



Center for a
New American
Security

OBAMA'S WAR

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INTERVIEW WITH CNAS FELLOW ANDREW EXUM

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Let's start in the fall of 2008. ... How was the Afghanistan conflict shaping up as the American elections roll around? What does it look like over there?

The situation in Afghanistan has been steadily deteriorating over the past several years, and in a lot of ways it's suffered from neglect. ... It has not seen nearly the amount of on-the-ground resources that Iraq has seen.

It's also suffered from a lack of intellectual resources. Our best and brightest commanders -- Gen. [Stanley A.] McChrystal, Gen. [David] Petraeus -- have been focused on Iraq, especially in 2006, 2007. And that's because the U.S. has obvious interests in Iraq, and that was the focal point of President Bush's strategy and foreign policy efforts. ...

The big change that has taken place in Afghanistan has been the Obama administration, in words at least, putting Afghanistan front and center. And in a lot of ways during the campaign it was easy for a Democratic candidate to talk about putting Afghanistan number one and talk about placing emphasis on Afghanistan [over] Iraq. Now, once you come into office, things change, because we still have a lot of interests in Iraq that need to be looked after. And Afghanistan, as it turns out, is a really difficult environment in which to operate and in which to secure U.S. and allied interests. ...

And the Obama administration, by every indication, has been serious in its attempt to get its hands around the problem. Talk a little about how they've approached designing a new policy.

Our policies toward Iraq and Afghanistan really started [to] change in 2007. There was not just a change of leadership in Iraq with Gen. Petraeus and [former] Ambassador [Ryan] Crocker coming in, but there was also a change to the National Security Council. A lot of the more ideological members of the Bush administration left, and with Gen. [Douglas] Lute taking over in the National Security Council for both Iraq and Afghanistan, you started to see a lot more pragmatic voices come to the fore.

And during the election, I think it's important to highlight the fact that the Bush administration got both campaigns together and said: "Look, when you take over in January, you're not going to have 90 days, 120 days to sit back and think about what you're going to do in Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan is serious; it's deteriorating. It's going to demand immediate attention."

...

Let's talk about the policy as it's outlined in Obama's speech. When you heard the speech, what struck you as genuinely new in that stance?

I think when you talk about it, the only thing that's really new is that we start talking about Afghanistan and Pakistan as one big problem. Our interests in both places are relatively similar, which is that we don't want either place to be a region that is hospitable toward the types of international or transnational terror groups which can strike against the United States or its allies. ... Similarly, we do not want transnational terror groups to be able to destabilize Pakistan. ...

President Obama and Gen. Petraeus ... don't just have to look at Afghanistan. They can really look at the Af-Pak region. And more than that, they can look at Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, India, the Central Asian states, Iran. They can take a more holistic approach to the problem set.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but there is a sense of renewed commitment -- new resources, new personnel. Can you talk about that a little bit?

To a large degree, the interests of the United States remain constant regardless of who is the president. ...

The strategic goals you lay out -- in other words, how you're going to secure your interests -- those change. And if you change the strategic goals, you also have to change resources. Depending on what your goals are, if you have very moderate goals or very modest goals, so to speak, then you don't need as many resources. If you change your goals to articulate a more expansive strategy, then you're going to need more resources.

When the Obama administration came out with its white paper (PDF) on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the first thing that struck me is you're really talking about accomplishing limited ends with very expansive means. So we've got a counterterror problem, or a counter-safe-haven problem, and we're going to approach it using a counterinsurgency strategy of sorts; in other words, trying to build up the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan so they can exert sovereignty over their states and using the full force of the United States and its allies to do so.

And that means more than just military?

Absolutely. One of the very difficult lessons that the military, and also the American people, have learned in both Iraq and Afghanistan is that you can't just throw the military at the problem and expect that things will be solved, especially not in political wars. If the problem is governance, if the problem is a lack of essential services being provided to a population, then the military can't solve that.

So you have to utilize other instruments of national power, whether it be the State Department, whether it be USAID [United States Agency for International Development], whether it be instruments that aren't national power but maybe non-governmental organizations, international organizations. ...

The corollary trend that I've observed is this coming to grips with a more pragmatic approach with these conflicts, the counterinsurgency thinking. ... If you could sort of walk me through just the brief history of how that's happened, how the dissidents have taken power to a certain degree. [What are] some of the implications of that?

The degree to which counterinsurgency is now ascendant in U.S. strategic, or at least operational, thinking really owes to the difficulties that we encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a failure of the U.S. military to really institutionalize the lessons from Vietnam.

It's not that counterinsurgency is a panacea. It's not that counterinsurgency strategy is the only military strategy that's out there. But whether you're talking about Gen. Petraeus in 2007 in Iraq or Gen. McChrystal in 2009 in Afghanistan, there is a realization by smart generals on the ground, generals who have a lot of experience conducting other forms of warfare, that counterinsurgency offers the best chance of success; that population-centric counterinsurgency is the best means by which you can realize your political ends. ...

Starting with the difficulties that we encountered in Iraq in 2003-2004, and while the eyes of the nation and the eyes of the world were on Iraq, similar difficulties were being encountered in Afghanistan. We realized that the old force-on-force model of industrial warfare was, if not dead, then at least irrelevant, at least as far as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were concerned.

So we had to start rediscovering -- less trying to come up with new ways to think about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but rediscovering old ways to think about them. So a lot of officers went back and were looking at some of the most prominent French thinkers of the 1950s and 1960s, Roger Trinquier and David Galula, ... who had experience in Indochina and then Algeria.

Others went back to the Marine Corps' *Small Wars Manual*, which is a good manual as far as counter-guerrilla warfare is concerned. ... It was kind of a rediscovery that took place of a lot of doctrine that had previously been forgotten.

So you were recently in Afghanistan surveying terrain to a certain degree with some of these ideas in mind. I'd like to talk about the south and about the east. As you observed the Helmand offensive, what's happening there? What strikes you about the developments on the ground?

Everything is more difficult in the south, and that's whether you're talking about manning the Afghan National Army or Afghan National Police or trying to provide essential services to the Afghan population. ...

The decision that was made to commit as many resources as we have committed to Helmand province was made long before Gen. McChrystal took command in Afghanistan. Now that we've committed those resources, though, we do not have the Afghan national security forces on the ground right now or in the foreseeable future that are going to be able to take over for the Marines once they clear through the Helmand valley. ...

That sounds like more troops?

I believe that in both the south and the east we are suffering from a lack of not just Afghan resources but also NATO and ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] resources. ... The problem is a lot of those resources just take a while to get there. You can't surge resources immediately over a few months' period of time. ...

We are sending more Afghan resources into the south. Five of the next eight Afghan Kandaks from the Afghan National Army are going to either the south or to Farah province, which is the southernmost province of Regional Command West [RC West].

We're sending the next two commando battalions into southern Afghanistan. The 205 Corps, which is the Afghan National Army corps responsible for southern Afghanistan, that will continue to be the priority corps for manning in southern Afghanistan. So we're sending more Afghan national security forces into the south as fast as we can send them. ...

... As you look forward to the next few months, what are the kinds of things we'll be looking out for as Gen. McChrystal's plan really takes shape?

I think when Gen. McChrystal's plan takes shape, one of the first things that people are going to look for are resources. They're going to want to know the price tag: How much is it going to cost? How many more troops are we going to have to commit?

That's really not what I'm going to be looking for. I think one of the most important things that we can do is change the operational culture in Afghanistan. So as I'm traveling back and forth from here in Washington to Afghanistan over the next year, the things I'm going to be looking for are things like how many patrols we conducted [were] dismantled. If I see an American casualty, the first question on my mind is not necessarily going to be, "Well, did he have the proper armor, or was he in an MRAP [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle]?" The question I'm going to be asking is, "Well, what was he or she doing?"

The way we are going to stop IED [improvised explosive device] attacks in Afghanistan, for example, is not by putting soldiers in these armored shells where they're indestructible. The enemy will always be able to come up with a bigger bomb, with an explosively formed projectile [EFP], with some sort of technological innovation that allows him to defeat our countermeasures.

The way that you stop IED attacks is you dissuade people from planting IEDs. And our strategy in Afghanistan, or our operations in Afghanistan at least, are going to succeed or fail based upon the relationships that we build with the Afghans at every level. That means the partnerships that we develop with the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army, increasing their capacity, increasing their ability to do their mission, as well as making sure that say, for example, the Afghan National Police, which has a less than stellar reputation among the population, is not being predatory toward the Afghan people.

And it matters, how well do we know the communities? How well are we building up local relationships? Because that's the kind of stuff that is going to lead to people turning in IEDs, to people refusing to allow insurgent groups to operate in their areas.

But to do that, you're going to have to assume a lot of risk. We Americans are very wary of military casualties in Afghanistan. ... The reality is that we're going to have to get on the ground in boots and patrol the areas that are most dangerous. We're going to have to get to know those communities, because, again, the enemy's always going to find a countermeasure to allow him to kill you. What you have to do is build relationships that create an environment in which the ground in Afghanistan is inhospitable toward the enemy insurgent groups. ...

Now, the good news is that now we have a three-star command in Afghanistan. One of the things we're going to be able to do is fight this war on a countrywide level. Before, we fought this war

in many ways -- region to region -- so you had four separate campaigns going on in Afghanistan, one in the west, one in the east, one in the north, one in the south. Now we can fight a more national-level campaign, but one of the tough tasks that Gen. [David M.] Rodriguez is going to have as Gen. McChrystal's deputy is going to be to shove the vision of the commander down the throats of a lot of subordinate commanders. And it's very difficult.

I think you're going to have politicians in London, in Rome, in Paris that are going to be asking: "Why are we taking this many casualties? Why were our soldiers just out on the streets patrolling on foot? Why weren't they in armored vehicles?" And we're going to have to have some answers ready. We're going to have to explain why we're taking the risks that we're taking.

Let's talk about the Haqqani network. And let's talk about Khost as a battlefield. Are we losing ground there?

... The good news is we're not going to lose to the Haqqani network or the Quetta shura Taliban [leadership council] anytime soon. Neither one of them is going to be able to march into Kabul and take over the government anytime soon.

What I'm worried about [more is] a campaign of fear and intimidation that's taking place, both in the south and in the east. I think that the Quetta shura Taliban and the Haqqani network are targeting certain population centers. ... They're not just waging campaigns of assassination; they're killing plenty of people, but they're also pursuing these campaigns of fear and intimidation. ... And if we're looking at the main effort of the Haqqani network in eastern Afghanistan, I would identify that as their main effort. ...

Are we losing the information war?

I think that one has to be careful when one thinks about whether or not we're winning or losing in Afghanistan. We're not going to lose in Afghanistan in some big climactic battle. But the problem is that the Quetta shura Taliban and its allies are pursuing a strategy of exhaustion. They are just trying to get us to give up and leave. And I believe that they are having some success there, not just in terms of their activities on the ground but also in terms of perceptions. I believe that when you hear Afghanistan referred to as the "graveyard of empires" -- I can't open *The Guardian* newspaper in London without reading another op-ed about how it's impossible to win in Afghanistan. And to a large degree I get frustrated by this.

The problems and the realities of Afghanistan are hard enough, but I think that the Taliban has been very good at playing to the sense that Afghanistan is simply unwinnable or ungovernable or that our interests in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without just continuous bleed on our resources. I'm not sure that's the case.

I think that the problems in Afghanistan are very real. The one I'm worried about is the government of Afghanistan. But I do think that to a large degree we have lost this battle as far as perceptions much more than we've lost this battle in actual kinetic engagements or even in the contest for the will of the people of Afghanistan.

It seems the insurgency benefits enormously from the hangover, if you will, of air strikes, prisoner abuse, Guantanamo. We're carrying a lot of baggage.

Yeah, we sure are.

Can you talk about that, and in the context of if this is a hearts-and-minds battle that's part of what we're up against?

I think that you get what you pay for, and we haven't paid for a lot in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has suffered from a lack of resources, from a lack of commitment.

In Iraq, one of the big revelations that we had in 2007 was we started to ask Iraqis, "OK, how would you secure your own country?" And they responded with enthusiasm and helped us to devise a lot of the operations and strategy that went into the surge and went into the overall effort to pacify Iraq.

In Afghanistan, if you ask an Afghan, "Well, how would you secure your country?," you're going to get an answer very different from an Iraqi. They're not going to say, "Oh, well, here's how I'd secure my country." They're going to say: "Look, if you don't know how to secure my country, then get out. If you don't know what you're doing, then leave."

So I think that one of the problems that we have faced in Afghanistan is that if you're an [Afghan], we can ask you to invest in your institutions, but we haven't provided security for you to do so. We can say that the government of Afghanistan is functioning, but you don't see it on the ground. We can say that Kabul is secure, Mazar-e-Sharif is secure, Herat is secure -- but we travel around in armored vehicles. So I think that we have suffered through a lack of trust with the Afghan people, and it's entirely understandable.

If I were an Afghan living in Wardak province, I wouldn't trust the Americans right now either. I wouldn't trust NATO forces either. And I think that we have a very uphill struggle to convince the Afghan people that we're a, going to do things differently, and that b, we're going to take the security problems of their country seriously.

Then there's the danger that we now [have an] elegantly calibrated, nuanced campaign in Afghanistan, and we haven't addressed the problem.

In Afghanistan, it's entirely possible that we wage the finest counterinsurgency operations ever devised by man, that we wage incredibly moral and ethically responsibility campaigns, that we wage a campaign in which we put protecting the people front and center, and we could still lose this war.

And this is something that people don't want to talk about in American counterinsurgency circles. We like to believe that we are masters of our own destiny. But the reality is that when you engage in a counterinsurgency campaign as a third party, your success or failure is largely dependent upon what the host government does and fails to do.

So we could be perfect in Afghanistan. And so far -- I want to be clear about this -- we have been far from perfect. But we could change everything over the next 12 months and still fail in Afghanistan, because the government of Afghanistan is perceived as illegitimate. And when I say illegitimate, I mean the people of Afghanistan do not have faith that existing institutions are those most appropriate for society, that they think that the government should either be different or they think that the Taliban presents a better alternative.

And we've seen so far that some of the things that the Taliban does -- this is one of my favorite examples. In southern Afghanistan, the Taliban now has ombudsmen. They send people out into southern Afghanistan, and they say: "How are we doing? What do you think of your local shadow governor? Is he appropriate? Is he just? Is he doing a good job? What do you think about our operations in your district? You know, do we interfere with your poppy harvest?" They ask questions like this.

And you know what it is: a direct challenge to the way that NATO, ISAF and the government of Afghanistan have been doing business for the past eight years. It's especially a direct challenge to perceived corruption in the government of Afghanistan. And make no mistake about it: We are seen as being entirely complicit with the corruption of the government of Afghanistan. ...

So from the perspective of the Afghan people, they want governance; they want somebody to be in there doing the good job on behalf of the Afghan people. But they haven't seen it from either the Taliban or the Haqqani network or the people that we reinstalled in power after 2001.

You talk about the perfect counterinsurgency campaign putatively. Is full-fledged reconciliation effort part of that?

... Most counterinsurgency campaigns have to end with either some sort of reconciliation process or some sort of political agreement. They rarely end in complete, overwhelming victory, so there has to be some sort of reconciliation process that takes place, at least at the lower levels.

The problem in Afghanistan is that, as the social science literature and as all the historical literature on insurgents leads us to believe, control very rarely follows collaboration. Collaboration follows control.

And what I mean by that is that unless you establish control over the population, unless you are able to provide security, unless you are able to in large part defeat the insurgency on the battlefield, it is going to be very difficult for you to get some sort of collaboration from low-level insurgents or from mid-level insurgents. To bring people into the fold, so to speak, you have to exhaust the insurgency in the same way they're exhausting you.

If you try to buy everybody off at the very beginning -- which is what some people try to say that we did in 2007 -- you're very rarely going to get a friendly security situation. ...

The other problem with our perfect counterinsurgency campaign is, isn't the real problem in Pakistan?

In Afghanistan we have two interests. One interest is to prevent Afghanistan from being a safe haven through which transnational terror groups can plot to attack against the United States of America and our allies. So far we've protected that interest to a large degree.

Our other interest is that Afghanistan is not used as a platform by which Pakistan can be destabilized. Without question, our interests in Pakistan are greater than our interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan is much more populated; Pakistan has nuclear weapons. The list goes on and on.

But we have much less leverage in Pakistan. So one of the reasons that we're focused on Afghanistan is because, a, that's where our leverage is, and b, I don't think you even want to consider a large-scale intervention in Pakistan unless you're willing to go in with World War II-sized armies. It's a fool's errand.

And so our focus in Pakistan is in a lot of ways our focus in Afghan. It's a focus on building up institutions of the state. But the problems in Pakistan are in many ways similar to our problems in Afghanistan, which is that our interests may or may not be aligned with the interests of those in power in Pakistan. And that's not just the elected leadership or the people at the very highest levels of the Pakistani military, but also the intelligence services and at the lower levels in the military.

So, for example, the Pakistanis, I believe, now share our interest in going after some of the insurgent groups that are bent on destabilizing Pakistan, that are bent on causing destruction in Pakistan. They do not share our interests as of yet in taking an aggressive stance against what we would call the transnational groups or the groups that are seeking to destabilize the government in Afghanistan.

The Quetta shura.

The Quetta shura, the Haqqani network. One of the problems that we have with the Pakistanis is we have a problem with threat perception. ... The Indians enjoy a very strong relationship with the government of Afghanistan. The Pakistanis see this as a threat, not [without] reason.

But what we are trying to do is we are trying to convince the Pakistanis that ... the Pakistani Taliban and the transnational terror groups represent a greater threat to the Pakistani state than does the government of India.

And what's more, the government of India cannot be blamed for the safe haven that transnational groups or the Pakistani Taliban has enjoyed. If you're looking for blame, there's a lot of blame to go around, but some of it can be found in the Pakistani intelligence agencies.

Some of whom we're essentially at war with in Afghanistan. Is that overstating it?

Some analysts would say that the Quetta shura Taliban, at the very least, was stood back up after their defeat in 2001 and 2002 by the Pakistani intelligence services and that the Pakistani

intelligence services have supported the Quetta shura Taliban in their efforts to weaken the government of Afghanistan.

I cannot confirm or deny that the Pakistani intelligence services have had this role, but there is certainly reporting in the open sources that would lend credence to the idea that certain elements within the Pakistani intelligence services, within the military and within the intelligence services have had a direct role in supporting, aiding, abetting, whatever you want to say, the Quetta shura Taliban, the Haqqani network, and some of the groups that have sought to destabilize the government in Pakistan.

Amrullah Saleh, the head of intelligence in Afghanistan, told us that the Americans still don't get it, that Pakistan is the problem; Pakistan's the enemy.

The Pakistanis would say that we Americans don't get it, that India is the problem, that India is the enemy. The Afghans will tell us that we Americans don't get it, that Pakistan is the problem, that Pakistan is the enemy. We Americans are frequently accused of not understanding the regional and local dynamics in Central Asia, and we're frequently guilty of not understanding the local dynamics in Central Asia.

The problem is -- let's say just for sake of argument that Pakistan is in fact the primary problem in Afghanistan, that the actions of individuals within the Pakistani government are responsible for the difficulties that Afghanistan is enduring. We still don't have a lot of leverage on the ground with the Pakistanis. We don't have 90,000 troops on the ground there.

And in addition, I would turn things back on the Afghan government and say that if they were effectively providing essential services to their population, if they were seen as legitimate by their population, if Afghanistan weren't perceived as one of the most corrupt governments on earth or corrupt nations on earth, then I think that a lot of Afghanistan's problems would go away.

But as it stands right now, the Taliban enjoys popularity in certain areas of Afghanistan, not just because of the campaign of fear and intimidation, but because they ably capitalize on the weaknesses of the Afghanistan government. So we will continue to focus on building institutions of Afghan government partly because our leverage in Pakistan is limited, but partly because that's also where we see the problems in Afghanistan lying.

As a counterinsurgency expert, what strikes you about the Pakistani offensive into the border area, the North-West Frontier Province?

I think that the Pakistanis made very good use of the Frontier Corps that have been trained by the United States over the past few years. In a lot of ways, they used them as shock troops in the Swat Valley, but I think they were probably as surprised as we were that they have actually fought very well.

I have been impressed by the Pakistani military's willingness to sacrifice in recent months, but have been cautiously impressed. The difficult part in counterinsurgency is not smashing the

enemy's fighting forces on the battlefield. Look, I was there in the Shah-e-Kot Valley in March 2002 when we thought we once and for all smashed Al Qaeda's hold in Afghanistan. I was there for the biggest battle that took place in the war in the afternoon when we fought this large, pitched battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. But ... it's seven years later, and we're still there in Afghanistan. The tough part is not defeating the enemy's fighting forces on the battlefield; the tough part is holding the building afterward.

So wearing my counterinsurgency hat, I'm really looking more at what the Pakistani military and Pakistani state does afterward with internally displaced people, with providing long-term security in the Swat Valley than I am about their willingness to kill some terrorists.

For that reason, even though I want the Pakistanis to take a strong stance against the militants that are within their borders, I would actually paradoxically tell them to go slow; make sure that you consolidate your gains first. And that's what I've been looking for with respect to the Pakistani military.

You're talking about uprooting the Taliban rather than simply displacing it. Is that fair?

The Pakistani approach to counterinsurgency has, in a lot of ways, looked like a large-scale population displacement. But what we are not trying to do is just shift insurgents from one valley to another valley. ... What we're trying to do is ... remove the conditions under which insurgency thrived -- so taking on the enemy in all of his lines of operation; taking away his ability to wage information operations through the radio, which the Pakistani Taliban has done quite well; taking away his ability to provide essential services to the population; providing your own essential services to the population; providing security to the population; and having a permanent security presence there that makes areas inhospitable toward insurgent groups. That is what I am most worried about in Pakistan. I know the Pakistani military can kill all the insurgents in the world, but I don't think that's going to solve the problems that they're facing in the North-West Frontier Province and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Do they have the capacity to do full-fledged counterinsurgency?

I think that if the Pakistani military wants to have the capacity to do full-fledged counterinsurgency, the United States of America stands by to assist them. But again, we face a problem with respect to threat perception.

The Pakistani military has, in the past, used a lot of our aid and assistance to them to focus on weapons systems and military capabilities that are more appropriate for a battle with the state of India than with the militants in the North-West Frontier.

But if the Pakistani government seeks aid in its efforts to root out and to defeat insurgent groups in the North-West Frontier Province and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, that's great from a U.S. perspective, because one of the things that we've learned since 2001 is that counterinsurgency campaigns conducted by the host nations themselves are much more effective, much more cost-effective and ultimately much more politically effective than counterinsurgency

campaigns that are waged by the United States or its allies fighting as third parties on behalf of the host government.

Is there an ongoing American effort to teach counterinsurgency?

The United States has shown after many years in which our military's been the acknowledged expert in state-on-state and industrial warfare, we've actually taught ... counterinsurgency to ourselves quite effectively over the past five, six years. We are now doing so for not only our allied nations -- many of our allied nations read and study the U.S. counterinsurgency debates that take place within our own military institutions -- but we've also established counterinsurgency academies, for example, in Afghanistan, where we are teaching how to watch counterinsurgency campaigns. So the expertise is out there; the willingness to teach is out there. ...

Are drone strikes part of the strategy, or counterproductive at this point?

I believe that drone strikes, unless they were tethered to a coherent strategy in Pakistan, are part of the problem. That does not mean that they are not part of the solution. But for drone strikes to be effective, they have to be accompanied by a properly resourced information campaign and have to be part of the greater strategy. Right now we are allowing the tactic to substitute for a strategy, and that, I believe, is not in our long-[term] interests.

We're pulling the trigger without fully thinking through the reverberations?

I believe that certain agencies in the United States government are under tremendous pressure to kill terrorists and that they believe the problem is that we have a set number of terrorists that we need to decapitate in order to keep U.S. interests secure.

From my personal experience, which is admittedly limited, we tried to do this in Iraq in 2003. We thought that if we just got, you know, 52 high-level Baathists that we were going to have strategic victory in Iraq. But these are wars that you can't kill your way out of.

So even though killing the enemy, even though decapitating the heads of terrorist organizations, the heads of insurgent organizations, even though this is an important component of any successful strategy, it can't substitute for the strategy. ...

Is this now Obama's war?

To a large degree, when Obama became the president, every military engagement that the United States was in was going to be his war, whether you're talking about the war in Iraq or the war in Afghanistan. [With] the war in Iraq, U.S. interests don't change just because the American president changes.

But President Obama in many ways backed himself into a rhetorical corner during the campaign by placing so much emphasis on Afghanistan. So whether or not he realized it, I think he's committed himself to this war, at least in the short term.

Now, he has the right as the president after 12 more months, after 18 more months, to review his own strategy, to see whether or not it's working, to see whether or not the war remains in the interests of the United States. But over the near term at least, I think he's committed himself to making an honest effort to win in Afghanistan.

... Can he sell it long enough to the American people to get the time he needs to get the results that we hope for?

President Obama has three problems. First, he has a problem selling this war to our allies, whose publics are much more nervous than our own. He has a problem with his political opponents, who are going to be looking for every opportunity to criticize his handling of what has traditionally been perceived as a Democratic weakness, which is foreign policy and the waging of our nation's wars. And then he's got a problem with his own base. I think that the left-wing chorus to get out of Afghanistan now is gathering in intensity and has been gathering for sometime. ...

Given what you've seen recently even, would you plead for time?

I think that the president is well within his rights to evaluate this campaign, to ask for hard metrics to gauge the way in which we're going to measure our success or our failure, and to then adjust his policy and his strategic goals based upon the degree to which we are successful or fail.

I think that by naming Gen. McChrystal the commanding general in Afghanistan, he at least has to give him 18 months to try to right the ship, so to speak, in Afghanistan. A lot of the changes that Gen. McChrystal can bring to the mission in Afghanistan, or that Ambassador [Karl] Eikenberry, for that matter, can bring to the mission in Afghanistan, are not going to be able to be made over three, four months. They are long-term changes. And I think that these changes will start to take place, and we'll start to feel the effects, in the spring of 2010, and that then, by kind of summer, fall of 2010, at that point, it will be fair to start evaluating how the operations and strategy is going in Afghanistan. ...

What do you think Americans don't understand about this conflict?

I think one of the things that Americans don't understand is just how hostage we are held to the Afghan government. We, again, like to believe that our interests are going to match up simply with those of the host nation on whose behalf we are fighting this counterinsurgency campaign. But that's not always the case.

So I think the American people need to understand that we can do everything right in Afghanistan -- and we've done a lot wrong in Afghanistan so far -- but we can do everything right in Afghanistan, going forward, and still lose this war.