

**Leaving Afghanistan?  
Moral, political & strategic consequences**

Scott Burchill

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## **Introduction**

On the 8th anniversary of the West's attack on Afghanistan (7 October, 2001), it is time to examine the moral, political and strategic consequences of a withdrawal of foreign troops.

The war has now been going on longer than the WW1 & WW2 combined. If it goes on for another 5 years it will be the longest war in US military history.

No one seriously believes that either victory or defeat is imminent.

The Obama Administration in Washington is currently reviewing its entire strategy in Afghanistan, after receiving a request from the US military commander there (McChrystal) for an additional 40,000 troops. This is despite Washington injecting 21,000 troops early this year (March).

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff: the situation "is serious and it is deteriorating ... the Taliban insurgency has gotten better, more sophisticated ..."

Lt. General Stanley McChrystal has warned that without the additional troops he has requested, the war "will likely result in failure."

There are currently around 100,000 Western troops in Afghanistan, including 68,000 US troops. Australia has 1,550 troops deployed there (deployed because NATO-members, which have carriage of the war, won't put boots on the ground).

The war is currently costing US taxpayers \$US4 billion each month. Democrats in Congress want results before next year's congressional elections (a speedier withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq & Afghanistan would shave \$1.1 trillion off the budget in the next decade, a recent congressional budget projection says).

In 2003 the Taliban controlled 30 out of 364 districts. At the end of 2008 that figure had increased to 164 out of 364 districts. Taliban attacks increased by 60% between October 2008 & April 2009. Research by the International Council on Security and Development indicates that 80% of Afghanistan now has a permanent Taliban presence and that 97% of the country has "substantial Taliban activity."

US commander McChrystal recently said there were no signs of major al-Qaida presence in Afghanistan (possibly as few as 100 militants).

Presidential election on 20 August (low voter turnout):

- Hamid Karzai 54.6%
- Abdullah Abdullah 27.8%
  
- possible fraud 20% of vote
- 33% of votes for Karzai fraudulent (Peter Galbraith - UN)
- female vote as less than 30%

The dubious election may have consolidated Karzai's grip on power (he is very unpopular in Washington & Islamabad) but it signals the collapse of Obama's political strategy in Afghanistan: "is this what we are fighting for – a corrupt government which won a fraudulent election?"

In a report leaked to the Washington Post, McChrystal conceded there was now a "crisis of confidence" among the Afghan people in their government.

It's a view shared by many in the West. In August Afghanistan passed a law permitting Shia men to deny their wives food and sustenance if they refuse to obey their husbands' sexual demands, despite international outrage over an earlier version of the legislation which President Hamid Karzai had promised to review.

Karzai's dubious legitimacy & growing independence from Washington makes him a difficult, and possibly useless partner in counter-terrorism operations. Meanwhile, revelations of corruption and electoral fraud are a significant boost for the Taliban.

In international politics the 'domestic' usually trumps all. What deals will Obama have to do in Congress on health care, for example, to get support for his new strategy in Afghanistan (compare with LBJ's 'Great Society' v Vietnam), whatever it might be? He may require GOP support, which would be almost surreal.

One thing is clear, the collapse of Washington's political strategy in Afghanistan has forced a reconsideration of its military strategy. Although John Howard, Jim Molan (wants 6,000 additional Australians) and other conservatives are calling for more troops to be sent, this seems premature in light of Obama's review of the whole campaign. Withdrawal, we are told, is not being considered as part of the review. In my view it should be.

## **Pretexts & mission goals: a silent change with deadly consequences**

Shortly after 9/11 – in early October 2001 - the US demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden. Taliban leader Mullah Omar said he would consider the request, and asked Washington to submit a formal extradition request with accompanying evidence of bin Laden's responsibility for the 9/11 attacks - normal practice under international law. No evidence was produced because, at the time, none was available. In June 2002 (eight months *after* the bombing of Afghanistan began and following arguably the most intensive investigation in human history) the FBI was still unable to definitively say who was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, claiming it "believed" the attack may have been hatched in Afghanistan and that planning occurred in Germany and the UAE.

The initial justification for the war was the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda officials. There is no time here to mention the number of terrorists from Central America and the Caribbean whom the US refuses to hand over to prosecutors in Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, etc,. Once again, hypocrisy & double standards rule the day.

Three weeks *after* the bombing commenced, however, the goals of the mission changed and its pretext was retrospectively adjusted. In what may have been an unintentional admission, the Chief of the British Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, declared that the "squeeze will carry on until the people of the country themselves recognise that this [ie the bombing campaign] is going to go on until they get the leadership changed." In other words, we will continue to bomb you until you remove the Taliban from power, even though many of you have actually been trying – albeit unsuccessfully – to accomplish precisely this objective for a number of years - and we accept you probably cannot achieve their removal from power without help anyway.

The bombing was not undertaken to remove the Taliban from power. That was an afterthought, added later on. This shift is crucial in explaining both the confusion of mission goals and the subsequent failure to achieve anything approaching "success."

Subsequently, the conflict became a war against the Taliban conducted initially by US proxies with a similar moral outlook to the Taliban, the venal warlords of the Northern Alliance. The initial justification for the war – the handover of bin Laden – is now largely and unsurprisingly forgotten. The whereabouts of Al Qaeda's leadership is uncertain, though it is thought to be in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan. Washington has delivered no such ultimatum to Islamabad.

It's worth noting that three weeks after the bombing began in October 2001, 1,000 Afghan leaders (internals & exiles) met in Peshawar. All were committed to overthrowing the Taliban and all opposed US air raids.

## **Moral principles and intervention**

Although there are relatively few moral principles that enjoy universal support, those who favour a “consequentialist” approach to ethics argue people should be responsible for the predictable consequences of their behaviour, both their actions and inaction.

According to Noam Chomsky, this responsibility is enhanced by privilege and mounts with a greater opportunity to act effectively, if there is relative impunity from adverse consequences, and when the effects of our actions (or inaction) can be more clearly anticipated.

Ethical responsibility also “extends to the policy choices of one’s own state to the extent that the political community allows a degree of influence over policy formation.” To varying degrees, the citizens of functioning democratic states accept shared responsibility for the actions their governments commit in their name (eg. to invade and occupy Iraq), as well as decisions taken not to act (eg. refraining from intervention in Sudan).

For individuals, ethical decision-making stems from a capacity to imagine ourselves in the positions of others, a unique aspect of the human condition. We are capable of appreciating the likely consequences of our behaviour for others: to see how things might look through their eyes.

Though not a moral agent, the same principle can apply to the state, specifically its foreign policies. The state may not be a moral actor but its actions have moral consequences that can be anticipated. To take an obvious example, enlightened self-interest dictates that when the purchase of a new fighter aircraft with a longer range is planned, our neighbours are consulted in advance about the implications of the acquisition for our strategic doctrine.

It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that actions and inaction are always morally equivalent. As Ted Honderich argued about the Iraq war, “there is no parity between our doing something with the absolute dead certainty of killing and maiming thousands, and not doing it with only some probability, some chance, that some people will suffer as an indirect result.”

In other words, there is a heavier burden of proof on our purposive behaviour. First & foremost, the ethical value of our actions should be measured by their anticipated and predictable consequences. If you invade & attack a country, you are responsible for its fate.

This is how we should approach the moral implications of our intervention in Afghanistan. After eight years, ongoing intervention has little chance of “success” not the least because “success” cannot be meaningfully or coherently defined. When recently asked to define victory in Afghanistan, US special envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, could only say “we’ll know it when we see it.”

We can be certain that military intervention will continue to result in the death of innocent civilians, and place our own military forces in harms way. It is difficult to mount a moral defence of the war – which by definition will increase the number of civilian & military casualties as it continues – when there is no clear, achievable strategic goal. It is even harder to defend such a case without overwhelming support for such action from the recipient population.

At this point a distinction must be made between opposition to the war on purely *strategic* grounds (it can't be won) and opposition on *ethical* grounds (the war is fundamentally wrong & immoral) – a distinction in the West which typically separates the political elite from the public (as it did right to the end of the Vietnam War). My own position is that the war (our purposive behaviour) is morally indefensible, and my opposition to it is enhanced by its strategic futility.

The argument that we should not withdraw because it is possible that civil war will be reprised and that the Taliban may return to power is worthy of serious consideration. The consequences of this are also of our making. However, in my view it is a much weaker moral position with a more nebulous standard of proof than the *a priori* argument based on the social impact of our behaviour in the country since October 2001. The burden remains on us to demonstrate that our ongoing intervention is clearly better for the lives of the Afghan people than an orderly withdrawal. Questions of sovereignty, proportionality and strategic consequences are also important, but secondary.

A cosmopolitan ethic demands that on occasions, our national attachments & interests should surrender to the higher ethical conviction that our primary loyalties are to the whole of humanity. A primary consideration of our wider duty to humanity must be our complicity in the misery of others.

At the very least we should “first do no harm” and then if we proceed, protect individuals from the avoidable harm our actions will cause.

## **Official justification: Australia**

Confusion over changing mission goals, what constitutes “victory” or “success” and the increasingly difficult challenge of maintaining popular support for the war, can be seen from official government justifications for the war in Australia. Here are PM Rudd, FM Smith & DM Faulkner explaining the presence of Australian troops in Afghanistan (this is the totality of their justifications):

a) *“In Afghanistan, Australia has two fundamental interests at stake. First, we need to deny sanctuary to terrorists who have threatened and killed Australian citizens. Second, we also have an enduring commitment to the United States under the ANZUS Treaty which was formally invoked at the time of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington.”* – Kevin Rudd

b) *“The strategic objective which Australia and our partners in the international community are pursuing in Afghanistan is clear: it is to ensure that Islamist extremists and terrorist groups are denied safe haven in Afghanistan so that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground or hotbed for international terrorists.”* – Stephen Smith

c) *“The Australian Government has clearly set out the specific goals underlying Australia's commitment and military involvement in Afghanistan, which the Prime Minister identified in April this year. They are:*

- 1. helping to stabilise the country through combined and co-ordinated military, police and civilian assistance;*
- 2. training sufficient Afghan security and police forces in Oruzgan Province to allow Afghan authorities to take over within a reasonable timeframe; and*
- 3. helping to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a training ground and operating base for international terrorists.”* – John Faulkner

In summary: denying terrorists sanctuary, managing the alliance, national stability & security self-sufficiency. I will deal with each of these as I go through.

## **The challenge of local self-sufficiency in security**

The resources necessary to secure 32 million people from the Taliban do not exist. They never have.

Building up local forces to sufficient strength will take years: Obama's existing strategy of doubling the strength of the Afghan army to 240,000 and police to 160,000 will take until 2014 at the earliest, assuming all goes well – there are serious critical analyses, including one by Anna Jones, which argue that this may never be possible due to widespread endemic corruption and deficiencies in the Afghan Army.

It is estimated that 90% of the Afghan army is illiterate. Another estimate suggests the country contains only 200 literate & competent bureaucrats.

## Reasons to stay

- 1) According to *Ahmed Rashid*, a NATO & US withdrawal during the next 12 months “would almost certainly result in the Taliban walking into Kabul. Al Qaeda would be in a stronger position to launch global terrorist attacks. The Pakistani Taliban would be able to ‘liberate’ large parts of Pakistan. The Taliban’s game plan of waiting out the Americans now looks more plausible than ever.” We owe the Afghans something better, both morally & politically. But what? How much?
- 2) Regional stability, especially Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban would be boosted by a withdrawal from Afghanistan. Could also destabilise Pakistan-India relations.
- 3) An essential component of counter-terrorism. Keep Al Qaeda under pressure.
- 4) Credibility – US & NATO. Already tarnished in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, a withdrawal would suggest the West doesn’t have the stomach for a fight. More importantly, its capacity to intimidate & bully would be diminished. NATO’s intervention in Serbia in 1999 was all about credibility. According to John Howard, a withdrawal from Afghanistan would be “an enormous blow to American prestige.”
- 5) Maintaining the US alliance. More than just a quid pro quo for withdrawal from Iraq? A higher premium for insurance, intelligence sharing, advanced warning systems, technology transfers, etc.,.
- 6) We owe the people of Afghanistan a better future and we should finish what we started.

## Reasons to withdraw

1) Dwindling public support in the West (in US 51% believe the war hasn't been worth the cost, 26% supported an escalation of troops; opposition in Australia, the UK, Germany, Italy is growing fastest). Polls aren't everything, however in a democracy only popular consent confers legitimacy on public policy.

2) The presence of Western troops makes things worse ("first do no harm")

3) No coherent definition of "success" or "victory" The war is futile & cannot be won.

4) The "denying terrorists such as Al Qaeda a safe haven from which it can attack the West" argument. There are 3 problems with this:

*a) Al Qaeda's leadership appears to have decamped to safe havens in Pakistan. It doesn't need Afghanistan.*

*b) there are many safe havens to choose from, pick any failing state – Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Pakistan, Philippines, Indonesia, etc – they can't all be occupied indefinitely.*

*c) how important is a physical safe haven for terrorists to threaten the West? Answer – not very much. 9/11 planned in UAE, US, Germany, Spain. Modern terrorists embrace globalisation (internet). Strategic denial is not worth the cost in blood & treasure.*

5) Occupation isn't necessary to achieved the more limited goal of stability. Al Qaeda can be held at bay using intensive intelligence, Predator drones, cruise missiles, raids by Special Operations commandos and even payments to warlords to deny haven to Al Qaeda. After all, the CIA has killed more than a dozen top Qaeda leaders in the lawless Pakistani tribal areas, disrupting the terrorists' ability to plot and carry out attacks against the United States and Europe.

6) A different form of intervention is possible - nation-building: education, infrastructure, institution-building, anti-narcotics policies. There is too much emphasis on military confrontation.

7) The Australia-US alliance would not be damaged by a phased, orderly withdrawal of Australian military forces.

## What do the people of Afghanistan want?

Afghan civilian casualties 2001-9  
(by insurgents, US-led forces, as a result of the war)  
Estimate only: - 25,00 - 65,000

How reliable are polls? Which polls are accurate?

According to Gallup, 49% of Afghans believe additional troops will help stabilise security in the South, 32% say they won't. An alternative poll (BBC, ABC News, ARD-Germany) says only 18% of Afghans favour an increase in troops (44% want fewer US-led forces, 29% want them kept at the current figure).

*Regional variations:* those in the South were mixed, in the North more enthusiastic (70% support) and in the West more solidly opposed (69% opposed).

*Ethnic variations:* Pashtuns (35% support), Tajiks (60% support), Hazaras (64% support).

According to an LA Times survey, Afghans want:

- the US to take local advice instead of trying to impose its own ideas
- invite the Taliban to negotiate (64% support if Taliban stop fighting)
- use traditional governing structures rather than new, imposed ones
- spend money on infrastructure rather than weapons
- worried about increasing violence and electoral fraud
- a rapid withdrawal may trigger further civilian conflict
- a military build-up isn't the answer

According to the BBC, 77% of Afghans are opposed to the use of air strikes by the US and other foreign troops, even if it helps to defeat the Taliban. 64% want a negotiated settlement. 51% want a withdrawal of US-led troops within 2 years.

The Taliban's current demands were set out in a *New York Times* article on 20 May: 'The first demand was an immediate pullback of American and other foreign forces to their bases, followed by a cease-fire and a total withdrawal from the country over the next 18 months. Then the current government would be replaced by a transitional government made up of a range of Afghan leaders, including those of the Taliban and other insurgents. Americans and other foreign soldiers would be replaced with a peacekeeping force drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, with a guarantee from the insurgent groups that they would not attack such a force. Nationwide elections would follow after the Western forces left.' Taliban leaders also added two more conditions: an end to the drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas, and the release of some Taliban prisoners.

Perhaps we should listen more to the courageous and inspirational Malalai Joya or the brave women of RAWA who have consistently spoken out – at great personal risk – against the warlords, the Taliban, the Karzai Government, NATO air strikes and the US occupation?

## **What do people in the West want?**

Coalition fatalities 2001-9

Overall: 1445 (US – 869; Australia – 11)

50% of Americans are opposed to sending more troops.

65% of Australians are opposed to an escalation (Australia has barely suffered double digit fatalities, though a rising figure would certainly increase public opposition).

53% of people in the UK now oppose the decision to send British troops to Afghanistan. In the US the figure is 37% (61% of Americans believe the war is going badly for the US, 51% say its not worth fighting).

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said on 8 September he was “concerned” by the rising opposition to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, cautioning that “the public discourse on the effort in Afghanistan has started to go in the wrong direction” (he presumably means for those who want to continue military operations in the country).

## **Unanswered questions & conclusions**

Those who seek to control or determine the destiny of humanity are in for surprises and disappointment. Any vainglorious and limitless ambition to rule the world is doomed to failure, regardless of the state.

The world – whether it be the global financial system or the politics of Central Asia – is simply too complex for rational management, even by the world's only superpower. In Donald Rumsfeld's words, there are too many "unknown unknowns."

And yet, a superpower such as the US still refuses to acknowledge the limits of its power. This hubris, and a persistent failure to learn from past mistakes, has catastrophic consequences. Washington has power without wisdom.

Cynical, promiscuous and unsuccessful interventions have long been a feature of US foreign policy regardless of the President – and they have almost always left the world more dangerous & uncertain, whilst enhancing anti-Americanism. Afghanistan is no exception.

As in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan has been characterised by illusions, fantasies, incompetence, ignorance & capriciousness. Nothing new here, but another reminder of how dysfunctional modern wars can be, and how many unintended consequences and insoluble problems they can produce. Wars usually go awry and become uncontrollable. And yet we remain surprised by this.

There are no military solutions to the political & social challenges the US faces in Afghanistan (& elsewhere). Military power rarely if ever translates into geo-political influence or positive long-term outcomes. Gabriel Kolko was right when he declared the war "lost" as far back as 2002. Neither technological fetishism nor another troop "surge" will change the dynamics in any meaningful way – just ask the Russians or the British before them. In a very real sense the mistaken lessons of Iraq (about the "surge") have to be unlearned.

In the past Washington's strength rested on its ability to convince other nations that it was in their vital interests to see the US prevail in its global role - in wars such as Afghanistan. Bush's strident unilateralism undermined this capacity. Can Obama win it back?

Even if the West withdraws, why would Al Qaeda – which is comparatively safe in its current sanctuaries in Pakistan – want to return to Afghanistan? Perhaps we have exaggerated Afghanistan's significance and underestimated Pakistan's? After all, the US now says Pakistan & Iran are helping the Taliban.

Can we hive off the Taliban (who don't aim to attack the US) from Al Qaeda (who do)?

The Obama Administration is split about an escalation of troops (Biden, Emmanuel v Gates, Clinton & the Generals), and it has a very full agenda (Iran, Pakistan, Israel-

Palestine, G20 & the GFC, health care, etc, etc). There are no obvious solutions to a war he inherited and that he made a focus – in contrast to Iraq – during the presidential election last year.

The Taliban will have to be politically engaged (as say the IRA was in Northern Ireland and the FLN in Algeria). There is nowhere for them to go. They have survived and prospered over the last eight years. Whether it is possible to distinguish and negotiate with so called “moderate” Taliban leaders remains to be seen, but we can be sure a ceasefire will be a condition of their participation in any agreement. Wedging Al Qaeda from the Taliban may be a key.

In other words, instead of fretting over a new military strategy for Afghanistan, Obama needs a new political strategy – and fast. Get that right and the rest (namely an orderly withdrawal) will follow.