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Myth V. Fact: Afghanistan

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While "Change" has been Barack Obama's mantra, as of late he has been channeling his predecessor.

"Afghanistan," [according to Obama](#), "is a war of necessity... [And] If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans."

President George W. Bush was adept at keeping the American public in an elevated state of panic. That tactic may be useful for advancing controversial policies. But if policymakers continue to downplay the drawbacks of our current course of action, America risks intensifying the region's powerful jihadist insurgency and entangling itself deeper into a tribal-based society it barely understands.

Americans must be told the truth about the war in Afghanistan. To understand the disadvantages of pursuing present policies, we must unpack the myths that war proponents use to justify staying the course.

Myth #1: Both al Qaeda and the Taliban Are Our Mortal Enemies

Given the magnitude of the atrocities unleashed on September 11th, removing both al Qaeda and the Taliban regime that sheltered the terrorist organization was appropriate. But eight years later, is waging a war against the Taliban a pressing national security interest? Not really.

The Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other guerilla-jihadi movements indigenous to this region have no shadowy global mission. In fact, what we are witnessing is a local and regional ethnic Pasthun population -- divided arbitrarily by a porous 1,500-mile border -- fighting against what they perceive to be a hostile occupation of their region. Prolonging our mission risks uniting these groups and making U.S. troops the primary target of their wrath.

As I mentioned in an earlier post, even if the Taliban were to reassert themselves amid a scaled down U.S. presence, it is not clear that the Taliban would again host al Qaeda. In [*The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*](#), Lawrence Wright, staff writer for New Yorker magazine, found that before 9/11 the Taliban was divided over whether to shelter Osama bin Laden. The terrorist financier wanted to attack Saudi Arabia's royal family, which, according to Wright, would have defied a pledge Taliban leader Mullah Omar made to Prince Turki al-Faisal, chief of Saudi intelligence (1977-2001), to keep bin Laden under control. The Taliban's reluctance to host al Qaeda's leader means it is not a foregone conclusion that the same group would provide shelter to the same organization whose protection led to their overthrow.

As the war in Afghanistan rages on, President Obama should be skeptical of suggestions that the defeat of al Qaeda depends upon a massive troop presence. Globally, the United States has degraded al Qaeda's ability to pull off another 9/11 by employing operations that look a lot like police work. Most of the greatest successes scored against al Qaeda, such as the snatch-and-grab operations that netted Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Ramzi bin al Shibh, have not relied on large numbers of U.S. troops. Intelligence sharing and close cooperation with foreign law enforcement and intelligence agencies have done more to round up suspected terrorists than blunt military force.

Myth # 2: We Must Remain in the Region to Protect Pakistan

The "Pakistan-is-imploding" meme that coursed through the Beltway like wildfire last spring was excessively alarmist.

First, the danger of militants seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons remains highly unlikely. Pakistan has an elaborate command and control system in place that complies with strict Western [standards](#), and the country's warheads, detonators, and missiles are not stored fully-assembled, but are [scattered and physically separated](#) throughout the country.

Second, average militants have no viable means of taking over a country of 172 million people. The dominant political force within Pakistan is not radical fundamentalist Islam, but a desire for a sound economy and basic security. In fact, if the country were to be taken over by al Qaeda sympathizers, it would likely be because U.S. policies in both Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan are being exploited by militants to undermine public support for the government in Islamabad.

Third, policymakers have underestimated how greatly leaders in Islamabad fear the rise of pro-India government in Kabul. India inspires a sense of profound insecurity in Pakistan. For all of Washington's talk of the "Af-Pak" border, eighty percent of Pakistan's military still sits

on the [border with India](#), not Afghanistan. Pakistan's fear of India has existed for decades, and Pakistani military leaders are committed to securing "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, their regional backyard, and they do so to prevent India from establishing influence there and encircling Pakistan.

Finally, and most importantly, while America has a vital interest in ensuring Pakistan does not become weakened, its America's own policies that are pushing the conflict over the border and destabilizing the nuclear-armed country.

Airstrikes from unmanned drones are strengthening the very jihadist forces America seeks to defeat by allowing militants to exploit the popular resentment felt from the accidental killing of innocents. On August 12, the U.S. special envoy for the region, Richard Holbrooke, [told](#) an audience at the Center for American Progress that the porous border and its surrounding areas serve as a fertile recruiting ground for al Qaeda. One US military official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, called airstrikes from U.S. unmanned drones "[a recruiting windfall for the Pakistani Taliban](#)."

Citizens living outside the ungoverned tribal areas also detest drones. A recent poll conducted by Gallup Pakistan for Al-Jazeera found that a whopping 59 percent believed the [U.S. was the greatest threat to Pakistan](#).

If America's interests lie in ensuring the virus of anti-American radicalism does not infect the rest of the region, discontinuing policies that add more fuel to violent religious radicalism should be the first order of business.

Myth #3: Terrorists Dwell in Ungoverned Parts of the World

According to the president, our strategy is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda. Yet in order to accomplish that goal, the Obama administration believes we must create a functioning national state there. Why?

Beltway orthodoxy tells us that because extremists will emerge in ungoverned parts of the world and attack the United States, America must forcibly stabilize, liberalize, and democratize Afghanistan.

This thinking is flawed for several reasons.

First, the argument that America's security depends on rebuilding failed states ignores that terrorists can move to governed spaces. Rather than setting up in weak, ungoverned states, enemies can flourish in strong states because these countries have formally recognized governments with the sovereignty to reject foreign interference in their domestic affairs. This is one reason why terrorists find sanctuary across the border in Pakistan. [Note: 9/11 was planned in many other countries, Germany included].

Second, as my Cato colleagues Chris Preble and Justin Logan [point out](#), there's reason to doubt whether state failure or poor governance in itself poses a threat.

Third, such an extraordinarily costly, open-ended military occupation gives Osama bin Laden and his ilk exactly what they want: America's all-volunteer military force is pressed to cope with two protracted irregular wars, we are inadvertently killing innocent civilians and our policies are recruiting militants to their cause.

Myth # 4: We Can Have a Successful Nation-Building Mission in Afghanistan

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps' Counterinsurgency Field Manual states, "Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as [warriors rebuilding infrastructure and basic services](#)." That sentiment is shared by many of the people informing administration policy.

Stephen Biddle, civilian advisor to General Stanley McChrystal, America's top commander in Afghanistan, [said](#) a critical requirement for the success in Afghanistan "is providing enough of an improvement in Afghan governance to enable the country to function without us."

But like many within the Obama administration, Biddle's advice is more goal than strategy.

First, Afghanistan has yet to demonstrate the capability to function as a cohesive, modern, nation state, with or without us -- and perhaps never will. Many tribes living in rural, isolated, and sparsely populated provinces have little interest cooperating with "foreigners," a relative term considering the limited contact many have with their country's own central government.

Second, arguments supporting a multi-decade commitment of "armed nation building" -- the words of another civilian advisor to the mission, Anthony Cordesman -- overlook whether such an ambitious project can be done within costs acceptable to the American public.

Our attempt to transform what is a deeply divided, poverty stricken, tribal-based society -- while our own country faces economic peril -- is nothing short of ludicrous, especially since even the limited goal of creating a self-sufficient, non-corrupt, stable electoral democracy would require a multi-decade commitment--and even then there'd be no assurance of success.

Myth #5: It's Altruistic to Help Afghans

[This video at "Rethink Afghanistan"](#) upends this myth, particularly on the issue of women's rights.

In addition, while it's understandable for the President and other elected leaders to empathize with the plight and suffering of others, why Afghanistan? What about Haiti? Or Congo? Or the dozens of other poverty-stricken countries around the world, and at that point does America stop nation-building?

As Boston University Professor Andrew Bacevich [argues](#):

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...outranks Afghanistan by several orders of magnitude...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.

Over the past year, the mission in Afghanistan has shifted from the limited goal of taking down al Qaeda to a much broader counterinsurgency approach. Americans are now being told their troops must protect the villages of Afghanistan. Planning will always fall short of our expectations because we can't reliably predict the course of future events. As the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated in an August 2009 report, "Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is not a reconstruction project--it is a construction project, starting almost from scratch in a country that will probably remain poverty-stricken no matter how much the U.S. and the international community accomplish in the coming years."

Denying a sanctuary to terrorists who seek to attack the United States does not require Washington to pacify the entire country or sustain