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We Have Just Lost Afghanistan Because We're Not Earth's Special Snowflake

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1/1/2013

It was always the good war. Not like that weird Iraq distraction. "The right war was Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan," John Kerry said in 2004. "We cannot lose Afghanistan," Barack Obama said in 2008. Well, we lost it, America. Because we suck much more than we're willing to admit to ourselves.

Via the Washington Post:

A new American intelligence assessment on the Afghan war predicts that the gains the United States and its allies have made during the past three years are likely to have been significantly eroded by 2017, even if Washington leaves behind a few thousand troops and continues bankrolling the impoverished nation...

"In the absence of a continuing presence and continuing financial support," the intelligence assessment "suggests the situation would deteriorate very rapidly," said one U.S. official familiar with the report.

We will not continue our presence and our financial support. As of 11 this morning, America's 12-year-plus war in Afghanistan cost an estimated \$685,006,590,642 and killed 3,409 coalition troops and maybe 15,000 civilians.

A poll this morning showed 82 percent of Americans now oppose the war in Afghanistan, more than ever opposed Vietnam or Iraq. It's over. We didn't win, but we want the end of war.

On one hand, this seems incredible. In October 2001, 93 percent of Americans wanted to go to war in Afghanistan. We went to fight in Afghanistan to punish the people who figured out how to commandeer our commercial cross-country jetliners early in their flights, while they were still full of fuel, and fly them into structures that were both symbolic of American power and full of human beings. Everyone wanted war after that. "We are all Americans," *Le Monde* wrote on September 13, 2001.

We killed Osama bin Laden, the chief giver of that scar we suffered in 2001, which we still rub in myriad unconscious ways. Osama wasn't even in Afghanistan when we found him. Yet after we dumped his meat husk in the briny deep, we kept on warring in Afghanistan, for permanent stability and no more 9/11s or something. And now we war dully, pushing our remaining pawns around the board and staving off checkmate, except our pawns are Americans and Afghans with brains and lungs and livers.

On the other hand, of *course* we lost. We continue to fight in Afghanistan because we operate under the illusion that we are a snowflake nation. We think we are exceptional and beautiful and wonderful and can fix everything that is wrong with the world—that we can not only find and kill a bin Laden, but we can also prevent any given piece of rocky real estate from being run by his kind.

Both major political parties in America have perpetuated the fiction that American ingenuity emanating from think tanks and Capitol offices and executive office buildings could grasp the nature of The Afghan and shift it away from some posited tribal primitive perversion into a new, benign, America-loving norm. (I bought into this illusion as well.) It made for good sound bites. It made for good myths we could tell ourselves when filing into voting booths and civics classrooms: We are good, and we can win if we pick the best leaders and empower them to do good abroad.

For most liberals, the hard work of victory meant getting out of the Iraq occupation business and winning hearts and minds with honey and not vinegar, building wells and helping "Afghans grow their economy from the bottom up," as Obama put it in 2008. For conservatives, the hard work of victory meant bombing the Muhammad out of those dirty little primitives. "In war, you kill your enemy until he quits," wrote retired soldier, Fox News commentator, and noted fascist Ralph Peters, without any sense of his own statement's absurdity.

These two views—killing with kindness and killing with GBU-28 5,000-pound bunker-busting bombs—are not as different as they seem. Both hold at their hearts the notion of America as the snowflake nation: Afghanistan can be a different place, not because of Afghans, but because of what *we* can make Afghans become. Soft power, hard power, it's all power that we Americans want for ourselves. We are craftsmen, and everyone else is the raw material of our inspired labor.

Conservatives can howl that Obama and his progressive ilk are not American exceptionalists, that they're communist apologists who can't trudge over an earthworm without shuddering in

grief. But the past few years have proven that to be piffle. Democratic politicians are as likely to wear American-flag lapel pins as Republicans, and for the same reasons. America elected Obama, and re-elected him, for the same reasons they elected and re-elected George W. Bush: because these men convinced Americans that ours is still the snowflake nation that can make anything happen.

Except we aren't. And until we limit our visions to the possible, we will continue wasting ourselves on the impossible.