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Lessons Learned and the What Next

by [Joshua Foust](#) on 9/14/2010 · [10 comments](#)

Having now seen [Matthew Hoh](#) and [Stephen Walt](#) chime in to defend the Afghanistan Study Group Report, as well as Christian's [response](#) and Julian Borger's [thoughts](#), I think this might be a good opportunity to take a step back and examine what this experience is teaching me about the policy-making process.

I think a good place to start would be with Steve Clemons—who penned by far the most gracious and engaging response to my criticisms of the ASG's report—and the [comment](#) he left at my blog explaining how he viewed its importance:

This isn't a static process — and it is designed in part to try to raise the sort of debate about US-Afghanistan policy that I think you support... This has been a ten month process. This report — flaws included — has past [sic] muster with enough of the establishment that it matters and will be part of the policy discussion.

Ignoring the vaguely Soviet-overtones of pleasing a disembodied “establishment” in order to derive value, this is, to me, deeply revelatory—rather than getting their facts straight, which is a process Clemons, to his unique credit, says they struggled with—the ASG seemed to care more about appealing to their peers in Washington that they have the answers.

But this gets back at my primary concern with the document, especially as they constructed it: good strategy, and an impetus for good discussion, relies on good data. While Bernard Finel has written at great length now of his [views of strategy](#), I've only seen Stephen Walt acknowledge that I, and others who found much to disagree with in the ASG report “hold different views about U.S. strategy,” as he put it. So, what is inspiring the near-apoplexy of the response to very plain counterarguments that point out serious failures in fact and analysis, and the obstinacy of those refusing to acknowledge the importance of starting the analytic process on a solid foundation?

If some of the responses are anything to go by, a lot of it seems to rest on an argument from authority: a lot of genuinely impressive people—Stephen Walt included—contributed to the ASG report. It's easy to think that because they are people famous for being smart, that their argument would therefore be smart. It could also be easy for many of the authors to think that their intelligence places them above questioning. It's a real worry: ever since posting my response, I've received dozens of emails from

journalists, graduate students, professors, and other think tankers who said, in varying ways, that they agree with the criticism but are afraid to associate their names with it. One junior analyst at a prominent think tank even told me that their career “would be in shambles” if they spoke out against some of the names associated with the ASG..

Now, in lots of situations, gravitas can be a good thing. But relying on gravitas to power through an argument is not really a legitimate form of persuasion. Would we accept an argument on authority from the government? I doubt it. The shock and anger with which the ASG authors have responded tells me that they feel they are above criticism. To wit: the most common complaint I have against the ASG report, *pace* how Walt defined it, is “**what is your evidence for saying this?**” It’s a fairly simple question: the entire strategy they put forth is based on assumptions and assertions, many of which are provably false. Yet to compile the responses I’ve read so far indicates an unwillingness to answer such a simple question.

- [Steve Clemons](#): “The question of “right” or “wrong” in various aspects of our framing the so-called civil war which we describe is important and something we struggled with a great deal.”
- [Bernard Finel](#): “Must conflicts be analyzed primarily by regional specialists?”
- [Justin Logan](#): “I’d humbly suggest Foust may want to revisit this claim” (this was tangential, about the relative expertise of the authors, and the closest Logan came to discussing to issue of evidence).
- [Matthew Hoh](#) declines to address the evidence argument, and instead listed a bunch of news stories about how the war is going poorly.
- [Stephen Walt](#): “This latter complaint is partly valid, but largely beside the point.”

If Hoh and Clemons are to be believed—that the ASG report is meant to inspire discussion and debate, and not simply be received as an exercise in didacticism—then surely the evidence discussion is an important one. If one of the centerpiece of your justification for your strategy is that the insurgency is disaffected rural Pashtuns in the south—and such an [assertion](#) is repeated constantly—then surely information about non-Pashtun insurgencies in Afghanistan (I mentioned a Tajik insurgent movement in Herat and an Uzbek insurgent movement in Takhar, Baghlan, and Kunduz, but there are others) would raise a few important questions about how the ASG authors are framing their recommendations? Yet this is written off as mere “sniping,” or being “too granular,” or being too bogged down in the operational and tactical details of the war.

Those details matter. They are vital, in fact. This comes back to a point I continue to harp on: framing matters when conducting an assessment. If you cannot frame a situation properly, then your assessment will be wrong, and your strategy to change it will fail. ASG did not frame the war in Afghanistan properly. There are substantial errors of fact in how they portrayed the war, its fighters, and efforts to manage it, along with a whole host of evidence-free assertions. And the authors steadfastly refuse to discuss why or how this is the case. Instead, they claim, almost to a T, this is about strategy, where details don’t matter (Finel says [framing matters](#) in a follow up post, but he seems unwilling to apply his own standards to himself when he argues that framing Afghanistan properly [does not matter](#)).

Rather than discussing the shaky foundations of the report, the authors of the report say, universally, that their intent was to discuss American strategy, and details of where that strategy will be applied matter little. They could have structured their report that way—nearly half of it, perhaps more (I did not do a word count) is spent describing Afghanistan as a justification for why they recommended the things they did. I’ll never quibble with people wanting to identify vital national interests, but to do so you have to frame the issue properly, and develop a supportable assessment. Doing it in a vacuum accomplishes little of value.

In any sort of strategic document, you must have certain things. As [Finel](#) said on his blog,

strategy needs to be conceived of as an iterative framework connecting ends, ways, means, and risks in a way that allows for the development and comparison of various courses of action (among other things), but also allows for the generation of branches and sequels, consideration and testing of assumption, an analysis of time, and other factors. It isn't just a plan of action. It is an analytical framework. One key elements include the formulation of assumptions, which are necessary proposition used to bridge areas of uncertainty. Another key element is the concept of risk which is essentially the feedback mechanism use to judge whether a given course of action is acceptable.

There are assumptions in the ASG Report about the nature of capability of the threat we face in Afghanistan, but it's based on nothing concrete, and the authors decline repeatedly to substantiate their assessment of the threat with facts. And that might be okay—I will accept Walt's argument that facts *can* be incidental to strategy, if you structure your strategy right. But, where in the ASG document can we find ends, means, and risks? One of the major complaints I and [Michael Cohen](#) had about this report was how it ignored the likely consequences of its recommendations—for example, what really happens when the U.S. suspends all combat operations in the south? Do they think it will result in a perfect detente between Kabul and Kandahar?

In fact, Finel's conception of strategy, which I find persuasive and is apparently in line with the consensus on the construction of strategic thought, *undermines* the ASG report. While its authors repeat, again and again, regardless of the specific complaint, that what they care about is strategy, the ASG Report contains none of the basic elements of a strategic document: there is no framework for connecting ends, ways, means, and risks (since ends and risks are not even specified); it is not iterative, since the authors apparently feel disputing the report is improper, nor is there a mechanism contained within the report for a revisiting of its conclusions; there is no "comparison of various courses of action," nor is there theoretical room for branches and sequels; and there is no discussion whatsoever of assumption, to say nothing of accounting for assumption, even though the report is riddled with them. Most egregiously, there is no discussion of risk: if we chose this, this bad thing will happen that we must plan for.

In fact, by insisting so strongly that the ASG report is meant to be a strategic document based on national interests, only marginally related to the reality of the war in Afghanistan, the authors have guaranteed that a detailed discussion of a strategic process will make it less credible, not more.

However, I think Finel is correct to highlight the iterative nature of strategic decision-making. The ASG has gone through its motions—now let the rest of us chew on it. The ASG makes a lively critique of current U.S. strategy, but denies such a lively critique of its own. Clemons said in his comments that he welcomes debate—and that's a wonderful thing. Let's fulfill one of the report's objectives and have an honest and thorough discussion about the assumptions, processes, and outcomes that underpin this strategy they've laid out.

I'd like to start by asking "what next?" The "what next" question is vitally important: it is the ostensible purpose of the ASG, even if they didn't quite answer it. My biggest concern about ASG, besides its shaky factual basis, is that it doesn't fundamentally answer that "what next" question. It has five things to do, which we can debate to death. But it doesn't tell me how this ends. Afghanistan is incredibly difficult, and no one has a firm idea of what exit conditions look like. Arguing for a reduced commitment is fine and fair, but it is an argument at the margins if it doesn't offer an alternative to defeating the Taliban ("political reconciliation" is a simplistic answer, to be honest, since the *terms* of that reconciliation will make all the difference in the world).

Rather than the imperious “how dare you question me” responses, I think the ASG would be better served by adopting Clemons’ response—defending his intentions (which are, to be clear, valid and laudable), defending his effort, and asking for more input. That is, in fact, how you start a debate about strategy—not by complaining that people felt your vision was incomplete.

So, Afghanistan Study Group. There is a dispute about methods, sources, facts, and assumptions. What next? Is your report up for the debate, the way the current policy is? Or shall we just accept it as unchangeable?

{ 10 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }



[1 Bernard Finel](#) 9/14/2010 at 11:14 pm

Yay, you’re back. This is a powerful and thought-provoking post. Two pieces in particular demand more attention and show real weaknesses of the ASG report. They are, IMHO:

- (1) Your concern about the non-Pashtun elements of the insurgency which is, indeed, largely ignored in the report as to its causes, likely course under various options, and consequences.
- (2) Your “what’s next” question as well. You are right, at best the ASG is an attempt to return to a slightly more coherent version of 2008. But there is no long-term vision.

That said, I do disagree with your comment that there is a desire to chill debate. I mean, literally, everyone has cited your and Michael’s concerns, even if we haven’t all simply conceded defeat. That is quite different from, say, the COINdinistas who rarely deigned to acknowledge their critics, much less answer them. You can’t expect us to like your criticisms of a product we’ve endorsed, but we are debating it with you, no?

[Reply](#)



[2 Christian](#) 9/15/2010 at 2:38 am

Bernard,

Giustozzi confirming what a lot of people have been saying about non-Pashtuns and the insurgency:

Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, ‘The Northern Front The Afghan insurgency spreading beyond the Pashtuns’, Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2010.

<http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/20100623NORTH.pdf>

Antonio Giustozzi, ‘The Taleban beyond the Pashtuns’, CIGI, July 2010.

http://www.operationspaix.net/IMG/pdf/CIGI_TalibanBeyondPashtuns_2010-07-22_.pdf

This trend is not new. And the reporting of it is not new either.

[Reply](#)



3 Bobby 9/15/2010 at 7:37 am

If your experience is exclusively in the south, then it is easy to see how one could assume the Taliban insurgency is overwhelmingly (in parts, perhaps even exclusively) Pashtun, since you see much of that dynamic down there. If, on the other hand, you have experience in the west, north, northeast, and even parts of the central highlands, you'll see entirely different dynamics. The media doesn't see this, and most of their reporting covers the "frontlines" in the south, which is why pop culture believes the insurgency (falsely) to be "a Pashtun thing."

That said, I suspect this is precisely why Josh notes that Afghanistan subject matter experts should be consulted in a project of this undertaking—excluding them risks making false assumptions, which in turn puts the entire proposal into question.

—Bobby

[Reply](#)



4 Michael Drew 9/15/2010 at 4:07 am

It is the question of risk combined with the predominance of assertion and lack of evidence that in my view will fail to win over Americans. I (@MikeDrewWhat) tweeted at Finel that the report tells Americans they can have their cake and eat it too on Afghanistan. He said the report says we must give half of Afghanistan to the Taliban. But what does that mean for American interests? It can't be known, but the report states what is likely (or rather unlikely: Taliban regaining control, or the government otherwise falling; also an appreciably increased threat to the U.S. from terrorism. *But it gives no reason for someone trying to decide where to come down on that matter of probability to agree with it – it just asserts it.* This ought to raise anyone's eyebrow, but what it does next ought to keep them both permanently cocked: it facetiously declares that if it happens to be wrong about a reconstituting of Al Qaeda in a new weakened-state or stateless scenario, the threat will be manageable by air power. Just like that, with no discussion of the modalities involved in that. It also fails to present this as what it (at least potentially) really is: an implicit long-term military strategy for Afghanistan (rather than merely a risk-mitigation fallback), and do the appropriate analysis from an interest perspective of whether Americans ought to embrace this positively rather than as a strategic backstop for their rosy assumptions with regard to threat risk in their mainline proposal.

[Reply](#)



5 Michael Drew 9/15/2010 at 4:55 am

I should add that I don't mean to suggest that in the fairly short term, Americans may well be persuaded by any proposal that significantly restrains costs, irrespective of risk. Though

it should be added that the fiscal returns (\$60-\$80 bn per annum starting in an unidentified annum after implementation I believe was the number given) constitute yet another entire domain of claims in the Report that are simply without documentation of any kind.

[Reply](#)



6 Caleb Kavon 9/15/2010 at 6:32 am

[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/15/opinion/15iht-eddorronsoro.html?
r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/15/opinion/15iht-eddorronsoro.html?r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss)

The above link is what is next. Dorronsoro is clear, we are staring the first defeat in the War on Terror straight in the face.

We are looking at a Vietnam situation where we negotiate our way out just like the Soviets did. We are looking at Karzai as Najibullah to see how long he lasts and counting the months to see which Ayatollah comes out of Pakistan.

Our overconfidence with “spray and pray” Enemy has led to a position where they have jujitsu flipped us and know we are on the mat looking up. We win the battles and lose the war because we cannot see the forest through the trees. What should be a red alert moment is just another strategy review, and we now can assess that the Taliban surge is working very well this year.

[Reply](#)



7 Caleb Kavon 9/15/2010 at 7:00 am

Yes, Joshua is right again. Steve Clemons deserves all the praise in the world for coming out, being honest, and discussing his recognition of the logic gaps in the report. He was straightforward and willing to discuss all the angles.

Time is running out, so this needs more urgency rather than less or we are in fait accompli land and can spend the next 10 years talking about “why we lost Afghanistan and Pakistan” like we did after China so long ago.

[Reply](#)



8 Boris Sizemore 9/15/2010 at 7:27 am

Josh Foust is right. This blog is right. Soon we will be writing not about Afghanistan, because that is over, but about the Islamic insurgency in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and how they are picking up after the Taliban flag was planted in Kabul

[Reply](#)



[9](#) M Shannon 9/15/2010 at 9:36 am

Final says you don't need to start with goals when discussing strategy and then list "interests" and assigns a maximum cost. I'm sorry but I don't see the difference.

Here's my definition of strategy: The use of resources in a manner designed to increase relative national power.

Clearly Iraq and Afghanistan have failed the test of improving the position of the US. Past tense. Nothing in either theater can be done to reverse the mistakes made. All that can be done is to limit further damage. Fiddling around trying to leave with honor or conduct further COIN experiments will simply amplify the harm that's already occurred.

[Reply](#)



[10](#) Joshua Novak 9/15/2010 at 11:06 am

"It's a real worry: ever since posting my response, I've received dozens of emails from journalists, graduate students, professors, and other think tankers who said, in varying ways, that they agree with the criticism but are afraid to associate their names with it. One junior analyst at a prominent think tank even told me that their career "would be in shambles" if they spoke out against some of the names associated with the ASG.."

Joshua-the very fact that we operate under some sort of Stalinist fear factor and that questioning this work would bring such a reaction to it. "Afraid for their careers" is amazing in of itself. You have done all of us a service by protesting the flawed impression of the "slam dunk" in analysis presented by this B Team. I am sure they are more than disapointed themselves.

They are looking for a pull out with some caveats a la 1990 and hoping and praying that things do not get worse. We will be discussing this Team B along with the COIN specialists when we start to ask "Who lost Afghanistan?" in a short time. Paper Tigers are Paper Tigers...thanks for exposing this.

Fear not, this exercise teaches us that neither experience nor reason are prerequisites for current policy formulation (a fatal flaw), and fear of the difficult is not equal with the concept of running away that ASG is desperately trying to promote.

You have illustrated why so many are shaking their heads right now about our course in this war, and the thinking that mars any progress. Meanwhile, the IEDs are still going off as soldiers struggle in what is now a losing battle. Shame will be a constant companion to many a "smart" person after this struggle concludes. Paper Tigers are Paper Tigers. Not hard to recognize them when they appear. Establishment support or not.

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