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GUEST VIEW

Afghanistan is America's latest folly

The word from President Barack Obama, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. Stanley McChrystal is that we need to send more troops to Afghanistan. We've heard that siren song before.

Forty years ago we heard it about Vietnam. Send more troops, send more troops, send more troops — until 55,000 of them came home in body bags.

Six years ago an American president lied to the American people about why we had to invade Iraq. Soon it was send more troops, send more troops, send more troops — until 4,300 of them were dead and tens of thousands more wounded.

Now we're hearing it about Afghanistan: Send more troops. It's the same litany, with the same dismal outcome in sight.

Of course, the numbers of dead and wounded are not the whole story. It would be different if the United States had vital interests at stake. But these are case histories of frivolous trumped-up wars, with nothing substantial to show for them.

In Vietnam, for example, we were told that it was vital to stop Communism, that if we didn't win the Communists would take over and soon China would control all of southeast Asia (the "domino" theory, remember?). Today there is a five-star Marriott Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, hundreds of American corporations do business in Vietnam and the Chinese are definitely not in control.

Iraq, that ongoing totally unnecessary tragedy, is a devastated country filled with angry Muslims who hate Americans. Granted, removing Saddam Hussein was a plus, but hardly worth all the bloodshed.

And now Afghanistan, which has never been conquered, probably never will be conquered. By the way, why are we fighting there? No one seems to know. To capture or kill Osama bin Laden? That was the original justification, but it's seldom heard any more. To establish democracy? As the current election results show, that's not very likely in the foreseeable future.

Or maybe we're there to defeat the Taliban? That we can probably do, with enough troops, if only the Taliban will stand and fight like men so we

don't have to target them with drones that kill far more civilians than insurgents.

These wars are based on at least three myths:

1. The United States has a responsibility to police all the nations of the world, to punish the bad guys, reward the good guys and establish freedom and democracy everywhere.

2. The United States is the most powerful country in the world, with invincible armed forces, and therefore we can do whatever we want to in the world.

3. The United States may not be perfect, but our motives are always pure and our goals are always good.

Like all broad, general statements, there is at least a grain of truth in each of these myths. But their overall thrust is to lead us into wars that should never be fought, to kill and maim thousands upon thousands of young American men and women (not to mention uncountable numbers of non-Americans), with very little to show for it.

It's time to stop our "warring madness," as the hymn writer put it, and take a long, hard look at a forgotten ideal: peace on earth. Not peace at any price — sometimes we have to fight — but peace as the preferred option, using diplomacy, negotiations and even economic carrots and sticks to assert legitimate American interests in the world.

In other words, let's stop rushing headlong into conflicts that can easily be avoided. But first we have to get out of Afghanistan.