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Countdown to Disaster: Trump's Looming Afghan Crisis

By David Rosen
March 31, 2017

Ten days after taking office, Pres. Donald Trump's ordered his first foreign military initiative, a covert counterterrorism operation by Navy's SEAL Team 6 in Yemen. He apparently approved the attack following discussions with his principle "strategist," Stephen Bannon. Trump is about the only person who still claims it was a "great" success even though it led to the death of 24 innocent civilians and a U.S. serviceman, let alone the reported \$75 million cost of a helicopter.

The war in Afghanistan is now in its 16th year, the longest war in U.S. history. Who knows how long it will drag on under Trump, the Commander-and-Chief of all U.S. military – intelligence and nuclear – forces. Since the war-monger troika of Pres. George Bush, VP Dick Chaney and Sec. of War Donald Rumsfeld reigned supreme, a reported 6,800 U.S. troops have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2003 and 2015.

This is a relatively tiny body-count compared to the losses of American lives sacrificed in the Vietnam War, 48,000, and in World War II, 292,000. One can only wonder if, for most Americans, the war in Afghanistan is not unlike what Romans likely felt about the Middle East wars taking place during the time of Jesus. Out of media sight, out of the minds of most Americans.

The American media's attention span is a nanosecond, the moment between the latest scandal and the next hyped press release. Its currently consumed by the Shakespearian soap opera

playing out on the White House stage, let alone foreign engagements like the battle against Isis, the Syrian civil war and the battle for Mosul being waged in Iraq. So, what about Afghanistan?

In 1893, the Agreement Between Great Britain and Afghanistan was signed in Kabul, reconfirming the 1873 Agreement that launched the Great Game. A century later, in 1979, the Game saw the former Soviet Union invade Afghanistan and withdraw in defeat a decade later, in 1989. As portrayed in Mike Nichols' movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*, the CIA's secret support for the Afghan *mujahideen* defeated the Soviet military. Now, nearly 16 years after September 11th attacks, the U.S. flounders in the latest round of the Great Game. Will Trump, like Nixon in Vietnam, proclaim victory and withdraw in the face of defeat?

There are about 9,800 U.S. troops and some 5,000 troops from allied countries still fighting in Afghanistan, with their service split between fighting terrorist groups and propping up a faltering government. In February, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Chairman of the Armed Service Committee, lamented the state of the war in Afghanistan: "I want to know why we're losing, and what we need to do to start winning."

Had the good Senator simply read the January 30, 2016, report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), he would have gotten his answer. It states:

The Taliban now controls more territory than at any time since 2001. Vicious and repeated attacks in Kabul this quarter shook confidence in the national-unity government. A year after the Coalition handed responsibility for Afghan security to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), American and British forces were compelled on several occasions to support ANDSF troops in combat against the Taliban.

The lack of security has made it almost impossible for many U.S. and even some Afghan officials to get out to manage and inspect U.S.-funded reconstruction projects.

In December 2016, the Dept. of Defense reported to Congress that the U.S.-backed Afghan government controlled about 20 percent of the Afghan population and the

Taliban controlled only 10 percent. *Politico* reports that as of November 2016, the Afghan government controlled just more than half (57%) of the country's districts. Most alarming, U.S.-backed government-controlled districts have 21 percent of its former district-control since a year earlier, November 2015.

Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Jason Dempsey paints an eye-opening — if disappointing — view of the current situation in Afghanistan: "The United States military failed America in Afghanistan. It wasn't a tactical failure. It was a failure of leadership."

James Mattis, Sec. of Defense, a retired Marine Corps general, oversees the nation's war machine and is among the failed Afghan "leadership." He spent over four decades in the military, with commands in the Persian Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. He garnered his

nickname, “Mad Dog,” for his role in 2004 battle of Fallujah, Iraq, the same year he ordered an attack on a “suspected foreign fighter safe house” in a small Iraqi village, Mukareeb, that led to the killing of 42 people attending a wedding ceremony. From 2010-2013, he was Commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), but forced out by Pres. Obama over his hardline, hawkish stance on Iran.

Mattis is famous for his pithy statements and one he made to fellow officers is notorious: “... there are some assholes in the world that just need to be shot. There are hunters and there are victims. By your discipline, cunning, obedience and alertness, you will decide if you are a hunter or a victim. It’s really a hell of a lot of fun. You’re gonna have a blast out here!”

During Mattis’ Senate confirmation hearing, a retired Green Beret officer and a fellow at the New America think tank, Jason Amerine, raised a question of Mattis’ leadership. Amerine claimed that “Mad Dog” hesitated sending medical evacuation flights and left soldiers to die during a 2001 friendly-fire incident in Afghanistan. Staff Sgt. Brian Cody Prosser and at least two Afghans died after they were hit by a U.S. bomb outside of Kandahar. “He was indecisive and betrayed his duty to us, leaving my men to die during the golden hour when he could have reached us,” wrote Amerine. Mattis now leads Americans long-failed campaign in the Middle East and North Africa, let alone the rest of the world.

The current Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani (president) and Abdullah Abdullah (chief executive) is mired in age-old corruption with embezzlement and bribery siphoning billions of U.S. dollars to private bank accounts and pay-offs to warlords and Taliban. Equally troubling, unemployment is estimated at 40 percent and millions of Afghans have fled to Pakistan, Iran and Europe. More disturbing, over the last 15 years that U.S. has “invested” \$8.5 billion to fight opium cultivation and trafficking, but Afghan’s illegal opium industry is booming. The SIGAR report found, “Afghan farmers are growing more opium than ever”; they account for an estimated 90 percent of the world’s illicit opiates like heroin. The UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime reported that Afghan opium production jumped 43 percent over the last year.

Trump has been in office for two months and has laid out no new military plan for Afghanistan. Nor has the new Sec. of War issued a comprehensive plan addressing the conditions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Isis, let alone Iran and Pakistan.

However, over the last few years, Trump has made repeated – if often confusing – statements about the war in Afghanistan. The following are some of his gems:

“We made a terrible mistake getting involved there [Afghanistan] in the first place. We had real brilliant thinkers that didn’t know what the hell they were doing. And it’s a mess. It’s a mess. And at this point, you probably have to [stay] because that thing will collapse about two seconds after they leave. Just as I said that Iraq was going to collapse after we leave.”

“I never said that. OK, wouldn’t matter, I never said it. Afghanistan is a different kettle. Afghanistan is next to Pakistan, it’s an entry in. You have to be careful with the nuclear weapons. It’s all about the nuclear weapons. By the way, without the nukes, it’s a whole different ballgame.”

“I would stay in Afghanistan. I hate doing it. I hate doing it so much. But again, you have nuclear weapons in Pakistan, so I would do it.”

“I don’t trust him [Putin]. But the truth is, it’s not a question of trust. I don’t want to see the United States get bogged down. We’ve spent now \$2 trillion in Iraq, probably a trillion in Afghanistan. We’re destroying our country.”

“Afghanistan is not like what’s happening in Chicago. People are being shot...”

A plan for Afghanistan will likely be announced after Trump fulfills his campaign promises with one executive order after another. Its outline might be suggested by the three U.S. military outposts in operations – 1,000 soldiers in Kuwait, 400 marines in Syria and 1,000 (of a promised 4,000) troops in Poland. And the civilian-causality continues to mount with a minimum of 2,543 civilians killed by Coalition forces.

It appears that Pres. Obama was a restraining force not only against the inherent war-making tendencies of the military leadership, but also – during his first term – a hawkish Sec. of State. With Trump, the gloves are off and the military can do whatever it wants. “Mad Dog” seems to be following the Obama line of cautious probes with a limited number of military personnel, but backed by extensive military aid and air support.

One can only wonder if Trump and his advisers share a common fantasy to renew the Great Game by committing a sizable force of the U.S. military to battle insurgent forces of anti-modernism, of local corruption and 1st-world exploitation. We’ll learn more when the plan comes out – if it ever does. Scarier still, the only Congressional leaders to likely hold back the worse-instincts of Mattis and Trump (with Steve Bannon) from a still-deeper engagement in Afghanistan, or another war zone, is Senators McCain and Lindsey Graham, two conservative, militarist Republicans. Scary times.