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Starting Another Year of War in Afghanistan

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October 2009 has begun with the *New York Times* reporting that "the president, vice president and an array of cabinet secretaries, intelligence chiefs, generals, diplomats, and advisers gathered in a windowless basement room of the White House for three hours on Wednesday to chart a new course in Afghanistan."

As this month begins the ninth year of the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan, "windowless" seems to be an apt metaphor. The structure of thought and the range of options being debated in Washington's high places are notably insular. The "new course" will be a permutation of the present course.

While certainty is lacking, steely resolve is evident. An unspoken mantra remains in effect: When in doubt, keep killing. The knotty question is: Exactly who and how?

News accounts are filled with stories about options that mix "counterinsurgency" with "counterterrorism." The thicker the jargon in Washington, the louder the erudite tunes from the latest best and brightest — whistling past graveyards, to be filled by people far away.

In the White House, there's no indication of a pane that's facing the pain in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, where the U.S. government continues to bring gifts: a

The letter was neatly printed with a blue pen. "I've been fed up and damaged," it said. "My hope is that from you and all entrepreneurs and all who have compassion, I respectfully ask you to help me for God's sake. I'm downtrodden. I hope you understand my situation."

The situation, living in a squalid camp for refugees in Kabul, was desperate. "I am Sayed Ali — from Geresh district of Helmand province."

Moments after handing me the letter, he grabbed it out of my hands. A controlled rage flooded his voice. Pashto words cascaded, and a translator tried to keep up.

Sayed Ali said that he'd given other letters to officials and nothing changed. Month after month in this forsaken camp, little more than ditches and improvised tents.

Two weeks later, in mid-September, I met with a few staffers and members of Congress; some of the most progressive on Capitol Hill. But when I talked about the refugees I saw in Kabul — many of them homeless because of U.S. bombing in southern Afghanistan — the discussion couldn't seem to get anywhere.

In the air was an unspoken message: Desperate refugees are routine in war. That's the way it is.

Washington doesn't recognize Sayed Ali, with his suffering and his smoldering rage, or other Afghans in similar predicaments. An unspoken calculus in Washington figures that we owe them next to nothing. It's a matter of priorities, you know.

Yes, there are plenty of photo ops and news reports on U.S. aid projects, happening in tandem with Army and Marines military maneuvers. But what's budgeted to help rebuild Afghanistan is paltry compared to what's spent on making war there.

"We proclaim moral principles when justifying our actions, but we wreak havoc and destruction on a backward, ancient world we do not understand," retired U.S. Army colonel and author Douglas Macgregor wrote in *Defense News* on September 28. He added: "Our troops are not anthropologists or sociologists, they are soldiers and Marines who have been sent to impose America's will on backward societies. The result is mutual hatred — not everywhere, but in enough places to feed what American military leaders like to call an 'insurgency'..."

U.S. media and politics are now awash in talk about getting smarter and shrewder in Afghanistan. The idea of setting a country right while waging war is a popular Washington fantasy. What it has to do with reality is another matter.

"I don't want any foreigners building roads or big buildings for me when I am cleaning blood from my home," a shopkeeper in Helmand province, Haji Dawood Khan, told a *Financial Times* reporter in late September. The newspaper quoted a businessman from Kandahar province, Mohammad Karigar, who said: "The more foreign troops there are, the more people will hate them."

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In Washington, few politicians or journalists mention that 90 percent of the U.S. government's current spending in Afghanistan is for military operations.

There was plenty of money to pay for bombing Sayed Ali's neighborhood in Helmand province, but there's no money to ease his current desperation.

Sayed Ali is speaking for countless other people: "I respectfully ask you to help me for God's sake."

More than eight months have passed since the inaugural speech when Barack Obama told foreign leaders: "Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy." And so President Obama will be judged.