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'Strategic Considerations Override Concern for Foreign Suffering'

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This article is a response to **Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan**.

Nir Rosen has pierced a lethal fog of wishful thinking concerning the prospects of America's Afghan war. Some American military options are more vulnerable to his insights than others. But it would be another bit of wishful thinking to trust the United States to make a morally responsible choice among them.

Rosen's powerful criticisms of counterinsurgency advance the case against an American military project of defeating the Afghan Taliban—hoping to hand over the project to Afghan allies, deploying development aid and pressures toward reform, but seeking out and destroying Taliban until Afghan forces can complete the job. This would require devastation far in excess of morally relevant gains. The frustrations of Team Prowler, in Rosen's poignant narrative, reflect the obstacles to this project. When Gilles Dorronsoro—now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a scholar of Afghanistan for over twenty years—returned from a trip this past August, he reported that "there is no state structure" and "no practical way to separate the insurgency and the population" in the Pashtun countryside, the site of the "dominant influence in 11 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces" that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff now ascribes to the Taliban.

The Taliban are often strongly supported by local clergy, who exercise leadership in village courts that impose draconian justice based on a rigid interpretation of *sharia* law that has broad acceptance in this region, in the communal adjudication that most Afghans strongly favor as more trustworthy and effective than state courts. As the Senior U.S. Civilian Representative in Zabul Province noted in his letter of resignation in September 2009, the forays meant to defeat this movement are a powerful source of recruitment: "The Pashtun insurgency . . . is fed by what is perceived by the Pashtun people as a continued and sustained assault, going back centuries, on Pashtun land, culture, tradition, and religion by external and internal enemies." Afghan Pashtuns plausibly fear abuse and inequity from a government dominated by Northern ethnic groups, led by the warlords who spearheaded the American invasion of 2001.

There is no end in sight to the power of those warlords, the reliable Afghan enforcers of order after decades of competition in violence. Nor is there any end in sight to the Pakistani haven for coordination and supply of the insurgency, which the Pakistani military will provide for strong strategic reasons. India has become the major regional sponsor of the Kabul regime. For example, India's Border Roads Organization built a major new highway connecting landlocked Afghanistan to a new port in the southeast tip of Iran, close to India and itself a joint India-Iran project, which will provide a more attractive outlet than Karachi. In addition to external rivalry, the need to keep Pakistan from breaking into pieces pushes toward support for the Afghan Taliban. The Pashtuns of Pakistan are only separated from the Pashtuns of Afghanistan by an artificial border imposed by Britain in 1893. The Pakistani government reasonably fears that if discontented Pashtuns west of the line were to turn away from Afghan ambitions, they would join with Pashtuns east of the line in the recurrent struggle for an independent Pashtunistan, with secessionist Baluchis as allies.

An American war that would overcome these obstacles and defeat the insurgency in the Pashtun countryside would inflict widespread death, maiming and destruction. There is no good evidence that the people of the Pashtun countryside would be willing subjects of this deadly operation, or that there would be any loss on balance to al Qaeda when it is confined to refuges and resources elsewhere while offered this rich new prize in Muslim outrage. If, as if likely, the American electorate would not tolerate the mounting U.S. casualties, the toll of this moral folly would be utterly in vain.

Still, those inclined to oppose America's Afghan war need to consider another project of killing that Obama may have in mind. Interpreters of the Delphic Oracle must sometimes have reached a firmer consensus than those explaining his intentions in announcing the Afghan Surge, but he did, significantly, avoid explicitly making assurance of the Taliban's defeat a condition for military withdrawal. What he and, subsequently, his high officials and officers have said sometimes suggests a very different aim: securing conditions in which the Taliban do not control cities or the roads linking them or large swathes of territory outside of the Pashtun belt. A temporary surge of American forces in the South and East might serve this aim by providing time and means to strengthen the defense of Kandahar, Kabul, and the highways, while tying up Taliban resources that could otherwise be used in expansion rather than self-defense. Hearing such a message of self-limitation, Rory Stewart, one of the most astute opponents of larger war aims, celebrated Obama at West Point as an Erasmus heralding a great reformation of U.S. military policy, in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books.*

Reminiscent though it is of Soviet Afghan strategy, this is not a foolish or cruel project. Outside of the Pashtun countryside and Pashtun pockets in the North, the Taliban lack strong support and are often hated and feared. The warlords who emerged from the vicious post-Soviet competition, shedding oceans of innocent blood, no longer fight each other and often provide basic order, letting some aid through their nets of patronage. An eighteen-month surge followed by rapid de-escalation to a much smaller force for training, emergency reinforcement, attacking al Qaeda, and securing the largest population centers might change the order of battle in a North-South, urban-rural civil war after the surge, increasing the chances of protection of people who do not want to be oppressed by the Taliban, even in light of their alternatives. Deprived of confidence in national victory, the Taliban would be more apt to make a deal.

The studied ambiguity of American military aims poses morally urgent questions of how quickly the U.S. will reduce suffering inflicted by its war. In the planned appraisal after eighteen months, the Taliban will, almost certainly, still dominate the Pashtun countryside. If their gains elsewhere have started to be well-contained, will this be taken as reason enough for rapid de-escalation, conceding untroubled local victory to a ragtag band of insurgents, or will the agony be prolonged, to tarnish and reduce this triumph? Suppose containment fails (Kabul is now just 25 miles from Taliban territory, and substantial parts of Kandahar are under Taliban control.) Would the United States opt for military withdrawal, conceding most or all of Afghanistan to the Taliban, or vast escalation to turn the tide? In both cases, the more violent path would inflict great suffering without adequate moral justification. But one cannot have any confidence that the United States will promptly take the less violent path, not just because of electoral pressures and counterinsurgency fantasies, but because of strategic considerations that override concern for foreign suffering.

A great power's desire for fearsome credibility continually threatens to cross morally vital limits. In the Pentagon Papers and the Nixon tapes, the goal of increasing the costs of defiance, regardless of expectation of ultimate victory, is the main rationale for carnage in Vietnam. A day after Obama's West Point speech, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates explained to the Senate Armed Services Committee that "failure in Afghanistan" ("a Taliban takeover of much, if not most of the country,"

"Taliban-ruled areas once again sanctuary for al Qaeda") was unacceptable because of the "narrative" it would strengthen:

> What makes the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan uniquely different . . . is that this part of the world represents . . . the historic place where native and foreign Muslims defeated one superpower . . . . For them to be seen to defeat the sole remaining superpower in the same place would have severe consequences for the United States and for the world.

In 2006, when the probable toll of Iraqi deaths due to the war and occupation was about half a million, Barack Obama explained to *The New Yorker*'s Jeffrey Goldberg that he "looks at the war in Iraq as a test of American credibility which is why he doesn't support an immediate withdrawal, even though he believed that the original invasion was ill-conceived." In Afghanistan, the interest in fearsome credibility is accompanied by Afghans' bad luck of living in a strategic crossroads, important in a contest between China and U.S.-allied India which the U.S. intelligence community puts at the forefront of U.S. global interests in the decades ahead.

In the effort to contain U.S. violence in Afghanistan, those who urge that paths of lesser violence are strategically preferable on balance will play a vital role. So will those who urge basic moral distrust of what the U.S. government does in promoting American power. This helps to sap support for further violence. It threatens to impose a cost to power that played a leading role in counsels of de-escalation in Vietnam: disillusion among a growing minority of Americans about the basic goodness of their government. Afghan history can contribute to the argument for distrust. The episode Gates highlighted began when the Carter administration aided opponents of a new pro-Soviet regime in Kabul in the shrewd view that this provocation would have "the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap," as Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski later boasted. The death toll of that trap was over a million, mostly civilians. After the Soviet withdrawal, the U.S. continued to fund warlords as their fights killed hundreds of thousands—for example, about 25,000, mostly civilians, in the battle over Kabul in 1994. In spreading moral anxiety about what America is apt to do, Afghanistan is emblematic, just as Gates testified.

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