

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Aug 20, 2010): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/afghanistan-obama%E2%80%99s-war-president-thinking-3906>

Afghanistan as Obama's War: What was the President Thinking?

| [More](#) ^[1]
[Comments](#) (0)

|
August 19, 2010

Doug Bandow ^[2]

Afghanistan has become Barack Obama's war. More Americans have died there over the last year as died during the roughly seven years of conflict under George W. Bush. [As of today](#) ^[3]:

the United States has suffered more combat deaths in [Afghanistan](#) ^[4] under President Barack Obama than it did during the two-term presidency of George W. Bush. The latest casualty figures show 577 American soldiers have died in the war from January 20, 2009, the date of Obama's inauguration, until now. The U.S. suffered 575 deaths from October 2001 to January 19, 2009, according to figures computed by Robert Naiman, of [Just Foreign Policy](#) ^[5] from figures provided by [icasualties.org](#) ^[6].

Of course, it isn't just Americans who are dying. So are military personnel from allied nations. And Afghans. Civilian deaths are up dramatically this year. [Reports the Daily Mail](#) ^[7]:

Despite massive efforts by Nato-led forces to reduce casualties, more than 1,200 civilians were killed and another 1,997 injured, the United Nations said—the worst figures since the Taliban was driven out following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.



The Taliban are responsible for most of these killings, but hundreds of civilians still die from mistaken allied strikes. And it is the war that leads to the other deaths. However humanitarian Washington's ends, there are few humanitarian results.

For what are people dying in Afghanistan?

America's original mission was obvious: capture or kill al Qaeda operatives and punish the Taliban regime for hosting the terrorists who struck America. Those ends were rapidly achieved. Today al Qaeda is largely absent from Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban, as well as other governments around the world, know that the U.S. will oust regimes that back anti-American terrorists.

Would al Qaeda return to a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan? Not if Mullah Omar and his colleagues don't want to be defenestrated a second time. Anyway, terrorists are not dependent on whether Hamid Karzai, the Taliban, or someone else ends up ascendant in Kabul. They have proved to be fully capable of operating elsewhere.

Unfortunately, U.S. policy has shifted to nation-building. Obviously, it would be nice to create a stable, competent, liberal, and pro-Western national government in Kabul. On my recent trip to Afghanistan I met a number of activists who hope to establish just such a political order.

But the belief that Washington can do so—at least at reasonable cost in reasonable time—appears to be the tragic triumph of hope over experience. The point is not that Afghans are incapable of living together peacefully: they did so for many years under the king. But decades of war and international interference have wrecked Afghan society. Humpty Dumpty isn't going to be put back together anytime soon, and certainly not by what passes for a government in Kabul. It is hard to find anyone, at least not on an official payroll, with a positive word to say about the regime.

Even if the U.S. and its allies have developed an improved military strategy, the Afghans have no political solution. And Western aid often is more hindrance than help. Indeed, much financial assistance seems to disappear into the gaudily decorated "poppy palaces" that fill Afghanistan's capital rather than reach the many people in desperate need on the streets beyond.

There's little practical difference between the neoconservative war-initiators under George W. Bush and the liberal war-expanders under Barack Obama. Which is why the American death toll in Afghanistan will continue to climb.

President Obama, like many of his predecessors, is a victim of hubris. He appears to genuinely believe in social engineering abroad. Unfortunately, we will all pay the price of his folly in Afghanistan. Having made the Afghan war his own, it now will be his responsibility if more Americans die in vain.

More by

Source URL (retrieved on Aug 20, 2010): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/afghanistan-obama%E2%80%99s-war-president-thinking-3906>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/doug-bandow>

[3]

http://www.allgov.com/Top_Stories/ViewNews/Military_Deaths_in_Afghanistan_under_Obama_Top_Those_under_Bush_100818

[4] <http://www.allgov.com/nation/Afghanistan>

[5] <http://www.justforeignpolicy.org/>

[6] <http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/ByMonth.aspx>

[7] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1301793/Afghanistan-civilians-killed-year-soars-1-200.html>