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Obama's Neverending Afghan Adventure

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March 31, 2010

President Barack Obama snuck in and out of Afghanistan on Sunday. He made his secret escape from Camp David and flew around the world to show the troops he cared, and to assure all of them and all of us back at the home front—despite all that talk last year of a foreseeable and expected drawdown in troops and eventual withdrawal—that, “The United States of America does not quit once it starts on something.... We keep at it. We persevere. And together, with our partners, we will prevail. I am absolutely confident of that.”

Bold talk of perseverance leading to victory, delivered to the brave souls who risk death trying to make it come true—now that’s a political narrative for Obama. At least it's the sort of narrative that *Reason* Editor in Chief Matt Welch criticized the president and his media enablers for constantly seeking out: a pithy story, easy to understand and cheer, but without any of the messy realities that unfold in actual life.

As a political move, Obama’s Afghan vacation was a strange choice to cap what had been a pretty impressive streak, with health care and student loans supposedly flowing down like gentle manna from Obama's healing hands. From one perspective, the trip could be seen as drawing attention to an intractable problem whose standing with the American people shifts for no obvious reason.

Barring some catastrophic event unquestionably connected to someone in Afghanistan, I suspect Obama could treat this war like a national Chuck Cunningham and never mention it again. That

he bothered to cap his political triumphs with a reminder of this persistent foreign policy bummer seems to prove that he really has adopted this war as his own.

Which is good for neither his political future nor the future of American foreign policy. Consider Afghan boss and American partner Hamid Karzai. He's in office through fraud, he's unable or unwilling to meet U.S. demands in terms of ending corruption and the local drug trade, and he's happy to invite U.S. enemies such as Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to speak in his country.

Karzai does at least say “thank you” when we ask him to, as he did during Obama’s visit. Still, he can often sound like the most radical domestic opponents of American Empire, as *The New York Times* recently noted:

“[Karzai] has developed a complete theory of American power,” said an Afghan...who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. “He believes that America is trying to dominate the region, and that he is the only one who can stand up to them.”

Mr. Karzai said that, left alone, he could strike a deal with the Taliban, but that the United States refuses to allow him. The American goal, he said, was to keep the Afghan conflict going, and thereby allow American troops to stay in the country.

This is the ally we have chosen. Beyond the country's domestic politics, things do not seem to be on a one-year stroll to a forceful quelling of the Afghan insurgency. American casualties during the first three months of this year are nearly double that of the same period last year. Justice in Afghanistan remains rudimentary and terrifying by American standards, and barely half the Afghan population prefers the government’s courts over more tribal or private means of adjudication. Twenty-six percent of the civilian casualties in 2008, the most recent year with accurate records, were from pro-government air strikes. The Brookings Institution, which has the best civilian statistics collection on the Afghan war effort, sums up the current realities:

In terms of raw violence, the situation is at a historic worst level, with early 2010 levels of various types of attacks much higher than even last year at this time. Much of that is due to the recent Marja campaign and, more generally, the deployment of additional U.S. (and Afghan) troops to parts of the country where they have not been present before. One hopes, therefore, that it is a temporary effect only.

By way of comparison, the rate of attacks in Afghanistan country-wide is now more than double the level seen in Iraq. However, civilian fatality rates for the two countries are comparable. That is because in Afghanistan, the enemy targets security forces selectively, more than civilians, and also because General McChrystal's emphasis on reducing accidental harm to civilians has led to more care by NATO troops in the use of firepower.

As goes Marjah, so will go Kandahar—or at least that's the hope. (Though the significance of the Marjah victory might be less than it’s being spun, both in scope and in victory.) Undoubtedly, Afghanistan presents fertile ground for any number of future “victories,” complete with casualty figures higher for Them than for Us (and with the civilian Them somewhere in the middle).

But none of this means that the end goal of establishing internal security, crippling the insurgency, and guaranteeing that no one will ever plot wickedness against the U.S. from the Afghanistan area will be reached, or could be reached, minus an eternal American occupation.

Domestic and foreign policy foolishness dovetail in Afghanistan. Among all the other dubious things we are trying to accomplish in this tribally-torn land—whose younger generation has known pretty much nothing but internecine strife—is the elimination of poppy and opium production, which as much as 35 percent of the country is likely involved in. We'll probably never learn just how much peace and prosperity we could bring to this troubled land simply by letting them grow that which the world seems to most want from them. How much peace and prosperity we can bring with 100,000 troops, we will alas find out.

This doesn't mean some sort of “victory” is impossible in Afghanistan. We already knocked out the Taliban government that enabled our Al Qaeda attackers, which was the reason we invaded in the first place. But then overthrowing a government can be much easier than propping up an existing government that's reviled by lots of angry, well-armed people. And as far as driving Al Qaeda out of a safe haven where they could safely grow, well, according to Gen. Stanley McChrystal himself last fall, we've pretty much done that.

Neither our national safety, our national dignity, nor our national need to prove that no one should fuck with us have been at stake in Afghanistan since 2002, when *Foreign Affairs* declared our military operation there a “flawed masterpiece” of both political and military strategy.

The U.S. getting trapped in Afghanistan is neither a matter of fate nor of survival. It is about the story we choose to tell. Are we Russia in the 1980s or Babur the Mughal emperor in 1504? Is the Afghan mission an imperialist U.S. power grab or a feminist mission of mercy? We are actively trying to change how both our European allies and the Afghan people themselves tell the story of our involvement. We can get any number of advantages from staying, ranging from helping set up a possible casus belli with Iran to convincing the world that when we cry havoc, we mean havoc 'til the bitter end.

But there are so many bitter ends along the way. Sticking it out will mean tens of thousands added to the already hundreds of thousands of displaced people in the whole Afghanistan-Pakistan mess. It will mean more repetitions in the coming years of the \$33 billion on top of the \$65 billion we are spending over there this year alone. Not to mention—though really we should mention almost nothing else—the lives lost on all sides trying to guarantee the impossible. The one thing we could do—ridding ourselves of a state that coddled our enemies and giving the Afghans another chance to try self-rule—is done, and thus there is no reason our “mission” should not be as well.

Obama snuck in and out of Afghanistan quickly and, abetted by his press followers, with great secrecy. The troops whose morale he was trying to improve are regrettably still there, with many more to come.

There's still time to change the narrative. But each day we don't change it adds to the dead and to the displaced and to a legacy of justifiable rage against America-as-foreign-occupier. The very

sort of rage, incidentally, that has fueled most guerrilla terrorism throughout history. As a means to make the U.S. safer, that's an unconvincing tale. But Obama is right about one thing: It is his narrative to shape, and to change, if he wants to.