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The Burden of Fighting in Afghanistan Will Fall on Trump's Supporters

by John Carney

8/24/2017

“Since the founding of our republic,” Trump said in his speech on Afghanistan this week, “American patriots from every generation have given their last breath on the battlefield for our nation and for our freedom.”

Although Trump refused to say how many American troops he would commit to Afghanistan to carry out his escalation, it is a certainty that many of those breathing their last breaths there would be from the places that delivered him his electoral victory last November. A recent study found that there is a significant relationship between the support for Trump in a county and the county's rate of casualties from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are places that voted for Trump because they had suffered enough in our wars and wanted a president who promised a change.

The study found that casualty rates correlated to Trump victories in three key states—Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The authors say their findings suggest that a slightly lower rate of casualties would have flipped the states for Hillary Clinton.

During the campaign, Trump was the most credible candidate for those who had had enough. He derided the wars in Iraq as “total disasters” and “wastes of money.” He promised he would govern according to a philosophy of “America first.” As he said on Monday, his “original instinct was to pull out.”

Even when controlled for variables such as race, income, education, rural population, and veteran population, the burden of war made the difference, the study found. Nine months later, it is likely that the thousands of additional American troops will come from areas that thought they were voting against escalation. The American patriots who breathe their last breathes in Afghanistan will come from the communities that voted for Trump.

Trump and his family will not pay the price of escalation in blood. But it may cost them votes.

In a recent op-ed in Politico, the study’s authors explained that Trump may pay the political price of his reversal:

Americans who lost friends, family members and neighbors in the war in Afghanistan may have seen Clinton, who backed President Barack Obama’s decision to send more troops there, as supportive of those efforts; Trump’s isolationist rhetoric, on the other hand, likely seemed refreshing. But what now? Trump, convinced by the foreign policy establishment and brushing off the advice of his now-ousted strategist Steve Bannon, is expanding the very war he once so strongly criticized. In doing so, he joins George W. Bush, Obama, Clinton and virtually every other mainstream politician in overlooking the inequality of military sacrifice today in America.

Can Trump get away with it? We don’t think so. Already, important elements of the Trump base—led by Bannon and the Breitbart News machine—are pushing back against the president’s reversal. And our research suggests that if Trump wants to win again in 2020, he should be wary of amassing more casualties from overseas wars. As former House Speaker Newt Gingrich recently observed, casualties always pose risks to political leaders. But these risks are particularly acute for Trump, as they would fall heavily on his political base.

The foreign policy establishment might be cheering Trump’s decision. But his strongest supporters aren’t rooting for the establishment. And they won’t be rooting for Trump if their family members and neighbors return from Afghanistan’s war zone dead or wounded. Trump finally listened to the experts in the room. But, unfortunately for the nation and for his electoral fortunes, this is one time he should have stuck with his instincts.

Afghanistan has been called the “graveyard of Empires,” as so many attempts by outsiders through history to conquer it have foundered. America has spent \$117 billion in its war in Afghanistan over the past 16 years. More than twenty-thousand Americans have been wounded in the fighting. More than 2,300 Americans have been killed. Escalation raises the possibility that Afghanistan could become the graveyard of the Trump administration, the place where Trump’s presidency breathes its final breath.

