Turning the Tide in Afghanistan
An Address by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (ID-CT)
The Brookings Institution
January 29, 2009

Thank you so much, Strobe, for that kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be back at the Brookings Institution, which has flourished under your leadership. Thank you also, Michael O'Hanlon, for moderating this afternoon's discussion, and for the discerning and thoughtful scholarship you have contributed to so many of our critical national debates.

Nine days ago, Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States, at a moment in history when our country faces unprecedented economic problems. But the world will not allow our new President or our country to concentrate solely on our domestic challenges, critical as they are. As the President said recently, we remain a nation at war, with multiple simultaneous crises confronting us abroad.

One of the most important challenges the Obama administration has inherited is Afghanistan, where every year, for several years, the security situation has worsened. The insurgents have grown in strength, size, and sophistication, and have expanded their influence over an increasing swath of territory, including provinces on the outskirts of Kabul that were until recently secure.

I visited Afghanistan twice last year, in January and again last month. During one of those visits, an official of our military coalition there tried to reassure me that, whenever the Taliban stands and fights, we defeat them. This may be true.

But as students of counterinsurgency know, it is also insufficient. The center of gravity of the fight in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, is not our ability to kill insurgents on the battlefield, but to provide sustained security for the population. By that measure, today, we are failing in Afghanistan.

Reversing Afghanistan's slide into insecurity will not come quickly, easily, or cheaply. On the contrary, conditions are likely to get worse before they get better, and the path ahead will be long, costly, and hard.

But as General David Petraeus put it two years ago about another battlefield: "hard is not hopeless." In my remarks today, I want to speak, first, about why—despite the missteps and difficulties in Afghanistan—I am still confident we can turn the tide there; second, about how we can do so; and third, about why I believe we must do so.

Why We Can Win

Let me begin with a few reasons for my cautious confidence about our ability to ultimately prevail in this hard war.

The first is Iraq. Simply put, two years ago, we were losing there. Today, that situation has completely reversed. And although the gains we have achieved are not irreversible, and we need to be careful and responsible in the pace of our withdrawal, the success we have achieved in Iraq means that more forces will be available for Afghanistan—in particular, southern Afghanistan—and that our military will deploy from Iraq to Afghanistan with high morale, great experience, and real confidence.

Seven years ago, when we first went into Afghanistan, the American military was not built for the kind of fight we are in now. But through the crucible of war, it has transformed itself into the most capable counterinsurgency force in history. And although Iraq and Afghanistan are very different places, many of the same guiding principles and lessons of counterinsurgency do apply to both theaters—most importantly, the primary need to secure the civilian population.

Afghanistan itself is another reason for hope. There's no question that much about this country is very hard and very complex. It is large and remote, with limited infrastructure, harsh terrain, and some of the most extreme poverty in the world.

Yet despite its difficulty and complexity, we also have advantages in Afghanistan. Afghans are a proud people with a long history. Although their frustration with our coalition is growing, they are not eager to return to the tyranny and poverty of life under the Taliban. On the contrary, they want schools, medicine, roads, and other basic services, not to mention cell phones and music—all of which the Taliban try to deny them. That is why the insurgents have not won the support of the Afghan people—and why they have been forced to resort to the self-defeating tactics of cruelty and coercion.

In a recent article in Foreign Policy magazine, counterinsurgency experts Nate Fick and John Nagl put it well: "Afghans are not committed xenophobes, obsessed with driving out the coalition… Afghans are not tired of the Western presence; they are frustrated with Western incompetence."

In addition to the gulf between the Afghan people and the insurgents, there are also divisions among the insurgents themselves we can exploit. Some like Al Qaeda and many Taliban are committed extremists who will fight to the last suicide bombing, but others have taken up arms in Afghanistan for reasons that are far more opportunistic. And many will not hesitate to switch sides, if they conclude they are headed for defeat and can get a better deal by aligning themselves with the government and our coalition instead.

That, after all, is how most insurgencies end: not when every last insurgent is killed or captured, but when a critical mass comes to the conclusion they are not going to win, and that they'd be better off suing for peace.

A third reason for confidence about our prospects in Afghanistan is here in America, and in the new administration and Congress. President Obama has made very clear that this is a war he intends to win and he has moved swiftly to take command of it.

He has not wavered in his pledge to deploy more troops to the region, and last Thursday, on his second full day in office, traveled to the State Department to stand alongside Secretary Clinton as they announced the appointment of Ambassador Richard Holbrooke as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

My advice to anyone who is hedging their bets in South Asia: the combination of Dick Holbrooke and Dave Petraeus, led by Hillary Clinton and Bob Gates, is not a team I would bet against.

Perhaps most important of all, seven years on, the war in Afghanistan—unlike the war in Iraq—continues to command bipartisan support in Congress and from a solid majority of the American people. These are considerable advantages.

How We Can Win

That, then, is the good news. The bad news is that—even if we do everything better in Afghanistan, and we are far from that point today—it is still going to be hard as hell to turn around.

Nor do we have the luxury of time. Afghanistan is slated to hold presidential elections later this year. The insurgents see the vote as a window of opportunity and will try to derail it, in the hope of discrediting the Afghan government and our coalition. We must prevent that from happening, and reverse this dynamic, so that the election instead becomes a breakthrough for improved security, development, and governance across the country.

That is one of several reasons why the decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan this year is both right and important. As the Bush administration learned the hard way in Iraq, counterinsurgency is manpower-intensive. Our military coalition is undermanned and overstretched in Afghanistan today.

However, as we also learned in Iraq, successful counterinsurgency requires more than a heavy military footprint. In fact, our allied coalition has already doubled the number of troops in Afghanistan over the last two years. But at the same time, security has worsened.

That is why we must match the coming surge in troop strength in Afghanistan with at least five other surges that are equally important to success.

A Surge in Strategic Coherence

First, we need a surge in the strategic coherence of our war effort.

The problem in Afghanistan today is not only that we have devoted too few resources, but that the resources we have devoted are being applied incoherently. In contrast to Iraq, where General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker came together two years ago to

develop a nationwide civil-military campaign plan to defeat the insurgency, there is still no such integrated nationwide counterinsurgency plan for Afghanistan. This is an unacceptable failure.

It is also the predictable consequence of a fragmented military command structure under NATO, an even more incoherent civilian effort, and no unified leadership between the two. This is no way to run a counterinsurgency.

This serious problem, paradoxically, results from something good: the willingness of so many countries and organizations to contribute to this war effort. Many of our allies have fought bravely and nobly and to the very limit of their capacity in Afghanistan; we should be grateful for their sacrifices. We should also be grateful for the courage of the political leaders of our NATO allies who have contributed to Afghanistan despite the unpopularity of this war in their countries.

But we owe them and NATO more than our gratitude. We owe them success. And that, in turn, requires an integrated campaign plan. It is time for the United States to provide the stronger leadership necessary to ensure that we get one.

Ambassador Holbrooke's appointment as Special Representative is a big step in the right direction, and I know that both he and General Petraeus are very focused on the strategic incoherence of our war effort. Congress must also be a strong ally in this.

If we are to support the dispatch of tens of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan on a long term basis, it must be as part of a multifaceted nationwide campaign plan that we are confident will work. Indeed, it is unclear to me how we can justify sending 30,000 additional troops in the absence of a plan that can justify why this is the necessary number of forces to succeed.

A Civilian Surge

Second, we must insist that any military surge in Afghanistan is matched by a surge in civilian capacity. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul needs to be transformed and expanded, with the necessary resources and the explicit direction to work side-by-side with the military at every level. This should include co-locating the U.S. ambassador and the coalition commander in the same headquarters, as was the case until a few years ago.

Civilian capacity must also be ramped up outside our embassy—at the provincial, district, and village levels, embedding non-military experts among our troops as they move in. Provincial Reconstruction Teams need to be expanded in number, size, and sophistication, with seasoned experts pulled from across the U.S. government and the private sector.

As Ambassador Crocker can attest, getting the appropriate civilian talent from a recalcitrant federal bureaucracy for an unconventional and dangerous assignment is a difficult task. But it is absolutely critical to the success of any counterinsurgency

campaign. In Afghanistan, it will require steadfast leadership, constant advocacy, and ruthless determination from top decision-makers in the Obama administration, and from Congress.

An Afghan Surge

Third, as the United States steps up its commitments in Afghanistan, it is equally important that we help the Afghans surge with us.

A year ago, I called for a major expansion in the size of the Afghan National Army. I am encouraged that this is now happening. But more is required.

We need to further expand the Afghan National Army, beyond the current goal of 134,000 troops, to at least 200,000 troops, and equip them well. We must also take a fresh look at how our forces partner with the other, more neglected branches of the Afghan National Security Forces, in particular the police and the internal intelligence service.

We must also take tough action to combat the pervasive corruption that is destroying the legitimacy of the Afghan government and fueling the insurgency. This requires more than threatening specific leaders on an ad hoc basis. Because the problem is systemic, it requires a systemic response.

We must roll back corruption by strengthening Afghan governance and development comprehensively—both from top-down and bottom-up. The truth is, in the last seven years, we have only invested in one Afghan state institution in a patient, resource-intensive, and system-wide way: the Afghan army.

And the ANA, as a consequence, is emerging as a capable, courageous, professional, multi-ethnic force. If we want other Afghan institutions to operate this way, we need to make similarly focused, long-term investments in them. If we can build an army of 200,000 that works, we should be able to build a civil service of 20,000 that also works.

To help develop Afghanistan's human capacity, we should also work with our allies to establish a major scholarship program to bring thousands of Afghans students and professionals to the United States and other coalition countries every year—much as we did with South Korea in the 1950s, when that country was still mired in poverty.

We also need to invest in proven Afghan-led programs that will complement our campaign plan at the local level. Rather than funding a parallel government in Kabul through foreign NGOs and contractors that buy up the best Afghan human talent and detract from the ability of the actual Afghan government to do its job, we should be supporting efforts like the National Solidarity Program, which empower Afghan communities by offering them grants to design and implement their own development projects.

And instead of putting forward these projects piecemeal, the United States should bundle them together in a large-scale, ten-year plan of assistance for governance and development. The Afghan government in return would need to accept tough, specific benchmarks on its performance and progress. It would be a policy of "more for more."

A Regional Surge

Fourth, as many have observed, we cannot deal with Afghanistan in a vacuum. That is why we also need a surge in our regional strategy.

Almost all of Afghanistan's neighbors are active in some way inside the country. Some of this is positive. For instance, it is a good thing when a foreign company invests in Afghanistan, or when a foreign government provides aid. But it is a very different matter when a neighboring state gives weapons to insurgents, or otherwise treats Afghanistan as a chessboard on which to pursue its geopolitical ambitions.

Part of the solution must be to "harden" Afghanistan against malign interference from outside by strengthening Afghan institutions at both the national and local levels so the country becomes less vulnerable to foreign interference.

The United States should also explore the possibility of signing a bilateral defense pact with Afghanistan that would include explicit security guarantees.

Some of Afghanistan's neighbors and some Afghans are hedging their bets because they fear what will happen "the day after" America grows tired and abandons the region, as we did once before. Nothing will put an end to that dangerous uncertainty better than a long-term American security commitment to Afghanistan.

A Political Surge

Fifth and perhaps most importantly, success in Afghanistan requires a sustained, realistic political and public commitment to this mission here at home.

This was brought home to me in December when I visited Forward Operating Base Bastion, which will become one of the major logistical hubs when American forces begin to flow into southern Afghanistan later this year. A great American officer I met there put in very blunt terms exactly what this meant.

"I asked you to come here," he told me, "because six months from now, American soldiers are going to be dying here, and I want you to understand why."

We have an urgent responsibility to prepare our public for this reality, and to make the public case why it is necessary. Before the casualties begin to rise, before the old patterns of partisanship return to Washington, this is a moment for all of us—Congress and the White House, Democrats and Republicans—to step forward and recommit ourselves

publicly and unambiguously to this fight. There are many competing demands on our attention right now, but there are few more important to our future than this.

Why We Must Win

Indeed, there are already voices on both the left and the right murmuring the word "quagmire."

They say Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, that we should abandon any hope of nation-building there, and that President Obama should rethink his pledge to deploy additional forces.

Why, then, is this wrong? Why should we send tens of thousands of our loved ones to a remote country on the far side of the world?

The most direct answer is that Afghanistan is the frontline of the global ideological and military war we are waging with Islamist extremism. Afghanistan is where the attacks of 9/11 were plotted, where al Qaeda made its sanctuary under the Taliban, and where they will do so again if given the chance.

It is also because, although Afghanistan is remote, it is in the heart of a region in which we do have vital national security interests. Getting Afghanistan moving in the right direction will not solve every problem in South Asia, from the terrorist safe haven in the FATA to the threat of nuclear weapons slipping into the hands of terrorists. But our defeat there will make every problem there worse and harder to solve.

And finally it is because, in Afghanistan, we have the opportunity to strike a powerful blow to our terrorist enemies—both through our military power and through our good works.

There is no question, we all need to be realists when it comes to Afghanistan, both about our objectives and about the limits of our power. And I agree with Secretary Gates that we need to have "modest expectations" about the near term in Afghanistan. But we should not and cannot take any false comfort from these modest expectations, because the way ahead is still going to be extremely hard.

We all agree, our foremost interest in Afghanistan is preventing that country from becoming a terrorist safe haven. But the only realistic way to prevent that from happening is through the emergence of a stable and legitimate political order in Afghanistan, backed by capable indigenous security forces—and neither of those realities is going to materialize without a significant and sustained American commitment. This will not be easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

We should also acknowledge that, although we face many problems in Afghanistan today, none of them are because of the good things we have already helped Afghanistan achieve. None are because we have made it possible for five million Afghan children,

boys and girls, to go to school, or because child mortality has dropped 25 percent since we overthrew the Taliban in 2001, or because Afghan men and women have been able to vote in their country's first free and fair elections in history.

On the contrary, the reason we have not lost in Afghanistan—despite our many missteps—is because America still inspires hope of a better life for millions of ordinary Afghans, and has already delivered it to so many. And the reason we can defeat the extremists is because they do not.

That, ultimately, is how I believe the war on terror will end—and it will end—not because we capture or kill Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar, though we must, but because we have empowered and expanded the mainstream Muslim majority to stand up and defeat the extremist minority.

That, then, is the real opportunity and objective that is ours to seize: to make Afghanistan into a quagmire—not for America, but for al Qaeda and its fellow extremists.

I thank you, and look forward to your questions.

###