



Ending the Mother of All Quagmires

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Nearly 18 years of intervention in the Graveyard of Empires has taught America an inescapable lesson: Afghanistan is a graveyard for empires.

Scratch that. Empires don't have graves. But the 1,888 U.S. warriors killed in action in Afghanistan since October 2001 do. Hundreds more have lost their lives in non-hostile ways. Over 20,000 servicemen have been wounded.

The bill for Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Freedom's Sentinel will never be calculated to the penny. So far, it's hit nearly \$1 trillion for in-country expenses. Hundreds of billions of dollars will be spent, in the decades to come, to care for wounded vets.

So much blood and treasure. And it was all for nothing.

Lest there be any doubt regarding such a cruel conclusion, the Cato Institute has published "Overcoming Inertia: Why It's Time to End the War in Afghanistan." Authors John Glaser and John Mueller thoroughly debunk dead-enders' arguments, finding that the war cannot be won "on the terms stipulated by the three presidents who have waged it, at least not at an acceptable cost." Continuing to live in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where "the Taliban can be defeated and ... a constitutionally bounded, democratic, and competent Kabul-based government can be left in its place" may satisfy the foreign policy establishment. But out in Flyover Country, people are paying for the Afghan quagmire with their lives and their dollars. And the polls suggest they've had enough. Last month, the Pew Research Center documented that 59 percent of adults — *and 58 percent of veterans* — believe that the conflict has not been worth fighting.

Yet the madness continues. Glaser and Mueller direct some of their harshest criticism at the top brass, and "how it interacts with politics at the national level." America doesn't like failure, and our top warriors get that. In 2008, General David McKiernan insisted that "we are not losing in Afghanistan." Two years later, General Stanley McChrystal declared that "success is still achievable." In 2011, General David Petraeus said that his men had "reversed the momentum of the Taliban." In 2013, General Joseph Dunford boasted of "the inevitability of our success." The following year, General John Campbell told NPR that "the Afghan security forces [are] really stepping up their game," and that he was "excited about the future here." Last year, Dunford claimed that "momentum is going to favor the Afghan forces," with hundreds of fresh U.S. trainers inevitably serving "as an accelerant to the Afghans being able to achieve momentum."

Poppycrack, write Glaser and Mueller. "The Taliban now holds more territory than at any point since 2001, and the regime in Kabul ranks as one of the worst in the world on corruption and respect for human rights. ... According to Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI), ranking member of the Senate

Armed Services Committee, the Afghan security forces ‘would disintegrate’ without U.S. economic and military backing.”

There’s no light at the end of the Afghan tunnel, and “Overcoming Inertia” goes on to slay more myths:

- The mullahs back in power might not be a bad thing for terrorism. “[U]nlike al Qaeda, the Taliban has a very localized perspective. They have never been interested in conducting international terrorism. They are primarily concerned with governing Afghanistan as they see fit free from outside interference.” Besides, “[t]he notion that terrorists need a lot of space and privacy to hatch plots of substantial magnitude in the West has been repeatedly undermined” — for example, the 2016 bombings in Brussels.
- An American withdrawal wouldn’t lead to regional destabilization. The area’s “players are likely to increase their investment of energy and resources in Afghanistan in ways that address their somewhat overlapping (albeit occasionally conflicting) interests. In short, Afghanistan would become someone else’s problem.”
- The Taliban relies on heroin to fund its fight, but it does so “out of need, not out of preference or indifference.” In 2000, after several years in power, the mullahs “famously imposed an outright ban on all opium cultivation, which reduced the harvest by 94 percent.”
- Bugging out would represent a “loss of credibility” for Washington? Absurd. One word: Vietnam. Fifteen years after the “fall” of Saigon, the Berlin Wall came down.

Eschewing ideology, Glaser and Mueller recommend a “negotiated settlement, with a formal cease-fire and a U.S. military withdrawal.”

Their logic is impeccable. Inside every Afghani, there is *not* an American trying to get out. The Graveyard of Empires likes its “country” brutal and backward. How many more years will it take for Washington to understand that?