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Afghanistan, a Decade after 9/11

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Nearly ten years after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, [the *New York Times*'s editorial board](#)^[3] attempts to explain how the United States and its allies can bring about “a minimally successful end to the Afghan war.” In reality, the piece offers up a lot of “let’s tough it out” sloganeering and little in the way of actual substance, reflecting the superficial treatment that many in the Beltway provide regarding the problems the coalition confronts. The editorial has many serious flaws, but I will limit myself to three.

The first is the claim that America and its allies can build a legitimate and stable Afghan government alternative to the Taliban. The *Times* seems undeterred by its own admission that “Afghanistan still lacks a functioning government, Parliament or banking system” even after a decade of war, [more than \\$450 billion spent](#)^[4] and [over 1,600 American lives lost](#)^[5]. Rather than ask its readers whether the creation of a popular and effective Afghan government is beyond the coalition’s ability, the *Times*—as epitomized by the piece’s title, “The Clock Is Ticking”—seems to

assume that Afghanistan can be rebuilt from the bottom up on a timetable acceptable to the West, never mind the Afghans.

This may come across as a trivial critique, but it's not. We are constantly reminded that Afghanistan needs "a government that Afghans would be willing to fight for [3]," "a government that won't implode as soon as American troops are gone [3]" and "one that doesn't steal its people blind [3]." Many Americans have come to the understandable conclusion that however desirable or emotionally appealing helping Afghanistan might be, we—as foreigners—cannot "minimize corruption [6]" in the Afghan legal system. We cannot provide Afghans with "universal access to justice with an emphasis on the rights of women [7]." And we cannot stop Afghan police from "soliciting bribes [6]" or making "petty arrests [6]."

The second issue with the editorial is that many of its objectives seem intrinsically incompatible. For example, "international donors will need to keep underwriting Afghanistan for years to come" while insisting "what the aid has not built is a stable and viable country." This, in fact, is the core problem with nation building. Top-down development strategies often deepen a foreign country's dependence on the international donor community [8]. It should come as little surprise that the nation-building mission in Afghanistan has had little success [9] in creating an economically viable and politically independent Afghan state. As a report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee concluded recently [9], donor practices in Afghanistan have created a culture of dependency, distorted labor markets and contributed to insecurity.

Another example of contradictory objectives is this little tidbit: "Afghanistan will first need to build a functioning banking system; the corruption and near-collapse of the Kabul Bank [10] is a reminder of how much effort that will take." What the *Times* conveniently leaves out is that those responsible for the "near-collapse" of Afghanistan's largest private financial institution [11] included one of President Karzai's brothers as well as one of his cousins, a former vice president and brother of the current vice president, the Kabul Bank chairman and other well-connected elites. This convoluted web used tens of millions in bank loans to finance their private lifestyles and fund lucrative real-estate projects in Dubai. And although U.S. officials often lead us to believe that they are dedicated to enhancing local capacity and strengthening Afghanistan's all-important financial system [12], USAID spokesperson Mark Dillen told the *Washington Post*: "The U.S. does not, and indeed should not, have an operational role in supervising Afghan banks." So much for accountability [13].

Finally, what the *New York Times* fails to answer is what interests are being served by rebuilding Afghanistan. The issue comes down to whether Afghanistan is vital to America's future and security. What purpose warrants the deployment of 100,000 troops and the expenditure of over \$100 billion a year? It's helpful to remember that this debate comes at a time when the West is drowning in debt, planners in Washington are imposing "austerity" measures on hard-working American taxpayers and U.S. troops are concerned about their pensions.

Sadly, the *Times's* analysis is completely divorced from the costs of America's decade-long occupation. Proponents of building a stable Afghan government should be the first to explain what legitimate interests necessitate the squandering of foreign blood and America's ever-diminishing financial resources.

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