



## Afghanistan: Reckoning with US Failure and the Return of the Armed Men

*Robert Matthews\**

*We thought we were done with these things but we were wrong.  
We thought, because we had power, we had wisdom.  
We thought the long train would run to the end of Time.  
We thought the light would increase.  
Now the long train stands derailed and the bandits loot it.  
Now the boar and the asp have power in our time.  
Now the night rolls back on the west and the night is solid.  
Our fathers and ourselves sowed dragon's teeth.  
Our children know and suffer the armed men.*

Stephen Vincent Benét (U.S.) "Litany for Dictatorships," 1935

For several years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was showcased as a successful example of US military determination. It emerged as a symbol of the accomplishments of the Bush administration's belligerent foreign policy -- transforming a security threat into a functioning democracy. Even critics of the war in Iraq would cite Afghanistan as the place where the US had diminished the threat of terrorism from a failed state. However, the scenario was never quite so rosy as the overly optimistic commentary; since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Afghanistan has suffered from inattention and neglect, lack of resources, and a narrowly-based military strategy. The reality of developments in Afghanistan since 2005 have mocked US assertions and in 2006 the scales finally fell from the eyes of those observing events in Afghanistan. The dragon's teeth have sprouted on Afghan soil; the armed men have returned.

Today, even the initial tactical success of the US in toppling the Taliban regime has receded in significance in the face of a growing and dangerous insurgency. There are now an estimated 600 attacks a month, still far from the nearly 100 a week in Iraq, but four times

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the rate in Afghanistan last year. The Taliban are resurgent inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan along the 500-mile border of tribal areas. It is here that Osama Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are most likely hiding. Insurgents and foreign fighters from Arab countries, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the latter linked to Al Qaeda, are growing ever stronger in the border area, threatening the stability of Pakistan. In Afghanistan, these militants are using tactics like suicide and roadside bombings that have so thoroughly shredded security in Iraq. The much heralded elections last year have not produced anything like the stability they promised; poppy cultivation has mushroomed in the vacuum of security that the still weak national Afghan forces can do little to fill. Ninety per cent of the world's heroin now comes from the country. This month (January 2007) Taliban commander Mullah Muhammad Omar announced that he would never negotiate with the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai and pledged to continue the war until foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan.

From the beginning, in the aftermath of 9-11, the Bush administration pursued the overthrow of the Taliban regime on the cheap, using "a light footprint" in the words of observers. A short military campaign, relying on the CIA and US Special Forces to harness the anti-Taliban Afghans-- primarily the Northern Alliance--brought down the government. However, the defeat was far from definitive, with many Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies escaping into the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and eventually regrouping. To fight another day.

In response, The US reluctantly agreed to the formation of an international military contingent, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a stabilization force authorized by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001. In 2006, the ISAF assumed command of the south and eastern part of the country where the escalating fighting against the insurgency has been most violent. It is generally agreed, however, that foreign efforts have been inadequately staffed and funded. Compared to many recent post-conflict situations--Afghanistan has never been considered in the same sense as Bosnia, and Kosovo -- it has had relatively fewer peacekeepers and less resources. As late as of 2005 Washington was preparing to reduce the 20,000 US troops by 3,000.

NATO took control of the ISAF in 2003, but the US still dominated, providing the bulk of the troops and the shared command structure. The ostensible mission of the NATO-led troops was to assist the new Afghan government in creating military and police forces. The NATO forces, while criticized for being less aggressive than US forces, were essentially subordinated to overall US military strategy which defined long-term security as killing enough Taliban and other anti-government insurgents to eliminate the physical threat they pose. After the error of franchising out the battles of 2001, the US assumed a higher military profile but compounded the initial mistake by pursuing a quintessentially military strategy in attempting to remake Afghanistan. Nevertheless, increasingly, US commanders are recognizing the pitfalls of simply throwing more troops at complex insurgencies. Echoing General John P. Abizaid, the senior commander in the Middle East, who opposed augmenting US troop strength in Iraq without a commensurate emphasis on a political solution, General James L. Jones, NATO's supreme commander, recently said there was no purely military solution in Afghanistan. Jones emphasized the need for "strengthening local police forces, creating a viable justice system and state-building: fostering political and economic development on a national scale."

Currently, the ISAF consists of 32,000 troops and support personnel from 34 nations. Another 8,000 troops—mainly US-- are engaged in counterterrorist operations. Their higher profile in the area today, however, and operations which have claimed the lives of some 4,000 Taliban or foreign jihadists during the past year have provoked even more attacks and more recruits for the insurgency. At the NATO summit in Riga this past November Washington essentially asked its NATO allies to help pull its Afghan chestnuts out of the fire by committing more troops. There is still no evidence that Washington recognized its past errors of omission and commission.

US military priorities and their influence in NATO's strategy in Afghanistan appear to have fueled the insurgency and produced the most violent year of the war since 2001. The strategy has also retarded reconstruction of the state, the creation of a political infrastructure and the development of the Afghan economy and society (US military expenditures have been eleven times greater than economic outlays). Paradoxically, this emphasis has in the end undercut the underlying goal of the foreign military presence: the establishment of a sustainable security throughout the country by creating and training local police forces and reforming the creaky and corrupt judicial system as a precondition for state-building and economic development. Finally, it should be added that short-term measures such as relying on discredited and unpopular warlords, undisciplined militias, and draconian anti-terrorism legislation has further hindered the goal of constructing durable institutions.

The most dreadful and dangerous blunder of the Bush administration-- and perhaps in all US history-- was its decision to invade and occupy Iraq. This ill-conceived, unjustified misadventure has had serious negative consequences? for US foreign policy in the region and elsewhere-- including the hemorrhaging of US prestige throughout the Muslim world. This has complicated US policy in Afghanistan. The Bush administration's obsession with the false danger of Iraq drained military resources, economic reconstruction aid and political energy away from Afghanistan and the Pakistan border area. The diversion of attention to the dismal disaster in Iraq shifted the focus of the war on terrorism from the true geographical center of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and, together with Washington's kid gloves treatment of the Pakistani government of Pervez Musharaff, inhibited efforts to neutralize the Taliban and Al Qaeda in that critical zone.

Iraq and Afghanistan are billed as the frontline of the war on terrorism. Yet, there is a stunning lack of evidence that war, military operations, and armed occupation can effectively reduce terrorism or provide lasting security; on the contrary, an approach based primarily and simplistically on killing as many of the insurgents as possible appears, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, to be counterproductive. Brute military force against terrorism has proven to be as futile as classic counterinsurgency doctrine warns it is for confronting local armed movements. Terrorist attacks have increased three fold since 2001 and 50% now occur in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thomas Ricks in *Fiasco* (Penguin Press, 2006, p. 250) cites Lt Col. Christopher Holshek as saying "In counterinsurgency the battlespace isn't physical, it's psychological. The battle is for the people." Killing people is not the point. "[The] bottom line is you can kill every bad guy, and there will be two more tomorrow—until you start focusing on their support, active or passive, in the resident population. People are the prize not the playing field..." Lamentably, the current tactics of Western forces in Afghan often lead away from the strategic goal of winning popular support.

All US intelligence agencies now admit that the US military invasion of Iraq has “helped spawn a new generation of Islamic radicalism.” Likewise, there is mounting evidence that use of brute military force to crush the Afghan insurgency is a losing proposition. By launching a fierce campaign against the Taliban and labeling all resistance to perceived foreign occupation as Taliban-related, the ISAF and the US have conflated these groups in the minds of Afghans and thereby strengthened their common identification. Moreover, NATO’s aerial bombing has produced an inordinately high death toll of civilians, provoking an outcry even from the Karzai government which undoubtedly worries about the potential for stoking anti-Western sympathies and multiplying the enemies of a regime allied with the West. As a “senior Western military official” told *the Washington Post* on September 16, 2006, “We have killed a lot of Taliban, but they are not running out of foot soldiers, and for every one we kill, we create new families that hate us.” Finally, it should be remembered that the mere survival of the insurgency is in itself a triumph that boosts its prestige in the country. It is a commonplace among counterinsurgency specialists that “the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.”

The second track of the US war against terrorism is a campaign to promote freedom and democracy—an approach inspired and led by Washington and generally applauded by the developed world. However, the US military mission in Iraq and Afghanistan continues on automatic pilot while the credibility of Washington’s authority to lead a global struggle for democracy has been shattered and the moral imperative which drove it may be on its way to the dustbin of history.

Periodic elections (whether or not they are fully open), without social and economic justice will not solve the problems of many countries and are incapable of resolving the problems of fragile states like Afghanistan, or of eliminating ethnic cleansing and internecine violence. If democracy is to be more than window dressing in Afghanistan, the government needs to incorporate its people in a new and truly participatory political order. In order to act as effective deterrents to the lure of radical movements like the Taliban, such polities must deepen democracy by supporting a “democratic institutional infrastructure.” This necessarily includes a representative government of checks and balances with serious, legitimate opposition parties and diverse sectoral and constituent lobbies. The socio-political environment must also provide ethnic and religious pluralism, a free press, grass roots organizations, independent courts, and respect for both civil rights and minority opinion.

Time may be running out for the US and NATO to win the crucial battle for the hearts and minds of Afghans, many of whom were initially supportive of ousting the Taliban and welcomed western promises of democratization. Today, growing numbers of them see these forces as foreign interlopers, aligning themselves with corrupt or ruthless leaders, and wielding a blunt military instrument that results in the callous murder of innocent civilians. Many Afghans, especially in conflicted rural areas, feel less secure and discouraged by the lack of democracy, justice and development. While armed conflict may still last many years, the immediate imperative is to provide for the safety of the population, creating adequate political, police and judicial mechanisms to address its security concerns and legitimate grievances. Finally, the West must succeed in convincing the people of Afghanistan that western forces seek the common political goal of a democratic and inclusive state.

As did the Americans before them in Vietnam, the Soviets failed to understand the complex military mission they attempted to accomplish by employing raw force in Afghanistan. The price of that obtuseness during the decade of the 1980s was failure and a loss of

international credibility. There may still be a chance for the US and NATO to avoid that fate. It may yet be possible to disarm the offspring of decades of planting dragon's teeth in the rocky vastness of Afghanistan—but only by finally harnessing wisdom to power.

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