

AS FAILURE LANGUAGE CREEPS INTO AFGHANISTAN DISCUSSION, MCCAIN, YOUNG CALL FOR ACCELERATED WITHDRAWAL

Now that most joint operations involving US and Afghan forces have been put on hold, there are major developments in both media discussions of the war and in opinions among prominent Republicans in Washington on how the US should move forward from this point. The change in media language is that there are more overt references to the war being a failure. Perhaps reflecting a realization of this point, both Bill Young (R-FL), who chairs the House Appropriations Defense subcommittee, and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) have called for an accelerated exit from Afghanistan.

In The Guardian, we hear once again from Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, whose earlier report on the failures of the Afghanistan war strategy was largely ignored. Davis' message has not changed, but with the rapid rise of green on blue deaths and the suspension of most joint US-Afghan operations put into place so fast that NATO allies were caught off guard, Davis' message now seems more likely to be understood (emphasis added):

Lieutenant colonel Daniel Davis – who caused a political stir in Washington in February by accusing the Pentagon of “lying” about the situation in Afghanistan because his experience during a year-long deployment “bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by US military leaders about conditions

on the ground” – said that calling off of joint operations will be damaging because it will reinforce a perception among Afghans that the US is rushing to leave.

Davis said “insider attacks” have eroded trust among Nato troops of their Afghan colleagues. But, he added, confidence between the two militaries has been on the wane for some time because of overly optimistic claims by the US about the state of the war with the Taliban and Barack Obama’s setting of a 2014 date for an end to American combat operations.

“In my personal opinion, we (Isaf) have been responsible for a portion of the destruction of trust between the Afghan forces and Isaf troopers because so often our leaders say things like “everything’s on track”, “we’re on the right azimuth.”

“But when those messages are heard by the Afghan government, the Afghan security forces, and even the Taliban, they see with their own eyes that nothing could be further from the truth. When they hear us saying these things and actually appear to believe them, they either don’t trust us or they don’t put any value in our ability to assess,” Davis said.

“When you’re using the language of success to describe abject failure, you have no credibility in the eyes of those on the ground who know the truth.”

But it’s not just Davis who is spreading the message of failure. Consider this from Time, where Ben Anderson discusses his new book “No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan” (emphasis added again):

What is the book's bottom line?

Despite the incredible hard work, bravery and suffering of our troops, despite the massive Afghan civilian casualties, despite the hundreds of billions spent, we have not achieved our goals in Afghanistan.

Essentially, we're supposed to be clearing an area of insurgents and then persuading locals to choose us and our Afghan allies over the Taliban. Most areas where we are based have not been cleared of the Taliban and even if they had been, we're fighting to introduce a largely unwelcome government.

The Afghan army cannot provide security on its own, the Afghan government is spectacularly corrupt and the police are feared and hated, for good reason.

So even if the military part of the strategy goes perfectly to plan (and it never does) the locals don't want what we are offering.

It's a hard pill to swallow, but I've been told countless times that locals prefer the Taliban to foreign forces and the Afghan government, particularly the police. I should point out that I've spent most of time in Afghanistan in Helmand and Kandahar, where the war has always been fiercest.

Writing at Foreign Policy, analyst Arif Rafiq adds to the language of failure (emphasis added):

What's in store for Afghanistan is more war. The most perilous scenario is a renewed, full-fledged civil war – total conflict with every faction for itself. Many, including people in Kabul, Washington, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, will be responsible for the carnage that

could follow. But it is indisputable now that the Obama administration's once-vaunted "AfPak" strategy is a massive failure.

Osama bin Laden is, of course, dead. His killing and the rescue of General Motors were crudely displayed together at the Democratic National Convention as President Barack Obama's greatest achievements. A vigilant drone campaign has depleted al Qaeda's core. Many commanders have fled for greener pastures in the Arab heartland, where the next great jihad could begin.

But the jihad in South Asia continues despite the Obama campaign's celebratory chants. Al Qaeda affiliates and partner groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan – including the Haqqani network and a variety of Pakistani Taliban groups – remain resilient. The region is on fire, and growing instability creates a potential habitat for groups that will challenge regional security and, perhaps down the road, past the current U.S. election cycle, the American homeland.

Beyond al Qaeda, the U.S. president has achieved little of strategic importance in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is incorrect, if not disingenuous, when he says that the Taliban's momentum has been "blunted." The Taliban's spear is sharp as ever. Last week, on Sept. 14, it cut through Camp Bastion, one of the most secure foreign bases in Afghanistan. There, in a complex attack that cost \$10,000 or \$20,000 at most, it destroyed six jets valued at up to \$180 million. The ratio of cost to achievement of the \$100 billion-a-year war in Afghanistan is indefensible, though it must be said that the president, with his emphasis on "nation-building here at home," recognizes this

uncomfortable fact.

It would appear that at least two Republicans who have been among the most hawkish in their positions on Afghanistan now have changed their tunes. Congressman Bill Young of Florida was first, calling on Monday for an early withdrawal:

Over and over, every time the subject of pulling American troops out of Afghanistan has come up, U.S. Rep. C.W. Bill Young has voted to stay the course. He opposed resolutions to withdraw, and even a resolution to set a timetable for a full withdrawal.

Not anymore.

"I think we should remove ourselves from Afghanistan as quickly as we can," Young, R-Indian Shores, said during a meeting with the *Times* editorial board Monday. "I just think we're killing kids that don't need to die."

Young added that he was not alone with this view:

Young said he has talked with his Republican colleagues in Congress about his new position on Afghanistan and he believes they feel the same way he does, "but they tend not to want to go public" about it. He said he has also talked to military leaders about his views "but I don't get a lot of reaction."

Yesterday, John McCain joined Young in calling for an accelerated withdrawal:

"I think all options ought to be considered, including whether we have to just withdraw early, rather than have a continued bloodletting that won't succeed," McCain said Wednesday.

Unlike Young, though, McCain couldn't resist trying to lay the blame for failure at Obama's feet:

The mishandling of the war in Afghanistan by the Obama administration has made it so dangerous that the U.S. should consider withdrawing all troops from the country early, according to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and other lawmakers.

We only need go back to last March, a full month after Daniel Davis' report on the failures of the strategy in Afghanistan to see McCain, along with his sidekicks Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham, engaging in the very rhetoric of success to describe abject failure that Davis found so appalling:

Significant military progress has been made in Afghanistan – progress that we have personally witnessed over repeated visits. Four years ago, southern Afghanistan was overrun by the Taliban, and our coalition lacked the resources and the strategy necessary to break their momentum. Today, that situation has been reversed, thanks to the president's surge of forces, the leadership of talented military commanders, and the courage and perseverance of our troops.

Similarly, our effort to build the Afghan National Security Forces – which was under-resourced and disorganized four years ago – has been overhauled. Growing numbers of Afghan units are increasingly capable of leading the fight.

Whether it is approached with Young's chastened attitude that it is time to end unnecessary deaths or even with McCain's cheap political finger-pointing, it is a very encouraging sign

that even some of the most hawkish Republicans now favor an accelerated withdrawal. It is hard to see how the Obama administration could choose to make such a drastic change in strategy without at least some cover from Republicans, and that cover now seems to be developing. It still seems likely to me that Obama will wait until after the November election to make this move, but it is difficult to see how he has any other option. Resuming the previous strategy and re-starting training seems virtually certain to come with an even higher rate of green on blue attacks now that those who lean that direction have seen that the attacks are producing results. Also, keeping the suspension of training in place for very long means that the normal high desertion rate for Afghan security forces will result in the force level falling far below that at which NATO says it will be appropriate for force withdrawal. Accelerating the withdrawal is the only option that makes any sense at all.