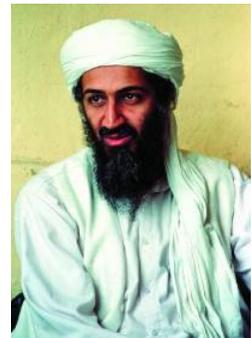


Afghanistan is the best line item DoD could cut

J. Michael Barrett, OpEd Contributor

How does America face the challenge of a \$16.4 trillion national debt, while meeting competing domestic, foreign policy and national security goals? This question, brought to the fore once again by the so-called fiscal cliff, has sparked discussion on everything from across-the-board Defense Department cuts to reducing civilian and military personnel to cutting infrastructure with new rounds of base realignment and closure, or BRAC.

While some of these deserve serious attention, one bold part of the answer that is all but ignored has all of the uncommon virtues of being financially prudent, supportive of our stated shift toward Asia and nearly guaranteed to save hundreds of service members' lives. Namely, the rapid drawdown of our forces in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, this has become a political third rail, even though that war costs us several hundred billion dollars per year and, from a purely analytical perspective, is not making progress -- at least not in the right direction.



Our current course of action in Afghanistan is flawed for two major reasons. First, we have accomplished what we went there to do. We went to Afghanistan to bring al Qaeda's leadership to justice and to destroy its primary safe haven. We have more or less achieved the former goal through a decade of war on multiple fronts and the daring raid that killed Osama Bin Laden. And al Qaeda's safe havens in Afghanistan, while not eradicated permanently, have diminished in military relevance in favor of locations in Mali, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan's northwestern provinces and elsewhere across the globe.

Second, there is little hope of improving the situation there further. When speaking off the record, very few if any military personnel or diplomats sincerely believe that Afghanistan's corrupt regime and fledgling military and police forces will survive even a year after we leave, much less make Afghanistan a place where freedom and democracy will take hold. The high attrition rate (27 percent) in the Afghan army, the lack of senior enlisted and qualified officers to serve as leaders, and the Afghan army's inability to act alone without allied support for logistics, resupply and air power are all depressing realities. The Taliban are already attacking women who dare to get educated and killing international aid workers while launching truck bombs in the capital, Kabul. The situation will only get worse once the U.S. and international forces leave, but we are leaving anyway; the only question now is how much more we waste before we go.

A mature democracy must be strong enough to admit when it is time to change course. If the relative strategic importance of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations has diminished (it has) and war aims we have espoused are so clearly unattainable (they are), and we can't afford our current expenditures (we can't), then why the reluctance to recognize reality and change our strategy?

After the past decade of war, we will have huge bills to pay in terms of veterans benefits, medical care, equipment replacement and upgrades, and interest payments on the borrowed money. When you add in that everything from deferred aircraft maintenance to reductions in base services for military families is being considered to save a few bucks here and there, the only smart move is a precipitous withdrawal from this faltering and failing mission.

One can only hope that if the rumored nomination of Republican Vietnam veteran and former Sen. Chuck Hagel to lead the Defense Department does come to pass, he could give Republicans the cover they need to break with the hawkish ideologues and get back to making more rational policy. The place to start is with cuts to the hundreds of billions being wasted in this particular lost cause.

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