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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Two Wrongs Make Another Fiasco

By [FRANK RICH](#)

THOSE of us who love F. Scott Fitzgerald must acknowledge that he did get one big thing wrong. There are second acts in American lives. (Just ask Marion Barry, or William Shatner.) The real question is whether everyone deserves a second act. Perhaps the most surreal aspect of our great Afghanistan debate is the Beltway credence given to the ravings of the unrepentant blunderers who dug us into this hole in the first place.

Let's be clear: Those who demanded that America divert its troops and treasure from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2002 and 2003 — when there was no Qaeda presence in Iraq — bear responsibility for the chaos in Afghanistan that ensued. Now they have the nerve to imperiously and tardily demand that America increase its 68,000-strong presence in Afghanistan to clean up their mess — even though the number of Qaeda insurgents there has dwindled to fewer than 100, [according to the president's national security adviser](#), Gen. James Jones.

But why let facts get in the way? Just as these hawks insisted that Iraq was “the central front in the war on terror” when the central front was Afghanistan, so they insist that Afghanistan is the central front now that it has migrated to Pakistan. When the day comes for them to anoint Pakistan as the central front, it will be proof positive that Al Qaeda has consolidated its hold on Somalia and Yemen.

To appreciate this crowd's spotless record of failure, consider its noisiest standard-bearer, John McCain. He made every wrong judgment call that could be made after 9/11. It's not just that he echoed the Bush administration's [constant innuendos that Iraq collaborated with Al Qaeda's attack on America](#). Or that he hyped the faulty W.M.D. evidence to the hysterical extreme of [fingering Iraq for the anthrax attacks in Washington](#). Or that [he promised we would win the Iraq war “easily.”](#) Or that he predicted that the Sunnis and the Shiites would “probably get along” in post-Saddam Iraq because there was “[not a history of clashes](#)” between them.

What's more mortifying still is that McCain was just as wrong about Afghanistan and Pakistan. He routinely minimized or dismissed the growing threats in both countries over the past six years, lest they draw American resources away from his pet crusade in Iraq.

Two years after 9/11 [he was claiming](#) that we could “in the long term” somehow “muddle through” in Afghanistan. (He now has the chutzpah to [accuse President Obama of wanting to “muddle through” there](#).) Even after the insurgency accelerated in Afghanistan in 2005, [McCain was still bragging about the “remarkable success” of that prematurely abandoned war](#). In 2007, some 15 months after the Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf signed a phony “truce” [ceding territory on the Afghanistan border to terrorists](#),

McCain [gave Musharraf a thumb's up](#). As a presidential candidate in the summer of 2008, McCain cared so little about Afghanistan [it didn't even merit a mention among the national security planks on his campaign Web site](#).

He takes no responsibility for any of this. [Asked by Katie Couric last week](#) about our failures in Afghanistan, McCain spoke as if he were an innocent bystander: "I think the reason why we didn't do a better job on Afghanistan is our attention — either rightly or wrongly — was on Iraq." As Tonto says to the Lone Ranger, "What do you mean 'we,' white man?"

Along with his tribunes in Congress and the punditocracy, Wrong-Way McCain still presumes to give America its marching orders. With his Senate brethren in the Three Amigos, Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham, [he took to The Wall Street Journal's op-ed page](#) to assert that "we have no choice" but to go all-in on Afghanistan — rightly or wrongly, presumably — just as we had in Iraq. Why? "The U.S. walked away from Afghanistan once before, following the Soviet collapse," they wrote. "The result was 9/11. We must not make that mistake again."

This shameless argument assumes — perhaps correctly — that no one in this country remembers anything. So let me provide a reminder: We already did make that mistake again when we walked away from Afghanistan to invade Iraq in 2003 — and we did so at the Three Amigos' urging. Then, too, they promoted their strategy as a way of preventing another 9/11 — even though no one culpable for 9/11 was in Iraq. Now we're being asked to pay for their mistake by squandering stretched American resources in yet another country where Al Qaeda has largely vanished.

To make the case, the Amigos and their fellow travelers conflate the Taliban with Al Qaeda much as they long conflated Saddam's regime with Al Qaeda. But as Rajiv Chandrasekaran of The Washington Post [reported on Thursday](#), American intelligence officials now say that "there are few, if any, links between Taliban commanders in Afghanistan today and senior Al Qaeda members" — a far cry from the tight Taliban-bin Laden alliance of 2001.

The rhetorical sleights of hand in the hawks' arguments don't end there. If you listen carefully to McCain and his neocon echo chamber, you'll notice certain ties. President Obama better make his decision by tomorrow, or Armageddon (if not mushroom clouds) will arrive. We must "win" in Afghanistan — but victory is left vaguely defined. That's because we will never build a functioning state in a country where there has never been one. Nor can we score a victory against the world's dispersed, stateless terrorists by getting bogged down in a hellish landscape that contains few of them.

Most tellingly, perhaps, those clamoring for an escalation in Afghanistan avoid mentioning the name of the country's president, Hamid Karzai, or the fraud-filled August election that conclusively delegitimized his government. To do so would require explaining why America should place its troops in alliance with a corrupt partner knee-deep in the narcotics trade. As long as Karzai and the election are airbrushed out of history, it can be disingenuously argued that nothing has changed on the ground since Obama's inauguration and that he has no right to revise his earlier judgment that Afghanistan is a "war of necessity."

Those demanding more combat troops for Afghanistan also avoid defining the real costs. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the war was running [\\$2.6 billion a month in Pentagon expenses alone](#) even

before Obama [added 20,000 troops this year](#). Surely fiscal conservatives like McCain and Graham who [rant about deficits being “generational theft”](#) have an obligation to explain what the added bill will be on an Afghanistan escalation and where the additional money will come from. But that would require them to use the dread words “sacrifice” and “higher taxes” when they want us to believe that this war, like Iraq, would be cost-free.

The real troop numbers are similarly elusive. Pre-emptively railing against the prospect of “half measures” by Obama, Lieberman [asked MSNBC’s Andrea Mitchell rhetorically last week](#) whether it would be “real counterinsurgency” or “counterinsurgency light.” But the measure Lieberman endorses — Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s reported recommendation of 40,000 additional troops — is itself counterinsurgency light. In his definitive [recent field manual on the subject](#), Gen. David Petraeus stipulates that real counterinsurgency requires 20 to 25 troops for each thousand residents. That comes out, conservatively, to 640,000 troops for Afghanistan (population, 32 million). Some 535,000 American troops couldn’t achieve a successful counterinsurgency in South Vietnam, which had half Afghanistan’s population and just over a quarter of its land area.

Lieberman suggested to Mitchell that we could train an enhanced, centralized Afghan army to fill any gaps. In how many decades? The existing Afghan “army” is small, illiterate, impoverished and as factionalized as the government. For his part, McCain likes to justify McChrystal’s number of 40,000 by imbuing it with the supposedly magical powers of the “surge” in Iraq. But it’s rewriting history to say that the “surge” brought “victory” to Iraq. What it did was stanch the catastrophic bleeding in an unnecessary war McCain had helped gin up. Lest anyone forget, we still don’t know who has “won” in Iraq.

Afghanistan is not Iraq. It is poorer, even larger and more populous, more fragmented and less historically susceptible to foreign intervention. Even if the countries were interchangeable, the wars are not. No one-size surge fits all. President Bush sent the additional troops to Iraq only after Sunni leaders in Anbar Province soured on Al Qaeda and reached out for American support. There is no equivalent “Anbar Awakening” in Afghanistan. Most Afghans “don’t feel threatened by the Taliban in their daily lives” and “aren’t asking for American protection,” [reported Richard Engel of NBC News last week](#). After eight years of war, many see Americans as occupiers.

Americans, meanwhile, want to see the fine print after eight years of fiasco with little accounting. While McCain and company remain frozen where they were in 2001, many of their fellow citizens have learned from the Iraq tragedy. [Polls persistently find](#) that the country is skeptical about what should and can be accomplished in Afghanistan. They voted for Obama not least because they wanted a new post-9/11 vision of national security, and they will not again be so easily bullied by the blustering hawks’ doomsday scenarios. That gives our deliberating president both the time and the political space to get this long war’s second act right.

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