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As US Empire Fails, Trump Enters a Quagmire

By Kevin Zeese
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A quagmire is defined as a complex or unpleasant position that is difficult to escape. President Trump's recently announced war plans in Afghanistan maintain that quagmire. They come at a time when US Empire is failing and its leadership in the world is weakening. The US will learn what other empires have learned, "Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires."

During the presidential campaign, some became convinced that Trump would not be an interventionist president. His tweets about Afghanistan were one of the reasons. In January of

2013, he tweeted, “Let’s get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghans we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense! Rebuild the USA.” Now, we see a president who carries on the interventionist tradition of US Empire.

While Afghanistan has been a never-ending active war since 9-11, making the 16-year war the longest in US history, the truth is the United States became directly involved with Afghanistan some 38 years ago, on July 3, 1979. As William Rivers Pitts writes “On that day, at the behest of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter signed the first directive in an operation meant to destabilize the Soviet-controlled government of Afghanistan.” In fact when the US dropped the MOAB bomb, Trump was bombing tunnels built with the assistance of the CIA in the 1980’s for the mujaheddin and Bin Laden.

Trump’s Afghan policy is inaccurately described as a new approach but has only one element that is new – secrecy, as Trump will not tell us how many soldiers he will send to this war. His so-called new strategy is really a continuation of the permanent war quagmire in Afghanistan, which may be an intentional never ending war for the empire’s geopolitical goals. Ralph Nader reviews 16 years of headlines about Afghanistan, calling it a “cruel boomeranging quagmire of human violence and misery... with no end in sight.”

Another Afghan Review Leads To Same Conclusion: More War

During his campaign for president, Trump called for the US to pull out of Afghanistan. Early in his administration, President Trump announced a review of the Afghanistan war. This week when he announced escalation of the war, Trump noted this was his instinct. Unfortunately, the president did not trust his previous instincts and missed an opportunity to end the war.

We have seen how President Trump refuses to admit mistakes, so it is highly unlikely he will change course from this mistaken path. His rationale is so many US soldiers have given their lives that we must stay until the United States wins. This is the quandary – the US must continue the war until we win because soldiers have died but continuing the war means more will die and the US must stay committed to war because more have died.

After we read President Trump’s Afghanistan war speech, we went back and re-read President Obama’s Afghanistan war speech given in March 2009. It is remarkable how similar the two speeches are. When Russian president Putin was interviewed by filmmaker Oliver Stone as well as when he was interviewed by Megyn Kelly, he made a point proven by US policy in Afghanistan, “Presidents come and go, and even the parties in power change, but the main political direction does not change.”

Both presidents conducted a lengthy review early in their administration and both talked with generals and diplomats who convinced them to escalate rather than end the war. Both presidents put forward what they claimed was a new strategy but in reality, was just doing the same thing over again: more troops, building up Afghanistan’s military by working closely with them, using economic and diplomatic power and putting pressure on Pakistan not to be a safe haven for the Taliban and those fighting against the United States.

To ensure a quagmire both presidents said that decisions would not be based on a timeline but on conditions on the ground. Both promised victory, without clearly defining what it would mean; both raised fears of the Taliban and other anti-US militants using Afghanistan to attack the United States again. Trump had the advantage of knowing that President Obama's approach had failed despite repeated bombings in Pakistan and working with Afghan troops, but that didn't alter his course.

Afghanistan Victims of a February, 2012 US air strike that killed 8 children in Kapisa, Afghanistan.

Failure To Learn Lessons Ensures Repeating Them

According to Mike Ludwig, since President Obama approved a troop surge in 2009, the war in Afghanistan has claimed at least 26,512 civilian lives and injured nearly 48,931 more. In July, the United Nations reported that at least 5,243 civilians have been killed or injured in 2017 alone, including higher numbers of woman and children than previous in years. Trump seems less concerned than previous presidents with killings of civilians.

Trump noted that the Afghanistan-Pakistan region was now the densest part of the world when it comes to anti-US militants, saying there were 20 terrorist groups in the area. President Obama added tens of thousands of troops to the Afghanistan war, dropped massive numbers of bombs and the result was more terrorism. The US was killing terrorists but the impact was creating more anti-American militants. Trump failed to connect these dots and understand that more US attacks create more hatred against the United States.

After Obama failed to 'win' the war by adding tens of thousands of troops, with more than 100,000 fighting in Afghanistan at its peak, Trump should have asked his generals how adding thousands more (reports are between 4,000 and 8,000 soldiers) would change failure to success. Wasn't there anyone in the room who would tell Trump there is nothing new in the Trump strategy that Obama and Bush had not already tried. Steve Bannon was the most opposed to war in the administration and reportedly fought against more war, but he was not in the room. Did anyone in the room stand up to the hawk-generals?

The policy of working more closely with the Afghan military in order to build them up ended in disaster in the Obama era. The New Yorker wrote in 2012: "We can't win the war in Afghanistan, so what do we do? We'll train the Afghans to do it for us, then claim victory and head for the exits." But, the US discovered that it could not train the Afghans in the 'American way of war.' In 2012, the Obama administration ended the program of fighting alongside Afghan soldiers to train them because those soldiers were killing US soldiers. How many US soldiers will die because Trump was ignorant of this lesson?

Trump also took the wrong lesson from the Iraq war and occupation. He inaccurately described the so-called withdrawal from Iraq as hasty. He points to the rise of ISIS as created by the vacuum in Iraq when the US reduced its numbers of troops. Trump said the US "cannot repeat in Afghanistan the mistake our leaders made in Iraq."

In fact, ISIS rose up because the killing of hundreds of thousands, some reports say more than a million, of Iraqis, displacement of more than a million more, the destruction of a functioning government as well as war crimes like the Abu Gharib torture scandal made it easy to recruit fighters. Furthermore, the training and supply of weapons to Sunnis during the ‘Awakening’ created armed soldiers looking for their next job.

It was US war and occupation that created ISIS. The seeds had been planted, fertilized and were rapidly growing before the US reduced its military footprint. Trump is repeating the mistake of more militarism, and in the end ISIS or some other form of anti-US militancy will thrive.

The US does not want to face an important reality – the government of the United States is hated in the region for very good reasons. Bush lied to us about 9-11 when he claimed they hate us for our freedoms. No, they hate the US because US militarism kills hundreds of thousands of people in the region, destroys functioning governments and creates chaos.

Victory Means Something Different to an Empire

In trying to understand why the US is fighting a war — a war that has been unwinnable for 16 years — it helps to look at a map and consider the resources of an area.

Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell’s former adviser, predicts the US will be in Afghanistan for the next 50 years. Indeed, that may be the ‘victory’ the empire seeks. Afghanistan is of geopolitical importance. It is a place where the US can impact China’s ‘One Belt One Road’ to Europe where China can take the place of Russia and the United States in providing wealthy Europeans with key commodities like oil and gas. Just as the United States has stayed in Germany, Italy and other European states and Japan after WW II, and in Korea after the Korean war, the empire sees a need to be in Afghanistan to be well positioned for the future of the empire. Terrorism is not the issue, economic competition with China, which is quickly becoming the leading global economic power, is the real issue.

And, competition with Russia and China is at the top of the list of the bi-partisan war party in Washington. Pepe Escobar points out that “Russia-China strategic partnership wants an Afghan solution hatched by Afghans and supervised by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (of which Afghanistan is an observer and future full member). So from the point of view of neocon/neoliberalcon elements of the War Party in Washington, Afghanistan only makes sense as a forward base to harass/stall/thwart China’s Belt and Road Initiative.”

Afghanistan is next to China, India and Pakistan, three nuclear powers that could pose military risks to the United States. Having multiple bases in Afghanistan, to allegedly fight terrorists, will provide the forward deployment needed to combat each of those nations if military action is needed.

Afghanistan also borders on Iran, which could be a near-future war zone for the United States. Positioning the US military along the Afghanistan-Iran border creates a strategic advantage with Iran as well as with the Persian Gulf where approximately 18.2 million barrels of oil per day transit through the Strait of Hormuz in tankers.

Afghanistan's land contains \$3 trillion in rare earth minerals needed for computers and modern technology including rich deposits of gold, silver, platinum, iron ore and copper. The US has spent \$700 billion in fighting a failed war and President Trump and empire strategists are looking to make sure US corporations get access to those minerals. Since the US Geological Survey discovered these minerals a decade ago, some see Afghanistan as the future "Saudi Arabia of lithium", a raw material used in phone and electric car batteries. US officials have told Reuters that Trump argued at a White House meeting with advisers in July that the United States should demand a share of Afghanistan's mineral wealth.

Jeffrey St. Clair reminds us not to forget the lucrative opium trade. Afghanistan is the largest source for heroin in the world. He writes:

Since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, opium production has swelled, now accounting for more than one-third of the wrecked Afghan economy. In the last two years alone, opium poppy yields have doubled, a narcotic blowback now hitting the streets of American cities from Amarillo to Pensacola. With every drone strike in the Helmond Province, a thousand more poppies bloom.

The decision on a never ending war — with no timetable for exit — is evidence that the Pentagon and intelligence agencies are in charge of US foreign policy with Trump as a figurehead. Of course, the war also ensures immense profits for the war industry. St. Clair emphasizes that "in 2016, the Pentagon spent \$3.6 million for each US soldier stationed in Afghanistan. A surge of 4,000 to 10,000 additional troops, either as 'private military units' or GIs, will come as a welcome new infusion of cash to the dozens of defense corporations that invested so heavily in his administration."

The firing of Steve Bannon just before the meeting that decided Afghanistan's future was not coincidence as he was the opponent of escalation. Glenn Greenwald writes in the Intercept that this permanent power structure has been working since his election to take control of foreign policy. He also points to the appointment of Marine General John Kelly as chief of staff and how National Security Adviser, General McMaster, has successfully fired several national security officials aligned with Steve Bannon and the nationalistic, purportedly non-interventionist foreign policy. The deep state of the permanent national security complex has taken over and the Afghan war decision demonstrates this reality.

With these geopolitical realities, staying Afghanistan may be the victory the Pentagon seeks — winning may just be being there. The Intercept reported this week that the Taliban offered to negotiate peace, but peace on the terms of the Taliban may not be what the US is seeking.

Call for an End to War for Empire

It would be a terrible error for people to blame Trump for the Afghanistan war which began with intervention by Jimmy Carter, became a hot war after 9-11 under George Bush, escalated under Obama and now continues the same policies under Trump. The bi-partisan war hawks in Congress for nearly 40 years have supported these policies. Afghanistan is evidence of the never ending policy of full spectrum dominance sought by the US empire. The bi-partisan warriors

span the breadth of both parties, Jeffrey St. Clair highlights the Afghanistan war cheering by Senator John McCain and Senator Elizabeth Warren.

Throughout recent decades the United States has failed to show what Kathy Kelly called the courage we need for peace and continues the cowardice of war. In fact, many ask why are we still at war in Afghanistan: Osama bin Laden is dead, other alleged 9-11 attack attackers are caught or killed. This shows that calling Afghanistan the longest running Fake War in US history is right — fake because it was never about terrorism but about business. If terrorism were the issue, Saudi Arabia would be the prime US enemy, but Saudi Arabia is also about business.

We share the conclusion of human rights activist and Green vice presidential candidate in 2016 Ajamu Baraka who wrote for the Black Alliance for Peace that:

In an obscene testament to U.S. vanity and the psychopathological commitment to global white supremacy, billions have already been wasted, almost three thousand U.S. lives lost and over 100,000 dead. It is time to admit defeat in Afghanistan and bring the war to an end. Justice and common sense demand that the bloodletting stop.

When we understand the true motives of US Empire, that conclusion is even worse — to steal resources from a poor nation and put in place permanent bases from which to conduct more war. US hegemony is costly to millions of people around the world and at home it sucks more than 54% of discretionary spending from the federal budget and creates an empire economy that only serves the wealthiest corporate interests that profit from transnational military dominance while creating a record wealth divide where most people in the United States are economic slaves. It is not only time to end the Afghanistan war but to end US Empire.