
Capt. Matthew P. Hoh (ret.)

Why Are We Expending Lives in a Civil War?

On Sept. 10, 2009, retired U.S. Marine Captain Matthew P. Hoh, a senior civilian representative for the State Department in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, submitted the following letter upon resigning from his post. Not made public until late October, Hoh's letter has helped open the floodgates of opposition to the "surge" in Afghanistan. He has given a number of interviews and speeches since his letter became public. Here are excerpts:

It is with great regret and disappointment I submit my resignation from my appointment as a Political Officer in the Foreign Service and my post as the Senior Civilian Representative for the U.S. Government in Zabul Province. I have served six of the previous ten years in service to our country overseas, to include deployment as a U.S. Marine officer and Department of Defense civilian in the Euphrates and Tigris River Valleys of Iraq in 2004-2005 and 2006-2007. I did not enter into this position lightly or with any undue expectations nor did I believe my assignment would be without sacrifice, hardship or difficulty. However, in the course of my five months of service in Afghanistan, in both Regional Commands East and South, I have lost understanding of and confidence in the strategic purposes of the United States' presence in Afghanistan. I have doubts and reservations about our current strategy and planned future strategy, but my resignation is based not upon how we are pursuing this war, but why and to what end. *To put [it] simply: I fail to see the value or the worth in continued U.S. casualties or expenditures of resources in support of the Afghan government in what is, truly, a 35-year old civil war.* [Emphasis in original.]

This fall will mark the eighth year of U.S. combat, governance and development operations within Afghanistan. Next fall, the United States' occupation will equal in length the Soviet Union's own physical involvement in Afghanistan. Like the Soviets, we con-

tinue to secure and bolster a failing state, while encouraging an ideology and system of government unknown and unwanted by its people.

If the history of Afghanistan is one great stage play, the United States is no more than a supporting actor, among several previously, in a tragedy that not only pits tribes, valleys, clans, villages and families against one another, but, from at least the end of King Zahir Shah's reign, has violently and savagely pitted the urban, secular, educated and modern of Afghanistan against the rural, religious, illiterate and traditional. It is this latter group that composes and supports the Pashtun insurgency. The Pashtun insurgency, which is composed of multiple, seemingly infinite, local groups, is fed by what is perceived by the Pashtun people as a continued and sustained assault, going back centuries, on Pashtun land, culture, traditions and religion by internal and external enemies. The U.S. and NATO presence and operations in Pashtun valleys and villages, as well as Afghan army and police units that are led and composed of non-Pashtun soldiers and police, provide an occupation force against which the insurgency is justified. In both RC East and South, I have observed that the bulk of the insurgency fights not for the white banner of the Taliban, but rather against the presence of foreign soldiers and taxes imposed by an unrepresentative government in Kabul...

The Afghan government's failings, particularly when weighed against the sacrifice of American lives and dollars, appear legion and metastatic...

Our support for this kind of government, coupled with a misunderstanding of the insurgency's true nature, reminds me horribly of our involvement with South Vietnam...

I find specious the reasons we ask for bloodshed and sacrifice from our young men and women in Afghanistan. If honest, our stated strategy of securing Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda resurgence or regrouping would require us to additionally invade and occupy western Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, etc...

Eight years into war, no nation has ever known a more dedicated, well trained, experienced and disciplined military as the U.S. Armed Forces. I do not believe any military force has ever been tasked with such a complex, opaque and Sisyphean mission as the U.S. military has received in Afghanistan. The tactical proficiency and performance of our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines is unmatched and unquestioned. However, this is not the European or Pacific theaters of World War II, but rather is a war for which our leaders, uniformed, civilian and elected, have inadequately prepared and re-

sourced our men and women. Our forces, devoted and faithful, have been committed to conflict in an indefinite and unplanned manner that has become a cavalier, politically expedient and Pollyannaish misadventure....

...Thousands of our men and women have returned home with physical and mental wounds, some that will never heal or will only worsen with time. The dead return only in bodily form to be received by families who must be reassured their dead have sacrificed for a purpose worthy of futures lost, love vanished, and promised dreams unkept. I have lost confidence such assurances can anymore be made. As such, I submit my resignation.