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# Flipping the Taliban

How to Win in Afghanistan

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After seven years of the Bush administration's neglect and mismanagement of Afghanistan, President Barack Obama was prompt in ordering the deployment of 21,000 more U.S. troops. Over 55,000 U.S. soldiers will soon be on the ground there. The replacement of General David McKiernan with General Stanley McChrystal at the head of U.S. operations in Afghanistan is also intended to increase force projection there. The United States' allies are under pressure to follow suit, if not with combat troops, then at least with training and money. All are concerned about the Taliban's recent success at persuading thousands of young Afghan men to sacrifice themselves to fight the foreign occupation. The Taliban's followers have pushed the Afghan government and its allies out of large swaths of the countryside and crept up to the gates of Kabul, bringing an alternative administration and sharia courts to the vacated areas. The Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar recently offered, ironically, to give safe passage to NATO forces that choose to leave the country, just as the mujahideen offered safe passage to Soviet troops two decades ago.

Although sending more troops is necessary to tip the balance of power against the insurgents, the move will have a lasting impact only if it is accompanied by a political "surge," a committed effort to persuade large groups of Taliban fighters to put down their arms and give up the fight. Both the recent interagency white paper on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan and Obama's March 27 speech announcing a new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan acknowledged that integrating reconcilable insurgents will be a key complement to the military buildup. Yet U.S. policymakers have not adequately developed a vision of how to achieve reconciliation. Admitting their lack of knowledge about the precise character of the insurgency, they equate reconciliation with merely cajoling Taliban foot soldiers into crossing over to the U.S. side.

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