

In Defense of the Afghanistan Study Group Report

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If the opposition to the Obama administration's policy in Afghanistan were anywhere near as hysterical or shrill as the attacks on [the report of the Afghanistan Study Group](#) (in which I participated), the country might be in a happier place. Perhaps it is unsurprising, but I don't think the critics have covered themselves in glory.

For example, blogger Joshua Foust offered [over 3,600 words](#) of [what he now admits was "vitriol"](#) to critique the report. I will leave aside the polemical language and ad hominem attacks because they are not worth responding to. One brief note, however, on the signatories:

Foust writes that the Group "did not contain anyone with expertise on Afghanistan or the military." Does Foust really believe that Michael Desch, Pat Lang, Barry Posen, and Stephen Walt do not have expertise on the military? Have Juan Cole, Bernard Finel, Selig Harrison, Parag Khanna, Pat Lang, Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, Anatol Lieven (!), and Paul Pillar never "studied Afghanistan in any detail?" I'd humbly suggest Foust may want to revisit this claim.

[Andrew Exum](#) [chimes in](#) to laud Foust's post, asserting that it "[absolutely demolishes](#) pretty much everything the report says" and constitutes "the most clinical and devastating take-down of a policy paper I have ever read." Exum adds [a constructive suggestion](#) that a better executed report would have consulted with Foust before drawing any conclusions, and also should have consulted with counterinsurgency gurus Erin Simpson, Lieutenant General David Barno, and several others of his friends.

I am forced to conclude that neither Foust nor Exum understands what strategy is. It is not, *pace* Foust, induced by piling up mounds of granular operational and tactical detail and then seeing what one can shape out of the pile. Instead, those engaged in strategy must attempt to discern and state clearly the interests at stake (in this case those the United States has in Afghanistan or the region more broadly) and then to attempt to connect the complex chain of ends, ways, and means in order to explain how best to pursue those interests. I thought the report was fairly clear on the task force's views on America's interests and in proposing to bring America's exertions better into line with its interests. Thoughtful critiques would engage either on the grounds that the authors have misconstrued (a) America's interests, (b) how best to pursue them, or (c) both.

But for the life of me 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. Indeed, Foust himself inexplicably closes with the argument that the reason he finds

this report so ridiculous and angering [is that] I agree with [ASG's] broad goals—I don't think anyone who reads this blog can think I support the war in its current form. But this report blames the object of the war, rather than the war machine itself. So it's misdiagnosing the problem, and perpetuating the likelihood that a similarly mishandling of policies and expectations will happen next time. That is an incredibly dangerous thing to do, and, ultimately, cowardly.

I'll confess to not understanding what Foust is on about here. "The war machine?" Leaving a dumb war makes it more likely we'll enter another dumb war? Come again?

As for Exum, he co-authored a policy paper in the summer of 2009 urging the administration to expand the war effort in Afghanistan. When, on the report's release, Andrew Bacevich demanded to know the strategic justification for escalating—or even continuing the "war on terror" in this way—[Exum thanked Bacevich for a contribution that "starts asking these questions about where exactly our interests are," then admitted that his report had "specifically focused...on the operational questions and some of the lower-level strategic challenges that are presented by Afghanistan and Pakistan without getting into grand strategy."](#) Exum closed by condemning Bacevich's own thinking for being "completely divorced from the political realities facing this administration."

It seems to me that the role of people who work at think tanks is not to defer to the alleged "political realities" facing any administration, but rather to educate policy elites in Washington and educated lay people about the challenges the country faces and how best to deal with them, rather than offering politically-deferential, operational-only recommendations for "triaging" bad policies. The latter can be called many things, but "strategy" ought not to be one of them.

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