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Afghanistan expert: Engaging 'Joe Afghan' important

By ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star

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Cooperating with some Taliban groups might be productive, but the United States should also engage the average "Joe Afghan" and help him rebuild his war-torn country, an expert on Afghanistan said Saturday.

"You've got to get to the average Joe Afghan. We're losing them right now," said Thomas Gouttierre, dean of International Studies and Programs at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

"We really aren't demonstrating to them that we're effective in reconstructing that country. Their quality of life, their style of living, has not been improved in seven years (since 9/11). That's embarrassing."

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Gouttierre commented on President Barack Obama's statement Saturday that there could be opportunities to cooperate with some elements of the Taliban and possibly move them toward reconciliation. But Obama said that could be a tough task, given the history of fierce independence among tribes.

Gouttierre agreed, saying that the term "Taliban" does not describe a monolithic group.

"There are many kinds of groups in Afghanistan that are in opposition or insurgency that are not connected with each other," he said in a phone interview.

For example, there are Taliban that are active in Pakistan only, he said, and there are Taliban that cross the border into Afghanistan. There are also Taliban who are loyal to Osama bin Laden and al-Quaeda and they cross the Afghan-Pakistan border as well. And there are those who call themselves Taliban and are really not.

"They are individual tribal groups that are making a statement in one way or another, sometimes violent, and sometimes because they are not being incorporated into the reconstruction of Afghanistan," Gouttierre said. "The thing is, they are not in league with the central Afghanistan government."

Gouttierre commended Obama and the Afghanistan government for trying to find out if they can incorporate some of these groups into the national reconstruction effort.

"A lot of people are saying you can't win the war in Afghanistan militarily. It's a misleading statement. We could lose it militarily. The best way to be successful is to do effective reconstruction involving the average Afghan to the greatest extent possible," Gouttierre said. "If this is what Obama is talking about, then I think it's a good plan."

Gouttierre noted that the U.S. and its international allies have not done a good job of reconstruction. He said they "dropped the ball" in 1989 when the Soviets pulled out and did not engage moderate Afghans.

"Into the vacuum came the insurgents," he said.

Gouttierre said the U.S. had a second chance at helping Afghans rebuild their country in 2003 but instead invaded Iraq.

"The greatest majority of the Afghan people really want to be engaged in their own reconstruction," Gouttierre said. "After 30 years, life in this horrendous cycle of destruction is not appealing."

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