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Once Again in Afghanistan, the U.S. Proves It Can't Be Trusted



The Taliban emerged in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar around September 1994.
Photograph Source: Karla Marshall – Public Domain

The first draft of this column came not to bury but to praise Donald Trump. I planned to applaud the president's peace initiative with the Taliban, his strategy of ignoring the corrupt and discredited puppet regime Bush installed in Kabul and his desire to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan. This was a move I have been almost alone in promoting since the U.S. idiotically invaded the country in 2001 and I congratulate

Trump for having the courage to unwind Bush and Obama's mistakes. The Afghan people should be allowed to shape their future free of imperialist interference.

But then, hours before representatives of the Taliban which controls about half of Afghanistan were set to board a plane to Washington where they were scheduled to meet with Trump at Camp David, the president canceled their visit and scuttled years of progress toward ending America's longest war, which has killed more than 2,300 U.S. servicemen and at least 30,000 Afghans. "He claimed that it was because the Taliban had been behind a recent attack that killed an American soldier," reported Politico.

There is, of course, no requirement that combatants observe a ceasefire during peace negotiations. Richard Nixon's "Christmas bombing" campaign in 1972, which killed 1,600 Vietnamese civilians, was a U.S. attempt to soften up North Vietnam at the upcoming Paris peace talks. The United States has killed numerous Taliban soldiers throughout 2019.

"This [decision to scuttle peace talks] will lead to more losses to the U.S.," said Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman. "Its credibility will be affected, its anti-peace stance will be exposed to the world, losses to lives and assets will increase." He is right.

Few Americans pay attention to Afghanistan. Fewer still are aware of America's history of proving itself an untrustworthy diplomatic partner in that war-torn country—a tradition that Trump's fickleness continues. "The Taliban have never trusted American promises; [Trump's] volte-face will only deepen that mistrust," observes The Economist.

In the late 1990s Afghanistan was the world's leading producer of opium. The U.S. and its European allies were seeking to mitigate a heroin epidemic and the Clinton Administration was negotiating terms for a pipeline to carry oil and natural gas from Central Asia via Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean. So, even though the U.S. had imposed sanctions on the Taliban who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and denied them diplomatic recognition, Clinton paid the Taliban \$114 million in 2000 to encourage them to ban the farming of opium poppies. Bush followed up with \$43 million in 2001.

For the most part the Taliban held up their side of the bargain. Their ban on poppy cultivation reduced production of exported heroin by about 65%. Considering Afghanistan's primitive infrastructure, poor communications and fractious political culture during an ongoing civil war, that was as much as the U.S. could have hoped for.

But tensions grew between the Taliban and the U.S. over the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline project. The U.S. tried to lowball the Taliban with below-market transit fees, the Taliban

refused and American negotiators became angry. “Accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs,” a U.S. negotiator snapped at her Taliban counterparts at a meeting in Islamabad. It was August 2001, three months after Secretary of State Colin Powell paid the Taliban \$43 million and weeks before 9/11.

It’s impossible to know for certain why the U.S. chose to invade Afghanistan, which had nothing to do with the attacks. The hijackers were recruited from and funded by Saudi Arabia. Osama bin Laden lived in Pakistan, where the terrorists were trained. Central Asia watchers speculated that the U.S. was more interested in controlling the then-only pipeline carrying the world’s largest untapped energy reserves than catching bin Laden.

We do know what the Taliban took away from the experience. They cut a deal, did their part and got bombed, invaded and occupied in return.

Both sides say they are open to resuming talks. If and when they do, the Taliban—who, after all, didn’t invade anyone and are defending their territory from foreign aggression—hold the moral high ground over the United States.

Heckuva job, Donnie.

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