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Ballots over bullets

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The meaning of the recent Afghan presidential election cannot be overestimated. It should give hope to the Americans and people around the world that the greatest enemy of the ideology of radical Islam, liberty, has won a historic victory. We all need to take a deep breath, consider the meaning of Oct. 9, and after that thank the Afghan people.

Our Afghan friends over there describe a new feeling of confidence, a cheery demeanor reflected in the faces of the people on the street. They talk about the victory of ballots over bullets. Even "warlords" of all stripes participated in the election process. They realize that the Era of the Gun is coming to an end and they want to get in on the action.

But it has been so quiet in our own mainstream media: They've moved on. After the election was defined as an overall success, the TV news barely covered the story. To them, the real story would have been the disruption of the election: more on the wrong ink, voting more than once by a lot of people--any variation on the theme of election failure and the juicy story of how bad it might have looked for an incumbent U.S. president. Indeed, that's probably still the case.

The adage that victory has a thousand fathers but defeat is an orphan was reversed by the mainstream media.

How can America fight and win a war when it doesn't get to see its own victories? How good is it for the morale of our troops and their families when everything they sacrificed for is dismissed into 10 or 15 seconds or nothing on the evening news? America had the courage to go to war to liberate a people in a distant land, and America, with a serious coalition of allies, and those very people are winning the war. We, as a nation, need to pause a moment and take some credit.

In that part of the world, so central to the war on terror, Afghanistan shares long borders with both Iran, which sponsors terrorism and Pakistan, where terrorists find haven. Afghanistan is a country that was occupied by the inhuman Taliban and last but not least, it served as the home base for Osama bin Laden himself. Turning such adversity into the Oct. 9 election was no mean task.

The enemies of freedom for the Afghan people like the Taliban and al Qaeda, claiming to represent the future of Islam, those terrorists who are pulling out all the stops to disrupt democracy in both Afghanistan and Iraq, have experienced their biggest defeat to date. The symbolism for the region, with Iraq just across Iran from Afghanistan, and indeed for the whole of the Muslim world, is enormous. A very traditional Muslim society has just engaged in the democratic process and elected itself a president. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for next spring.

Can it be that Muslims love freedom like everyone else?

Of course, there is plenty of work to be done. To stay on the offensive, Afghanistan should accelerate the process of government reform, whereby those who govern are selected more for their competence in doing their job and less for their tribe or ethnicity. It can move to reduce corruption in the bureaucracy and increase transparency. The national army can be strengthened and militias demobilized. President Hamid Karzai deserves credit for his bold moves before the election to diminish some of the major non-national concentrations of military power and the results of the election will allow him to do a lot more.

Serious work remains to diminish the opium trade, a big job not only for the producing nation but for the consuming nations as well. A lot of the fight will depend on whether the Afghan government's economic policies are capable of stimulating large-scale and rapid job creation in the private sector, particularly in agriculture-related areas.

Donor-nation assistance will flow more easily and the Afghan government's attention to the economy, specific emerging tax policies, and "rule of law" issues will increase. As this article is being written, Afghanistan has a golden opportunity to create tax policies that are not only friendly to investment and economic growth but are the envy of other nations in that part of the world. A new force for economic progress, the Afghan International Chamber of Commerce, has emerged to boost such tax policies, guide the country's transition to a modern market economy and boost investment.

The thousands upon thousands of nation-building deeds performed daily across Afghanistan demand exposure to a wider public. They represent the many small steps that when taken together overwhelm the much smaller number of shootings and bomb blasts. They create an attractive landscape in which to build lives, families and businesses. They provide hope to Americans and Afghans alike who need to know what's going right not just what's going wrong.

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