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When the Only Reasonably Easy Thing to Achieve in Afghanistan is Getting Yourself Killed

By Abu Muqawama
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Andrew Sullivan highlights [the crux of Justin Logan's defense](#) [1] of the Afghanistan Study Group:

I cannot find evidence that either Foust or Exum recognizes strategic thought. Both appear to believe that they are engaging in it by picking nits with various aspects of the report's analysis, but none of their critiques of the smaller claims does anything to knock down the report's conclusion: that America has limited interests in Afghanistan; that those interests are actually reasonably easy to achieve; and that our current efforts there are at best wasteful and at worst counterproductive.

First off, I am not sure when, exactly, I pushed Justin's mother down a flight of stairs, but I must have done it, because man, Justin [seriously doesn't like me](#) [2]. That having been said, I think he is certainly correct when he argues that the United States has limited interests in Afghanistan and that our efforts thus far have been, in some cases at least, wasteful and even counterproductive. (I think Justin and I would probably be in agreement, for example, concerning the effects of the massive amount of aid and development money that has flowed into Afghanistan since 2001.)

Where I think Justin and the rest of the ASG get things wrong is when he says that our interests are "reasonably easy to achieve." This gets back to the main point I made in [\(constructively, I thought\) criticizing the ASG](#) [3]: the lack of actual knowledge of Afghanistan and the current environment there within the ASG contributes to a drastic underestimation of the difficulty we would have securing our interests through their proposed strategy. (They might also, as one friend pointed out, similarly *overestimate* the costs of the status quo.) So again, I applaud the efforts of the ASG, but they would have perhaps been better off drafting [this guy](#) [4] or [this guy](#) [5] -- neither of them "counterinsurgency enthusiasts," as [Steven Walt has taken to calling me](#) [6] -- into their team to help them sort through how they might operationalize an alternative strategy in a way that makes sense in Afghanistan's local context.

I don't think Justin considers me very intelligent, and, heh, he's probably right. But my limited cognitive capacity has paradoxically given me enough epistemological humility to know when I don't know something and need to ask for help. Every paper I write for CNAS on Afghanistan, for example, is sent out to people who might not agree with me but know more about Afghanistan than I do. Even the smartest kids in class, with the grandest theories about how the world is supposed to work on paper, need to check their work against subject matter and area experts. Not doing that results in [the anguish with which Christian Bleuer, another Afghanistan expert who isn't a fan of the current strategy, greeted the ASG report](#) [7].

Finally, regarding whether or not I understand strategy, allow me to quote [someone who most certainly does understand strategy](#) [8]:

Strategy is very difficult for many reasons, one of which is that it is neither a question of politics nor fighting power, but rather the conversion of military effort into political reward.

War is the continuation of politics by other means, and all politics is local. (Tip O'Clausewitz said that.) And for the reasons outlined by [Josh](#) [9], [Christian](#) [7] and [others](#) [10], I just don't think the ASG managed to explain how it would convert military effort into political reward in a way that makes sense in the context of Afghanistan. I suggest the gang at the ASG should not take the criticism so personally and should instead think about how they can do things better the next time around.

[Afghanistan](#)

1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW | Suite 403 | Washington, DC | 20004 | Ph: 202-457-9400 | Fax: 202-457-9401 | info@cnas.org

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- [1] http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2010/09/the-case-for-modes.html
- [2] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/andrew-exum-and-the-philosophy-of-science/>
- [3] <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama/2010/09/better-asg.html>
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- [6] http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/14/defending_the_afghan_study_group_report
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- [10] <http://allthingscounterterrorism.com/2010/09/15/houses-on-sand-the-asg-report/>