

## **The ‘Good War’ Isn’t Worth Fighting**

**By RORY STEWART**  
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AFGHANISTAN does not matter as much as Barack Obama thinks.

Terrorism is not the key strategic threat facing the United States. America, Britain and our allies have not created a positive stable environment in the Middle East. We have no clear strategy for dealing with China. The financial crisis is a more immediate threat to United States power and to other states; environmental catastrophe is more dangerous for the world. And even from the perspective of terrorism, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are more lethal.

President-elect Obama’s emphasis on Afghanistan and his desire to send more troops and money there is misguided. Overestimating its importance distracts us from higher priorities, creates an unhealthy dynamic with the government of Afghanistan and endangers the one thing it needs — the stability that might come from a patient, limited, long-term relationship with the international community.

We invaded intending to attack Al Qaeda and provide development assistance. We succeeded. By 2004, Afghanistan had a stable currency, millions more children in school, a better health system, an elected Parliament, no Al Qaeda and almost no Taliban. All this was achieved with only 20,000 troops and a relatively small international aid budget.

When the decision was made to increase troops in 2005, there was no insurgency. But as NATO became increasingly obsessed with transforming the country and brought in more money and troops to deal with corruption and the judiciary, warlords and criminals, insecurity in rural areas and narcotics, it failed. In fact, things got worse. These new NATO troops encountered a fresh problem — local Taliban resistance — which has drawn them into a counterinsurgency campaign.

More troops have brought military victories but they have not been able to eliminate the Taliban. They have also had a negative political impact in the conservative and nationalistic communities of the Pashtun south and allowed Taliban propaganda to portray us as a foreign military occupation. In Helmand Province, troop numbers have increased to nearly 10,000 today from just 2,000 in 2004. But no inhabitant of Helmand would say things have improved in the last four years. Mr. Obama believes that sending even more troops and money will now bring “victory” in Afghanistan. Some of this may be politically driven: a pretense of future benefits appears better than admitting a loss; and because lives are involved, no one wants to write off sunk costs.

Nevertheless, these increases are not just wasteful, they are counterproductive. The more costly we make this campaign, the more likely we are to withdraw when another crisis emerges or our attention wanders. Grand investment precipitating a sudden withdrawal repeats the “Charlie Wilson’s War” effect of 1990, when Afghanistan fell in a moment from spoiled godson to orphan, leaving bankruptcy and chaos behind.

Further, the more we give, the less influence we have over the Afghan government, which believes we need it more than it needs us. What incentive do Afghan leaders have to reform if their country is allowed to produce 92 percent of the world’s heroin and still receive \$20 billion of international aid? Are they wrong to think that if they became more stable and law-abiding and wiped out the Taliban we would give them less support? That this is a protection racket where the amount of money one receives is directly proportional to one’s ability to threaten trouble?

This is certainly the experience of the more stable provinces in central Afghanistan, where leaders talk about the need to set off bombs to receive the assistance given to their wealthier but more dangerous neighbors. A more detached strategic perspective and less aid would give us more leverage.

A sudden surge of foreign troops and cash will be unhelpful and unsustainable. It would take 20 successful years to match Pakistan’s economy, educational levels, government or judiciary — and Pakistan is still not stable. Nor, for that matter, are northeastern or northwestern India, despite that nation’s great economic and political successes.

We will not be able to eliminate the Taliban from the rural areas of Afghanistan’s south, so we will have to work with Afghans to contain the insurgency instead. All this is unpleasant for Western politicians who dream of solving the fundamental problems and getting out. They will soon be tempted to give up.

It is in our interests for Afghanistan to be more stable in part because it contributes to the stability of the region, and in particular Pakistan. Well-focused, long-term assistance in which we appear a genuine partner, not a frustrated colonial master, could help Afghans achieve this goal. We will be able to create, afford and sustain such a relationship only if we put it in a broader strategic context and limit its scope.