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## Vietnam redux?

### America's failure to exit Afghanistan has a familiar ring

Dan Simpson  
February 24, 2016

I realize that I may be becoming something of a broken record on Afghanistan, continuing to insist that we should get out of there while the getting is good. Nonetheless, as the smell of death wafts under the doors of that policy edifice, I feel compelled to try one more time to make the case.

Perhaps it comes from having just returned from Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon, where a tour guide insisted on showing us the building from the roof of which the last official Americans were evacuated by helicopter from the South Vietnamese capital. I knew about it already and had seen photographs and film footage, but it still made me singularly uncomfortable to look at the site of America's final humiliation there at the end of decades of war. The war cost thousands of American and other lives, and a fortune in money needed at home.

Why do we have to do the same thing again in Afghanistan?

Its government is rotten. Like a fish it has spoiled from the head down. In this case, the corruption is opium. The United States has spent an estimated \$7 billion over the past 14 years to

fight the opium trade in Afghanistan. Instead, it is now the world's largest exporter of opium, a true narco-state.

Forget hearts and minds; the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban fight for control of the opium trade as much as Mexican drug gangs duke it out for control of the drug trade there. The Kabul government wants continued American military involvement to enable it to hold onto its piece of the opium and heroin action.

Second, the Russians, no innocents in Afghan matters, have decided that cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan is “useless,” in the words of a senior Russian official. Until now, they have seen some virtue in working with us to a degree there. Afghanistan is near enough to their own borders. Militant Islam can be something of a threat to Russia and, closer at hand, to the former Soviet, predominantly Muslim republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — that stand between it and Afghanistan.

Now, Moscow has apparently made a decision to concentrate its efforts on building up the armed forces of Tajikistan rather than cooperating with the United States in Afghanistan through agreeing to staging rights and other assistance to the United States in the 'Stans. It's rats leaving a sinking ship, or ships leaving a sinking rat. Choose your metaphor.

The third very significant sign that the Kabul ship is going down is that, in spite of mighty, expensive, labor-intensive American efforts to train the Afghan army, it is not only still unable to hold onto territory in the face of the Taliban, it is also crumbling from within. Last week Afghan security forces carried out a singularly ignoble raid on a hospital run by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, abducting and killing three patients.

For me, the current actions of the Afghan security forces, in principle overseen by U.S. forces, have the tinny echo of American troops in Vietnam trying to restrain some of the more reprehensible actions of the South Vietnamese soldiers. They became more and more desperate as they felt the hot breath of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces bearing down on them near the end.

The most chilling recent figure to come out of Afghanistan was the United Nations assessment that 2015 was the worst year yet for civilian casualties. The United Nations said 3,545 civilians died last year and 7,457 were injured, exceeding the 2014 total. A quarter of the civilian dead and wounded were children.

Ironically enough, the Ashraf Ghani government almost certainly realizes that its days are numbered and that it needs to cut a deal with the Taliban if its people — or perhaps its opium traders — are to survive a transition that almost certainly has to involve Taliban participation in government. There is no reason to believe that Mr. Ghani and his associates cannot cut a deal with the Taliban. They are, after all, Pashtuns. They speak the same language, they operate by the same code and they are somewhat used to each other after all these years.

It is we who cannot survive a transition. We are the milk cow tethered to the tree under which the Afghans can gather to cut a deal. America's president has said — falsely in the event — that he was going to end the Iraq War but was going to persist in Afghanistan. America has sold a lot of expensive military equipment to the Afghans, on credit, which it doesn't want to write off. America's politicians have run up the flag on Afghanistan, assuming — without justification — that the place represents some threat to the United States, that we have an actual stake in the survival of Mr. Ghani's government.

Has anyone looked at the map to see where Afghanistan is, in terms of assessing the threat to us that anything there can pose? We are so far now from 9/11 that it should be put firmly on the shelf of history. If a new Osama bin Laden were cooking up something there against us, we would see it through overhead intelligence and take it out with drones or bombs. Afghanistan now is just one more war that we don't know how to end, that we don't know how to move beyond, almost 15 years later.

It is some generals' ticket to rich post-retirement employment, some consultants' basis for "wise" analysis, more cash for the defense industries or a flag for American politicians to wave as they lead us in the chant "USA, USA" or in silly promises of revisited greatness. Holding on to the bitter end in Afghanistan is not greatness. Greatness is having the sense to pull the plug before it becomes necessary to leave from the roof.