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Why Are We in Afghanistan?

By Tom Bethell

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Over the years I have heard 10 or more reasons, but not one that is convincing. "This will not end well," George Will wrote, and I agree with that. Yes, President Obama inherited the Afghanistan war, but he has dug himself in deeper, and as they say he owns it now. It will be hard for him either to win it or to extricate us.

Why are we there? At first it was retaliation for 9/11. We should "get the people who attacked us," as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said. It is the one reason that Americans understand and do accept. I was certainly in favor of the Afghanistan invasion of 2001, and perhaps that's why Obama called it the necessary war. Striking at al Qaeda made sense in a way that invading Iraq never did. But that was a reason for going into Afghanistan, not a reason for still being there eight and a half years later.

When our bombing missions and commando raids met with uncertain success, the rationale for expanding the war shifted. It was said that we couldn't let this evil thing called al Qaeda have the run of a whole nation to plot further attacks. That meant we had to get control of the whole country.

Of course you don't need a whole country -- Afghanistan is about the area of Texas, with a population of 30 million -- to plan an assault. And even if you do, it doesn't have to be Afghanistan. How about Yemen or Somalia? Or failing that, an American motel. Some of the Saudi hijackers met shortly before 9/11 in a Florida motel, others at various addresses in Virginia.

The plot succeeded not because they were free of a meddling government but because they enjoyed the element of surprise. They were willing to commit suicide in the planes they had seized -- something new in the history of hijacking. The pilot's cabin won't be so easily reached in the future.

It would have been nice if our 2001 aerial bombardment of Afghanistan and cave raids on al Qaeda had killed Osama bin Laden right away. Then we could have withdrawn victoriously. I'm afraid that

in the end we may be reduced to retreating indecisively, even ignominiously. Incidentally, we can't rule out the possibility that bin Laden is dead, as Angelo Codevilla has argued (see TAS, March 2009). The CIA, surely, has too readily accepted recordings of "his" voice as genuine. Why not insist on video before accepting anything? The national security establishment may want to preserve a formidable foe, just as the WHO loves a new flu virus. Some may recall that the CIA grossly exaggerated Soviet GNP -- by a factor of 10, I believe -- right up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Analysts may be playing the same game now with bin Laden.

In November, Obama agreed to a troop buildup in Afghanistan, opting for "counter-insurgency" rather than "counter-terrorism." Probably not one American in a thousand understood that. It means "enhancing the military, governance, and economic capacity" of the region, Obama said. It's a disguised way of heading down the path to nation-building. People don't want that so it has been obscured by doubletalk.

Some defenders of the U.S. position say, "Now that we are there, we can't just pull out." That's like saying mistakes can't be corrected. A related argument for "rebuilding" Afghanistan goes like this. We have made "commitments" to the "international community," and we can't shirk them now. That's another way of saying it's too late to reverse a decision once it has been made. (By the way, what is "the international community" and who is its leader?)

I read my old friend David Ignatius's columns in the Washington Post. We joined the Washington Monthly on the same day in 1975 when he was reputed to be an antiwar radical. Now he is a near neocon. He wrote in October that Obama "rightly" saw walking away from the Afghanistan war as a "reckless course." Why so? Because "neighboring Pakistan is facing its own brutal onslaught from the Taliban."

Well, Ignatius is one of the WP's foreign policy experts, and he has spent more time in more foreign countries than I can even count. All I can say is that if we are in Afghanistan to save Pakistan -- and you do hear that more and more -- then the president should come right out and say so.

Feminists have made a surprising common cause with pro-war forces, as Doug Bandow has pointed out. They want the military to stay on and fight so we can get Afghan women out from under male oppression and out of their burqas. Fancy imagining that American soldiers, 10,000 miles from home, in a strange and hostile land, can engineer a cultural change of that magnitude.

If it can happen on an American campus, they think, why not the Khyber Pass? Really, it's impressive that they have such faith in American military power.

We cannot win this war for an important cultural reason: ours is an increasingly feminized culture, so we cannot take the casualties. Every death is published, broadcast, made the occasion for an honor guard and a hometown page-one story. The Washington Post's Richard Cohen wrote an interesting column about this -- "A Price to Pay, One Name at a Time." What newspaper could publish the names of the Civil War dead, he asked, an average of about 600 per day; or even the Vietnam War dead -- 182 per week. "Brevity makes mourning possible." And it intensifies the question: Why are we there?

It's good that the horrors of war have been so individualized. The callousness about death that we saw in the world wars of the 20th century will not easily be repeated. At the same time we are now up against a renovated Islamic culture of death in which suicides think of themselves, and are treated as, martyrs. Our honor-guard funerals will be no match for their martyrdoms, and they will surely outweigh our huge technological advantage.

I believe, then, that our Asian wars will not be sustainable. If the (masculine) British and Soviet empires of the 19th and 20th centuries could not handle Afghanistan then, I don't see how our feminized culture can do so now.

Thomas Friedman of the New York Times may have noticed this. He sees that the world is not quite as "flat" as he would like. Arab and Muslim societies need to start "shaming suicide bombers and naming their actions 'murder,' not 'martyrdom,'" he wrote, with a touch of impatience. Until they do, "this behavior will not stop." No kidding. So Obama should "call for it," he added, not just for "more airport security."

Consider the Islamic traitor at Fort Hood, who shot and killed 12 soldiers in November. The response? Chaplains moved promptly to "comfort" the "larger army community," which was itself "struggling to make sense of what happened." It made perfect sense, however, to those engaged in Islamic jihad -- and to those who understand that that is their intention. It made no sense only to those who think that the world consists of liberals-at-heart, some of whom suffer from too much "stress." A lieutenant colonel on the base said that the Fort Hood "community" responded like this: They were holding "critical-incident stress-management sessions."

That's it. They have martyrs, we have critical-incident stress-management sessions.

It is not our duty to give Obama cover on the grounds that a war calls for patriotism, not partisanship. Great errors of judgment must be pointed out, not glossed over. Democrats in Congress will probably want to get out of this war ahead of the Republicans, who could lend support to Obama's ill-advised war. Yet it could be the GOP's opportunity, as the Cato Institute's Ed Crane has pointed out.

At least let's hope that John McCain isn't the GOP nominee once more.