

Imminently, we are told, President Obama will decide how many troops to send to Afghanistan and what their mission should be. Many are demanding that the President "listen to his General," meaning he should accede to General Stanley McChrystal's reported requests for anywhere from 30,000 to 60,000 additional forces for an effective counterinsurgency mission.

But there is another General the President should listen to – General McChrystal's boss, CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus. His published and highly regarded doctrine on counterinsurgency reveals some painful truths about what is really necessary in Afghanistan. The Petraeus Doctrine, issued in 2006, calls for 20-25 security forces (including the host nation's military and police forces) for every thousand persons. Afghanistan's population of 28.396 million would therefore theoretically require between 567,920 and 709,900 troops. Even with the Afghan Security Forces current strength of approximately 180,000 troops that's hundreds of thousands of additional U.S. and allied nation forces, not the tens of thousands that General McChrystal proposes to add.

Most analysts agree that the annual cost of a deployment to Afghanistan is \$1 billion per thousand forces. The total cost of a deployment sufficient to meet the recommendations for a successful counter-insurgent force could exceed \$500 billion (less if other countries share the burden and less if the growth of Afghanistan's security forces is accelerated).

Then, of course, there is the duration of this fight. The average successful counterinsurgency takes 15 to 20 years. But you don't need an Army manual to tell you that. Just listen to the people conducting the mission. Several years ago, I visited a remote fire base in Helmand Province and interviewed some Special Forces personnel about their counterinsurgency mission. I asked them if they had everything they needed: the supplies, the personnel, the intelligence, the support.

"We're supposed to win the hearts and minds of these people," one soldier told me. "But guess what? People change their minds and their hearts. If we're really going to give them an alternative to the Taliban, we have to protect it. And that's going to take a long time."

I agree with that soldier and with General Petraeus. I also believe that the American people deserve an honest reckoning of what will be required of their taxes, their treasury, and their war fighters. So when I hear my colleagues argue that we should listen to our Generals, I wonder if they'll like what they hear.

Five hundred thousand U.S. and allied nation troops at a \$500 billion cost over as many as 20 years just isn't sustainable. It's not remotely realistic. What is sustainable and realistic is not the counterinsurgency mission, but a counter-terrorism mission that roots out and degrades Al Qaeda wherever it threatens our interests.

Listen to our Generals? I agree. But let's listen to the whole truth. No one wants to fight a war on the cheap. And no one wants to fool the American people with cheap talk.