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The Afghan Quagmire

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

The economy is obviously issue No. 1 as Barack Obama prepares to take over the presidency. He's charged with no less a task than pulling the country out of a brutal recession. If the worst-case scenarios materialize, his job will be to stave off a depression.

That's enough to keep any president pretty well occupied. What Mr. Obama doesn't need, and what the U.S. cannot under any circumstances afford, is any more unnecessary warfare. And yet, while we haven't even figured out how to extricate ourselves from the disaster in Iraq, Mr. Obama is planning to commit thousands of additional American troops to the war in Afghanistan, which is already more than seven years old and which long ago turned into a quagmire.

Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel who is now a professor of history and international relations at Boston University, wrote an important piece for Newsweek warning against the proposed buildup. "Afghanistan will be a sinkhole," he said, "consuming resources neither the U.S. military nor the U.S. government can afford to waste."

In an analysis in The Times last month, Michael Gordon noted that "Afghanistan presents a unique set of problems: a rural-based insurgency, an enemy sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, the chronic weakness of the Afghan government, a thriving narcotics trade, poorly developed infrastructure, and forbidding terrain."

The U.S. military is worn out from years of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. The troops are stressed from multiple deployments. Equipment is in disrepair. Budgets are beyond strained. Sending thousands of additional men and women (some to die, some to be horribly wounded) on a fool's errand in the rural, mountainous guerrilla paradise of Afghanistan would be madness.

The time to go all out in Afghanistan was in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 terror attacks. That time has passed.

With no personal military background and a reputation as a liberal, President-elect Obama may feel he has to demonstrate his toughness, and that Afghanistan is the place to do it. What would really show toughness would be an assertion by Mr. Obama as commander in chief that the era of mindless military misadventures is over.

"I hate war," said Dwight Eisenhower, "as only a soldier who has lived it can, as only one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

What's the upside to the U.S., a nation in dire economic distress, of an escalation in Afghanistan? If we send 20,000, or 30,000, or however many thousand more troops in there, what will their mission be?

In his article for Newsweek, Mr. Bacevich said: "The chief effect of military operations in Afghanistan so far has been to push radical Islamists across the Pakistani border. As a result, efforts to stabilize Afghanistan are contributing to the destabilization of Pakistan, with potentially devastating implications.

"No country poses a greater potential threat to U.S. national security — today and for the foreseeable future — than Pakistan. To risk the stability of that nuclear-armed state in the vain hope of salvaging Afghanistan would be a terrible mistake."

Our interest in Afghanistan is to prevent it from becoming a haven for terrorists bent on attacking us. That does not require the scale of military operations that the incoming administration is contemplating. It does not require a wholesale occupation. It does not require the endless funneling of human treasure and countless billions of taxpayer dollars to the Afghan government at the expense of rebuilding the United States, which is falling apart before our very eyes.

The government we are supporting in Afghanistan is a fetid hothouse of corruption, a government of gangsters and weasels whose customary salute is the upturned palm. Listen to this devastating assessment by Dexter Filkins of The Times:

"Kept afloat by billions of dollars in American and other foreign aid, the government of Afghanistan is shot through with corruption and graft. From the lowliest traffic policeman to the family of President Hamid Karzai himself, the state built on the ruins of the Taliban government seven years ago now often seems to exist for little more than the enrichment of those who run it."

Think about putting your life on the line for that gang.

If Mr. Obama does send more troops to Afghanistan, he should go on television and tell the American people, in the clearest possible language, what he is trying to achieve. He should spell out the mission's goals, and lay out an exit strategy.

He will owe that to the public because he will own the conflict at that point. It will be Barack Obama's war.

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