



Afghanistan: No More the Good War

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In the beginning, Afghanistan looked like a good war. The United States won a quick victory, drove the Taliban and Al Qaeda out, and installed a friendly government. The results seemed so impressive that even before the fighting stopped, the Bush administration decided to replicate the model in Iraq.

But the victory was a mirage. Contrary to what most Americans thought, the United States had jumped into a quagmire in Afghanistan. The root of the problem is simple: a superpower can often topple a hostile regime with relative ease, but then it morphs into an occupying power without an exit strategy. And that usually generates an insurgency.

This problem was not immediately apparent in Afghanistan because the United States overthrew the Taliban with a combination of air power, local allies, and small Special Forces units—not a large-scale invasion. Thus when the fighting ended, the United States didn't look like an occupier, at least at first. Washington then helped place Hamid Karzai in charge, hoping he would pacify Afghanistan without much U.S. help.

These optimistic expectations were soon dashed, however. The Taliban was not decisively defeated, and many of its leaders and fighters melted into the local population or escaped to Pakistan. The Karzai government turned out to be incompetent and corrupt, and never had much influence outside Kabul. It was no match for the Taliban, which began to reestablish itself.

All of this meant that the United States and its NATO allies had to take on the Taliban again. But this time, they would need large numbers of ground forces and would become an occupying power propping up an unpopular regime. Between October 2004 and October 2006, U.S. and NATO troops spread out into every region of the country. Not surprisingly, that bigger footprint helped fuel the insurgency, creating today's dire situation.

The Obama administration spent the fall desperately trying to find a solution. But no policy can stave off defeat in Afghanistan. Even with more troops and better tactics, the U.S. military cannot decisively defeat the Taliban, because it is a shadowy guerrilla force that can always melt away and come back to fight another day. The local population will

not side with Karzai or the United States much longer, because they know Karzai is a loser and NATO—unlike the Taliban—will eventually leave.

Even if the U.S. military does pacify Afghanistan, moreover, Al Qaeda will still have its sanctuary next door in Pakistan. And Washington will face the same problem it did before 9/11; after all, those attacks could just as easily have been planned from Pakistan.

The only viable strategy for Afghanistan is thus the one President Obama will not seriously contemplate: acknowledge defeat and pull out completely. Yet that's precisely what Washington should do, while making it clear that it will leave the Taliban alone if it keeps Al Qaeda out. If the Taliban refuses, Predator drones should be sufficient to keep the jihadis at bay—or take them out.

The real key to preventing another 9/11, however, is for the United States to work closely with other governments to monitor Al Qaeda and round up terrorists before they strike. Timely intelligence and sound police work are the main reasons that there has not been another attack on the U.S. homeland. The war in Afghanistan has done little to make Americans safer at home, and prolonging it won't either. It's been a bad war from the start and will be to the bitter end.

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