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Teflon Lies and Mowing Lawns: The Afghanistan Papers

Afghanistan is a famous desert for empires, a burial ground which has consumed those in power who thought that extra fortification and trading most might benefit them. It remains a great, and somewhat savage reminder about those who suffer hubris, overconfidence and eagerness in pursuing their agendas. But the country has also served another purpose: a repository for the untruths of those who invaded it.

That said, the normative sense does not always keep pace with the actual; people might well insist that they loathe being lied to but that is no guarantee for altering conduct or votes. The US citizen has been the recipient of mendacity on the republic's foreign engagements since President Thomas Jefferson decided to expand its operations against the Barbary pirates in Europe. There have been deceptions, concoctions and fabrications to either justify an intervention or justify the continuation of US garrisons in foreign theatres. Cometh the empire, cometh the military presence.

Since US forces were deployed after September 11, 2001 ostensibly to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the US has lost 2,400 personnel, seen the deaths of over a hundred thousand Afghans and expended, through Congress, $137 billion in reconstruction funds. Some $1 trillion has been spent in the military effort. A note from the Congressional Research Service from January 31 this year, despite toeing the line, had to concede that, while "most measures of human development have improved […] future prospects of those measures remain mixed in light of a robust Taliban insurgency and continued terrorist activity."

The Afghanistan Papers, as they have now come to be known, should have stimulated something more than it did. Run as a set of interviews in the Washington Post in December from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), they are filled vignettes of confusion, incompetence and indifference. The interviews feature an imperium in a mess, dithering, muddled, and in need of a purpose. At times, there is an astonishing freshness that only comes with being frank.

SIGAR, the main oversight body responsible for examining the US operation in Afghanistan, has released nine reports in its "Lessons Learned" series. The seventh report, for instance, notes "the difficulty of reintegrating ex-combatants during an active insurgency in a fragile state." The words of the executive summary are almost brutal in their common sense. "In Afghanistan, we found that the absence of a comprehensive political settlement or peace agreement was a key factor in the failure of prior reintegration programs targeting Taliban fighters."

From September 2016 comes another report detailing "Corruption in Conflict". Ambassador Ryan Crocker's words feature prominently. "The ultimate point of failure of our efforts… wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption." The report identified five pertinent grounds that affected the entire effort: the presence of corruption that "undermined the US mission in Afghanistan by fuelling grievances and channelling support to the insurgency"; the direct contribution by the US to corruption; a slowness to recognise the scale of the problem; the trumping of "strong anticorruption actions" in favour of security and political goals and the conspicuous lack of "sustained political commitment" in anticorruption efforts.

The picture sketched by the Post is one of dysfunction and even deceit in the planning process. As with any policy that demands many hands and many tiers, the grunts and diggers are bound to have a different view to those seated behind desks either in Kabul or Washington. The SIGAR project also saw criticism from over 400 insiders on the deepening nature of US involvement in a project without success or end. "With a bluntness rarely expressed in public," notes the paper, "the interviews lay bare pent-up complaints, frustrations and confessions, along with second-guessing and backbiting."

Distant wars fall victim to attention deficit syndrome. Geography dispels interest. The enemy is there, away from any reckoning. Whether a Taliban fighter is killed, or a school girl in Kabul educated, is irrelevant to the purchase of groceries of a shopper in Wisconsin. Few American voters have a concept of where the country is, seeing any deployment of forces in the most abstract of terms. The idea that US forces are there is

only as relevant as the idea that they might serve some purpose to repel evil and shore up the interests of the country. Other factors rarely count.

The budgeting feature behind the war is also a matter that confines it to the periphery. Being part of "emergency supplementary spending", the issue rarely finds scope for debate and discussion in the broader issues of Congressional spending. The US political establishment, in other words, shows little interest in this bit of nastiness in the Middle East. As an editorial in the Christian Century put it, "The war, in short, has little effect on most Americans' lives."

Not even President Donald Trump has been able to arrest this tendency, despite being very much of the view that US forces should be reined back from various theatres of operation. The objectives of his administration in Afghanistan entail "achieving a peace agreement that ensures Afghan soil is never used again by terrorists against the United States, its allies, or any country that allows American troops to return home." Politics is often not only the art of the possible but the vague.

Besides, he has had impeachment proceedings to battle, a process which has served to draw attention away from the less appealing, let alone competent nature, of US foreign policy when it comes to overthrowing governments and finding suitable substitutes. On the issue of Afghanistan, Republicans and Democrats are to blame, both united by the strand of shoddiness that characterises imperial engagements that look increasingly doddering in their nature. Nation building is a near impossible exercise, and remains the exception that proves the rule.

The default position of US foreign and military policy in its Trump phase, then, is "mowing the lawn", an expression bequeathed to us by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. This entails measures of brutal violence to keep the enemy in check as "every now and then, you have to do these things to stay on top of it so that the threat doesn't grow, doesn't resurge." A solid retreat, then, from the bricks and mortar of state-building.

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