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America's Ruinous Pursuit of Mission Impossible in Afghanistan

On May 1st, the date Donald Trump signed onto for the withdrawal of the remaining 3,500 American troops from Afghanistan, the war there, already 19 years old, was still officially a teenager. Think of September 11, 2021 — the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and the date Joe Biden has chosen for the same — as, in essence, the very moment when its teenage years will be over.

In all that time, Washington has been fighting what, in reality, should have been considered a fantasy war, a mission impossible in that country, however grim and bloody, based on fantasy expectations and fantasy calculations, few of which seem to have been stanchd in Washington even so many years later. Not surprisingly, Biden's decision evoked the predictable reactions in that city. The military high command's never-ending urge to stick with a failed war was complemented by the inside-the-Beltway Blob's doomsday scenarios and tired nostrums.

The latter began the day before the president even went public when, in a major opinion piece, the *Washington Post*'s editorial board distilled the predictable platitudes to come: such a full-scale military exit, they claimed, would deprive Washington of all diplomatic influence and convince the Taliban that it could jettison its talks with President Ashraf Ghani's demoralized U.S.-backed government and fight its way to power. A Taliban triumph would, in turn, eviscerate democracy and civil society, leaving rights gained by women and minorities in these years in the dust, and so destroy everything the U.S. had fought for since October 2001.

By this September, of course, 775,000-plus Americans soldiers will have served in Afghanistan (a few of them the children of those who had served early in the war). More than a fifth of them would endure at least three tours of duty there! Suffice it to say that most of the armchair generals who tend to adorn establishment think tanks haven't faced such hardships.

In 2010 and 2011, the Obama surge would deploy as many as 100,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. The Pentagon states that, as of this month, 2,312 American soldiers have died there (80% killed in action) and 20,666 have been injured. Then there's the toll taken on vets of that never-ending war thanks to PTSD, suicide, and substance abuse. Military families apart, however, much of the American public has been remarkably untouched by the war, since there's no longer a draft and Uncle Sam borrowed money, rather than raising taxes, to foot the \$2.26 trillion bill. As a result, the forever war dragged on, consuming blood and treasure without any Vietnam War-style protests.

Not surprisingly, most Americans know even less about the numbers of Afghan civilians killed and wounded in these years. Since 2002, at least 47,000 non-combatants have been killed and another 43,000 injured, whether by airstrikes, artillery fire, shootings, improvised explosive devices, or suicide and car bombings. A 2020 U.N. report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan notes that 2019 was the sixth straight year in which 10,000 civilians were killed or wounded. And this carnage has occurred in one of the world's poorest countries, which ranks 187th in per-capita income, where the death or incapacitation of an adult male (normally the primary breadwinner in a rural Afghan home) can tip already-poor families into destitution.

So how, then, can the calls to persevere make sense? Seek and you won't find a persuasive answer. Consider the most notable recent attempt to provide one, the Afghanistan Study Group report, written by an ensemble of ex-officials, retired generals, and think-tank luminaries, not a few of them tied to big weapons-producing companies. Released with significant fanfare in February, it offered no substantive proposals for attaining goals that have been sought for 19 years, including a stable democracy with fair elections, a free press, an unfettered civil society, and equal rights for all Afghans — all premised on a political settlement between the U.S.-backed government and the Taliban.

Still Standing After All These Years

Now, consider Afghanistan's bedrock reality: the Taliban, which has battled the world's most fearsome military machine for two decades, remains standing, and continues to expand its control in rural areas. The U.S., its NATO allies, and the Afghanistan National

Security and Defense Forces have indeed killed some 50,000 Taliban fighters over the years, including, in 2016, its foremost leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor. In 2019-2020 alone, several senior commanders, also members of the Taliban's shadow government, were killed, including the "governors" of Badakshan, Farah, Logar, Samangan, and Wardak provinces. Yet the Taliban, whose roots lie among the Pashtun, the country's historically dominant ethnic group, have managed to replenish their ranks, procure new weapons and ammunition, and raise money, above all through taxes on opium poppy farming.

It helps that the Taliban continues to get covert support from Pakistan's military and intelligence service, which played a pivotal role in creating the movement in the early 1990s after it was clear that the leaders of the Pakistan-backed Pashtun *mujahedeen* (literally, those who wage jihad) proved unable to shoot their way into power because minority nationalities (mainly Uzbeks and Tajiks) resisted ferociously. Yet the Taliban has indigenous roots, too, and its success can't be attributed solely to intimidation and violence. Its political agenda and puritanical version of Islam appeal to many Afghans. Absent that, it would have perished long ago.

Instead, according to the *Long War Journal*, the Taliban now controls 75 of Afghanistan's 400 districts; the government rules 133 others, with the remaining 187 up for grabs. Although the insurgency isn't on the homestretch to victory, it's never been in a stronger military position since the 2001 American invasion. Nor has the morale of its fighters dissipated, though many are doubtless weary of war. According to a May U.N. report, "the Taliban remain confident they can take power by force," even though their fighters have long been vastly outmatched in numbers, mobility, supplies, transportation, and the caliber of their armaments. Nor do they have the jets, helicopters, and bombers their adversaries, especially the United States do, and use with devastating effect. In 2019, 7,423 bombs and other kinds of ordnance were dropped on Afghanistan, eight times as many as in 2015.

Tallying Costs

As 2019 ended, a group of former senior U.S. officials claimed that the Afghan campaign's costs have been overblown. American troops killed there the previous year, they pointed out, amounted to only a fifth of those who died during "non-combat training exercises" and that "U.S. direct military expenditures in Afghanistan are approximately three percent of annual U.S. military spending" and were decreasing. It evidently escaped them that even a few fatalities that occur because a country's leaders pursue outlandish objectives like reshaping an entire society in a distant land should matter.

As for the monetary costs, it depends on what you count. Those “direct military expenditures” aren’t the only ones incurred year after year from the Afghan War. Brown University’s Costs of War Project, for instance, also includes expenses from the Pentagon’s “base budget” (the workaday costs of maintaining the armed forces); funds allotted for “Overseas Contingency Operations,” the post-9/11 counter-terrorism wars; interest payments on money borrowed to fund the war; the long-term pensions and benefits of its veterans; and economic aid provided to Afghanistan by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Do the math that way and the price tag turns out to be so much larger.

But even if you were to accept that 3% figure, that would still total \$22 billion from the \$738 billion fiscal year 2020 Pentagon budget, hardly chump change — especially given the resources needed to address festering problems on the home front, including a pandemic, child poverty, hunger, homelessness, and an opioid epidemic.

Nation-Building: Form vs. Substance

Now, consider some examples of the “progress” highlighted by the proponents of pressing on. These would include democratic elections and institutions, less corruption, and inroads against the narcotics trade.

First, the election system, an effective one being, of course, a prerequisite for democracy. Of course, given the way Donald Trump and crew dealt with election 2020 here in the U.S., Americans should think twice before blithely casting stones at the Afghan electoral system. In addition, organizing elections in a war-ravaged country is a dangerous task when an insurgency is working overtime to violently disrupt them.

Still, each of Afghanistan’s four presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) produced widespread, systematic fraud verified by investigative reporters and noted in U.S. government reports. After the 2014 presidential poll, for instance, candidate Abdullah Abdullah wouldn’t concede and threatened to form a parallel government, insisting that his opponent, Ashraf Ghani, had won fraudulently. To avert bloodshed, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a power-sharing deal that made Abdullah the “chief executive” — a position unmentioned in the Afghan constitution. (Incidentally, elections to the national legislature have also been plagued by irregularities.) Although USAID has worked feverishly to improve election procedures and turnout, spending \$200 million on the 2014 presidential election alone, voting fraud remained pervasive in 2019.

As for key political institutions, which also bear American fingerprints, the respected Afghanistan Analyst Network only recently examined the state of the supreme court, the

senate, provincial and district assemblies, and the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution (ICOIC). It concluded that they “lacked even the minimum independence needed to exercise their constitutional mandate to provide accountability” and aggravated the “stagnation of the overall political system.”

The senate lacked the third of its membership elected by district assemblies — the remaining senators are appointed by the president or elected by provincial assemblies — for a simple reason. Though constitutionally mandated, district assembly elections have never been held. As for the ICOIC, it had only four out of its seven legally required commissioners, insufficient for a quorum.

When it comes to the narcotics trade, Afghanistan now accounts for 90% of the world’s illicit opium, essential for the making of heroin. The hectares of land devoted to opium-poppy planting have increased dramatically from 8,000 in 2001 to 263,000 by 2018. (A slump in world demand led to a rare drop in 2019.) Little wonder, since poppies provide destitute Afghan farmers with income to cover their basic needs. A U.N. study estimates that poppy sales, at \$2 billion in 2019, exceeded the country’s legal exports, while the opium economy accounted for 7% to 11% of the gross domestic product.

Although the U.S. has spent at least \$9 billion attempting to stamp out Afghanistan’s narcotics trade, a 2021 report to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) concluded that the investment had next to no effect and that Afghan dominance of the global opium business remained unrivalled. The report didn’t, however, mention the emergence of a new, more insidious problem. In recent years, that country has become a major producer of illegal synthetic drugs, especially methamphetamine, both cheaper and more profitable than opium cultivation. It now houses, according to a European Union study, an estimated 500 meth labs that manufacture 65.5 tons of the stuff daily.

As for the campaign against corruption, a supposed pillar of U.S. nation-building, forget it. From shakedowns by officials and warlords to palatial homes built with ill-gotten gains by the well-connected, corruption permeates the American-installed system in Afghanistan.

Though U.S. officials have regularly fumed about the corruption of senior Afghan officials, including the first post-Taliban president, Hamid Karzai, the CIA funneled “tens of millions” of dollars to him for years (as he himself confirmed). Investigative reporting by the *Washington Post*’s Craig Whitlock revealed that many notorious warlords and senior officials were also blessed by the Agency’s beneficence. They included Uzbek strongman and one-time First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum,

accused of murder, abduction, and rape, and Mohammed Zia Salehi, the head of administration at the National Security Council under President Karzai.

In 2015, a U.S. government investigation revealed that \$300 million earmarked to pay the Afghan police never actually reached them and was instead “paid” to “ghost” (non-existent) officers or simply stolen by police officials. A 2012 study traced 3,000 Pentagon contracts totaling \$106 billion and concluded that 40% of that sum had ended up in the pockets of crime bosses, government officials, and even insurgents.

According to SIGAR’s first 2021 quarterly report to Congress, one U.S. contractor pled guilty to stealing \$775,000 in State Department funds. Two others, subcontractors to weapons giant Lockheed Martin, submitted nearly \$1.8 million in fraudulent invoices, while hiring local employees who lacked contractually required qualifications. (They were asked to procure counterfeit college diplomas from an Internet degree mill.)

And lest you think that this deeply embedded culture of corruption in Afghanistan is a “Third World” phenomenon, consider an American official’s recollection that “the biggest source of corruption” in that country “was the United States.”

Hubris and Nemesis Strike — Yet Again

While writing this piece, a memory came back to me. In 1988, I was part of a group that visited Afghanistan just as Soviet troops were starting to withdraw from that country. After a disastrous 10-year war, those demoralized young soldiers were headed for a homeland that itself would soon implode. The Red Army had been sent to Afghanistan in December 1979 by a geriatric Politburo leadership confident that it would save an embattled Afghan socialist regime, which had seized power in April 1978 and soon sparked a countrywide Islamist insurgency backed by the CIA and Saudi dollars that spawned a small group that called itself al-Qaeda, headed by a rich young Saudi.

Once the guerillas were crushed, so Soviet leaders then imagined, the building of a modern socialist society would proceed amid stability and a shiny new Soviet-allied Afghanistan would emerge. As for those ragtag bands of primitive Islamic warriors, what chance did they stand against well-trained Russian soldiers bearing the latest in modern firepower?

Moscow may even have believed that the Kabul government would hold its own after the Soviet military left what its new young leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had then taken to calling “the bleeding wound.” The Afghan president of that moment certainly did. When our group met him, Mohammed Najibullah Ahmadzai, a burly, fearsome fellow who had previously headed the KHAD, the country’s brutal intelligence agency, confidently

assured us that his government had strong support and plenty of staying power. Barely four years later, he would be castrated, dragged behind a vehicle, and strung up in public. The Politburo's experiment in social re-engineering in a foreign country — no one said “nation-building” back then — led to more than 13,000 dead Soviet soldiers and perhaps as many as one million dead Afghans. No two wars are alike, of course, but the same vainglory that possessed those Soviet leaders marked the American campaign in Afghanistan in its early years. The white-hot anger that followed the 9/11 attacks and the public's desire for vengeance led the George W. Bush administration to topple the Taliban government. He and his successors in the White House, seized by the overweening pride theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had long ago warned his fellow Americans about, also believed that they would build a democratic and modern Afghanistan. As it happened, they simply started another, even longer cycle of war in that unfortunate country, one guaranteed to rage on and consume yet more lives after American soldiers depart this September — assuming Biden's decision isn't thwarted.

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