it had to be changed.

The editorial sounded a different note arising from the events surrounding the fall of General McChrystal: Mr. Obama, said *The Times*, “must order all of his top advisers to stop their sniping and maneuvering” and come up with a coherent political and military plan for driving back the Taliban and building a minimally effective Afghan government.”

In short, Mr. Obama must get his team together and evolve a plan.

Unfortunately, the task he faces is not that simple.

First, consider the “team.” It has two major components, the military officers whom McChrystal gathered in Kabul. As they made clear in the *Rolling Stone* interview, they think of themselves as “Team America” and hold in contempt everyone else. Those who don’t fully subscribe to their approach to the war are unpatriotic, stupid or cowardly. Those officers are not alone. Agreeing with them is apparently now a large part of the professional military establishment. They are the junior officers whom David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal have selected, promoted and with whom they take their stand..

The other “component” is not a group but many groups with different agendas and constituencies. The most crucial for my purposes here are the advisers to the President; they were dismissed out of hand as “the wimps in the White House.” Most, but not all, were civilians. Other senior military officers, now retired, who are not part of “Team America” and its adherents were also disparaged. Famously, General Jim Jones, the director of the National Security Council staff, was called a “clown.”

These were the comments that forced Mr. Obama’s hand and were what the press latched upon to explain the events. But many missed the point that McChrystal had just a few days before his dismissal written a devastating report on his mission. Confidential copies of it were obtained by the London newspaper, *The Independent on Sunday*, which published it today, but of course the President had seen it earlier. Essentially, its message boiled down to failure.

McChrystal pointed out that he faced a “resilient and growing insurgency,” with too few troops and expected no progress in the coming six months. Despite expenditures of at least \$7 billion a month, his politico-military strategy wasn’t working. Within weeks of the “victory” over the Taliban in the agricultural district of Marja, the Taliban were back and the box full of government he had announced proved to be nearly empty. As the expression went in the days of the Vietnam War, whatever happened during the day, the guerrillas “owned the night.” As he described it, Marja was the “bleeding ulcer” of the American campaign.

Behind McChrystal’s words, the figures were even more devastating: Marja, despite the descriptions in the press is not a town, much less a city; it is a hundred or so square miles of farm land with dispersed hamlets in which about 35,000 people live and work. Into that small and lightly populated area, McChrystal poured some 15,000 troops, and they failed to secure it.

To appreciate what those figures mean, consider them in context of Petraeus’s counterinsurgency theory, on which McChrystal was basing his strategy. As he had explained it, Marja should be taken, secured and held. Then an administration – McChrystal’s “government in a box” -- should be imposed upon it. Despite all the hoopla about the brilliant new strategy, it was hardly new. In fact it was a replay of the strategy the French General Lyautey called the *tache d’huile* (the oil spot) and applied in Indochina over a century ago. We also tried it in Vietnam, renaming it the “ink spot.” The hope was that the “spot,” once fixed on the Marja, would smudge into adjoining areas and so eventually spread across the country. Clear and simple, but unfortunately, like so much in counterinsurgency theory, it never seemed to work.

Petraeus’s counterinsurgency theory also illuminated how to create the “spot.” What was required was a commitment of forces in proportion to native population size. Various numbers have been put forth but a common number is about one soldier for each 50 inhabitants. Marja was the area chosen for the “spot.” The people living there, after all, were farmers, wedded to the land, and so should be more tractable than the wild warriors along the tribal frontier. Moreover, it was the place where the first significant American aid program, the Helmand Valley Authority, had been undertaken in the late 1950s. So, if an area were to be favorable to Americans, it ought to be Marja. But, to take no chances, General McChrystal decided to employ overwhelming force. So, what is particularly stunning about the failure in Marja is that the force applied was not the counterinsurgency model of 1 soldier for each 50 inhabitants but nearly 1 soldier for each 2 inhabitants.

If these numbers were projected to the planned offensive in the much larger city of Kandahar, which has a population of nearly 500,000, they become impossibly large. Such an attack would require at least four times as many US and NATO as in Marja. That is virtually the entire fighting force and what little control over Marja and most other areas, perhaps even the capital, Kabul, that now exists would have to be given up or else large numbers of additional American troops would have to be engaged. Moreover, in response to such an attack, it would be possible for the insurgents also to redeploy so the numbers would again increase.

The more fundamental question, which needs to be addressed, is why didn’t this relatively massive introduction of troops with awesome and overwhelming fire power succeed. Just a few days before he was fired, as I have mentioned, General McChrystal posed, but could not answer, that question. I hope President Obama is also pondering it.

For those who read history, the answer is evident. But, as I have quoted in my book *Understanding Iraq*, the great German philosopher, Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel, despaired that "Peoples and governments never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it" and, therefore, as the American philosopher George Santayana warned us, not having learned from history, we are doomed to repeat it. Indeed, it seems that each generation of Americans has to start all over again to find the answers. Who among our leaders and certainly among college students now really remembers Vietnam? So, consider these simple facts:

The first fact, whether we like it or not, is that nearly everyone in the world 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 we are territorial animals. Dedication to the protection of homeland permeates history. 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 we should open our eyes to seeing the Afghan insurgents as they see themselves: "They are freedom fighters fighting for their country and fighting for their faith." We agreed when they were fighting the Russians; now, when many of the same people are fighting us, we see them only as terrorists. That label does not help us understand *why* they are fighting.

Instead of asking why they are fighting, counterinsurgents think they can overcome aversion to foreign invaders by "renting" the natives. In Marja, we not only put in a large military contingent but, as Rajiv Chandrasekaran reported this month in *The Washington Post*, we offered to employ virtually the entire adult population, 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 we offered.

Why so few? After all, the Afghans, as I wrote in an earlier article, have suffered through virtually continuous war for thirty 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 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 we think they should welcome our efforts to aid them. But Marja shows that they do not. Nation-wide, independent observers have found that attitude is common: most do not want us there, even giving them aid. And even those who do are fairly easily dissuaded by the insurgents.

Threats or attacks by the insurgents have brought them into our gunights. In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, we have tried to so weaken the insurgents that they cannot effectively block our programs. Our "body counts" in Vietnam showed that we killed off the entire Viet Minh several times over and today we are told that the ranks of the Taliban have been severely depleted. But, because the motivation that energized the first group of insurgents is widely shared, and is usually intensified by foreign military action, which by its nature is regarded by many of the natives as unjustified and brutal, new insurgents as well as supporters of the temporarily evicted insurgents will emerge from among the inhabitants of the oil/ink spot. Outsiders may have come in, but, according to US military intelligence about three in four insurgents fight within five miles of their homes. They were "home" and taking up arms within a month in Marja.

Indeed, the campaign may have been, to use that cumbersome locution of governmentese, "counter-productive." According to the former British counter-terrorism chief and current head of the UN monitoring mission, Richard Barnett, as cited in *The Guardian/The Observer* last week, "Attempts by British and American forces to expand their control over Afghan territory over the past 12 months have been counter-productive and led to a worsening security situation."

The second fact is that those insurgents who don't get killed are the ones who have learned three simple ways to defeat the counterinsurgents.

The first of these ways to defeat counterinsurgents is to use appropriate tactics -- never stand and fight. Insurgents can see that their enemies outgun, and usually far outnumber, them so they should hit and run -- lay mines, ambush patrols, disrupt logistics but never get caught. Drawing on a Kenyan fable, this has been termed "the war of the flea and the lion." The flea bites and jumps away. The powerful lion swats, occasionally hits, but eventually tires and moves away. Lions don't defeat fleas.

The second way insurgents can defeat the counterinsurgent is a form of jujitsu -- using his strength against him. His strength is his superiority in weapons. So the insurgent seeks to incite him to use them. Inevitably, caught in the middle, the people -- who are after all the "spoils" in insurgency warfare -- get hurt. And when they get hurt, they naturally come to hate those who fire the weapons. In Vietnam, insurgents would sometimes enter a "neutral" village, shoot at an American airplane and then steal away. The attacked airplane would call in troops or gunships. The villagers would suffer and would be confirmed in their hatred of the Americans. It was brutal but very effective.

Counterinsurgents think they can avoid this problem by withholding as much as possible of their lethal power. But doing so is very difficult. Their soldiers also get hurt and angry. And they come to hate the locals -- wogs, gooks, rag heads, *untermenschen* -- who appear to them dirty, slovenly, corrupt and cowardly. No one can be trusted when even children act as spies or carry bombs. Soldiers make bad neighbors to civilians in the best of circumstances and insurgency is not one of those circumstances. As I have pointed out in my book, *The Birth of America*, it was the presence of even superbly disciplined British troops in Boston that touched off the American Revolution.

The third way insurgents can defeat invaders is by destroying their local puppets. Ruling another country is, of course, expensive and difficult so foreigners have almost always and everywhere enrolled willing natives to help. In the American Revolution we called those people "the Loyalists." In Vietnam, they were the government of the South. In Afghanistan they are the "Kabul government."

So the insurgents regard collaborators -- "Quislings" as we called them in the Second World War -- as their prime target. In America, the colonists threatened, tarred and feathered, lashed, imprisoned, hanged or drove away tens of thousands of the Loyalists. In Vietnam, French police records show that in the 1950s, the Viet Minh virtually wiped out the administration of the southern government, murdering policemen, postmen, judges and other civil servants as well as teachers and doctors. And today in Afghanistan, as Rod Nordland reported in *The New York Times* on June 10, "The Taliban have been stepping up a campaign of assassinations in recent months against officials and anyone else associated with local government in an attempt to undermine counterinsurgency operations in the south."

One Afghan told Nordland, "I know many people who are afraid to take jobs with the government or the aid community now. It's a very effective and very efficient campaign; the armed opposition are using this tool because it works." Even from a nationalist perspective, this is very rough justice. But many Afghans appear to believe it is both "justice" and *Afghan* justice.

To validate their actions, the insurgents must themselves supply what the foreigners and their local supporters offer. We have full records of how insurgents did this in Yugoslavia and Greece during the Second World War. The records are not so open for Afghanistan as yet. But, we know from a study by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) that the Taliban has set up a "widespread paramilitary shadow government...in a majority of Afghanistan's 34 provinces."

One of the things these shadow governments do is administer the law. For years, I have read reports contrasting what happens in a government court and a Taliban court. In the government court, cases languish for months or years while bribes are collected. A UN study found earlier this year that officials shake down their fellow citizens for an amount that is nearly a quarter of the country's gross domestic product. In a Taliban court, there is no bribery and no delay: Islamic law as defined by Afghan custom is immediate. From our point of view, this too is very rough justice, if justice at all, but in insurgencies, people appear willing to put aside the niceties of peaceful life. In our Revolution we did too.

So where are we?

For some years I have been reading every study, poll, government release, press report and assorted other documents I could find. What I see is a decline, accelerated in the last two years, of "security." In 2009, there were 8,159 "incidents" involving bombs (IEDs), and in the first four months of 2010 there have already been almost half that many. But, more important than "security," I think, is the widely held belief that America is not moving toward anything that can be considered success. And certainly not on anything like President Obama's reelection-related timetable.

I have been taxed with being severe in this judgment, but listen to General McChrystal's Chief of Operations, Major General Bill Mayville. Having described the war as unwinnable, he said "It's not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win. This war is going to end in an argument." Even his choice of the word "argument" may be unduly optimistic. In Vietnam, the disgraceful scene of the helicopter taking a few people off the roof of our embassy -- while abandoning others of our supporters to the rough justice of the Viet Minh -- is hard to put out of mind.

But, I am astonished to find how many Americans today *do* manage to put not only the now-distant Vietnam war but also the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan out of their minds. In lecturing around the country, I find little interest among the American public in the growing number of wounded -- now over a hundred thousand -- or the casualties. Based on informal talks with members of my audiences, I have come to attribute this is to the fact that, whereas in the Vietnam war, our army was made up of draftees who were drawn from our families, today our army, and therefore our casualties, come in high proportion from the disadvantaged, minorities and foreigners. As a man in one lecture I gave in Arizona put it bluntly, "they just aren't our people." The pain does not reach most of us. Recent polls show a different view in Europe. Some 72% of the citizens of our principal ally, Great Britain, want their troops home immediately and 62% of the Germans agree.

Surprisingly, the vast expenditure of money on the war does not seem, at least yet, to worry Americans either. As a people, we seem far more ready to spend money on warfare than on our own health, housing, jobs and education.

But, worry about the course the war is taking appears strongest in precisely those places where it is most crucial – the ruling circles of Afghanistan. Recognition of this development was apparently what motivated Afghan President Hamid Karzai at least to talk about a new peace initiative: he must see that not only his regime but his life is in danger. Closer to it than we, he must know that the war is being lost.

So what can America do?

We can begin by being realistic. We were sold a phony policy in counterinsurgency - one that essentially tried to substitute technique for politics, enthusiasm for wisdom, money for knowledge. As I have shown in my book on insurgency, terrorism and guerrilla war, *Violent Politics*, there is no record that counterinsurgency ever worked anywhere, and it is certainly not working now in Afghanistan. The neoconservatives also sold the Bush administration on the quixotic idea of “regime change.” Whole cultures and the regimes they embody are not phantoms to be whisked away, overthrown, replaced by foreign mandate. Trying to do so may be quixotic, but we should remember what Cervantes tells us the real windmill did to Don Quixote.

But, can we just “cut and run?” That question is meant to turn off intelligent analysis. So the proper answer to it is ‘No, but unless we come to a realistic policy, we are likely to be forced eventually to do something like our disgraceful exit from Vietnam. Therefore, let us think carefully and move prudently before it is too late.’

So what should be included in a realistic policy?

The first thing is to go beyond merely *saying* that a solution may ultimately and under certain unidentified circumstances involve negotiation to actually working to bring negotiation about. Astute commentators have pointed up the obvious: we have opposed negotiation at every opportunity and still do so. We complain that we don’t think the Taliban now want to negotiate. Were I Mullah Umar, I would not either.

Why not? Is it just because he is a bad man? A narrow-minded ideologue? Or because he is driven by a hatred of freedom and democracy? Otherwise sober and intelligent people have adduced each of these. They don’t get us very far. So let us examine the “negotiating climate.”

We have repeatedly said that we want to bloody the insurgents to make them more amenable to our terms. So our concentration has been, and still is, on killing enough of them to weaken their movement. Suppose we manage to do that, what do we then offer?

One proposal under discussion is “reintegration,” which the US favors. Under this rubric, we have said that we are willing to forgive those low-level Taliban footsoldiers who defect. Even more, we have espoused a new order for them in the “Afghan Peace and Reintegration Plan.” As Joshua Partlow summarized in *The Washington Post*, the defector who renounces violence and promises to support the constitution is then set out on a trajectory that he is bound to regard as humiliating: first, he must be fingerprinted and given a retinal scan; then he must get his fellow tribesmen to vouch for his sincerity; next he must submit to a course in Islam given by an appointee of the government. Because he is

likely to be at least a graduate of a religious school, and may be a man of religion himself, this is no mean psychological hurdle. But, never fear, if he does, there is a pay-off: As Jon Boon reported in *The Guardian*, he will be offered a manual job in such things as carpet-weaving. In Afghanistan, that is a task for children. There is not a great deal of incentive in this plan. One is tempted to ask: did those who designed it want it to fail?

The other proposal, which America opposes, is aimed at more senior insurgents. "Reconciliation" holds out only the prospect of eventual but limited participation in the existing Karzai government for those judged innocent of any serious crime. Excluded, of course, are the commanders. Again think back to Vietnam: could anyone have seriously thought that the Viet Minh would have accepted a minor role in the despised Saigon government, when they thought they were winning. And today, are the terms offered in this proposal likely to be even vaguely attractive to the Taliban? It is hard to imagine.

But, if they are not acceptable, why can't these proposals at least be discussed? Under discussion they might be modified in ways that would make them acceptable. The answer is a wonderful example of "Catch-22."

The "22<sup>nd</sup> catch" is that American military command maintains a secret list of insurgents who can be shot on sight. Because the list is secret, no Talib can know if he is on it. So, he is apt to suspect that the offer of negotiation is really a trap. It is very hard to negotiate with anyone when you are trying to kill him. As Steve Coll pointed out in a perceptive article in *The New Yorker*, even President Karzai is "powerless to offer the Taliban a secure place to negotiate." Moreover, Coll identified a joker in the American strategic hand which presumably, Mullah Umar and his comrades will also have spotted: "Whether talks succeed or fail," Coll points out, "the very act of opening serious negotiations could touch off divisions and confusion within the Taliban leadership."

Thus, if we are honest with ourselves, we can understand at least part of what makes the Taliban reluctant to deal with us or our Afghan proxy. We don't start with a hand outstretched, as President Charles DeGaulle did with his October 1958 proclamation of the "Peace of the Brave," in a move to start the process of ending the Algerian war. We start with a hand hidden behind our back that may contain at least a handcuff and perhaps a gun. It will take time and effort to change these appreciations. That process can happen only if there is a change in the reality of our policy.

President Obama has said that a change in our policy is not in the cards. So is there another way that negotiations might be begun?

This might be the place where Pakistan and/or other neighboring countries, including Iran, could be helpful. We are told that we should not trust Pakistan because it has its own (not our) policy toward Afghanistan. Of course it has. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the Khyber Pass between Pakistan and Afghanistan is about as close to Islamabad as Hartford is to New York. And the two countries share millions of Pashtuns as their citizens. To imagine that Pakistan does not and should not have an Afghan policy is criminal naïveté. But that it *could* play a useful role is surely evident.

Iran is now our favorite whipping boy. We are furious with it and it is fearful of us. I won't dilate on that dangerous situation here as I have dealt with it in length in my book, *Understanding Iran*. Let us just say, it is doubtful that the Iranians would want to do us any favors.

But we should keep in mind two things: the one is that an end to the war in Afghanistan would be to the national interest of Iran as meetings between Karzai and Ahmadinejad have already made clear. So apart from their feelings about America, the Iranians might play a useful role in Afghanistan. The second is a precedent: Iran actually has furthered American interests in Afghanistan in the past. At a critical point, it helped us to overcome the Taliban in the Western, mainly Shia Muslim, area around Herat. Apart from these ventures, Iran also deployed a significant part of its army and police force to try to interdict the drug traffic. Since it is Afghanistan's neighbor, we cannot exclude Iran from Afghan affairs. And, of course, if we could work out even a minimal accommodation with Iran, it could be a major force for peace in Afghanistan.

So what is really up for negotiation with the Taliban?

Apart from timetables, reparations, further aid, and such technicalities, the core issue is the internal social/political/religious balance of the country -- not the longevity or composition of the Karzai government.

It isn't only that the Karzai government is corrupt, weak and almost universally hated -- all of which is true -- but that its inner circle and hangers-on have already begun to jump ship. With their hands deep in our pockets -- as a recent Congressional study ("Warlord, Inc.) documented for just one activity, road transport, and as others have charged for years in virtually every other area -- and in the pockets of their poorer citizens, whom they fleece with apparent abandonment, they are moving hundreds of millions of dollars out of the country and, at the same time, many have put their families abroad. All this apparently has been documented by, among other things, wiretaps on senior officials. We saw the same flight of money to foreign bank accounts and people to safe havens during the war in Vietnam. It was personally smart but governmentally disastrous. So, the collapse of the Karzai government is already underway. Saving it is probably beyond our capacity. Nor, in the opinion of most observers, would the government's collapse be a major loss. But it would be beneficial to us and to the Afghans if, as in Vietnam, it could last for a while. That is, it would be beneficial if it could help to get negotiations underway and if we are smart enough to use the time we are given to get our policy in order.

What would be a tragic and dangerous loss would be for the civil war to recommence or for the rapacious warlords to give up the pretence of legality and revert to raping and pillaging.

How to avoid these two outcomes is what negotiations must be all about.

We don't do ourselves a favor with wishful thinking. We were not able to prevent the Viet Minh from taking over all of Vietnam. Their takeover was initially a horrible ordeal. Many people suffered and many were killed. I think we might be able to leave Afghanistan in better condition if we act intelligently and soon and if we get others to help us. And we can take hope from what subsequently happened in Vietnam. Finally, the Afghans are a resilient people and may, themselves, also have learned by their ordeal.

I will stop here with my analysis of the obstacles we face. In a later letter, I will pick up the issue of how we can help to bring about a situation in which most of what really matters to us remains intact and with an end to the terrible drain on our morale, our people and our money.

Very sincerely yours, Bill