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Tet Offensive echoes In Afghanistan attacks

The attacks in Afghanistan on April 15 were a faint echo of the Tet Offensive, and the message was strikingly similar

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Much like what is currently happening in Afghanistan, the Tet Offensive of 1968 served as an exemplar of a war that could not be won

As I first heard about coordinated attacks in the heart of Kabul and three other locations across Afghanistan last Sunday, my thoughts turned immediately to the Tet Offensive, the totally unexpected nationwide military offensive launched by South Vietnam's Viet Minh guerrilla forces in 1968 that finally broke through the wall of denial in Washington DC, and convinced the American people that the Vietnam War could not be won.

The offensive was eventually turned back, and the forces who launched it were almost entirely wiped out - only to be replaced by a massive influx of North Vietnamese forces. Years later, American conservatives would rewrite what happened to make it a story of US military victory, turned into defeat by the hated - even traitorous - liberal media. But this US-centric view of things had nothing to do with the reality of Vietnam. The Vietnamese had been fighting outsiders for almost 2,000 years. Mostly they had fought the Chinese, then the French, then the Japanese, then the French again, and then the United States.

From a nationalist perspective - broadly shared, well beyond the communist's base - major offensives like Tet, or the French defeat at **Dien Bien Phu** in the spring of 1954, were a necessary part of their defensive wars against much more powerful foreign forces. But their real strength was their capacity simply to keep on fighting, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, however long it took, and whichever foreign power they were fighting against. A Tet or a Dien Bien Phu might succeed or fail militarily, but that was not really the point. The point was political: to force the foreign power to realise that the Vietnamese people would *never* stop fighting for their own self-determination, however many years - or generations - their struggle might take. Surely the descendents of Lexington, Concord and Valley Forge could understand this - if they only wanted to. If they only tried.

The same, of course, can be said of Afghanistan, long famous as the "graveyard of empires".

Which is why America was relatively clever (not to say wise) when it decided, after losing Vietnam, to "give the Soviets their own Vietnam" in Afghanistan, and unfathomably stupid to forget all that when it invaded Afghanistan itself within months of 9/11. Of course, the Bush Administration outdid itself with the folly of invading Iraq, creating such a spectacular disaster in such short order that one might almost forgive America for forgetting how foolish the earlier invasion of Afghanistan had been. After all, at least Afghanistan had some rational relationship to the 9/11 attacks, even if the invasion itself was an utterly ill-conceived and bungled response.

A more sophisticated form of folly

This is where Barack Obama's much more sophisticated form of American folly comes into play - first as candidate, then as president. The key to his success as a primary candidate lay in appealing to the anti-war Democratic base, which ultimately trusted him more than Hillary Clinton because he had spoken out against the Iraq War in October 2002, the same month that she had semi-wittingly voted to authorise it. But part of the key to Obama's success in the general election was to not appear "naive" or "soft on defence" - and so he went back to the same ambiguous principle he had invoked in opposing the Iraq War: that he was not opposed to all wars, just "dumb wars".

This stance was close enough to what many progressive Democrats believe to make them think that he was one of them - only for them, the criteria isn't intelligence: It's morality and necessity that set World War II and the Civil War apart from all of America's other wars, large and small, declared and undeclared. And so when candidate Obama spoke of Afghanistan as a "smart war" as opposed to the "dumb war" of Iraq, what he was up to really didn't register with much of the progressive Democratic base. Either they thought he was just saying that "because he had to", or they believed that "of course" he would change his mind once he got into office and took a comprehensive look at just how dumb that "smart war" really was. Because for them, there was always a moral dimension implicit in what's "smart" or "dumb", and they mistakenly assumed the same about Obama, as if he were not, after all, a politician of empire.

Unfortunately, that moral dimension is all too easily suppressed politically, after taking years to mobilise and fully articulate. And that's precisely what has happened under Obama. Opposition to the war in Afghanistan remains quite broad, extending well beyond the Democratic base to include a substantial part of the Republican base as well. But the *intensity* of that opposition has been greatly diminished. There are, after all, so *many* bad things America's elites are doing, so many things to oppose.

Which is why the echoes of Tet in Afghanistan matter, however faint they may be.

A soldiers view of the ground truth

The February issue of *Armed Forces Journal* carried a devastating critique of the conduct and status of the Afghanistan war, "**Truth, lies and Afghanistan: How military leaders have let us down**" by Lt Colonel Daniel L Davis. It's a high condensed version of a report he wrote - "Dereliction of Duty II: Senior Military Leaders' Loss of Integrity Wounds Afghan War Effort" - in both classified and unclassified form. *Rolling Stone* magazine obtained a draft version of the unclassified version, 84 pages long, and published it [here](#) [PDF].

Davis is a 17-year Army veteran who has served four combat tours, most recently a year in Afghanistan (his second tour there) with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, which took him to most of operational sectors of the US occupation, giving him firsthand experience and hundreds of interview opportunities with US troops, Afghan allies, and civilians, including a few village elders, which he supplements with material from other authoritative reports as well.

One such report is "The Failures that Shaped Today's War", by Anthony Cordesman at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. The first finding Davis cites from Cordesman's report is "US and ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] won every major tactical clash, but lost much of the country" - the exact same pattern of "success" that held true throughout much of the US experience in Vietnam.

"Over the course of 12 months," Davis writes by way of introduction, "I covered more than 9,000 miles and talked, travelled and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, Paktika, Kunduz, Balkh, Nangarhar and other provinces. What I saw bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by US military leaders about conditions on the ground."

This was not what he had hoped for:

Entering this deployment, I was sincerely hoping to learn that the claims were true: that conditions in Afghanistan were improving, that the local government and military were progressing toward self-sufficiency. I did not need to witness dramatic improvements to be reassured, but merely hoped to see evidence of positive trends, to see companies or battalions produce even minimal but sustainable progress.

Instead, I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level...

I heard many stories of how insurgents controlled virtually every piece of land beyond eyeshot of a US or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base.

I saw little to no evidence the local governments were able to provide for the basic needs of the people. Some of the Afghan civilians I talked with said the people didn't want to be connected to a predatory or incapable local government.

From time to time, I observed Afghan Security forces collude with the insurgency.

A chilling echo of Vietnam

The *Armed Forces* story is filled with discouraging detail for anyone with hopes of American success, and the unclassified draft has much, much more. But what stood out for me in particular was this telling bit of detail:

On a patrol to the northernmost US position in eastern Afghanistan, we arrived at an Afghan National Police (ANP) station that had reported being attacked by the Taliban 2.5 hours earlier.

Through the interpreter, I asked the police captain where the attack had originated, and he pointed to the side of a nearby mountain.

"What are your normal procedures in situations like these?" I asked. "Do you form up a squad and go after them? Do you periodically send out harassing patrols? What do you do?"

As the interpreter conveyed my questions, the captain's head wheeled around, looking first at the interpreter and turning to me with an incredulous expression. Then he laughed.

"No! We don't go after them," he said. "That would be dangerous!"

The reason this struck me was simple: It read like a passage right out of ***A Bright Shinning Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*** by Neil Sheehan. Like Davis, Vann was a lieutenant colonel whose clear-eyed, ground-level view of the war he found himself in clashed dramatically with the official line. It was Vann's clear-eyed tactical and strategic criticism that educated an entire generation of war reporters. He first arrived in Vietnam in 1962, well before the notorious "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" led to America's official entry. The war was very low-level at the time, in large part because the South Vietnamese military was deeply corrupt and unwilling to

fight. "We don't go after them. That would be dangerous" could have almost been their motto.

Yet, eventually Vann was able to get them to engage in a fair-sized conflict, the Battle of Ap Bac, fought on January 2, 1963, a humiliating rout which the book describes in minute and agonising detail. Anyone who has read that battle description can readily see that there was never any chance that US and South Vietnamese forces could have prevailed militarily over the long run, no matter how much blood and treasure the US was willing to sacrifice. The message that America as a whole finally got from the Tet Offensive six years later was already etched in stone and sent that day at Ap Bac.

How is it that 49 years after Ap Bac, America still hasn't learned the lessons that were written in blood there that day? If not the lessons about the moral limits of empire (there are none, from the empire's point of view), then at least the lessons about its practical nuts-and-bolts limits? One reason, surely, is the near-infinite capacity to spin narcissistic, self-deceptive yarns, about our own vaunted nobility, prowess and far-sighted vision.

Tell the truth

In his report, Davis highlights one particularly specific and disastrous example of this: The way in which the Iraq troop surge was blindly credited for a broad reduction in the level of violence that was largely driven by other factors outside of American military control - and how this misreading of the Iraq surge in turn became the foundation for military policy in Afghanistan, where it was even more unsuited to the actual situation. On page 5 of his unclassified report, Davis writes:

US military leadership unambiguously sought to replicate the fundamentals that were believed to have succeeded so well in Iraq and importing them into Afghanistan. Prime among those fundamentals was to 'Protect the population' which many still believe was primarily responsible for our success in 2007 Iraq. As will be thoroughly covered in a subsequent section of this report, however, that was never the case in Iraq and as we're about to thoroughly cover in the next section, it never worked in Afghanistan. What I hope to convey in this section is the lengths to which our current military leadership seems to have gone to keep the façade of success alive despite the presence of considerable quantitative and qualitative evidence to the contrary.

Of course the self-deception feeds other-deception, just as military deception feeds civilian deception. No one is blameless here. All have sinned. And all still seem disturbingly pleased with themselves.

In the conclusion of his *Armed Forces Journal* story, Davis writes:

When having to decide whether to continue a war, alter its aims or to close off a campaign that cannot be won at an acceptable price, our senior leaders have an obligation to tell Congress and American people the unvarnished truth and let the people decide what course of action to choose. That is the very essence of civilian control of the military. The American people deserve better than what they've gotten from their senior uniformed leaders over the last number of

years. Simply telling the truth would be a good start.

And that is precisely what the echoes of Tet in Afghanistan were telling America's leaders last Sunday. No one should be the least bit surprised if they still cannot hear. It's only been - what? - two generations?

Besides, they're very busy men. They have an entire empire to destroy from within.