



Trump Was Foolish to Invite the Taliban to Camp David but the War in Afghanistan Must End

Mehdi Hasan

September 9, 2019

The hashtag [#TalibanTrump](#) began trending over the weekend, after Donald Trump made a bizarre and very public admission on Twitter:

Unbeknownst to almost everyone, the major Taliban leaders and, separately, the President of Afghanistan, were going to secretly meet with me at Camp David on Sunday. They were coming to the United States tonight. Unfortunately, in order to build false leverage, they admitted to..

The president of the United States had planned to host the Taliban on U.S. soil, three days before the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Can you even begin to imagine the reaction from the right if Barack Obama had made a similar announcement?

To be clear: Inviting the loathsome Taliban to Camp David, of all places, for a personal meeting with the U.S. president, not only in advance of any finalized peace agreement but also on the eve of the 9/11 anniversary, was a dumb and offensive idea. However, engaging in negotiations with the Taliban to try and end the Afghan conflict — as the Trump administration has been doing for the past year in Qatar, including [nine separate meetings](#) led by the veteran U.S. diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad — is neither dumb nor offensive. It's something that should have been attempted by the George W. Bush administration back in 2002 or 2003.

The war in Afghanistan, remember, has been an utter catastrophe. It may have dropped out of the headlines here in the United States, but it still holds the title for the [longest-running conflict](#) in American history. As the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow has [pointed out](#), the Afghan war has lasted “longer than the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Korean War combined.”

This forgotten conflict has cost the U.S. taxpayer [almost \\$1 trillion](#) and has resulted in the deaths of [more than 2,400](#) U.S. military personnel — as well as [tens of thousands](#) of unnamed, innocent Afghan civilians. “We’re pretty close to the day when we will wake up to the news of a casualty in Afghanistan who was not born on 9/11,” Democrat Pete Buttigieg, who himself was deployed to Afghanistan in 2014, [said](#) at the CNN presidential debate in July.

So Trump, prior to becoming president, was right when he declared Afghanistan to be a “[mess](#)” and a “[total disaster](#).”

And he was right, upon assuming office, to have authorized peace talks with the Taliban (despite harshly condemning Obama for trying to do the same in 2012). Liberals who piously condemn Trump for trying to do a deal with the Islamist insurgent group need to explain how they plan to end the fighting without trying to do the same. (“At some point,” tweeted political scientist Paul Musgrave on Sunday, “the US will have to reach a deal with the Taliban, accept defeat, go on an all-out rampage, or make it a literal forever war.”)

Yet this weekend’s Twitter antics are further evidence that the supposed author of “The Art of the Deal” is singularly incapable of doing this particular deal. Why? Number one, as CNN reported, “The decision to invite Taliban leaders and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to Camp David was made a week ago. . . . Trump told his team he would be better positioned to do the negotiating himself.” He is, of course, deluded. North Korea is a stark reminder of what happens when Trump gets personally involved in international diplomacy.

Listen to Barnett Rubin, an expert on the conflict and a former senior adviser to the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who thinks this was all about Trump’s ego and not Afghanistan’s future. “He wanted a photo op and a high-ratings TV show,” Rubin tweeted on Sunday, “and when it didn’t work out, he canceled it.”

Number two: Trump has no firm beliefs or principles, and no understanding whatsoever of foreign policy or military strategy. So he is easily swayed by those around him — and those around him tend to be hawks. It was Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, Trump’s then-national security adviser, who convinced the reluctant president to send more troops to Afghanistan in 2017, after showing him a 1972 photo of Afghan women in miniskirts as evidence that Western mores could be reintroduced into that country (I kid you not).

And this latest decision to invite (and then disinvite) the Taliban to Camp David, and then pull the plug on negotiations across the board, was partly a result of uber-hawk John Bolton, Trump’s current national security adviser, whispering in his ear.

For the likes of Bolton and McMaster, Afghanistan is a “literal forever war.” What’s the alternative, they ask? To cut and run? To leave the Afghan people to be repressed or killed at the hands of the Taliban? To allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorists again?

It would, of course, be foolish to pretend that there is a neat solution to the chaos in Afghanistan, a poverty-stricken country divided on tribal, ethnic, and religious lines, fought over by a bevy of outside powers, and plagued by violence for more than four decades.

There isn’t. But here’s what the hawks don’t tell you: Afghan civilians are already dying in big numbers, not only despite the presence of U.S. forces — 2018 saw Afghan civilian deaths hit a record high — but because of them, too. How many Americans are aware of the fact that in the first six months of this year, the Afghan government and its U.S.-led international allies killed more civilians than the Taliban? Shouldn’t that shock us all?

As for the attempt to deny terrorists a safe haven, if 100,000 US troops couldn’t defeat the Taliban at the height of the Obama-ordered surge in 2011, why should we believe that the current deployment of 14,000 U.S. troops can achieve any kind of victory in 2019 or 2020?

Lest we forget, the Taliban right now controls “nearly half of Afghanistan.” There are at least 240 Al Qaeda fighters on the ground in Afghanistan, according to the U.N. Security Council.

Meanwhile, Georgetown University terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman says an ascendant ISIS has invested “a disproportionate amount of attention and resources in Afghanistan,” while the Pentagon says the jihadi group poses a “substantial threat” to the country.

A week ago, Khalilzad was suggesting that a deal had been done: “In principle, we have got there.” In return for a phased U.S. withdrawal, reported Reuters, “the Taliban would commit not to allow Afghanistan to be used by ... al Qaeda or Islamic State as a base for attacks.”

Yet, on Saturday, the president announced that he had cancelled both the Camp David meeting and “called off peace negotiations.” This is madness. Trump himself, prior to entering the White House, decried the war in Afghanistan as a “complete waste” and demanded a “speedy withdrawal.” Now he takes to Twitter to dismiss the possibility of signing a “meaningful agreement” with the Taliban and to ask this rather plaintive question: “How many more decades are they willing to fight?”

The answer? Many more decades than most Americans are.