

Trump Is Right: Afghanistan Is A ‘Loser War’

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After three years of the Trump presidency, the *Washington Post* is breathlessly reporting that Donald Trump is a boor who insults everyone, including generals used to respect and even veneration. He’s had the impertinence to ask critical questions of his military briefers. For shame!

President Trump’s limitations have been long evident. The *Post*’s discussion, adapted by Carol D. Leonnig and Philip Rucker from their upcoming book, *A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump’s Testing of America*, adds color, not substance, to this concern. It seems that in the summer of 2017, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and others were concerned about the president’s international ignorance and organized a briefing at the Pentagon to enlighten him.

Was that a worthwhile mission? Sure. Everyone in the policy world marvels at the president’s lack of curiosity, absent knowledge, bizarre assumptions, and perverse conclusions. He doesn’t get trade, bizarrely celebrates dictatorship, fixates on Iran, doesn’t understand agreements, acts on impulse, and exudes absolute certainty. Yet he also captures the essence of issues and shares a set of inchoate beliefs held by millions of Americans, especially those who feel ignored, insulted, disparaged, and dismissed. Most important, he was elected with a mandate to move policy away from the bipartisan globalist conventional wisdom.

The latter was evidently the main concern of these briefers. The presentation as described by the article exuded condescension. That attitude very likely was evident to Trump. The briefing was intended to inform, but even more so to establish his aides’ control over him. While they bridled at Trump’s manners, they were even more opposed to his substantive opinions. And that made the briefing sound like a carefully choreographed attack on his worldview.

For instance, Mattis used charts with lots of dollar signs “to impress upon [the president] the value of U.S. investments abroad. [Mattis] sought to explain why U.S. troops were deployed in so many regions and why America’s safety hinged on a complex web of trade deals, alliances, and bases across the globe.” Notably, Mattis “then gave a 20-minute briefing on the power of the NATO alliance to stabilize Europe and keep the United States safe.”

No doubt Secretary Mattis sincerely believed all that. However, it was an argument more appropriately made in 1950 or 1960. The world has since changed dramatically.

Of course, this is also the position of the Blob, Ben Rhodes’ wonderful label for the Washington foreign policymaking community. What has ever been must ever be, is the Blob’s informal

mantra. America's lot in life, no matter how many average folks must die, is to litter the globe with bases, ships, planes, and troops to fight endless wars, some big, some small, to make the world safe for democracy, sometimes, and autocracy, otherwise. If America ever stops fulfilling what seems to be the modern equivalent of Rudyard Kipling's infamous "white man's burden," order will collapse, authoritarianism will advance, trade will disappear, conflict will multiply, countries will be conquered, friends will become enemies, allies will defect, terrorists will strike, liberal values will be discarded, all that is good and wonderful will disappear, and a new dark age will envelope the earth.

Trump is remarkably ignorant of the facts, but he does possess a commonsensical skepticism of the utter nonsense that gets promoted as unchallengeable conventional wisdom. As a result, he understood that this weltanschauung, a word he would never use, was an absolute fantasy. And he showed it by the questions he asked.

For instance, he challenged the defense guarantee for South Korea. "We should charge them rent," he blurted out. "We should make them pay for our soldiers." Although treating American military personnel like mercenaries is the wrong approach, he is right that there is no need to protect the Republic of Korea. The Korean War ended 67 years ago. The South has twice the population and, by the latest estimate, 54 times the economy of the North. Why is Seoul still dependent on America?

If the Blob has its way, the U.S. will pay to defend the ROK forever. Analysts speak of the need for Americans to stick around even after reunification. It seems there is no circumstance under which they imagine Washington not garrisoning the peninsula. Why is America, born of revolution, now acting like an imperial power that must impose its military might everywhere?

Even more forcefully, it appeared, did Trump express his hostile views of Europe and NATO. Sure, he appeared to mistakenly believe that there was an alliance budget that European governments had failed to fund. But World War II ended 70 years ago. The Europeans recovered, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Eastern Europeans joined NATO. Why is Washington expected to subsidize a continent with a larger population than, and economy equivalent to, America's, and far larger than Russia's? Mattis apparently offered the standard bromides, such as "This is what keeps us safe."

How? Does he imagine that without Washington's European presence, Russia would roll its tanks and march to the Atlantic Ocean? And from there launch a global pincer movement to invade North America? How does adding such behemoths as Montenegro keep the U.S. "safe"? What does initiating a military confrontation with Moscow over Ukraine, historically part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, have to do with keeping Americans "safe"? The argument is self-evidently not just false but ridiculous.

Justifying endless wars is even tougher. Rucker and Leonnig do not report what the president said about Syria, which apparently was part of Mattis's brief. However, Trump's skepticism is evident from his later policy gyrations. Why would any sane Washington policymaker insist that America intervene militarily in a multi-sided civil war in a country of no significant security interest to the U.S. on the side of jihadists and affiliates of al-Qaeda? And stick around illegally as the conflict wound down? To call this policy stupid is too polite.

Even more explosive was the question of Afghanistan, to which the president did speak, apparently quite dismissively. Unsurprisingly, he asked why the U.S. had not won after 16 years—which is longer than the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War combined. He also termed Afghanistan a “loser war.” By Rucker’s and Leonnig’s telling, this did not go over well: “That phrase hung in the air and disgusted not only the military men and women in uniform sitting along the back wall behind their principals. They all were sworn to obey their commander in chief’s commands, and here he was calling the way they had been fighting a loser war.”

But it was and is true. Indeed, when I visited Afghanistan back when U.S. troop levels were near their highest, “off camera,” so to speak, military folks were quite skeptical of the war. So were Afghans, who had little good to say about their Washington-created and -supported government unless they were collecting a paycheck from it. An incoming president could be forgiven for suspecting that his predecessor had poured more troops into the conflict only to put off its failure until after he’d left office.

The fault does not belong to combat personnel, but to political leaders and complicit generals, who have misled if not lied in presenting a fairy tale perspective on the conflict’s progress and prognosis. And for what? Central Asia is not and never will be a vital issue of American security. Afghanistan has nothing to do with terrorism other than its having hosting al-Qaeda two decades ago. Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan. In recent years, it’s Yemen that’s hosted the most dangerous national affiliate of al-Qaeda. So why are U.S. troops still in Afghanistan?

Accounts like that from Rucker and Leonnig are beloved by the Blob. America’s role is to dominate the globe, irrespective of cost. Those officials pursuing this objective, no matter how poorly, are lauded. Any politician challenging Washington’s global mission is derided.

President Trump has done much wrong. However, he deserves credit for challenging a failed foreign policy that’s been paid for by so many while benefiting so few. It is “crazy” and “stupid,” as he reportedly said. Why should Americans keep dying for causes that their leaders cannot adequately explain, let alone justify? Let us hope that one day Americans elect a president who will act and not just talk.

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