

Should the United States Withdraw from Afghanistan?

After long being overshadowed by America's other war to the west, the conflict in Afghanistan is once again the focus of public attention. President Obama has committed to "winning" it with a larger troop presence, but is the better solution to end the military presence instead? At a policy forum on September 14, foreign policy experts provided their views on why—and how—the United States should withdraw from Afghanistan. The speakers included Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute and coauthor of "Escaping the 'Graveyard of Empires': A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan"; Celeste Ward, senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation; Robert Naiman, national coordinator for Just Foreign Policy; and Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and coauthor of "Escaping the 'Graveyard of Empires.'"

MALOU INNOCENT: Americans understand intuitively that the question about Afghanistan is not whether the war is winnable, but whether it constitutes a vital national security interest. America still does not have a clearly articulated goal. This is why the usual topic of discussion—how to build key institutions and create a legitimate political system—is not so much misguided as it is misplaced.

The issue is not whether we *can* but whether we *should*. Only recently has the debate moved to this question. *Should* we remain in Afghanistan? The answer—when stacked against our objective of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda—is clearly no. Going after al Qaeda does not require a large-scale, long-term military presence for several reasons.

First, we must keep in mind that the military is wonderful for killing bad guys with disproportionate firepower, destroying enemy troop formations, or bombing

command centers, but not for finding hidden killers. The scalpel of intelligence-sharing and close cooperation with foreign law enforcement agencies has done more to round up suspected terrorists than the sledgehammer of military force.

Second, whether we withdraw or whether we stay, al Qaeda can twist our choice into a victory. If we withdraw, we appear weak—even though America is responsible for almost half of the world's military spending, can project its power to the most inaccessible corners of the globe, and wields one of the planet's largest nuclear arsenals. But America also looks weak if it remains in the region too long. The military will appear bogged down, the strategy aimless, and, despite our best efforts, military operations will continue to kill Afghan civilians, eroding support for our presence among the population.

Third, our policy toward Afghanistan is undermining core U.S. interests in

Pakistan. Drone operations have successfully killed a number of high-value targets and may have seriously degraded al Qaeda's global capabilities. But our policies are also pushing the region's powerful jihadist insurgency over the border into Pakistan. As early as 2007, in response to repeated Pakistani army incursions, along with a growing number of U.S. missile strikes, an amalgamation of over two dozen tribal-based groups calling themselves "the Taliban" began to emerge in the Pakistani border region. Unfortunately, present U.S. policy is pushing militants deeper into Pakistani cities, strengthening the very jihadist forces we seek to defeat, and pressing this weak but nuclear-armed country in the direction of civil war.

Nonetheless, I think perhaps the worst thing we can do is turn our back on this region entirely. That's what we did after nearly a decade of funding the mujahedeens, and we paid for it dearly eight years ago. But there are costs to remaining in the region, not simply in manpower and resources, but in giving al Qaeda what it wants, pushing the conflict into Pakistan, and looking weak by remaining and possibly accomplishing little. America should scale down its combat presence, continue open relations and intelligence sharing with all countries in the region, deploy Special Forces for discrete operations against specific targets, and engage in intensive surveillance as it already does today.

CELESTE WARD: Over the last few years the violence in Afghanistan has come to be dubbed an "insurgency" that requires the application of a counterinsurgency strategy. This is in keeping with the general zeitgeist of "population-centric counterinsurgency"—or COIN—which has now risen to such prominence in U.S. defense and national security thinking that it borders on theology. COIN has become the overriding theme in discussions about not just

present, but future, wars; a cultural movement in military defense circles, and, indeed, a worldview. As Colonel Gian Gentile at West Point has written, it has become the new American way of war.

The problem is that counterinsurgency doctrine and theory impede our ability to accurately apprehend the nature and extent of our predicament in Afghanistan and are serving as an awkward stand-in for a rational strategy. The existence of a much ballyhooed manual—the Army’s Field Manual 3-24—and perceived success in employing its precepts in Iraq are serving to obscure the real costs of the campaign in Afghanistan and provide a dangerous illusion concerning the limits of American power.

A central problem with population-centric COIN theory is that, at heart, it is really nation building. The theory emphasizes the population—meeting its needs, establishing governmental legitimacy, developing economies and so on. Indeed some notable COIN adherents have even emphasized its potential to “change entire societies.” So for those of you who argue that there is no strategy in Afghanistan, I would submit to you that, in effect, there is. It is implicit in the logic of COIN, and it is to transform Afghan society. But because the discussion is often wrapped in the more abstruse language of defense wonkery and larded with historical analogies and assumptions, the real strategic trade-offs—the exorbitant costs of building a nation in a country with a history of no real central governance and that ranks 219th in per capita GDP—are glossed over. I would argue that if General McChrystal had released not his counterinsurgency guidance but, instead, his “nation-building guidance,” we’d be having a very different discussion.

In addition to being the functional equivalent of nation building, there are a number of problems with counterinsurgency theory and doctrine itself. As just one example, a key precept is that we must win over the population. The theory goes that most of the population is unsure whose side they should be on, and we should influence that decision so that they will choose us. But this assumes that a foreign force such as ours could truly under-

stand, never mind penetrate and manipulate the opinions and loyalties of an ancient tribal people. The conceit inherent in this notion goes mostly unremarked upon.

By saying we’re waging a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan we are



Malou Innocent

The scalpel of intelligence-sharing and close cooperation with foreign law enforcement agencies has done more to round up suspected terrorists than the sledgehammer of military force.”

committing ourselves to a massive project of nation building in a country that one commentator recently described as “like walking into the Old Testament.” It has become cliché to note the administration has yet to articulate a real strategy in Afghanistan. I would submit that counterinsurgency—as an operational concept and set of tactics—has been in effect elevated to the status of a strategy. And calling it a counterinsurgency masks layers of complexity highly relevant to the outcome: tribal rivalry, ethnic conflict, the underlying struggle between tradition and modernity, and doubtless several others.

By stripping away the jargon and slogans of counterinsurgency and instead exploring the problem of Afghanistan as it is, includ-

ing a hard look at our real ends, ways, and means, we would not be “abandoning” Afghanistan as some have suggested. But were we to commit further American blood and treasure before such an analysis, all we would risk abandoning is our reason.

ROBERT NAIMAN: The United States should withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan through a public timetable. Specifics should be negotiated with the Afghan government and other partners.

The U.S. public does not support the war in Afghanistan. Since the majority of Americans don’t support the war, the U.S. prosecution of the war should not continue.

Some say such important decisions can’t be made according to the vagaries of public opinion polls. But the most important decisions should be decided democratically, and U.S. public opinion is not volatile on questions of war and peace. Once the public turned against the Iraq war, it never turned back.

Some say the war is making Americans safer. But the American public is the highest judge on this question. Since the American people oppose the war, they must believe it is not making them safer, or that whatever contribution the war is making to their safety is too small to justify the human and financial costs.

Some argue against a “precipitous” withdrawal. In practice, this is a straw argument. The probability of a “precipitous” U.S. withdrawal is minuscule. The overwhelming likelihood is that as the U.S. moves towards withdrawing its troops, it will do so gradually, as it is doing in Iraq.

The Afghan government cannot be perceived as legitimate when it doesn’t have effective input into key decisions affecting the country’s welfare. Whether and how the war should continue, whether and with whom there should be negotiations, isn’t being decided in Kabul. President Karzai asked for an agreement governing the conduct of foreign forces and said there should be negotiations with top insurgent leaders. The U.S. government has ignored these demands.

President Karzai has said he would invite the Taliban to a *loya jirga*, or grand tribal council, to restart stalled peace talks. The

idea of a broad national reconciliation process in Afghanistan that includes tribes backing the Taliban and other insurgents has long been advocated by the top U.N. official for Afghanistan, Kai Eide. A new *loya jirga* could establish a new national unity government including leaders representative of Afghanistan's various insurgencies.

The proposition that there will eventually be negotiations with insurgents in Afghanistan has been accepted by U.S. leaders. Admiral Mullen says we can't do so now because we'd be bargaining from a position of weakness. But more war is not likely to significantly affect the fundamental outlines of an eventual agreement. We should start negotiations now. The sooner negotiations begin, the sooner they can be concluded.

U.S. officials have said Mullah Omar is "irreconcilable." But the United States has one overriding legitimate national security interest in Afghanistan: that it not be a base for organizing attacks against the United States. Reports in the British press of past peace talks have indicated that Taliban leaders accept the legitimacy of that U.S. interest. If Mullah Omar will sign and enforce an agreement that Afghanistan will not be a base for organizing attacks on the United States, then he is "reconcilable" to the interests of the majority of Americans.

If the United States signals willingness to negotiate a withdrawal timetable with a national unity government, that will be a strong incentive for the formation of such a government: whoever participates will be at the table for negotiations.

TED GALEN CARPENTER: The United States, as of next month, will have been in Afghanistan for eight years. It is not only time to ask some hard questions, it's well past time to ask those questions.

Among the questions we ought to be asking: specifically what are America's objectives in Afghanistan? It's not enough to say we want to win. *Specifically*, what are our objectives? Second question: specifically, what is the strategy to achieve those objectives? Third question: what is the probability that the chosen strategy *can* achieve the stated objectives? And then, finally, what is the probability that the objectives can be

achieved with *any* feasible strategy? We waited seven long years for the Bush Administration to address those questions and it never really did so. We've now waited nearly eight months for the Obama administration to do so and it really has not pro-



Ted Galen Carpenter

“No matter how long we stay, how much money we spend, and how many lives we squander, Afghanistan is never going to become a central Asian version of Arizona.”

vided adequate answers for any of those questions, much less all of them.

What has happened is we seem to have drifted into an amorphous, open-ended, nation-building mission, one of unlimited scope and unlimited duration. That is a very bad business indeed. Our objective should be to prevent al Qaeda from again using Afghanistan as a reliable sanctuary to plan and execute large-scale attacks against the United States, as it did on 9/11. Now that's a fairly specific, fairly narrow objective. But that's really the core American interest in Afghanistan.

There are numerous missions that have been suggested, and this country seems to be pursuing, that we don't need to pursue to achieve that narrow objective. For example,

we don't need to try to transform Afghanistan into a stable, modern, democratic society with a strong central government in Kabul. I would argue that can't be done in any case. At least, it can't be done at a reasonable cost in blood and treasure and in a reasonable amount of time. Afghanistan is largely a pre-industrial, clan- and tribal-based society. It is almost a misnomer to refer to it as a nation-state in the Western sense of the term. In addition, nation building has a lousy track record, even in arenas that are far more promising than Afghanistan.

Secondly, we don't need to win a war on drugs in Afghanistan to accomplish our core security objective. This is another mission into which we have seemingly drifted. An August report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee made a startling admission; namely, that there is no credible evidence that al Qaeda derives significant revenues from narcotics trafficking. (That startled even me.) The Taliban does. As a matter of fact, just about everybody else in Afghanistan does. Illegal drugs, whether we like it or not, are a pervasive part of Afghanistan's economy, roughly a third of the country's total GDP. And lest we think that it's just the insurgents who benefit from narcotics revenues, pro-government factions are in the trade up to their eyeballs. Indeed, it would be much easier to draw up a list of prominent Afghan political figures who are not involved in the drug trade than it would to draw up a list of the ones who are. And it would be a much shorter list to cite the ones who are not.

Finally, we do not need to crush the Taliban to achieve our legitimate objectives regarding al Qaeda. It has been a big mistake of U.S. policymakers to conflate al Qaeda and the Taliban. The former is a foreign terrorist organization with the United States in its crosshairs. The latter is an admittedly repulsive political faction, but it represents a parochial insurgency and, in some ways, Pashtun solidarity, which is something to which we'd better pay attention. It is not a direct security threat to the United States. What has happened over the years is that we have drifted into a war against the Taliban, not primarily against al

Continued on page 13

Chris Edwards stirs up controversy

Federal Employees Grow Fat While Private Workers Tighten Their Belts

In a series of three posts on the Cato@Liberty blog this August, Cato Institute director of tax policy studies Chris Edwards exposed what ought to be obvious to anyone: federal employees are quite well paid. In fact, in total compensation as workers in the private sector, federal employees, on average, earn twice as much. What's more, the gap between government and private workers is growing. In 2000 the average federal civilian compensation was \$76,187, while private sector employees earned \$45,772. In 2008, while those not embraced by the comfortable, recession-proof arms of the federal government have seen their average compensation grow to only \$59,909, federal workers now take home a whopping average of \$119,982.

Edwards's analysis quickly gained much attention in the media, including two editorials in the *Investors Business Daily*, an excerpt in the *Wall Street Journal*, an excerpt in *Forbes*, and a *USA Today* quote. It was the topic of a CNN Lou Dobbs segment and a commentary by talk show host Mark Levin. The blo-



By permission of Gary Varvel and Creators Syndicate, Inc.

This cartoon appeared in *USA Today* a week after Chris Edwards's blog post created a flap over federal pay.

gosphere jumped on the story, too, with discussions on *The Economist* (twice), Glenn Reynolds's Instapundit, the *National Review Online* (twice), the *Atlantic*, govexec.com, federaltimes.com, fedsmith.com, and many others. And Edwards's inbox nearly burst with often irate feedback, including one fed-

eral employee who, after attacking Cato's "ivory pedestal," lamented that "capitalism is founded on abuses of labor, and on quasi criminal activity."

All this for simply pointing out that federal employees make more than they'd like you to think.

Continued from page 11

Qaeda. Indeed, on September 11 General McChrystal made an admission that I found almost as startling as the admission about drug revenues in the report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He said that there really is no evidence of a significant al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. My response to that was: well, if al Qaeda isn't in Afghanistan, why on Earth are we in Afghanistan? We went there to defeat al Qaeda. If this isn't the arena for al Qaeda anymore, then our mission seems to have no rational purpose whatsoever.

I believe we can develop a strategy for success but have to dial back the concept of victory to something that protects America's core security interests and has a reasonable prospect of success. That means focusing on disrupting and weakening al Qaeda. And note the terms I use. I don't talk about a definitive victory. That's not possible against a shadowy, nonstate terrorist adversary. We're not going to get some kind of surrender ceremony, or a signed document.

Instead, we have to treat the threat posed by al Qaeda as a chronic security problem, but one that can be managed. I tend to get very impatient with people in Washington and in the opinion-shaping sector in America generally, who seem to act as though Islamic terrorists are all 15 feet tall and about to take over the planet. They aren't, and they aren't. The sooner we realize that, the far better strategy we will have.

We need to abandon the counter-narcotics campaign in its entirety. And we need to abandon any notion of a nation-building campaign in Afghanistan. Now what should we be doing? Well, we should be cutting deals with any relevant player, not just acting as though the government in Kabul is the only relevant actor. Not just focusing on trying to create something that has never really existed in Afghanistan: a very powerful central government in control of the whole country backed by a strong national army. We need to be cutting deals with every relevant player who's willing to work with us. That means regional warlords. That means

tribal leaders. That means clan leaders. And yes, it includes trying to work out arrangements with elements of the Taliban that might be willing to try to work with us against al Qaeda. I don't think it is inevitable at all that, even if the Taliban were able to establish control over most of Afghanistan, it would necessarily give shelter again to al Qaeda. Taliban leaders have learned that there is a price to pay for that kind of decision.

We don't need a large military footprint to achieve such modest military goals. Small numbers of CIA and Special Forces personnel, to work with cooperative players, should be sufficient. That means that virtually all U.S. forces can and should be withdrawn over the next 18 months. Escalation, which is the course we're on now, is precisely the wrong strategy. No matter how long we stay, how much money we spend, and how many lives we squander, Afghanistan is never going to become a central Asian version of Arizona. We should stop operating under the delusion that it will.