

Bin Laden's last laugh

By Khalid Aziz | From the Dawn Newspaper 5th Aug 2011

SIMONE de Beauvoir, the French existentialist writer, was on the dot when she remarked, "If you live long enough, you'll see that every victory turns into a defeat."

With that in mind, one must inquire now what happened to the euphoria of the US 'victory' when the Taliban surrendered Kandahar on Dec 7, 2001. In 2004 and then again in 2007, Osama bin Laden said that he would bleed the US into bankruptcy, as he had done earlier with the Soviet Union. Today, it is quite clear that the military situation in Afghanistan is chaotic and appears to be failing.

Even when the neo-cons were at their peak under the Cheney-Rumsfeld team, there were warnings that "attacking Pashtuns, renowned for xenophobia, warlike spirits, and the love of independence, is a fool's mission", in the words of columnist Eric Margolis in 2006. "Pashtuns are Afghanistan's ethnic majority. Taliban is an offshoot of the Pashtun people. Long-term national stability is impossible without their representation and cooperation."

In hindsight, we can see that the war in Afghanistan was poorly conducted and led against one of the most backward and ill-equipped of adversaries. It would appear that modern warfare cannot succeed over an ideologically driven opponent in an under-developed nation. Furthermore, once the US military began running the national agenda of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, all dissent evaporated and even the media in the US became slavish, thus allowing mistakes to go unchallenged.

The curtailment of liberty and the criticism of government policies by harsh new homeland security legislation took away the US's edge in honest intellectual analysis. Today, it is possible to clearly see that this method of managing war almost brought a superpower to the verge of financial disaster. It is astonishing to note that after remaining engaged in Afghanistan for a decade, the US has not succeeded in subduing a medieval force — the Taliban.

In the process, the US created a huge financial black hole for itself. With its debt at an astronomical level of \$14.6tr, it will make \$600bn a year in interest payments. This is equal to its defence budget for one year. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of

the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told businessmen in Detroit that "the national debt is the single biggest threat to national security." Yet one could ask that as a military man, did he not have a hand in creating it?

The US failed in its strategy in Afghanistan because its military was so sure of success that it lost touch with the harsh Afghan reality. On a number of occasions, potentially more sound policy advice for stabilising the situation was suggested, such as by the British and Dutch in 2007, but it went unheard.

President Hamid Karzai's woes have multiplied with the killings of his closest confidants. The assassination of his half-brother Ahmad Wali, followed by that of the former governor of Uruzgan, Jan Mohammed, and later the mayor of Kandahar, have deprived him both of influence and advice regarding peace talks with the Taliban.

It is clear that without a successful peace deal with the Taliban, President Karzai's relevance in an ordered withdrawal of troops will be diminished. If there is no peace deal by December 2014, when the majority of the US troops will be withdrawn, then the US will still be in Afghanistan implementing a containment plan based on a counter-terrorism ring of fire in bases bordering the Pakhtun belt in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. Will this be a de-facto partition of Afghanistan? Whether so or not, this will usher in another period of blood-letting that will continue to destabilise the region — particularly Pakistan.

Why can't Afghanistan be stabilised after the expenditure of so much money and the concerted efforts of countless minds? There are a number of reasons behind this failure and I highlight just a few.

The first failing was the absence of an exit strategy at the start of the US intervention in November, 2001. A review of the US objectives shows that from the initial, limited aim of removing the Taliban government, the US took over the job of redesigning the Afghan state. This, obviously, was a formidable task. Recreating a tribal nation is impossible. That mission was bound to fail.

Afghanistan has always been a loosely-run nation where a king retained control by balancing the tribes and strongmen as well as shaping the ethnic dynamics. He often used the military to bring about change when other methods of persuasion failed. As long as the king could provide patronage and kept the resources flowing to the strongmen in the countryside, peace was ensured. Afghanistan remains the same today and patronage trumps policy. To expect otherwise was unrealistic.

When the Taliban were ousted in December 2001, President Karzai began rebuilding the state by relying on strongmen who can be considered the nouveau riche created by the drug trade rather than being traditional leaders of their tribes as in former times. For example, Gul Agha Sherzai, a drug entrepreneur, emerged to lead Kandahar, Jan Mohammed became the governor of Uruzgan and Sher Mohammed Akhundzada the governor of Helmand. The same sort of leaders emerged in other parts of the country. Such an administration compromised the very justification for the invasion. Meanwhile, Pakistan's role in fanning the flames to neutralise growing Indian influence was yet another cause of Afghan instability.

Secondly, in a country composed of various ethnicities of whom the Pakhtuns constitute 45 per cent of the population, the Tajiks 22 per cent, the Uzbeks 6.4 per cent and the Hazaras and Aimaks 5.6 per cent and 5.4 per cent respectively, the new structure denied the Pakhtuns their share. Furthermore, no space was kept in the Bonn design for reconciled Taliban, thus declaring hostility to a political compromise with them. These ethnic imbalances are now reflected in the rebuilt Afghan army and police. These groups will lose coherence as soon as

their mentors, who belong to foreign countries, are withdrawn. When this happens insecurity will return to Afghanistan after the 2014 withdrawal deadline.

The unpromising situation leads one to conclude that Afghanistan may after all constitute Bin Laden's last laugh.