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The Afghan Disaster

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In the private sector, there is always a test of success. The business must make a profit. It can sustain some losses but the clock is always running on those. At some point, after all cuts have been made and costs are trimmed to a minimum, the business has to close shop. The summer of losses must become the autumn of profits, or else it's all over.

Not so in government. Failing projects can go on forever. There is no profit and loss test. There is no test at all, in fact. Agencies like the GAO can blast away at a particularly egregious case of government waste, but hardly anyone pays attention. Congress has no reason to scrap it. No one does. Taxpayers have no means to pull the plug, because the whole thing is run outside their purview.

Now, with an intro like that, you might think I'm about to talk about Medicare or public schools or the post office. It would be easy enough. But let us never forget that foreign policy constitutes another sector of government management, central planning, and bureaucratic-driven missions that are no more or less successful than anything else a government does.

The case in question here is the Afghan invasion and occupation. The top military commander there, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, has written a report (supposed to be secret but emailed to the *Washington Post*) that says unless more troops arrive soon, the entire operation will fail. They won't be able to defeat the insurgency unless more force is applied. That's a serious problem, since it is not unreasonable to define the current and would-be insurgency as the entire population of Afghanistan, perhaps excepting those directly on the US payroll.

How well do I recall that first American foray into Afghanistan following September 11, 2001. The US just had to kill someone and soon. The Islamic hardcores running that country made a good target, especially since the average American doubts that anyone in such a far-flung country, where people dress funny and believe crazy things, is up to any good at all. Let's go get 'em!

There was hardly any opposition. Oh sure, there were [a few of us](#) out there. But mostly, everyone went along, as if this were a case of dispensing justice and, after all, that's what government is supposed to do, according to its own storyline. So far as I know, all D.C. think tanks got on board with that one. It was the least objectionable war of the modern period, the one that almost no one opposed.

Never mind that the precise relationship between 9-Eleven and Afghanistan was fuzzy at best. Never mind that the secret hideouts of the alleged terrorists there were built by the US itself during the days of the Soviet occupation. The basis of the attack was not that different from the attack on Iraq: it was something that the Bush administration wanted and 9-Eleven furnished the pretext.

Would it succeed? Anyone with a sense of history knows the answer to that. The British tried and failed. The Soviets tried and failed. The only way a person could believe that the US would succeed is if you believed that the US is somehow a country of magic power. After the invasion, the Taliban fled – very smart – and went into the hills to have years of fun with us, and so on it has gone.

But the General's report can't even recognize the failure: "While the situation is serious, success is still achievable."

Oh sure, and if we keep following this rainbow, we'll find a pot of gold at the end. We just have to keep walking and following the General.

People talk of the need for an exit strategy. A more serious problem for government is the exit motivation. So long as failed programs continue, everyone on the payroll loves it. The bureaucrats have power. The money rolls in. The Congress can pass out the contracts. The corporations in league with the warfare state get contracts and infrastructure development. The state gets to show force and muscle people.

What's not to love? The costs are borne by others, such as Americans who pay in taxes and inflation, and such as average Afghans who live amidst chaos and fear, and who stand little chance of experiencing normal lives so long as their country is used as a pawn in international politics. The resentments that are built up during times of occupation last for many generations, and the US will pay a long and heavy price.

But failure? The US will never admit it. The answer now, is as it was under Bush and will be forever with government programs, is more force, more death, more money, more determination to win. The private sector can't do this, which is precisely why all the stuff that

makes life worth living is produced privately, and all that the government does is slow down the progress of civilization and bring destruction and disaster wherever it goes.