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Across the Aisle:
The PSA Blog

Speaking Honestly to the American People about Afghanistan

by Christopher Preble | September 18th, 2009 | [Share This](#) [characteristically thorough post](#), and to take issue with Vogt for what was an [uncharacteristically superficial one](#).

Specifically, Brian points to a BBC poll of Afghans concerning the US/NATO mission and their preferences for govern the current government wins overwhelming support (82 percent), the Taliban barely registers (4 percent).

He concludes, therefore:

if the military presence is done right and actually brings increased security to Afghan citizens, they will be inclined to support it rather than the alternative.

Of course, that's the big "if" – if the military presence is done right. The problem is that for most of the past several years, the US and NATO forces have been ill equipped and too few in number to actually execute a proper counterinsurgency strategy. I agree that things have not been going well. Most Afghans in the south and east see little security benefit from either Afghan or US/NATO security forces. It's no wonder that many have put their faith in with the Taliban. It seems that one response to this problem would be a greater presence – not less – of security forces. (Emphasis mine)

This is a variation on the incompetence dodge, [about which I have written much](#). Our past failings should not be taken as evidence that we cannot succeed in the future. We have a new military team (Petraeus and McChrystal), and still relatively White House team (Obama et al). We've learned from our mistakes. We can fix this.

This betrays a particular faith in our government's ability to reshape foreign cultures that is not supported by the evidence. I'm not just referring the Bush administration's particular shortcomings. Most nation-building missions fail, even those carried out by wise and far-sighted military and political leaders. Nor is it clear that all of the objectives that we've set forth for our troops are actually essential to advancing American security, a point that my colleagues Malou Innocent and Ted Galen Carpenter make in [a just-published Cato paper](#).

The Obama administration's strategy would surely require *far* more troops, and I think it incumbent upon the advocates of the current strategy to be explicit about how many more, for how long, and at what cost.

Of course, the chief advocate for our strategy in Afghanistan must be the president himself. In this regard, I wholeheartedly endorse Brian's final recommendation, calling on the president to:

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lay out the options to the American people, their likely costs, the stakes of the conflict, and why sacrifice is necessary. For the past seven years we've had too many overly optimistic assessments about our military engagements and their costs.

This recommendation matches with that of the Foreign Policy Initiative, a clear successor to the now-discredited Project New American Century. In [a recent letter](#), FPI implored the president:

to fully resource this effort, do everything possible to minimize the risk of failure, and to devote the necessary tin to explain, soberly and comprehensively, to the American people the stakes in Afghanistan, the route to success, and the cost of defeat.

I'm curious why the president would listen to FPI, given that the signatories to its letter were uniformly wrong about Iraq, a point made not-too-subtly in [this letter](#) from the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy (full disclosure: I'm a signatory to the letter, and a founder of the Coalition). Be that as it may, if the president were to do as FPI asks, I'm confident that the limited support there is for the ambitious nation-building project in Afghanistan would collapse entirely.

But I guess we won't know until it is tried.

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