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The US Military Bombs in the Twenty-First Century

By Tom Engelhardt

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Here's my twenty-first-century rule of thumb about this country: if you have to say it over and over, it probably ain't so. Which is why I'd think twice every time we're told how "exceptional" or "indispensable" the United States is. For someone like me who can still remember a moment when Americans assumed that was so, but no sitting president, presidential candidate, or politician felt you had to say the obvious, such lines reverberate with defensiveness. They seem to incorporate other voices you can almost hear whispering that we're ever less exceptional, more dispensable, no longer (to quote the greatest of them all by his own estimate) "the greatest." In this vein, consider a commonplace line running around Washington (as it has for years): the U.S. military is "the finest fighting force in the history of the world." Uh, folks, if that's so, then why the hell can't it win a damn thing 14-plus years later?

If you don't mind a little what-if history lesson, it's just possible that events might have turned out differently and, instead of repeating that "finest fighting force" stuff endlessly, our leaders might actually believe it. After all, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it took the Bush administration only a month to let the CIA, special forces advisers, and the U.S. Air Force loose against the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's supporters in Afghanistan. The results were crushing. The first moments of what that administration would grandiloquently (and ominously) bill as a "global war on terror" were, destructively speaking, glorious.

If you want to get a sense of just how crushing those forces and their Afghan proxies were, read journalist Anand Gopal's *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, the best book yet written on how (and how quickly) that war on terror went desperately, disastrously awry. One of the Afghans Gopal spent time with was a Taliban military commander nicknamed – for his whip of choice – Mullah Cable, who offered a riveting account of just how decisive the U.S. air assault on that movement was. In recalling his days on the front lines of what, until then, had been an Afghan civil war, he described his first look at what American bombs could do:

“He drove into the basin and turned the corner and then stepped out of the vehicle. *Oh my God*, he thought. There were headless torsos and torso-less arms, cooked slivers of scalp and flayed skin. The stones were crimson, the sand ocher from all the blood. Coal-black lumps of melted steel and plastic marked the remains of his friends’ vehicles.

“Closing his eyes, he steadied himself. In the five years of fighting he had seen his share of death, but never lives disposed of so easily, so completely, so mercilessly, in mere seconds.”

The next day, he addressed his men. “Go home,” he said. “Get yourselves away from here. Don’t contact each other.”

“Not a soul,” writes Gopal, “protested.”

Mullah Cable took his own advice and headed for Kabul, the Afghan capital. “If he somehow could make it out alive, he promised himself that he would abandon politics forever.” And he was typical. As Gopal reports, the Taliban quickly broke under the strain of war with the last superpower on the planet. Its foot soldiers put down their arms and, like Mullah Cable, fled for home. Its leaders began to try to surrender. In Afghan fashion, they were ready to go back to their native villages, make peace, shuffle their allegiances, and hope for better times. Within a couple of months, in other words, it was, or at least shoulda, woulda, coulda been all over, even the shouting.

The U.S. military and its Afghan proxies, if you remember, believed that they had trapped Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda fighters somewhere in the mountainous Tora Bora region. If the U.S. had concentrated all its resources on him at that moment, it’s hard to believe that he wouldn’t have been in American custody or dead sooner rather than later. And that would have been that. The U.S. military could have gone home victorious. The Taliban, along with bin Laden, would have been history. Stop the cameras there and what a tale of triumph would surely have been told.

Shoulda, woulda, coulda.

Keeping the Cameras Rolling

There was, of course, a catch. Like their Bush administration mentors, the American military men who arrived in Afghanistan were determined to fight that global war on terror forever and a day. So, as Gopal reports, they essentially refused to let the Taliban surrender. They hounded

that movement's leaders and fighters until they had little choice but to pick up their guns again and, in the phrase of the moment, "go back to work."

It was a time of triumph and of Guantánamo, and it went to everyone's head. Among those in power in Washington and those running the military, who didn't believe that a set of genuine global triumphs lay in store? With such a fighting force, such awesome destructive power, how could it not? And so, in Afghanistan, the American counterterror types kept right on targeting the "terrorists" whenever their Afghan warlord allies pointed them out – and if many of them turned out to be local enemies of those same rising warlords, who cared?

It would be the first, but hardly the last time that, in killing significant numbers of people, the U.S. military had a hand in creating its own [future enemies](#). In the process, the Americans managed to revive the very movement they had crushed and which, so many years later, is at the edge of seizing a [dominant military position](#) in the country.

And keep in mind that, while producing a recipe for future disaster there, the Bush administration's top officials had far bigger fish to fry. For them and for the finest fighting force etc., etc., Afghanistan was a hopeless backwater – especially with Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein there in Baghdad at the crossroads of the oil heartlands of the planet with a target on his back. As they saw it, control of much of the Greater Middle East was at stake. To hell with Osama bin Laden.

And so, in March 2003, less than a year and a half later, they launched the invasion of Iraq, another glorious success for that triple-F force. Saddam's military was crushed in an instant and his capital, burning and looted, was occupied by American troops in next to no time at all.

Stop the cameras there and you're still talking about the dominant military of this, if not any other century. But of course the cameras didn't stop. The Bush administration had no intention of shutting them off, not when it saw a Middle Eastern (and possibly even a global) *Pax Americana* in its future and wanted to [garrison Iraq](#) until hell froze over. It already assumed that the next stop after Baghdad on the Occident Express would be either Damascus or Tehran, that America's enemies in the region would go down like ten pins, and that the oil heartlands of the planet would become an American dominion. (As the [neocon quip](#) of that moment had it, "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.")

It was a hell of a dream, with an emphasis on hell. It would, in fact, prove a nightmare of the first order, and the cameras just kept rolling and rolling for nearly 13 years while (I think it's time for an acronym here) the FFFIHW, also known as the Finest Fighting Force etc., etc., proved that it could not successfully:

- Defeat determined, if lightly armed, minority insurgencies.
- [Train](#) proxy [armies](#) to do its bidding.
- Fight a war based on sectarian versions of Islam or a war of ideas.
- Help [reconstruct](#) a society in the Greater Middle East, no matter [how much money](#) it pumped in.
- Create much of anything but [failed states](#) and [deeply corrupt](#) ruling elites in the region.

- [Bomb](#) an insurgent movement into surrender.
- [Drone-kill](#) terror leaders until their groups collapsed.
- Intervene anywhere in the Greater Middle East in just about any fashion, by land or air, and end up with a world [in any way](#) to its liking.

Send in the...

It's probably accurate to say that in the course of one [disappointment](#) or [disaster](#) after another from Afghanistan to Libya, Somalia to Iraq, Yemen to Pakistan, the U.S. military never actually lost an encounter on the battlefield. But nowhere was it truly triumphant on the battlefield either, not in a way that turned out to mean anything. Nowhere, in fact, did a military move of any sort truly pay off in the long run. Whatever was done by the FFFIHW and the CIA (with its wildly [counterproductive](#) drone assassination campaigns across the region) only seemed to create more enemies and more problems.

To sum up, the finest you-know-what in the history of you-know-where has proven to be a clumsy, largely worthless weapon of choice in Washington's terror wars – and increasingly its leadership seems to know it. In private, its commanders are clearly growing anxious. If you want a witness to that anxiety, go no further than *Washington Post* columnist and power pundit David Ignatius. In mid-January, after a visit to U.S. Central Command, which oversees Washington's military presence in the Greater Middle East, he [wrote](#) a column grimly headlined: "The ugly truth: Defeating the Islamic State will take decades." Its first paragraph went: "There's a scary disconnect between the somber warnings you hear privately from military leaders about the war against the Islamic State and the glib debating points coming from Republican and Democratic politicians."

For Ignatius, channeling his high-level sources in Central Command (whom he couldn't identify), things could hardly have been gloomier. And yet, bleak as his report was, it still qualified as an upbeat view. His sources clearly believed that, if Washington was willing to commit to a long, hard military slog and the training of proxy forces in the region not over "a few months" but a "generation," success would follow some distant, golden day. The last 14-plus years suggest otherwise.

With that in mind, let's take a look at what those worried CENTCOM commanders, the folks at the Pentagon, and the Obama administration are planning for the FFFIHW in the near future. Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that, with almost a decade and a half of grisly military lessons under their belts, they are evidently going to pursue exactly the kinds of actions that have, for some time, made the U.S. military look like neither the finest, nor the greatest anything. Here's a little been-there-done-that rundown of what might read like past history but is evidently still to come:

Afghanistan: So many years after the Bush administration loosed the U.S. Air Force and its Special Operations forces on that country and "liberated" it, the situation, according to the latest U.S. general to be put in command of the war zone, is "[deteriorating](#)." Meanwhile, in 2015, casualties suffered by the American-built Afghan security forces reached "[unsustainable](#)" levels. The Taliban now control [more territory](#) than at any time since 2001, and the Islamic State (IS)

has established itself in parts of the country. In response, more than a year after President Obama [announced](#) the ending of the U.S. “combat mission” there, the latest plans are to further slow the withdrawal of U.S. forces, while [sending in](#) the U.S. Air Force and special operations teams, particularly against the new IS fighters.

Libya: Almost five years ago, the Obama administration (with its NATO allies) dispatched overwhelming air power and drones to Libyan skies to help take down that country’s autocrat, Muammar Gaddafi. In the wake of his death and the fall of his regime, his arsenals were looted and advanced weapons were dispatched to terror groups from [Mali](#) to the [Sinai Peninsula](#). In the ensuing years, Libya has been transformed not into a thriving democracy but a desperately [failed state](#) filled with competing sectarian militias, Islamic extremist outfits, and a [fast-growing](#) Islamic State offshoot. As the situation there continues to deteriorate, the Obama administration is now reportedly [considering](#) a “new” strategy involving “[decisive military action](#)” that will be focused on... you guessed it, air and drone strikes and possibly special operations raids on Islamic State operations.

Iraq: Another country in which the situation is again deteriorating as oil prices plunge – oil money makes up [90%](#) of the government budget – and the Islamic State continues to hold significant territory. Meanwhile, Iraqis [die](#) monthly in [prodigious numbers](#) in bloody acts of war and terror, as Shiite-Sunni grievances seem only to [sharpen](#). It’s almost 13 years since the U.S. loosed its air power and its army against Saddam Hussein, disbanded his military, [trained](#) another one (significant parts of which collapsed in the face of relatively small numbers of Islamic State fighters in [2014](#) and [2015](#)), and brought together much of the future leadership of the Islamic State in a [U.S. military prison](#). It’s almost four years since the U.S. “ended” its war there and [left](#). Since August 2014, however, it has again loosed its Air Force on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, while dispatching at least [3,700](#) (and possibly [almost 4,500](#)) military personnel to Iraq to help train up a new version of that country’s army and support it as it retakes (or in fact [reduces to rubble](#)) cities still in IS hands. In this context, the Obama administration now seems to be planning for a kind of endless mission creep in which “hundreds more trainers, advisers, and commandos” will be [sent to](#) that country and neighboring Syria in the coming months. Increasingly, some of those advisers and other personnel will officially be considered “[boots on the ground](#)” and will [focus on](#) helping “the Iraqi army mount the kind of conventional warfare operations needed to defeat Islamic State militants.” It’s even possible that American advisers will, in the end, be allowed to engage directly in combat operations, while American [Apache helicopter](#) pilots might at some point begin [flying](#) close support missions for Iraqi troops fighting in urban areas. (And if this is all beginning to sound strangely familiar, what a surprise!)

Syria: Give Syria credit for one thing. It can’t be classified as a three-peat or even a repeat performance, since the FFFIHW wasn’t there the previous 14 years. Still, it’s hard not to feel as if we’ve been through all this before: the loosing of American air power on the Islamic State (with effects that devastate but [somehow don’t destroy](#) the object of Washington’s desire), [disastrous attempts](#) to train proxy forces in the American mold, the [arrival](#) of special ops forces on the scene, and so on.

In other words, everything proven over the years, from Afghanistan to Libya, not to bring victory or much of anything else worthwhile will be tried yet again – from Afghanistan to Libya. Above

all, of course, a [near-religious faith](#) in the efficacy of bombing and of drone strikes will remain crucial to American efforts, even though in the past such military-first approaches have only helped to spread terror outfits, chaos, and failed states across this vast region. Will any of it work this time? I wouldn't hold my breath.

Declaring Defeat and Coming Home

At some point, as the Vietnam War dragged on, Republican Senator George Aiken of Vermont suggested – so the legend goes – that the U.S. declare victory and simply come home. (In fact, he [never did](#) such a thing, but no matter.) Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and their adviser Henry Kissinger might, however, be said to have done something similar in the end. And despite wartime fears – no less rabid than those about the Islamic State today – that a Vietnamese communist victory would cause “[dominoes](#)” to “fall” and communism to triumph across the Third World, remarkably little happened that displeased, no less endangered, the United States. Four decades later, in fact, Washington and Vietnam are allied increasingly closely against a rising China.

In a similar fashion, our worst nightmares of the present moment – magnified in the recent Republican debates – are likely to have little basis in reality. The Islamic State is indeed a brutal and extreme sectarian movement, the incarnation of the whirlwind of chaos the U.S. let loose in the region. As a movement, however, it has its limits. Its appeal is far too sectarian and extreme to sweep the Greater Middle East.

Its future suppression, however, is unlikely to have much to do with the efforts of the finest fighting force in the history of the world. Quite the opposite, the Islamic State and its al-Qaeda-linked *doppelgangers* still spreading in the region thrive on the destructive attentions of the FFFIHW. They need that force to be eternally on their trail and tail.

There are (or at least should be) moments in history when ruling elites suddenly add two and two and miraculously come up with four. This doesn't seem to be one of them or else the Obama administration wouldn't be doubling down on a militarized version of the same-old same-old in the Greater Middle East, while its Republican and neocon opponents call for [making](#) the sand “glow in the dark,” [sending in](#) the Marines (all of them), and [bombing](#) the hell out of everything.

Under the circumstances, what politician in present-day Washington would have the nerve to suggest the obvious? Isn't it finally time to pull the U.S. military back from the Greater Middle East and put an end to our disastrous temptation to intervene ever more destructively in ever more repetitious ways in that region? That would, of course, mean, among other things, dismantling the vast structure of [military bases](#) Washington has built up across the Persian Gulf and the rest of the Greater Middle East.

Maybe it's time to adopt some version of Senator Aiken's mythical strategy. Maybe Washington should bluntly declare not victory, but defeat, and bring the U.S. military home. Maybe if we stopped claiming that we were the greatest, most exceptional, most indispensable nation ever and that the U.S. military was the finest fighting force in the history of the world, both we and the world might be better off and modestly more peaceful. Unfortunately, you can toss that set of

thoughts in the trash can that holds all the other untested experiments of history. One thing we can be sure of, given the politics of our moment, is that we'll never know.