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The Unwinnable War

By Aryn Baker
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Out at the Kabul military training Center, on a barren hilltop, Colonel Fazl Karim is giving a new batch of recruits his usual pep talk. It's two weeks before these soldiers are commissioned as regulars in the Afghan National Army, and in some ways they look ready to go: they sit cross-legged in the dirt, all aligned in neat rows. Construction crews build more barracks nearby; 100,000 more recruits are expected to go through the U.S.-built training center in the next three years. If everything goes as planned, some 352,000 men will be ready to defend this country the day the mostly American army of foreign fighters packs up and leaves. "You are all going to die one day!" shouts Karim. "You might as well die protecting your country!"

A few men stifle yawns. Others poke their snoozing companions awake. Even the American officers overseeing all the training are skeptical. Taliban infiltration, drug use and desertion are commonplace among the men who arrive here. Troop quality is poor; recruiters can't be too selective when they have such large quotas to fill. For U.S. Army Captain Jason Reed, who is part of the training mission, it's just a matter of time. A long time. "As long as training continues when we leave, there is no reason to think that Afghanistan can't continue to grow a professional army," he says. "But it's going to take generations."

The government of Afghanistan and its American patrons do not have generations to make the country work. Afghans are supposed to take responsibility for their own security on Dec. 31, 2014, 38 months from now. But 10 years after the U.S. invaded this long-suffering country and then settled in for a long occupation, Afghanistan is nowhere close to being able to stand on its own — militarily, economically or even politically. To many, it has become an expensive misadventure. Meanwhile, the U.S. keeps broadcasting its intention to leave, not so much withdrawing as recoiling from a problem it seemingly no longer has the will or the ability to

solve.

The prospect is frightening: Afghanistan today has the potential to be even more destabilizing for the region and the world than it was under the Taliban. Lawlessness has become the rule, so much so that many Afghans have grown nostalgic for the cold but effective dicta of Mullah Mohammed Omar's theocracy. Osama bin Laden may be dead and his fraying al-Qaeda network dispersed to other lands, but when the Americans leave, the country could easily revert to the failed narcostate and terrorist training ground that it once was. That alone would be a potent propaganda victory for America's foes. And it would risk unleashing another proxy war as rival militias, backed by regional allies, re-enact the civil war that saw the rise of the Taliban in the first place. Such a conflagration could pull nuclear-armed rivals Pakistan and India to the brink.

American patience for an alternative scenario is nearly tapped out. Over the course of 10 years, the U.S. has lost 1,786 service members and 763 private contractors there. An additional 14,342 service members have been wounded. The U.S. established over 180 forward operating bases around the country, deployed more than 9,000 mine-resistant vehicles and spent a total of \$444 billion in the past decade on securing and rebuilding the nation — and attending to the damage the war caused to its troops when they returned home. America's best strategists and military minds and nation builders and engineers were set to work on one of the largest country-building efforts since the Marshall Plan. And it simply hasn't worked.

Even now, 10 years after the 2001 invasion, security is at one of its low points. The U.S. embassy in Kabul suffered through a prolonged siege last month. High-profile assassinations have picked off the top tier of government and security officers, including a former President tasked with leading peace negotiations with the Taliban leadership. Even as NATO statistics point to a 2% reduction in enemy attacks, the U.N. holds that 2011 is on track to be the most violent since the invasion for Afghan civilians.

American officials, first in the George W. Bush era and now under Barack Obama, confidently maintain that economic and security conditions in the country are improving, little by little. But the evidence for that claim is scant, and the deadline for U.S. withdrawal gets closer each day. In many ways, the withdrawal has already begun.

Nothing from Money I first went to Afghanistan for TIME in the winter of 2003. I expected resentment, poverty and destruction. Instead I encountered an extraordinary sense of hope. I ate greasy stews with tribal elders who were anticipating roads that would connect their villages, for the first time, to civilization. I went to school with teenage girls who sat alongside 6-year-olds to get the first-grade education denied to them by the Taliban. I shared the country's dangers too: I was nearly blown up by a suicide bomber and was ambushed alongside U.S. troops near what we had thought was a friendly village. I once had my life threatened with a hurled teapot. But still I kept going back for the fix. Like all of Afghanistan, I was hooked on hope.

A few years later I moved to Kabul, where I met, and married, an Afghan American who had returned after two decades in exile because he too believed in the country's future. We had a daughter, and when she was 2 months old I got her an Afghan passport, determined that she would one day play a part in a resurrected Afghanistan.

These days, I am starting to think that the flimsy blue booklet, embossed with the Afghan state seal, will be little more than a souvenir of an infancy spent in a collapsed country known best for drugs, terrorism and its endless history of war — a country that may become a footnote in America's noble but sometimes foolhardy habit of trying to do good miles from home.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001, it was not just to avenge the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11; it was with, in the words of then President Bush, a moral obligation to "disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations." Bush also promised to raise the hopes of the "oppressed people of Afghanistan." The U.S. toppled the Taliban with little more than a few hundred Special Forces on horseback and satchels full of cash, showing — or so Washington thought — that the model of a light-footprint war could reverse a millennium of imperial routs in a country known as the graveyard of empires. That proved premature. The enemy the U.S. thought it had defeated simply melted into the population, while its leadership plotted a return from safe havens across the border in Pakistan. Distracted by Iraq and other crises, America's attention-deficit disorder toward Afghanistan undermined those early gains. The Taliban slipped back in, laying the groundwork for a tenacious insurgency that, several years on, even a threefold surge by U.S. forces has not been able to defeat.

Meanwhile, the U.S. flung money at quick-impact projects designed to win Afghan hearts and minds as much as applause from taxpayers back home. Americans were development dilettantes lacking a clear long-term vision. Roads crumbled within years of their completion, the product of low-quality cement brought in by shady subcontractors. Security contractors paid bribes to the Taliban to stop them from attacking fuel convoys. In a country without wheelchairs, medical clinics were equipped with handicapped-accessible ramps. Schools were built, but no teacher-training colleges were established to staff them. And when the insurgency continued to grow, the U.S. first said agriculture was the solution, then a bigger army, then reintegration of Taliban foot soldiers.

By some measures, the narrative of Afghanistan over the past decade should be upbeat. Afghans are seeing greater prosperity, increased access to basic health care and more children in school. American assistance has helped boost the attendance in elementary and secondary schools for girls from nearly zero in 2001 to more than 3 million and for boys from 1 million to over 5 million. Twice as many Afghans have electricity now as in 2001. Nothing makes me happier than seeing the streets of my neighborhood swarming with girls in white headscarves making their way to class. They want to grow up to be President, they tell me, or doctors, or pilots so they can see the world. In the past year, the U.S. has trained and deployed 23 Afghan prosecutors and judges to districts that had neither, and it plans to raise that number to 52 eventually.

But these gains have come with caveats. Life expectancy has gone down since 2001. Outside the cities, those kids in school have nowhere to go after sixth grade. The measures of American success in Afghanistan have been couched in kilometers of roads built, money spent, insurgents killed. The Afghan National Army is judged not on its ability to fight but on the number of recruits trained. The metrics should tell the story of a nation rising from the ashes; the truth is that the country is just steps from the precipice.

The economy, which was averaging 10% growth largely because of annual injections of international aid, has slowed to a crawl. Foreign and private investment has stalled, and real estate prices in Kabul have been slashed by a third. And as attacks on the capital have increased, the economy has nose-dived. "Our economy depends on security," says Mohammad Azim, who runs an international cash-transfer office in Kabul's old money-exchange market. "When there is no security, everyone sends their money abroad. So business is good for me but bad for Afghanistan." The situation will only worsen, he says, the closer it gets to 2014. When the foreign forces depart, the support industries, from private security to trucking and construction, will collapse.

A Battlefield with Few Victories The U.S. ambassador to Kabul, Ryan Crocker, might have deemed last month's deftly orchestrated terrorist attack on the embassy "harassment," but his glib assessment of an assault that paralyzed the capital for 19 hours, took 16 innocent lives and demonstrated the militants' ability to penetrate even the most heavily guarded areas of the capital with weapons in tow has failed to convince Afghans that they are safe. Not long afterward, I got an e-mail from my local assistant, who was in Sweden for a three-month fellowship, telling me he wasn't returning. A bright, energetic law student who speaks in idiomatic slang learned from American troops, he had often voiced his dreams of making a difference for his country. No longer. The uncertain life of an illegal migrant seeking asylum is more appealing.

One of the fundamental pillars of the U.S. exit strategy is the assumption that the Afghan army will be able to stand up as the U.S. withdraws. Afghans are good soldiers, and brave, but as Reed points out, the timeline of their success extends far beyond the American deadline to leave. Last month, the Pentagon halved its budget over the next three years for training, paying and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces. A reduction in their already low salaries — about \$200 a month for an Afghan army private — could lead to wider defections. One soldier, picking up his salary at Kabul's money-changing market, looked doubtfully at the wad of cash in his hand when asked what he would do if his pay were cut. "I'd quit," he said simply. Another soldier said he would probably join the Taliban. He was only half joking. "I hear they pay better," he said.

U.S. attempts to rapidly boost the number of alternative security forces may be undermining stability. A report released last month by Human Rights Watch documents alarming levels of abuse by the Afghan Local Police, a force created by the U.S. in remote areas where more-formal security forces are spread thin. These militias have been accused of rape, murder, extortion, armed land grabs and, in one gruesome case, hammering nails through the foot of a suspected teenage insurgent. David Petraeus, who commanded the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force before he stepped down to head the CIA, told the U.S. Senate in March that the program was "arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capability to secure itself."

And then there was the surge.

Petraeus' attempt to replicate his Iraq-war strategy in Afghanistan has had mixed results. In late 2009, in an effort to permanently defeat the Taliban insurgency, Obama ordered an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, boosting the number on the ground to 100,000. Yet the consensus

is that the surge has not been the success it was in Iraq and that in some ways it has failed as a strategy. The military situation in the south has improved, but security in the eastern and northern sectors of the nation remains sketchy. Security in some provinces has actually deteriorated. The Taliban have shown a capacity for daring raids — for example, springing about 500 detainees by way of an underground tunnel from a prison near Kandahar in April — that suggests they may be gaining strength. "If you are looking at things over the summer, it's hard to point to a lot of good news coming out of Afghanistan," says a former Obama Administration security official in Washington. "There's no denying that."

Meanwhile, the ever more frequent air strikes and night raids that hit innocents along with insurgents are starting to undercut public support for the foreign forces. "We don't want the foreigners to leave," says women's-rights activist Shoukria Haider. "We know they are the only thing standing between us and a return to civil war. But the longer [they] stay, the more violence we see, so we are caught. We want the violence to end too."

A Nation No One Could Build? The easy narrative is to blame Afghanistan, a country that managed to repel both the British and Soviet armies in their primes and frustrate all manner of occupiers. But to throw hands up in exasperation and say Afghanistan, with its tribes and conservative traditions, is an ungovernable place impervious to change is to cower behind a convenient historical falsehood. Before the 1979 Soviet invasion, my mother-in-law wore Chanel suits and held a senior position with the national airline. My father-in-law worked for a functioning government that was slowly yielding development and progress.

Even today, my Afghan friends run successful media companies and work in a vibrant telecommunications sector. Sure, they are urban exceptions in a country whose rural population is still mired in poverty, but their successes could point to a future Afghan success, if the country is given the tools it needs. Afghans never saw the post-9/11 foreign presence as an invasion. They desperately wanted what the U.S. was offering — democracy, governance, human rights and financial independence. Even the most conservative Afghans recognized the need for schooling their young daughters. After 15 years of war and five more of Taliban rule, they were ready to regain their place among nations.

But instead of a Marshall Plan, the U.S. has come up with a patchwork of short-term solutions that seemed designed to showcase the appearance of progress rather than create enduring change. More damaging, perhaps, it has looked the other way when Afghan government officials, whose salaries are paid by American funds, flagrantly indulge in corruption and graft. Afghans are equally at fault: police indulge in petty bribes, power brokers rape, and parliamentarians steal land with little risk of legal or political retribution. The resulting lawlessness has Afghans across a broad spectrum of society waxing nostalgic for the era when a single Talib in the town square would dispense justice with a quote from the Koran and a flick of his lash. "Even as a liberal, I can say that the Taliban time was better," says Gholam Sadiq Niazi, a Soviet-trained technocrat in Afghanistan's oil-and-gas industry. "It doesn't matter if I have to go to mosque five times a day or grow a beard, as long as we have rule of law."

Niazi is no radical. He speaks from a comfortable, middle-class apartment in central Kabul. Financially, he says, he is better off now than in 2001, but what's the point, he asks, if someone

could murder him tomorrow for his property and get out of jail with a bribe or political connections? The sister of an 11-year-old rape victim whose politically connected attacker was never prosecuted once shouted at me with rage and frustration, "If the Taliban were still here, that rapist would have already been executed by now."

Few Afghans today support the wanton violence of the reincarnated Taliban insurgency, and history shows that the Taliban too were no strangers to corruption — but the fact that both women and religious moderates speak well of their reputation for security shows how shallowly rooted the support is for 10 years of Western assistance.

As much as some Afghans clung to the hope that talks earlier this year with the Taliban would bring peace, few believed they would result in anything more than another deal between armed political elites. And even those hopes evaporated when a Taliban peace envoy detonated his explosives-stuffed turban while embracing the head of the National Reconciliation Council. Burhanuddin Rabbani was killed instantly in a clear demonstration of how the Taliban truly feel about making peace: They don't need to compromise. They just need to wait.

So Many Exit Strategies Nearly nine years after I set my first, nervous foot on Afghan soil, my battered Nokia flashlight phone (essential in a country where, even in the capital, power outages are still common) is filled with the numbers of long-departed diplomats, soldiers, press officers, consultants and development experts. I too am only a temporary visitor these days. My husband and I left a year ago after we reluctantly came to the conclusion that our beloved city simply wasn't a safe enough place to raise our child. Each time I return, I find that the barricades are bigger, the razored garlands of concertina wire more numerous and thick. Anxiety and fear nibble at the edges of my conversations with ordinary Afghans. The indomitable Afghan pride has been shoved aside by canny calculations on how to get out — family in Pakistan, a student visa for Europe. Many Afghans too have exit strategies.

Military officials say things will get worse before they get better and that it will take time for the shaky Afghan forces to find their footing. Meanwhile, the Taliban have taken their campaign of rural intimidation to the cities, where their highly organized, complex suicide attacks undermine whatever confidence is left. NATO officials blithely assert that the suicide attacks are a sign of desperation, proof that the enemy is no longer capable of mounting a frontal attack. That may be the case, but the Taliban's ability to recruit volunteers for "martyrdom," as demonstrated by their profligate use of three or four at a time, indicates to me a far more terrifying kind of strength.

Even as the Obama Administration assures the American public that the drawdown of troops is on track, U.S. diplomats and military officials in Kabul weave a hopeful narrative of progress. Few of us on the ground see it that way. It used to be that American withdrawal was conditioned on success. Now, it seems, withdrawal has become the definition of success. If that's the case, success in Afghanistan will feel a lot like failure.