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America's 'More' Law in Afghanistan: More Money, Violence, Insecurity

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September 11, 2001. It was one of those defining generational moments. It shattered America's belief in its invincibility and, for many, ushered in an unaccustomed sense of fear. Throughout all of President George W. Bush's eight years and now seven under the Obama Administration, a never-ending parade of senior civilian and uniformed leaders have relentlessly assured Americans that they will be safe in the future because Afghanistan is not "going to be a source of terrorist attacks again." But has the extraordinary sacrifice in human lives and national treasure Washington has shelled out in Afghanistan over the past 15 years backed up that boast and ensured our safety? In very quantifiable ways it has not.

Perversely, the expense and labor have actually *increased* our vulnerability to future terrorist attacks.

Even in recent months, senior defense officials have argued that it is important to keep as many troops in Afghanistan as possible beyond 2016, arguing the mission is currently at "an inflection point" and the United States must "not waiver in Afghanistan." Yet these statements are eerily similar to the assessment given by former commander of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, almost exactly five years ago.

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, the general said, "while the security progress achieved over the past year is significant, it is also fragile and reversible. Moreover, it is clear that much difficult work lies ahead with our Afghan partners to solidify and expand our gains. . . ." But despite the general's optimism, not only were gains not expanded, they suffered considerable deterioration. A reasonable man would ask why, when Petraeus's optimism under far better conditions in 2011 proved wrong, would the encouragement by current generals to continuing supporting the mission have any more expectation of success?

I was in Afghanistan at the height of the surge in 2011 when more than 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops were there to fight against the Taliban. I observed that in the areas with the greatest density of combat troops, there were still huge swaths of the country where our military efforts didn't even influence, much less control, the insurgents. Furthermore, I saw first-hand how after seven years of U.S. and NATO efforts to train Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF), there were many members of the national police, army and local militias that showed little ability to successfully defeat the insurgency. The security situation has deteriorated every year since my redeployment in 2012, reaching a level so dire now that some experts argue the country is already in the throes of a multidimensional civil war.

Few realize just how bad a return on investment the United States has suffered on the Afghanistan mission. In just the last month, there has been one alarming report filed after another to substantiate just how badly our money has been wasted:

Anthony Cordesman on America's Afghan Strategy: "It was clear from the start in forming the new strategy that no number of tactical victories could bring security and stability to Afghanistan. . . . Without such success, "classic counterinsurgency (COIN)" became a farce that could win temporary control in sparsely populated areas [but]. . . it could never win the war. . . ." Cordesman added, "past strategy is dead, and we desperately need either to decide on a workable 'transition' strategy for the future and then actually fund and implement it or develop an honest exit strategy that will do minimal damage to the Afghan people and our national interest."

United Nations on Civilian Casualties in 2015: "Afghan hostilities in 2015 left more than 3,500 civilians dead, including an unprecedented number of children—one in four casualties over the

past year was a child—and nearly 7,500 others wounded, making this the highest number of civilian casualties recorded.”

James Clapper on Fighting in 2016: “We assess that fighting in 2016 will be more intense than 2015, continuing a decade-long trend of deteriorating security. . . .”

And most astonishingly:

John Sopko on Scale of Wasted Money: “Since FY 2002, Congress has appropriated approximately \$113.1 billion to rebuild Afghanistan. That is at least \$10 billion more, adjusted for inflation, than the amount the United States committed in civilian assistance to help rebuild Western Europe after World War II.”

The bottom line: there has been—and after 14 years remains—no coherent national strategy that could end the war. Civilians continue to die in increasing numbers. The fighting in 2016 is likely to expand further. After spending more on Afghan reconstruction than the United States spent on all of Europe under the Marshall Plan, we have only bought worsening conditions.

The government should by all means do its utmost to protect American citizens from the violence terrorists seek to inflict. But likewise it must spend precious tax dollars wisely. Washington must stop underwriting a blind adherence to military strategies that do not succeed simply because that’s how we’ve always done things. The security and wellbeing of our nation depends on getting this right.