

Comment by Michael C H Jones

After nine years of war in Afghanistan this month June is already "the deadliest single month for US-led foreign forces" with 79 casualties including 5 Australians. The Taliban seem to be on the offensive and not the defensive.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates asserts "I believe we are making some progress" but that still hasn't secured cities such as Kandahar let alone the surrounding provinces. Moreover it is commonly stated that the corruption of the Kabul Government would cause it to collapse if foreign forces were withdrawn anytime soon.

Three questions come to mind, two US related and one philosophical.

Firstly what is likely to be the reaction domestically and internationally to a perceived US defeat similar to the withdrawal from Vietnam in the early 1970s. The Afghanistan-isation of the War in West/Central Asia is unlikely to be any more successful than the Vietnam-isation of another War in Indo-China forty years ago.

However this time the domestic popular reaction in the USA towards Government in Washington and its alleged incompetence is likely to be far more ferocious. The attitude of sacked General Stanley McChrystal and his 'Team America' staff towards President Obama and civilian authority is very ominous. I could easily see General McChrystal as a Republican Vice Presidential candidate in 2012 or 2016.

Similarly those determined to undermine the US and its Allies internationally will be considerably emboldened where ever. Future land wars in Asia will be avoided with a reliance on drones and 'client-state' mercenaries. This will not be a good look for the Democracies and certainly no incentive for governments to move in that direction. The actions of China and Russia will be, perhaps, to fill the US vacuum but for the benefit of their own political systems.

The philosophical issue is perhaps most important. What is the definition of 'political murder'. Could a case ever be mounted in an International Court against a Government and/or Minister for Defence/Foreign Affairs for sending men and women to war situations where death was a distinct probability knowing full well that the conflict was not winable and/or the resources to win that conflict would not be provided. In other words do the same rules for political honesty and morality that operate domestically - virtually nil - also apply internationally in war situations?

The Liberal Party of Australia was never held accountable for the deaths of over 500 Australians during the Vietnam War. Will both the Howard and Rudd/Gillard Governments be held accountable for the deaths of Australians in Afghanistan. I agree these are very unpalatable questions.