

# STRATEGIKA

ISSUE 48

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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## US STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

IN THIS ISSUE

HY ROTHSTEIN AND JOHN ARQUILLA • BING WEST  
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# CONTENTS

FEBRUARY 2018 • ISSUE 48

## BACKGROUND ESSAY

**Americanism in Afghanistan? A Flawed Design**  
by Hy Rothstein and John Arquilla

## FEATURED COMMENTARY

**Afghanistan Options: Leave, Increase, Stand Pat, or Cut Back?**  
by Bing West

**Committed to the Long Haul**  
by Max Boot

## RELATED COMMENTARY

**Afghanistan: No Choice but to Remain**  
by Thomas Donnelly

**US Aid to Afghanistan Remains Critical**  
by Mark Moyer

**Our Long Last Stand in Afghanistan**  
by Ralph Peters

## EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

**Suggestions for Further Reading**  
**Discussion Questions**



## ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

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# Americanism in Afghanistan? A Flawed Design

By Hy Rothstein and John Arquilla

Since the war in Afghanistan began in late 2001, three successive presidential administrations have claimed that the Taliban are on the verge of collapse, the Afghan military is close to securing the country, and Afghan leaders in Kabul are just one step away from providing legitimate governance. Last November, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and coalition commander Gen. John Nicholson declared, “We have turned the corner. The momentum is now with the Afghan Security Forces.” But devastating attacks on both hard and soft targets continue. About 45 percent of Afghanistan’s districts are either under Taliban control or being contested, a percentage that seems to get higher every few months. In the first few weeks of 2018, hundreds of innocent Afghans were killed, belying the claims of American and Afghan officials. The attacks show the deteriorating state of security and have plunged Afghan citizens into a state of despair. What is clear is the limitations of the government in Kabul—and of coalition forces—to ensure public security. The Taliban and other terrorist groups are growing stronger, despite more than sixteen years of energetic efforts to combat them.



Image credit: United States Army 8th Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne) issuances, AF D0124-U\_front, Hoover Institution Archives.

President Trump’s “new” strategy, coupled with President Ghani’s and Gen. Nicholson’s confidence, can’t quite obscure the obvious: something is very wrong. The succession of shifting strategies cannot overcome the fundamental design flaw in US Afghan policy that helped shape the government in Kabul: the belief that creating and supporting a strong central government and military would ensure countrywide security. This approach is utterly unsuited to the history and culture of the Afghan people. The American strategy so doggedly pursued for the past sixteen years—basically, mirror-imaging Afghans as a people eager for American-style democracy, and that security in the countryside can be delivered from Kabul—is not a formula for stability; it is the cause of instability and of the continuing growth and strength of the insurgency. Rarely has a great power like the United States undertaken a significant military campaign with such a poor understanding of what was necessary for success.

This grievously flawed policy cannot be fixed by improved military strategy or increased resources. Policy is the realm of political leaders. Military strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve policy goals. Thus, strategy supports policy and is the realm of generals. But good strategy is not possible in the absence of good policy. In the latest strategic evolution, President Trump, going against his own instincts about drawing a sharp distinction between his approach and that of his predecessor, has actually doubled down on the strategy pursued by Barack Obama. Trump’s vow not to discuss troop numbers, withdrawal dates, or attack plans reflects, rather than true policy change, his decision to enter the realm of the military generals and avoid, as did Presidents Bush and Obama, the realm of policy.

In developing a better way forward than continuing to employ the failed methods of his predecessors, the president should demand that his advisors answer the following questions:



Why were Afghans, with minimal US support, able to push the Soviets out of their country in less than ten years?

Why were less than two hundred special operators and CIA operatives using US air power and working with a few thousand Northern Alliance allies able to defeat the Taliban and push al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan in a few short months?

Why did the defeated Taliban regain political and military traction?

Why have as many as 130,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) not been able to prevail over an estimated 30,000 Taliban insurgents?

Why has the cumulatively massive US investment in Afghanistan had such a limited (perhaps even negative) impact?

The president should also insist that his advisors examine the experiences of others. So far, American policy in Afghanistan has failed to acknowledge the historical lessons of governance in that country. The British, the Soviets, and even the pre-9/11 Taliban wrongly assumed that a strong centralized government could deliver stability. By not resolving the overarching policy question—What should we be trying to achieve?—poor policy by three administrations has guaranteed that the war will continue on its endless course, at ruinous cost.

The path to a better policy in Afghanistan begins with understanding how that country “works.” The rugged terrain and ethnic diversity of rural Afghanistan have historically put the villages beyond the formal control of a central government. Equally important, rural Afghans are suspicious of what goes on in Kabul. Their primary allegiance is local and based on kinship. The rural population, which makes up 70 percent of the Afghan people, rarely see themselves as part of a single nation with common interests. However, rejecting control from Kabul does not mean rural Afghans reject governance. Local institutions are highly effective, because they are grounded in perceptions of fairness and trust. Effective and legitimate governance exists at the local level; at the level of the central government it does not.

Historically, regimes that have tried to impose strong central authority from Kabul have generated insurgencies against them. Yet the United States has fallen into this pattern, supporting a government design that is contrary to the way rural Afghans understand governance. Unsurprisingly, this effort is opposed in the rural areas. Nothing highlights this issue better than the current standoff between President Ghani and Atta Mohammad Noor, the powerful and popular provincial governor of Balkh, whom Ghani is trying to remove from office, but who refuses to go. Additionally, the presence of foreign troops in the countryside is especially destabilizing, because they are viewed as defenders of the central government rather than the local population.

US policy and the central government that it helped engineer provoke and empower the insurgency. This is why US initiatives and investments have not thwarted the Taliban. Another inconvenient reality is that the Afghan government is hooked to a US life-support system. Afghan security forces are still the primary combatants against the insurgents. If the US pulls the plug, the government in Kabul will die. This is not a good option. Nor is a permanent dependency by the Afghan government on the US.

Political leaders in Kabul who hold power will resist sharing it. But Washington and Kabul must recognize the flawed design and move toward a more decentralized, and ultimately more legitimate, form of governance. The consent of the governed matters. Most important, increased government legitimacy will go a long way toward defusing the insurgency.

It is with this in mind that we offer the following recommendations that should inform the development of new policies and strategies for Afghanistan. First, devolve the power of the Afghan government to conform to historical Afghan traditions of local control. Specifically, “Go local. Go small. Go long.” Going local means Afghan stability will depend on local governmental, security, and legal arrangements rather than control from Kabul. Going small means relying mostly on Army Special Forces, the Green Berets, working with and through legitimate, local institutions, especially for developing local security forces. Going long means being prepared to stay as long as necessary.

Close most bases. The existing infrastructure and expenditures fuel both the insurgency and corruption. Downsize the Afghan National Army (ANA) and reallocate resources to professionalizing local security forces. Maintain moderately sized national security forces for external threats and when interregional matters require outside intervention. Maintain very small US strike capability for high-value terrorist targets and to defeat insurgents who mass for an attack or otherwise present attractive targets of opportunity.

Stop expensive development projects. When financial investments are made, they must first be matched by some type of investment of effort by locals. And finally, help the Afghans develop their narrative, and the corresponding actions, reflecting the Afghan ways of security, governance, and justice. This may be the best way to fight terrorism and will undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban.

The effort to reroute the currents of Afghan culture and history by armed force has come undone. The time is now to stop doing the things that have failed over the past decade and more. There is a way ahead that seeks stability and order, rather than continuing the current endless course of a stalemated war. It is a way that speaks to the Afghans' traditions of decentralized governance, justice, and local security. And it is a way for the United States to prevent Afghanistan from becoming once again a haven for terrorist networks. In that troubled land, all counter-insurgency is local, the American military footprint can be quite small, and there is a true way ahead for the Afghan people that is consistent with their own views of the world.

Hy Rothstein and John Arquilla teach in the special operations program at the US Naval Postgraduate School, and coedited and contributed to *Afghan Endgames: Strategy and Policy for America's Longest War*. The views expressed are theirs alone.



**HY ROTHSTEIN** has been on the faculty at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA since 2002. Hy has spent considerable time in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines observing the conduct of those wars. Dr. Rothstein has written and edited books about Afghanistan, Iraq, the similarities between insurgency and gang violence, military deception, and the challenges of measuring success and failure during war. Dr. Rothstein teaches courses on the strategic utility of special operations, military deception, and psychological and political warfare. He also served in the US Army as a Special Forces officer for more than twenty-six years.



**JOHN ARQUILLA** is professor and chair in the department of defense analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School. His research interests extend from explorations of the history of irregular warfare to the implications of the information revolution for society and security. His books include *Networks and Netwars*, *The Reagan Imprint*, *Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits*, and *Afghan Endgames*. Dr. Arquilla has also served as consultant to senior military commanders in conflicts ranging from Operation Desert Storm to the Kosovo War, and in several post-9/11 actions.

# Afghanistan Options: Leave, Increase, Stand Pat, or Cut Back?

By Bing West

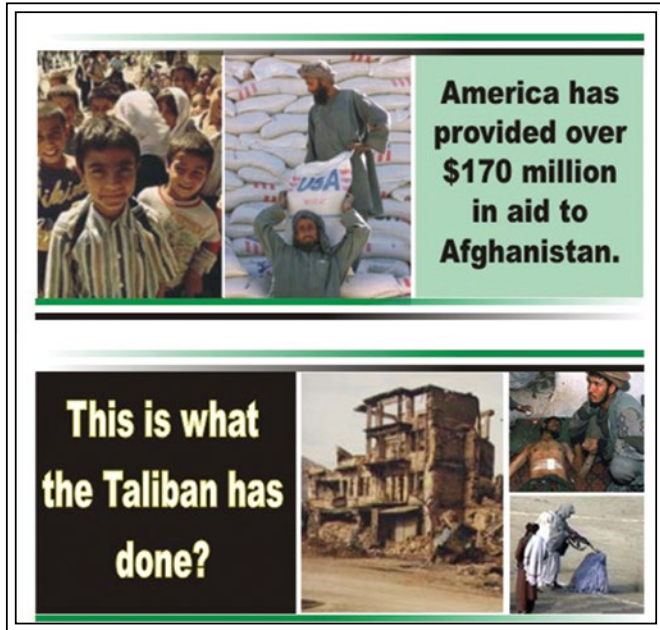


Image credit: United States Army 8th Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne) issuances, AF D012b\_U\_back, Hoover Institution Archives.

After seventeen years on a treadmill, obviously no good option exists. But to pull out our troops would be to repeat Saigon in 1975. The consequences to America's credibility would be crushing. Unlike in the Vietnam case, no domestic political movement is dedicated to insuring a total, humiliating withdrawal. Conversely, no American power center, bureaucratic or political, is lobbying to increase our force numbers.

Similarly, no influential groups are lobbying to cut back at this time in our domestic electoral cycle. Our casualties are low, few American journalists remain in Afghanistan, and our expenditures there are small in comparison to our gargantuan appetite to spend money our children will have to repay.

So, at least until the next American presidential election, we will stand pat in Afghanistan. A stalemate is likely to continue for the next several years. Our electronic and overhead intelligence, coupled with our air and artillery, will attrite the Taliban whenever they mass. The Taliban are mostly Pashto, and the Afghan National Army is mostly non-Pashto. ANA soldiers lack

the spirit and incentive to patrol in small numbers in the rural areas. So we are deploying advisers to patrol with the ANA soldiers. This will insure a modest improvement. In the net, the Taliban are too weak to seize the cities and too tenacious to be driven from the countryside along the Pakistan border.

The notion dating back to the Bush presidency of creating a stable democratic nation-state was impossible. In South Korea, that process took forty years and the commitment of 30,000 US troops. We weren't going to do that in Afghanistan (or Iraq). Many civilian and military senior officials failed in their duty to tell truth to power or, worse, they ignored the unvarnished reports of their own troops in the field. But that is yesterday's news. No official is currently predicting stability or national unification in tribal Afghanistan.

What, then, is our policy? In Kabul on 27 January, a suicide murderer drove an explosive-filled ambulance into a crowd, killing more than one hundred Afghans. The Taliban called the mass murder "a clear message for Trump." A few days later, the US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan responded, "The recent violence . . . won't change our policy . . . to convince the Taliban that no military solution is possible, and security will be determined by talks." [<https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-washington-post/20180131/281930248419595>] Talks? How is "security determined by talks" with murderous terrorists who mock us while they carry out their horrific bombings?

Our policy is Kafkaesque. It is reminiscent of President Johnson's plaintive response after the North Vietnamese launched the Tet offensive in 1968. "It is our fervent hope that North Vietnam," President Johnson declared, "will now cease its efforts to achieve a military victory and join with us in moving toward the peace table." [<http://www.presidency.ucs.edu/ws/?pid=28772>] As Johnson learned, when you plead to negotiate, you signal to your enemy that you lack resolve. That the end state in Afghanistan will be

determined by talks with the Taliban is an illusion that sensible officials should abandon.

America simply cannot uproot the three main causes of the never-ending war. The first cause is the tribal competition inflamed by the Taliban's rabid Islamist religiosity. The flames of caliphate radicalism will not abate until Muslim leaders assert themselves. Until that too distant time, we must kill the terrorists who are intent upon killing us. As our bombing and Special Forces deployments in Iraq and Syria have demonstrated, we can drive the Islamist terrorists underground and limit their access to our shores.

The second cause is Pakistan's support of the Taliban. For decades, Pakistani officials have outmaneuvered American officials. That will not change. For the Pakistani ruling elite, duplicity is synonymous with diplomacy. Our leverage is meager because Pakistan controls the supply lines into Afghanistan and because we don't want to risk a fissure that results in nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands.

The third cause is the economics of opium. In southern Afghanistan, over half of the rural households grow poppy, making four times what they can from any other crop. [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt15sk868>] The annual export of opium and heroin yields between \$1 and \$4 billion, depending upon how one calculates the multiplier effect. The Taliban reap hundreds of millions, government officials are paid off, and fortunes are made in Pakistan and in Iran. The Pashtun tribes view the Kabul government as more fingers in their soul-sucking heroin pie.

While Afghanistan is a sick society with poor leaders, we cannot walk away as we did in, for instance, Somalia. It would be a disaster for the prestige, influence, and self-image of America if Kabul fell in a manner similar to Saigon in 1975. But unlike the Vietnam case, Congress exhibits no passion for withdrawal. Our current level of effort therefore seems about right. No satisfactory end state will emerge over the remaining term of the current commander in chief. So we will soldier on. What happens after 2020 will depend more upon the decisions of the American president than upon any other variable.



**BING WEST** is an author and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs during the Reagan administration. He is a graduate of Georgetown and Princeton Universities where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, and served in the marine infantry in Vietnam. He is the best-selling author of nine books on military history and travels frequently to war zones. His latest book is entitled *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War* (2014) and *Into the Fire: A Firsthand Account of the Most Extraordinary Battle in the Afghan War* (2013).

# Committed to the Long Haul

By Max Boot



Image credit: United States Army 8th Psychological Operations Battalion (Airborne) issuances, AF D040d\_U\_front, Hoover Institution Archives.

The situation in Afghanistan is frustrating and even enraging. Despite the death of more than 2,400 US military personnel and the expenditure of billions, even trillions, of dollars over the past sixteen years, the Taliban are as much of a threat as ever. They are well-funded—the United Nations estimates that opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan set a new record in 2017—and they have cross-border support from Pakistan, which has no intention of cutting them off despite the Trump administration's cutoff of security assistance.

In January either the Taliban or other insurgent groups such as the Haqqani Network or Islamic State carried out several major attacks in Kabul, including besieging a major hotel popular with foreigners (twenty-two dead) and setting off a bomb inside an ambulance in the middle of the city (over 100 dead). Security conditions in much of the countryside are even worse. The American-backed government in Kabul is said to “control” or “influence” roughly 64 percent of the population, down from 80 percent in 2013. That leaves nearly eleven million people living in areas either “controlled” or “contested” by the Taliban. The

government appears farther than ever from its ambitious goal of bringing 80 percent of the populace under its control by 2019.

While US casualties have been greatly reduced from the war's height (499 US troops died in 2010, compared to fifteen in 2017), Afghan military forces and Afghan civilians continue to suffer the worst fatality totals of the entire war. The situation has become so dire that the US and Afghan governments no longer release figures on Afghan military casualties.

Given the American failure to win, it is tempting to throw up our hands in despair and simply pull out of Afghanistan—and turn over our security commitment either to foreign military contractors or to indigenous warlords. But in the end this is simply not a viable option, which is why President Trump, after actively considering a pullout or privatization of the war effort last summer, in the end decided to accede to US military commanders' requests for reinforcements. US troop strength, which had hovered around 10,000 personnel since the premature end of President Obama's surge in 2016, will now go up to roughly 15,000.

This is not a case of reinforcing failure—a long-standing military no-no. It is, rather, a case of buying an affordable insurance policy to avert a catastrophe, in this case a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. If that were to occur, it would be just as much a blow to American interests as the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014. It would represent another jihadist state that would be closely linked with international terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. A victory for the terrorists would be a catastrophe on multiple levels for the region and for the United States; it could even lead to an Islamist takeover in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state.



Only the presence of a substantial contingent of US troops prevents this catastrophe from coming to pass. Absent US support, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces would be unable to fight effectively and would collapse. We would be back to the pre-9/11 status quo. There is no reason to expect that an increase in contractors would avert the worst-case scenario, given that there are already more contractors than US troops in Afghanistan. And relying on warlords would simply be a prescription for plunging Afghanistan back into the civil war of the 1990s, which led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place.

The US needs to continue backing the democratically elected, reformist government led by Western-educated technocrat Ashraf Ghani. His security forces are fighting hard against the Taliban and taking heavy casualties. His government is even beginning to prosecute officials whose corruption has done so much to undermine its legitimacy. Unfortunately Ghani is hard put to exert his will against powerful warlords such as Atta Mohammad Noor, the notoriously corrupt governor of a northern province, who has refused to leave office despite the president's attempts to fire him. Ghani is even struggling to exert control over the central government because, he is forced to share power with a rival politician, Abdullah Abdullah, who occupies the extra-constitutional post of chief executive. Still, backing Ghani is our best bet to keep his country out of the hands of violent extremists—the goal that we have been fighting for since 9/11.

The bad news is that, having already reduced our troop presence too far and too fast under the Obama administration, we will not be able to make another drawdown in the near future. We must simply get used to the prospect that, like the British forces that garrisoned the Northwest Frontier for roughly a century (from the 1840s to the 1940s), US troops must remain for the long haul. The good news is that, while US troops must stay engaged, they need not suffer heavy casualties, because, with the exception of some Special Operations Forces, they are largely in a supporting role. The Afghans are in the lead, fighting and dying for their own country.



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Boot holds a bachelor's degree in history, with high honors, from the University of California–Berkeley (1991), and a master's degree in history from Yale University (1992). He was born in Russia, grew up in Los Angeles, and now lives in the New York area. The Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow in National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, he is the author of critically acclaimed *New York Times* best seller *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*.

# Afghanistan: No Choice but to Remain

By Thomas Donnelly

Quite unlike Great Britain or the Soviet Union, the United States has never had a coherent strategy for its engagement in Afghanistan. No amount of military operational acumen or diplomatic experience can make up for that deficiency; it hardly matters what we do if we have no idea why we're doing it.

Both the British and the Russians understood that the "Great Game" was played on a field that spanned South Asia, and that the prize in the contest was India, the jewel in Queen Victoria's crown. She, her foreign office, and her generals—most notably Field Marshal Frederick Roberts, the victor of the Second Afghan War—kept a remarkably consistent course over decades as, for that matter, did the tsars and commissars who were their opponents. Absent such a perspective, President Trump's question—"Why are we still there?"—is unanswerable.

With such a perspective, the questions of military tactics hardly matter. Afghanistan has little intrinsic value, human capital, or economic potential, but has ever been the playground for external great powers. Even worse, it has become a playground for Pakistan, the world's original failed nuclear state, a disaster since its creation in 1947. (Can you say, "East Pakistan?") Simply denying Pakistan its longed-for "strategic depth" in Afghanistan may be worth the price of admission.

Further, it becomes more apparent with time that an American strategic partnership is an essential ingredient in containing the effects of Chinese growth and Russian revanche. The Indians care a lot about Afghanistan, which is both a blessing and a curse—after decades of inward-looking "nonalignment," they're relearning the lessons of Lord Curzon but have yet to master them. Then there's the matter of the jihadi terrorism that is crippling the Sunni Muslim world; that the hydra grows new heads does not eliminate the need to cut them off. We need to cover our mouths and keep the scythes sharp.

Thus the most compelling strategic reason to be in Afghanistan is an exercise in circular reasoning: we're still there—and should be—because we need to be there. This is international broken-windows policing, little more. What we've come to call a counterinsurgency strategy there would be most effective, and while the methods of counterterrorism cost more than they return, they have not been futile. Nor would warlord-wheeling-and-dealing, though that's the weakest way to wield influence. But, as our Iraq experience suggests, the only thing worse than being in Afghanistan is not being in Afghanistan.



**THOMAS DONNELLY**, a defense and security policy analyst, is the codirector of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. From 1995 to 1999, he was policy group director for the House Committee on Armed Services. Donnelly also served as a member of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. He is the author, coauthor, and editor of numerous articles, essays, and books, including *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* and *Clash of Chariots: A History of Armored Warfare*. He is currently at work on *Empire of Liberty: The Origins of American Strategic Culture*.

# US Aid to Afghanistan Remains Critical

By Mark Moyer

Abandonment of Afghanistan at this time would be highly inadvisable because of the inordinate risks of abetting Islamic extremism and generating higher outflows of narcotics and people. The strategy of 2013–2017, in which small numbers of American troops advised Afghan forces and conducted raids, prevented the Kabul government from falling, but it failed to prevent insurgents from retaking much of the country. Military setbacks heightened infighting among Afghan elites and impeded the development of a viable national government.

The August 2017 announcement of an enduring US commitment has been a welcome change, easing Afghan fears of American abandonment—fears that have caused many Afghans to sit on the fence or side with the insurgents. The Trump administration's determination to preserve the Afghan government and its resolve to get tougher with Pakistan could also cause the Pakistani government to reduce its assistance to the Afghan insurgents. The actual impact on the Pakistanis, however, remains to be seen.

The proper degree of reliance upon local and regional warlords has bedeviled security efforts in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. For the first few years of the post-Taliban era, the international community permitted the warlords to convert their militias into police forces, but the misbehavior of those forces and their ineffectiveness in halting the return of the Taliban led to increased emphasis on national security forces. Building those forces required a long-term commitment, for a decade of civil war and Taliban rule had left Afghanistan bereft of trained and experienced officers. The slow rate of progress, coupled with the revival of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, led to intermittent efforts to empower warlords, with widely varying results.

The American effort to build the national security forces has been expensive, and at times has been fruitless because of lack of care and patience, but it has produced a younger generation of military and police officers who are less prone to criminality and corruption than the warlords. Given what has been achieved and what is at stake, continued investment is warranted. The national security forces will have to take the lead in securing Afghanistan's provinces because of their superior competence and commitment to the nation of Afghanistan.

Whether the warlords can play constructive roles going forward will have to be handled on a case by case basis. Having spent considerable time traveling around Afghanistan, I have found that it is most difficult to gauge the current state of affairs without visiting the districts and provinces, and that there is great variation from one place to the next. With the international media presence now much smaller than a few years ago, it is even more difficult to tell what is going on from afar.

Bolstering the US advisory presence with the Afghan national security forces, as the Trump administration is in the process of doing, will help reverse the negative military trends of the past few years. Many of the Afghan units are now reasonably good at basic infantry skills, but they require help with combat-enabling functions such as close air support, intelligence, and logistics. Considering the limited size of the recent US troop augmentation, the recapture of territory and population is likely to be incremental, not rapid. Although the American public is generally impatient with overseas military commitments, it is likely to tolerate this level of US military involvement so long as American casualties continue to remain low.



**MARK MOYAR** is director of the Center of Military and Diplomatic History in Washington, DC. He recently published *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces* and is currently writing the sequel to his book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*. He served as a professor at the US Marine Corps University and as a senior fellow at the Joint Special Operations University. He holds a BA summa cum laude from Harvard and a PhD from Cambridge.

# Our Long Last Stand in Afghanistan

By Ralph Peters

Approved by the president in August, we have a “new” plan in Afghanistan. It will increase the US troop strength to approximately 14,000 service members. Those 14,000 troops will be expected to achieve what 140,000 US and allied troops could not achieve when the Taliban was weaker, al-Qaeda lay broken, and ISIS did not exist.

When all the countless, blindingly detailed briefing slides are done, what we have is not a plan built upon rigorous and cold-blooded analysis, but an emotional response to failure. Our vision for Afghanistan, after we made the fateful and foolhardy decision to remain in strength after our necessary 2001 punitive expedition, took account of what we wanted, but not of what Afghans needed. We really believed that, on some profound level, all human beings must desire what we desire of life. But they don’t.

Now, with the bill above a trillion dollars and thousands of young Americans killed or maimed, the Taliban are resurgent and the Afghan National Army, despite our largesse and encouragement, still cannot match the resolve and strategic effectiveness of ill-equipped guerrillas with minimal foreign backing. Our counterinsurgency doctrine, politically correct and irrelevant, assumed that we would be in support of a government that could and would win the allegiance of its people. But successive governments in Kabul, where we turned pickpockets into crime lords with our wealth, have failed to excite the loyalty-unto-death of the Taliban’s core volunteers.

Nor is the oft-heard excuse that the Taliban have a safe haven in Pakistan a sound explanation for its successful reconquests—the Taliban could not have survived and fought on without a committed local constituency. Caressed by artful sycophants in Kabul, we cannot accept that a substantial portion of Afghanistan’s ethnic-Pashtun majority simply prefer the Taliban to us. And, of note, our sycophants, while willing to transfer our money to Dubai, are not themselves willing to fight or send in their children.

Our generals, good and honorable men, followed orders, accepted political restrictions, and did their best for sixteen years. Now they cannot bear the thought that all was for little or naught, that their soldiers, Marines, air-

men, and Navy corpsmen gave life and limb for clans of rapacious whores who swore they loved us.

We focus on the moral issue of abandoning Afghanistan and “our” Afghans. But the true moral and ethical question is whether American service members should die for a foreign government when its own citizens won’t.

For all of our military’s well-intentioned reading lists (which backfired by encouraging intellectual conformity), for all the translations of Clausewitz, which few officers ever finished, or the good parts skimmed from Thucydides, we failed to learn the immediate lesson of failure in Vietnam: Our well-intentioned, lavish generosity corrupted the government and armed forces we sought to aid. Ultimately, the North Vietnamese beat us because they were poor.

## POLL: What is the best US military policy for Afghanistan?

- ☐ Cut our losses and quickly leave Afghanistan.
- ☐ Reduce our forces and protect Kabul.
- ☐ Keep enough forces to protect all the major cities.
- ☐ Bomb the Taliban to scatter it like we did ISIS.
- ☐ Send more forces, destroy the Taliban, and Westernize Afghanistan.



Now we have committed ourselves, again, to the longest last stand in modern history. And we have the wealth and power to sustain it—although our forces could better be employed elsewhere, given that Afghanistan is strategically worthless dirt. Our casualties won't be high. We'll hold or retake the key cities and the age-old caravan routes, before allowing the Afghans to lose them again. But Afghanistan and Afghans will not change. (Added to which, the best-educated and highest-skilled Afghans have emigrated, leaving little with which to build our dream of a "better" Afghanistan.)

It seems to this long-term observer that the wiser course would have been to *reduce* our troop commitment to between 3,000 and 5,000 troops, with a strict focus on counter-terror operations—while continuing to equip the Afghans, but not to bleed for them.

If Afghans will not stand and fight for the Kabul government, we can keep it on life support indefinitely, but the ultimate outcome is foreordained.

Ironically, the Soviets, during their Afghan years, did a better job of modernizing Afghan society and infrastructure than we have managed to do (they weren't at the mercy of contractors who had mastered the art of grand theft within the law). Blinded by the Cold War, we failed to see that the Soviets were the good guys in that struggle.

We and the Russians believed that changing a government could change a deep-rooted culture. We and they were foolish, enraptured by our own measurements of power. Now a few thousand more Americans will seek to accomplish what even Alexander could not sustain.

Perhaps our greatest folly—and that of those Soviets we helped fanatics drive out—was to believe that we were exempt from history.



**RALPH PETERS** is the author of twenty-nine books, including works on strategy and military affairs, as well as best-selling, prize-winning novels. He has published more than a thousand essays, articles, and columns. As a US Army enlisted man and officer, he served in infantry and military Intelligence units before becoming a foreign area officer and global scout. After retiring in 1998, he covered wars and trouble spots in the Middle East and Africa. He now concentrates on writing books but remains Fox News's strategic analyst. His latest novel, *Hell or Richmond*, a gritty portrayal of Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign, follows his recent *New York Times* best seller, *Cain at Gettysburg*, for which he received the 2013 Boyd Award for Literary Excellence in Military Fiction from the American Library Association.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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- Thomas Barfield and Neamatollah Nojumi, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 Pathways to Stability," *Middle East Policy* 17.4 (2010). <http://www.mepc.org/bringing-more-effective-governance-afghanistan-10-pathways-stability>
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- David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (Hurst, 2016). <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/a-state-built-on-sand>
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- Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* [2nd ed.] (Yale University Press, 2002). <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300095197/fragmentation-afghanistan>
- Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (Ballantine, 2005). <http://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/162323>

## Discussion Questions

1. Is it time to write off Afghanistan and get out, double down on our current strategy, or focus on Kabul and outsource the countryside to the warlords?
2. Has any foreign power controlled Afghanistan for long?
3. Are the benefits of a stable Afghanistan worth the costs of foreign aid and/or occupation?
4. What are the interests of Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and India in Afghanistan?
5. Why does Afghanistan remain a tribal society?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The Value of Economic Sanctions



## Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

## Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

## *Strategika*

*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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