

The Goal of 'Not Losing' in Afghanistan

Exclusive: America's adventures in Afghanistan – dating back to the 1980s – have led to one disaster after another with President Trump and other politicians afraid to finally admit failure, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

"Let's get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghans we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense!" – Donald Trump, January 11, 2013

Taking a break from his defense of the "very fine people" who marched with Nazis in Charlottesville, President Trump will reportedly meet with his national security team today (Friday, August 18) at Camp David to discuss a far deadlier but ironically less controversial issue: the war in Afghanistan.

That war, the longest in our history, has cost the United States more than 2,350 killed, 20,000 injured, and a trillion dollars. Yet unlike Charlottesville, it arouses little passion. It gained impeccably bipartisan credentials through successive Republican and Democratic administrations. Although a huge majority of Americans today oppose the war, they lack sufficient conviction to prevent Congress from continuing to appropriate tens of billions of dollars each year to fund it.

Trump is in a bind. As Taliban forces continue to rack up military and political gains across their country, no serious expert can possibly believe that continued U.S. intervention will deliver "victory." Sixteen years of experience show that almost every U.S. tactic has not only failed, but backfired.

Far from winning hearts and minds, nighttime Special Forces raids and bombing runs have turned countless villagers against the Afghan government and its foreign backers. Far from bolstering Kabul's resources, tens of billions of dollars in U.S. aid created an epidemic of corruption that decimated the government's credibility and put money and weapons in the hands of the Taliban.

Far from defeating Islamist tyranny, the United States has empowered viciously cruel warlords. Far from promoting law and order, U.S. anti-drug campaigns turned poppy-growing peasants into allies and funders of the Taliban. And far from closing off Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, Washington's surly relations with Islamabad have amplified dangerous anti-American sentiments in that nuclear-armed, Islamic state.

A Parallel Disaster

“It is most disturbing to find that after [many] years [the country] appears less, not more, stable than it was at the outset,” said one prominent U.S. senator. “It appears more removed from, rather than closer to, the achievement of popularly responsible and responsive government.”

That was actually the observation of Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, D-Montana, reporting on a study mission to Vietnam in the fall of 1962. It applies just as well to Afghanistan today.

Yet as Trump’s national security experts huddle with the President, most are almost certainly advocating an increased troop commitment to Afghanistan – not to bear the brunt of the fighting, but ostensibly to train government forces to stand on their own. That, of course, was the mission of U.S. military advisers sent to Vietnam in the early 1960s, before that war ballooned into a national disaster.

Trump’s generals – McMaster, Mattis and Kelly – know this history as well as anyone. (H. R. McMaster’s book, *Dereliction of Duty*, is considered a classic history of failed military leadership in the Vietnam War.) So does John McCain, the Senate’s most famous Vietnam veteran, who nonetheless insists on doing whatever it takes to “turn the tide” in Afghanistan. So why do they – like Obama’s team before them – keep calling for throwing away more lives and money on a lost cause?

The answer to that also lies in Vietnam. As former Defense Department official and Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel Ellsberg argued in a seminal 1971 essay, “The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine,” U.S. leaders knew full well, every step of the way, that their successive escalations of that war would not bring victory. Instead, their goal was to prevent defeat – and with it, a repetition of the political traumas that followed the “loss of China” and the rise of McCarthyism in the early 1950s.

“If I tried to pull out completely now, we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands,” President John F. Kennedy told Sen. Mansfield in 1963. The assassination of Kennedy that November precluded any possibility that he would pull out after his reelection. Two days later, President Lyndon Johnson told a White House meeting, “I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.”

The Cost of ‘Not Losing’

Forty-six years later, a *Washington Post* story on America’s longest war reports, “talk of ‘winning’ is scarce. The goal now seems more akin to ‘not losing.’” Pundits like former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta now talk of staying in

Afghanistan for decades. It's a replay of the Vietnam stalemate – but with more manageable costs, little TV coverage, and no mass anti-war demonstrations.

Most Washington leaders hardly know or care whether any U.S. “national interests” are actually at stake in Afghanistan. But they view the political risks of pulling out as worse than the risks of keeping the stalemate going. They don't dare face charges that they allowed Afghanistan to become once again a haven for terrorists. No matter that Islamist jihadists operate just fine today without bases in Afghanistan – in our post-reality world, what counts are not the facts, but what fire-breathing analysts on Fox News will say about any apparent retreat.

No one knows what would happen if the United States were to pull out of Afghanistan. But if the Vietnam analogy holds, the consequences, though not pretty, would surely be less disastrous than many pundits predict. It's hard to dispute the (admittedly self-serving) words of one Taliban spokesman, who said a U.S. withdrawal “will prevent further loss of its manpower and economy . . . This will be a means of salvage for us Afghans, too. . . Therefore, if America's occupation comes to an end, it means that the problem between the two nations will end, too.”

Donald Trump, who had no trouble advising President Obama to quit the war, has reportedly ruled out a withdrawal from Afghanistan and complained to his military advisers that they aren't giving him a strategy to win. If those reports are correct, he will forfeit his last opportunity to blame the war on his predecessor and cut his losses.

Senator McCain had it partly right when he said in July, “Eight [try 16] years of a ‘don't lose’ strategy have cost us lives and treasure in Afghanistan. Our troops deserve better.”

So do American taxpayers – and Afghan civilians. Unfortunately, McCain, like most members of the Washington foreign policy “blob,” can only envision further military escalation to maintain the stalemate. What the United States desperately needs now is a mass movement to resist not only racism and plutocracy at home, but endless militarism abroad.

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