
Gen. Wesley Clark (ret.)

'In Afghanistan, What Is Our Purpose?'

On Nov. 17, Gen. Wesley Clark (USA, ret.) was a witness at the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq. Clark began by asserting that "more troops ... is not the principal question we should be addressing.... Rather, we should be addressing the purpose of our engagement there, our specific mission, the strategy, and its requirements for success...." The following excerpts are from his written statement.

The legacy of Vietnam looms large over these discussions. I recall from the early and mid 1960s similar issues in our escalating presence in Southeast Asia—the same pleading for more troops, the diplomatic constraints hindering cross-border operations to get at the source and sustainment of that conflict, the careful—and in retrospect misguided efforts—to balance military needs, strategic concerns ... and political support inside the United States....

Every conflict is different. ... But we must nevertheless learn from our experiences. There are worrisome similarities in both conflicts, including a local government that lacks legitimacy....

In Afghanistan, what is our purpose? Not to defeat Al Qaeda, for they are not largely there. Not to create a functioning, Western-style democracy, for that is clearly beyond our means in a nation 90% illiterate [and] imbued with wholly different values....

We seek in Afghanistan nothing more than to prevent the emergence of a terrorist state that would physically harbor Al Qaeda and use its diplomatic and legal authorities as weapons against the very international system of which it is a member. These are minimalist objectives. They could be met by diplomacy, by promoting economic development and regional economic integration, by acting through regional allies, and, if necessary, by our direct threat, by preemptive strikes and limited incursions. We can also defend against threats here at home....

In principle, our purpose there does not require us to reconstruct the Afghan state.... And therefore we have no inherent need to fight a comprehensive, counter-insurgent war....

The war in Afghanistan should have been declared over when we broke the back of the Taliban force and drove the Taliban from power. We failed, however, to capture or eliminate Osama bin Ladin in the process. He and the senior leadership of Al Qaeda, believed to be located in Pakistan, remain a threat.

Now, together with our NATO allies, we have almost 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. Any abrupt reversal of existing US policy ... might have serious adverse consequences far beyond Afghanistan....

On the other hand, the longer we stay, and the larger our force, the more resistance and resentment we create, by our disruptive influence, by the casualties we inflict deliberately and accidentally. We are a foreign element there in a culture which doesn't tolerate diversity.... We need to find our way out ... for the region is better dealt with from a distance than with our presence, and especially not with military presence.

The approach I would recommend is focused on an exit strategy. The best exit would be after the take-down of the top Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan. This is an objective about which discussion has been publicly suppressed, and it probably should remain so. But I hope it will be foremost in the minds of the Administration. In the meantime, in Afghanistan, our exit strategy must be built around four factors: attempting to reduce the level of violence by seeking a political amelioration of the conflict. Greater assistance to the government of Pakistan in dealing with the Al Qaeda and Taliban remaining in Pakistan, economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and developing a more capable security structure for the Afghans....

These measures are neither simple nor easy. There is no guarantee of success. In matters of strategy, there are only two kinds of plans, those that might work and those that won't work. This approach might work....