

The Flawed Consensus on Afghanistan

THE SKEPTICS

Malou Innocent | December 22, 2011

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Earlier this week, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and former president Bill Clinton disparaged remarks made by Vice President Joe Biden about the threat posed to America by the Taliban. Their agreement on this issue is a good example of how bipartisan consensus in Washington can prove hazardous.

In a typically levelheaded fashion, McCain [blasted](#) as “the latest outrage” the vice president’s “cockamamie” and “disgraceful” idea of negotiating with the Taliban and that “the Taliban is not our enemy.” When asked by [Bill O’Reilly](#) about Biden’s claim that “the Taliban is not an enemy of the United States,” Clinton said in a far more measured tone that because the Taliban gave al Qaeda safe haven, “they would give them safe haven again if they were free to operate in Afghanistan.”

To begin with, both of these gentlemen butchered Biden’s quote. In his [interview](#) with the Council on Foreign Relation’s Leslie Gelb, which apparently neither McCain nor Clinton actually read, Biden said:

Look, the Taliban per se is not our enemy. That’s critical. There is not a single statement that the president has ever made in any of our policy assertions that the Taliban is our enemy because it threatens U.S. interests. **If, in fact, the Taliban is able to collapse the existing government, which is cooperating with us in keeping the bad guys from being able to do damage to us, then that becomes a problem for us.** [Emphasis added.]

To those who read Biden’s interview, that last sentence should have raised a red flag. Biden went on to say that, “Pakistan could live with an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban,” and quickly followed up with, “We could not. We could not because they harbored, sheltered, and supported an outfit that created a real threat to the United States.”

So, who exactly *is* arguing, “the Taliban is not our enemy”? Apparently no one, including Biden. Even on the subject of reconciliation with the Taliban, the vice president seemed lukewarm stating, “Whether it will work or not is another question.” This is wise in some respects if the administration is trying to dampen expectations. Although Biden expressed dissatisfaction with Obama’s 2009 troop increases and advocated for a scaled back

presence focusing on al Qaeda, it seems his assertion about the Taliban's resurgence is an escape clause for a commitment to America fighting a guerilla war in Central Asia, if the circumstances demand it. This is the underlying problem of bipartisan consensus on Afghanistan.

Hawks on both sides of the aisle are doing their darndest to convince Americans that "If Afghanistan falls to the Taliban," as Obama [said](#) in March 2009, "...that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can." The [flawed logic here](#) sticks out like a six-foot Yemeni in Abbottabad. First, as this author has [written before](#), if Afghanistan were to fall to the Taliban, it is not clear that they would again host al Qaeda. Protecting al Qaeda is what led to their overthrow. Second, rather than tens of thousands of boots on the ground, we have measures more targeted for countering threats as compared to what former president Clinton had at his disposal. Third, to declare that Afghanistan never again becomes a terrorist haven merely justifies an indefinite war of whack-a-mole, which is precisely the type of [intervention and meddling that serves as a radicalizing impetus](#) against the United States.

Until America finally withdraws from Afghanistan in 2014, a prospect that [looks bleaker](#) with each passing day, administration planners and their minions will try to eradicate corruption, reduce violence, prevent Kabul from imploding, train law enforcement, plan projects, and forge a comprehensive settlement involving regional stakeholders. In essence, we're staying the course.