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Bait and Switch in Afghanistan

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| [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)^[2]

Americans who might wonder just how and why, nearly nine years after 9/11, we are mired in a seemingly endless counterinsurgency campaign/nation-building mission in Afghanistan, need to grasp that this was a classic case of foreign policy “bait and switch.”

U.S. leaders justified the initial invasion of Afghanistan as a warranted and necessary response to the terrorist attack on the United States. Foreign fighters belonging to al Qaeda had used the country as their primary safe haven, and the Taliban government had enabled Bin Laden and his ilk to do so. In [statement](#)^[3] after [statement](#)^[4], American officials [stressed that defeating al Qaeda](#)^[5]—and, if possible, killing or capturing Bin Laden—was the primary objective. Ousting the Taliban regime was a corollary to that goal, but no one advocated a long-term war against that indigenous Afghan faction, however odious its social policies might be.

The justifications today—and for the past two or three years—are quite different. U.S. political and [military leaders now blithely describe](#)^[6] the [Taliban as the principal enemy](#)^[7], as though that were always the case. Bin Laden and al Qaeda are scarcely mentioned at all. Indeed, American military commanders concede that there are probably [no more than a few dozen al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan](#)^[8] any longer.

But making the Taliban the primary enemy has gotten the United States into a very different kind of war—and, in all likelihood, an unwinnable war. Al Qaeda fighters were foreigners (primarily Arabs) who were resented by most Afghans. [The Taliban, on the other hand, is a powerful faction](#)^[9] within [Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group—the Pashtuns](#)^[10]. We are now not only caught-up in the middle of a civil war in Afghanistan, but a civil war within one ethnic faction in Afghanistan. And we’re doing that as the foundation for a [bizarre nation-building venture](#)^[11]—the kind of utopian scheme that would have made Woodrow Wilson’s heart go pitter patter.

How involvement in a parochial sub-national spat half way around the world serves the genuine security interests of the United States ought to be a [mystery to all Americans](#)^[12]. We were never asked to sign-up for a crusade against the Taliban—much less for a quest to bring modernity and gender equality to Afghanistan. We were asked to embrace a limited, punitive campaign to defeat (or at least badly damage) the terrorist group that attacked the United States on 9/11.

What has occurred with respect to Washington's policy in Afghanistan is a bait and switch tactic that would make the most unethical merchant blush.

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