

Still necessary?

Is America's commitment to the war in Afghanistan waning?



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When he was campaigning to be president, Barack Obama said over and over again that Afghanistan was the necessary war, the one that was justified by al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 but which had been starved of resources because of the unnecessary war in Iraq. Since taking office he has generally been as good as his word. He deployed an additional 17,000 troops, declaring in March that if the Afghan government fell to the Taliban, the country would "again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can." In May he fired General David McKiernan and sent a new man, General Stanley McChrystal, to command the American and coalition forces. Now, however, the new man is asking for still more soldiers—and it is not clear whether Mr Obama will let him have them.

General McChrystal's assessment of the job he faces in Afghanistan, leaked to the Washington Post on Monday, pulls no punches. He says bluntly that success cannot be taken for granted, that the overall situation is deteriorating in the face of a resilient and growing insurgency, and that America and NATO are in urgent need of a completely re-engineered and "properly resourced" counter-insurgency campaign. He does not specify how many additional forces he will need. Indeed, he is careful to say that resources alone will not win the war. But he does say that "under-resourcing could lose it". And although he thinks it would be ideal if Afghan security forces could lead the fight, he concludes that they will not be strong enough soon enough, so coalition forces will have to bridge the gap. Once the coalition has adopted its new strategy, the general adds, "we must signal unwavering commitment to see it through to success."

As it happens, Mr Obama had a perfect opportunity to send just such a signal on September 20th, when he appeared on several of America's Sunday talk shows in an effort to boost support for health reform. He has had the general's report for several weeks and the White House confirms that he has read it. But no indication of unwavering commitment was forthcoming—if anything, the opposite. "Until I'm satisfied that we've got the right strategy I'm not gonna be sending some young man or woman over there—beyond what we already have," he told NBC's "Meet the Press". "I'm not interested in just being in Afghanistan for the sake of being in Afghanistan or saving face or, in some way—you know, sending a message that America is here for the duration."

This was not a case of a president being caught on the hop. Robert Gibbs, his press secretary, told reporters on Monday that an overall assessment of strategy in Afghanistan was continuing inside the administration and would not be completed for several more weeks. No decision would be made about sending more troops until it was. And this assessment, Admiral Michael

Mullen, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, said last week, was starting from “first principles”.

Could Mr Obama’s commitment to fight the “good” war in Afghanistan be fading? Two recent developments are bound to influence his thinking. First, support for the war is declining. A national CNN/Opinion Research poll in mid-September found 39% in favour of the war in Afghanistan compared with 58% against. Embarrassingly for a Democratic president whose concessions on health reform have already annoyed many on the left of his own party, most of the support comes from Republicans. A second factor weighing heavily on the administration is the blatant ballot-stuffing that occurred during last month’s fraud-ridden presidential election in Afghanistan.

Although General McChrystal calls for additional resources, the chief conclusion of his leaked report is that victory will depend not on killing more Taliban fighters but on winning the confidence of the people, many of whom have been alienated by widespread corruption under President Hamid Karzai and have “little reason to support their government”. This crisis of confidence, the general argues, has created fertile ground for the insurgency, which will not be defeated until Afghanistan has a capable government of its own. “A foreign army alone cannot beat an insurgency,” he says. Mr Obama, it seems, may not be willing to send out a bigger one until he is persuaded that Afghanistan has a government that he too can believe in.

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