

Face the Truth On Afghanistan!

by Carl Osgood

June 4—On May 31, dissident U.S. Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis appeared for the first time in a public forum on Capitol Hill, a forum held under the sponsorship of the bipartisan Out Of Afghanistan Caucus. Davis had written a scathing 84-page critique of the Obama Administration’s strategy in Afghanistan, and the military leadership’s less-than-honest appraisal of conditions on the ground there, which became public in February. In writing his report, and taking it to the U.S. Congress, Davis has confronted its members with their responsibility to put the well-being of the nation ahead of their own political careers.

The Out of Afghanistan Caucus has taken up Davis’s challenge with the intention of forcing the debate where it belongs: the House Armed Services Committee and the floor of the full House of Representatives. It was that caucus, led by Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.), that hosted Davis and two other experts—Ria Dellewar, director of the Afghanistan Study Group, and Malou Innocent, a Cato Institute foreign policy analyst—at a press conference and informal hearing on May 31, that made the case for a more accelerated withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Afghanistan, as well as a change in U.S. strategy there.

Lee and Jones, as well as other members who appeared with them, including James McGovern (D-Mass.), Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.), Peter Welch (D-Vt.), and Tim Johnson (R-Ill.), are demanding a full debate on the issue, a debate which so far has been blocked by the House leadership.

Jones’s involvement is key, in part because of his sponsorship of House Concurrent Resolution 107 (see previous article in this section), which demands that Congress adhere to its Constitutional responsibility as the only agency of

government that can declare war, and warns that any President who launches war without Congressional approval is subject to impeachment.

The matter of Congressional responsibility is also at issue in the Afghanistan War. Jones and McGovern co-sponsored an amendment to the fiscal year 2013 defense authorization bill that would have required that, aside from calling for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, any U.S. military presence in Afghanistan after that date would require approval by Congress. The amendment was blocked in the House Rules Committee on May 16, the day before the bill came to the full House for consideration.

“We got only ten minutes of debate” on the amendment, McGovern said, characterizing that as “an insult” to the men and women serving in the military in Afghanistan. Jones noted that he had brought the same amendment to the floor last year, and it lost by only seven votes. “I believe that the Republican leadership knew that if

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Daniel Davis’s (inset) briefing to the Out of Afghanistan Caucus on the status of the Afghanistan War was in sharp contrast to the official line from the White House. Below: A Marine wounded in fight with the Taliban is taken to a hospital.



U.S. Navy/Hospitalman Dan K. Marker

we'd gotten the McGovern-Jones amendment to the floor, it would have passed." Jones noted. Later in the proceedings, he said that the entire arrangement of leaving in 2014 could change. "That's why we need to assert ourselves and meet our Constitutional responsibility," he said.

The Out of Afghanistan Caucus also has been pressuring the House leadership and the relevant committees to allow Davis to testify. In a Feb. 10 letter to House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), they wrote that Davis's assessment (as published in the Feb. 6 *New York Times*) was "vastly different than the one that the U.S. Congress has been receiving from the Obama Administration." They noted that Davis's critique was also supported by a National Intelligence Estimate completed in December of 2011. "As we withdraw from Afghanistan, it is vital that the Congress hear another perspective from what we have heard over ten years," they wrote. No invitation from Congress has so far been forthcoming, causing the caucus to take on that responsibility themselves.

Another motivation for the informal hearing was the report-back from a trip to Afghanistan, early last month, by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.), the chairs, respectively, of the Senate and House Select Committees on Intelligence. Their report belied statements by the Pentagon and the White House that the Taliban are growing weaker under the pressure of combined NATO and Afghan security force operations.

Feinstein reported, on CNN's State of the Union on May 6, that the Taliban has a shadow system of governors; that they have moved into the northern and eastern parts of the country; that the number of attacks are up; and that the Taliban are recruiting from Pakistan-based *madrassas* (religious schools). "So that an insurgency which one can expect will burn itself out after a period of time, will not necessarily burn out," she said.

Davis, for his part, reiterated his critique of the failure of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. He noted, as he did in February, that there is a direct correlation between the level of violence in Afghanistan and the number of U.S. troops. He presented two International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) graphs that demonstrated his point. One graph shows that IED (improvised explosive device) attacks on NATO troops were down 10% in April 2012 in comparison to April 2011. Well, so is the number of NATO troops, with the withdrawal of 10,000 of the surge troops that the U.S. pro-

vided, along with a smaller number troops from other countries.

The second graph Davis provided, again from an ISAF report, shows civilian casualties rising from 2006 to 2011. During that same period, NATO troop levels rose from about 42,000 to 150,000, and as a consequence, so did the level of violence. "When we put more troops in there, we put 30,000 more targets on the ground," he said, "then that gave cause to the Taliban to rise and to grow accordingly." What happened, he said, was that when U.S. troops went into areas where they hadn't previously been, the Taliban emerged in those areas.

In his colloquy with Davis, Jones went straight at the question of truthfulness. "I don't know how we in the Congress can convey that a military strategy isn't working and that a military strategy won't help the people of Afghanistan," he said. "What I don't understand is why the military leadership won't shoot straight. I wonder why the military is acculturated so that the truth escapes them. . . . The frustration of Congress and the American people is that we don't know where to go to get the truth."

Davis replied: "My objective was to come to Congress to get Congress to ask some of those same questions." He otherwise wouldn't speculate on why the senior military leadership won't tell the truth about Afghanistan, but he did point out that, despite having 150,000 of the best-trained, best-equipped troops in the world, "we haven't been able to knock [the Taliban] down." Therefore, there's no point in continuing to fight over the Summers of 2012 and 2013 after the withdrawal of the surge troops. "What will you accomplish with 33,000 fewer troops that you didn't in the past three years?" he asked.

As for the response he's received on his report, Davis, in reply to a question from Woolsey, said that the feedback he's received from lower-ranking officers (the rank of captain and below) has been very supportive and, in fact, they've supplied him with much more information that supports his critique of the strategy, but from officers above the rank of lieutenant colonel, "I've heard nothing." He said that the younger officers tell him they're glad he went public with his critique, but they're also afraid for their careers if they should join him in coming forward with the truth. "We don't have the ability in the military to debate these issues, either," he said.

cjosgood@att.net