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Groundhog Day in Afghanistan

Malou Innocent
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The war in Afghanistan tragically feels like the movie *Groundhog Day*: reliving and retelling the same stories repeatedly but with the situation worse than it was the previous time. The United States is perpetually stuck in a repetitive series of setbacks and scandals that damage the mission. It cannot escape the shadow that ruinous events cast over the prospect of defeating the Taliban.

Today, the *Los Angeles Times* published photos of U.S. soldiers posing with the mangled corpses of alleged insurgents. This latest grisly and embarrassing episode, much like the incidental burning of Korans, the murder of seventeen Afghan civilians by a U.S. army sgt., and the U.S. kill team that collected the fingers and teeth of Afghan corpses as trophies, is yet another scandal that damages what America stands for. Certainly, war breeds hatred for one's enemies. But perhaps even more troubling is that over a decade of fighting has—as military expert Carl Prine and others have observed—led to a serious breakdown in military discipline, leadership and chain of command.

These photos also come after a series of coordinated assaults rocked Kabul and three provincial capitals this past weekend. The Taliban's annual spring offensive has commenced. These attacks do not bode well for America's plan to transition to Afghan forces, or for the 2001 Bonn Agreement proclamations of bringing about “national reconciliation” and “lasting peace.” Of the many interpretations one can glean about the significance of these recent the attacks in the heart of the capital city, three stand out.

First, they show that despite coalition night raids and drones strikes that have managed to eliminate the Taliban's numerous shadow governors, mid-level commanders and weapons facilitators, the insurgents still have the upper hand in terms of local knowledge and connections with the Afghan people—including high-level officials. As a classified NATO [report](#) from January stated, the Taliban's "strength, motivation, funding and tactical proficiency remains intact," and, "Many Afghans are already bracing themselves for an eventual return of the Taliban."

Second, these attacks send the unequivocal message to the Afghan people that their government is vulnerable and thus unable to protect them. While some commentators have pointed to the performance of the Afghan security forces, the attacks, if anything, underscore the fragility of a Kabul-centric government reliant on an endless stream of foreign-aid dollars. After all, in addition to these attacks, there was the [coordinated assault](#) on the U.S. embassy and NATO headquarters last September and the growing number of top Afghan leaders who have been assassinated one by one. These include Jan Mohhammed Khan, the former governor of Uruzgan province; Ahmed Wali Karzai, President Hamid Karzai's half-brother; General Daud Daud, the governor of Takhar province; Khan Mohammed Mujahed, the police chief of Kandahar; and others.

Third, as one astute observer has [noted](#), the mainstream media has reported on the attacks in Kabul, Pol-e-Alam (Logar), Gardez (Paktia) and Jalalabad (Nangarhar) but overlooked the attempted attack in Kunduz in northern Afghanistan. This would have undercut the conventional narrative that the anti-Afghan government insurgency remains where the Obama administration's "surge" was most focused: in the South. But rather than remaining in one pocket of the country, the complex blend of factions that includes the Hezb-i-Islami militia, the Haqqani network and other loosely affiliated groups has [spread](#) to the [north as well](#). Paradoxically, much of the international community's development aid and military resources have gone to some of Afghanistan's most insecure provinces. As Oxfam International's former head of policy in Afghanistan Matt Waldman [writes](#), if Helmand province were a state, it would be "the world's fifth largest recipient of funds" from USAID.

As usual, [political leaders](#) and [military commanders](#) have downplayed these latest attacks as yet another "one-off" incident. [Americans know better](#). To them, these attacks—and the photos—will serve as yet another stunning reminder of how poorly things are going, and why we need to leave.