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Purple Nation

July 15, 2010

Time to Get Ground Troops Out of Afghanistan — Now By Lanny J. Davis

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It feels like 1975.

That was the year when left and right came together and we got our kids out of harm's way in Vietnam ... forever.

Back then, we all heard intimidating rhetoric against critics of continuing U.S. involvement in Vietnam — i.e., that it was "dangerous" or even "unpatriotic" to criticize war policy when there were "GIs at risk during wartime"; or, worse, that it was unpatriotic to "cut and run," which would mean "50,000 had died in vain."

Those ugly charges didn't work then, and they won't work now.

Americans were smart enough then to realize that we could honor every one of those GIs and still not want a single additional life lost in a war that both the left and right had decided was no longer worth fighting, albeit for different reasons. The left saw the war as wrong and immoral. The right saw handcuffs on the military due to political and diplomatic considerations and thus, it said, "If we can't win, get out." So in 1975, a Republican president (Gerald Ford), facing legislation forced through by Democratic members of Congress cutting off all funding for continued U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, finally ordered all U.S. ground forces out of the country.

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Doesn't this feel very familiar? Just recently, more than 100 liberal House Democrats voted to cut funds to pay for U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan. Conservatives like Joe Scarborough and Pat Buchanan on "Morning Joe" have questioned why we are still spending billions and losing American lives to "nation-build" in a country where there are few al Qaeda terrorists. And the spokesman for the Democratic National Committee — of all people — came very close to questioning the patriotism of Michael Steele, chairman of the Republican National Committee, claiming Steele was undermining U.S. troops' morale when he described the Afghan war as President Obama's "war of choice."

I believe we may now, as in 1975, be approaching a critical mass of American public opinion that, after nine years in Afghanistan, there is no apparent mission that can justify a single additional U.S. life or casualty.

This is a good time to recall the words that were quoted on the Internet by Vice President Joe Biden, allegedly spoken during the internal debate in September 2010 in the White House prior to President Obama's decision in December to support a "surge" of 30,000 more U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The vice president is quoted as asking:

"Can I just clarify a factual point? ... How much will we spend this year on Afghanistan?"

The answer was \$65 billion.

"And how much will we spend on Pakistan?"

The answer supplied was \$2.25 billion.

"Well," Biden replied, "by my calculations that's a 30-1 ratio in favor of Afghanistan. So I have a question. Al Qaeda is almost all in Pakistan, and Pakistan has nuclear weapons. And yet for every dollar we're spending in Pakistan, we're spending \$30 in Afghanistan. Does that make strategic sense?"

I just don't think it does — although I am not sure I am right and still have great faith in Barack Obama's careful analysis and the judgment of many people I respect, such as the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. And I consider myself a liberal, a man on the left of virtually all issues.

But I am beginning to dissent on the policy of maintaining ground troops to nation-build in Afghanistan. But I gather a lot of people on the left and right have come to feel the same way. So here is an alternative policy that I believe at least should be considered — one I feel is consistent with the perspective the vice president expressed last year:

1. Get all U.S. ground forces out of Afghanistan now — of course, with a plan that protects them as they leave. If a democratic nation is to be built, we can support President Hamid Karzai and Afghans doing so with economic aid and democracy training — but the U.S. military cannot do it for them any longer.
2. Increase substantially military and economic support for Pakistan, backing their taking the lead to assist their neighbors in Afghanistan to find a peaceful solution. We can and should expect Pakistan to show zero tolerance for the Taliban oppressing women and human rights if it is allowed to share power and for harboring anyone from al Qaeda or any other terrorist group as it did pre-9/11.
3. If we can find any member of al Qaeda or any members of other terrorist groups on the ground in Afghanistan, the U.S. should exercise its right of self-defense to kill them — through air power, such as drones or laser-guided bombs, or even Special Forces assassination squads. (And that includes killing them in the Northwestern Tribal Territories of Pakistan, where we know most of them, including almost certainly Osama bin Laden, are hiding.)

Whether the above recommendations are right or wrong — and I honestly am not certain whether they are right — what is missing is a real debate on the possible need for a new policy.

The president himself must lead and inform that debate — and encourage dissent — without challenging anyone's patriotism or devotion to the heroes who served.

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This piece appears today, July 15, 2010, in Mr. Davis's regular weekly column in The Hill "Purple Nation" and "The Daily Caller" an online political website.

Davis, a Washington D.C. attorney at the law/media/legislative strategies firm of Lanny J. Davis & Associates, served as Special Counsel to President Bill Clinton in 1996-98 and was a member of President Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board in 2006-07. He is the author of Scandal: How 'Gotcha' Politics Is Destroying America.

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