

In Afghanistan: America's Longest War will Never be Won

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Global Research, April 20, 2017

[Reader Supported News](#) 18 April 2017

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Terrorism, US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

"I'm very, very proud of the people. Another—really, another successful job. We're very, very proud of our military. Just like we're proud of the folks in this room, we are so proud of our military. And it was another successful event." - President Trump's answer to the question, "Did you authorize that bomb?"

The US war in Afghanistan, by proxy and/or direct intervention, is approaching the end of its [fourth decade](#). And now the US is running short on big bombs to use there that are still smaller than thermonuclear weapons. On April 13, for the first time in combat, the US used its [GBU-43B](#), a Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) explosive that weighs 21,000 pounds and [creates an air blast](#) equivalent of 11 tons of TNT. The aerial fireball effectively sets the air on fire within a one-mile radius, above and below ground, incinerating, burning alive, or suffocating anyone within its reach. [Official reports](#), as in The New York Times, were suitably bland and [non-specifically threatening](#):

U.S. forces in Afghanistan on Thursday [April 13] struck an Islamic State tunnel complex in eastern Afghanistan with "the mother of all bombs," the largest non-nuclear weapon ever used in combat by the U.S. military, Pentagon officials said. [emphasis added]

To hear mainstream media and the Pentagon tell it, this is just war business as usual for [the current NATO mission](#), "Operation Resolute Support." The official line is that the mission of 8,400 US troops there is training and support, not combat (except sometimes fighting terrorists). Just before the big bomb drop, on April 8, a [US Army Special Forces](#) officer (Staff Sgt. [Mark R. De Alencar](#), 37) was killed in action when his unit was attacked during anti-ISIS combat operations in Nangarhar Province, along the Pakistan border. That's where the MOAB was dropped (in one of more than [460 US airstrikes](#) in Afghanistan this year). Nangarhar Province has been a [difficult to conquer military terrain](#) for at least 2,500 years (Alexander the Great held it for a few years after 331 BC). These days, no one really controls Nangarhar, much less the rest of Afghanistan, certainly not the Afghan government, despite NATO and independent US support. Conventional wisdom at the moment has it that the Taliban is winning, though it's not clear what that might mean. Despite US attention to ISIS forces, real or imagined, ISIS is nowhere close to controlling the country and is at war with the Taliban as well. That reality makes [Sean Spicer's highlighting](#) of an essentially irrelevant explosion in a relatively remote location somewhat surreal:

The GBU-43 is a large, powerful and accurately delivered weapon. We targeted a system of tunnels and caves that ISIS fighters used to move around freely,

making it easier for them to target U.S. military advisers and Afghan forces in the area. ... The United States took all precautions necessary to prevent civilian casualties and collateral damage as a result of the operation. Any further details, I would refer you to the Department of Defense on that. [emphasis added]

Other than the novel notion that one might “move around freely” in caves and tunnels, the press secretary’s announcement is so opaque that one wonders if the White House knows what actually happened. This sense is reinforced later in the same press session when a reporter asks:

“On the GBU-43 bomb – the first time it’s ever been used. Why did you choose this particular location? And would you say that this bomb won’t be used again in another flashpoint around the world, like Syria? Like North Korea, for instance?”

The question assigns a significance to the bomb that has yet to be demonstrated. But the question’s policy points with regard to Syria and North Korea are nevertheless germane. Spicer does not even try to address that, but again defers to the Pentagon, as if that’s where policy is being made these days.



U.S. Special Operations personnel prepare to board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter during a mission in Afghanistan. (photo: U.S. Department of Defense)

When the White House and the [Pentagon promote](#) “a [strike](#) on an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan tunnel complex in Achin district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, as part of ongoing efforts to defeat ISIS-K in Afghanistan” they are focusing on a currently minor opponent with a long historical shadow. This is the same region in which the US failed to capture bin Laden before he escaped into Pakistan’s tribal region. [According to the US](#), over the past six months or so it has reduced ISIS-K’s strength in Achin district from as many as 3,000 fighters to some 600 presently (though it’s not clear how many may have tactically withdrawn to Pakistan). The air blast took out [another 30-90](#), according to different reports, and “only” another 10-12 civilians, including four children. The commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, indicated that there were no reports or evidence of civilian casualties, although US and Afghan forces had withdrawn to a safe distance before the bomb blast. As the Times headlined it April 14: A Giant U.S. Bomb Strikes ISIS Caves in Afghanistan.

But here’s the funny thing about the cave and tunnel complexes in Nangarhar Province: the US helped create them. During 1978-1988, the US, through the CIA, supported the mujahideen opposition to Soviet control and invasion of Afghanistan. Although the US has now used the “mother of all bombs” to attack caves and tunnels built with US support, the US couldn’t hope to destroy them because they were built deep into mountains to be largely impervious to aerial attack. Referring to “ISIS caves” is both ahistorical and misleading, since ISIS is merely the current tenant. The US did not use its “bunker buster” bomb, the GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP), which delivers a larger payload than the MOAB. Nor did the US use any of its somewhat smaller, non-nuclear bunker buster bombs on the bunker-like complex of caves and tunnels.



The MOAB is an anti-personnel weapons, it's designed to annihilate soft targets, especially people. One of its predecessors, named the BLU-82B, or "[Daisy Cutter](#)," was used in Vietnam to cleanse suspected Viet Cong areas of most living things for a [one-mile diameter](#). The Daisy Cutter was also used in Iraq and Afghanistan, before the last one was dropped on a Utah test range in 2008. Its primary use has often been psychological more than strictly military.

The US, in the person of Gen. Nicholson, chose to use the weapon with the media-friendly nickname "mother of all bombs," which of course it isn't at all, though it does serve very well as a good, shiny-object distraction for the media. With an explosive power of 11 tons of TNT, the MOAB is not even as big as the "small" [Hiroshima atomic bomb](#), nicknamed "Little Boy," with its 15 kilotons of explosive power. The "mother of all bombs" is [a tiny dwarf](#) next to the US [arsenal of nuclear weapons rated by the megaton](#) (1,000 kilotons) of destructive power. The most powerful US nuclear bomb (as distinct from a warhead) is the B83, a "[nuclear bunker buster](#)" (or 1.2 million tons, more than 100,000 times the size of the "mother of all bombs").

Nuclear weapons have remained unused in war since 1945, subject to an international taboo that President Trump is eroding, perhaps quite deliberately. Using a nuclear weapon in Afghanistan remains, for now, "unthinkable," as they say. But how close to "thinkable" is it becoming for North Korea? And who decides what's thinkable now, who's doing the thinking? Depending on the time of year, prevailing winds would carry radioactive fallout from an attack on North Korea either to Japan or China. President Trump and the White House provide almost no clarity or guidance to their thinking, as this April 13 shouted press exchange illustrates:

SHOUTED QUESTION: How about that bomb, sir? Did you authorize that bomb?

PRESIDENT TRUMP: I'm very, very proud of the people. Really another successful job. We're very, very proud of our military. Just like we're proud of the folks in this room, we are so proud of our military, and it was another successful event.

REPORTER: Did you authorize it?

TRUMP: Everyone knows exactly what happened. So, and, what I do is I authorize my military. We have the greatest military in the world, and they have done the job, as usual.

We have given them total authorization, and that's what they're doing, and frankly, that's why they've been so successful lately. Take a look at what's happened over the last eight weeks and compare it with the last eight years. There is a tremendous difference. Tremendous difference.

We have incredible leaders in the military, and incredible military, and we are very proud of them.

REPORTER: Does this send a message to North Korea?

TRUMP: I don't know if this sends a message, it doesn't make any difference if it does or not. North Korea is a problem, the problem will be taken care of....
[emphasis added]

The president went on to suggest vaguely that China will resolve the North Korea problem somehow. But what he has just described is unconstitutional government. He has confirmed the abdication of civilian control of the US military. If there are any exceptions to the "total authorization," the administration has not made clear what they are, or even if they include nuclear weapons. It's small comfort that this abdication by the president is a bookend to the similar abdication by the Congress on September 14, 2001, in a resolution giving "total authorization" to the president to make war at will. That Congressional action, driven by the panic of 9/11, was the [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#) Against Terrorists. It passed both houses without any reflective consideration and with only one vote in opposition - Rep. Barbara Lee, a California Democrat (two cowardly Republican Senators, Larry Craig and Jesse Helms, were "present/not voting"). Barbara Lee has been trying in vain ever since to have the authorization rescinded and to return the country to traditional constitutional order, under which the power to declare war belongs to Congress.

Insofar as the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force has contributed to making the US an increasingly militarized, emerging police state, the terrorists are winning, mostly with our help.

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