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Woodward's Outrages

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September 22, 2010

[Benjamin H. Friedman](#)^[2]

Two things in Bob Woodward's [article](#)^[3] on the Obama administration's Afghanistan policy-making are supposed to outrage us.

First, the President thinks that "we can absorb a terrorist attack," as we absorbed 9/11. Our friends at [Heritage](#)^[4] and [AEI](#)^[5] want us to believe that this empirically [sound](#)^[6] observation means that the president doesn't care about preventing terrorist attacks. But of course that's not what he said or meant. Suggesting otherwise is just a cheap talking point.

The [argument](#)^[7] that we did not absorb 9/11 attacks because the terrorists managed to kill a lot of people is also unconvincing. The "we" here is the United States, and it does no disservice to the dead to admit that their loss [did not ruin](#)^[8] the national economy. We absorb terrorism in the same sense that we annually absorb the deaths of [15,000 plus](#)^[9] murder victims.

What's truly outrageous is the notion that the only valid response to terrorism is cowering in fear at home and endless warfare abroad. Somehow, for much of the right, crediting our enemies with the ability to wreck our society is required, and it is verboten to say that we are something other than a pathetic, brittle nation that cannot manage adversity. (For more on that "something other," read the [book](#)^[10] I recently co-edited.)

The [second](#)^[11] [source](#)^[12] of outrage is that, in the course of considering the virtues of expanding the war in Afghanistan, the president worried about alienating his democratic base. The outrage comes from the myth that politics can stop at the waters edge and the argument that it should. I believe neither.

The golden era of bipartisan foreign policy [never existed](#)^[13]. There are [examples](#)^[14] of politicians, especially [unsuccessful](#)^[15] ones, who fit this mold. But because elected officials need to please voters, and voters sometimes care about foreign policy, electoral concerns are bound to drive foreign policy decisions. You can't get the politics out of politics.

Those outraged that the president worried about his supporters' reaction to the war's expansion should reflect on what it would take to have leaders that don't worry about such things. Should we leave foreign policy to a civil service of D.C. foreign policy mandarins or the Joint Chiefs of

Staff? The drafters of the constitution were on to something when they submitted war to popular check.

Plenty of bad ideas, including invading Iraq, gain popularity if enough elites sell them [16], but the solution is better politics, not none. Iraq became a disaster for Republicans because Democrats harnessed its failure for political gain. The trouble was not partisanship. The problem was that the Republicans' political read was short-sighted.

I have no idea what the best domestic political strategy is for Obama in Afghanistan. But it's good to hear that that he doubts open-ended nation-building is the ticket. I hope he panders to his base more and gets out.

More by

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