

## Obsidian Wings

"This is the Voice of Moderation. I wouldn't go so far as to say we've actually SEIZED the radio station ... "

September 02, 2009

### Is Afghanistan Worth It?

by publius

I shudder to write this -- but put me in the George Will camp (cough, ack, glurp) on Afghanistan. (Sorry, that's a tough phrase to get out). I have two basic reasons: (1) The goal of preventing Taliban control isn't a sufficient reason to stay; and (2) Even if it is, our tactics are accomplishing exactly the reverse -- that is, we're empowering the Taliban by staying.

First, the goal. Joe Klein writes:

[T]he U.S. has a real national security interest in Afghanistan. We don't want to see it revert to its former status--run by Taliban extremists who provide a safe haven for Al Qaeda[.]

But there are two analytically distinct points embedded in there. Even assuming the Taliban regains control (which I would abhor), it doesn't necessarily follow that they would turn around and provide a safe haven.

To me, that's the million dollar question. What exactly is the evidence that the Taliban would provide a safe haven? Unless such evidence exists, I don't see any national security interest whatsoever in Afghanistan, with or without the Taliban.

Via our own Eric Martin, Stephen Biddle is skeptical that al Qaeda would be welcomed back. But even if they were, he thinks we could disrupt them in ways short of massive occupation. Stephen Walt has also been skeptical, but Peter Bergen disagrees. In any event, this is the key debate. Advocates of staying need to demonstrate why these safe havens would re-emerge, especially in light of the enormous costs that the Taliban has incurred in the past for housing al Qaeda.

But even assuming that preventing Taliban re-rule is a legitimate national security interest, there's still the question of tactics. To be blunt, we seem to be helping the Taliban more than hurting them.

Via CFR, I just read this white paper from Thomas Ruttig (pdf), and it makes several important points. First, and most importantly, there's really no such thing as "the insurgency" or "the Taliban." In reality, the "insurgency" is an extremely diverse band of various groups and tribes with wildly varying agendas. In fact, many have exclusively local agendas, and could care less about the West.

In addition, Ruttig makes the point that the insurgency is growing because (1) the national and local governments are corrupt and are excluding these groups; and (2) resentment is growing from Western "occupation" and civilian casualties. Al Qaeda-style ideology has very little to do with it.

The upshot, then, is we seem to be pursuing a course that's exacerbating both of these causes. Our escalation will inevitably lead to more civilian casualties (and will stir anti-occupation resentment). And our support for Kabul and its local affiliates will drive more and more disaffected people into the broader insurgency.

The whole thing just seems completely misguided to me, on almost every conceivable level. Which, I suppose, is what makes it so attractive to Bill Kristol.

[UPDATE: Malou Innocent at Cato adds more on these points. Worth checking out.]

Posted by SuperUser at 02:09 AM in Foreign Affairs | Permalink      ShareThis

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## Comments

Ok - I really have to log out of the stupid SuperUser. Sorry. I was in there cleaning comments much of the day.

Posted by: [publius](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:13 AM](#)

*I shudder to write this -- but put me in the George Will camp (cough, ack, glurrrp) on Afghanistan. (Sorry, that's a tough phrase to get out).*

You could always call it the Jesurgislac camp. As in: for the US to make war on Afghanistan in revenge for 9/11 was always as pointless an endeavor as any enterprise inspired by vindictiveness would be - and nothing has been done by the US in the past 8 years to make it any less pointless.

Posted by: [Jesurgislac](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:27 AM](#)

Time for ladies to use traditional arabic chemistry... Then all will be solved.

Posted by: [HCN](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 05:21 AM](#)

The US military needs justification for keeping it's size after the end of the cold war. And to justify a big big military you need enemies.

Posted by: [Jörgen in Germany](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 06:01 AM](#)

"In reality, the "insurgency" is an extremely diverse band of various groups and tribes with wildly varying agendas. In fact, many have exclusively local agendas, and could care less about the West."

Yes, let's talk about those 'exclusively local agendas'.

Even if we accept Publius' (1) and (2), How about (3) that the Taliban was a monstrous regime, a fundamentalist dictatorship under which the treatment of women was comparable to the treatment of Jews under the Third Reich?

From the wiki:

"Women were forced to wear the burqa in public, because, according to a Taliban spokesman, "the face of a woman is a source of corruption" for men not related to them.[3] They were not allowed to work. They were not allowed to be educated after the age of eight, and until then were permitted only to study the Qur'an. Women seeking an education were forced to attend underground schools such as the Golden Needle Sewing School, where they and their teachers risked execution if caught.[4][5] They were not allowed to be treated by male doctors unless accompanied by a male chaperone, which led to illnesses remaining untreated. They faced public flogging[6] and execution for violations of the Taliban's laws.[7][8] The Taliban allowed and in some cases encouraged marriage for girls under the age of 16. Amnesty International reported that 80 percent of Afghan marriages were considered to be by force.[9]"

And the Taliban was not unique. Its unpleasant blend of Islamic radicalism and local tribal customs is matched, if not exceeded, by the 'diverse band of various groups' this post dismisses as harmless. No matter how much American support of the present government (which is horrific on women's rights, but better than any other government since the era of the British empire) 'empowers' the Taliban and other such groups, they will be unable to return to power. Unless, of course, we let them.

I am, quite frankly, horrified that people who have been so vocal about the rights of (Western) women would consider the lives and bodies of millions of Muslim women expendable for the sake of opposing an abstraction like 'Western imperialism'.

Posted by: [mad the swine](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 08:19 AM](#)

It isn't for the sake of opposing Western imperialism alone: it's because there are serious risks involved, and because we suck at this mission.

No one is saying we shouldn't help the Afghanis: the question is whether we should be running a pseudo-occupation.

Posted by: [JamesNostack](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 08:28 AM](#)

mad the swine, can you please explain what specific actions American soldiers have taken in Afghanistan that have improved the lives of women there? I could be mistaken, but I don't recall hearing that "massive social engineering" was part of the curriculum at West Point. Do you think all of the US government is now equipped to perform massive social engineering or is that capability limited to the US Army?

Posted by: [Turbulence](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 08:33 AM](#)

*I am, quite frankly, horrified that people who have been so vocal about the rights of (Western) women would consider the lives and bodies of millions of Muslim women expendable for the sake of opposing an abstraction like 'Western imperialism'.*

Quite clearly you're not concerned about Muslim women so I'm not sure what you're complaining about.

Posted by: Ugh | [September 02, 2009 at 09:19 AM](#)

I realize the US went into a period of unquestioning support for Bush after 9/11 and weren't allowed to question his leadership for some time. Whereas the absence of weapons of mass destruction has allowed for a reexamination of the decision to invade Iraq, a similar reexamination of the decision to send troops to Afghanistan has not taken place. I have read that the Taliban were conflicted between their custom of hospitality and anger that Osama had done something that endangered them, and that if Bush hadn't had the need to invade somewhere (to distract attention from examining his executive incompetence that allowed 9/11 to happen) and instead had negotiated with the regime, Osama might have been evicted.

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 09:21 AM](#)

"Do you think all of the US government is now equipped to perform massive social engineering or is that capability limited to the US Army?"

The Civil Rights Act was doubtlessly a work of massive social engineering. Perhaps you think we should have let the South grow out of its quaint local customs on its own? Or, if you prefer foreign examples, I point you to post-war Germany and the Marshall Plan, or, for that matter, post-war Japan.

Some people on the left have the same attitude towards American foreign policy as the right does towards American domestic policy, that is, that the government can only make things worse, and the only moral course is opposition to all government intervention. In both cases, this is not exactly justified by the historical record :)

Posted by: mad the swine | [September 02, 2009 at 09:23 AM](#)

Let's bomb the burqa factories. I remember during the Cold War with the Soviet Union how we bombed the babushka factories.

"... can you please explain what specific actions American soldiers have taken in Afghansistan that have improved the lives of women there."

Well, I think some of the soldiers fly to various bases for R&R and try to improve the lives of the Filipina hookers.

Posted by: John Thullen | [September 02, 2009 at 09:27 AM](#)

Just as the goal in Iraq shifted from "our national security is at stake because of WMD's" to "while we are here let's be neocolonialists and revamp the political system" so too regime change in Kabul became the goal after the fact.

I have a suggestion the US should amend its Constitution to require Congress to declare war before invasion of other countries. In that declaration the US must specify its reason for going to war, and when that goal is fulfilled or evaporates, US troops have to withdraw.

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 09:28 AM](#)

Look. Afghanistan is a tiring place. I understand you are sick of it. But publius's argument makes little sense.

It is likely that the Taliban will allow al Qaeda to set up shop because (a) they share a common ideology and history and (b) that's what they did last time. Publius says they will have learned their lesson. But if they are back in power the lesson will be that they can beat the superpower and that the Western democracies aren't willing to suffer any casualties to fight them.

Also, there is the problem of signalling. If you can sponsor an attack on 3 thousand Americans and eventually be welcomed back to the fraternity of nations, what is there for other regimes to worry about?

The point about Taliban heterogeneity is partly true, as with any other political group. Karzai has tried for a while to win over "moderate Taliban". That is only going to happen if they think the Taliban as a whole are losing.

On women's rights and democracy, the Western Left seems incapable of grasping the concept of the "lesser evil". There is much to be unhappy about, but if we want to push things further, we'd have to put more resources in Afghanistan, not less.

And George Will is a pompous buffoon whose self-regard allows him to spout off about everything without any knowledge.

Posted by: Pithlord | [September 02, 2009 at 09:31 AM](#)

Although I am somewhat sympathetic to the thrust of publius' post, I have to comment on this:

| What exactly is the evidence that the Taliban would provide a safe haven?

That they have, before. That they're more overtly our enemy now than before.

More evidence than evidence to the contrary, I think. The question is, how can we discourage this from happening without having to destroy the whole village to save it? I think this is the real question, and one that can't be answered by guys like you and I.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 09:31 AM](#)

mad the swine, I note, based on your refusal to answer my questions, that the US Army hasn't actually done anything of note to improve

the lives of women in Afghanistan. Given that the US Army lacks the training, resources and mission needed to seriously improve the lives of women in Afghanistan, it seems your objection is not serious.

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 09:32 AM](#)

Pithlord says it better, and a wee bit sooner.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 09:33 AM](#)

If we believe that the Taliban can never be trusted to avoid working with AQ in the future, isn't that equivalent to believing that enemies can never negotiate a peace? I mean, how could the British ever believe that IRA would not start bombing them? After all, THEY DID IT BEFORE!

What am I missing here?

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 09:40 AM](#)

"Also, there is the problem of signalling. If you can sponsor an attack on 3 thousand Americans and eventually be welcomed back to the fraternity of nations, what is there for other regimes to worry about?"

Pithlord, it is not clear that they sponsored it or even knew about it. They did provide a sanctuary for Osama and his boys, perhaps out of gratitude for his efforts in freeing their country of the Russians.

"the Western Left seems incapable of grasping the concept of the "lesser evil".

This was the intellectual foundation for justifying torture and other evils visited upon Iraq (and why Ignatieff is morally unfit for high office).

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 09:42 AM](#)

I happen to agree with both Pithlord and Slarti on this one. Plus, the past does not predict the future. There are many major indicators that the approach is being radically changed. Whether or not what the previous administration did in mishandling everything makes a newer more comprehensive approach unworkable remains to be seen.

Posted by: john miller | [September 02, 2009 at 09:42 AM](#)

*On women's rights and democracy, the Western Left seems incapable of grasping the concept of the "lesser evil". There is much to be unhappy about, but if we want to push things further, we'd have to put more resources in Afghanistan, not less.*

Pithlord seems incapable of grasping the concept of a cost benefit analysis or the limitations of the US military.

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 09:42 AM](#)

*The Civil Rights Act was doubtlessly a work of massive social engineering.*

No, the Civil Rights Act was a much-needed step towards bringing the whole of society into compliance with the rights guaranteed to all US citizens in the Constitution.

*Perhaps you think we should have let the South grow out of its quaint local customs on its own?*

Only if you believe the rights guaranteed in the Constitution are meaningless or subject to veto by bigots.

*Also, there is the problem of signalling. If you can sponsor an attack on 3 thousand Americans and eventually be welcomed back to the fraternity of nations, what is there for other regimes to worry about?*

If I switch "3 thousand Americans" to "millions of Iraqis," will you still consider this a useful argument?

Posted by: Phil | [September 02, 2009 at 09:48 AM](#)

| If we believe that the Taliban can never be trusted to avoid working with AQ in the future

I'd shorten that by removing the last eight words.

The Taliban hasn't decided to give up making war on the people of Afghanistan, and (as far as I'm aware) hasn't forsworn supporting Al Qaeda. If they do even the second of those things, this conversation would begin to have some context.

The Taliban would have to be both blind and deaf to have been unaware of what Al Qaeda's agenda was. I mean, the notion that the Taliban might just spontaneously and genuinely renounce support for militant Islam is magical thinking.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 09:48 AM](#)

but isn't part of publius' point (in anticipation of pithlord), that when we talk about the taliban, it's a mistake to refer to "they", as though there is some continuous bunch of people who were in power through the late 90's-2002, and would now resume power?

i mean: the "taliban" of the pre-invasion era were a mixture of some locals, plus a lot of arab imports. indeed, it was primarily bin laden's people and bin laden's money that made the pre-invasion taliban what it was.

the "taliban" of today, the ones that are fighting our troops, are frequently just local villagers who have no connection to the pre-invasion people. they also may hate the idea of pushy saudis running their village just as much as the idea of pushy americans trying to.

i mean, "taliban" may just be as much of a generic term here as "insurgents". just because you kicked out one bunch of insurgents, and then a different bunch pops up later, it doesn't make any sense to say that "they" have returned. "the insurgents" may refer to different people, different agendas, different funding sources, different ideologies, etc.

(afterthought--the one obvious role for continuity, though, is the pakistani hand: the pak secret services sponsored the old taliban, and may be helping the new one too. as always, pakistan is the elephant in the room.)

Posted by: kid bitzer | [September 02, 2009 at 09:49 AM](#)

the "taliban" of today, the ones that are fighting our troops, are frequently just local villagers who have no connection to the pre-invasion people

That's a decent point, kb. There may be no "they" there to even negotiate with.

Which is not to say that the same kind of folks who were inclined to grab power in the first place won't be wanting to fill the power vacuum when we leave, but that may just be unavoidable. Right now we're probably fighting a lot of the same kind of folks who resisted Soviet occupation, just because that's what they do.

I don't see any non-disastrous options, but then again, I am not one of the experts.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 09:56 AM](#)

To the extent Mad the Swine's making the argument, moral outrage cannot be the *sole* determinant of our foreign policy. The question is where does it rank vis-a-vis other considerations?

There are serious strategic limits here, and we're foolish to ignore them. Precursors to the Taliban humiliated the Soviet Union at the height of its power, when it was pouring men and money into the conflict.

In order to win this, we need to be much smarter than the Soviets, and to make more sacrifices over a much longer duration than they did.

The question is whether we as a nation are willing to make that level of commitment. It's worth remembering that if the goal is simply to stop Al-Qaeda, (a) they could just as easily hide elsewhere and then Afghanistan is irrelevant, and (b) there are ways to fight terrorism that don't involve conquering a country and rebuilding it from the ground up over twenty years.

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 10:02 AM](#)

what does victory in Afghanistan look like ? how will we achieve it, and when ?

Posted by: cleek | [September 02, 2009 at 10:05 AM](#)

By the way, I'm not necessarily calling for a withdrawal. I'm just saying, the decision on whether to stay or not is a much tougher call than most of our national politicians have been willing to acknowledge, at least in public.

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 10:07 AM](#)

Wow, I'm lining up with Pithlord and Slart on this. You link to the Walt/Bergen debate, but [this](#) is from Foreign Policy Magazine's AfPak channel specifically about the Will piece with the first two contra Will and the third pro Will. This [piece](#) by the former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald Neumann, also has some good points. There are several other good things about this over there, but since I only have one more link, I'll give this [one](#), because it is Mark Lynch, formerly Abu Aardvark, discussing Afghanistan strategy, though the post immediately after this one discusses Holbrooke's comments at the beginning of August and makes some interesting points about the linkage diplomacy with Iran and getting its help in Afghanistan.

Posted by: liberal japonicus | [September 02, 2009 at 10:15 AM](#)

And what exactly does big pharma have to say about what our role in this should be. We seem to forget that poppies are not only the symbol of the VFW.

Posted by: watchinginwonder | [September 02, 2009 at 10:19 AM](#)

Turbulence: the U.S. Army improved the lives of women in Afghanistan by, you know, removing the Taliban. The work of improving women's lives further - work that (I will allow you this) can best be done by NGOs dedicated to the purpose, ideally founded and maintained by Afghanis rather than foreigners - can only continue if Afghanistan does not return to civil war or fundamentalist rule. Which, at the moment, requires a continuing American presence.

"If we believe that the Taliban can never be trusted to avoid working with AQ in the future, isn't that equivalent to believing that enemies can never negotiate a peace?"

I'd like to express my agreement with Pithlord, Slarti, etc., that people who expect the Taliban not to support terrorist activities against the United States fail at pattern recognition. The problem is not that 'enemies can never negotiate'. The problem is that (unlike the IRA) the Taliban has shown no desire to negotiate. (At least not with Western forces; they've signed a truce with Pakistan that grants them de facto authority in the areas they control.) As such, to imagine that the Taliban will suddenly transform itself into a Western-friendly (or even Western-neutral) force if we depart and allow it back into power borders (as Slarti said) on magical thinking.

Posted by: mad the swine | [September 02, 2009 at 10:19 AM](#)

"And what exactly does big phama have to say about what our role in this should be. We seem to forget that poppies are not only the symbol of the VFW."

Deploying tinfoil in 3... 2... 1...

Posted by: mad the swine | [September 02, 2009 at 10:23 AM](#)

*The Civil Rights Act was doubtlessly a work of massive social engineering.*

*Perhaps you think we should have let the South grow out of its quaint local customs on its own*

Oh yes, the Soviets who invaded and occupied the South, thus socially engineering the racism out of the old Confederacy, is a story told among all people of color.

Or do you see the North as an invading and occupying force?

Posted by: someotherdude | [September 02, 2009 at 10:32 AM](#)

To make it clear, I despise the Taliban -- I think they're some of the most wretched vile people on earth.

But again, moral outrage isn't enough to justify this sort of endeavor, in a place where really good armies have all historically failed.

This is a good thread -- I have to get ready for class, but I'll address more points this afternoon hopefully

Posted by: publius | [September 02, 2009 at 10:32 AM](#)

This is exactly the kind of argument I love having -- and I'm too tied up now to have it! (AARRGGHH!)

So, for now at least, I'll just say I basically agree with Pithlord and Startibartlast -- and that threads like these are a lot more enjoyable if you just skip over the whole "What about the women?" debate.

Posted by: Point | [September 02, 2009 at 10:38 AM](#)

Faker here again.

Posted by: gwangung | [September 02, 2009 at 10:55 AM](#)

*Pithlord seems incapable of grasping the concept of a cost benefit analysis or the limitations of the US military.*

They could do anything if not for liberals voting for defeat.

Seriously, we've been in Iraq for five years and even generally sane conservatives are still making "sapping our precious bodily fluids" arguments? And "if you don't think invasion and occupation can solve any problem, then you hate women"? What a farce.

Posted by: Cyrus | [September 02, 2009 at 10:59 AM](#)

I suspect there were some practical reasons why the Bush administration viewed Iraq as a more desirable project, than Afghanistan. And Rumsfeld's observation, that there are no good targets in Afghanistan must mean something.

*"Rumsfeld was saying that we needed to bomb Iraq," Clarke said to Stahl. "And we all said ... no, no. Al-Qaeda is in Afghanistan. We need to bomb Afghanistan. And Rumsfeld said there aren't any good targets in Afghanistan. And there are lots of good targets in Iraq. I said, 'Well, there are lots of good targets in lots of places, but Iraq had nothing to do with it.*

*"Initially, I thought when he said, 'There aren't enough targets in- in Afghanistan,' I thought he was joking."*

From: [Iraq: Because Rumsfeld Needed Better Targets](#)

I really believe Cheney and Rumsfeld knew the chances of an Imperial army in Afghanistan, and the US had to kick some Muslim butt, thus the "shock & awe" in Iraq seemed much more attractive, than the long slog in Afghanistan.

The US military can do nothing for Afghanistan, nor us/US...but peace talks for the militaristic US is not an option, as well...so be prepared to have American soldiers and Afghani civilians die for U!S!A! Pride.

Posted by: someotherdude | [September 02, 2009 at 11:02 AM](#)

This post is terrible. Eric Martin should write about foreign policy, not publius. If Martin isn't doing FP anymore there's no point to this blog now that Hilzoy left.

This comment is terrible. What's the point of having a spoofer, if he's not going to make the least effort to have his posts show up as

plausible for even a few seconds?

I think we should trade our spoofer in for one that's more up-to-date and isn't actively slaying Mother Gaia with his greenhouse gas-emitting comments.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 11:04 AM](#)

In response to cleek, I don't think "victory" or "defeat" are particularly helpful in this context. The question is whether the benefits of your proposed option outweighs the costs, relative to the alternatives. That's hard enough, but throwing in outdated ideas about "victory" just confuses things.

In response to point, I don't think we can marginalize the women's rights issue. Angry misogyny is pretty central to what al Qaeda and the Taliban are about. And primary education for girls has been shown to be possibly the most important determinant for development.

In response to turbulence, I just don't think the resources the West has put into Afghanistan are going to break us, certainly compared to the restoration of the Taliban.

Posted by: Pithlord | [September 02, 2009 at 11:04 AM](#)

Apparently, killing mass amounts of children and women in the name of women's rights and liberty as well as American safety isn't going over to well in Afghanistan.

### War Complicates U.S. Aid Efforts for Afghan Women

#### Helping Afghan Women and Girls?

#### US military occupation isn't the answer for women's rights in Afghanistan

Posted by: someotherdude | [September 02, 2009 at 11:14 AM](#)

Seriously: I was not aware that non-Taliban Afghans were on-board with an American-led women's rights program. Did I miss something?

Aren't the Taliban's views on the treatment of women similar to those are the average non-Kabul dwelling Afghan? Are we actually working on changing this? Is our man Karzai in Kabul a big feminist?

I'm just plain puzzled by this argument. I'm all for woman's rights, but it's unclear to me that the US military is fighting for them in Afghanistan.

So then what \*are\* we doing? Preventing the Taliban from coming back to power, as they aided and abetted a terrorist organization that attacked us and killed thousands of our citizens. Ok, that at least makes a modicum of sense. I was on board with it after 9/11, and not b/c I wanted revenge (I guess you will just have to trust me on that). The trouble that I see is that: a) we clearly failed to capture Bin Laden; b) the punitive part of the mission (let's be honest: there was an element of "fuck with us and we'll sick the USAF & Marines on you" in this) has run its course. This leaves us fighting Pastuns to prevent them from retaking power in an area inhabited by and run by... Pastuns. Slightly less radical Pastuns, perhaps, but Pastuns nonetheless. How is this supposed to work, exactly?

I'd actually like to hear a good answer, because I'd like to believe we have a shot here. POTUS and Congress are clearly going to keep this thing going.

Oh, and as an aside: why don't we buy the poppy crop and sell it to drug companies instead of burning the crop and trying to get them to grow wheat or whatever?

Posted by: Rob in CT | [September 02, 2009 at 11:21 AM](#)

It's Pashtuns, isn't it? Damn it. Spelling fail.

Posted by: Rob in CT | [September 02, 2009 at 11:27 AM](#)

"Tribal Leaders Say Karzai's Team Forged 23,900 Votes" (that happens to be 100% of the votes in the location) so reads the NYT lead headline.

I don't see the US going into complete colonial mode and taking over the administration of the Afghani government, so how does it benefit "democracy" to militarily protect a regime that appears to have committed election fraud?

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 11:33 AM](#)

*In response to point, I don't think we can marginalize the women's rights issue. Angry misogyny is pretty central to what al Qaeda and the Taliban are about. And primary education for girls has been shown to be possibly the most important determinant for development.*

Can you tell me what specific aspects of the American effort in Afghanistan are improving the lives of women? I mean, the Taliban do not seem significantly worse than the government currently running Afghanistan in this regard. And the US military simply does not have

the capability or the mission to restructure Afghani society so as to make it less misogynistic.

*In response to turbulence, I just don't think the resources the West has put into Afghanistan are going to break us, certainly compared to the restoration of the Taliban.*

"It is not going to break us" might be said of my plan to have the government take \$10 billion every year and light them on fire. It won't break us. But of course it won't accomplish much either, and opportunity costs matter. We are not going to make Afghani society less misogynistic. We don't know how. Even if we did know how, we almost certainly would not choose to spend the money required.

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 11:50 AM](#)

*In response to cleek, I don't think "victory" or "defeat" are particularly helpful in this context. The question is whether the benefits of your proposed option outweighs the costs*

First, I think "whether the benefits outweigh the costs" actually is a pretty good way to determine a victory of a defeat.

Second, if achieving some ultimate objective is less important than avoiding the consequences of inaction, isn't that pretty much the "Fight them over there, so they don't fight us over here" argument?

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 11:53 AM](#)

Rob in CT got the point.

The production of opium poppy in Afghanistan was lowest under the bans enforced by the Taliban in 2000. Now, its the same war lords that are the drug lords in the illicit trade. Are they the "new Taliban"?

Production has soared since the US invasion. The push to legalize the industry would perhaps provide some competition to India, Turkey, etc.

Here is some background:

<http://newsflavor.com/opinions/iraq-oil-afghanistan-opium/>

[hnn.us/blogs/comments/18321.html](http://hnn.us/blogs/comments/18321.html)

Posted by: watchinginwonder | [September 02, 2009 at 12:04 PM](#)

Ooops, that should be "victory OR a defeat" @ 11:53

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 12:08 PM](#)

*"Oh, and as an aside: why don't we buy the poppy crop and sell it to drug companies instead of burning the crop and trying to get them to grow wheat or whatever?"*

That idea has actually occurred to me as well; does anybody know if it was ever seriously discussed?

To Pith's point, Turb beat me to it\*:

*"Can you tell me what specific aspects of the American effort in Afghanistan are improving the lives of women? I mean, the Taliban do no seem significantly worse than the government currently running Afghanistan in this regard."*

Well, not *much* worse anyway...

I would just reiterate that, while the overall development of Afghanistan (economic, political, etc) looks to be central to securing an (at least) quasi-permanent safeguard against a Taliban revival -- though I understand not everyone here agrees with that assessment -- that does not mean that larger social change is necessary, or that our failure to achieve it is in any way critical to our overall mission.

\*sort of

Posted by: Point | [September 02, 2009 at 12:11 PM](#)

*Or, if you prefer foreign examples, I point you to post-war Germany and the Marshall Plan, or, for that matter, post-war Japan.*

Neither of those were aimed at reengineering German and Japanese cultures, just governments. (Obviously, the two are interrelated, but not identical.) Neither of those were waged on the cheap for the first seven years. And, maybe most importantly, in both of those, there was a common enemy against which Germans and Japanese saw us as the lesser of two evils. I think a worldview in which none of that matters is too simplistic to be taken seriously.

Posted by: Cyrus | [September 02, 2009 at 12:28 PM](#)

Is it possible to separate the discussions into 'strategy' and 'tactics' here? Actually there are four questions here, and I may get so long-winded that it will take four long comments to answer them -- but these are questions I have been asking myself at least since Vietnam.



[And because of the length of this -- interrupted by cat feeding, etc. -- I should say that this was started after Point's post at 10:38]

The first one is one we all duck out on. **Can America remain neutral in a situation where there is a conflict between a people and an evil regime?**

The answer to that one is simply no. And I'm using the term 'can' to mean 'is it possible for us to,' with no talk -- for the moment -- of 'moral imperatives.'

The simple fact that we forget is that, given America's size and importance, no action we take as a government is neutral. Anything we do will either strengthen the government or strengthen the insurgents -- whoever they are and whatever they are fighting for.

(And, because of our history of 'clandestine meddling' and particularly after the Bush era, too often anything an American citizen does will be seen as 'really' an action by the government. And this is heightened by the fact that the sort of regimes I am discussing have much less separation between the private and public sectors than we do. So if an American company opens a plant, the Peace Corps or a corps of American missionaries arrive, this will be seen not as a private or NGO action but something America is doing.)

So we can't even pretend to take a 'hands-off' approach, because even that affects the country -- see Cuba, "Red China" etc.

So whatever engagement we have with Afghanistan will, in some ways, affect the balance between the Taliban and other facets of Afghanistan.

(More in a moment, but a cat is threatening to sit on the keyboard and make his own comments if i don't feed him.)

Posted by: [Prup \(aka Jim Benton\)](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:31 PM](#)

Also: Germany and Japan were industrialized states with strong centralized governments and intense feelings of national unity. Germany, at least, was also pretty much culturally homogenous.

Posted by: [JamesNostack](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:32 PM](#)

"I point you to...post-war Japan".

What Cyrus said.

I also understand that for several years the US govt had a team of academics seriously studying Japanese culture and planning how to carry out the occupation.

Posted by: [Johnny Canuck](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:36 PM](#)

*So we can't even pretend to take a 'hands-off' approach, because even that affects the country -- see Cuba*

Not sure what you mean here. I think our policy towards Cuba is the exact opposite of "hands-off."

Posted by: [Uncle Kvetch](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:38 PM](#)

"Germany, at least, was also pretty much culturally homogenous."

Surely Japan even more so.

Posted by: [Johnny Canuck](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:39 PM](#)

I think Japan may have been a bit more multi-ethnic than Germany.

[Citizenship, immigration and Ethnic Hegemony in Japan](#)

From: Rethinking Ethnicity: Majority Groups and Dominant Minorities

Posted by: [someotherdude](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:54 PM](#)

No, "benefits outweigh costs" is not at all the same kind of frame as "victory vs. defeat". "Victory" sounds, to me at least, like some sort of conclusion. Napoleon surrenders and goes to Elba. That just isn't the right way of thinking about this. There is a spectrum of Taliban control over Afghanistan: you can have more or less. There is also a spectrum of rights for women and girls. It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you, but it's not a mature way to deal with real strategic options.

Posted by: [Pithlord](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 12:59 PM](#)

*It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you, but it's not a mature way to deal with real strategic options.*

I don't think reducing anti-war arguments to a strawman like this is fair, honest or civil. For shame. Bad! Bad!

/rolled-up newspaper

Posted by: [Cyrus](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:12 PM](#)

*I also understand that for several years the US govt had a team of academics seriously studying Japanese culture and planning how to carry out the occupation.*

Actually, this wasn't really the case so much. The 1946 education mission to Japan, which I am most familiar with, gives an idea of the 'planning' involved. The mission, led by George Stoddart, had not one person with any Japan experience. To give an idea of the selection process, James B Conant, president of Harvard, was put forward to lead it, but because his name had been suggested as a potential Presidential candidate, MacArthur's staff vetoed him. On the other hand, MacArthur wanted to add a Catholic educator to the list in order to support his presidential aspirations (this is discussed in Gary Tsuchimochi's book on the Educational Mission) which was done. The mission consisted of 27 Americans (no foreign or Japanese members) and was only in country for a month, and after 3 weeks of school visits, took a week to write out a plan for what postwar education would be. My understanding is that education planning was a bit more well planned than other aspects.

Posted by: [liberal japonicus](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:15 PM](#)

*No matter how much American support of the present government (which is horrific on women's rights, but better than any other government since the era of the British empire)...*

Actually, women gained larger amounts of freedom from traditional gender roles starting in the 1950s and 1960s. They were enfranchised, allowed to appear in public unveiled, and began entering the workforce.

This series of changes was overturned by the 1978 war and the victory of the militant Muslims. It may be worth noting that we supported the guys who were oppressing the women in that conflict.

As for the British- iirc they didn't spend any time or energy reforming Afghani society, they merely used Afghanistan as a buffer state to protect India. Im not sure what you know about the British Empire, but I assure you their goal was not social engineering.

If you're going to lecture us on Afghani history, it might help if you weren't ignorant of the subject other than what you need to grind your political axe.

Also, the Taliban are certainly not the only country with oppressive attitudes towards women- shall we invade all of the rest as well?

*I am, quite frankly, horrified that people who have been so vocal about the rights of (Western) women would consider the lives and bodies of millions of Muslim women expendable for the sake of opposing an abstraction like 'Western imperialism'.*

You may not realize this, but the impression you give off is that of not caring one iota about Afghani women. This comes from your use of obvious political hacks such as 'opposing Western imperialism', when publius is clearly concerned about whether we can be effective rather than some 1960s political correctness. It comes from your ignorance of the subject matter. It comes from your breezy assertion that we must act without providing a single detail about how. It comes from your obvious lack of concern about the oppression of women by our 'allies' in the region. It comes from the incoherence of a position that would seem to require us to declare war on dozens of nations around the world.

Posted by: [Carleton Wu](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:17 PM](#)

I think blacklisting Communists in Japan, seemed to be the main concern of American occupation and the Japanese elite, after WW2.

Posted by: [someotherdude](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:19 PM](#)

Getting rid of Communists, in Afghanistan and elsewhere was the primary goal of US policy in the developing world, after WW2, and as a result, it usually meant suppressing women's rights and modernization.

Posted by: [someotherdude](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:23 PM](#)

*It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you, but it's not a mature way to deal with real strategic options.*

Im not sure who ordered the irony of childish insults combined with the plea for maturity, with a childish topping of goals lacking coherent plans for implementation. It's tasty, but lacks substance.

*On women's rights and democracy, the Western Left seems incapable of grasping the concept of the "lesser evil".*

This is one of those dilemma-type pseudo-arguments- you can always accuse others of either being too dogmatic or too flexible. Either of ignoring moral absolutes or being blinded by them. Ironically, those who truck in such arguments often shift back and forth between them, each time (as here) invoking the flaw as if it were eternal.

That is, yes, the big problem with the American Left has always been its moral absolutism. As opposed to the American Right, which has always been comfortable with moral ambiguity, but sometimes falls into the trap of missing the big moral arguments because they're bogged down by their moral relativism.

Posted by: [Carleton Wu](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 01:29 PM](#)

*There is also a spectrum of rights for women and girls.*

What specific metrics are you using to judge the improvement Afghanistan is making in rights for women and girls? And what specific

actions do you think should be tied to that metric? I ask because if no improvement is made, I get the sense that you think the US should continue staying in Afghanistan indefinitely.

No matter how important you think the rights of female Afghans are, it is not a priority for the US government. The US government's efforts in Afghanistan have not been directed at improving these rights nor have they been particularly effective.

*It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you, but it's not a mature way to deal with real strategic options.*

How amusing. I, an Arab, am being lectured on my inability to differentiate between different ragheads by a Canadian. I'm glad that you continue to demonstrate the knowledge and critical thinking that have characterized interventions by white folks in most of the world.

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 01:32 PM](#)

@Pithlord:

*It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you, but it's not a mature way to deal with real strategic options.*

Who on earth is doing this, much less suggesting it?

If I understand you correctly, there is no point in discussing "victory" or "defeat" because the presume there will be an end to an on-going process. Which seems to imply that there will *never* come a time where we can step back and assess whether our involvement in Afghanistan is worth (however we choose to measure worth) the sacrifices in lives, money, and foregone opportunities.

Obviously we will have some *interest* in what happens in Afghanistan (if only as fellow human beings), and to that extent our involvement can never be truly said to end. The question is whether our military involvement is equally never-ending.

Raising objections to using the American military to rebuild Afghan society from the ground up for the foreseeable future regardless of any cost, has *nothing to do* with dismissing "ragheads" or a desire to "throw up your hands."

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 01:37 PM](#)

*It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you*

I'm going to pile on here. This comment was contemptible.

Posted by: Uncle Kvetch | [September 02, 2009 at 01:49 PM](#)

| If you're going to lecture us on Afghani history

There's a pretty decent summary of it [here](#). I'm not sure how the history of Afghan currency has much to do with the current discussion, though.

Posted by: Slartibartfast | [September 02, 2009 at 01:59 PM](#)

What I find rather frustrating about the Iraq War Debate generally, and this thread in microcosm, is that the proponents of military action insist that it's necessary to achieve \_\_\_\_\_, but have enormous difficulty explaining how to measure progress toward \_\_\_\_\_.

So, we have to do something right away! At any cost! But we can't tell you if it's working, or when you can stop. And anyone who objects isn't being Serious.

Posted by: JamesNostack | [September 02, 2009 at 02:02 PM](#)

Liberal japonicus, no doubt you are in a better position to know, I was extrapolating from memory of the following book about which Wiki says: "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture is an influential study of Japan by Ruth Benedict written at the invitation of the Office of War Information in order to understand and predict the behavior of the Japanese in World War II"

and I remember someone making the argument that in contrast to Iraq, in which poor General Garner was recruited just a few months before the invasion, the US had been planning for post-war Japan throughout much of WWII. eg. deciding role of Emperor, if any.

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 02:02 PM](#)

I apologize for intemperate language. It was uncalled for. Obviously, I have no real way of knowing where the various pseudonyms are coming from.

What I would ask is that we be open to the possibility that there are real distinctions of degree, even if every conceivable political faction in Afghanistan are bound to be conservative Muslims. The Karzai government brought in reactionary legislation legalizing marital rape among Shi'ites, but it also responded to international pressure and changed its position.

The critical metric, I think, is universal primary education for girls.

I also see a nationalist tendency (sometimes quite explicit!) to care only about what happens to Americans (or Canadians). That's inevitable, I suppose, in democratic politics, but I'd argue we should pay some price and bear some burden to help people who are a lot worse off than we are. Not "regardless of any cost", but also not on the basis that any casualties of our troops are unacceptable.

Finally, I think "victory" talk is just an impatience to see magical results. It might make sense to commit resources and take risks just to prevent things getting worse. We devote resources to domestic crime control without expecting victory over crime. There are risks and harms out there in the world that call for the same response.

I would accept staying in Afghanistan indefinitely even though no improvement is made if leaving Afghanistan would mean that things would get a lot worse. I realize that at some point that will become politically impossible, so I certainly hope there will be improvement.

Posted by: [Pithlord](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:11 PM](#)

Thanks Carleton, Turbulence. I felt a little guilty or worried about leaving a non-substantive, *ad hominem* comment like mine at 1:12 p.m. (just a tiny bit, though), but even as cynical as I usually am, this thread is depressing. Like I said at 10:59 p.m., pro-war arguments haven't evolved at all. Read comment #78 [here](#), for example, then read #131, then read #138. 131 and 138, in case it isn't clear from context, came after 78 rather than before it, and they all came four years before this discussion we're having now. (Obviously, those are addressing Iraq not Afghanistan, and I'm talking to different people now, but it all seems relevant here, sadly.)

Posted by: [Cyrus](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:12 PM](#)

Invasion and Occupation of a non-threatening sovereign nation (Afghanistan) by military aggression CAN EVER be justified, publius? You seem to suggest it can. I don't quarrel with targeted strikes against al Qaeda (against whose aggression we have the right of self-defense), but what have the Afghanis ever done to the U.S. that justifies U.S. aggression against them? I suppose by your reasoning we COULD detonate our mass weapons of destruction against the entire region, because that ASSURES us we've ridden the world of al Qaeda. Unless, of course, they've moved.

You are on a very slippery slope questioning your instincts. The ONLY aggression morally permissible is one of SELF-DEFENSE, not nation reconstruction in our image. Or are you closer to Leo Strauss than Michael Walzer?

Posted by: [The Gay Species](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:12 PM](#)

*I also understand that for several years the US govt had a team of academics seriously studying Japanese culture and planning how to carry out the occupation.*

McArthur's efforts in Japan were distinguished by his refusal to listen to experts on Japan. At least, that's what I remember reading in "Embracing Defeat". I think LJ is correct on this issue. But I don't think the question has much to do with Afghanistan. The US government is trying to build a stable, legitimate, non-corrupt, centralized government in Afghanistan. We don't know how to do that. We just have no idea. Our experience in Japan tells us nothing because Japan was a radically different place in 1945 than Afghanistan is now (or was in 2002).

Beyond that, Pithlord wants the US government to improve the lives of women and girls there. His desires are not relevant since he has no power and since his desires are not shared by the US government. But here again: we really have no idea how to accomplish this. People in Afghanistan have a very different conception of gender roles than we do. I think their conception is stupid and objectively harmful, but there's no way I can convince them of that. And there's no way we can force them to change their beliefs.

Posted by: [Turbulence](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:15 PM](#)

someotherdude is certainly right that the West subordinated women's rights to anti-Communism in Afghanistan in the eighties. The CIA didn't want to argue with Pakistan's intelligence service about which mujahedin to support. In the long run, that turned out to be unwise.

For what it's worth, I always opposed the Iraq war.

Posted by: [Pithlord](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:16 PM](#)

*I would accept staying in Afghanistan indefinitely even though no improvement is made if leaving Afghanistan would mean that things would get a lot worse.*

Thanks for finally putting your cards on the table, Pithlord. I couldn't disagree with you more, but it's refreshing to encounter this level of honesty.

*I also see a nationalist tendency (sometimes quite explicit!) to care only about what happens to Americans (or Canadians). [...] We devote resources to domestic crime control without expecting victory over crime. There are risks and harms out there in the world that call for the same response.*

So by your reasoning, the US government has the same obligations to "promote the general welfare" of the people of Afghanistan as it

does the people of the United States.

I've gotta say, I'm gobsmacked.

Posted by: Uncle Kvetch | [September 02, 2009 at 02:18 PM](#)

"It is convenient to just throw up your hands and say all the ragheads look the same to you"

You gotta be kidding me. This is what you're bringing? Knife to a gunfight, son.

Posted by: Rob in CT | [September 02, 2009 at 02:20 PM](#)

*The Karzai government brought in reactionary legislation legalizing marital rape among Shi'ites, but it also responded to international pressure and changed its position.*

It changed its position regarding laws on the books. There's no evidence to suggest that women who are raped by their husbands will have any practical legal recourse. None. Zero. Zilch. And even if the government was committed to practically enforcing these rights, the rampant corruption makes going to the government worthless. Who do you think will be better able to bribe a police officer or prosecutor or judge in Afghanistan: a woman who has been raped by her husband or her husband? Given how much of Afghanistan's government is engaged in corruption, this is hardly an academic matter.

*The critical metric, I think, is universal primary education for girls.*

The US is blowing \$60 billion on Afghanistan per year. How many of those dollars were going to universal primary education for girls?

*I also see a nationalist tendency (sometimes quite explicit!) to care only about what happens to Americans (or Canadians). That's inevitable, I suppose, in democratic politics, but I'd argue we should pay some price and bear some burden to help people who are a lot worse off than we are. Not "regardless of any cost", but also not on the basis that any casualties of our troops are unacceptable.*

Shouldn't our decision to help these people be somehow related to our capability to do so? And what on Earth makes you think that the US is good at nation building or at fundamentally changing vastly different societies?

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 02:25 PM](#)

Turbulence, I mentioned Japan as an example of greater pre-occupation planning (I assume by State department), not military's implementation. Seems like the same with Iraq. Garner's planning was jettisoned.

Dower speaks of 'the wartime mobilization' of an 'impressive contingent of American and British anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and psychiatrists' for psychological warfare but leading to conclusions about Japanese national character. Embracing Defeat pg 219

Posted by: Johnny Canuck | [September 02, 2009 at 02:38 PM](#)

Basic project management triage:

1. What is your primary goal?
2. What is your plan for reaching that goal?
3. How will you know when you have reached it?
4. How much time, money (and in this case lives) will it take to get there?

I have yet to hear anything resembling convincing answers to those questions. The answers I hear sound a lot more like descriptions of the functions of government, which is an open-ended commitment. But a foreign army cannot take on that governmental role. An occupying army must approach their task as a project with a definite endpoint.

I could be persuaded that the NATO (but primarily US) military presence in Afghanistan can answer those questions, but I have yet to see such answers, and I have been looking. All I see is a lot of unfocused talk about safe havens, women's rights, or showing weakness. Unless you can describe to me how such a goal will be accomplished and how it will remain accomplished after we leave the country, I have no reason to believe that it will ever be accomplished or stay accomplished. And if it will never be accomplished there is no point in paying for an ongoing futile effort to accomplish it.

Posted by: Jacob Davies | [September 02, 2009 at 02:38 PM](#)

I don't think the US is good at nation building or at fundamentally changing vastly different societies. And I realize the Afghan state isn't very effective and is highly corrupt.

I think a slightly better security situation could make possible a generation of higher literacy for women (maybe getting back to the situation in the late seventies). Experience around the world suggests that leads to significant social change. Birth rates go down, infant mortality goes down and growth tends to go up. These are just statistical generalizations and you can't prove that the rosy scenario will

occur in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, I don't think it matters that the "US Government doesn't care about women". The US Government is an institution, not a person. It generates effects; it doesn't have intentions.

The evidence from people like Paul Collier persuades me that peacekeeping can work, and that both security and insecurity create mutually-reinforcing feedback loops. From what I've seen of Afghan public opinion, there is opposition to aerial bombardment and a weariness with the whole conflict, but there is at least potential support for NATO involvement among the progressive part of the population. There is also a pretty clear security rationale given the Taliban's patron relation with Al Qaeda. If the Western public gives up on Afghanistan, even after 9/11, then I think it's going to be out of short-term nationalist weariness with the costs of addressing problems, and not out of anti-imperialist principle.

Posted by: [Pithlord](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:43 PM](#)

*So by your reasoning, the US government has the same obligations to "promote the general welfare" of the people of Afghanistan as it does the people of the United States.*

In principle, I'm a moral cosmopolitan, so I think the welfare of a person in Afghanistan ought to count in the cost-benefit analysis the same as of a person in the United States. I realize that's not going to happen.

Posted by: [Pithlord](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 02:47 PM](#)

Pithlord, thanks for your 2:11 p.m. comments and your retraction.

I don't think we're that far apart. I'm quite sympathetic to your position, but I'm chastened by our low level of competence in this arena.

I agree that Karzai's government, bad as it may be, is an enormous moral improvement over the Taliban; I agree that securing basic human rights for women is extremely important; I agree that the fight against terrorism is more like crime-prevention than traditional warfare. But if the goal is to deny Al-Qaeda the capacity to operate, I think that can be done without nation-building in an extremely fractious and poorly understood society. And if the goal is to create a stable, centralized government in Afghanistan that respects human rights norms, I don't think we're using the right tool for that job, assuming any outsider has such a thing.

Posted by: [JamesNostack](#) | [September 02, 2009 at 03:02 PM](#)

*Experience around the world suggests that leads to significant social change. Birth rates go down, infant mortality goes down and growth tends to go up. These are just statistical generalizations and you can't prove that the rosy scenario will occur in Afghanistan.*

Oh, I'm sure that if you could improve female literacy in Afghanistan, life there would improve dramatically (over time). I'm not questioning that at all. I'm questioning the notion that the US will be able to improve female literacy.

*On the other hand, I don't think it matters that the "US Government doesn't care about women". The US Government is an institution, not a person. It generates effects; it doesn't have intentions.*

Yes, but it does have explicit goals. It does have metrics that it uses to guide its efforts. And to the extent that "improving the status of women and girls in Afghanistan" doesn't appear amongst those goals, our money won't be used to effect that goal. To the extent that "female literacy" does not appear among the metrics used in the Pentagon, there's just no reason to believe that our money will improve female literacy.

The current government in Afghanistan does not like women much. There is no reason to believe that US government action will change that fact, no matter how much "security" we provide. Is there?

*The evidence from people like Paul Collier persuades me that peacekeeping can work, and that both security and insecurity create mutually-reinforcing feedback loops.*

Those statements are true but they're also very very vague. So vague that they don't tell us anything about Afghanistan right now. Unless you'd like to narrow them?

*There is also a pretty clear security rationale given the Taliban's patron relation with Al Qaeda.*

This rationale exists only given certain assumptions. You need to assume that (1) the Taliban are irrational extremists that cannot learn from their experience and cannot be bought, (2) the US will not be capable of dealing with AQ in Afghanistan even if the Taliban run the country, and (3) AQ's ability to fund the Taliban has not declined since 2001 nor have the Taliban's financial needs increased. These assumptions might be correct, but you have to at least argue them.

(1) is believed by everyone who tries to demonize their opponents; I'm of the opinion that some factions of the Taliban could be quite accommodating to our desires for AQ control if we gave them a small fraction of the \$60 billion we spend on Afghanistan each year. I mean, the Taliban hosted AQ in large part because of cash. Now, who do you think has more cash, AQ or the US?

Posted by: Turbulence | [September 02, 2009 at 03:03 PM](#)

"Now, who do you think has more cash, AQ or the US?"

Do we get to print it or do we have to use cash on hand? :)

Posted by: Marty | [September 02, 2009 at 03:11 PM](#)

*I also see a nationalist tendency (sometimes quite explicit!) to care only about what happens to Americans (or Canadians).*

Sure (although it's as prevalent on the right as on the left), but that's a textbook ad hominem when invoked against rational arguments for leaving Afghanistan.

*That's inevitable, I suppose, in democratic politics, but I'd argue we should pay some price and bear some burden to help people who are a lot worse off than we are. Not "regardless of any cost", but also not on the basis that any casualties of our troops are unacceptable.*

No one has argued either of those positions- that we aren't obligated to help others or that American casualties are unacceptable. They've clearly been arguing that we may not be helping at all. I think your only hope to make headway is to discuss the specifics- if we can help, how can we do so? Given the political reality that a permanent presence is unacceptable to all sides, how do you foresee our involvement producing a better outcome?

*Finally, I think "victory" talk is just an impatience to see magical results.*

I think that wanting to know how we're going to help and how it leads to a better result isn't exactly asking for magic. We're asking for a plan, or a sketch of one, that can produce the results we \*all\* want to see- a better, safer, more stable Afghanistan. Wanting to help and having the resources to help does not automatically mean that our involvement will help.

*someotherdude is certainly right that the West subordinated women's rights to anti-Communism in Afghanistan in the eighties.*

I think it would be prudent to observe that this series of unintended consequences might have been averted with 1)more planning and 2)more emphasis on outcome than singleminded moral absolutes. We wanted to save the Afghans from Communism; we ended up delivering them to theocracy. Good intentions do not create good outcomes- hope is not a plan.

Posted by: Carleton Wu | [September 02, 2009 at 03:26 PM](#)

I'm not against planning. I just think it's possible to have exaggerated faith in it. We should devote resources just up to the point where the difference they make exceeds the cost. It could be that the difference they make is only that they avert disaster. It could be that they provide the opportunity for improvement, which political forces in Afghanistan may or may not make possible.

Project management is a good way to think about building bridges. But it doesn't work when results depend on what a lot of other people with different agendas do. Engineering metaphors have a bad history in warfare.

In terms of nationalist arguments that all that matters are the security effects on Americans, Eric Martin has certainly argued exactly that, although I doubt his heart is in it.

Posted by: Pithlord | [September 02, 2009 at 03:59 PM](#)

*We should devote resources just up to the point where the difference they make exceeds the cost.*

Im not sure that makes sense- the units aren't the same, and there's no conversion from \$ or soldiers & civilians killed to % of girls getting primary education.

Also, it assumes that the efforts we're making are having a positive effect, which is precisely the point publius argued against in the original post: *our tactics are accomplishing exactly the reverse -- that is, we're empowering the Taliban by staying.*

Not seeing that positive intent + effort can equal negative results usually leads to bad feedback. Think relationships-turned-stalking, or overparenting. Not arguing that that's the case here, just that that's part of the opposing argument, as opposed to "who cares about women and brown people."

Posted by: Carleton Wu | [September 02, 2009 at 04:39 PM](#)

Gary Farber has a good post up over at his place regarding the ratio of DOD private security contractors to U.S military troops in Afganistan .... and their relative behavior toward each other and the domestic population working under them.

I doubt too many of these cowboys are treating the Afghan women very well -- considering how they treat the men.

The private sector works its magic again.

Posted by: John Thullen | [September 02, 2009 at 04:50 PM](#)

I don't think "impatience for magical results" really flies, considering how long we've already been in Afghanistan, what's already been

spent, and the current situation as I understand it (I know I'm not an expert on this, so it's possible my understanding is poor).

We are attempting nation-building in a country that is: a) a disaster and b) about as different from us culturally as is possible. The mission may very well be impossible, no matter how much blood and treasure you are willing to pour into it.

Posted by: Rob in CT | [September 02, 2009 at 04:52 PM](#)

"We should devote resources just up to the point where the difference they make exceeds the cost"

Cost-benefit analysis can be a useful tool, but in this case we have three significant problems with using it: one, our inability to measure or quantify "the difference" that is being made, two, our inability to measure or quantify "the cost" of what we are doing, and three, any consideration of the opportunity costs of spending the money/lives in Afghanistan rather than elsewhere.

Without those things CBA is useless; all it amounts to saying is "I feel like we should stay there", although wrapped in some language that implies that it was a bloodless decision made on objective grounds.

As for the poor history of project management in warfare, well, yes and no. Pick the wrong quantifiers and it's not going to work out too well (e.g. body counts). But armies do not approach (successful) campaigns with as vague an idea as "We're going to fight until it doesn't seem worth it anymore." They approach them with goals like "Capture Berlin" or "Force the unconditional surrender of Japan". Those goals (and their sub-goals) were not CBA except in the sense that the cost of not achieving them was considered infinite. They were a classic example of project planning. That is exactly what the military can do well - if the goal is clear, the people think it's worth achieving, and the military possesses the capability of achieving it.

Posted by: Jacob Davies | [September 02, 2009 at 05:02 PM](#)

Jacob, the army's great at project planning. No doubt about it. And it works great for tactics and logistics.

The problem is at the strategic level, there is a range of outcomes from ideal to disastrous, and opponents with the reverse valuations. We can envision an ideal set of outcomes, but the fact that we can't accomplish it does not necessarily mean we should quit. Things could be worse. They *were* worse on September 10, 2001.

Posted by: Pithlord | [September 02, 2009 at 05:51 PM](#)

Can you name even one case where the military did not have a simple - achievable - strategic goal of obvious importance, and yet the overall mission was considered a success?

Again, what is the goal (or goals plural) of the American military mission in Afghanistan?

Is it achievable?

Is it being achieved?

How much will it cost to achieve it?

Posted by: Jacob Davies | [September 02, 2009 at 06:13 PM](#)

The Taliban leadership has explicitly said that they would give al Qaeda safe harbor, so if they take over Afghanistan, al Qaeda is sure to follow, not there's much ideological daylight between the two.

Joshua Foust has a good piece on our strategic interests, starting [here](#), and Part II [here](#).

Bailing on Afghanistan is going to widen the Taliban's area of operations, which can't be helpful to Pakistan, and Pakistan is still having serious problems with the Taliban in the [Swat Valley](#).

On tactics, there have been too many civilian casualties in the past, which the Taliban has taken advantage of, and the rules of engagement have been tightened. Bottom line, I think Obama should be given a fair shot to let McChrystal do his job.

Posted by: Charles Bird | [September 02, 2009 at 06:47 PM](#)

I think you're profoundly confused. It is to me obvious that reestablished Taliban rule would be *ipso facto* an establishment of at least a potential safe haven for those who might plan attacks, should they choose to exploit it. Do we really expect Taliban to spend time fighting and rooting out anti-Western militancy this time merely because we might get mad again? We let them come back once (in that scenario). How scared will they be? To me the relevant questions are three:

- 1) Are we preventing the return of Taliban rule by staying/How much does the likelihood of the return of Taliban rule go up when we withdraw or substantially downscale the mission?
- 2) How likely is it that if Taliban rule returned, AlQaeda would seek to exploit it? If they did so choose, what is our capability to hunt and kill those planning to attack the West absent a large presence on the ground?
- 3) Should Al Qaeda (or those with like motives) move into a safe haven in Afghanistan, and we are unable to detect or destroy them,



what is the likelihood that plans made in Afghanistan could effect a successful terrorist strike against the West in any case, given the much tighter world-wide intelligence and security network than was in place on 9/11/01?

Lastly, the overarching strategic question for the U.S. and the West is the following: which is the better strategy for minimizing any threat from the region from a cost-to-efficacy standpoint: attempting over the relatively short run (5-10 years) to establish a stable enough government in Afghanistan that we can largely rely on it to police threats posed from within its borders to other countries, or dispensing with concern over the make-up of any government there and merely asserting authority for the West to police such threats irrespective of Afghan sovereignty by means determined by us (largely drone strikes and commando raids, as well as continuous small-team covert and spy presence) for an undefined period of time into the future?

Posted by: Mike | [September 03, 2009 at 05:19 AM](#)

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