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Anthony Zinni on America's "Honor Problem" in the Wake of the Iraq War



Former CENTCOM Commander General Anthony Zinni discusses the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the perils of special envoys, and why Obama needs a national security strategy.

Sir Richard Dalton on the Iranian Election Crisis and What's Next



Former UK Ambassador to Iran Sir Richard Dalton discusses the recent domestic turmoil in Iran and its implications for the future of the

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On Afghanistan: Two Bipartisan Consensuses?

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Cato Institute foreign policy program [Christopher Preble](#) has a [smart piece](#) on the Partnership for a Secure America blog "Across the Aisle" today correctly noting that there is no bipartisan divide on US strategy in Afghanistan. Instead, there is a divide between "two bipartisan consensuses."

Preble [writes](#):

In keeping with the PSA's charter, we're seeing bipartisan consensus emerging around U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The bad news? There are actually two bipartisan consensuses.

Technically, that is impossible. Consensus means "general agreement" or "a view reached by a group as a whole" so there can't really be more than one.

And that is the problem. So long as the right is fighting the right, and others on the left are fighting the left, policymakers will be inclined to focus on other policy issues, content to let Afghan policy drift, and hope for a miraculous turnaround (e.g. Karzai becomes less corrupt and more competent; the Afghan economy begins to produce something other than opium; the Pashtuns decide to make common cause with the Tajiks, Turkmen and Hazara; Afghan men decide that Afghan women should have rights, etc).

Our men and women in uniform, engaged increasingly in armed social work are caught in the middle while the pointy-heads pull on their respective chins.

Certain leading voices on the right agree with others on the left that we must redefine our ends in Afghanistan, and begin exploring ways to draw down the military presence there.

I'm with those that think that "Surge Envy" is not a strategy - and that the inflation of America's commitment to a different order in Afghanistan is outrunning reasonable deployment of resources and any ability to sustain a stable national outcome that Americans will be able to support.

Preble is author of [The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous and Less Free](#).

Preble and I were also founding board members of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy -- which we established during the Iraq War and which we are considering resuscitating to address our concerns about the war in Afghanistan.

-- Steve Clemons

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Posted by [Zathras](#), Sep 04 2009, 4:15PM - [Link](#)

Islamic Republic.

Flynt Leverett and Kenneth Ballen Discuss the Iranian Presidential Election



Flynt Leverett and Kenneth Ballen analyze the results of a New America Foundation/Terror Free Tomorrow poll that found most Iranians support improved relations with the United States.

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The current situation in Afghanistan has been developing for years. Part of our problem now is that our discussion of Afghanistan is being conducted as if it just popped up on the radar screen last January 20.

President Obama is as responsible for this as anyone. During the campaign he criticized the Bush administration for devoting too many resources to Iraq and not enough to Afghanistan, but the purpose of his criticism was to capitalize on the unpopularity of the war in Iraq. Neither during the campaign nor as President has Obama discussed the damage done to our chances of anything that might be called success in Afghanistan by the Bush administration's having tread water there for nearly seven years. Possibly the greatest damage -- the missed opportunity to build from scratch an Afghan government able to do more than demand bribes and conspire in the drug trade, and the establishment instead of a government that does both those things and little else -- is little discussed by the President or his team out of deference to President Karzai.

The problem is that when some trains leave the station they are well and truly gone, and gone for good. The failure of the administration and its supporters on both left and right is greatest on this point. They all premise their arguments on the idea that we either have Afghan partners now or will have them after some reasonable period of time. Evidence for that premise is lacking, ironically a direct result of the under-resourcing of Afghanistan by the last administration that Obama complained about during the campaign.

The failure of the administration's critics, on left and right, is their inability and occasional unwillingness to grapple with the risk that an American withdrawal from Afghanistan would involve. Some choose to deny there is any such risk; others, like George Will, give cursory consideration to a "small footprint" presence that would rely on the Afghans we are leaving to face the Taliban alone for intelligence on its activities, and strike at them as opportunities present themselves. The comparison to Iraq is relevant; terrorists intent on attacks against Americans and Western targets did not actually operate out of Iraq before the 2003 invasion and now have many armed enemies there, but such terrorists did operate out of Afghanistan before the Americans threw them out in 2001 and would have scant armed opposition if the American army pulled out now. Still others try to take up ground in the middle. They don't speak of withdrawal from Afghanistan, but rather of the need to "...begin exploring ways to draw down the military presence there," which could mean anything.

Honesty in the debate over policy toward Afghanistan is not a matter of debate participants' personal integrity. Rather, it concerns the need to face squarely on the one hand the question of whether what might have been possible in the winter of 2001-02 is still possible in the summer of 2009, and on the other the issue of whether an Afghan sanctuary for al Qaeda terrorists -- probably backed by a Pakistan glad to move them off its territory -- is something we should still seek to prevent. Arguments for "resolve" that ignore the first question and arguments for withdrawal that glibly pass over the second don't get us anywhere.

Posted by Dan Kervick, Sep 04 2009, 5:06PM - [Link](#)

"The current situation in Afghanistan has been developing for years. Part of our problem now is that our discussion of Afghanistan is being conducted as if it just popped up on the radar screen last January 20."

Well, this is an interesting point. Afghanistan never received the share of the national debate and discussion to which it was entitled on the merits, due to the fact that it was quickly overshadowed by the debate over the much more prominent and spectacular war in Iraq.

Posted by Curious observer, Sep 04 2009, 5:53PM - [Link](#)

"...such terrorists did operate out of Afghanistan before the Americans threw them out in 2001."

Indeed they did. They also first discussed a 9/11 style attack in the Philippines in 1996. They worked out most of the strategy for 9/11 in Hamburg and the tactics in South Florida. I guess we need to go to war in all those places too. Maybe we should bomb Hamburg to smithereens again because the Brits didn't do it right in WWII. I mean, clearly it's a terrorist haven, right?

Just because terrorists hang out in a certain place it does not logically follow that Washington's legions must occupy that place.

And as Jeff Huber wrote at Antiwar yesterday (in a piece specifically about what he calls the "Bananastans"), "It is impossible to disrupt terrorist networks when the only 'sanctuaries' those networks need in order to operate are pockets large enough to carry an iPod."

Steve, by all means, bring back the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy. As you stood in heroic opposition to the PNAC crowd during Iraq, you need to do the same with the CNAS crowd now.

Posted by jackie, Sep 04 2009, 5:53PM - [Link](#)

Dan,

Good point. I keep reading a lot about what is the Afghanistan strategy? We've been there for 8 years and it's finally dawning on us that we need a strategy? THAT'S a problem!

I guess that is what happens when you have an administration that just wants to invade places, but doesn't know why.

Posted by John Waring, Sep 04 2009, 7:18PM - [Link](#)

I have yet to read a recent analysis that actually describes Afghanistan as it is in itself, and not largely as an extension of a debate among Americans.

After reading the second chapter of Michael Scheuer's "Imperial Hubris" one more time, I am again struck by the alien strangeness of the place and it's people. I recommend it to you.

This is what I want to say to those who want to do armed nation building for the next several years in Afghanistan.

Hello? Do you realize you are not in Kansas anymore? Kindly explain how your policy fits an Afghan context. Why should those people buy anything we are selling? That's my problem with the Heritage Foundation, the Brookings Institute, General McCrystal's report, and the like.

They have done no sanity check. They do not realize American stuff does not fit Afghanistan. We are as clueless about

Afghanistan as we were about Vietnam and Iraq. And a policy of armed nation building will fail as utterly.

Posted by JohnH, Sep 04 2009, 8:47PM - [Link](#)

Why doesn't Steve change the name of his group to the Coalition for a Rational Foreign Policy? Or is there some problem with trying to pursue a foreign policy that makes sense?

If the curtain were yanked away to expose the inner workings of the foreign policy mob, it would certainly reveal a system that makes as much strategic sense as the US health care system. It would most likely reveal nothing more than an enormous cluster of special interests all clamoring to get their piece of Uncle Sam's tax booty. All of them are fighting to keep their corporate revenues or agency budgets generated by adventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and to get more revenue and bigger budgets from starting a war with Iran.

The fact that no TWN authorized post has ever made any attempt to explain the reasons behind US involvement or engagement with any country makes it crystal clear that the underpinnings of US foreign policy are rotten. There is simply no rational policy basis for Uncle Sam's foreign adventures. If the US had a clear, rational understanding of its national interests and goals, it would not be that hard to explain them.

The difference between the foreign policy establishment and the health care establishment is that Americans are directly affected by the health care disaster, so there is the potential for some accountability. In foreign policy, Americans are not directly affected, so the special interests are free to pursue their hidden agendas to loot the treasury for their own gain. The fact that they don't even bother to make sensible policies indicates how deeply corrupt this shadowy system has become. Blogs like TWN don't even question what they are doing, protesting at most at their undiplomatic behavior.

Posted by ..., Sep 04 2009, 9:51PM - [Link](#)

i agree johnh... thanks for saying that and i hope steve reads your post and gives it some consideration as it relates to his own involvement...

Posted by JohnH, Sep 05 2009, 12:49AM - [Link](#)

The Nation has a piece on the secret government. It talks about the CIA and how Frank Church reeled it in a bit. Now I suspect the disease has spread to the entire "national security" apparatus.

I've been posting here for years, frequently asking the same questions: Why is the US doing what it's doing? What are the goals and ambitions? What are the stakes and those undefined, mysterious "vital strategic interests?"

There has never been any answer from anyone TWN hosts. No one ever tried to take a stab at why we are occupying Iraq and Afghanistan or threatening Iran.

Normally when you set out to convince people to do things, you start with a clear definition of the problem, describe the stakes, and then explain how what you propose will address the problem.

But in foreign policy discussions, they always pass by the problem and the stakes. They always go directly to "this is what we need to do," without ever referencing, even in passing, what the goals are or why it needs to be done.

Oh, yes, the politicians come up with sweet sounding, noble goals to lull the public: Saddam's nuclear program, freedom and democracy, human rights, etc. etc. And the goals are always the same from country to country! And they are often so outlandish as to be laughable. For a while hasbara was trying to promote the idea of Venezuela supplying Iran with uranium. Only problems were that Venezuela doesn't mine uranium and Iran already has plenty of its own. Laughable, simply laughable nonsense!

In Afghanistan we set out to kill Osama (like we did Saddam). But we couldn't find him--reminds you of the Keystone Cops! Since that didn't work out so well, now we want to make Afghanistan into a stable democracy and staunch supporter of women's right (like Iraq!!!). The foreign policy mob sheds "justifications" for its actions like a snake sheds skins, hoping one will finally stick.

The foreign policy PR folks have used the same script from the same cookbook for so long that I think that people are finally starting to catch on to the fact that it's a moldering heap of BS.

Since the foreign policy mob can't explain its goals in any coherent way, at some point you have to conclude: a) they know what they are doing but refuse to say, or b) they don't have a clue.

I used to think that the foreign policy mob was capable of some coordinated effort, at least to the extent of grabbing others' energy and water resources. Now I think it's just an enormous cluster of special interests (oil, water, defense contractors, ALPAC, Bacardi, Turkish, Christians(TM), etc. etc.) all clamoring to get their piece of Uncle Sam's tax booty, promoting foreign misadventures so they can skim off their profits. And they fund an enormous PR effort to make it look like there is some logic behind it all. Just like the wealthy fund think tanks to find phony rationales to justify their greed (trickle down economics, the discipline of the market, etc. etc.)

I doubt that Steve can ever tell his readers how foreign policy really works--it would be too embarrassing. So they all keep up the noble fictions.

Posted by ..., Sep 05 2009, 1:39AM - [Link](#)

johnh -i agree with what you've said here... i perceive the pr folks connected to foreign policy as being more into socializing then resolving anything - and blogs are a nice social outlet for the most part... i know steve would like to see changes made in the usa's policy towards cuba, but notice how little his desire for this results in anything different...one could say change is slow to nonexistent...

the same can be said for all of us here who'd like to see a stop to the madness, whether it be wars in iraq, afghanistan, or somewhere else that we'll be reminded about from israel, or anyone else who just might have some vested interest in monetarily, whether it be the zinni's or the richard perles and on and on... it never stops with these folks and nothing much ever comes of any of our talk about it, other than some release and an acknowledgment that others are aware of all this as

we are and don't like watching a train wreck unfolding... perhaps it would be helpful if i could! venting on a blog is one way to release some of the tension associated with seeing a lot of madness being acted out on a daily basis... thanks for your regularly astute comments.

Posted by JohnH, Sep 05 2009, 11:21AM - [Link](#)

Sad to say, but none of the courtiers noticed that the Emperor wasn't wearing any clothes. It was a child who was not totally corrupted by the system.

You and I may like to see a stop to the madness, but where is the brave soul in Washington who will speak truth to power?

Maybe we should purge the entire foreign policy mob and replace them with a few good children.

Posted by ..., Sep 05 2009, 12:27PM - [Link](#)

johnh - adults think they're smarter.. they're not... and, they are no where near as honest and straight forward either...

Posted by PissedOffAmerican, Sep 05 2009, 1:20PM - [Link](#)

"You and I may like to see a stop to the madness, but where is the brave soul in Washington who will speak truth to power?"

Well, both Ron Paul and Kucinich have stood up for sanity. Here is Kucinich just yesterday....

"News reports covering today's attack by the U.S. command southwest of Kunduz province show that the good intentions of NATO forces in Afghanistan are not sufficient," Kucinich stated. "If we want to avoid killing innocent civilians, we must end the war."

Further...

"There is little hope for a truly independent investigation because the Karzai Government is compromised and NATO forces are digging in for the long term based on the Administration's policy. The war in Afghanistan is quickly developing into a tragedy of monumental proportions. It is time for the U.S. to end this war and bring our troops home."

<http://rawstory.com/08/news/2009/09/04/kucinich-renews-call-for-afghan-withdrawal-after-botched-airstrike/>

When the MSM media, and the actual electoral slanted process, took Paul and Kucinich out of the debates, all of you should have been able to see through Obama's smooth tongue and front-man posturing. Why would two candidates that truly represented "change" be removed from the process if "change" was actually being offered? The handwriting was on the wall when this unknown empty suit reached superstar status through mass media marketing, using common sense analysis to determine how best to move his lips in a manner that delivered sounds that echoed what the American people wanted to hear. The citizenry of the United States were punked, conned, sold a bill of goods by a media construct, an unknown whose lack of public exposure and reknown provided the perfect shapeless lump of clay with which a false hero could be sculpted.

This man is even more dangerous than George Bush. Far more intelligent, and not unmindful of the complete breakdown of our system of checks and balances against executive abuse, he has already shown us that what is offered is not what is given. In record time, this President has revealed his disrespect for the law, international treaties, and the will of the people. He knows that executive abuse is no longer punished, and he has appointed his own private consigliere AG to assure no need to observe the law. Holder is Obama's Gonzalez. Its not conjecture, it has already been shown to be fact by Holder's stated intent to administer the law selectively and through political whim.

Posted by Outraged American, Sep 05 2009, 5:26PM - [Link](#)

To...you could do what I did and just go out and take a massive pay cut and work in independent media.

You care enough, then just do it.

Posted by ..., Sep 06 2009, 12:21AM - [Link](#)

outraged american - i'm not in media, so it isn't applicable... i do care though..

Posted by JohnH, Sep 07 2009, 12:58AM - [Link](#)

Gotta love Karzai's fake election. I've watched a lot of fake elections over the years, and this one is the best! Nary a pretense of legitimacy! Most fake elections at least try to put a fig leaf over the dirty business. But not Karzai. His is worthy of Fellini!
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/07/world/asia/07fraud.html?_r=1&hp

It's probably time to discard the canard that America is in Afghanistan to promote a stable democracy. What a joke! The next person to say that nonsense should be laughed out of the room.

So what are America's reasons for occupying Afghanistan now? Afghanistan's nuclear program? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

And TWN got all self righteous about how bad Iran's election was. Yeah, right! America sure presided over a doozy!

Hopefully, this will give people something to think about when America conducts another one of its best elections money can buy.

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