

Operation Enduring Freedom: A Retrospective

By Stephen Zunes | October 18, 2006

It has become a given, even among many progressive critics of Bush administration policy, that while the U.S. war on Iraq was illegal, immoral, unnecessary, poorly executed, and contrary to America's national security interests, the war on Afghanistan—which was launched five years ago last week—was a legal, moral, and a necessary response to protect American national security in the aftermath of 9/11. Virtually every member of Congress who has gone on record opposing the Iraq War supported the Afghanistan War. Similarly, a number of soldiers who have resisted serving in Iraq on moral grounds have expressed their willingness to serve in Afghanistan.

Relatively speaking, the war in Afghanistan has not been nearly as much the unambiguous tragedy as the U.S. war on Iraq. Only the most committed pacifists or the most extreme among the ideological critics of U.S. intervention would have ruled out the possibility of at least some use of force against al-Qaida following the 9/11 attacks against the United States.

Were it not for the Iraq War, however, there would be a lot more debate and serious questions regarding U.S. policy in Afghanistan. On the fifth anniversary of Operation Enduring Freedom, the large-scale civilian casualties inflicted by U.S. forces, the torture and abuse of detainees, the ongoing suffering and violence in that country, and the resurgence of the dreaded Taliban all demand a significant rethinking of the war.

Non-Military Options

The first question is whether al-Qaida's operational base in Afghanistan could have been destroyed and Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders could have been brought to justice without the use of military force. Was a war of this magnitude really necessary?

The Bush administration insisted that it launched its war against Afghanistan only after the Taliban regime had refused to accept non-military means of resolving the conflict such as handing over bin Laden. Unfortunately, the absence of an International Criminal Court at that time, delayed in large part by U.S. objections, made it impossible for the Taliban to find a face-saving means of bringing

bin Laden to justice without giving him to a hostile foreign government. Furthermore, the United States refused Taliban requests for evidence that bin Laden was connected with the terrorist attacks, even though such evidence presumably existed at the time and sharing such evidence is normally expected before complying with an extradition request.

In addition, Pakistani and British newspapers reported that in late September and early October, leaders of Pakistan's two Islamic-identified parties negotiated a deal that could have avoided war. According to these reports, the Taliban was apparently willing to extradite bin Laden to Pakistan to face an international tribunal that would then decide whether to try him there or hand him over to the United States. However, U.S. ambassador to Pakistan Wendy Chamberlain pressured Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, to kill the deal. An American official was later quoted as saying that "casting our objective too narrowly" risked "a premature collapse of the international effort if by some luck chance Mr. bin Laden was captured." In short, the Bush administration appeared to prefer going to war than bringing bin Laden to justice.

Other U.S. demands were even more difficult for the Taliban to accept: the Bush administration demanded the expulsion of all al-Qaida fighters, even though most had nothing to do with foreign terrorist operations but instead were brought in by bin Laden as a mercenary force that served as the backbone of the Taliban's defense against the Northern Alliance. Similarly, the Taliban viewed the Bush administration's additional demand of unfettered U.S.



inspections throughout the country as an unreasonable encroachment of Afghan sovereignty.

The United States might have pursued another non-military option by taking advantage of the deep divisions within the Taliban and the restive political leaders in the southeastern part of the country. Such an exploitation of political differences might have also broken the impasse regarding al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan, which was causing great resentment even among some Taliban partisans. No attempts from the Bush administration were forthcoming, however.

It is very possible that such efforts would have failed anyway, requiring serious consideration of military options. This leads to the second question. Why did the United States focus on high-altitude bombing instead of precisely targeted small-unit commando operations, which would have presumably been a more appropriate tactic against a terrorist group like al-Qaida?

Military Failures

When the Taliban refused to give in to its demands, the United States—with support from Great Britain—began a major bombing campaign against Afghanistan on October 7, four weeks after the alleged al-Qaida attacks against the United States. Given the physical devastation of the preceding 20 years of conflict on one of the poorest countries in the world, the United States conducted war on what some strategic analysts called “not a target-rich environment.” General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged that by the third day of the air strikes U.S. planes were returning with their ordnance since they could not find obvious targets. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld added, to the laughter of assembled journalists, “We’re not running out of targets. Afghanistan is.”

The U.S. military operation resulted in widespread civilian casualties. During the heaviest phases of the air strikes that fall, American bombs struck a Red Cross food convoy, a military hospital, a boys' school, an old age home, several small villages, and residential neighborhoods. Twice, U.S. planes attacked a Red Cross food distribution center. Amnesty International demanded “an immediate and full investigation into what may have been violations of international and humanitarian law such as direct attacks on civilian objects or indiscriminate attacks” by the U.S. military. A study by Carl Conetta of the Project on

Defense Alternatives estimated that, by the end of the year, civilian deaths from the bombing ranged between 1,000 and 1,300. Another study, by Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire, estimated that the civilian deaths toll had risen to above 3,700. In addition, Conetta estimates conservatively that the U.S. air campaign created more than a half million additional refugees as well as an additional 3,200 civilian deaths from starvation, exposure, and related illness and injury sustained while trying to flee from the bombing. These civilian deaths are particularly tragic given that the Afghan people were the first and primary victims of the Taliban, perhaps the world's most totalitarian regime during its five years of rule.

Since these estimates were first made at the end of 2001, the civilian death toll may have doubled. The number of civilian casualties—from both the bombing and the resulting refugee crisis—have far surpassed the numbers killed in the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and on the four hijacked airliners.

A case can certainly be made that there is a significant difference in moral culpability between terrorists who kill civilians on purpose and military personnel who kill civilians accidentally. However, most U.S. bombing raids in Afghanistan have taken place when there was no serious enemy fire and when the Americans had plenty of time and technology to avoid such mistakes. Manslaughter may not be as bad as murder, but it is still a crime. The emphasis on high-altitude bombing was less a strategic necessity than an effort to avoid casualties among U.S. pilots. Such a trade-off is understandable when soldiers face enemy soldiers, but it is unethical and illegal when the result is a higher civilian death toll. The high rate of casualties among Afghan civilians seemed particularly questionable since none of the terrorists involved in the hijackings and none of their leaders were Afghans. The 9-11 plotters were outsiders who had taken advantage of Afghanistan's political tragedy, which was rooted in foreign invasion over 20 years earlier. Similarly, Afghan citizens did not elect the Taliban and had no party in the decision to provide sanctuary for bin Laden and his followers.

Fighting Terrorists

A war against a foreign government involves clear, fixed targets such as command-and-control centers, intelligence headquarters, heavy equipment, major weapons stockpiles,

large concentrations of troops, and major military complexes. A war against a terrorist group is not so straightforward. Due to the nature of attacks organized by small groups using clandestine methods, so-called “terrorist bases” generally contain no tangible assets that can be seriously crippled by military strikes. As a result, such air campaigns have a mixed success rate at best, particularly in poor rural countries that have few obvious targets to destroy or damage.

Furthermore, the Taliban regime’s provision of sanctuary to bin Laden and his supporters was not a typical case of state-backed terrorism. As a result of bin Laden’s personal fortune and al-Qaida’s elaborate international network, al-Qaida did not need and apparently did not receive direct financial or logistical support from the Afghan government. If anything, al-Qaida had more influence over the Taliban than the Taliban had over al-Qaida.

The further decentralization of al-Qaida operations resulting from the loss of its base in Afghanistan has made it even harder to track down and arrest or eliminate its operatives. Much of the terrorist network’s capability to launch terrorist attacks has always resided outside of that central Asian country. Carl Conetta predicted in early 2002—correctly, according to recent intelligence reports—that:

The capacity of Al-Qaida to repair its lost capabilities for global terrorism rests on the fact that terrorist attacks like the 11 September crashes do not depend on the possession of massive, open-air training facilities. Warehouses and small *ad hoc* sites will do. Moreover, large terrorist organizations have proved themselves able to operate for very long periods without state sanctuaries—as long as sympathetic communities exist ... Thus, Al-Qaida may be able to recoup its lost capability by adopting a more thoroughly clandestine and “stateless” approach to its operations, including recruitment and training.

Indeed, the key figures in the 9/11 attacks lived in residential neighborhoods in Hamburg, Germany, not in the bombed-out “terrorist bases” in Afghanistan. Similarly, they received more training from flight schools in the United States than from military camps in Afghanistan. No countries outside the Taliban’s Afghanistan have formally granted sanctuary to the al-Qaida network, but these terrorists have still continued to operate.

Regardless of the nature of the Taliban government or its support for al-Qaida, the image of one of the richest nations in the world bombing one of the world’s poorest nations contributed to growing anti-American resentment, particularly in the Islamic world. The *New York Times* noted four weeks into the bombing campaign that “portraits of the United States as a lonely, self-absorbed bully taking out its rage on defenseless Afghanistan are on the rise.”

Much of this anti-Americanism could have been avoided had the United States found a means of avoiding military action in Afghanistan or if the military response had been limited to special operations and tactical air strikes. Indeed, the most urgent action related to the post-September 11 defense needs were related to al-Qaida cells outside of Afghanistan, which would be primarily the responsibility of intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Even if an international consensus had developed to oust the Taliban regime, the United States and its allies should have taken the time to lay the political groundwork for a post-Taliban government and prepare post-war peacekeeping troops and development aid prior to the launch of military action.

Most American allies supported this strategy, but the Bush administration opposed it. As Conetta observed, “The lack of proper political preparation makes it harder to achieve military success and raises its cost.” Indeed, the Bush administration paid very little attention to the political future of Afghanistan. The Bush administration has “one part-time upper-middle-level figure working on the political side,” Afghan scholar Barnett Rubin noted soon after the launch of the war on Afghanistan in 2001, “and they’ve got all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff working on the military side.”

A Less Secure America

While many Americans celebrated the U.S. triumph over a few thousand Pashtun tribesmen in Afghanistan, getting involved in such a tribal war has not likely made the United States more secure. The United States has little to show for its efforts beyond the overthrow of the weak and impoverished Taliban regime. It was unable even to capture bin Laden. As one veteran British journalist noted, “There is no victory in Afghanistan’s tribal war, only the exchange of one group of killers for another.” Not long after the Taliban fell came widespread reports of massacres

of prisoners by Northern Alliance forces, some of which may have had U.S. complicity. Referring to non-Afghan fighters in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld declared that “they will either be killed or taken prisoner,” highlighting U.S. ambivalence toward such atrocities.

The Bush administration’s lack of apparent concern over what would happen to Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban is at the root of the country’s deteriorating situation today. The United States, while continuing counter-insurgency operations in various parts of the country, refused to provide forces for the European-led UN peace-keeping operation dispatched to Afghanistan to operate beyond the capital of Kabul. In recent years, the United States has taken leadership in bombing a country but relied on the UN to provide the subsequent humanitarian relief and the Europeans to provide post-war security. The hesitancy in getting involved in peacekeeping operations does not extend to an unwillingness to engage in other military operations, however. The U.S. Air Force has engaged in air strikes against rival forces of the Afghan government that had no affiliation with al-Qaida or the Taliban, despite Congress not having authorized the use of military force beyond those responsible for the 9/11 attacks or those harboring them.

The initial U.S. victory over the Taliban regime was more difficult than some hoped but quicker than others feared. Unlike the Soviets, who faced as many as 100,000 Afghan

resistance fighters armed with sophisticated American equipment, the Taliban were a small ragtag group of a few thousand tribesmen.

Ridding the world of perhaps the most oppressive and misogynist regime on the planet could be considered a worthwhile result whether or not it enhances the struggle against terrorism. However, questions remain as to whether the regime would have shortly collapsed from within as some had predicted; whether suddenly bringing to power opposition warlords has been worth the price in terms of Afghanistan’s ongoing violence, instability, reinvigorated opium trade, and other problems; and, whether the devastation from the U.S. assault will create a reaction that will lead to the rise of new extremists in the future. Also worthy of critical evaluation is whether the United States is culpable for creating the conditions that brought the Taliban to power in the first place.

While the serious negative legal, moral, and security implications of the U.S. war on Iraq remain in the forefront of debate today, similar concerns regarding the U.S. war on Afghanistan should not be ignored.

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