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INK SPOTS

INK SPOTS IS A BLOG DEDICATED TO THE DISCUSSION OF COUNTERINSURGENCY, STABILITY OPERATIONS, POST-CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS, AND WHATEVER OTHER SECURITY ISSUES WE DEEM WORTHY OF COMMENT. OUR CONTRIBUTORS ARE SECURITY PROFESSIONALS - FROM THINK TANKS, GOVERNMENT, CONSULTING, AND NONPROFIT WORK. WE HOPE THIS SITE WILL BE NOT MERELY A SOAP BOX FOR THE FIVE OF US, BUT A FORUM FOR DISCUSSION AND DEBATE ON THOSE ISSUES THAT MATTER TO US ALL.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2009

Should I stay or should I go?

If I go there will be trouble, and if I stay it will be double. Or so goes the song.

It was also the (foregone) conclusion of the panel the CATO Institute held yesterday in DC on "Should the US withdraw from Afghanistan?" To this question, the authors of [a new CATO report on Afghanistan](#), Malou Innocent and Ted Carpenter, provide an unambiguous response: "Yes, and fast." Their report states that:

"In short, as the war in Afghanistan rages on, President Obama should be skeptical of suggestions that the defeat of al Qaeda depends on more and more U.S. troops. First, al Qaeda terrorist havens can be disrupted though covert operations and supported by unmanned aerial vehicles. Second, an oppressive regime in Afghanistan does not necessarily threaten the United States. Third, it is not clear that the Taliban, if they were to regain control of much of the territory, would again harbor al Qaeda. And fourth, troop increases are likely to incite fierce resistance to foreign forces rather than enhance the prospects of success in a country as large, rural, and impoverished as Afghanistan."

The report echoes [George Will's op-ed](#) in the *Washington Post* two weeks ago: "[...] forces should be substantially reduced to serve a comprehensively revised policy: America should do only what can be done from offshore, using intelligence, drones, cruise missiles, airstrikes and small, potent Special Forces units, concentrating on the porous 1,500-mile border with Pakistan, a nation that actually matters."

I am no Afghanistan or UAV specialist, but this seems to me like an extremely optimistic view of what drones and cruise missiles can

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I'm just sayin'.

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Army of Dude

ATTACKERMAN

Bernard Finel

Complex Terrain

achieve. My understanding was that both of them need a lot of HUMINT to be able to strike in the right spot and at the right time. At this stage, there are still a number of high-value targets we can not locate and take out. So how do we expect that with the Talibans back in power and Al-Qaeda again its guest (which I think is likely to happen, but Innocent and Carpenter disagree), those targets will be more exposed and vulnerable to drone attacks? I see how this option is a seductive way out, but we should not get fooled about its ability to achieve even limited objectives—unless someone can point to me a convincing study about the high rates of success of such operational means.

In addition to the potential lack of effectiveness of this option, Lt. Col. Paul Yingling added a few days ago this major caveat (in his response to General Krulak's email supporting George Will's op-ed): "General Krulak advocates the use of 'hunter-killer teams' backed by airpower governed by minimal rules of engagement to 'take out the bad guys'. This light footprint tactic has failed for the last eight years. Aircraft operating with few or no ground forces cannot distinguish between insurgents and innocent civilians. Minimal rules of engagement result in maximum civilian casualties, tacitly assisting our enemies as they seek sanctuary and support from civilian populations". Or are civilian casualties suddenly acceptable because, with fewer troops on the ground, we don't care anymore whether they hate us or not?

Back to the CATO panel, Celeste Ward's intervention was less about what to do in Afghanistan than about denouncing COIN as a "worldview" that "now borders on theology", in an intervention that was reminiscent of her [Washington Post op-ed of last May](#)—with more citations of Gian Gentile. Her main argument is that applying the COIN cookie-cutter approach to Afghanistan is lazy and dangerous (on top of being not based on convincing historical precedents), since conflicts are largely unique and "groupings obscure more than they illuminate". She does have a point, and any political scientist attempting to find patterns to conflicts and their resolution is faced with this shortcoming (see on this issue the recent and [excellent post by Marc Lynch on whether there is a "political scientists" consensus on the future of Iraq](#)). This, however, should not prevent political scientists/analysts from trying to do so, while keeping in mind that how they apply such models to amorphous, changing and novel situations is a daunting challenge. Or is it to say that lessons learned are worth nothing?

Patrick Cronin from NDU was the lone defender of the alternative view according to which the US should not withdraw from Afghanistan, or at least not yet. Arguing that a serious strategy has

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 - ▼ September (16)
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 - [Should I stay or](#)

not yet been attempted, he cited [Anthony Cordesman](#) on how resources for the Afghanistan war have been insufficient and scattered over the past eight years, and concluded that we should give the new administration at least 12 months to see if progress is possible—and if the new strategy can offer any hope.

Friend of Inkspots Bernard Finel was in the audience and asked a good question on the relevance of human (and, more specifically, women's) rights in the decision to let go of Afghanistan and let the Taliban gain back control of the country. Malou Innocent's reply, along the lines of "we care, but intervening in one place when we can not intervene everywhere is hypocritical anyway", was far from convincing. Celeste Ward's take on it ("we care, but we don't need a full-blown nation-building endeavor to do something for women's rights in Afghanistan") was more astute but I wish she could have elaborated... What exactly did we do for Afghan women's rights between 1996 and 2001, and why would that be different after a US withdrawal?

I only touched on a couple of questions debated at this panel, so if you are in the mood for more, it has been taped and can be found [here](#).

POSTED BY ALMA AT 10:20 AM 
LABELS: AFGHANISTAN

1 COMMENTS:

[Alex Engwete](#) said...

Was Mr. Bernard Finel joking with his question in which he sets a positive correlation between U.S. presence in Afghanistan and women's rights? This is a broken record of mine but worth repeating it here: Karzai signed this year the "wife rape" law; and women still walk around stifled in burqas with American troops around! Without getting into the debate over withdrawing US troops or not—whose intricacies are beyond my competence, in the particular question of human rights, there are global NGO's that deal with this issue: one being Human Rights Watch (besides the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights)...

SEPTEMBER 15, 2009 2:22 PM

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