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# A Real Team of Rivals

This morning the *New York Times* reported that U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl W. Eikenberry, expressed in writing his reservations about deploying additional troops to the country. His reason: the pervasive corruption and illegitimacy of President Hamid Karzai's regime.

Concerns over the legitimacy of the U.S.-backed central government were also voiced by Brookings Institution senior fellow Bruce Riedel, who chaired an interagency review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan for the Obama administration. Riedel said at a Brookings event in August: "If we don't have a government we can point to that has some basis of legitimacy in the country, the best generals, the best strategy isn't going to help turn it around."

Now in its ninth year in Afghanistan, the United States finds itself in the unenviable position of assisting and sponsoring a corrupt, illegitimate, and slightly autocratic regime, which itself is contributing to the collapse of public confidence and to the resurgence of the Taliban insurgency. Conflicting assessments over what to do in Afghanistan is why President Obama has been "dithering" on a decision. His hesitancy is an implicit recognition that the United States might not succeed in laying a centrally-administered facade onto Afghanistan's preexisting society. As the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated in an August 2009 report:

Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is not a reconstruction project--it is a construction project, starting almost from scratch in a country that will probably remain poverty-stricken no matter how much the U.S. and the international community accomplish in the coming years.

The fact that Americans are even discussing the capacity and political will of the government of Afghanistan shows how far we have strayed from our original objectives. The October 2001 invasion was to punish al Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban regime that harbored them. That narrow mission has since morphed into improving governance, fighting corruption, and building infrastructure. Underpinning U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is the belief that remaining will keep America safe, despite evidence to the contrary. For example, a 2004 Pentagon Task Force that reviewed the Bush administration's anti-terrorism efforts found that the underlying sources of threats to American interests were America's direct intervention in the Muslim world. This was the same task force that reported: "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies." Reminder: *That was Rumsfeld's Pentagon*.

But when some people in Washington hear that nation-building in Afghanistan is not a precondition to making America safer, or that prolonging our presence undermines America's security, the argument for remaining then shifts to preserving the security and human rights of the people of Afghanistan. While I too would endorse preserving the human rights of the Afghan people, this line of reasoning invites certain questions: how many Afghans will be killed to save one Afghan life? How long should America stay until it sees progress? And what if some Afghans do not want the protection of western troops or the central government we keep afloat?

Of course, the same people who argue for preserving the security and human rights of the people of Afghanistan overlook certain contradictions. For instance, America's commitment to maintaining forward basing rights in countries like Uzbekistan puts America in the position of appearing to side with states that repress its own people. And, as my Cato Institute colleague Chris Preble says here on a recent [bloggingheads.tv](http://bloggingheads.tv) appearance, the rationale for intervening in Afghanistan was not the Taliban's human rights abuses, which we were well aware of in the late 1990s. Rather, the rationale was for bringing al Qaeda to justice. Similarly in Iraq, the central rationale was not that Saddam Hussein did horrible things to his people. Only later--after several years of mission creep--did U.S. policymakers shift the goalposts of the mission to include moral considerations.

As we honor our veteran's this week with Armistice Day, we should be asking yet another important question regarding the preservation of human rights abroad: should U.S. soldiers be asked to fight and die for issues not directly

related to U.S. national security?

In a recent article that appeared in the Times of London:

'We're lost -- that's how I feel. I'm not exactly sure why we're here,' said Specialist Raquime Mercer, 20, whose closest friend was shot dead by a renegade Afghan policeman last Friday. 'I need a clear-cut purpose if I'm going to get hurt out here or if I'm going to die.' Sergeant Christopher Hughes, 37, from Detroit, has lost six colleagues and survived two roadside bombs. Asked if the mission was worthwhile, he replied: 'If I knew exactly what the mission was, probably so, but I don't.' The only soldiers who thought it was going well 'work in an office, not on the ground'. In his opinion 'the whole country is going to s\*\*\*'.

Over one million U.S. soldiers have fought in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to General George Casey, U.S. Army chief of staff, troops have endured tough rotations of one-year-in, one-year-out for the past five years. Ryan Jaroncyk over at The Humble Libertarian writes that repeated deployments are leading to record suicide rates and an explosive epidemic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Given the strains on America's all volunteer force, we should not forget that within the first one hundred days of his administration, Obama approved sending an additional 21,000 troops (it was actually more like 30,000 when we include the number needed for logistical and support purposes). These numbers don't include the more than 70,000 private security contractors in the country right now.

Washington has already surged into Afghanistan once this year. The United States should not spend more American blood and more of its ever-diminishing financial resources to prop up Karzai's ineffectual regime.