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HEADLINE: A job half finished

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BODY:

* The Iraq War distracted us from finishing what we started. Unless we recommit ourselves, a larger crisis looms

Of the many critical recommendations made by the 9/11 commission, none may be more important than what the commission had to say about Afghanistan, the country that was, in the words of the final report, "the incubator for al-Qaida and for the 9/11 attacks."

The 9/11 commission found that, almost three years after U.S.-led forces removed the Taliban regime from power, "grave challenges" remain. "Taliban and al-Qaida fighters have regrouped. . . . Warlords control much of the country beyond Kabul. . . . Economic development remains a distant hope. . . . The narcotics trade is again booming." Some warn, the commission reported, that Afghanistan is near "the brink of chaos." The recent deadly bombing in Kabul by the Taliban -- the forerunner of a campaign to disrupt the country's Oct. 9 presidential election -- underscores this dire prediction. America must not let this occur. Afghanistan cannot become once again a sanctuary for international terrorism and drug trafficking. The 9/11 commission therefore is right to recommend that the United States and the international community should signal a renewed and strengthened long-term commitment to Afghanistan and redouble efforts "to secure the country, disarm militias, and curtail the age of warlord rule."

Unfortunately, since its initial success in toppling the Taliban, the Bush administration has mishandled Afghanistan badly. Its reliance on local Afghan warlords, in many cases the same warlords who made Afghanistan a failed state in the 1990s, very likely allowed Osama bin Laden to escape at Tora Bora. The administration compounded that mistake by diverting critical intelligence and military resources to Iraq before the mission was accomplished in Afghanistan despite warnings from many concerned U.S. experts.

A successful plan for this key battleground in the war on terror includes moving on many fronts simultaneously in close cooperation with our partners in the international community:

* Expand security: After resisting pleas from the Afghan government and the United Nations for nearly two years, the Bush administration finally agreed to expand the size and mission of the International Security Assistance Force now under North Atlantic

Treaty Organization command. Additional troops from Italy and Spain will bolster security for the October presidential election. As the leading member of NATO, the United States should provide logistical and other assistance to ISAF and strongly support a longer-term expansion of NATO forces in Afghanistan stretching beyond the election period.

* Demobilize the warlords: The presence of large warlord militias -- with as many as 60,000 fighters across the country -- remains a continuing challenge to security in Afghanistan and the authority and viability of the Karzai government. The United Nations' demobilization program has been moving at a snail's pace in part because the United States has remained aloof. President Hamid Karzai recently pledged to crack down on militia commanders who resist disarmament. U.S. forces in Afghanistan (now almost 20,000) should work in tandem with the Afghan government, Japan and other partners to bolster the U.N. effort. This program -- vital to strengthening the central government and increasing security -- will fail otherwise.

* Attack the drug trade: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said recently that Afghanistan's drug problem was "too serious to ignore." Yet that is exactly what the Bush administration has done over the past two years. During that time, Afghanistan resumed its place as the world's leading producer of opium and heroin and is now in danger of becoming a narco-state. The United States should double its counternarcotics assistance to the Karzai government, develop guidelines for joint operations to destroy labs and interrupt trafficking and, with the United Nations and other partners, do more to promote alternate crops.

* Accelerate rebuilding: President George W. Bush promised a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan, but he has not delivered. In fact, the administration's budget for next year cuts reconstruction funding nearly in half. The Afghan government and the World Bank estimate reconstruction needs at \$28 billion over the next seven years. The United States should make a multiyear funding commitment to support half of that amount -- a modest \$2 billion a year -- and challenge the international community to cover the other half.

The 9/11 commission concludes that "The United States and NATO have already committed themselves to the future of the region -- wisely, as the 9/11 story shows." But the commission also warns that "failed half-measures could be worse than useless."

There must be no "half-measures" when a new administration takes office next January. Afghanistan's future -- and the national security of the United States -- depend on success. We must finish the job we have started in Afghanistan.

NOTES:

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