

What Can We Really Learn from Afghanistan?

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As difficult as it may be to believe after almost nine years of war in Afghanistan, at some point that war will be over. It is unlikely that President Obama will bring our troops home by his summer 2011 deadline, and even more unlikely that victory, whatever that means now, will be achieved in Afghanistan. It is, however, almost apparent that at some point we will have to wind down the war. This may come following some modest gains there, on the heels of a victory declaration or after a humiliating defeat, but it will happen eventually.

The lessons which the U.S. learns from Afghanistan will frame foreign policy for the decades to come, but it is not at all clear what all those lessons will be. Some of these lessons, that the U.S. cannot easily bring any country it chooses into the modern democratic world, that we should not lay our trust in leaders as erratic, undependable and corrupt as Hamid Karzai, that winning the peace is far more difficult than winning the war and that the conflicts of the 21st century are quite different than those which characterized most of the 20th century, are obvious.

There are other less obvious lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan which are worth exploring as well. The first is that, perhaps more than ever, we live in an interconnected world. The war in Afghanistan has influenced U.S. relations with Russia, countries of Central Asia, much of the rest of the former Soviet Union, NATO and elsewhere. The need for secure transit routes to Afghanistan has made the U.S. dependent on Central Asian despots and made good relations with Russia imperative. This has also made it necessary for the U.S. to move away from its commitment to democracy in the region and it more difficult for the U.S. to be a powerful counterweight to Russian influence and power.

A big picture lesson from Afghanistan is that when crafting foreign policy what is possible should probably play a bigger role in decision making than what is ideal or even what is right. There is clearly room for ethics and human rights in foreign policy, but it needs to be tempered by a more sober understanding of the limits of American power. Helping Afghanistan become a modern, democratic, free country was not a bad goal, but it was never going to be achieved absent an exponentially larger and more expensive U.S. effort—an effort which may not have been politically possible.

Afghanistan also exposed the division in the U.S. between the military and the rest of society. The assertion that in both Iraq and Afghanistan it is the American military, not the U.S. more broadly that is at war, has become something of a cliché, but it remains true. Over time, this will have an impact on the U.S. as those who fight our wars become increasingly isolated from those who do not. This may increase the challenges veterans have when returning to civilian life as well as make those Americans with no ties to the

military more callous about sending people into harm's way. Additionally, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have put tremendous stress on the U.S. military and demonstrated the limits recruitment strategies. This is another constraint which will frame future foreign policy.

The war in Afghanistan has had a complex impact on national security and the war on terror. Although American casualties continue to mount in Afghanistan, it remains true that since the war began there have been no terrorist attacks on American soil. This is not because the terrorist threat no longer exists, because it does. Nor is it because the war has sufficiently disrupted terrorist networks in Afghanistan, because it hasn't. Instead, the war effort in Afghanistan has been part of a range of security efforts both domestic and foreign that have helped keep America safe. This is somewhat counter intuitive because the war is not broadly seen as a success. Attacks on our troops are common; Osama Bin Laden has not been found; and the Taliban is, at least according to some measures, becoming stronger in that region. None of this has been enough to contribute to another attack on American soil.

How this impact is explained will be very central to the legacy of the Afghan war. One interpretation would be to see this costly and seemingly endless war as having been essential to our security since September 11th. Another interpretation would be that the war in Afghanistan was essentially spurious, coinciding with almost a decade following September 11th when there were no attacks on the U.S. Neither of these interpretations are meaningfully accurate and both would lead to wrongheaded foreign policy decisions. Synthesizing these two interpretations, both of which contain important elements of truth will be the challenge facing future American administrations.