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We Can't Make Afghans Accept Karzai Now

LOS ANGELES--Eight years. We've been in Afghanistan longer than any other war in American history. The party of the president who invaded Afghanistan has been repudiated at the polls. Yet we still haven't altered the flawed strategy that allowed uneducated tribesmen with outdated weapons to defeat us year after year.

We haven't learned a thing.

You can see the myopia in our leaders' talking points. "Our goal [in Afghanistan] is to disrupt, dismantle, defeat Al Qaeda and its extremist allies," secretary of state Hillary Clinton told ABC News' "Nightline." "But not every Taliban is Al Qaeda. There are people who are Taliban, who are fighting because they get paid to fight. They have no other way of making a living."

So few words. So much stupidity. Where to start? Here: Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan in 2001 was negligible. Al Qaeda was a Pakistani phenomenon. Still is.

You're welcome, have another: Not only is every Taliban not Al Qaeda, there's no such thing as a Taliban, as in: "That guy is a Taliban." Members of the Taliban are called Talibs. You invade a country, send in 100,000 troops, presume to decide what form of government it should have and who should rule it--yet you still don't know something as basic as what the members of the nation's majority political movement are called? Still wondering why "they" hate us?

Last and not least, actually, while it's true that the neo-Taliban (as South Asian experts call them) sometimes pay stipends to their fighters, it's one hell of a stretch--not to mention reflective of an utter misunderstanding of the situation--to depict them as a bunch of greedy and/or desperate entrepreneurs trying to scrape together a few afghanis to make ends meet. (Afghanis are the national currency. Afghans are the people of Afghanistan. Neither the president nor news reporters know this.)

The neo-Taliban are merely the most recent reflection of a historical truth: Afghans set their political differences aside when it's time to kill invaders. Nothing the U.S. can or will do can or will change what we are: a hostile occupation force. Nothing the U.S. can say will change why the Afghans think we're there: to kill them and steal their land.

Eight years. Look, we were never going to win. No one does empire like the British, but the Afghans beat them like a drum. Next-door neighbor Russia knew all about the Afghans and their culture; they lost too. There was no way we were going to outperform the English and the Russians. Still, even if America's political class doesn't read history, you'd think they might catch a clue about crushing the hopes and aspirations of ornery brown people over the course of *eight years of occupation*. At least by osmosis.

Of said clues, Number One If-You-Forget-Everything-Else-I-Tell-You-Remember-This-One Clue goes as follows: Hamid Karzai, appointed as a U.S. puppet in 2001, has never been considered the legitimate president of Afghanistan by the people who count--Afghans. We've done a lot to piss off the Afghans--slaughtering wedding parties, dropping depleted-uranium bombs on civilians, encouraging opium poppy cultivation--but the biggest single reason every single American soldier who died in Afghanistan has died for nothing is that they died fighting for Hamid Karzai.

Karzai's Afghanistan is a disaster. The average Afghan has received zero assistance from the U.S.-led coalition, has seen zero improvement in his or her life, and has seen no reconstruction whatsoever. Most Afghans never even *see* American aid workers, who never leave their compounds in Kabul. \$13 billion has been allocated for aid to Afghanistan--but there is no evidence that a single cent has ever been spent. Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies says the overall effort in Afghanistan "has been a nightmare; vast amounts have been wasted."

"The [Afghan] judiciary is so weak," reports the *Times*, "that Afghans increasingly turn to a shadow Taliban court system because, a senior military official said, 'a lot of the rural people see the Taliban justice as at least something.'" Which is how the Taliban came to power in 1995-96. There was chaos. They brought order.

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But President Obama doesn't understand a thing.

"Administration officials describe Mr. Obama as impatient with the civilian progress so far," reports *The New York Times*. "The president is not satisfied on any of this," a senior administration official tells the paper.

Mr. President: The Afghan war was lost the day the U.S. invaded. It was doomed to disaster the day it installed an illegitimate stooge. Not only is he a puppet, he is a puppet on a shoestring budget--so he can't try to buy the kind of public support that other Afghan politicians have earned with bravery on the battlefield.

Now the U.S. is trying to retroactively legitimize the Afghan pseudo-president. But it's a sucker's bet. Leaving even one U.S. soldier in Afghanistan means only one thing: more death.