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The War We Can't Win
Afghanistan & the Limits of American Power

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8/6/2009

History deals rudely with the pretensions of those who presume to determine its course. In an American context, this describes the fate of those falling prey to the Wilsonian Conceit. Yet the damage done by that conceit outlives its perpetrators.

From time to time, in some moment of peril or anxiety, a statesman appears on the scene promising to eliminate tyranny, ensure the triumph of liberty, and achieve permanent peace. For a moment, the statesman achieves the status of prophet, one who in his own person seemingly embodies the essence of the American purpose. Then reality intrudes, exposing the promises as costly fantasies. The prophet's followers abandon him. Mocked and reviled, he is eventually banished—perhaps to some gated community in Dallas.

Yet however brief his ascendancy, the discredited prophet leaves behind a legacy. Most obvious are the problems created and left unresolved, commitments made and left unfulfilled, debts accrued and left unpaid. Less obvious, but for that reason more important, are the changes in perception.

The prophet recasts our image of reality. Long after his departure, remnants of that image linger and retain their capacity to beguile: consider how the Wilsonian vision of the United States as crusader state called upon to redeem the world in World War I has periodically resurfaced despite Woodrow Wilson's own manifest failure to make good on that expectation. The prophet declaims and departs. Yet traces of his testimony, however at odds with the facts, remain lodged in our consciousness.

So it is today with Afghanistan, the conflict that George W. Bush began, then ignored, and finally bequeathed to his successor. Barack Obama has embraced that conflict as "the war we must win." Those who celebrated Bush's militancy back in the intoxicating days when he was promising to rid the world of evil see Obama's enthusiasm for pressing on in Afghanistan as a vindication of sorts. They are right to do so.

The misguided and mismanaged global war on terror reduced Bush's presidency to ruin. The candidate whose run for high office derived its energy from an implicit promise to repudiate all that Bush had wrought now seems intent on salvaging something useful from that failed enterprise—even if that means putting his own presidency at risk. When it comes to Afghanistan, Obama may be singing in a different key, but to anyone with an ear for music—especially for military marches—the melody remains intact.

Candidate Obama once derided the notion that the United States is called upon to determine the fate of Iraq. President Obama expresses a willingness to expend untold billions—not to mention who knows how many lives—in order to determine the fate of Afghanistan. Liberals may have interpreted Obama's campaign pledge to ramp up the U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan as calculated to insulate himself from the charge of being a national-security wimp. Events have exposed that interpretation as incorrect. It turns out—apparently—that the president genuinely views this remote, landlocked, primitive Central Asian country as a vital U.S. national-security interest.

What is it about Afghanistan, possessing next to nothing that the United States requires, that justifies such lavish attention? In Washington, this question goes not only unanswered but unasked. Among Democrats and Republicans alike, with few exceptions, Afghanistan's importance is simply assumed—much the way fifty years ago otherwise intelligent people simply assumed that the United States had a vital interest in ensuring the survival of South Vietnam. As then, so today, the assumption does not stand up to even casual scrutiny.

Tune in to the Sunday talk shows or consult the op-ed pages and you might conclude otherwise. Those who profess to be in the know insist that the fight in Afghanistan is essential to keeping America safe. The events of September 11, 2001, ostensibly occurred because we ignored Afghanistan. Preventing the recurrence of those events, therefore, requires that we fix the place.

Yet this widely accepted line of reasoning overlooks the primary reason why the 9/11 conspiracy succeeded: federal, state, and local agencies responsible for basic security fell down on the job, failing to install even minimally adequate security measures in the nation's airports. The national-security apparatus wasn't paying attention—indeed, it ignored or downplayed all sorts of warning signs, not least of all Osama bin Laden's declaration of war against the United States. Consumed with its ABC agenda—"anything but Clinton" was the Bush administration's watchword in those days—the people at the top didn't have their eye on the ball. So we let ourselves get sucker-punched. Averting a recurrence of that awful day does not require the semipermanent occupation and pacification of distant countries like Afghanistan. Rather, it requires that the United States erect and maintain robust defenses.

Fixing Afghanistan is not only unnecessary, it's also likely to prove impossible. Not for nothing has the place acquired the nickname Graveyard of Empires. Of course, Americans, insistent that the dominion over which they preside does not meet the definition of empire, evince little interest in how Brits, Russians, or other foreigners have fared in attempting to impose their will on the Afghans. As General David McKiernan, until just recently the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, put it, "There's always an inclination to relate what we're doing with previous nations," adding, "I think that's a very unhealthy comparison." McKiernan was expressing a view common among the ranks of the political and military elite: We're Americans. We're different. Therefore, the experience of others does not apply.

Of course, Americans like McKiernan who reject as irrelevant the experience of others might at least be willing to contemplate the experience of the United States itself. Take the

case of Iraq, now bizarrely trumpeted in some quarters as a “success” and even more bizarrely seen as offering a template for how to turn Afghanistan around.

Much has been made of the United States Army’s rediscovery of (and growing infatuation with) counterinsurgency doctrine, applied in Iraq beginning in late 2006 when President Bush announced his so-called surge and anointed General David Petraeus as the senior U.S. commander in Baghdad. Yet technique is no substitute for strategy. Violence in Iraq may be down, but evidence of the promised political reconciliation that the surge was intended to produce remains elusive. America’s Mesopotamian misadventure continues.

Pretending that the surge has redeemed the Iraq war is akin to claiming that when Andy Jackson “caught the bloody British in the town of New Orleans” he thereby enabled the United States to emerge victorious from the War of 1812. Such a judgment works well as folklore but ignores an abundance of contrary evidence.

Six-plus years after it began, Operation Iraqi Freedom has consumed something like a trillion dollars—with the meter still running—and has taken the lives of more than forty-three hundred American soldiers. Meanwhile, in Baghdad and other major Iraqi cities, car bombs continue to detonate at regular intervals, killing and maiming dozens. Anyone inclined to put Iraq in the nation’s rearview mirror is simply deluded. Not long ago General Raymond Odierno, Petraeus’s successor and the fifth U.S. commander in Baghdad, expressed the view that the insurgency in Iraq is likely to drag on for an-other five, ten, or fifteen years. Events may well show that Odierno is an optimist.

Given the embarrassing yet indisputable fact that this was an utterly needless war—no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction found, no ties between Saddam Hussein and the jihadists established, no democratic transformation of the Islamic world set in motion, no road to peace in Jerusalem discovered in downtown Baghdad—to describe Iraq as a success, and as a model for application elsewhere, is nothing short of obscene. The great unacknowledged lesson of Iraq is the one that the writer Norman Mailer identified decades ago: “Fighting a war to fix something works about as good as going to a whorehouse to get rid of a clap.”

For those who, despite all this, still hanker to have a go at nation building, why start with Afghanistan? Why not first fix, say, Mexico? In terms of its importance to the United States, our southern neighbor—a major supplier of oil and drugs among other commodities deemed vital to the American way of life—outranks Afghanistan by several orders of magnitude.

If one believes that moral considerations rather than self-interest should inform foreign policy, Mexico still qualifies for priority attention. Consider the theft of California. Or consider more recently how the American appetite for illicit drugs and our liberal gun laws have corroded Mexican institutions and produced an epidemic of violence afflicting ordinary Mexicans. We owe these people, big-time.

Yet any politician calling for the commitment of sixty thousand U.S. troops to Mexico to secure those interests or acquit those moral obligations would be laughed out of Washington—and rightly so. Any pundit proposing that the United States assume responsibility for eliminating the corruption that is endemic in Mexican politics while establishing in Mexico City effective mechanisms of governance would have his license to pontificate revoked. Anyone suggesting that the United States possesses the wisdom and the wherewithal to solve the problem of Mexican drug trafficking, to endow Mexico with competent security forces, and to reform the Mexican school system (while protecting the rights of Mexican women) would be dismissed as a lunatic. Meanwhile, those who promote

such programs for Afghanistan, ignoring questions of cost and ignoring as well the corruption and ineffectiveness that pervade our own institutions, are treated like sages.

The contrast between Washington's preoccupation with Afghanistan and its relative indifference to Mexico testifies to the distortion of U.S. national security priorities induced by George W. Bush in his post-9/11 prophetic mode—distortions now being endorsed by Bush's successor. It also testifies to a vast failure of imagination to which our governing classes have succumbed.

This failure of imagination makes it literally impossible for those who possess either authority or influence in Washington to consider the possibility (a) that the solution to America's problems is to be found not out there—where "there" in this case is Central Asia-but here at home; (b) that the people out there, rather than requiring our ministrations, may well be capable of managing their own affairs relying on their own methods; and (c) that to disregard (a) and (b) is to open the door to great mischief and in all likelihood to perpetrate no small amount of evil. Needless to say, when mischief or evil does occur—when a stray American bomb kills a few dozen Afghan civilians, for instance—the costs of this failure of imagination are not borne by the people who inhabit the leafy neighborhoods of northwest Washington, who lunch at the Palm or the Metropolitan Club, and school their kids at Sidwell Friends.

So the answer to the question of the hour—What should the United States do about Afghanistan?—comes down to this: A sense of realism and a sense of proportion should oblige us to take a minimalist approach. As with Uruguay or Fiji or Estonia or other countries where U.S. interests are limited, the United States should undertake to secure those interests at the lowest cost possible.

What might this mean in practice? General Petraeus, now commanding United States Central Command, recently commented that "the mission is to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a sanctuary for Al Qaeda and other transnational extremists," in effect "to deny them safe havens in which they can plan and train for such attacks."

The mission statement is a sound one. The current approach to accomplishing the mission is not sound and, indeed, qualifies as counterproductive. Note that denying Al Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan hasn't required U.S. forces to occupy the frontier regions of that country. Similarly, denying Al Qaeda safe havens in Afghanistan shouldn't require military occupation by the United States and its allies.

It would be much better to let local authorities do the heavy lifting. Provided appropriate incentives, the tribal chiefs who actually run Afghanistan are best positioned to prevent terrorist networks from establishing a large-scale presence. As a backup, intensive surveillance complemented with precision punitive strikes (assuming we can manage to kill the right people) will suffice to disrupt Al Qaeda's plans. Certainly, that approach offers a cheaper and more efficient alter-native to establishing a large-scale and long-term U.S. ground presence—which, as the U.S. campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated, has the unintended effect of handing jihadists a recruiting tool that they are quick to exploit.

In the immediate wake of 9/11, all the talk—much of it emanating from neoconservative quarters—was about achieving a "decisive victory" over terror. The reality is that we can't eliminate every last armed militant harboring a grudge against the West. Nor do we need to. As long as we maintain adequate defenses, Al Qaeda operatives, hunkered down in their caves, pose no more than a modest threat. As for the Taliban, unless they manage to

establish enclaves in places like New Jersey or Miami, the danger they pose to the United States falls several notches below the threat posed by Cuba, which is no threat at all.

As for the putatively existential challenge posed by Islamic radicalism, that project will prove ultimately to be a self-defeating one. What violent Islamists have on offer-a rejection of modernity that aims to restore the caliphate and unify the *ummah* [community]—doesn't sell. In this regard, Iran—its nuclear aspirations the subject of much hand-wringing—offers considerable cause for hope. Much like the Castro revolution that once elicited so much angst in Washington, the Islamic revolution launched in 1979 has failed resoundingly. Observers once feared that the revolution inspired and led by the Ayatollah Khomeini would sweep across the Persian Gulf. In fact, it has accomplished precious little. Within Iran itself, the Islamic republic no longer represents the hopes and aspirations of the Iranian people, as the tens of thousands of protesters who recently filled the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities made evident. Here we see foretold the fate awaiting the revolutionary cause that Osama bin Laden purports to promote.

In short, time is on our side, not on the side of those who proclaim their intention of turning back the clock to the fifteenth century. The ethos of consumption and individual autonomy, privileging the here and now over the eternal, will conquer the Muslim world as surely as it is conquering East Asia and as surely as it has already conquered what was once known as Christendom. It's the wreckage left in the wake of that conquest that demands our attention. If the United States today has a saving mission, it is to save itself. Speaking in the midst of another unnecessary war back in 1967, Martin Luther King got it exactly right: "Come home, America." The prophet of that era urged his countrymen to take on "the triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism."

Dr. King's list of evils may need a bit of tweaking—in our own day, the sins requiring expiation number more than three. Yet in his insistence that we first heal ourselves, King remains today the prophet we ignore at our peril. That Barack Obama should fail to realize this qualifies as not only ironic but inexplicable.