



F-100D Super Sabre aircraft over South Vietnam

Political-Military Lessons from U.S. Operations in Vietnam and Afghanistan

BY MICHAEL J. WILLIAMS

Using history to understand the present can be a useful tool, but it is also a limited one.¹ Historical cases are not identical to contemporary ones, and there is a danger of conflating challenges in such a manner that, rather than illuminating a present challenge, history obfuscates it. This problem tends to be evident in the inaccurate use of analogies by policymakers, commentators, and analysts. Such may be the case in the contemporary American debate over the state of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Since President Barack Obama came to office in 2009 and deployed an additional 60,000 troops to Afghanistan in the first year of his administration, the debate over continued U.S. involvement has been dogged by analogies to Vietnam. But it is not readily apparent that Vietnam is an appropriate analogy for understanding the current challenge the United States faces in Afghanistan.

Analysis through analogy tends to be of limited use. As Yuen Foong Khong argued in his landmark *Analogies at War*, “More often than not, decision-makers invoke inappropriate analogues that not only fail to illuminate the new situation but also mislead by emphasizing superficial and irrelevant parallels.”² Analogies can help at an early stage, but at some point they become destructive, as Rand Spiro’s study indicates: “Simple analogies help novices gain a preliminary grasp of difficult, complex concepts but may later become serious impediments to fuller, more correct understandings.”³ Khong argues that it was such analogical reasoning that failed to deter the United States from entering Vietnam. In his study of the supposed rationale for the Vietnam War, the French experience in Indo-China and the American experience in the stalemate of the Korean War should have compelled Washington not to become militarily involved. But the use of analogical reasoning based on the appeasement of Nazi Germany at the Munich Conference led to a different policy.⁴ Such reasoning currently dominates much of the discussion related to Vietnam War–Afghanistan War comparisons. The vast majority of op-eds and short “analytical” pieces that look at the Vietnam–Afghanistan comparison cite a variety of reasons why Vietnam is not

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Afghanistan or why Vietnam is Afghanistan, but both sets of analyses fall under the rubric of “simplified comparative analogy” rendering them useless in terms of understanding the evolution of the conflict and lessons to learn. They retain potent political power, however.

One can read most anything one desires in the “Afghanistan is Vietnam” analogy. Does it mean that U.S. military leadership today is fighting the wrong war like General William Westmoreland did in Vietnam? Does it mean that U.S. soldiers today are drugged out of their minds and fragging officers as they did in Vietnam? Does it mean that Afghanistan is unwinnable because of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan, similar to Communist safe havens in Cambodia or Laos? Does it mean that the war is being won on the ground but is domestically unsustainable back in the United States and on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) home fronts? The fact of the matter is that labeling Afghanistan as being the same as the war in Vietnam is a potent charge that deserves more investigation—not only to determine the validity of the comparison, but also to distill some lessons from the two conflicts that political-military policymakers can learn from.

This article is not specifically concerned with counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. An impressive COIN literature has developed over the last 50 years, and in the last decade alone, the number of writings on COIN has skyrocketed. The vast majority of these studies, however, are micro-level analyses—they are rightfully concerned with the mechanics of COIN campaigns, but this means there is a gap in our macro-level understanding of such conflicts. Thus, when such studies posit a pro-COIN argument along the lines of “the British won their counterinsurgency in Malaya,” they

often fail to appreciate the strategic context in which the mechanics of the COIN campaign took place. These studies are overwhelmingly tactical in nature rather than strategic in outlook. The success of a COIN campaign is as much about how the political-military leadership views a conflict and pilots the strategic level as how the first lieutenant conducts COIN in theater. In fact, one could argue quite convincingly that the first lieutenant has no chance of success if the political-military leadership sets him up to fail.

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This article is therefore concerned with the political-military interface and the resultant strategy (or lack thereof) that animates U.S. foreign policy rather than the mechanics of COIN. The mechanics of COIN are not the sole determinate of success. Indeed, as we have seen in Iraq, it is possible to secure military success as General David Petraeus did with the 2006 surge while still seemingly failing to achieve strategic success, a fact apparent in the daily press.⁵ Only time will tell if political stability takes root in Iraq, which would then validate the entire U.S. approach to the second half of the Iraq War.

This article, which is part of a larger study of how political-military leadership in the United States wages war, illustrates that Afghanistan is most certainly not Vietnam in terms of how the campaign was conducted. The two cases are also highly distinct in terms of ideological composition, terrain, and enemy command and control—to name but a few

examples. However, this comparative analysis indicates that, while they have undertaken numerous positive nation-building projects over the last decade, the United States and NATO will accomplish little lasting strategic effect as a result of the 11-year campaign in Afghanistan. Allies and the United States are in a rush for the exits.⁶

Whether the United States and its NATO Allies manage to stave off a downward spiral of chaos in Afghanistan as they draw down forces remains to be seen. The similarity in outcome is not because contemporary policymakers made the same mistakes they did in Vietnam. While some similar errors were committed, the U.S. military in particular learned much from Vietnam, which is reflected in operations in Afghanistan. The latter operations are significantly different. In that regard, the analogical comparison is faulty. But while the military learned relatively well, it has not resulted in strategic success. It is apparent from a historical reading of the two conflicts that the sum of the politico-military challenges are such that strategic outcome of U.S. and NATO involvement in Afghanistan will be similar to that in Vietnam. There is an exceedingly high probability that there will be little positive and lasting strategic effect. If the United States is lucky, Afghanistan may end up like Lebanon.

Lesson One: Clearly Defined Goals and Strategy Are Necessary

American policy written in the 1950s and 1960s was made in the context of the Cold War struggle between the United States and Soviet Union. The decision to intervene in Afghanistan in 2001 was taken at the peak of America's unipolar moment in 2001. While the context and historical periods are different, the United States made many of the same

substantive mistakes. In both cases, there was more of a slide toward full-scale intervention than a deliberate choice. In Vietnam, the United States saw regional/local issues against the relief of a wider global conflict.⁷ The Lyndon Johnson administration did not consider how prior U.S. involvement to support the French colonial administration would easily lend itself to coloring by the Communists as an imperial American war against the Vietnamese people. Senator Mike Mansfield was one of many who warned the Johnson administration of that danger.⁸ Such a development would inordinately increase opposition to U.S. forces, which would intensify as the war continued. A failure to distinguish the Communist-nationalist movement in Vietnam from the wider context of the Cold War would result in a terrible strategic mistake.

The civilians in the Johnson administration, however, did not slide the United States into war alone. Indeed, the civilian policymakers favored the use of airpower without a fighting force on the ground to compel North Vietnam to stop supporting a Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. As a State Department cable dated January 6, 1965, reported, there were "a large number of installations in which we have important US interests. They total 16 important airfields, 9 communications facilities, one large [petroleum, oil, and lubricants] storage area and 289 separate installations where US personnel work or live. Any one of these is conceivably vulnerable to attack."⁹ General Westmoreland requested 75,000 U.S. personnel in this telegram, noting that the large airfields alone required "up to six battalions of US ground forces."¹⁰

Never happy with the civilian's belief in the efficacy of limited war, John Lewis Gaddis posits that the military argued for

this “entering wedge” to secure a future Presidential mandate for a combat operation on the ground. The plan worked. In April 1965, President Johnson approved a combat role for U.S. forces to secure installations. McGeorge Bundy authorized two brigades (approximately 3,500 troops) to guard Da Nang. By the end of 1967, there were 486,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. Westmoreland would pursue a strategy of search and kill against the Communists, which Andrew Krepinevich notes “was nothing more than a natural outgrowth of [the U.S. Army’s] organization recipe for success—playing to America’s strong suits, material abundance and technological superiority, and the nation’s profound abhorrence of U.S. casualties.”¹¹

In 2001, the George W. Bush administration committed a similar sin, confusing/confusing the weakness of Afghanistan in civil war and the subsequent rise of the Taliban (which had been inadvertently fomented by the United States) with a radical, globalized terrorist network.¹² That led the administration to aim its efforts elsewhere rather than concentrating on getting Afghanistan right and addressing the regional and local issues that enabled the rise of the Taliban and the manipulation of Afghanistan by Pakistan.

The strategy that the United States would implement as a result of this calculation and subsequent policy laid the groundwork for the outbreak of the insurgency in 2006.¹³ Although a clear decision was made to attack Afghanistan in October 2001, the Bush administration had no postconflict plans to develop the strategic situation to American advantage. Washington had repeatedly tried to apprehend Osama bin Laden since the 1990s, and the main goal was to dismantle al Qaeda.¹⁴ At one of the early principals meetings, Secretary of

State Colin Powell argued that for the impending mission in Afghanistan, “It is not the goal at the outset to change the regime but to get the regime to do the right thing. We hit al Qaeda targets because they were used for terrorism in the past. . . . We’ll sneak up on the Taliban issue.”¹⁵ Recalling other interventions, including Vietnam, there was a hesitancy to put boots on the ground. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted, though, that such an action sent a message: “Boots on the ground has a value in and of itself, it gives a different image of the United States. We’re not invading; we’re not going to stay. But we need to start creating an environment in which Afghanistan becomes inhospitable to al Qaeda and the Taliban.”¹⁶ Therefore, when NATO became involved in Afghanistan as a way to provide an “exit” from the impending U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States was dragged back into a war that the Bush administration believed it had completed and walked away from. A critical error in both Vietnam and Afghanistan was strategic and ethnocentric myopia. Perhaps this was unavoidable and is only readily identifiable in retrospect; however, in both cases, there were countless warnings not to simplify the problem.

The failure to develop clear strategic goals would put the cart before the horse in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. As the United States was slowly dragged into Vietnam, the Johnson administration and its military leaders believed that it could achieve its strategic objective through the use of technology. Civilians thought that coercive airpower would save American lives and enable Washington to pressure the North Vietnamese economically. There was a robust belief among civilian policymakers in the Johnson administration that technology could get the job done at low risk.

Policymakers believed that not using an invasion force posed less of a risk in provoking a full-on response from the Soviets or Chinese.

While the military leadership and the organizational culture of the Army thought an airpower strategy was faulty, they also thought technology gave the United States the upper hand against a ragtag Third World military force.¹⁷ A similar strategic error was made in Afghanistan. The Bush administration, in the grips of the Rumsfeld revolution at the Pentagon, believed the United States could do more with less. Technology would enable the United States to fight the conflict in a “revolutionary” manner. Some observers went so far as to argue that the new “Afghan model” of war enabled the United States to

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leverage coercive diplomacy more because it required fewer American troops to facilitate the transition to stability and democracy.¹⁸ The result was a plan to deliver a crushing blow to the Taliban through the use of airpower and conventional ground forces.

The empirics of the campaign illustrate that, to the contrary, the U.S.-led war was not novel, as Steven Biddle has argued. While the technological edge of American forces was impressive and provided an advantage, in the end the campaign was a “surprisingly orthodox air-ground theatre campaign where heavy fire support decided a contest between two land forces.”¹⁹ H.R. McMaster reinforced this assessment with his assertion that the Pentagon’s “self-delusion about the character of future conflict weakened US efforts in Afghanistan

and Iraq as war plans and decisions based on flawed visions of war confronted reality.” Thus, contrary to some arguments that the war was a success, the Afghan model did little other than push the Taliban over the border into Pakistan. The Bush administration, similar to the Johnson administration, forced its opponent off the conventional field of battle and into the margins of guerrilla warfare. Both the Taliban and the Viet Cong along with the North Vietnamese army began to conduct irregular warfare against U.S. forces. Again, the character of the two wars is different, but the nature of the U.S. mistake was the same. The Bush administration, like the Johnson administration 40 years earlier, believed it could win a war with little economic, manpower, and materiel cost because of the superiority of American technology. Instead, both administrations simply forced their opponents to fight in a different fashion that reduced and nearly eliminated the conventional superiority of American forces following initial combat operations.

Many of those who decry the comparison of Vietnam and Afghanistan argue that Westmoreland never understood the nature of the war he was fighting. This is the argument presented by the “counterinsurgency school” of the Vietnam war, embodying thinkers such as Andrew Krepinevich, Guenter Lewy, Lewis Sorley, and John Nagl, who criticize Westmoreland for instituting a purely “search and destroy” approach to the war.²⁰ A revisionist argument by historians such as John Carland, Dale Andrade, Andrew Birtle, and Mark Moyar counter this position by stating that the threat posed by the main units of the North Vietnamese army required Westmoreland to conduct a conventional campaign.²¹ In the revisionist argument,

Westmoreland fought a semi-counterinsurgency campaign fused with a conventional search and destroy mission against North Vietnamese army forces in South Vietnam.

These arguments seem weak, however, when one considers that by 1967, conventional North Vietnamese soldiers numbered only 55,000 whereas there were 245,000 irregular combatants in South Vietnam.²² Westmoreland's "small war" was led by an array of U.S. agencies including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), U.S. Agency for International Development, and U.S. Information Agency. They were eventually unified into what the Johnson administration would call Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), which would become a joint civil-military program led by Robert Komer. Security was required to facilitate development, and indigenous South

Vietnamese forces were failing to protect villagers. To prevent the coercion of villagers by insurgents (and to stop villages from willingly offering support), the military initiated the Combined Action Program (CAP) in 1965. Although the program was a success, in the words of Max Boot, it was "a sideshow."

Casualties among U.S. forces in CAP were 50 percent lower than in the conventional forces, and British COIN expert Sir Robert Thompson proclaimed it "the best idea I have seen in Vietnam, and it worked superbly."²³ Unfortunately, Westmoreland never allocated more than 2,500 troops to the operation. He wrote, "I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village, only in those not yet pacified." But as Boot notes, putting a squad in every hamlet "would have required no more than 167,000 troops—a fraction of the 540,000 eventually



U.S. Army (Justin P. Merelli)

Afghan checkpoint at Pakistan border, Paktika Province

deployed.”²⁴ Westmoreland talked the talk of COIN, but he fought the war of U.S. military convention. American forces in Vietnam fought the wrong war. If one looks to international relations theory for a general explanation of why the weak win wars, Ivan Arreguin-Toft’s work is an obvious place to start.²⁵ The war in Vietnam was lost, he argues, because in his typology, there are two types of strategies: direct strategies where the opponent’s ability to wage war is attacked, and indirect strategies where the will to wage war is attacked. The United States used a direct approach against an adversary using an indirect approach and therefore lost.

Commanders in Afghanistan have been far more adept in identifying the type of war being fought even if their analyses were slow to respond to events. The organizational culture of the U.S. Army favored a return to clear-cut wars as embodied in the Powell-Weinberger Doctrine that dominated policy until the mid-1990s.²⁶ Moving away from this mentality was difficult, and the Army adapted slowly following the initial military operations in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), but it did adapt in a manner dissimilar to the Vietnam experience. At the outset, NATO thought the mission in Afghanistan was state-building while the United States was focused on Operation *Enduring Freedom*, a terrorist hunting campaign. By 2006, it was evident that a different approach was needed.²⁷ U.S. and NATO forces worked to provide the same type of development as the CORDS program, and they ran into the same challenge of providing security to the local population. The vast majority of U.S. and NATO forces placed in Afghanistan were significantly more sophisticated in terms of people-centric COIN war as opposed to the vast majority of the forces

placed in Vietnam. This is a clear and marked difference between the approaches.

But whereas Westmoreland had enough forces to put a squad in every village and to conduct a proper COIN campaign *if he wanted to*, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan has been woefully understaffed from the day it began.²⁸ As President George W. Bush’s spokesman Ari Fleischer stated at the beginning of American operations in Afghanistan:

*The President’s position is unchanged about the use of the United States combat forces. The President continues to believe the purpose of the military is to be used to fight and win wars, and not to engage in peacekeeping of that nature. Having said that, the United States is committed to the long-term of Afghanistan, including its security and its safety. That’s one of the reasons that the United States is providing the amount of aid—funding aid we are giving to Afghanistan, the training aid that we’re providing to Afghanistan.*²⁹

The Bush administration had gone with the light footprint strategy, but over time the mission morphed from ousting the Taliban and hunting down terrorists to something akin to nation-building. But the lack of resources made this mission nearly impossible. Afghanistan received the least financial and military assistance of any postcombat operation since World War II, exactly as it had after the end of the CIA’s work with the mujahideen in 1989. In his accounting of how the insurgency developed, RAND’s Seth Jones illustrated the comparative barrenness of U.S. engagement well.

In U.S.-occupied Germany following World War II, Jones notes that there were

89.3 U.S. soldiers per 1,000 German soldiers. In the 1990s, there were 17.5 troops per 1,000 inhabitants in Bosnia and 19.3 per thousand in Kosovo. In East Timor, the ratio was 9.6 to 1,000. In Afghanistan, there were only 1.6 troops per 1,000 Afghans. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 with 150,000 soldiers (202 Iraqis per American) diverted valuable U.S. and European resources with disastrous consequences. Thus, even if it wanted to, ISAF was poorly placed to conduct COIN operations. Initial European deployments were far too small to adequately secure the population in what was still a hostile operating environment. Commanders allowed themselves to be strung out across the countryside in a vain effort to protect everything, thereby protecting nothing and opening them up to a series of prolonged campaigns to hold on to insignificant villages such as the British did in Musa Qala. In 2006, the situation was so bad that

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Taliban forces actually attacked Canadian and European forces in a conventional manner.³⁰ The Taliban/al Qaeda forces were destroyed, but NATO forces were essentially pinned down. As the NATO ISAF Commander General David Richards noted in his testimony to the British Defence Select Committee in 2007, choosing to fight a pitched battle against NATO was the best thing the Taliban could have done as it allowed the Alliance to concentrate manpower and firepower on the Taliban forces.³¹

To overcome limited numbers of troops, the United States and NATO relied on

airpower, which wrought civilian casualties. NATO air strikes accidentally killed far more people than Taliban bombings of bazaars. Thus they did not help the international forces to win over the population. Being no fans of the Taliban, the people chose to sit on the fence. U.S. military leadership decided in 2008–2009 that more troops were required to get the job done, but that followed on the heels of 8 years of near stagnation, and the numbers of troops eventually allocated meant they could still not adequately conduct the COIN operation they believed was necessary to win the fight for “hearts and minds.”³²

Despite having recently rewritten the COIN manual that specified one counterinsurgent per 40–50 people, the U.S. number was far below the ratio that stipulated a force nearer to 500,000. That begs one to ask why write a manual only to ignore it. The military was clearly making do with what forces it was being allocated, but given the political impossibility of committing a properly sized force, would it not have been best to pursue a different strategy rather than the same strategy poorly resourced? Complicating matters, U.S. military leadership advocated for the surge strategy in Afghanistan without considering the wider geopolitical picture involving Pakistan and India. The argument for COIN in Afghanistan took place within a strategic bubble, one the Obama administration also seemingly chose not to address. The new strategy approved by President Obama was contingent on Pakistan taking proactive measures against the Taliban, but in Pakistan’s opinion, that would have undermined its international security. Thus, the U.S. strategy was paradoxical. No matter how appropriate the military model of the conflict (COIN) might be, the strategic outcome may be very different than

expected because of external, rather than internal factors.

General Westmoreland chose not to wage a small war against the Communists; instead, he waged a large conventional war. Even though he had enough forces to attempt a COIN operation, that was never his operational priority. In Afghanistan, the strategy, first off, has never been as settled as it was in Vietnam. Westmoreland appraised the situation, instituted a plan, and stuck with it. In Afghanistan, commanders have rotated in and out every few months, and the strategy, while being supposedly population-centric since at least 2006, has meandered depending on the personal view of the commander at the time. For example, the period under British General David Richards was regarded as a high point of a people-centric approach despite too few resources, while his successor, U.S. General Dan McNeill, focused more on the use of airpower to attack the Taliban, moving ISAF away from a successful COIN strategy.

Despite differences in approaches to the conflict, the nature of the problem was the same: the United States failed to win the hearts and minds of the population enough to decisively affect the outcome of the war. Some have noted that the Afghan insurgency is not a broad-based insurgency. This is true. But the Communist insurgency was not initially broad based at all: the north fomented it with northern transplants to the south. Furthermore, for the strategic outcome, it does not matter if the population does not endorse the Taliban as much as it matters that they are onside with NATO/U.S. forces. In Afghanistan, much of the population has chosen to sit on the fence rather than root out the Taliban because NATO and American forces have been unable to provide enough security in the most volatile part

of the country. Victory for the Taliban, like the Communists in Vietnam, is not a matter of winning any battles against the United States; instead, the goal is to wear the opponent down. Therefore, the difference in scale between the two conflicts and the scale of the forces fighting the United States is irrelevant. So as long as the Taliban can continue to harangue U.S. and NATO forces, they can achieve their attritional objective to wear down the will to fight in the United States.

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Lesson Two: External Safe Havens Cannot Be Tolerated

The objective of guerrilla forces is to win control of the population, but in Vietnam and in Afghanistan there is the added aspect of using irregular warfare to wear down the will of the United States to fight the war. This ability to outlast the enemy is greatly enhanced in conflicts where the insurgents have access to external refuge. In the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese Army Commander General Vo Nguyen Giap counted on the fact that U.S. forces would not pursue him into North Vietnam—and that they would not pursue or bomb his forces in staging areas outside of Vietnam. Giap made extensive use of Laos and Cambodia to evade U.S. forces, which prompted the United States to become covertly involved in these countries.³³ The Parrot's Beak and the Fishhook in Cambodia provided Giap with staging areas only 30 miles from Saigon.³⁴ He was able to build up supplies and mass his forces and move them in and out of the

conflict zone with near impunity. Once outside of South Vietnam, he knew his supplies, logistics, and regular and irregular fighters were safe.

In Laos, the Communists made extensive use of a network of trails that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Stretching from North Vietnam through Laos and on into South Vietnam, the route provided Giap with an unparalleled advantage in his campaign against the U.S. forces. He also benefited from a largely untouched homeland.³⁵ Although the United States was bombing North Vietnam in an attempt to coerce the Communists to the negotiating table, it was pursuing a strategy that slowly ratcheted up the pressure on the North. The United States did not blanket bomb the North or attack the industrial centers there. The bombing did little to hamper Giap's largely irregular forces in any way. Without U.S. forces on the ground in North Vietnam, Giap was mostly free to move about as he wished.

Even if the bombing of North Vietnam had been more intense, Robert Pape notes that it most likely would not have done much to hinder the Communist war effort. The Communist forces in South Vietnam were extracting large amounts of resources from the South and did not rely on supplies from Hanoi. Meanwhile, American forces pursued a conventional strategy based on the destruction of enemy forces while the Communists waged guerrilla warfare to gain control over the population. Air interdiction is aimed at knocking out the capacity of the enemy to fight, but the Communists did not rely heavily on resources from the North, and Giap also benefited from his sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. The Communist forces were never put on the defensive by the American war until Richard

Nixon shifted the American strategy in 1972 to include bombing of Cambodia and Laos. Nixon's strategy would prove more successful; in March 1972, the Communists transitioned from phase II to phase III of a guerrilla war—that is, they went conventional. Because North Vietnamese forces began with conventional operations, they were logistically more vulnerable. The Communists needed more equipment and munitions, and the inelastic nature of the conventional campaign meant that shortages in the supply chain could be exploited.³⁶ As such Nixon, through airpower and the use of conventional forces, was able to stalemate the Communists and compel them to the Paris peace talks.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces faced a similar challenge to the one they needed to confront in Vietnam. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan runs approximately 1,640 inhospitable miles.³⁷ This rugged landscape is home to a diverse number of ethnicities, the largest composition of which is Pashtun. Incidentally, it is the Pashtuns living north of the border in Afghanistan who offer the most resistance to NATO and U.S. forces. Large portions of the Pashtuns south of the border in Pakistan live in what is known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This portion of Pakistan is loosely governed by Islamabad and has historically been considered a rather ungovernable part of the country. The precedent for FATA stretches back to British colonialism when Victorian imperialists decided that the Pashtun tribes were far too ungovernable to attempt to directly rule the region. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and subsequent defeat of the Taliban, many of the guerrillas took shelter in the FATA.

A cable from the U.S. Embassy dated November 13, 2002, noted that U.S. firepower

had pushed the Taliban, al Qaeda, and foreign fighters over the border. It also noted that while Pakistan and the United States agreed on the endstate, they did not agree on the means and that Pakistan was focused on the “long term.” In the FATA, Pakistan would need to gain “firepower superiority” over the local tribes before effective operations could be conducted. There was, following the U.S. assault on Afghanistan, a “window of opportunity” for the Pakistani military to work with the tribal leaders to apprehend Taliban.³⁸ But this window was small if it ever existed. The Pakistan military lost hundreds of troops between 2004 and 2007 as it attempted to control the region before President Pervez Musharraf decided to pursue “peace deals” with the tribes. This ungovernable space in Pakistan coupled with an open border means that Taliban and al Qaeda insurgents can move easily in and out of Afghanistan. U.S. forces have been using drones to target al Qaeda and Taliban leadership in Pakistan against the wishes of the Pakistani government, but targeted assassinations cannot dissolve the insurgent network in Pakistan that supports the insurgency against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

To make matters worse, the Taliban does not just benefit from an ungovernable space in Pakistan; it also receives direct support from elements of the government, military, and intelligence service in Pakistan. It is difficult to determine to what extent the Taliban is officially supported by Islamabad, but it is an open secret that such cooperation exists. This has been the case since the early 1990s when Islamabad began supporting the Taliban as the group in Afghanistan that Pakistan felt it could “control.” With a civil war raging in Afghanistan, Pakistan wanted to ensure a friendly government in Kabul that would

be an asset against India and other regional concerns. As a U.S. Intelligence Information Report from October 1996 details, “Pakistan’s ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] is heavily involved in Afghanistan.”³⁹ Islamabad consequently provided material and additional support to the Taliban. It also used commodities such as wheat and the fuel trade in attempts to control the Taliban.⁴⁰ A recent leaked NATO report based on 27,000 interviews

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with 4,000 Taliban, al Qaeda, and other foreign fighters details official support for insurgents from Pakistan. For example, the report notes, “Senior Taliban representatives, such as Nasiruddin Haqqani, maintain residences in the immediate vicinity of ISI headquarters in Islamabad.” One detainee perhaps put it best: “The Taliban are not Islam. The Taliban are Islamabad.”⁴¹

The problem for the United States is that no matter how well crafted a COIN strategy is, unless the United States can stop Pakistani assistance, the campaign will fail. Two factors work against U.S. interests in this regard. First, the Taliban is an indigenous Afghan entity. For better or worse, it is part of Afghanistan, and it seems dubious that the United States can eradicate it any more than the British could eradicate the Irish Republican Army. Of course, unlike the British, the United States does not consider Afghanistan part of the Nation, and thus this war is ultimately a peripheral rather than central interest in the minds of Americans, making it difficult for the United States to wear down the Taliban

to negotiations. Second, a strong Afghanistan with a sound military is Pakistan's nightmare—particularly if India is involved in Afghanistan. Pakistan has no interest in being surrounded by “hostile” states and thus works to utilize the Taliban as a strategic lever of Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. Although this fact was widely discussed by military and civilian officials during the Obama administration review, the military still disregarded this absolute strategic fact when pushing its COIN strategy upon the President. Although civilians were cognizant of the wider strategy situation, the President found himself in a difficult position domestically. Having solicited the “expert advice” of the military, it was then nearly impossible to overrule the military without a negative domestic political blowback. The result was a hybrid strategy that assented to additional troops but confined the deployment to a specific timeline. This policy was the result of the policy process and political realities; it was not necessarily the best strategy.

Lesson Three: Corruption and Legitimacy Matter

Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan is that they are all ostensibly to support the government of Afghanistan to win the will of the people. But the Afghan central government is riddled with corruption, and corruption is essentially a way of life across the country. The United States attempted to instill legitimacy in Afghanistan through elections, but as Mark Moyar has written, what one does with power is more important than how one acquires it. In Afghanistan, the government has often not done as much for the people, or at least is not perceived to have done as much, as the shadow Taliban government.

Afghans want a government that performs traditional administrative functions, such as resolving disputes, in a just fashion. If someone violates their irrigation rights, they want the authorities to exact the standard fine of 31 pounds of wheat. If a thief takes one of their goats, they expect that the culprit will be found and compelled to transfer five of his goats to the victim. In such administrative matters, the Taliban's shadow governments have generally proven more energetic and impartial than Hamid Karzai's government.⁴²

Corruption in Afghanistan is problematic when it means the denial of justice to the people resulting in a collapse of government legitimacy. The rampant corruption there is reminiscent of the corruption within South Vietnam that undermined U.S. efforts 50 years ago. Much like modern day Afghanistan, the leadership of South Vietnam was to a large extent corrupt and delegitimized in the eyes of the people, a process that we further reinforced by an inappropriate military strategy in Vietnam. The legitimacy crisis in Afghanistan is actually worse than it was in South Vietnam although, in both cases, corruption weakened support for the governments supported by the United States. To remain in power, Nguyen Van Thieu relied on a military junta that was distanced from the people. Thieu, like Karzai, was more concerned with his own interests than the national interest. As the Americans pumped in supplies to the CORDS program—bulldozers, fire engines, concrete, tin, surgical instruments, foodstuffs—an estimated 25 percent went “missing” into the black market.⁴³ Although Thieu was never directly linked to any corruption racket himself, his administration presided over governmental rackets in prostitution, extortion, and drug-trafficking to name but a few. As one U.S. advisor explained,

"We had to make sure that the [Army of the Republic of Vietnam was not] alienating the local population by stealing their food."⁴⁴

Endemic corruption and legitimate governance in Afghanistan are highly problematic given that the strategy advocated by General Petraeus is based on winning the hearts and minds of the people, which is difficult at best when these people do not trust their "elected" government. While much of the problem in establishing legitimate government can be put on the leaders, the lack of a coherent ISAF

the legitimacy crisis in Afghanistan is actually worse than it was in South Vietnam

strategy that was well resourced has damaged efforts to provide an alternative to the harsh justice of the Taliban. The legitimacy problem has been an issue in Afghanistan for nearly three decades, although the challenges and varied ways of establishing legitimate governance in this region go back centuries.⁴⁵ Although a central goal of the ISAF state-building enterprise was to build a legitimate government, little has changed. An International Crisis Group report from June 2011 noted, "Nearly a decade after the U.S.-led military intervention, little has been done to challenge the perverse incentives of continued conflict in Afghanistan . . . the economy as a result is increasingly dominated by a criminal oligarchy of politically connected businessmen." A 2010 report from the International Crisis Group on the state of the Afghan judiciary bluntly opined, "Afghanistan's justice system is in a catastrophic state of repair" and that despite nearly a decade of international efforts, the majority of Afghans have little to no access to the judiciary, which is full of endemic corruption.⁴⁶

It is not just elements of the government that are corrupt; it goes all the way to the top. As former Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry wrote in an October 2009 cable, "The meeting with [Ahmed Wali Karzai] highlights one of our major challenges in Afghanistan: how to fight corruption and connect the people to their government, when the key government officials are themselves corrupt." Reporting on the cables, the *New York Times* reported, "President Hamid Karzai and his attorney general 'allowed dangerous individuals to go free or re-enter the battlefield without ever facing an Afghan court.' The embassy was particularly concerned that Mr. Karzai pardoned five border police officers caught with 124 kilograms (about 273 pounds) of heroin and intervened in a drug case involving the son of a wealthy supporter."⁴⁷

One can hardly expect a president who was elected to office in a rigged election to worry about corruption in his country. In the 2009 elections, ballot-box stuffing and intimidation were rife. The United Nations-approved Electoral Complaints Commission discredited so many votes that incumbent Karzai fell below 50 percent to avoid a runoff election.⁴⁸ Karzai's family also abused the position of the president to forge lucrative relationships and procure powerful positions in the government.⁴⁹ Karzai actively appointed family members to such positions to create an oligarchy of powerful families. For example, the husband of a Karzai woman was appointed a senior foreign affairs advisor to the president despite having previously only worked in retail shops in Leesburg, Virginia. The *New York Times* went on to report that "At least six Karzai relatives, including one who just ran for Parliament, operate or are linked to contracting businesses that collect millions

of dollars annually from the American government." Like Karzai, South Vietnam's Thieu promoted family and friends. Thieu did not want a cut of the action, but rather demanded favors down the road. One of the most scandalous rackets, reported by Jacques Leslie of the *Los Angeles Times*, involved the sale of scrap metal (all of which was legally owned by the United States) to Japan by South Vietnamese generals.⁵⁰ A State Department cable from Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker highlights concern over endemic corruption in South Vietnam and the effect it might have on U.S. operations.⁵¹

The situation in Afghanistan remains conflicted, and to speak of a broad-based insurgency would be incorrect. The insurgency is largely isolated to the south and east of the country and is primarily supported by Pashtuns. But the United States has done little to help itself over time. The U.S. strategy employed in 2001 helped to pave the way for corruption to take root. To be fair, it would have been impossible to avoid corruption to some extent, but the U.S. reliance on warlords to topple the Taliban ensconced the very people who destroyed Afghanistan in the civil war of the 1990s back into positions of power. This problem was highlighted in a *Time* magazine article where an Afghan official noted that seeking justice in Afghanistan today is "like going to the wolves for help, when the wolves have stolen your sheep."⁵² As a result, the majority of the population has chosen to sit on the fence to wait out the war rather than risk openly supporting the Americans. The Taliban consequently win when the populace fails to support the government, and as perceptions of government corruption become more obvious there is little reason for them to support the central government.⁵³

Afghanistan Is Not Vietnam (But the Outcome May Be the Same)

This comparative review of American involvement in Vietnam and Afghanistan illustrates that the character of the conflict and challenges the United States faced in Vietnam are different on the surface from those it faces in Afghanistan. The nature of the challenges, however, is nearly identical. In both cases, policymakers misidentified the basic nature of the conflict they were entering. In Vietnam, American policymakers failed to mark a division between central and peripheral interests as George Kennan argued they should during his time as Director of Policy Planning at the State Department. Much the same could be argued in the case of Afghanistan. In both cases, policymakers never adequately matched resources to achievable goals with a workable strategy. In both cases, the military was forced to determine the best way to fight its opponent. In Vietnam, General Westmoreland simply fought the wrong war. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military and NATO Allies have largely fought the right war at least since 2006 but never possessed enough troops and materiel to implement the strategy properly, thereby

the majority of the Afghan population has chosen to sit on the fence to wait out the war rather than risk openly supporting the Americans

greatly reducing the chances it would succeed. In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers needed to redress the role of external actors to the conflict. In Vietnam, the United States redressed this issue in 1972 when it began bombing Cambodia and Laos, which effectively damaged the ability of

the Communists to wage the conventional war they attempted starting in 1972. In Afghanistan, the United States has actively targeted insurgent leaders hiding in Pakistan since 2008 through the use of drones, but a Janus-faced ally and an impenetrable border area have enabled insurgents to largely elude U.S. and NATO capture and/or destruction. Moreover, both the bombings of Cambodia and Laos, as well as the drone strikes in Pakistan, have had a blowback effect on the operation.

Finally and perhaps most worryingly, the United States was fighting a war to win the hearts and minds of the people in both Afghanistan and Vietnam for governments that were corrupt and not seen as legitimate in the eyes of many inhabitants. This perceived lack of legitimacy was worsened by an inappropriate strategy in Vietnam and an ineffective strategy in Afghanistan that in the former case actively helped to recruit Communist-nationalist insurgents and in the latter case has at the very least prompted the majority of Afghans to sit on the fence. Given that the primary objective of an insurgency and the COIN campaign is to win the support of the people, it would seem that a U.S. “loss” is inevitable today as it was 40 years ago. Afghanistan may not be Vietnam, but that does not mean that the outcome will not be the same given the similarity in the nature of the challenges facing the United States and its allies. **PRISM**

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Notes

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