



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Quagmires

Quagmires

You can kill ten of my men for everyone I kill of yours.
But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.
---source cited in footnotes

November 3, 2009

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. The quotes below pertain to the current debates on America's involvement in Afghanistan. The sources for the quotes are noted below.

The Afghanistan Debate

"You know," an American General recently said to a Taliban leader, "you can never defeat us on the battlefield." To which the Taliban leader replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."

Taliban leader, "We are not strong enough to drive American troops out of Afghanistan, but that is not our aim. We seek to break the will of the American government to continue the conflict. The Americans are wrong to count on their superior firepower to grind us down."

Taliban leader, "The fortified positions are manned by warriors who do not give up even after their eardrums have burst from the concussion...and blood is pouring out of their noses."

Afghanistan diplomat, "Small nations must be wary of the Americans, since U.S. policies shift quickly as domestic politics and public opinion change."

Afghanistan diplomat, "The struggle for us is a matter of life and death. But for the Americans, it is merely an unhappy chapter in their history, and they can turn the page."

An American general, "A country is not conquered and pacified by crushing its people through terror. After overcoming their initial fear, the Afghanistan villagers grow increasingly rebellious, their accumulated bitterness steadily rising in reaction to the brutal use of force."

American historian, "If we depart, believing a region pacified, the Taliban will arrive on our heels...There is only one possible defense, to multiply our posts, fortify them, arm and train the villagers, coordinate intelligence and the police."

Taliban commander, "You can kill ten of my men for everyone I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win."

A State Department official, Karzai is "...a figure deserving of the ridicule and contempt with which he is generally regarded by the Afghans."

A State Department official, Karzai "...defies American advice to reform his administration...the United States thinks the war cannot be won with Karzai."

A writer, "The statements coming out of Kabul and Washington...the war cannot be won without the tribesmen."

An American official: Karzai is "...a puppet who pulls his own strings---and ours as well."

State Department official: Soldiers and ordinary citizens have "lost confidence" in Karzai.

A writer, about an American medic examining an Afghanistan child, "The villagers often welcome American help but sympathize with the Taliban."

The Vietnam Debate:

I've misled you. The quotes from the previous section of this report have been edited but only in the context of their source of the quote and their verb tense. Each quote has been extracted from Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*.¹ I took the liberty of making the changes of those speaking the words in order to offer a different view of the current debate about the so-called parallels of Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Here are the direct quotes from Karnow's book. To aid in your analysis, I've repeated my alterations. I've also cited the page of the book from which I extracted the quote. Or you can take my word on this matter and skip to the next section.

Page 19:

Karnow: "You know," (General Westmoreland) boasted to a North Vietnamese colonel after the war, "you never defeated us on the battlefield." To which the Communist officer replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."

Black: "You know," an American General recently said to a Taliban leader, "you can never defeat us on the battlefield." To which the Taliban leader replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."

Page 20:

Karnow: "We were not strong enough to drive a half million American troops out of Vietnam, but that wasn't our aim," Giap explained to me. "We sought to break the will of the American government to continue the conflict. Westmoreland was wrong to count on his superior firepower to grind us down."

Black: Taliban leader, "We are not strong enough to drive American troops out of Afghanistan, but that wasn't our aim. We seek to break the will of the American government to continue the conflict. The Americans are wrong to count on their superior firepower to grind us down."

Page 21:

Karnow: An American Colonel, "The fortified positions were manned by hardcore mothers who didn't give up even after their eardrums had burst from the concussion...and blood was pouring out of their noses."

¹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

Black: An American Colonel, “The fortified positions are manned by warriors who do not give up even after their eardrums have burst from the concussion...and blood is pouring out of their noses.”

Page 25:

Karnow: South Vietnam diplomat, “Small nations must be wary of the Americans, since U.S. policies shift quickly as domestic politics and public opinion change.”

Black: Afghanistan diplomat, “Small nations must be wary of the Americans, since U.S. policies shift quickly as domestic politics and public opinion change.”

Page 25:

Karnow: South Vietnam diplomat, “The struggle for us was a matter of life and death. But for the Americans, it was merely an unhappy chapter in their history, and they can turn the page.”

Black: Afghanistan diplomat, “The struggle for us is a matter of life and death. But for the Americans, it is merely an unhappy chapter in their history, and they can turn the page.”

Page 119:

Karnow: A French General, “A country is not conquered and pacified by crushing its people through terror. After overcoming their initial fear, the masses grow increasingly rebellious, their accumulated bitterness steadily rising in reaction to the brutal use of force.”

Black: An American general, “A country is not conquered and pacified by crushing its people through terror. After overcoming their initial fear, the Afghanistan villagers grow increasingly rebellious, their accumulated bitterness steadily rising in reaction to the brutal use of force.”

Page 166:

Karnow: American historian, “If we departed, believing a region pacified, the Vietminh would arrive on our heels...There was only one possible defense, to multiply our posts, fortify them, arm and train the villagers, coordinate intelligence and the police.”

Black: American historian, “If we depart, believing a region pacified, the Taliban will arrive on our heels...There is only one possible defense, to multiply our posts, fortify them, arm and train the villagers, coordinate intelligence and the police.”

Page 184:

Karnow: Ho Chi Minh, “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”

Black: Taliban commander, “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.”

Page 192:

Karnow: A State Department official, Bo Dai (leader of South Vietnam for a while) is "...a figure deserving of the ridicule and contempt with which he is generally regarded by the Vietnamese."

Black: A State Department official, Karzai is "...a figure deserving of the ridicule and contempt with which he is generally regarded by the Afghans."

Page 230:

Karnow (his quote): Diem (leader of South Vietnam before he was murdered) "...defied American advice to reform his administration....the United States concluded that the war could not be won with Diem."

Black: A State Department official, Karzai "...defies American advice to reform his administration....the United States thinks the war cannot be won with Karzai."

Page 247:

Karnow (his quote) "...Every statement coming out of both Saigon and Hanoi repeated...the struggle could not be won without the peasants."

Black: A writer, "The statements coming out of Kabul and Washington...the war cannot be won without the tribesmen."

Page 251:

Karnow: An American official: Diem became "...a puppet who pulled his own strings---and ours as well."

Black: An American official: Karzai is "...a puppet who pulls his own strings---and ours as well."

Page 269:

Karnow: State Department official: Soldiers and ordinary citizens have "lost confidence" in Diem.

Black: State Department official: Soldiers and ordinary citizens had "lost confidence" in Karzai.

Page 334:

Karnow: The peasants often welcomed American help but sympathized with the Vietcong."

Black: A writer, about an American medic examining an Afghanistan child, "The villagers often welcome American help but sympathize with the Taliban."

So What?

You can question my machinations by asserting: So what? I've been asking the same question to myself. So what if there are parallels between America's Vietnam and Afghanistan wars? Does it alter the fact that Vietnam was a war of choice and Afghanistan is a war of necessity? At the very least, taking out the 9/11 attackers and gaining at least some assurance it will not happen again. Does it alter the possibility that we may be sinking into a so-called quagmire, similar to that of Vietnam? Do the parallels tell us we should high-tail it out of Afghanistan?

Vietnam Experiences

I was in favor of our involvement in Vietnam. (I was in-and-around Vietnam from mid 1963 to early 1966.) In the early 1960s, I had reached a decision about America's involvement in the conflict. I believed the two choices for the South Vietnamese were to be under the umbrella of America or the umbrella of Communism. In those Cold War days, I did not see South Vietnam as a stand-alone, neutral country. Because of its history and geographical location, coupled with the nature of the Cold War, I thought Vietnam was destined for either the Western or Communist camp.

I was sufficiently knowledgeable to understand the deficiencies of Communism. But I was ignorant of the extent of the repressive and exploitive behavior of colonial France and Vietnam's Diem. I did not realize that Ho Chi Minh was primarily a nationalist, and secondarily, a Communist. I did not know he would likely have "pitched his tent" in our camp had we taken the initiative (and snubbed our French ally and France's role in post WWII Europe).

I was also unaware the leaders of Communist China had no intention of "absorbing" Vietnam. They knew full-well that Chinese and Vietnamese did not "mix". But as the war progressed, I came to the conclusion (in 1965) that America would not win because of our half-hearted commitment and the ineptitude of the South Vietnam leaders.

Usually, it is only in hindsight that humans have insight. I've missed the target on making predictions in the international arena so many times I would be embarrassed to tally them up. But my eventual misgivings about Vietnam came true. The present-day Vietnam does not make me happy with my correct forecast made in 1965. The country is now a brutal dictatorship. It hands-out long prison terms (for former military people) and death sentences (for civilians) if they demonstrate for a two-party system.

Afghanistan Realities

My stand on this issue is simple: I support our involvement in Afghanistan, but only to disrupt our enemy's operations, not to send missionaries to make Muslims into Mormons, village elders into mayors, or tribal chiefs into senators. The United States might be able to overlay democracy on top Afghanistan's ancient ways of living, but that will be it: a superfluous swathe.

Given 9/11 and my understanding of the growing "worldwide jihad" movement, I do not see an alternative to our being in the country with our armed forces to dislodge the organizations that attacked us. However, changing the country to that of a democracy is simply not doable. To think otherwise is to engage in delusion.

The question (to myself) has been: *Can we succeed in defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda?* The answer is no. We will not have the will to stay-it-out. It's as simple as that. Our goal in Afghanistan should be to do exactly what we did initially: Disrupt our enemy so that they cannot attack us from that country. Mission accomplished. Go home.

Why does this seldom happen? Because idealistic America thinks it must redo centuries of customs and traditions of a people who do not want to have their customs and traditions changed. In the long run (and Turkey is a short run experiment), I do not think a religion whose credo is the integration of church and state can succeed as a secular democracy. Nor should we Americans continue to think every person on earth yearns for a way of life using the United States Constitution as a model. Quite the opposite, they resent our intrusions, however noble they may be.

Extermination Psychopaths

Tracing human history, we find our race has been populated with murderers, plunderers, nihilists, anarchists, and terrorists---I call them *extermination psychopaths*---since recorded time.

Try as we may, we will always be bedeviled with these miscreants. Looking through our past, we find them disguised in the clothing of monks, imams, emperors, village chieftains, presidents, dictators, groupie cult leaders, even Nobel Peace Prize winners. The list goes on. And make no mistake, al Qaeda and the more radical elements of the Taliban are extermination psychopaths, disguised as righteous religious soldiers.

Does the never-ending presence of these types of people mean that we give-up on trying to find the "causes" for their existence, that we only attack them physically? It does not. Some terrorists have legitimate complaints. But we must continue to hold at bay the segments of our race who, for all their misguided religious zeal, are nothing more than ego-driven killers.

With the inevitable availability of WMDs to non-nation states in the future, the war equation will have changed. In the past, an extermination psychopath was not a significant variable in the equation because he could do relatively little damage (Stalin, Hitler, etc. are exceptions, but even they were limited in their destruction capacities because of their visibility.) As time ticks through this century, WMDs will become available to these people. They will have no compunction about using them.

Disturbing Parallels

I believe the quotes above show several disturbing parallels between our wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan: A committed enemy determined to wait us out; a corrupt leader who cannot rally the support of the populace; dauntingly unfavorable terrain for the war; distrust of the staying power of American troops by the citizens; and perhaps most bothersome: the lack of staying power of America's citizenry.

Also, it would be folly to ignore the fact that the inhabitants of Afghanistan are deeply hostile to others, including other Islamic factions, and that they have no history of being governed from a central source, which we are trying to accomplish. Trying to impose a democracy onto a warlord culture, one that has stood for centuries, is most likely impossible.

The similarities of Vietnam and Afghanistan are troubling. I am not confident we can do any better in Afghanistan than we did in Vietnam because, at this time, the American public and Congress are vacillating about our involvement in the Afghanistan conflict.

Anyway, even if we do make a solid commitment, the war will not be won in the conventional sense of winning a war. Yet many Americans are stuck in the WWI and WWII mentality of “unconditional” surrenders. Sure, maybe in Grenada and Panama. But not in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and not in Afghanistan.

Nowhere to Go

In 1965, I attended a USO show. It had come to the Western Pacific to entertain the troops. Other than the Playboy Bunnies, I don't remember much about the performance. But I do recall watching the entertainment, which took place on a helicopter carrier deck. The ship was located off the coast of Vietnam, its landmass in sight. I looked out across the water to the shore and wondered if our enemy was surreptitiously taking in the party. Loud speakers blasted rock and roll to the enemies' shores.

The scene was unreal. In the middle of a war zone was a comedic rock-and-roll affair---all to keep us warriors happy and attuned to the goings-on back home. I don't mean to come across as some sort of sage, but on that carrier deck, I came to the realization that we were not going to win this one. Charlie had nowhere else to go. He was not concerned with morale boosters. He was fighting for his homeland *in* his homeland. He was fighting for a cause. He was much more committed than we. He was highly integrated with the populace and had their support. (They had no choice.) What is more: *We had the watch, but he had the time.*

What to Do?

So, what do we do in Afghanistan? We must keep trying; we must make an attempt to at least stabilize the region to the extent it will not spawn other 9/11s. Can it be done? Given the history of the Afghanistan and its current leadership, I'm doubtful. But what are the alternatives?

After a misconceived start to this war---resulting in the alienation of a large part of the Afghanistan population---we're now fighting a smarter battle. Is it too late? It may be. Is Karzai another Diem? There are many similarities. Can we win with him in office? The parallels give me pause, but again, the war equation has changed since Vietnam. We are no longer fighting nation-states; we are fighting a population that diffuses into the larger population, but who emerge from their hiding for 15 milliseconds of fame with a suicide bomb. We are involved in an area of the world---trying to change it---that has successfully resisted change since Alexander's Greeks.²

As long as the Taliban and al Qaeda believe they can wait us out, they will indeed wait us out. Even with a commitment to an infinite stay, we may not succeed in Afghanistan. But without this commitment, we will *not* succeed. I wish I could say that Obama has some good choices before him, but he does not. The President is indeed working against the clock.

² Thanks to an email from a foreign policy expert for this observation. I do not mention this name for privacy reasons.

One final point: Let's suppose America announced to the world it was withdrawing its military might to within its own borders; that is was moving back its forces from around this earth; that it was returning to its creed, "The business of America is business," and not the creed of, "The business of America is the world's policeman." Do you think we would then be safe from the extermination psychopaths?

If you do, I know of a bridge in Brooklyn that is for sale.

As always, I thank you for your interest and hope you will communicate with me, pro or con.

Terrible Wars and Wars of Terrorism Report Two: Playing a Bad Hand

Ya gotta know when to hold 'em,
know when to fold 'em,
know when to walk away,
know when to run.

---verse from a country and western song

Ya gotta know when to bet 'em,
know when to raise 'em,
know how to play your chips,
so you can win.

---verse from anon

January 15, 2010

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Thank you for the responses to my initial report on Afghanistan. Some comments have been posted at my blog and can be reached by clicking on U's Blog at UylessBlack.com.

Since writing that report (November 3, 2009), President Obama has announced the strategy the United States will pursue in Afghanistan: Substantially more troops, but with a timetable for drawing them down.

As best I can tell, he's received more criticism than praise for this strategy. The principal criticism is: The Taliban and al Qaeda now know they have time on their side and will wait us out. The critics complain the strategy is an admission of defeat. The supporters of the policy state the additional troops might be the straw that breaks the enemy's back, so it's worth a try.

I'm going out on a limb to say that Obama has not come clean with us because he can't. I think he believes the war in Afghanistan cannot be won in the sense of eradicating the Taliban and al Qaeda, the Alice in Wonderland idea of changing the country into a democracy. He's hoping these next couple of years of increased effort will (maybe and at least) diffuse the enemy, as well as diffuse public opinion. He's hoping his announcement of a time of withdrawal will serve to motivate the Afghanistan leaders and people to take more aggressive and assertive actions on their own accord.

Obama is playing a bad hand. He can't fold it; he's got to play it for a while. In order to stay in this round of poker, he has had to ante more into the pot (additional troops). But ultimately, he thinks he can't continue playing hand-after-hand. He thinks his last bet of additional personnel--deployed and employed differently than the first part of the war---is worth the bet. If it doesn't work, he has already announced he is no longer pushing more chips into what he thinks will become a bottomless Afgan poker pot.

Given the hand he drew---rather, the hand that was drawn for him---I think it fair to say he, and most everyone else, do not really know how to play the hand. Some people say his strategy is brilliant. Others say he's deranged for putting it into effect.

Which side do you come down on? After reading report one of this essay, I hope I've laid-out the pros and cons of commitment and non-commitment to the war in Afghanistan. I'd like to hear from you.

To finish this segment, our anon musician offers this song, which was placed at the beginning of this report:



Ya gotta know when to bet 'em,
know when to raise 'em,
know how to play your chips,
so you can win

Winning is knowing when *and* how to play a hand. How do you think America is doing with the Afghanistan hand?

We'll continue the discussion about terrorism, insurgency, and Afghan Hold'um in subsequent reports.