

Even Warhawks Doubt Obama's Afghan Policy

by Carl Osgood

Sept. 24—When the longest-serving Republican in the House of Representatives changes his mind about supporting the war in Afghanistan, people ought to sit up and take notice, especially when that Republican also has a long record of hawkishness on U.S. military interventions around the world. Rep. C.W. “Bill” Young (R-Fla.), formerly chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and currently chair of its Defense Subcommittee, detailed his change of heart in an interview published Sept. 18 by the *Tampa Bay Times*.

“I think we should remove ourselves from Afghanistan as quickly as we can,” he said. “I just think we’re killing kids that don’t need to die.”

Even Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) is beginning to have second thoughts about the policy. “I think all options ought to be considered, including whether we have to just withdraw early, rather than have a continued bloodletting that won’t succeed,” McCain said the next day.

Young has come to the conclusion that an accelerated withdrawal may be the only way out of the disaster we’ve made for ourselves in Afghanistan. Young said that he came to his changed view from numerous discussions with wounded veterans at the Walter Reed military hospital in Bethesda, Md., and in VA hospitals. “It’s a real mess,” he says of Afghanistan. But what pushed him over the edge was a letter he received from 26-year-old Staff Sgt. Matthew S. Sitton, an Army Ranger serving with the 82nd Airborne Division in Kandahar Province in Afghanistan, who was killed in action last month.

In his letter, which Young had read into the record during a Sept. 20 hearing, Sitton wrote of his and other platoons being forced to conduct foot patrols in areas known to be infested with IEDs (improvised explosive devices) for no particular purpose, but that these patrols were causing an average of one amputee per day for the brigade that Sitton’s platoon was part of. Sitton also wrote that soldiers were being put at greater risk of bacterial and fungal infections by being forced to live in

unhygienic conditions. Young told the *Tampa Bay Times* that Sitton predicted his own death, “and what he said would happen happened.” Sitton and another soldier were killed by an IED on Aug. 2. He left behind a wife and two young children.

Young later said, in comments reported by the *Tampa Tribune* on Sept. 20, that he had written to the Army leadership and to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, about the conditions in Afghanistan that Sitton had reported. “Frankly, nothing happened until we were notified that Matt Sitton was killed in the very same field he said that they knew there were IEDs and no reason [the troops] should even be in there,” Young said. The Congressman said that, the previous week, he received a two-page classified letter from Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno, but that he rejected the letter because it didn’t have “a third page saying what do we do to fix this.”

On Sept. 20, Young chaired a hearing of his Defense Subcommittee on the problem of IEDs in Afghanistan. He told Army Lt. Gen. Michael Barbero, the director of the Pentagon’s Joint IED Defeat Office, that “when I got [Sitton’s] letter, I had heard similar stories from other wounded warriors at the hospitals. . . . I hear pretty much the same story you will read in his letter. So, it’s convinced me that there is something really needed to be done about this.”

Barbero could only offer tactical solutions to address the problem. While he made clear in his opening remarks that protective measures have resulted in reducing IED deaths in Afghanistan, the IED has become the weapon-of-choice for insurgent and terrorist groups around the world. Barbero reported that there have been more than 10,000 IED events in 112 countries *outside of Afghanistan* since January of 2011. What he didn’t say is that resistance to the U.S. occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011 is what gave birth to the modern IED threat, in the first place.

The Out of Afghanistan Caucus

Young’s change of heart aligns him with the bipartisan Out of Afghanistan Caucus in the House, led by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.), and others who have been demanding an end to the war on Afghanistan for quite some time. Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) joined Woolsey in a press conference on Sept. 20 to make the point that, despite 11 years of effort, the Afghan security forces still can’t take responsibility for the country. “You can train a monkey to ride

a bicycle in that length of time,” Jones said sarcastically.

He added that it makes no sense to continue spending billions of dollars there, given the death toll, and a plan going forward that lacks coherence. “When our friends turn out to be our enemies, it’s time to pull the plug,” he said, referring to the so-called “insider” attacks that are taking an increasing toll on U.S. and other foreign forces, there.

The Out of Afghanistan Caucus was formed in May 2010, and has at least 30 members. It has sponsored legislation to require a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The “Responsible End to the War in Afghanistan Act,” introduced by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) in February of 2011, which has garnered 72 co-sponsors, would require that funds appropriated for military operations only be used for the safe and orderly withdrawal of all U.S. military and Defense Department contractor personnel from Afghanistan. The “Afghanistan Exit and Accountability Act,” introduced on May 5, 2011 by Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.), which has 78 co-sponsors, would require the President to submit to Congress, within 60 days, a plan with a time frame and completion date for the accelerated transition of U.S. military and security operations to the government of Afghanistan.

Harrowing Weekend in Afghanistan

Young’s turn-about also followed a harrowing weekend in Afghanistan for U.S. and other troops of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), there. Over the course of two days, from the evening of Sept. 14 through Sept. 16, six more troops, four American and two British, were killed as the result of insider attacks, and a Taliban attack on a U.S.-British base in Helmand province caused the worst single loss of U.S. aircraft in any attack since the Vietnam War. Tensions between U.S. and Afghan officials were also worsened by a U.S. air strike that killed eight women, and a lingering dispute over Afghan prisoners still held by the U.S. at the Bagram air base.

Insider attacks result when Afghan troops allied with, or thought to be allied with ISAF, instead turn their guns on the ISAF troops who are training them. Fifty-one ISAF troops, mostly American, but including at least four French, three Australian, and two British soldiers, have died in these attacks this year, causing an erosion of trust between ISAF forces and the Afghan troops they’re supposed to be training, to the point that

joint patrols by ISAF and Afghan troops are no longer allowed without the approval of an at least two-star general.

Contrary to the positive gloss that many Administration officials have put on the process, Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged, during a NATO chiefs of defense meeting in Romania on Sept. 16, the seriousness of the problem. “We have to get on top of this,” he said. “It is a very serious threat to the campaign.”

The Sept. 14-15 attack on Camp Bastion, the U.S.-British base in Helmand province, was yet another wake-up call. By some means yet to be explained, about 15 Taliban insurgents, reportedly dressed in U.S. Army uniforms, and armed with rocket-propelled grenades, suicide vests, and small arms, penetrated the base perimeter, and successfully destroyed six U.S. Marine Harrier jets (out of ten assigned), heavily damaged two others, and destroyed three refueling stations and some hangars. Two Marines were killed in the resulting firefight, including the commander of the Harrier squadron. ISAF tried to present it as some kind of victory, by bragging that all but one of the attackers were killed (the other one was captured alive), but there’s no hiding the fact that the Marine Corps’ only fixed-wing close air support capability in Afghanistan was wiped out.

In fact, the Harrier squadron had moved to Camp Bastion in July, having previously been stationed at Kandahar air field, because of the draw-down of the surge forces. At the height of the surge, there were 20,000 Marines in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, a number which has now been reduced to 7,000. Marines interviewed by the *San Diego Union Tribune* in the days after the attack, attributed the loss to that reduction of forces, which, they believe, compromised security and increased the risk of a Taliban attack.

Whatever the case, the attack could not have been merely a response to the anti-Muslim video that is being blamed for inflaming passions against the U.S. all over the Muslim world, despite the Taliban claim. “Given the sophistication of the attack, one can say with a lot of confidence that the Taliban had been training, rehearsing and preparing for weeks and even months,” Afghan analyst Wahid Mujda told the *New York Times* on Sept. 16. This is hardly the picture of a Taliban “on the run,” which Panetta is trying to sell to the world.