

OPINION

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Stuck in
 Afghanistan

BY JOE CONASON
 Syndicated Columnist

There is good news about Afghanistan.

No, really. It comes from Jonathan Alter, Newsweek columnist and author of the book "The Promise: President Obama, Year One." He thinks the president is firmly resolved to end our involvement there. Based on his sources inside the administration, he says one thing is certain: "We ain't stayin' long."

Anyone who thinks nine years of stalemate is enough would like to believe Alter, whose reporting skills are not in doubt. But it may be more prudent to believe Gen. David Petraeus.

Reminded of Obama's commitment to begin withdrawing a year from now, the new commander in Afghanistan carved out four lanes of wiggle room. "There will be an assessment at the end of this year after which undoubtedly we'll make certain tweaks, refinements, perhaps some significant changes," he told senators.

So we may be leaving even sooner than planned? Um, no. "We'll need to provide assistance to Afghanistan for a long time to come," he said.

That's a recurring theme. Obama himself recently ridiculed the "obsession around this whole issue of when do we leave." The plan for next summer, he said, is not to leave but only to "begin a process of transition."

The Rockies may crumble and Gibraltar may tumble in the time it takes to complete a "process of transition." But Alter says his reporting gives him confidence "a significant withdrawal will begin within, at the most, 18 months to two years."

Not staying long? That would put off Obama's original drawdown by as much as a year. If Obama is willing to push back his deadline by a year, why not two years? Or five?

Harvard international relations scholar Stephen Walt notes that Obama has had three chances to begin our extrication — "right after his election, then following his strategic review in the fall of 2009, and most recently with the McChrystal firing." But he passed them up. "In each case," Walt told me, "he's chosen either to deepen U.S. involvement or he's publicly committed to 'staying the course.'"

It's possible that Obama will break that pattern next summer, just as it's possible that Adam Sandler will go for his doctorate. But there is no reason to bet on it.

He came into office opposed to the Iraq war, unlike the Afghanistan war — and yet his

schedule for withdrawal is no different from what President Bush planned. Why should anyone expect him to show more nerve in Afghanistan?

The political incentives are pushing him to go along with extending our presence because no president wants to be blamed for losing a war (see: Iraq, Vietnam). It's politically safer to muddle along hoping for something that can be portrayed as success than to admit failure.

To think Obama will take the risk of a major withdrawal as he's running for re-election assumes him to have more backbone on national security matters than he has yet demonstrated.

Time after time, forced to choose between sticking to his commitments and appeasing Republicans, he has opted for the latter — keeping Guantanamo open, giving up the idea of trying Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in New York City, abandoning his campaign pledge to leave Iraq in 16 months.

The only thing that would spur Obama to start a pullout would be major progress in Afghanistan, which is about as likely as a Hard Rock Cafe in Kandahar. June was the most lethal month for American and NATO troops in the entire war, and this may just be the beginning.

A UN report says the number of roadside bombings by our enemies nearly doubled in the first three months of this year. So did the number of "complex suicide attacks."

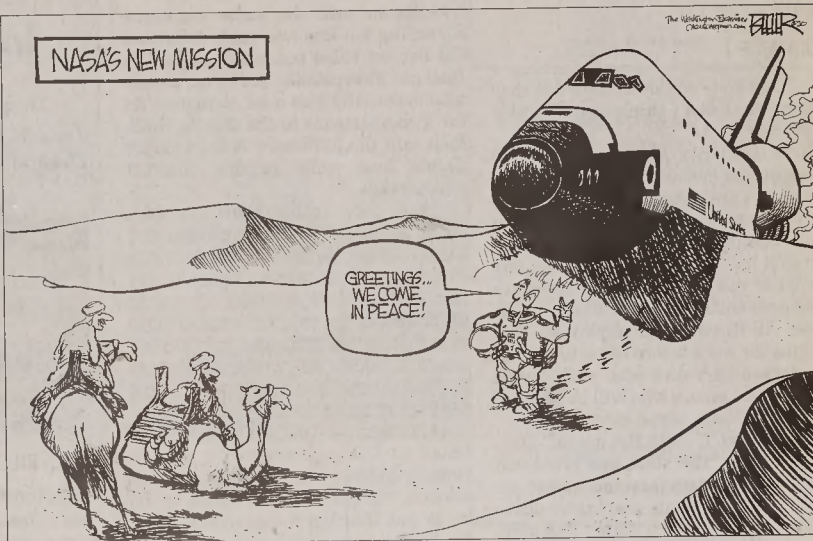
Meanwhile, our allies are failing us. Corruption has proliferated, and President Hamid Karzai has not captured the hearts of his countrymen since winning a rigged election last year.

The Afghan army suffers from ethnic divisions, weak leadership and an epidemic of desertion. The national police are plagued by illiteracy as well as graft. These developments do not spell "victory."

Getting out of Afghanistan would be easy for Obama if things were to go well. But to get out when things are going badly would let Republicans blame him and his party ever after for what happens next. Democrats learned that lesson from Vietnam.

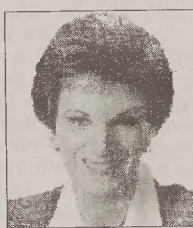
In the end, Obama is likely to follow a well-known rule of American politics: Fighting a futile war is excusable. Ending one is not.

Steve Chapman blogs daily at newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/steve_chapman. To find out more about Steve Chapman, and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.



U.S. Cuba policy: A 50-year failure?

VIEWPOINT



MONA CHAREN
 Syndicated Columnist

After a 134-day hunger strike, Guillermo Farinas' waist is so small that a dog collar could fit around it. This living skeleton (who has survived this long only because he has taken nutrients intravenously) now has a victory: The Cuban government has announced the planned release of 52 political prisoners. That Raul Castro appears to have buckled to international pressure is, of course, good news — though it comes too late for Orlando Zapata.

Zapata was a plumber and bricklayer who committed what the Castro brothers consider a treasonous act — he joined a political group that believes in freedom, the Alternative Republic Movement. After his 2002 arrest and conviction for "disrespect, public disorder, and resistance," he was repeatedly abused and beaten in prison.

Displaying a flair for irony, he demanded treatment comparable to that which Fidel Castro endured when imprisoned by Fulgencio Batista in 1953. Instead, he was further mistreated and his prison sentence was lengthened from three to 36 years.

Zapata's only weapon was his own suffering, but his demand was not for himself. He fasted for the release of 22 other ill political prisoners. Upon his death in February, at age 42, there was a quick

splash of negative headlines, and he was forgotten. A few weeks later, President Obama lifted the travel ban for those with relatives on the island and lifted other restrictions on contacts between Cuba and the United States.

Farinas, a psychologist, Cuban army veteran, and political "subversive," took up the gauntlet with his own hunger strike that now seems to have succeeded. "Seems" is the operative word since the Castro regime has often promised reforms without follow through. Even by its explicit terms, the government's agreement is to release only five prisoners immediately and the rest over the course of the next three or four months. All will leave the country.

Why the wait? Presumably, it's because the regime needs time to make its prisoners presentable. Bruises must heal. Weight must be gained. That sort of thing.

Here is a description of Cuban prison conditions from "The Black Book of Communism":

"Violence began with the interrogation ... Prisoners were forced to climb a staircase wearing shoes filled with lead and were then thrown back down the stairs. ... Working conditions were extremely harsh, and prisoners worked almost naked ... As a punishment, 'troublemakers' were forced to cut grass with their teeth or to sit in latrine trenches for hours at a time."

Cuba is a last redoubt of communism. Because Fidel Castro clings to life and to power, a veil still covers the island. Castro's crimes have scarcely begun to be revealed as he dodders toward a comfortable death in his bed. But enough, more than enough, is known. Between 1959 and the present, more than 100,000 Cubans have suffered in Castro's prisons

and camps (some just for homosexuals). An estimated 17,000 were shot. Two million fled. Another 100,000 died attempting to escape.

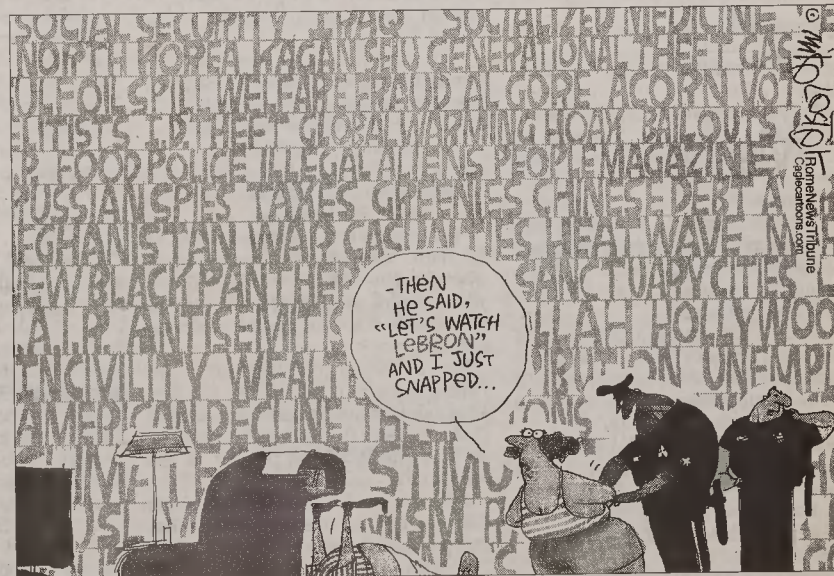
All of this is known and has been for decades. And yet the image of Che Guevara continues to sell on t-shirts and posters around the globe.

Now Congress seems poised to lift all travel bans on Cuba and provide a tourism boon to the regime. A broad spectrum of Americans approves the legislation, including Republicans and Democrats, farmers and business interests. Fine. It may serve the interests of freedom at this point to permit trade with Cuba (though one suspects that the Chamber of Commerce is interested in the business angle). What is galling is to hear one and all describe the 50-year embargo as a "failed policy."

In what sense did it fail? We declined to help or support a criminal regime in any way. Yes, Castro claimed that his island's persistent and desperate poverty was due to the embargo, but so what? Anyone with eyes could see that Castro traded freely with Canada, Mexico, Latin America, Europe, Russia, China, and virtually everyone else. His special relationship with the USSR and later Venezuela is all that kept Cubans from starving like their ideological brothers in North Korea.

The day is coming when the true scope of Castro's reign of terror will be fully revealed. Perhaps then we will take some grim satisfaction in having attempted, however unsuccessfully, to strangle the beast.

To find out more about Mona Charen and read features by other Creators Syndicate columnists and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate web page at www.creators.com.



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