

Why This Sudden Opioid Crisis?

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According to several credentialed best estimates, Afghanistan is believed to supply anywhere from 80-90 percent of the world's opium. Reliable, official, ranking sources, like the DEA, also say 99 percent of the opioids (natural and synthetic) in the United States do not come here from Afghanistan. They stand behind the claim even though Canada reportedly receives most of its opioids from that country, and the states first to declare war on opioids are clustered on the US' porous northern border. What's more, a fact sheet published by the American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians states, "Americans ... have been consuming 80 percent of the global opioid supply, and 99 percent of the global hydrocodone [a derivative of opium] supply, as well as two-thirds of the world's illegal drugs."

The numbers could be stretched to work, say, if most of the opioids in the country were synthetic, or if the statistics were in terms of milligrams instead of dosage; but on first blush there is something wrong with the tallies. Actually, that is to be expected. When asking simple questions about war or black markets, one is answered with political platitudes and conspiracy theories. It's no secret today's political parties are operating with separate sets of facts. When politicians make stupid announcements, citizens ask if this is some form of 26-dimensional chess or just late-stage dementia. Is it merely blather to appease ESL operatives without revealing covert strategies? Are those upon whom patriarchal policies are to be practiced supposed to respond logically or submit to a reverse-psychology scheme?

President Trump recently announced his intentions to escalate the War in Afghanistan, which is now in its sixteenth year, making it the longest war in US history. As of October 2016, blood and treasure tallies included the lives of 2,386 US military personnel and 1,173 US civilian contractors. In April of this year, the US had spent \$117 billion on the war. At least Trump only vaguely spoke about "winning" instead of honoring the tradition of handing the people a load of debunkable specifics. After all, the Whac-a-Mole game of chasing terrorists is not confined to Afghanistan, which, along with the Taliban and US forces, has a common mission of defeating ISIS. Osama bin Laden was found harbored in friendly Pakistan, and domestic lone wolves are doing more damage in the free world these days than anything out of Afghanistan.

Sure, an ISIS leader was just killed in a military strike in July; but he is the third in a year, and nothing has changed. Questions like that call to mind the old adage that all wars are economic. Sadly, about the only thing economic about Afghanistan is opium. It is estimated to make up 52-53 percent of that nation's licit GDP; the extent of the black market being anybody's guess. A simple question about whether there was any connection between the War in Afghanistan and the current opioid epidemic in the United States involved sifting through many through-the-looking-glass speculations. But after a while, certain facts and economic models appeared to stand firm

against a dusty background, although many recurring themes traced back to a common source in the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko.

So, are we funding another Opium War, exporting GDP for vapors and madness? Sopko and others challenge the official answer no.

Trump did well to say the US was getting out of nation-building in Afghanistan. The concept was known to be ill-advised even in the 1970s. Afghanistan is a collection of independent tribes not interested in the nation-builders' vision of them answering to a modern, centralized state in Kabul. Christian Tripodi, a Kings College professor specializing in war interventions in Afghanistan, explained US leaders failed to recognize, "tribal raiding and violence was not necessarily a product of poverty or lack of opportunity. The tribes viewed raiding as honorable and possibly quite fun, an activity that was centuries old, rooted in their culture and one of those things that defined a man in a society that placed a premium upon independence and aggression."

So, after almost two decades of nation-building, the Asia Foundation found 29.3 percent of Afghans surveyed felt their country was "moving in the right direction." Afghanistan ranked 111th out of 113 nations in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index; and Transparency International ranked it 166th out of 168 nations in corruption. A list of issues includes a government that cannot manage funds and does not have the wherewithal to know whether funds donated are being used appropriately. Supplies provided to the police are pilfered, but illiteracy is so high, police cannot take reports. The army and police are rampantly selling ammunition, fuel, and weapons to the Taliban, and the \$30-60 billion bribery industry is described by many citizens as a daily problem.

SIGAR said the US government, "failed to recognize that billions of dollars injected into a small, under-developed country, with limited oversight and strong pressures to spend, contributed to the growth of corruption." The aforementioned problems were well-understood by the US military and NATO forces, but not so much by policymakers in Washington, DC and their lobbyists. Cato Institute Fellow Doug Bandow explained, "For them, the conflict amounts to sending military personnel they don't know from states they don't visit to fight a war they don't understand in a land they don't know."

Nobody knows how much the US government has spent on military operations in Iraq; no official public records are maintained, but estimates run around \$1-2 trillion. Direct military spending to date, following Trump's call to arms, was estimated by military strategist Anthony Cordesman to be \$840.7 billion. While the budget surely is inflated to accommodate non-military Congressional deals; the indirect costs of veterans' benefits may double or quadruple the estimate. The amount, further, does not include State Department costs. While Trump's speech called for more diplomacy, he intends to cut funding to that department.

Between 2002 and 2016, Congressional appropriations for Afghanistan nation-building added \$113 billion on top of military spending. 26,000 contractors remain to this day. A large chunk of funds for roads, clinics, schools, and salaries for civil servants disappeared in corruption, but accounting practices aren't adequate to determine how much. Funds used for projects intended included a \$456,000 training center that disintegrated after four months, a \$2.9 million farming storage facility that was never used, and a modern hospital that cost five times as much to run as an Afghan-style facility. As a general rule, nation-building only squeezes the Afghani budget.

Then, another \$8.6 billion has been spent on drug interdiction. An alphabet soup of government agencies came into the country, the DEA alone setting up 95 offices. What followed had been predictably executed elsewhere. US forces are charged with confiscating drugs. It is a lot easier to go after low-hanging fruit, so agents target small farmers who won't put up a fight. So while the military was knocking off small-beans opium growers, they were clearing the market for higher-stakes operations. The term "cartelization" is used to describe the process whereby prohibition eliminates low-level players, leaving only people not averse to high risk, like those rich enough to bribe officials or mean enough to threaten violence, often to officials' family members.

Meanwhile, each low-producing peasant who was killed or otherwise harmed in the war on drugs became a cause célèbre, a recruit for insurgent forces; as if the mere occupation weren't already giving terrorists a go-to justification for destroying peoples and places in the West. Thus, tax dollars, indirectly, are recruiting for ISIS. The past sixteen years in Afghanistan have shown the poppy farmers are not married to any political ideology so much as they want to feed their families or be a little more well-off in the destitute nation. They flipped to love the Taliban after it gave them seeds to grow poppies and bought back the opium paste for processing and export. The Taliban reportedly has factories for processing paste into hard drugs for retail. It then uses the proceeds to buy up arms, which it uses against the sons and daughters of the taxpayers who are paying for the nation-building and drug interdiction.

In addition to proceeds from sales, the Taliban, as well as the Afghan state, profit by taxing poppy growers and coercing them to pay protection, so officials will overlook their fields during raids. In 2008, the United Nations estimated poppy levies brought in \$200-400 million for the Taliban and other warlord organizations; protection revenues, \$50-70 million. NATO and the DEA estimated 60 percent of the revenues of illegal armed groups in Afghanistan come from trafficking in drugs. The DEA also estimated worldwide 37 percent of "designated terrorists" are involved to some degree in the narcotics black market. Several independent observers have noted an unmistakable geographical correlation, in Afghanistan, between concentrated poppy fields and terrorist cells.

Goals of US intervention were to "win the hearts and minds" of the people, and armed forces were not going to do this taking away the fulltime income of a third of the population. So, the West attempted to find crops to displace opium, and this didn't work out, either. Growers can't get one-sixth the price of opium for crops like wheat, corn, and cotton. So, the United States invested in soybeans that wouldn't grow and spent \$6 million on nine rare Italian goats that instead of breeding disappeared "presumed eaten." When all would have been said and done – except people are wondering if this will ever be over – Afghan opium production increased 25-fold, in terms of tonnage, since programs commenced in 2001.