

Afghanistan Reconsidered: What the U.S. Should Do Now

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Back in July of 2010, [TNR asked nine experts to explore what the United States should do next in Afghanistan](#). In the twenty months since that symposium, much has changed. Tragic developments—such as the downing of a military helicopter that claimed 38 Americans and the recent massacre of 16 Afghan civilians by a U.S. Army Staff Sergeant—have stoked widespread discontent with the current course of action, and have many rethinking their commitments to the mission. Given the new circumstances, we invited our original contributors to follow-up on the suggestions they offered two years ago.

[Leon Wieseltier](#). I do not believe that the war in Afghanistan can be won by anyone except the Afghans, and I do not believe that they will win it. For us, this is a war against al-Qaeda, which, in Afghanistan but not in Pakistan and elsewhere, we have largely won; but for the Afghans this is a war against their own demons, religious and secular—against theocracy and kleptocracy; and it is war against their historical refusal to embrace the unifying force of a national definition, their preference for tribe over nation. After ten years I do not see any significant change for the better in this regard, even if the security situation improves in Helmand and Kandahar. We have been undone by our strategy: since it is a campaign for hearts and minds, counterinsurgency's success depends upon the sentiments of the hearts and the convictions of the minds, and those cannot be determined by military means. In such a war, the weak Afghans have a strong hand; and they have played it.

And how long will those provinces remain stable and safe when our protection is withdrawn? My distant impression—and I am not remotely expert on these matters—is that the Afghans want our externalities—our soldiers and our dollars—but are not prepared to accept our internalities—the accountable democratic institutions that we hoped to help them create. And so the war is a story of waxing and waning without end. Also, it is sloppy of me to refer to “the Afghans,” because there are many people in Afghanistan who ardently want to bring their country into a decent modernity. For this reason, my certainty that this war is futile, and that therefore we should quit it, torments me (pardon the melodrama, but what follows is not a small matter): we will be abandoning Afghanistan—the women, the women—to the Taliban, who seem completely unreconstructed to me. But I don't see what else we can do, except to remain there indefinitely, which would give the Afghans even less incentive to rely upon themselves and would eventually become indistinguishable from a mere occupation.

So I think we should go, and confront our enemies ferociously in western Pakistan and Yemen and Somalia and elsewhere. I would add only that our departure has been made more inevitable by Obama's bizarre handling of the war. Announcing the date of its expiration to our enemies was an act of extraordinary strategic incompetence. And escalating a war that he wanted to end seems a little cynical—excuse me, pragmatic. Soon the president will have his wish and no longer be a war president. We will not have been defeated in Afghanistan—from the standpoint of our security, we got what we came for. But the dream of a new Afghanistan will remain a dream. I wish that I could be persuaded otherwise, but even idealists—especially idealists!—need to keep their eyes open and see things clearly.

[Fouad Ajami](#). America's time is up in Afghanistan. Staff Sergeant Robert Bales had nothing to do with this moment of reckoning. There is something unacceptable about a war we wage with little debate, and precious little attention. Say what you will about the war in Iraq, George W. Bush claimed and defended it, paid a political price for it, and suffered the wrath of the war's opponents. From Susan Sarandon to the Dixie Chicks, it was the fashion to weigh in on the war in Mesopotamia. Iraq multiplied the ranks of the strategic analysts. For all the divisiveness of that time, it was nobler

than the silence and oblivion that attend the Afghan war.

This is Barack Obama's war, but it causes him no anguish. Nothing here of the torment that ate at Lyndon Johnson over Vietnam. The Afghan campaign is politically manageable, the Obama devotees give it a pass, and the Republicans (save for Ron Paul) have no coherent alternative to offer. They have no use for Afghanistan, they bristle at paying for the war, but they can't step forth and proclaim what they truly believe: that this is not a winnable war. A year or so ago there was a case for giving the war a chance. But our country is trapped there, hostage to the Afghan warlords and the Afghan furies. It is time to concede what the late Richard Holbrooke knew about the war he was asked to oversee: There is nothing there for us, there is no possibility that we can put together an order that would survive our withdrawal.

[Anna Badkhen](#). "Our trouble," Barry Lopez wrote once about our five-hundred-year history of vandalism, avarice, slaughter, and exploitation in North America, "has been that from the beginning we have imposed, not proposed." After 500 years of abuse we are beginning to rediscover our relationship with our own land. And after more than a decade of war, during which we have been trying—mostly unsuccessfully, often catastrophically—to impose our social and economic ideas in Afghanistan, it is time we begin to rediscover our role there. The winding down of the U.S. military engagement should become the beginning of a new kind of interaction between Afghanistan and the United States—one in which we listen.

We may not like what we hear. We may hear, as I have in villages in Northern Afghanistan, that many Afghans—yes, women, too—embrace the Taliban, and that no central government has any credibility with the population. That such lofty and beautiful ideas as democracy and public education for women are irrelevant, and that accessible and quality healthcare, passable roads, and viable distribution of water for irrigation—all far less telegenic than a classroom full of uniformed girls in neat white headscarves—are more important. But if the sincere answer to the question we keep asking—"What are we still doing in Afghanistan?"—is to make something better, then we must stop trying to do so on our terms.

This will require humility. This will require a common sense of shame. This will require the American public, not just the government, to take responsibility for every death in the war that was so enthusiastically supported in 2001, not just Staff Sergeant Robert Bales' massacre of sixteen villagers last week. This will require challenging the notion that our social ideas are, in Lopez's words, "superior if not unimpeachable." Only then can the United States begin to do what it must in Afghanistan: Help the people whose lives it has been methodically undoing in a way they want to be helped, not in the way we think they should.

[Steve Coll](#). I don't think the assumptions on which the American exit strategy is based are looking very convincing at the moment. The political foundation for the military transition strategy is pretty shaky, and I don't see much willingness to step back from those assumptions, which have been on a kind of automatic pilot, and ask the hard questions about what the alternatives might be if those assumptions are wrong. My fear is that the center will not hold when 2014 arrives. All this technocratic planning on transition and security handover—that whole narrative—depends on there being a political center and a government that's unified enough, with security forces that aren't crumbling, to prevent an ethnic-based civil war that's even worse than the one we have right now. It's important to start thinking ahead about some of those political questions, and I don't see that happening right now. The last few years, the White House has been sticking to its plan, but it's pointless to couple that outward resolve with an internal refusal to deal with reality, which is what I'm afraid is going on.

[Amitai Etzioni](#). I long argued that before we promote the full slew of human rights, we should attend to the most basic of them all: to protect life. Not because other rights are unimportant but because they are contingent on keeping people alive. We are failing this test in Afghanistan as we are about to leave after the elections, and leave a country in which killing will be rampant. We should try to work with the ISI, which has some leverage over the Taliban, to see if, in exchange for our support, they would try to avoid a civil war in Afghanistan and ensure that it will not serve again as a haven for terrorists. If not, we better have the drones ready.

I am not surprised that we shall not leave behind a stable democratic country; I never believed we could engage in nation building in this part of the world. And I am not surprised that we shall leave behind a country even more corrupt and subject to drug lords that we found. I am distressed about the size of the cemeteries Afghanistan will need.

Ahmed Rashid. The three recent gruesome incidents only highlight that Afghanistan is facing a serious political, military, and social meltdown. There is still time to rescue it from such a fate post-U.S. withdrawal, which could repeat the civil war that resulted from the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the failure then of the U.S. and the Soviet and Afghan communists to negotiate a political settlement. The Obama administration needs to put its emphasis on the present slow-moving but ongoing negotiations with the Taliban, despite a temporary suspension of the talks. The talks need to move rapidly: first with steps to build trust between the two sides, followed by military confidence-building measures that could reduce the violence perpetrated by both sides, and eventually political negotiations leading to power-sharing between the Afghan government and the Taliban. But divisions within the Obama administration and the Kabul government on talking to the Taliban have so far prevented a faster pace, while the U.S. elections could reduce Obama's capacity for risk-taking in the negotiations. Yet the U.S. cannot withdraw from Afghanistan leaving behind a continuing civil war. The only feasible option is for the U.S. to help negotiate an end to the civil war before 2014 and its withdrawal. The alternative could be a multi-dimensional civil war that would devastate the region.

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