Time to Admit the Afghan War is ‘Nonsense’

Exclusive: Officially, the U.S. military objective in Afghanistan is to force the Taliban to the negotiating table, but just last month President Trump said that talks with the Taliban are off the table, indicating an incoherent policy, as Jonathan Marshall notes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Whatever happened to the Donald Trump who tweeted in 2013, “Let’s get out of Afghanistan ... we waste billions there. Nonsense!”

And whatever happened to the reality TV star who used to tell under-performers, “you’re fired”?

Today, as commander in chief, President Trump is indefinitely extending the Afghan war’s record as the longest in U.S. history. He’s wasting $45 billion to wage it this year alone. And he’s not even thinking of firing his huckster generals who claim that sending a few thousand more troops and stepping up the bombing will be a “game changer.”

Much like the Vietnam War, every day’s news of war from Afghanistan puts the lie to optimistic claims of a military solution. A recent BBC study concluded that Taliban forces are now active in 70 percent of the country, more than at any time since the end of 2001. Unofficial U.S. estimates of their strength have soared from about 20,000 in 2014 to at least 60,000 today.

Afghan government forces number several times as many, but—like their counterparts in the Vietnam War—they “lack the one thing the U.S. cannot provide: the will to fight a protracted campaign against a committed enemy,” in the words of Bill Roggio, editor of the Long War Journal at the hawkish Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

The Taliban have proven that no place in Afghanistan is safe from their long arm. At the beginning of February, they infiltrated a bomb-laden ambulance into Kabul, just blocks from a meeting at the Afghan Ministry of Defense with the head of the U.S. Central Command. Its blast killed more than 100 people and injured 235. It followed only days after Taliban gunmen stormed the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, killing at least 20 people, including four Americans.

Inspector General Finds No Progress
The latest Inspector General report on the status of “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” issued Feb. 18, declares that U.S. and Afghan government forces made no progress last year in expanding their control of the country or in forcing the Taliban to the peace table, one of the administration’s stated goals.

“In addition,” the report said, “there were growing concerns about whether Afghanistan will be able to hold parliamentary elections as planned in July 2018, and the country was struggling to provide assistance to nearly two-million internally displaced persons.”

The report also highlighted the lethality of Taliban operations against Afghan military and police forces, but it declined to offer numbers, noting that the U.S. military had classified them at the request of the Afghan government.

To justify its optimism, the Trump administration has touted its ostensibly new tactic of bombing drug labs to deny the Taliban revenue. The Inspector General notes that such operations were undertaken as far back as 2009, to no end:

“The United Nations reported that opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan set a new record in 2017. Cultivated land increased 63 percent over 2016 levels and potential opium production set a new record at 9,000 tons. The United Nations stated that the Afghan government’s strategic focus on protecting population centers in 2017 might have made rural populations more vulnerable to the influence of anti-government entities who pay local farmers to grow poppy and protect farmers from government eradication efforts.”

Similarly, U.S. military operations have failed to suppress Afghanistan’s version of ISIS, which recently conducted several spectacular terror attacks in Kabul. The U.S. command made “no discernible progress” on convincing Pakistan to close its borders to insurgents. Last but not least, the Afghan government remains a mess, riven by factional fights between President Ashraf Ghani and provincial warlords.

An Incoherent Policy

Meanwhile, unaddressed by the IG is the basic incoherence of a policy of bombing the Taliban into reconciliation. On paper, Washington aims to force the Taliban to the negotiating table, acknowledging that outright victory is impossible. But only this January, President Trump told members of the UN Security Council, “we don’t want to talk with the Taliban,” and a spokesman for President Ghani said recently, “We never negotiate with groups who resort to crime and the brutal killing of people and then claim responsibility for it.”

That sounds like a policy of stalemate if ever there was one.
“For years, we have been pursuing a strategy that will not win, but at the same time, we are doing just enough to ensure that we do not entirely lose,” concedest Kevin Hulbert, former CIA station chief in Kabul. “The way forward will be determined by clarifying our objectives, which to this point, have remained ambiguous at best.”

Clarifying our objectives would certainly help, but just as important are clarity about U.S. interests and capabilities.

Ever since 9/11, policy makers have largely taken American interests for granted. Yet aside from fantasies about developing Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, it’s hard to make a serious case that American lives and treasure will be more at risk from getting out of Afghanistan than continuing an endless war. The only significant interest at stake is political: no president wants to lose such a war.

And as to capabilities, the Obama-era surge proved that even with 100,000 troops, the United States cannot win a war against committed, indigenous insurgents who enjoy unlimited funding and protected foreign sanctuaries. Unlike the United States, the Taliban have nowhere to go. They will wait us out, even if that means fighting for another 16 years.

A decade ago, a top-level policy analysis requested by President George W. Bush admitted, “The United States is not losing in Afghanistan, but it is not winning either, and that is not good enough.” Those words are as true in 2018 as they were in 2008. The situation is still not good enough, and there’s no chance of it getting any better. It’s time for President Trump to wake up and say “you’re fired!” to anyone on his team who pretends otherwise.

Jonathan Marshall is the author or co-author of five books on U.S. foreign policy and international affairs. His articles on Afghanistan include “The Goal of ‘Not Losing’ in Afghanistan,” “Blaming the Afghan War Failure on — Russia,” and “Afghanistan: President Obama’s Vietnam.”