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The Real Scandal: Americans Don't Care About Afghanistan

By Andrew J. Bacevich

July 26,

“Dwelling on the past is just not useful,” not at least in the opinion of Brigadier General Roger B. Turner Jr. ^[1], U.S. Marine Corps. General Turner’s current duty station is Afghanistan, where he commands a modest conglomeration of Marines and sailors known as Task Force Southwest.

We might empathize with General Turner. After all, what’s the point of getting hung up on the past when you are facing a dauntingly tough job in the here-and-now? That job requires Turner to do what a run of previous U.S. military commanders have been attempting to do without notable success for almost sixteen years: to pacify Helmand Province. Were he to reflect too deeply on the disappointments of those sixteen years—the U.S. troops killed and wounded, the billions of dollars expended, all to no evident purpose—Turner just might reach the conclusion that he and his charges are engaged in a fool’s errand conceived by idiots.

We don’t want brigadier generals entertaining such heretical thoughts about basic U.S. national security policy. Their proper role is to implement, not to formulate; to comply rather than to question; to do or die not to wonder why. So General Turner’s reluctance to dwell on the course that the Afghanistan War has followed since U.S. troops entered that country in 2001 qualifies as prudent and perhaps even necessary.

Unfortunately, the officials who issue Turner his marching orders seemingly share in his reluctance to contemplate the past. The people back at the White House and in the Pentagon who *should* be thinking long and hard about why America's longest war has gone so badly even as it drags on and on appear incapable or unwilling to do so. A willful amnesia prevails.

In a moment of candor, Defense Secretary James Mattis remarked not so long ago ^[2] that the American war effort in Afghanistan has entered what he calls a “strategy-free time.” Mattis is on the record as vowing to fix that problem by mid-July. That deadline has now arrived. The promised strategy has not.

Reporters I talk to tell me that the Trump administration remains deeply divided on how to proceed in Afghanistan. The internal debate appears to mirror the one that played out in 2006 when the George W. Bush administration wrestled with what to do with an Iraq War that had gone badly awry.

At that time, the Pentagon convened a so-called “Council of Colonels” to study the situation and identify available alternatives. The group, which included a rising star by the name of H.R. McMaster, came up with three basic options. They were: 1) Go Big, 2) Go Long, or 3) Go Home. Ultimately, President George W. Bush opted, in effect, for a combination of 1) and 2). The result was the Iraq Surge of 2007-2008.

In the event, however, it turned out that Big—an additional increment of 30,000 troops—wasn't big enough. And Long—the final two years of the Bush administration—wasn't long enough. A decade later controversy about who to blame persists, but by any measure Iraq remains an epic failure of U.S. policy.

As far as present day Afghanistan is concerned, Go Big is not a plausible option. Presumably, it should be possible for the world's greatest military to defeat the Taliban and the other primitively-armed Islamist groups active in Afghanistan. Yet political willingness to commit several tens of thousands of U.S. troops in an effort to win outright simply doesn't exist.

Having now risen to the post of national security adviser, McMaster reportedly wants to Go Long, apparently clinging to the view that the nation-building project once grandly known as Operation Enduring Freedom can yet be redeemed. Steve Bannon, viewed in some quarters as the American Rasputin, supposedly wants to Go Home, with Mattis either uncommitted or somewhere in between.

How General Turner's ultimate boss, the commander-in-chief, figures in all of this is difficult to say. Not least among the reasons that Afghanistan today is “strategy free” is that Trump himself has demonstrated remarkably little interest in what goes on there. Overseeing the Afghanistan War does not number among his priorities.

Worse still, members of the press share in Trump's inclination to treat Afghanistan as an afterthought. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* spare no expense as they subject President Trump, the Trump administration, and the Trump family to sustained and intense scrutiny—and rightly so. Yet when it comes to setting editorial priorities, both papers choose to

treat the Afghanistan War as a matter of marginal importance. Notably, neither paper maintains an active presence in Kabul.

Need further proof? Compare, if you will, the media attention lavished in just the past ten days on Beyoncé and her newborn twins with the attention allotted over the past year to what is the longest war in U.S. history. The former exceeds the latter by orders of magnitude.

Here, it seems to me, we confront the real scandal. It's not simply that six months into the Trump administration there is no strategy to guide U.S. actions in Afghanistan, although that is bad enough. It's that so few Americans care. They don't know why U.S. forces are in Afghanistan, what they are doing there, how long they will remain, and whether or not they are accomplishing anything beneficial either to the United States or to the people of Afghanistan.

General Turner faces a host of challenges. One of the most daunting must be to explain to members of his command why most Americans could care less about what they are trying to do.