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It's Time to Cut Our Losses in Afghanistan

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The mayhem unleashed after the burning of Korans at a U.S. base outside of Kabul—intentional or not—has likely irreparably damaged the U.S. training mission in Afghanistan. Peace talks with the Taliban—a major policy shift for the insurgent movement—could be off the table, too. This is just the latest incident in the downward spiral of U.S.-Afghan relations. Washington's policy must now shift dramatically toward an expedited withdrawal. The “hearts-and-minds” campaign was never likely to succeed in a country that views the United States as a guest who has overstayed his welcome.

Some political leaders and military commanders will argue that cooler heads must prevail and that a long-term strategy demands America's indefinite presence in Afghanistan. They will argue that any drawdown must be based on conditions on the ground. But conditions on the ground do not warrant staying the course, only narrowing our mission and avoiding further tragedies.

Retired four-star general Jack Keane, who has traveled to Afghanistan four times within the past eighteen months, says of the outrage and rioting that America in fact has a good relationship with the Afghan people. “We've forged an unusually strong relationship with those people. We've done it based on the values of the American people and our sensitivities to their culture. That's what is so frustrating about this.” With all due respect, General Keane and other like-minded observers are wrong. The mission is a waste of money, effort and, most importantly, lives.

Former heads of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal (retired) and General David Petraeus both emphasized the importance of winning hearts and minds of Afghans by treating them and their culture with respect. They believed the most helpful indicator of progress on the ground and the integration of political and military strategy is the protection of Afghan civilians.

But according to a recent report by U.N. mission in Afghanistan, [2011 was the fifth straight year in which civilian casualties rose](#) [3]. Of course, last year insurgents were responsible for 77 percent of Afghan civilian deaths. Despite this fact, after tripling the number of U.S. troops in that country—far fewer than the Pentagon asked for—President Obama made it America’s mission to protect the Afghan people.

A decade into the conflict, the Afghan government still remains incredibly weak, widely distrusted and underrepresented in poorly secured areas of the country. The roughly [180,000-strong](#) [4] Afghan army, whose performance and effectiveness [remains](#) [5] [questionable](#) [6], has an officer corps teaming with ethnic fissures and competing subnational interests. Meanwhile, the Afghan police force has [developed](#) [7] a reputation for desertion, illiteracy and rapaciousness. On top of limited and potentially unsustainable security improvements, the spiraling violence does not instill confidence in our victory.

Too many U.S. government planners forget that for Afghans we are their guests, and it is their country. We forget that back in 2010, Afghanistan’s president Hamid Karzai imposed a crackdown on alcohol consumption and closed a number of expat bars around Kabul because they were deemed offensive to Islam. The Afghan general who carried out the alcohol raids told the *Los Angeles Times* it was done for “Allah’s sake.” After that, violent [demonstrations](#) [8] and intercultural hostility increased after Florida pastor Terry Jones promised to “stand up” to Islam and burn a Koran. The recent incident of U.S. Marines urinating on corpses was yet another provocative episode in the erosion of American-Afghan relations.

As I [argued](#) [9] months ago, “Recent events in Afghanistan should be a wake-up call to how our ten-year occupation is actually being perceived. Rather than winning ‘hearts and minds,’ America’s civilizing mission has become increasingly associated with a Western cultural invasion.”

Many Afghans see outsiders constantly changing their mayors, their governors and their customs. They are told how to dress their women, what is culturally acceptable and what is culturally repugnant. Americans are infuriated when their politicians redistribute their taxes, yet they ignore how intrusive their own military and civilian planners have become to foreign peoples.

It’s no surprise that a report published last May by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit concluded that negative sentiments about democracy emerge from “the stated distaste among respondents for ‘Western culture’ and the potential threat it poses to ‘Afghan culture,’ traditional norms or values, and an Islamic identity.”

None of this should imply that the Quran burning or the grisly violence meted out against innocent people was justified. But the fact remains that America is widely scorned throughout the region—in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

According to a poll from last summer by the Pew Research Center, 59 percent of Americans want a withdrawal from Afghanistan immediately—not two years from now, not six months from now. Immediately. Americans may finally be realizing what George Mason University’s Christopher Coyne has argued, which is that the historical record indicates “that attempts to spread liberal democracy via military occupation will fail more often than they will work.”

More money, more time and more resources [will not change these underlying realities](#) [10]. To continue to train and assist the Afghan national army and police when distrust remains this high risks more violent incidents like [this](#) [11] and [this](#) [12] and [this](#) [13]. Rather than become Afghanistan’s perpetual crutch, Washington must cut its losses. The war is fiscally irresponsible and wasteful of U.S. taxpayer dollars. Most importantly, no more American or Afghan lives should be lost in pursuit of a strategy that is not in America’s national interest.

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