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## Sadism in Afghanistan

Tommy Raskin  
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For the past 16 years, the American war machine has been acting like a two-tiered sadist in Afghanistan. While facilitating the Kabul government's destruction of the communities it oversees there, our military apparatus has also harmed the U.S. itself by spilling American blood for an unnecessary and futile mission.

Granted, most Americans have not literally bled for the war in Afghanistan. Our sacrifice has been merely (merely?) financial. US taxpayers have paid – and will continue paying – for our government's \$1 trillion excursion there, an escapade already more expensive than the Marshall Plan to rebuild post-WWII Europe. Not all Americans have been as fortunate as civilian taxpayers, though. 2,400 US soldiers have died and upwards of 17,000 have suffered physical injuries in Afghanistan. Still other troops have returned home physically intact but psychologically scarred, motivating their retreat into a lonely depression.

Suicide has been a tragically fitting end to the lives of our most traumatized Afghanistan war veterans, whose premature deaths provide a chilling reminder that the US military apparatus has pursued a program of ruinous overexertion since its war against the Taliban began in 2001. Despite the popular impression that al-Qaeda and the Taliban were comrades in arms in the lead-up to 9/11, the reality is that Taliban leaders resented Osama bin Laden for issuing fatwas against the West and had even tried alerting the US of bin Laden's diabolical plans beforehand. When the attacks happened anyway, the Taliban remained fairly pliant, offering to surrender bin Laden

to the Organization of the Islamic Conference if the US could prove that bin Laden was behind the attacks. After President George W. Bush rejected that overture and bombed Afghanistan, in October 2001, the Afghan government quickly gave up its "proof of guilt" condition and sought a settlement that would involve surrendering bin Laden to a U.S.-selected third party. But in his apparently implacable desire to fight, Bush again rejected negotiations in favor of a mutually destructive war.

When the invasion began, General Tommy Franks instructed American troops to support the corrupt Northern Alliance in battle against the Taliban, even though al-Qaeda, not the Taliban, bore primary responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. At the very outset, then, the US was fighting somebody else's war in Afghanistan, buttressing warlords and drug dealers against a government clearly uninterested in going to bat for our *actual* enemies. With the US distracted and unwilling to destroy al-Qaeda in the now-infamous standoff at Tora Bora, bin Laden's men successfully fled to Pakistan before the year ended.

With those few hundred al-Qaeda fighters no longer inhabiting their ostensible "safe haven" in Afghanistan, the US should have left Afghanistan as well. After all, our military's job there was done. With al-Qaeda then in Pakistan, the Bush administration could have enlisted special operations forces to capture bin Laden before removing US personnel from the area altogether.

Unfortunately, President Bush had no interest in leaving Afghanistan after just a few short months. Within days of al-Qaeda's departure, the US began "rebuilding" the country by installing Hamid Karzai as president and helping the newly inaugurated Afghan National Army in battle against the Taliban. A full-fledged war was on the horizon, and these were the Bush administration's chosen "allies against terror."

But however optimistic some Americans may have been that Karzai's men would expedite Bush's efforts, the ANA proved to be a feckless force, what with members abusing drugs on the job, stealing weapons, and retreating prematurely in battle. That faithlessness has done a great disservice to the US in places like the Kunar Province, where twenty of our soldiers died just to hand over the Marawara Valley to ANA members who surrendered it shortly after acquiring it. But the suicidal sadism of US support for the ANA has probably found its most literal and poignant expression in more than 100 "green-on-blue attacks," wherein Afghan trainees have expressed a mixture of pro-Taliban sympathies and "personal" grievances by directly targeting their Coalition "allies."

Of course, our troops' sacrifices for the ANA might be "worth it" if the Afghan government were promoting liberal values in the places where it actually has secured control. In reality, though, US allies in Afghanistan may be *more* brutal than the Taliban. Lest we forget, Taliban members gained relative popularity in the 1990s by making some effort to crack down on sexual crimes. Though a far cry from humane, Taliban members to this day "rape less" than do ANA members, whose institutionally condoned molestation of children may itself be adequate to discredit all American claims of "humanitarianism" in Afghanistan over the past 16 years.

Alongside children, grown Afghan women have suffered tremendously under the post-Taliban government. Though nominally committed to gender equality, US allies adopted a "Shi'ite

personal status law" in 2009 defining women as property, thereby legalizing men's rape of their wives and treating external assaults on women as simple violations of male property rights. To this day, the Afghan National Police uphold this barbaric system by kidnapping and returning female escapees of abusive marriages to their tyrannical spouses and fathers.

Like their seedy Afghan allies, many US forces have themselves been brutalizing civilians since the occupation began. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, invading US forces relied on demonstrably unreliable sources – i.e., random Afghan civilians with unrelated axes to grind – to find "terrorists" to imprison. US servicemen have since initiated some relatively high-profile killings, like the lethal attacks on 33 people at Garloch in 2009, the Maiwand District slaughter of 3 people in 2010, the unprovoked massacre of 16 people in Kandahar in 2011, and the 2015 bombing of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz. But some of the less reported aspects of the US occupation have also been disastrous. For example, when "night raids" came to dominate US strategy in Afghanistan during President Barack Obama's troop surge, thousands of Afghan civilians ended up detained or dead because of US forces' over-reliance on suspects' misleading phone call data for information.

Although he suggested before taking office that he would withdraw from Afghanistan, the predictably erratic President Donald Trump is now exacerbating this tragedy by deploying thousands of additional troops to confront Afghanistan's encroaching Islamists. But the only two conceivable justifications for such a move – to protect people in the US, and to protect people in Afghanistan itself – hold as little water now as they did under Presidents Bush and Obama. Though President Trump claims that the US needs an Afghan foothold in order to prevent terrorists from seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons, the reality is that the US could withdraw from Afghanistan tomorrow and no less effectively send special operations forces to strike terrorists in Pakistan if the need ever arose.

That Afghanistan could become an Islamist "sanctuary" after the US leaves is also a poor excuse to stay. For even if we grant that the Taliban would exploit an American withdrawal by overrunning Afghanistan and safeguarding jihadists there, Afghanistan's threat to the US would remain tiny, seeing as Afghan Islamists lack nuclear weapons and have no other reliable means of attacking us from Southwest Asia. Of course, it is possible that Afghan terrorists could still attack the US by traveling here and planning a strike without raising any red flags, but that risk is small. As University of Chicago Professor Robert Pape notes, Middle Eastern terrorist groups are today focusing less on training militants to infiltrate our country than on inspiring US residents themselves to attack Americans around them. With that in mind, it is probably riskier for the US to *stay* in Afghanistan indefinitely and intensify the vengeful sentiments that inspired the domestic Fort Hood, Boston Marathon, and Orlando nightclub attackers to commit crimes from within.

Humanitarian arguments for staying in Afghanistan are equally unconvincing. Even if we assume that the US can maintain the occupation without committing any more war crimes, our "humanitarian" mission will continue to fail for the simple reason that our Afghan "allies" lack the will and organizational cohesion necessary to defeat anybody but themselves. As it stands, the Afghan government is a union of adversarial factions that Secretary of State John Kerry strung together after the contested 2014 Afghan presidential election. Reigning leaders Ashraf

Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, political rivals who each tried stealing the election from the other, hate each other at least as much as they hate the Taliban. Various warlords are sparring viciously beneath them, evincing little desire to defeat the Taliban and virtually no desire to create anything resembling a liberal democracy. For their part, the Afghan "police" are basically indistinguishable from the criminals themselves, changing allegiances whimsically and assaulting civilians left and right. It is this loose confederation of bloodthirsty Afghans – not peaceful Afghans who want nothing to do with war – benefiting from our military aid.

Some leaders of the US occupation have recognized these realities for what they are. For his part, the State Department's Matthew Hoh resigned his post in 2009 when he determined that US troops in Afghanistan were often killing the wrong people and dying for no good reason. US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry also publicly expressed similar misgivings a few weeks later, doubting that US support for (what was then) Karzai's government could effectively reform what was a fundamentally unmotivated and corrupt institution. But no matter how clear the futility of the US occupation of Afghanistan has always been, the war machine rages on in a sadistic craze, consuming US energy and dollars while immiserating whatever innocent foreigners stand in its way. At a certain point, though, we have to put our collective foot down and refuse to allow our military's leadership to continue depleting resources and destroying lives just to play silly games in Afghanistan. US troops are losing. US taxpayers are losing. Afghan civilians are losing. The whole situation is a bloody mess that our military is helpless to fix and liable to worsen. It is time to withdraw.