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## **Bring America's Troops Home From Afghanistan: Nation-Building A Bust**

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Afghanistan is a bust. The Taliban is expanding its control. The number of “security incidents” was up a fifth in the last months of 2015 over the previous year. Popular confidence is at its lowest level in a decade. More than \$100 billion in “aid” has been largely squandered. U.S. military officers now speak of a “goal line” defense of Kabul.

One begins to imagine a final evacuation like that from Saigon, via helicopter atop the U.S. embassy. Afghanistan is not yet there, but Washington’s expensive dream of remaking Central Asia almost certainly is dead.

The decline has come with extraordinary speed. I visited Afghanistan in both 2010 and 2011, the latter trip organized by NATO. Allied military officers and PR officials presented an optimistic case, that if only the money continued to flow the Afghan government could take over its defense. That is not proving to be the case.

Many Afghans fear their fate. There is little public confidence in a free and prosperous future. The young and well-educated, who have the greatest stake in a more efficient and better governed state, are most likely to flee. The majority of emigrants “are under the age of 30. This is really scary, we have very limited qualified, specialist people,” said Ahmed Siar Khoreishi, CEO of Ghazanfar Bank: “The brains are leaving.”

While the deadly geopolitical game is not yet over, it is hard to see how the current regime can survive without Washington’s continued combat support. Although the Obama administration appears committed to maintaining today’s small military presence—and sacrificing brave men’s lives—in order to put off the inevitable collapse until the next president is inaugurated, America will be coming home. And with it will go any hope for a liberal, democratic, unified Afghanistan allied with the U.S.

The nation-building mission always was Quixotic. Even before Afghanistan the U.S. had an awful record of trying to turn impoverished, war-torn Third World states into respectable members of the “international community.” Most of Afghanistan’s people don’t want foreign rule. Nor do they want control by Kabul. This conflict-ridden land was no candidate for immersion in Western values. For instance, the phenomenon of “bacha bazi,” or dancing boys, horrified American personnel, but the *New York Times* reported how the latter were ordered to ignore what amounted to Afghan security personnel raping children.

Indeed, the latest report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction shows how far this Central Asian land was and remains from developed status. And how ineffective U.S. aid programs have been in transforming it.

Post-Taliban Afghanistan started out poor, heavily reliant on poppy production. While it enjoyed some boom years amid the flood of cash from Western militaries, contractors, and aid workers, the benefits were concentrated in the well-connected. And this financial tsunami has receded. The reduced foreign presence has sharply cut the amount of cash flowing through Afghan hands. Moreover, domestic capital routinely flees for safer harbors elsewhere, especially in the Middle East. The money isn't likely to return, certainly not without an unexpected security improvement.

The foreign money also inflamed the problem of corruption. When I visited popular cynicism of the government was high, with discussions of officials suspected of secreting their ill-gotten gains abroad. People called large, garishly painted homes "poppy palaces." The well-connected gobbled up foreign contracts. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute explained: "The significant amount of aid and vast international military spending post-2001 has re-ingrained a culture of aid-rentierism: the Afghan elite competes internally for political rents from the international community."

Tougher times have not increased honesty. Indeed, the advance of the Taliban has made it more difficult for Kabul officials to oversee spending elsewhere. In its latest quarterly report, SIGAR noted that a recent Afghan task force "reportedly found that millions of dollars were being embezzled while Afghanistan pays for numerous nonexistent 'ghost' schools, 'ghost' teachers, and 'ghost' students."

Even worse, the same practice apparently afflicts the security forces. There are multiple reports of official yet nonexistent police and army personnel. SIGAR cited an Associated Press investigation: "In that report, a provincial council member estimated 40% of the security forces in Helmand do not exist, while a former provincial deputy police chief said the actual number was 'nowhere near' the 31,000 police on the registers, and an Afghan official estimated the total ANDSF number at around 120,000—less than half the reported 322,638." That helps explain the Afghan government's difficulty in repelling Taliban advances.

Security never has been good during the conflict. Today it is worse than ever.

Explained SIGAR: "in this reporting period, Afghanistan proved even more dangerous than it was a year ago. The Taliban now controls more territory than at any time since 2001. Vicious and repeated attacks in Kabul this quarter shook confidence in the national-unity government. A year after the Coalition handed responsibility for Afghan security to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), American and British forces were compelled on several occasions to support ANDSF troops in combat against the Taliban."

There is no reason to expect the situation to improve.

Yet the failure of U.S. aid programs reaches well beyond insecurity. Government-to-government assistance has an atrocious record around the world. It should surprise no one that despite pouring \$113.1 billion into Afghanistan, Washington has surprisingly few sustainable, long-term

benefits to show for it. About \$8.4 billion in reconstruction funding remains in the pipeline, and little more should be expected from it.

Citing just a few of its earlier audits, SIGAR reported on Afghan government agencies suffering from “divergent approaches and a lack of overall strategy, poor coordination and limited information sharing,” unable to “handle contract research, awards, and management,” and lacking “required documentation for contracts, task orders, and payments.” SIGAR discovered a well-built development project in which the private sector had no interest; an initiative for “quick delivery” grants ground to a halt with nothing being done for months. U.S.-funded “power and water systems [were] inoperable for lack of fuel” while an industrial park had minimal occupancy. Yet despite constant and manifold failures, SIGAR found “only one instance out of 127 [USAID] contracts, grants, and cooperative agreements where prescribed multi-tier monitoring was being used.”

Its latest audits yielded little better results. Internal controls remain a problem. The inspector general conducted five financial audits which “identified nearly \$1.8 million in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues.”

USAID devoted \$488 million to develop Afghanistan’s oil, gas, and minerals industries. SIGAR found “limited progress overall, and challenges prevent further investment and growth.” U.S. agencies follow “divergent approaches,” Afghan ministries aren’t committed to reforms, “many mining operations are still controlled by political elites, warlords, military personnel, and the police,” transportation networks are inadequate, the central government delays work, and several projects show no results while others fail to meet “key performance indicators.”

Tens of millions of dollars went for training and equipping an Afghan National Engineer Brigade, which was ineffective. The NEB was hampered by “army staff on leave for holidays, political events, low literacy levels, and security concerns.” The brigade “lacked initiative” and “was not capable of carrying out its mission.”

Some \$2.3 billion in USAID money went for stability programs, yet the agency “appears to be largely indifferent” to a critical outside evaluation of the results. Indeed, USAID made claims contradicted by these assessments. For instance, “villages receiving USAID stability projects scored lower on stability—an aggregate measure of whether the projects strengthened perception of good governance and effective service delivery—than similar villages that receive no such assistance. And some villages reportedly under Taliban control that received USAID stability projects subsequently showed greater pro-Taliban support.” Overall, said SIGAR, “villages that received USAID assistance showed a marked decrease in their stability scores relative to the overall decrease in stability scores for both villages that did and those that did not receive USAID assistance.” Here, at least, American “aid” apparently proved to be a hindrance.

Despite a consistently bad record, the official line remains positive. On one of my visits a Marine Corps officer warned me that “everyone is selling something.” But the practical results often are dismal. While I received glowing reviews of the police training program from my NATO handlers, one of the contractor-instructors privately lamented the difficulty in teaching students of such limited education and different culture. He collected his paycheck, but had no confidence when confronting a real rather than ghost policeman.

The U.S. has been fighting in Afghanistan for more than 14 years. That is longer than the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Korean War combined. It is time to turn the conflict over to the Afghans and let them determine their future.

Americans may not like the result, but attempting to establish a liberal Western outpost in Central Asia never made sense. The U.S. has no security need to do so, and the task can't be done at reasonable cost in lives and money.

Mr. President, it's time to bring home the troops. No more Americans should die in Afghanistan on your watch for nothing.

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