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IN AFGHANISTAN, THEY DIED FOR NO GOOD CAUSE

by Sheldon Richman

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Last week a remarkable exchange about the future role of the U.S. military in Afghanistan took place on the MSNBC program *Andrea Mitchell Reports*. In a discussion of the U.S. government's uncertain negotiations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai over the continued presence of U.S. troops beyond 2014, NBC's chief foreign correspondent, Richard Engel, pointed out that, between the Karzai talks and the negotiations with Afghanistan's next-door neighbor Iran, the Obama administration has a daunting task.

Part of the administration's objective, Engel said, is

to protect the legacy of America's longest war. For a lot of the soldiers we've been speaking to, this is personal. They've come here time and time again. They've invested so much. They've put their family lives on hold. They've lost friends here. So the collapse of Afghanistan would be in a certain way a personal affront to what *they* have done. So you also have to keep the investment, personal and otherwise, that the United States has put into military into this conflict — and that's also part of this calculation.

To which the show's host, Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent Mitchell, replied, "That's probably the *most* important part of the calculation."

Seriously? The most important part of the calculation as to whether the U.S. military will continue to occupy Afghanistan is what American military personnel have lost in the past 12 years? In the business world, that's called throwing good money after bad. In economics, it's known as sunk costs. The past is gone. Any action is future-oriented. The right question is, What would be the consequences of continued military occupation? Additional killing and dying will not bring back the dead or restore lost time, nor will it make the losses worthwhile.

Engel and Mitchell of course are not policymakers, but they are faithful conduits for the thinking of the ruling elite. So this exchange is not to be taken lightly.

Since the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Associated Press reports, at least 2,153 American military personnel have been killed. Asia scholar Juan Cole reports that 19,415 Americans were "wounded in Afghanistan badly enough to go to hospital."

Afghan casualty data are harder to come by, and in recent years most casualties have apparently been inflicted by Taliban insurgents. Yet journalists Bob Dreyfuss and Nick Turse write, "But it's an unassailable fact that many of those killed by anti-government forces would almost certainly be alive had the United States never invaded. And the victims of US forces and other foreign troops number in the many thousands."

What good is there to show for that loss and shattering of life? Nothing. Afghanistan remains a violent place, nominally ruled by a corrupt and repressive propped-up government that will remain precarious no matter how long the U.S. military stays. President Karzai regularly gets bags of CIA cash, the illegal drug trade thrives with official connivance, and stoning is about to be introduced as the penalty for adultery.

The Taliban, which reigned before the U.S. invasion and still is conducting an unrelenting insurgency, was never a threat to the American people. (The U.S. government was on its side after the Soviets invaded the country.) The organization that was a threat, al-Qaeda, did not plot the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan and has since spun off affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, and the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, the threat was a direct consequence of decades of U.S. intervention in the Muslim world. If there had been no American empire, there would have been no 9/11 attacks, nor would there have been any of the acts committed by al-Qaeda against the U.S. government before 2001.

What this means is that the sacrifices of America's military personnel — not to mention the war crimes committed against the Afghan people — were for *no good reason whatever*. It would be wrong, however, to say they were for no reason at all. Many Americans in and out of government have garnered immense wealth and power thanks to U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. War is a racket.

American forces should be withdrawn at once, for the sake both of the Afghan people and of the U.S. personnel, who are abused by America's rulers. We can only hope that Karzai refuses to sign a new agreement with the Obama administration, so that this long nightmare can come to an end.