

Remember George W.'s War on Terror? We Lost. So Why are We Continuing it?

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As I argue in my recently published [policy analysis](#) here at Cato, the American-led war on terror has clearly failed. Unfortunately, rather than accept the obvious fact that the campaign was badly misguided and focusing homeland security efforts in more fruitful areas, the Trump administration appears ready to embrace, and perhaps even to escalate, the American commitment in the Middle East. Though President Trump himself has frequently voiced concerns about nation building in Iraq and the mission in Afghanistan, few of his senior advisers appear to share his worries. And sadly, few voices from the foreign policy establishment have questioned the need for continued American intervention.

The near total lack of debate begs a simple question: Why do so many smart people support the continuation of a strategy despite its abject failure over sixteen years and in the absence of anything even remotely approaching a new theory of victory?

Though there are undoubtedly many different contributing factors, one important cause is the influence of several mutually reinforcing fallacies about terrorism and the use of force.

The first of these is the “political will” fallacy. This is the misguided idea that the United States can outlast the Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other local actors simply by illustrating sufficient political resolve. Once the terrorists and insurgents understand that the United States is truly “in it to win it” they will admit defeat. The reality, however, is that resolve is not something the White House can create. Resolve is a force that stems from how meaningful the objective is to a nation and how much its people are willing to pay to achieve it.

Given this, America’s adversaries clearly enjoy a decided advantage. Local actors like the Taliban have a tremendous stake in the outcome in Afghanistan – it is their home, after all. Americans, on the other hand, are rightly dubious of the value of slugging it out for a country of little significance to their security. Thus, much as happened during the Vietnam War, no matter how much firepower the United States brings to the fight local adversaries like the Taliban will always have greater resolve to keep fighting.

Buttressing this problem is the “organizational fallacy.” The war on terror has been focused on defeating terrorist groups, primarily by killing the people linked to them. But as the war on terror has illustrated, a group-centric, terrorist-killing approach is the wrong way to think about the problem. Terrorist organizations are not really organizations in a classical sense, nor are they

static entities. As the United States broke up Al Qaeda Central, eventually killing Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda simply morphed and other groups emerged elsewhere to carry the banner, including the Islamic State. Moreover, the Islamic State's success showed that even killing tens of thousands of fighters does not eliminate the problem of terrorism, even if it degrades the physical organization itself. As should be clear by now, killing individual terrorists does nothing to address the root causes of political conflict in the Middle East. Drone strikes cannot kill the ideologies, ideas, grievances, and emotions that motivate violence in the first place. In fact, many people, including American military commanders, believe that the group-centric, terrorist-killing approach has caused more problems than it has solved.

The final fallacy is what the economist Friedrich Hayek called the "fatal conceit." The fatal conceit is the mistaken belief that a small group of central planners can manage economic markets or other complex social functions. Sadly, this conceit runs rampant in foreign policy circles, where government officials routinely make plans to reshape nations and influence political outcomes around the world. Even worse, not even sixteen years of utter failure appear to have dampened the power of this fallacy.

As intelligent people, presidents and their foreign policy teams naturally believe that they can learn from history and apply those lessons to doing better in the future. And so they ignore the evidence that clearly indicates that the complex tasks of political and social engineering – which military intervention and nation building certainly are – are well beyond the ability of any group of people to manage, no matter how smart or well-intentioned they are. The result is that political leaders continue to throw money and military forces at Afghanistan and the Middle East, calling it nation building or a war on terror, believing they are directing events and making progress toward victory.

But these are blunt instruments, not precision tools, and as history has shown their impact has little to do with the plans made by the American government. The forces at play are so many and so complex that no one could have predicted the outcomes of the past sixteen years. Who would have predicted that the Taliban in 2017 would be at their strongest since the 2001 invasion, or the emergence and success of the Islamic State? And yet think tanks, military leaders, and other foreign policy experts continue to argue that the United States should persist until "we get it right."

At this point, these three fallacies are so deeply embedded in American strategic culture that it is impossible to imagine how the war on terror will ever end. Though Trump may yet confound his advisers and restrain them from their preferred escalation of American effort, a renewed American commitment to the current, failed strategy in Afghanistan and elsewhere seems almost certain.

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