



## Afghanistan: A Failure To Tell The Truth

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Speaking to the press in the Oval Office in July, President Trump acknowledged the need to “extricate ourselves” from Afghanistan. “We have been there for 19 years,” he complained. “It’s ridiculous.” This was not the first time Trump had talked about the war this way. He clearly does not believe in the mission. Negotiations with the Taliban—led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration’s Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation—showed considerable progress, until President Trump ostentatiously canceled a prospective meeting at Camp David to formalize the framework deal that had been reached “in principle.”

Though talks will likely continue, despite Trump’s insistence that they are “dead,” major obstacles remain. It still is not clear how the Kabul government, in which the United States has so heavily invested for almost two decades, can survive in the face of a resurgent Taliban without the U.S. military there to protect it. And many in the Trump administration who favor an indefinite residual U.S. counter-terrorism force in Afghanistan would prefer no deal rather than one calling for complete withdrawal.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the United States cannot win the war in Afghanistan on the terms stipulated by the three presidents who have waged it, at least not at an acceptable cost. As Lisa Curtis, deputy assistant to the president and senior director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council, puts it, “no one believes that there is a military solution to this conflict.” 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 human rights. After 18 years of trying to quell the Taliban insurgency and to build an independent and competent Afghan government, army, and police force, a recent Inspector General report concludes that security forces are still “not able to protect the population from insurgents in large parts of the country.”

### The Need for an Honest Assessment

One of the reasons the war has persisted, despite the many signs of mission failure, is because of the culture in the Department of Defense and how it interacts with U.S. politics at the national level. In their public portrayal of the war, U.S. military leaders have persistently depicted a rosier picture than the facts warranted. In 2014, Gen. John Campbell told National Public Radio that the good news of progress in Afghanistan “sometimes [doesn’t] make the media,” that “the Afghan security forces [are] really stepping up their game,” and that he was “excited about the future here.” In 2013, Gen. Joseph Dunford talked about “the inevitability of our success.” In

2011, David Petraeus said that U.S. forces had “reversed the momentum of the Taliban.” In 2010, Gen. Stanley McChrystal optimistically predicted that “success is still achievable.”

Overly optimistic portrayals are partly a result of institutional habits and a view about civil-military relations that calls for focusing on tactical and operational facts on the ground while leaving broader strategic and political assessments of the war to elected leaders. Some military leaders publicly misrepresented the course of the war to avoid the hit to troop morale they expected would result from more honest and critical presentations. Others felt strongly that negotiations with the Taliban should only occur from a “position of strength,” which they felt was always just around the corner. And sometimes the deception was flagrant: media reports revealed in 2011 that commanders tasked with briefing Congressional delegations in Afghanistan deliberately misled members of Congress about the progress of the war.

After his second deployment to Afghanistan, Army Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis (now retired) spoke out publicly against this kind of distortion. In 2012, he wrote two reports, one classified and one unclassified, and briefed members of Congress on his conclusions. “Senior ranking U.S. military leaders have so distorted the truth when communicating with the U.S. Congress and American people in regards to conditions on the ground in Afghanistan that the truth has become unrecognizable,” he wrote, adding that “If the public had access to these classified reports they would see the dramatic gulf between what is often said in public by our senior leaders and what is actually true behind the scenes.”

Nonetheless, elected officials are often deferential to military leaders and national security advisers. In part, this is due to the superior subject area expertise of military and national security professionals, but it is also because going against such advice can be politically costly.

When President Barack Obama came into office in 2009, the senior military leadership strongly favored a troop surge in Afghanistan. The White House, according to Vali Nasr, a senior adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan at the State Department at the time, was “ever afraid that the young Democratic President would be seen as ‘soft’” if he went against the military’s recommendations. Ben Rhodes claimed the administration’s Afghanistan policy review was “shaped by leaks from the military designed to box Obama into sending more troops into Afghanistan.” Obama himself complained that the military was “really cooking the thing in the direction that they wanted.” It appears that, as then-CIA director Leon Panetta put it, “No Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it.”

President Trump faced a similar kind of pressure. The advice Trump received from his military advisers was overwhelmingly supportive of continuing the mission—and adding another 4,000 troops. According to Bob Woodward’s account, Trump initially pushed back: “You guys have created this situation. It’s been a disaster. You’re the architects of this mess in Afghanistan. You created these problems. You’re smart guys, but I have to tell you, you’re part of the problem. I want to get out, and you’re telling me the answer is to get deeper in.” On one occasion when Trump expressed skepticism about a troop surge, his then-secretary of defense, James Mattis, told him, “Unfortunately, sir, you have no choice,” basing this conclusion on an absurd spasm of threat inflation holding that the troop increase was necessary “to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square.”

In the end, Trump acquiesced. When he was subsequently asked, “Can you explain why 17 years later we’re still there?” he replied: “We’re there because virtually every expert that I have and

speak to say [sic] if we don't go there, they're going to be fighting over here. And I've heard it over and over again."

### **An Institutional Failure**

That presidents are confronted with such unanimity is a monumental failure of executive branch policymaking. Military leaders have an obligation to provide honest assessments of the wars civilian leaders get us into. The failure to do so has contributed to some of the worst foreign policy blunders in American history.

The reluctance to scrutinize sacred cows, such as the safe haven myth, is a problem that extends well beyond the Department of Defense. The professional foreign policy class in Washington, concentrated in the various national security agencies of the executive branch, is subject to a powerful bias in favor of action over inaction, troop surges over withdrawal. As a result, the advice presidents receive from this expert community tends to reflect these biases.

And, despite what certainly appears to be a costly history of abject failure in Afghanistan, the military has a strong parochial interest in avoiding the perception that the war has been lost (therefore ensuring additional resources to continue waging it), and in distorting the potential for success, misleading successive commanders in chief as well as the American people. And in choosing to evaluate the battlefield measures of "success" in such a way as to disassociate them from the political ends to which they are supposed to be tied, the top brass have forsaken the basic Clausewitzian doctrine taught in every military academy.

It is a fantasy to pretend that the Taliban can be defeated and that a constitutionally bounded, democratic, and competent Kabul-based government can be left in its place. A Taliban victory might occur after an American military withdrawal, but this does not present a serious security concern to the United States. In particular, the threat of a terrorist safe haven is minimal and based mostly on the myth that territorial harbors provide great utility in conducting transnational terrorist attacks. Narrower elements of the mission, including quelling the opium trade and securing a lasting human rights regime, have substantially proven to be futile over almost two decades of effort and are not objectives that the U.S. military, a tool for protecting the country from threats overseas, is well suited to addressing.

In 2010, nearly 10 years ago, Obama mused, "It is very easy to imagine a situation in which, in the absence of a clear strategy, we ended up staying in Afghanistan for another five years, another eight years, another 10 years. And we would do it not with clear intentions but rather just out of an inertia. Or an unwillingness to ask tough questions." Time is up.

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