



Conservatives Divided Over Trump's Afghanistan Plan

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President Donald Trump on Monday announced his plan to recommit to the long-running Afghanistan war, a reversal that has divided conservative activists and policy analysts.

Trump long has been skeptical of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, dating to long before he became a Republican candidate for the presidency. His argument was simple: Washington politicians should stop wasting blood and treasure in Afghanistan and rebuild America instead. He cheered on former President Barack Obama when he indicated his desire to wind down the war and then blasted him when he announced a troop surge.

Now with the war months away from entering its 17th year, Trump announced another shift in strategy and hinted at additional troops. Aware of how the turnabout contrasts with his "America First" campaign, Trump said he made the decision only after a comprehensive review that considered all options.

"My original instinct was to pull out, and historically I like following my instincts," he said. "But all of my life I heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office. In other words, when you're president of the United States. So I studied Afghanistan in great detail and from every conceivable angle."

Trump promised to wage the campaign not just militarily, but with diplomatic and economic resources as well. He said that a diplomatic solution eventually might include elements of the Taliban. He also offered a carrot-and-stick approach to dealing with Pakistan. He said that country could not continue receiving billions of dollars in U.S. aid while harboring terrorists.

U.S. Military Deaths in Afghanistan

Year	Deaths
2001	12
2002	49
2003	48
2004	52
2005	99
2006	98

Year	Deaths
2007	117
2008	155
2009	317
2010	499
2011	418
2012	310
2013	127
2014	55
2015	22
2016	14
2017	11
Total	2 403

Source: iCasualties.org

Trump also said he would demand more help from India, particularly when it comes to economic development in Afghanistan.

Perhaps most importantly, Trump pledged a "shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions."

Trump said he would expand authority of the armed forces to target terrorist and criminal networks in Afghanistan. He declined to telegraph military action but said America would judge its efforts by results, not a calendar.

"Conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables, will guide our strategy from now on," he said. "America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack. But attack, we will."

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) did not even bother waiting for Trump's speech before criticizing the plan. He touted his plan to revoke resolutions passed in 2001 and 2002 authorizing military action in Afghanistan.

"The mission in Afghanistan has lost its purpose, and I think it is a terrible idea to send any more troops into that war," he said in a prepared statement.

Eric Gomez, a defense and foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, questioned whether a strategy change or more troops would produce different results after so many years of trying.

"I don't suspect that would change anything, and the question is, what are the troops for?" he said. "Are they a continuation of Obama-era policies? ... Is it worth it to keep sending people

over to maintain what we're doing there, or should we cut Afghanistan loose and make it someone else's problem?"

Rick Manning, president of Americans for Limited Government, said the United States has spent a great deal of time in Afghanistan with little to show for it.

"We've been in Afghanistan for 16 years now," he said. "The initial purpose was to take out the people who took down the Twin Towers. I think that mission's been accomplished."

Manning said 4,000 soldiers — as news reports suggest the troop increase will amount to — probably are too few to make a big impact. He said it makes no sense to continue the war in Afghanistan unless the United States is winning to fight a "spiritual" war that confronts radical Islamic ideology head-on. And even then, he said, troops and military equipment are ineffective tools for that type of battle.

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Staying in Afghanistan also might make sense if it is part of a larger strategy — for instance, to counter neighboring Iran or prevent the exportation of heroin, which often ends up on the streets of America. He also noted that Afghanistan has valuable rare earth metals, but a Chinese company during the Obama administration signed a deal to control those resources.

Simply sending troops in an effort to stabilize the country and prop up the government, however, sounds like more of the same, Manning said. He added that it is a sign that Trump's populist advisers are losing influence.

"There was a big fight in the White House," he said. "The national security adviser, Henry McMaster, never met a battlefield that he didn't want to send troops to. And he holds sway right now."

But other experts said boosting troop levels can work as long as they serve a new strategy. James Carafano, vice president of The Heritage Foundation's Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, said Trump needs to avoid Obama's mistake of surging troop strength without a well-developed plan and with a deadline that Taliban forces would wait out.

"One of the problems we had is we built that Afghan army, and we've been burning through it," he said.

Carafano questioned the conventional wisdom that Americans are war-weary.

"Anybody protesting in the streets?" he said. "This notion that Americans won't fight this war — it's ridiculous."

Michael Johns, president and executive director of the Tea Party Community and a former Heritage Foundation analyst, said he believes Trump's base will support his Afghanistan plan as long as the strategy makes sense and is connected to achievable goals. Noting that the Islamic State terrorism organization has gained a foothold in Afghanistan, he argued that Trump has been steadfast about the need to ramp up military action against international terrorists.

"The one consistent theme on the war on terrorism is that it should be won," he said.

