



“Après Nous, le Déluge”

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The Taliban have retaken control of Afghanistan. The quixotic, United States-led, 20-year nation-building project in Afghanistan is over. “I . . . don’t think anyone thought Afghanistan would turn so badly so quick,” a US official is quoted as saying recently.¹ If that is true, then no one read my book, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan: Why the Afghan National Security Forces Will Not Hold*, which in fact predicted these events in detail six years ago.² As I watched yet another foreign country imagined by the United States collapse and another foreign military built by the US Army disintegrate, I often thought of Paul Kattenberg, the State Department officer who tried unsuccessfully to alter the trajectory of American policy in Vietnam.³ By the early 1960s, Kattenberg had worked in and on Vietnam for more than a decade and knew the country better than anyone else in the United States.⁴ His expert advice was spurned by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Ambassador Frederick Nolting, none of whom had spent more than a few days in Vietnam and knew virtually nothing about the country. Kattenberg was marginalized for his efforts.⁵

In the summer of 2001, Afghanistan was part of my portfolio in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at the State Department. That summer, it was the last place on Earth anyone thought the United States would ever send combat troops. The September 11 attacks changed all that. For the next 20 years, I tried to prevent many of the mistakes that characterized the US political and military involvement in Afghanistan. As a State Department officer on the Afghanistan policy team, I wrote an official memorandum to Ambassador James Dobbins before the Bonn meetings in December 2001, urging that King Mohammad Zahir Shah and the Afghan monarchy be retained in a ceremonial role as a symbol of national unity and a source of legitimacy of government similar to that held by the emperor of Japan or the queen of England.⁶ Together with civilian American experts on Afghanistan with decades of experience dating back to the Soviet invasion, I also advocated against the creation of a strong, central government model for the country, a model that had no basis in Afghan history and culture. The US government delegation took the opposite path. The leader of the US delegation to the emergency Loya Jirga almost single-handedly dismantled the Afghan monarchy. According to eminent

Afghan political historian Dr. Thomas Barfield, the leader of the US delegation at the emergency Loya Jirga “strong-armed the king” into recusing himself from Afghan public life.⁷ As long-time Afghan scholars S. Frederick Starr and Marin Strmecki noted at the time, this effectively delegitimized the Afghan government.

*America’s envoys pressed the king to withdraw himself from consideration, in effect pre-empting the loya jirga from selecting the nation’s leader. The leading American envoy . . . then called a press conference to announce that the king would not accept appointment, thereby tainting the new government as a creation of foreign powers and causing delegates to lose face. Each would now return home without having had meaningful input into the crucial question facing the nation.*⁸

As Afghan analyst Michael Rubin noted, “As Afghans began discussing their future government, most assumed that Zahir Shah, the Afghan king ousted in a 1973 coup d’état, would play a role: He was an elder statesman, represented Afghanistan’s golden age, and was a unifying figure.”⁹ The Congressional Research Service found that “For most of his reign, Zahir Shah’s legitimacy was perhaps accepted by most of the Pashtuns and others who counted politically, both in Kabul and in the countryside. . . . Since the overthrow of Zahir Shah, each turn of the political wheel has reduced the legitimacy of the state.”¹⁰ The heavy US pressure to remove the Afghan king from Afghan state formation not only tainted the proceedings and angered many of the Pashtun delegates, it also eliminated the single best chance Afghanistan had for establishing a government that was broadly seen by the Afghan people as legitimate.¹¹

Largely as a result of this lack of traditional legitimacy of governance in the Weberian sense, the Afghan government was viewed as almost entirely illegitimate by its people, and the final Ghani government had the support of about 5 percent of the Afghan population. The US decision to impose a strong, central government model on a country that had never had one was almost equally ruinous.¹² As Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko said earlier this year, “Washington thought we would create a strong central government, and that was a mistake. . . . [I]f you talked to any experts on Afghanistan, they would have said, it was a mistake. The problem is we didn’t listen to any of them.”¹³ As former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy acknowledged recently,

*You look at the Afghan constitution that was created . . . and it was trying to create a Western democracy. . . . In retrospect, the United States and its allies got it really wrong from the very beginning. The bar was set based on our democratic ideals, not on what was sustainable or workable in an Afghan context.*¹⁴

In other words, state failure was baked into the cake in Bonn, but it didn’t have to be. Hindsight is fine, but as there were at the start of the Vietnam War, there were Americans who knew Afghanistan better before the Bonn process began.

Nor was the Afghan National Army (ANA)—built at the cost of some \$83 billion taxpayer dollars—preordained to be a paper tiger that would collapse immediately after our withdrawal.¹⁵ Before the creation of new programs and the transfer of many federal authorities for raising and funding foreign militaries from the State Department to the Department of Defense in the decade after the September 11 attacks, the State Department had a small voice in how money was spent on the Afghan National Army because initially the State Department held the purse strings for Afghan soldier salaries.¹⁶ Along with several State Department colleagues, I argued vociferously for a traditional, sustainable, provincially based Afghan army manned primarily by conscripts, in keeping with a century of Afghan military traditions.¹⁷ Afghan generals like former Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak did too. For more than a century, Afghan soldiers have served in their home provinces alongside men they knew—exactly as the US Army was structured from our earliest colonial days to the end of World War I.

But the Department of Defense took the opposite path. Authorization for funding for the salaries of Afghan National Army soldiers shifted to the DoD, and State’s limited influence over the program evaporated. In early 2002, the chairmanship of the small, interagency ANA policy group in Washington, DC, was vested in a US Air Force meteorologist—a major with no knowledge of Afghanistan and no experience with foreign armies, a reflection of the limited interest in the ANA program at this time.¹⁸ It was never a priority for manning. The US fill rate of trainer billets at the National Military Training Center – Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army training center in Kabul, was rarely above 50 percent for the duration of the ANA program, and most of the trainers had no prior experience in training foreign armies. Many were activated National Guard members who had never been outside the United States before, and a substantial number were men from noncombat branches of the US Army who were sent to Fort Carson for training in combat tactics before being sent to Afghanistan to teach them to Afghans.

From the start of the ANA program, the DoD was not interested in any State Department input and went to great lengths to withhold and conceal information about ANA attrition from State Department officials.¹⁹ The DoD was also not interested in any advice from senior Afghan military professionals like General Wardak—men with lifetimes of experience in their own army—and it was openly scornful of civilian expertise and historical precedent. “We know how to build armies,” we were told. As a result, for 18 years, annual attrition from the Afghan National Army was never below one-third of the entire force every 12 months.²⁰ It was like pouring water through a funnel. The result was an unmotivated, unsustainable, miniature model of the US Army that was almost entirely dependent on US logistics, maintenance contractors, air support—and money.²¹ Without them, the Afghan National Army collapsed, surrendering the country to the Taliban in eight days. The Iraqi National Army, which the United States spent over \$26 billion to create, literally disintegrated in a matter of hours in the face of a few ISIS terrorists.²² The United States spent approximately \$34 billion to build the South Vietnamese military, which included the fourth-largest air force in the world.²³ It lasted less than two years, even with massive ongoing US financial and materiel support.

During the conflict, I also wrote dozens of articles explaining why US military, political, and reconstruction tactics and methods in Afghanistan were wrong and were in fact fueling the rise of the Taliban phoenix.²⁴ Overuse of air strikes and culturally ignorant counterinsurgency tactics, I wrote, were pushing large swaths of rural Afghanistan to support the Taliban as the lesser of two evils.²⁵ My colleague Professor Thomas Johnson at the Naval Postgraduate School and I crisscrossed the United States for several years trying to discourage the practice of invasive house and compound searches in Afghanistan and reduce the number of arrests of Afghan civilians, many of whom were detained for years on the flimsiest of intelligence and identifications.²⁶ Again, the United States took the opposite path. The military doubled down on door kicking and “PUC-ing” thousands of Afghan men, sending them to Bagram or Guantanamo, or worse, and ignoring the ancient Afghan proverb, “Kill one enemy, make 10.”²⁷ No one in authority in the DoD we spoke to was interested in Pashtun culture or history and scoffed at where we advised these heavy-handed tactics would lead. “History starts today,” DoD officials told us.²⁸ It wasn’t long before the strict, homegrown Muslim Taliban was seen as an improvement over invading Christian foreigners, as has happened so many times before in Afghan history.²⁹

In other articles and other venues, I talked about how multiple scientific studies have proven that interpreted conversations are almost totally ineffectual in communicating in a foreign language, and I urged the extensive, multiyear language training of thousands of military personnel prior to deployment to Afghanistan.³⁰ Studies have shown at the very best, an interpreted conversation with a perfectly bilingual interpreter is a “50-percent conversation”—that is, 25 percent of the meaning and nuance of the spoken word is lost going in each direction. A study by Cesar Aranguri, Brad Davidson, and Robert Ramirez found, “Speech was significantly reduced and revised by the interpreter, resulting in an alteration of linguistic features such as content, meaning, reinforcement/validation, repetition, and affect. In addition, visits that included an interpreter had virtually no rapport-building ‘small talk,’ which typically enables the physician to gain comprehensive patient history, learn clinically relevant information, and increase emotional engagement in treatment.”³¹

Although some senior military leaders, including Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Lieutenant General Michael Vane, did recognize the language problem and sought to address it, scattershot approaches like the Af-Pak Hands language program to correct this fundamental, mission-critical deficiency were “haphazardly thrown together,” as one Army officer phrased it, and neither the Army nor the Marine Corps were institutionally willing or able to alter course fundamentally and train significant numbers of linguists for either Afghanistan or Iraq.³² Fly-by-night contractors in Afghanistan hired hundreds of ethnic-Tajik “interpreters” who often knew only pidgin English and pidgin Pashto to communicate with Pashtun tribal elders in the Taliban heartland.³³ In 20 years, only a handful of frontline American combat personnel (that is, personnel primarily assigned to patrolling, searching, and working with Afghan civilians in the rural areas and not primarily engaged in rear-area intelligence work) were trained to speak fluent Pashto, the language of the Taliban and the Pashtun tribes.³⁴ The Foreign Service

Institute classifies Pashto as a Category IV language and stipulates approximately one year is the minimum period of language training to achieve a basic level of conversation competency. For the small percentage of US military who received some language training before deployment, the course length was either eight or 16 weeks.³⁵ Nine years into the war, the US Army had a total of 32 Pashto language training slots per year.³⁶ As a result, the “war of ideas” in Afghanistan was fought between skilled, native Taliban propagandists adroitly weaving nationalist and religious narratives within their own cultural milieu—and foreigners babbling meaningless, unintelligible gibberish through unqualified, rude, and disrespectful Tajik interpreters.³⁷ Scientific studies prove that every conversation in Afghanistan that employed an interpreter to attempt to convey more than basic, immediate, tactical information to Pashto-speaking civilians was a waste of time, money, and effort.³⁸ If you want to communicate with people in a foreign country and earn their trust, learn their language.

As it does for most Americans who served in Afghanistan since the September 11 attacks, watching the events there today often creates powerful emotions, but, for me, a sense of vindication is not one of them.³⁹ The collapse of the 20-year US folly in Afghanistan is an epic tragedy that will have devastating consequences for the Afghan people for decades to come. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have already been killed and wounded in addition to the 2,451 American servicemen and servicewomen who died during the conflict. Many more Afghans will die in the months and years ahead. I cycle through anger, sadness, and incredulity at the dishonesty of American military and civilian officials who presided over the debacle, didn't listen, and told Americans for decades that we were making progress.⁴⁰ For me there is also a sense of overwhelming frustration: it didn't have to be this way. As they were before the Vietnam War, there were Americans in 2001 who understood Afghanistan and counseled a different path, beginning well before the Bonn process began. Instead, as it did in Vietnam, the Department of Defense and the Department of State entrusted the helm of the conflict to people with no real knowledge of Afghanistan and who never seriously questioned the ship's heading. If the policies were “reviewed,” they were reviewed by the same people with the same vested interests who were already bought into the existing policy road map. In other words, Afghanistan groupthink.⁴¹

As we turn away from Afghanistan now to face the growing challenge of China in Asia, we will discover Afghanistan's neighbors have watched these 20 years of unforced American errors, observed our precipitous withdrawal, and drawn conclusions about allying themselves with the United States in the years ahead. If we think we can compartmentalize the outcome in Afghanistan and firewall it away from our allies' (and potential allies') larger policy concerns in Asia, we are gravely mistaken.⁴² Whether we like it or not, for many countries in Asia and elsewhere, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan raises serious doubts about US promises and reliability, as did the withdrawal from South Vietnam.⁴³ We keep making the same mistakes over and over again—Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan—and we never seem to learn anything from them. Perhaps it is the nature of the fabric of US foreign policy to be woven by politicians from the comfortable cloth of political agendas rather than the coarse twine of

hardheaded, practical analysis. But the civilian experts and academics who can make those kinds of analyses and prevent these kinds of tragedies should at least not be deliberately marginalized or ignored, as was the case with Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Clemenceau was right: “War is too important to be left to the generals.” It is also too important to be left to political appointees.

ENDNOTES

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