

Fake News about Afghanistan is Bad for the Brass, but a Boon for Trump

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The Washington Post showed what it is capable of when it took a break from advocacy journalism and did some first-rate reporting on how American officials betrayed the public trust and ran a disinformation campaign against the American people to hide the truth about the war in Afghanistan.

The Post secured over 2,000 pages of interviews of participants in the Afghanistan conflict that were conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The reporting showed that a lot of work was put into obscuring from the American people, and many of its elected representatives, the fact that the project was failing.

The revelation that the U.S. is, as former General James Mattis said, “not winning” in Afghanistan is not news to the American public, but it was bracing to read officials’ own words about how they fumbled through the last 18 years, while confidently asserting that, this time, we had “turned the corner” or were “on the right track.” Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, the Bush and Obama White House advisor on Afghanistan, best summed up the Afghanistan venture: “...we didn’t know what we were doing.”

And the numbers: approximately \$2 trillion dollars spent or borrowed; over 2,400 dead, and over 20,000 wounded military; and over 3,800 dead contractors, most from poor countries. If we had just bought the place on September 12, 2001, we would be money ahead.

President Donald Trump campaigned on getting the U.S. out of Afghanistan and has steadily reduced troop levels, though critics say that reduces leverage in talks with the Taliban. Those critics are assuming Trump wants a deal with the Taliban more than he wants to keep his campaign pledge to cut troop levels to help secure re-election.

Trump is doing well in the polls, only Democrats care about impeachment, and confidence in the economy is near a record high. The Afghanistan revelations will be valuable on the 2020 campaign trail as Trump visits the small towns that produced the soldiers who were killed and wounded in Afghanistan. Will he politicize the tragedy of the failed U.S. project? You bet, and Trump being Trump, he’ll tweet names.

How can The Donald use this opportunity?

First, he will be able to set the pace of any U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and cut reconstruction spending, much of which is stolen anyway. Sure, the Taliban get a vote, but any advisor counseling a different pace than the president favors, and leaking about it, may be burdened by previous declarations on the conditions in-country: if the experts were wrong then, and admitted it, how can they be right now?

The only cheerleaders for continued involvement in that benighted place may be a few “dead-enders” at the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom, some think tanks, and some NGOs (many have government contracts), but those guys aren’t that many votes and their heedless optimism has been discounted by Trump and many prospective voters. Since 2001, the U.S. public was subject to many hopeful stories about Afghan girls finally going to school which is great, but is it worth \$2 trillion dollars? No.

Any more “turn the corner” briefings and Trump might start channeling a noted British newspaper editor and asking, “Why is this lying bastard lying to me?”

Next, Trump can neutralize antagonistic members of the national security establishment. The Never Trumpers have vanished beneath the waves, but many of the ex-ambassadors, and retired generals who carped about Trump’s failings will have to decide, now that the public knows what some of them really thought about Afghanistan, if they are knaves or fools. Whatever they decide, they still have a role in the 2020 campaign – as Trump’s whipping boy.

If the national security expert community feels ignored by the political level, it is due to their part in midwifing the catastrophe, the best example yet of what Professor Glenn Reynolds calls the “suicide of expertise.”

This is an excellent opportunity for senior officers to heed the advice of their NCOs and “keep off the skyline,” then start thinking about a potential conflict with China, not digging wells in Helmand Province. A good place to start is keeping their retired brethren off the campaign trail. We don’t need to be subjected to a convention parade or speeches by former somebodies when they should be quietly advising the candidate of their choice, not giving a candidate the public endorsement of the guys who commanded the losing side.

Retired officers like Admiral William McRaven think they have a duty to speak out against the president, and they do have valuable expertise to share with the public. But intemperate remarks like “Our republic is under attack from the president” will only encourage some eager beaver at the White House Office of Presidential Personnel to wonder if he shouldn’t be taking a close look at those admiral and general promotion lists in order to keep a one-star concern from becoming a four-star problem. Military (and foreign service) promotions have largely been free of political tests, the overseers’ concerns being improper personal behavior by the nominees, but “unprecedented” only applies to how we did it yesterday.

We got here because the military’s can-do mentality merged with the *mission civilisatrice* of the civilian agencies and NGOs and the American policy community’s ritual practice of threat inflation, as explained by John Glaser and Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute. In Afghanistan, there was something for everyone: take revenge for 9-11, educate the youth, liberate the women, and build a government as corruption-free as Denmark’s. The U.S. and its allies pursued a program to “...change an Afghan’s relationship with his family, his government,

and his god,” forgetting how an imposed reorganization of society worked out in Russia in 1918 or in Cambodia in 1975.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were more visible to the American public than previous wars. The 24-hour news cycle and instant updates via social media pressed the leaders, who were can-do and forward-leaning, to highlight indicators of progress. Regular televised testimony of the ambassadors and commanding generals added to the pressure because no one wants to be the bearer of bad news, especially on TV.

It’s unlikely anyone gave an explicit order to falsify reporting, but leaders did practice “fake it till you make it” in their public statements (and sworn testimony) because none of them wanted to be the guy who lost. So, commanders, motivated by ambition or frustration, asked “Don’t we have any good news stories?” and the staff got to work creating them.

All effective propaganda is built around a kernel of truth. In this case, it was *things are tough*, immediately followed by *but we’re making progress*, then a warm bath of statistics about miles of road built or number of schools opened (and are they still open?) in order to assuage or distract inquiring Congressmen.

The fact that a con was underway was evident when General Stanley McChrystal unveiled his infamous PowerPoint slide showing the complexity of the Afghanistan campaign. The slide obscured instead of illuminating, which was likely its purpose. Alexander the Great or Ulysses S. Grant, guys who actually won wars, could have explained what they were doing without graphics.

Trump will enjoy his swipes at the brass and bureaucrats but, aside from that China planning, the military leaders have to consider the impact of the revelations on the good order and discipline of the force.

For soldiers to fight well they have to believe there is The Plan. They see only their small slice of the overall effort but they have to believe that “above” has it worked out. We may be learning that all “above” had to offer was General McChrystal’s suggestion that in Afghanistan the U.S. should just “muddle along” (no doubt until “democracy kicks in”).

Rather than claim that The Washington Post article contained nothing “all that revelatory” (General Mattis) or querulously complain that his remarks were “off-the-record” (General Lute), the leaders need to consider how they’re going to make needed repairs, which means more than championing a pay raise or better housing. It will include answering uncomfortable rebuttals from troops, such as “our friends didn’t have to die,” by explaining why some leaders weren’t straight with the American people. A good starting point would be reflecting, as did Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, who led coalition training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, on how “we backed into not one but two long, indecisive counterinsurgent struggles to which our forces were ill-suited.”

And there’s no time to waste. Though the military as an institution is held in high esteem by the public, one recent poll showed a “tepid” 45 percent of Americans agreed that “most members of the military are truthful.”

The high-profile officers who oversaw much of the Afghanistan venture – David Petraeus, Stanley A. McChrystal, John Allen, Joseph Dunford, and Douglas Lute – are gone from the

scene. The force they left behind is in better shape than the post-Vietnam military, but they bequeathed their successors the unenviable task of rebuilding confidence in the moral leadership of the commanders.