

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



June 11, 2010

The Courage to Leave

By **BOB HERBERT**

There is no good news coming out of the depressing and endless war in Afghanistan. There once was merit to our incursion there, but that was long ago. Now we're just going through the tragic motions, flailing at this and that, with no real strategy or decent end in sight.

The U.S. doesn't win wars anymore. We just funnel the stressed and underpaid troops in and out of the combat zones, while all the while showering taxpayer billions on the contractors and giant corporations that view the horrors of war as a heaven-sent bonanza. BP, as we've been told repeatedly recently, is one of the largest suppliers of fuel to the wartime U.S. military.

Seven American soldiers were killed in Afghanistan on Monday but hardly anyone noticed. Far more concern is being expressed for the wildlife threatened by the oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico than for the G.I.'s being blown up in the wilds of Afghanistan.

Early this year, we were told that at long last the tide had turned in Afghanistan, that the biggest offensive of the war by American, British and Afghan troops was under way in Marja, a town in Helmand Province in the southern part of the country. The goal, as outlined by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, our senior military commander in Afghanistan, was to rout the Taliban and install a splendid new government that would be responsive to the people and beloved by them.

That triumph would soon be followed by another military initiative in the much larger expanse of neighboring Kandahar Province. The Times's Rod Nordland explained what was supposed to happen in a front-page article [this week](#):

"The goal that American planners originally outlined — often in briefings in which reporters agreed not to quote officials by name — emphasized the importance of a military offensive devised to bring all of the populous and Taliban-dominated south under effective control by the end of this summer. That would leave another year to consolidate gains before President Obama's July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing combat troops."

Forget about it. Commanders can't even point to a clear-cut success in Marja. As for Kandahar, no one will even use the word "offensive" to describe the military operations there. The talk now is of moving ahead with civilian reconstruction projects, a "civilian surge," as Mr. Nordland noted.

What's happening in Afghanistan is not only tragic, it's embarrassing. The American troops will fight, but the Afghan troops who are supposed to be their allies are a lost cause. The government of President Hamid Karzai is breathtakingly corrupt and incompetent — and widely unpopular to boot. And now, as [The Times's Dexter Filkins is reporting](#), the erratic Mr. Karzai seems to be giving up hope that the U.S. can prevail in the war and is making nice with the Taliban.

There is no overall game plan, no real strategy or coherent goals, to guide the fighting of U.S. forces. It's just a mind-numbing, soul-chilling, body-destroying slog, month after month, year after pointless year. The 18-year-olds fighting (and, increasingly, dying) in Afghanistan now were just 9 or 10 when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked in 2001.

Americans have zoned out on this war. They don't even want to think about it. They don't want their taxes raised to pay for it, even as they say in poll after poll that they are worried about budget deficits. The vast majority do not want their

sons or daughters anywhere near Afghanistan.

Why in the world should the small percentage of the population that has volunteered for military service shoulder the entire burden of this hapless, endless effort? The truth is that top American officials do not believe the war can be won but do not know how to end it. So we get gibberish about empowering the unempowerable Afghan forces and rebuilding a hopelessly corrupt and incompetent civil society.

Our government leaders keep mouthing platitudes about objectives that are not achievable, which is a form of deception that should be unacceptable in a free society.

In announcing, during a speech at West Point in December, that 30,000 additional troops would be sent to Afghanistan, President Obama said: "As your commander in chief, I owe you a mission that is clearly defined and worthy of your service."

That clearly defined mission never materialized.

Ultimately, the public is at fault for this catastrophe in Afghanistan, where more than 1,000 G.I.'s have now lost their lives. If we don't have the courage as a people to fight and share in the sacrifices when our nation is at war, if we're unwilling to seriously think about the war and hold our leaders accountable for the way it is conducted, if we're not even willing to pay for it, then we should at least have the courage to pull our valiant forces out of it.