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Imperial Failure: Lessons From Afghanistan and Iraq

By Ralph Nader
October 12, 2015



The photographs in the *New York Times* told contrasting stories last week. One showed two Taliban soldiers in civilian clothes and sandals, with their rifles, standing in front of a captured U.N. vehicle. The Taliban forces had taken the northern provincial capital of Kunduz. The other photograph showed Afghan army soldiers fully equipped with modern gear, weapons, and vehicles.

Guess who is winning? An estimated thirty-thousand Taliban soldiers with no air force, navy, or heavy weapons have been holding down ten times more Afghan army and police and over 100,000 U.S. soldiers with the world's most modern weaponry – for eight years.

ISIS forces from Syria have taken over large areas of northern and western Iraq, including its second largest city, Mosul, and the battered city of Fallujah. ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria are estimated to number no more than 35,000. Like the Taliban, ISIS fighters, who vary in their military training, primarily have light weaponry. That is when they are not taking control of the fleeing, much larger, Iraqi army's armored vehicles and ammunition from the United States.

Against vastly greater numbers of Iraqi soldiers, backed by U.S. weapons, U.S. planes bombing daily, 24/7 aerial surveillance, and U.S. military advisors at the ground level, so far ISIS is still holding most of its territory and is still dominant in large parts of Syria.

The American people are entitled to know how all this military might and the trillions of dollars spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, since 2003 and 2001 respectively, can produce such negative fallouts.

Certainly these failures have little to do with observing the restraints of international law. Presidents Bush and Obama have sent military power anywhere and everywhere, regardless of national boundaries and the resulting immense civilian casualties, in those tragic, blown-apart countries.

The current perception of the U.S. in these countries is that of invaders on a rampage. Recruiting motivated fighters, including a seemingly endless supply of suicide bombers, is easier when the invaders come from western countries that for over a century have been known for attacking, carving up boundaries for artificial states, intervening, overthrowing, propping up domestic dictators, and generally siding with oligarchic or colonizing interests that brutalize the mass of the people.

It hasn't helped for these invasions to be supported by an alien culture rooted in the Christian crusades against Islam centuries ago, whose jingoism in the U.S. continues among some evangelical groups today.

But of course more contemporary situations are, first and foremost, the wanton destruction and violent chaos that comes with such invasions. With the absence of any functioning central governments and the dominance of tribal societies, the sheer complexity of the invaders trying to figure out the intricate "politics" between and within tribes and clans turns into an immense, ongoing trap for the western military forces.

When the U.S. started taking sides with the Shiites against the Sunnis in Iraq, or between different clans and tribes in Afghanistan, U.S. soldiers, not knowing the language or customs, were left with handing out \$100 bills to build alliances. Our government air-shipped and distributed crates of this money. With the local economies at a standstill, public facilities collapsed, fear gripped families from violent streets and roads, and all havoc broke loose in the struggle for safety and survival.

Afghan soldiers, who are paid only \$120 a month, will do almost anything to supplement their income, including selling weapons. At higher levels, bribes, payoffs, extortions create an

underground economic system. The combination of lack of understanding, the systemic bribes, and the ensuing corruption has produced a climate of chaos.

Then there is the reckless slaughter of civilians – wedding parties, schools, clinics, peasant boys collecting fire-wood on a hillside – from supposedly pinpoint, accurate airplanes, helicopter gunships, drones, or missiles. Hatred of the Americans spreads as people lose their loved ones.

Our “blowback” policies are fueling the expansion of al-Qaeda offshoots and new violent groups in over 20 countries. On 9/11, the “threat” was coming from a corner of one country – northeastern Afghanistan. The Bush/Cheney prevaricator frenzy led to local bounty hunters taking innocent captives, falsely labeled as “terrorists,” who were sent to the prisons in Guantanamo, Cuba. These actions have damaged our country’s reputation all over the world.

All this could have been avoided had we heeded the advice of retired, high-ranking military, national security, and diplomatic officials not to invade Iraq and their advice not to overreact in Afghanistan. But the supine mass media, and an overall cowardly Congress let the lies, deceptions, and cover-ups by the Bush regime go unchallenged and, as Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) put it, Bush/Cheney “lied us into the Iraq War.”

It isn’t as if the Taliban and ISIS are winning the “hearts and minds” of the local people. On the contrary, while promising law and order, they treat local populations quite brutally, with few exceptions. But the locals have long been treated brutally by the police, army, and militias jockeying for the spoils of conflict. Unfortunately, there is still no semblance of ground-level security.

All Empires fail and eventually devour themselves. The U.S. Empire is no different. Look at the harm to and drain on our soldiers, our domestic economy, the costly, boomeranging, endless wars overseas and what empire building has done to spread anxieties and lower the expectation level of the American people for their public budgets and public services.

Not repeatedly doing what has failed is the first step toward correction. How much better and cheaper it would be if years ago we became a humanitarian power – well received by the deprived billions in these anguished lands.

What changes are needed to get out of these quagmires and leave a semblance of recovery behind? Press those gaggles of presidential candidates, who war-monger with impunity or who are dodging this grave matter, for answers. Make them listen to you.