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Taking Selfies in Iraq and Afghanistan

By *Tom Engelhardt*
October 27, 2015

Afghanistan!

Whether the story is the fall of a major city to the Taliban, the destruction of a hospital with staff and patients still in it, or the president's announcement that U.S. troops will remain in that country until at least 2017, it's true that you never feel there's an exclamation point after "Afghanistan." Fourteen years later, it remains part of the relatively humdrum background reality of American life. And yet imagine for a moment that you jumped into a time machine and took a spin back to 1978. There, you told the first American you ran into that you had just mainlined into the future and discovered that, starting in 1979, the U.S. would be involved in two wars (broken by a decade-long semi-absence) in a single country adding up to a quarter-century of conflict. If you had then asked for a guess as to which country that might be, I can guarantee you one thing: no American would have said Afghanistan.

I can guarantee you something else, too: if you had insisted that this *was* America's war-fighting future, you might have found yourself institutionalized. Back in 1978, if an American knew anything about that country, it was probably as an exotic stop on the "hippie trail," not as a war-torn land the U.S. could never leave. The very thought that Afghanistan was crucial to American "national security" or that the U.S. would someday pump hundreds of billions of dollars into that country in a fruitless attempt to "secure" it would have seemed laughable. Similarly, in the endless years of our second Afghan War, that the country would become the world's leading producer of a single agricultural product with consistently record-breaking yields – I'm talking,

of course, about opium – and be responsible for 75% of the global heroin supply, would have seemed like material for a science fiction novel, not reality. All of this would have been beyond imagining in the America of 1978.

So welcome back to the twenty-first century! That none of this shocks us today, that the word "Afghanistan" isn't joined at the hip to an exclamation point (or at least a question mark) in our thinking, if not the news, tells us just how strange – and yet how normal – the bizarre imperial world of the planet's "sole superpower" has become. As *TomDispatch* regular and retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William Astore suggests today, what this country needs is a medical intervention. After all, as he points out, in Afghanistan and elsewhere we're suffering from Imperial Tourism Syndrome. ~ *Tom*

Tourists of Empire
America's Peculiar Brand of Global Imperialism
By William J. Astore

The United States is a peculiar sort of empire. As a start, Americans have been in what might be called imperial denial since the Spanish-American War of 1898, if not before. Empire – us? We denied its existence even while our soldiers were administering "water cures" (aka waterboarding) to recalcitrant Filipinos more than a century ago. Heck, we even told ourselves we were liberating those same Filipinos, which leads to a second point: the U.S. not only denies its imperial ambitions, but shrouds them in a curiously American brand of Christianized liberation theology. In it, American troops are never seen as conquerors or oppressors, always as liberators and freedom-bringers, or at least helpers and trainers. There's just enough substance to this myth (World War II and the Marshall Plan, for example) to hide uglier imperial realities.

Denying that we're an empire while cloaking its ugly side in missionary-speak are two enduring aspects of the American brand of imperialism, and there's a third as well, even if it's seldom noted. As the U.S. military garrisons the planet and its special operations forces alone visit more than 140 countries a year, American troops have effectively become the imperial equivalent of globetrotting tourists. Overloaded with technical gear and gadgets (deadly weapons, intrusive sensors), largely ignorant of foreign cultures, they arrive eager to help and spoiling for action, but never (individually) staying long. Think of them as the twenty-first-century version of the ugly American of Vietnam-era fame.

The ugliest of Americans these days may no longer be the meddling CIA operative of yesteryear; "he" may not even be human but a "made in America" drone. Think of such drones as especially unwelcome American tourists, cruising the exotic and picturesque backlands of the planet loaded with cameras and weaponry, ready to intervene in deadly ways in matters its operators, possibly thousands of miles away, don't fully understand. Like normal flesh-and-blood tourists, the drone "sees" the local terrain, "senses" local activity, "detects" patterns among the inhabitants that appear threatening, and then blasts away. The drone and its operators, of course, don't live in the land or grasp the nuances of local life, just as real tourists don't. They are literally above it all, detached from it all, and even as they kill, often wrongfully, they're winging their way back home to safety.

Imperial Tourism Syndrome

Call it Imperial Tourist Syndrome, a bizarre American affliction that creates its own self-sustaining dynamic. To a local, it might look something like this: U.S. forces come to your country, shoot some stuff up (liberation!), take some selfies, and then, if you're lucky, leave (at least for a while). If you're unlucky, they overstay their "welcome," surge around a bit and generate chaos until, sooner or later (in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, much, much later), they exit, not always gracefully (witness Saigon 1975 or Iraq 2011).

And here's the weirdest thing about this distinctly American version of the imperial: a persistent short-time mentality seems only to feed its opposite, wars that persist without end. In those wars, many of the country's heavily armed imperial tourists find themselves sent back again and again for one abbreviated tour of duty after another, until it seems less like an adventure and more like a jail sentence.

The paradox of short-timers prosecuting such long-term wars is irresolvable because, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in the twenty-first century, those wars can't be won. Military experts criticize the Obama administration for lacking an overall strategy, whether in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. They miss the point. Imperial tourists don't have a strategy: they have an itinerary. If it's Tuesday, this must be Yemen; if it's Wednesday, Libya; if it's Thursday, Iraq.

In this way, America's combat tourists keep cycling in and out of foreign hotspots, sometimes on yearly tours, often on much shorter ones. They are well-armed, as you'd expect in active war zones like Iraq or Afghanistan. Like regular tourists, however, they carry cameras as well as other sensors and remain alert for exotic photo-shoots to share with their friends or the folks back home. (Look here, a naked human pyramid in Abu Ghraib Prison!)

As tourists, they're also alert to the possibility that on this particular imperial safari some exotic people may need shooting. There's a quip that's guaranteed to win knowing chuckles within military circles: "Join the Army, travel to exotic lands, meet interesting people – and kill them." Originally an anti-war slogan from the Vietnam era, it's become somewhat of a joke in a post-9/11 militarized America, one that quickly pales when you consider the magnitude of foreign body counts in these years, made more real (for us, at least) when accompanied by discomforting trophy photos of U.S. troops urinating on enemy corpses or posing with enemy body parts.

Here's the bedrock reality of Washington's twenty-first-century conflicts, though: no matter what "strategy" is concocted to fight them, we'll always remain short-time tourists in long-term wars.

Imperial Tourism: A Surefire Recipe for Defeat

It's all so tragically predictable. When it's imperial tourists against foreign "terrorists," guess who wins? No knock on American troops. They have no shortage of can-do spirit. They fight to win. But when their imperial vacations (military interventions/invasions) morph into neocolonial staycations (endless exercises in nation-building, troop training, security assistance, and the like),

they have already lost, no matter how many "having a great time" letters – or rather glowing progress reports to Congress – are sent to the folks back home.

By definition, tourists, imperial or otherwise, always want to go home in the end. The enemy, from the beginning, is generally already home. And no clever tactics, no COIN (or counterinsurgency) handbook, no fancy, high-tech weapons or robotic man-hunters are ever going to change that fundamental reality.

It was a dynamic already obvious five decades ago in Vietnam: a ticket-punching mentality that involved the constant rotation of units and commanders; a process of needless reinvention of the most basic knowledge as units deployed, bugged out, and were then replaced by new units; and the use of all kinds of grim, newfangled weapons and sensors, everything from Agent Orange and napalm to the electronic battlefield and the latest fighter planes and bombers – all for naught. Under such conditions, even the U.S. superpower lacked staying power, precisely because it never intended to stay. The "staying" aspect of the Vietnam War was often referred to in the U.S. as a "quagmire." For the Vietnamese, of course, their country was no "big muddy" that sucked you down. It was home. They had little choice in the matter; they stayed – and fought.

Combine a military with a tourist-like itinerary and a mentality to match, a high command that in its own rotating responsibilities lacks all accountability for mistakes, and a byzantine, top-heavy bureaucracy, and you turn out to have a surefire recipe for defeat. And once again, in the twenty-first century, whether among the rank and file or at the very top, there's little continuity or accountability involved in America's military presence in foreign lands. Commanders are constantly rotated in and out of war zones. There's often a new one every year. (I count 17 commanders for the International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan, the U.S.-led military coalition, since December 2001.) U.S. troops may serve multiple overseas tours, yet they are rarely sent back to the same area. Tours are sequential, not cumulative, and so the learning curve exhibited is flat.

There's a scene at the beginning of season four of "Homeland" in which ex-CIA chief Saul Berenson is talking with some four-star generals. He says: "If we'd known in 2001 we were staying in Afghanistan this long, we'd have made some very different choices. Right? Instead, our planning cycles rarely looked more than 12 months ahead. So it hasn't been a 14-year war we've been waging, but a one-year war waged 14 times."

True enough. In Afghanistan and Iraq as well, the U.S. has fought sequentially rather than cumulatively. Not surprisingly, such sequential efforts, no matter how massive and costly, simply haven't added up. It's just one damn tour after another.

But the fictional Saul's tagline on Afghanistan is more suspect: "I think we're walking away with the job half done." For him, as well as for the Washington establishment of this moment, the U.S. needs to stay the course (at least until 2017, according to President Obama's recent announcement), during which time assumedly we'll at long last stumble upon the El-Dorado-like long-term strategy in which America actually prevails.

Of course, the option that's never on Washington's table is the obvious and logical one: simply to end imperial tourism. With apologies to Elton John, "sorry" is only the second hardest word for U.S. officials. The first is "farewell."

A big defeat (Vietnam, 1975) might keep imperial tourism fever in check for a while. But give us a decade or three and Americans are back at it, humping foreign hills again, hoping against hope that this year's trip will be better than the previous year's disaster.

In other words, a sustainable long-term strategy for Afghanistan is precisely what the U.S. government has failed to produce for 14 years! Why should 2015 or 2017 or 2024 be any different than 2002 or 2009 or indeed any other year of American involvement?

At some level, the U.S. military knows it's screwed. That's why its commanders tinker so much with weapons and training and technology and tactics. It's the stuff they can control, the stuff that seems real in a way that foreign peoples aren't (at least to us). Let's face it: past as well as current events suggest that guns and how to use them are what Americans know best.

But foreign lands and peoples? We can't control them. We don't understand them. We can't count on them. They're just part of the landscape we're eternally passing through – sometimes as people to help and places to rebuild, other times as people to kill and places to destroy. What they aren't is truly real. They are the tourist attractions of American war making, sometimes exotic, sometimes deadly, but (for us) strangely lacking in substance.

And that is precisely why we fail.