

Afghanistan: Imagine There's No Future

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Here's a little thought experiment. Imagine it's Sept. 12, 2001, and America is in deep shock over the destruction of the World Trade Center the previous day. George W. Bush goes on national TV and declares:

"Now is not the time to lose our heads. Like Pearl Harbor, the death of thousands of innocent people in Lower Manhattan is a crime that will live in infamy. But our response must be carefully calibrated. With that in mind, we are sending teams of commandos to Afghanistan with the sole purpose of apprehending Osama bin Laden and his top henchmen. Once they're arrested – and, mark my words, they will be – we will bring them to New York to stand trial just a few yards from where their despicable act of mass murder occurred. We have no quarrel with the people of Afghanistan. But we will have no dealings with the Taliban government as long as it harbors despicable terrorist groups like Al Qaeda. We are confident that our allies will do the same."

The result of such a well-calibrated response would have been no war in Afghanistan, no prisoners in Guantánamo Bay, and almost certainly no war in Iraq either. Without earlier conflicts to pave the way, intervention in Libya, Syria, and Yemen would have all proved more difficult. Countless deaths would have been avoided and entire societies spared.

But it was not to be. The Bush administration was in no mood for calibration after 9/11, only brute revenge. It didn't want to put Bin Laden on trial because of the stories he might tell about Al Qaeda's ties to the CIA, the Saudi royal family, and others. It was more interested in going after Saddam Hussein because Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had somehow gotten it into his head that the Iraqi leader was ultimately responsible. It therefore decided to invade Afghanistan (a) because it wanted to show it could and (b) because it needed a stepping stone to an invasion of Iraq that would eliminate a bothersome rival in the Persian Gulf.

So it went to war. Nearly twenty years later, we're living with the consequences in the form of a conflict that has cost \$2 trillion and taken the lives of nearly 2,400 Americans and [at least half a million Afghans](#), yet which continues with no exit in sight and can only get worse. And Donald Trump's phony Taliban peace deal is proof.

Little, if anything, about the peace agreement signed last weekend in Qatar makes sense. It calls for a phased, fourteen-month withdrawal of 12,000 US troops in exchange for what the New York Times [called](#) "vague" commitments on the Taliban's part to protect the civil liberties, the very idea of which is ludicrous. It requires the Taliban to combat Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups operations even though Taliban military commander Sirajuddin

Haqqani heads a subgroup known as the Haqqani Network that is itself on the State Department's list of officially proscribed terrorist organizations.

It calls on the Taliban to release a thousand prisoners of war in exchange for five thousand Taliban fighters held by the Afghan government even though negotiators never contacted the Afghan government to see if it would go along. And it somehow imagines that the Taliban will do Trump's bidding from here on out even though a Taliban spokesman announced a day earlier that an accord would mark "the defeat of the arrogance of the White House in the face of the white turban." A group that brags about defeating Trump one day is not likely to prove very cooperative the next.

Which is why the agreement has fallen apart in record time. The day after it was inked, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani confirmed that a prisoner exchange was out of the question. Two days later, the Taliban retaliated by launching [43 attacks](#) against Afghan government forces. A day after that, the US responded by bombing Taliban positions in Helmand province, a longtime stronghold in southern Afghanistan.

This was after Trump spent 35 minutes on the phone with a Taliban leader named Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and [declared](#), "The relationship is very good that I have with the mullah." If this is a good relationship, one can only wonder what a bad one would be like.

Why won't the Taliban go along? The chief reason, as an ex-CIA officer named Douglas London pointed out in a recent New York Times [op-ed](#), is because it knows it's winning. "The Taliban has successfully challenged the government for control of rural areas, and by doing so, the roads necessary to resupply major urban areas," he wrote. "And while the government in Kabul can claim support from a greater percentage of the overall population - mainly people in the major cities - the Taliban continues to extend the territory over which it rules."

It knows that time is on its side, in other words, and that negotiations are a pointless distraction. London, moreover, noted out that it's not clear the group could enforce a peace even if it wanted to. Since it's more "diverse, decentralized, and factionalized" than generally realized, leaders will have a hard time convincing the rank-and-file to hold their fire against the hated Americans, while persuaded local fighters to turn their guns on Al Qaeda will be even worse. Why shoot down fellow Muslims if the only beneficiary is the US?

The very idea of a negotiated settlement is a pipedream, and the insurgents know it. Taliban attacks rose some six percent last year while ground operations by the Afghan government military simultaneously [fell](#), a clear indication of which way the win is blowing. US bombings are running at record levels. But since [civilian casualties are doing the same](#), the result is to create more enemies than the American military can possibly kill off.

Then there's Kabul where things are going from bad to worse. Ashraf Ghani is feuding with his chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, who claims to have won last month's presidential election and is threatening to set up his own parallel government if his rival doesn't step down. The same holds true in the military, where morale is plummeting among soldiers forced to man isolated outposts that the Taliban can seemingly attack at will.

"Police and soldiers are stuck in their bases," a district council head in western Afghanistan [told](#) the New York Times. "The Taliban are killing security forces easily, but no one pays attention." While elite special forces sometimes go on the offensive, the effect is like tossing

a pebble into the sea. “They come here, kill some people and arrest some, and that’s it,” one district governor observed. “When they leave, the Taliban come back.”

We’ve seen it all before in Vietnam, Algeria, Somalia, and whatnot. Hence, it was all so predictable. The “[Afghan Model](#),” as the Bush administration initial strategy is now known, rested on a combination of CIA and Special Forces teams, precision airpower, and local “rent-a-militias” that were willing to play along with the US in exchange for military and financial support. It proved devastatingly effective in scattering the Taliban and seizing control of major cities. But conquering a vast and thinly-populated country like Afghanistan is one thing and holding onto it year and year out is quite another – and in their rush to accomplish the first, “Vulcans” like Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney vastly underestimated the cost and difficulty of the second.

As a result, the US threw itself into a war that it can’t possibly win – and for no good reason, too. The result can only grow more and more painful as the White House searches desperately for a way out, only to find that all exits are blocked. Hopefully, there will be a helicopter waiting on the roof, but no one can be sure.

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