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## The US Will Never Win the War in Afghanistan

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President Trump hasn't decided whether to sign off on his generals' request for more troops for Afghanistan. Ironically, this would be one instance in which Trump — and the country — would benefit from repudiating President Barack Obama's example. Instead of yet another troop surge in America's longest war, now heading toward its 16th birthday, Trump should adopt the advice that then-Sen. George Aiken (R-Vt.) offered about Vietnam in 1966: "Declare victory and get out."

General John W. Nicholson testified that he wants an additional 5,000 soldiers to break the "stalemate" in Afghanistan. In the first months of his presidency, Obama signed off on a surge that ended with 100,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. His generals also promised to break the stalemate. Today, the Taliban controls more of the country than it has since 2001. A surge of 5,000 or even 10,000 troops won't defeat the Taliban. It is simply a recipe for more war without end and without victory.

Why are we still there? We went into Afghanistan after 9/11 to get Osama bin Laden and to punish the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda. Now bin Laden is dead; al-Qaeda is dispersed; the Taliban has been battered. Afghan civilians have been killed, wounded or displaced in increasing numbers. The United Nations reports that there were more than 11,000 war-related civilian

casualties last year, and 660,000 Afghans were displaced, adding to the country's massive refugee crisis.

The war has now cost us over \$1 trillion, making it the second-costliest U.S. war, after World War II. In fiscal year 2017, the war will cost about \$50 billion, nearly a billion every week. We've lost over 2,350 soldiers, with 20,000 more suffering injuries. And as Trevor Timm of the Guardian noted, in a couple of years, there will be soldiers fighting in Afghanistan that weren't even born at the time of 9/11.

We're no longer fighting to defeat an enemy; we're engaged in "nation-building." Good luck with that. Afghanistan is a landlocked country, with a brutal combination of severe mountains and harsh deserts. It remains one of the poorest nations in the world, despite more than \$117 billion in U.S. development appropriations since 2002. Its leading industry is illegal opium production, producing an estimate 70 to 80 percent of the world's supply. Despite the aid and the opium profits, Afghanistan is still near the bottom of multiple categories in the United Nations' Human Development Index, ranging from infant mortality to life expectancy, per capita income and more.

The United States is pouring money into a corrupt sewer. The World Justice Project's 2016 Rule of Law Index ranked Afghanistan 111 of 113 countries assessed. Despite U.S. arms, aid and training, its divided and demoralized security forces can't stand up to the Taliban.

We are asking our military to build a nation on the other side of the world, dispatching soldiers who don't know the language, the culture, the religion, the ethnic and sectarian divisions or the history. The one thing that may unify Afghanistan's tribes is their pride in their independence. Afghanistan is known as the "graveyard of empires." Its people routed the British forces repeatedly from 1839 to 1919 when Britain ruled the world. Its mujahideen defeated the Soviet Union's invasion in the 1980s. The United States, with the most powerful military in the world, may avoid defeat for as long as it wants to waste lives and resources, but it will not win.

The military has no strategy for victory, merely a plan to avoid defeat. After 15 years, no president wants to accept defeat. Yet a feature of Trump's campaign was his scorn for the United States wasting \$6 trillion in Middle Eastern wars we "don't win." He ought to read his 2013 tweet: "We should leave Afghanistan immediately. No more wasted lives. If we have to go back in, we go in hard & quick. Rebuild the US first."

Obama let the generals — and his arrogant national security advisers — convince him that a surge of troops could deliver victory in what he considered the "good war." After eight years, he was more sober and far wiser: "Afghanistan was one of the poorest countries in the world with the lowest literacy rates in the world before we got there," he said last year, "It continues to be." The country "was riven with all kinds of ethnic and tribal divisions before we got there. It's still there."

When the military dropped the "mother of all bombs" on Afghanistan last month, Trump boasted, "We have the greatest military in the world," and said, "We have given them total authorization, and that's what they're doing." But there is no reason to accept the military's

advice on Afghanistan, given its record in the Middle East. As Andrew Bacevich has detailed, its invasion of Iraq has been the greatest debacle since Vietnam, leading to a continued quagmire and eventually to creation of the Islamic State. Its “humanitarian intervention” in Libya produced a failed state, scarred by violence, that provides a new breeding ground for the Islamic State. The intervention in Syria has succeeded only in contributing to the humanitarian catastrophe there.

Trump should fulfill his campaign rhetoric and pull the plug. Praise the troops and bring them home. Use the money and lives saved to rebuild America. Redirect a tiny fraction of the United States’ bloated military costs fighting in Afghanistan to mitigating the refugee crisis and addressing that country’s needs. This is one policy area where deciding not to follow in Obama’s footsteps would actually help Trump’s flagging popularity.