

Soldiers' sacrifice best honoured by good policy: get out now

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The Age

8 June 2011

P. 17

For the second week in a row, just hours after the ramp ceremonies for the previous casualties in Afghanistan, the dreadful news came through. Another Australian soldier was dead, shot and killed by insurgents while standing guard in Helmand province — a long way from the training mission in Oruzgan that we're told is so vital to our success.

The grim ritual is now on loop: the solemn Defence press conference, revelations of heartbreaking details, tearful testimony of bravery and sacrifice, a ramp ceremony, a funeral, some carefully chosen words of sympathy from Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her colleagues, and, finally, their cynical reaffirmation of Australia's commitment to a futile war that was lost long ago.

Australia has now lost 27 lives in Afghanistan. At the current rate, Australia stands to lose more than 60 soldiers by the time the mission is due to end some time around mid-2014. And for what?

Osama bin Laden is dead. Al-Qaeda barely exists in Afghanistan. The country in 2014 will look much like it does today, just as it looks today much like it did three, four or five years ago. The central government will be weak and corrupt, its security services drug-addled and littered with elements whose loyalty is at best dubious. The Taliban will exist and, with Pakistani support, may even enjoy a more prominent political role. Warlords, drug lords, tribesman and bandits will be fending for themselves.

In 2014, the great power struggle for Afghanistan is likely to be even more intense. Pakistan and India will continue to jostle there to keep each other off balance. The inevitable result will be more of the same carnage.

The only difference for Australia is that many more of our fellow countrymen will be dead, wounded and maimed. More still will bear the mental scars of their prolonged exposure to war.

Australia is one of the largest non-NATO contributors to the war, having had an almost continual presence in the conflict since 2001.

Our soldiers have fought bravely in perilous situations. They have captured and killed scores of Taliban commanders. Others have helped build the Afghan nation with trade skills and training. They have achieved Australia's mission, narrowly defined, allowing Canberra to demonstrate its status as a loyal and steadfast ally to the United States. They should now come home.

Despite our best efforts, and those of our allies, the broader situation on the ground is hopeless. This is not due to incompetence or lack of heart, but because of the profound asymmetry of the conflict. Whereas the Taliban can win just by surviving, a coalition victory requires the fulfilment of a dizzying array of tasks, including building up Afghan security forces, clamping down on corruption and administering large swathes of territory without alienating the Afghan population.

Any one of these tasks is a formidable undertaking. Taken together, and in the face of continued resistance, they've proven insurmountable.

Other countries have been quicker to recognise this than we have. The Dutch have gone. Canada will be out soon. Germany begins its withdrawal in December. And Poland and Lithuania have committed to leaving in 2012.

Even Barack Obama has outlined a tentative time-frame for America's withdrawal, beginning in July this year.

The fight will continue for some time yet. But make no mistake: it's a matter of time before a deal is cut, whether formally or not, that brings the Taliban into government and cedes to them vast power and territory — most likely in the euphemistic name of "reconciliation" or "reintegration". In light of all this bad news, what should the Gillard government do?

The government needs to accept that in a situation such as Afghanistan — where no vital interests are at stake, where the very idea of success is elusive, and where, with some adroit diplomacy, the alliance will be on solid footing regardless of what we do — the preservation of even a small number of Australian lives is paramount.

As such, the PM will need to negotiate a compressed time-frame for Australia's withdrawal and new rules that minimise the risks to Australian personnel.

The combat element of Australia's contingent should be taken out of the line of fire immediately and sent home for a well-earned break. The bulk of Australia's forces, those involved in training the Afghan army, could stay a fraction longer while their withdrawal is negotiated, but with much tighter restrictions on the kinds of activities they perform. That would mean no patrolling dangerous roads, no defusing roadside bombs and training Afghan forces only from inside the base.

For Gillard, all of this will require real courage, leadership and diplomatic skill. The army, whose professional honour code stresses forging on at all costs, will do its best to resist any change. For others, even slight adjustments to Australia's role will elicit cries that the PM risks ruining the alliance. She should pay no attention.

The grim spectacle of military funerals in recent weeks is a sad reminder of the burden that a small few continue to accept on behalf of so many. However, the best way to honour the sacrifice of our soldiers is not to sacrifice more of them, to lay wreaths, march down the street or observe minutes of silence. Rather, it's to get the policy right — to make sure that we don't sacrifice any more life than is absolutely necessary to our national well-being. That means getting out of Afghanistan.

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