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Trump Out of Touch With Reality on Afghanistan

The president's proclamations about Afghanistan are not a plan; they're a letter to Santa Claus.

Steve Chapman

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"One did not have to be a lunatic or a particularly despondent visionary to conceive quite seriously that the war would literally never end and would become the permanent condition of mankind. The stalemate and the attrition would go on infinitely, becoming, like the telephone and the internal combustion engine, a part of the accepted atmosphere of the modern experience." —Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001, but don't worry: President Donald Trump is not going to be rushed out the door after a mere 16 years. In fact, he refuses to be tyrannized by any schedule.

"A core pillar of our new strategy is a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions," he announced. "America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out." Afghanistan, the longest conflict in American history, has been called "the forever war." Now it's the forever-and-a-day war.

The speech was a model of bold phrases and grand promises unsupported by any specifics that would indicate the president has any idea how to make his vision into reality. It doesn't tell us much when Trump makes declarations such as, "We will push onward to victory."

His predecessors, keep in mind, didn't actually set out to lose. They tried a lot of different options and couldn't find one that would produce victory at an affordable price. If Trump has found the magic formula, it's a well-kept secret.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson either hasn't heard it or doesn't believe it. He said Tuesday that his message to the Taliban was, "You will not win a battlefield victory. We may not win one, but neither will you."

Trump reportedly plans to add some 3,900 troops to our current force of 8,400—a small presence compared with the 30,000 under George W. Bush, which rose to more than 100,000 under Barack Obama. Yet Trump claims he will achieve the success that eluded them.

He thinks loosening the restrictions on how our forces fight will make a big difference. But those restrictions are designed to minimize civilian casualties—partly because killing innocents unnecessarily is morally wrong and partly because it antagonizes Afghans, thus increasing the number of people willing to fight against us.

Trump also claims he will force Pakistan to stop providing a safe haven for the Taliban, extract more economic aid from India, and persuade our NATO allies to up their involvement in the war. This is not a plan; it's a letter to Santa Claus.

Pakistan has vital interests at stake that take precedence over ours—not to mention leverage that has made it largely impervious to the demands of American presidents. The United States, reports Reuters, "has no choice but to use Pakistani roads to resupply its troops in landlocked Afghanistan. U.S. officials worry that if Pakistan becomes an active foe, it could further destabilize Afghanistan and endanger U.S. soldiers."

India is not about to let Washington dictate its policy toward a troublesome neighbor—and more Indian involvement would worsen our relations with Pakistan. Trump has done nothing to make our allies in Europe want to knock themselves out on our behalf.

Turning the tide in Afghanistan would take a far bigger commitment than what the administration has in mind. As Bush and Obama found, even that might not do the trick. There is no escaping the stark reality of wars like this: The outcome matters far more to those fighting against us in their own country than it does to us.

Trump indulged in such fierce, uncompromising rhetoric for an obvious reason: to distract Americans from how puny his plan is and how meager his goals. He promises victory, but all he can realistically hope to do is stave off defeat—at the cost of more American lives and \$25 billion a year.

David Petraeus, who once commanded coalition forces there, said in June, "This is a generational struggle. This is not something that is going to be won in a few years."

When Marine Corps Commandant Robert Neller visited Marines in Helmand province last fall, *The Washington Post* reported, he told them, "I can't guarantee your kids won't be here in 20 years with another old guy standing in front of them."

Trump is sinking more lives and money into the war, but they won't buy victory. They will only pay for a perpetual lease on an endless failure.