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America's Endless Afghan War

By William J. Astore
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News this week that 300 Marines have returned to Helmand Province in Afghanistan recalls the failed surge of 2009-10, when roughly 20,000 Marines beat back the Taliban in the region, only to see those “fragile” gains quickly turn to “reversible” ones (to cite the infamous terms of General David Petraeus, architect of that surge).

While fragility and reversibility characterize American progress, the Taliban continues to make real progress. According to today's report at *FP: Foreign Policy*, “the Taliban controls or contests about 40 percent of the districts in the country, 16 years after the U.S. war there began.” Meanwhile, in January and February more than 800 Afghan troops were killed fighting the Taliban, notes *Foreign Policy*, citing a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction. That's a high figure given that fighting abates during the winter.

Besides committing fresh US Marines to more Afghan security forces “training,” the US military has responded with PR spin. For example, when friendly Afghan forces abandoned a district and police headquarters, a US spokesman claimed it had been “repositioned.” According to *FP: Foreign Policy*, “US forces helped in ferrying [Afghan] government troops and workers out, and American jets came back to destroy the rest of the buildings and vehicles left behind.” Literally,

the old district center and its resources had to be destroyed, and a new one created, for the Afghan position to be “saved.”

Destroying things to “save” them: Where have we heard that before? The Vietnam War, of course, a lesson not lost on Aaron O’Connell, a US Marine who edited the book *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*. O’Connell’s recent interview with NPR cites the Vietnam example as he explains the one step forward, two steps back, nature of America’s Afghan War. In his words:

So we’ve spent billions building roads in Afghanistan, but we then turned the roads over to the Afghans in 2013. We trained up a maintenance unit so that it could provide for road maintenance, and nothing has happened since then. Now, today, more than half of the roads are deemed unfit for heavy traffic. And as one taxi driver put it in 2014 – things have gotten so much worse, now if we drive too fast, everyone in the car dies.

So it’s – really, we have to think about the things that are sustainable.

Americans have spent an enormous amount of money in Afghanistan without thinking about how to sustain the improvements we’ve funded. Meanwhile, as O’Connell notes, the security situation (as in lack of security) in Afghanistan undermines those infrastructure efforts.

With respect to US efforts to create a viable Afghan Army, O’Connell doesn’t mince words about its failings:

[T]he massive assembly-line attempt to produce capable, professional national security forces has not worked well, and it’s been at tremendous cost. And for all those who say we should just keep doing what we’re doing in Afghanistan, let me explain why that’s not sustainable. Every year, between a quarter and a third of the Afghan army and the police desert. Now, these are people that we have armed and trained. We’ve given weapons to them. We’ve given them basic military training. And every year, a third of them disappear [with their guns].

Here’s the grim reality: US military efforts to take charge and win the war, as in “winning hearts and minds” (known as WHAM) in 2009-10, proved unsustainable. Follow-on efforts to turn the war over to the Afghan government (analogous to LBJ and Nixon’s “Vietnamization” policy in the waning years of the Vietnam War) are also failing. Yet America’s newest commanding general in Afghanistan wants yet more troops for yet more “training,” effectively doubling down on a losing hand.

The logical conclusion – that’s it’s high-time US forces simply left Afghanistan – is never contemplated in Washington. This is why Douglas Wissing’s book, *Hopeless But Optimistic: Journeying through America’s Endless War in Afghanistan*, is so immensely valuable. Wissing is a journalist who embedded with US forces in Afghanistan in 2013. His book consists of short chapters of sharply drawn vignettes focusing on the street and grunt level. Its collective lesson: Afghanistan, for Americans, doesn’t really exist as a country and a people. It exists only as a wasteful, winless, and endless war.

What is Afghanistan to Americans? It's an opportunity for profit and exploitation for contractors. It's a job as well as a personal proving ground for US troops. It's a chance to test theories and to earn points (and decorations) for promotion for many officers. It's hardly ever about working closely with the Afghan people to find solutions that will work for them over the long haul.

A telling example Wissing cites is wells. Americans came with lots of money to drill deep water wells for Afghan villagers and farmers (as opposed to relying on traditional Afghan irrigation systems featuring underground channels that carry mountain water to the fields with minimal evaporation). Instead of revolutionizing Afghan agriculture, the wells drove down water tables and exhausted aquifers. As the well-digging frenzy (Wissing's word) disrupted Afghanistan's fragile, semiarid ecosystem, powerful Afghans fought to control the new wells, creating new tensions among tribes. The American "solution," in sum, is exacerbating conflict while exhausting the one resource the Afghan people can't do without: water.

Then there's the "poo pond," a human sewage lagoon at Kandahar Air Field that was to be used as a source for organic fertilizer. I'll let Wissing take the tale from here:

But instead of enriching Afghan soil, the U.S.-led coalition forces decided to burn the mountains of fertilizer with astronomically expensive imported gasoline. The [US air force] officer reminded me that the Taliban got \$1500 in protection money for each US fuel tanker they let through, so in the process the jihadists were also able to skim the American shit [from the poo pond].

Walking back, I spot a green metal dumpster stenciled with a large sign that reads, "General Waste Only." At that moment, it seems to sum up the whole war.

Wissing's hard-edged insights demonstrate that America is never going to win in Afghanistan, unless "winning" is measured by money wasted. Again, Americans simply see Afghanistan too narrowly, as a "war" to won, as a problem to be managed, as an environment to be controlled.

Indeed, the longstanding failure of our "answers" is consistent with the military's idea we're fighting a generational or "long" war. We may be failing, but that's OK, since we have a "long" time to get things right.

After sixteen years and a trillion dollars, the answer in Afghanistan is not another sixteen years and another trillion dollars. Yet that's exactly what America seems prepared to do in the endless war that to us defines Afghanistan.