

Field Report:

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Scholarly Critique

The most potent opposition to the war in Afghanistan is coming from academics. But why are think tanks in Washington, D.C., remaining silent?

By Dylan Matthews
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U.S. air support flies over as U.S. soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division take positions in Soviet Union war era bunkers high in the mountains above the Pech Valley in Afghanistan's Kunar province on Sunday, Oct. 25, 2009. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

Escalating [violence](#) in Afghanistan has failed to drum up scholarly criticism from some of the nation's leading policy organizations, leaving military experts at a crossroads. While prominent academics are voicing their dissent against the potential troop increase, other specialists in Washington, D.C., have remained mum.

In September, the [Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy](#), a group composed of scholars from approximately two dozen American universities, penned an [open letter](#) to the White House highlighting strategic concerns over the rationale to expand military operations in the Afghanistan for the sake of fighting terrorism.

Reasoning in the letter was simple enough: America's record on nation-building is abysmal; there is tenuous evidence to suggest that the war has denied al-Qaeda a safe haven; and costs required to successfully rebuild Afghanistan would be immense.

Shortly after the communiqué was published, General Stanley McChrystal, the Obama administration's commander in Afghanistan, announced his desire to send 40,000 new troops as part of a military surge.

The Afghanistan surge mission, expected to [cost](#) \$65 billion this fiscal year alone, would drain financial resources at "the expense of other national priorities, both foreign and domestic," according to the coalition.

The letter was signed by academic heavyweights, including John Mearsheimer and Harvard's Stephen Walt, of [The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy fame](#), as well as anti-imperialist writers and historians like

veteran war-chronicler David Rieff ([Slaughterhouse, A Bed for the Night](#)), and the paleoconservative historian Andrew Bacevich ([The New American Militarism, The Limits of Power](#)).

Only two prominent D.C. think tanks signed on to the memo: the Cato Institute, a libertarian policy group, and the New America Foundation, a centrist think tank.

While treating a single letter as an objective survey would be a mistake, opponents of escalation believe it is no coincidence that so few policy organizations have signed on. The disconnect between the academy and the D.C. think tank community on Afghanistan is real and systemic, according to Justin Logan, associate director of foreign policy studies at Cato.

"If your child wants to be a 'think-tanker' in D.C. it would be wise to advise him or her to become a neoconservative or a *New Republic*-style liberal imperialist," says Logan. "You don't get ahead in Washington by going around to policymakers and saying, 'You've been doing things wrong for a long time.'"

While Logan contends that Cato is influential, the think tank is not as likely to have influence in the Obama administration as, say, the Council on Foreign Relations, where Gen. McChrystal is a member, or the Brookings Institution, which produced United Nations ambassador Susan Rice and NATO ambassador Ivo Daalder, among many other administration officials.

"I don't feel that pressure because I don't want to be working in the administration," says Michael Cohen, who writes on military policy at the New America Foundation.

Michael O'Hanlon, noted liberal hawk and director of foreign policy research at the Brookings Institution, acknowledges that a disagreement exists between the academy and the think tanks.

"I value the views of people in academia. They had a great degree of vindication in the Iraq war," O'Hanlon says. "But there are not that many parts of the world where al-Qaeda could do as well for itself as Afghanistan."

The silence from policy organizations against the war may also have something to do with the fact that many of them, like the Brookings Institution, initially supported going to war in Afghanistan. In D.C., groups rarely find it in their political interests to restrain American military actions. Everyone from military equipment suppliers, to lawmakers who need to appear hawkish to voters, have an interest in supporting foreign conflicts.

Logan argues that this could change if think tanks working on other budgetary issues would coordinate against military spending, but says he has not seen that happen.

"Health care should be trying to eat the defense department's lunch," Logan says, "saying the \$100 billion we would be spending on additional efforts in Afghanistan or Iraq would be better spent on a health care project. What you don't see is that kind of cross-cutting policy debate."

With a [military budget](#) of \$533.7 billion, \$130 billion of which is spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, the funding potential for other programs is substantial. By comparison, the House health care bill is estimated to [cost](#) \$894 billion over ten years, averaging only \$89.4 billion per year. Health care reform could be more than fully funded by a complete withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cohen has a simpler explanation, stating that think tank fellows are paid to think of solutions and to provide recommendations to legislators. If the correct answer is "do nothing," that is harder to express than "being more engaged militarily."

Jack Snyder, an international relations professor at Columbia University who signed the coalition letter, argues that there is an opposite consensus on the question of escalation within the academy.

“Pretty much everyone thinks that the conditions in Afghanistan are terrible, that the political situation is terrible, and thus that the conditions for successful counterinsurgency and state-building are inauspicious,” says Snyder, warning that the current war strategy “would be costly, would take a really long time, and might not work.”

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