The United States and the "Roadmap to Peace" in Afghanistan

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce mapuje a analyzuje uplynulých jedenáct let současné války v Afghánistánu. Zkoumá události, které válce předcházely, a strategie, které v jejím průběhu byly použity. Dále pak tato práce dokumentuje nejrůznější úspěchy i neúspěchy koaličních sil během operace Trvalá svoboda. Zabývá se také nevojenskými aspekty afghánského konfliktu a poukazuje na význam obnovy této válkou rozvrácené země. V neposlední řadě se tato práce věnuje problematice přítomnosti koaličních jednotek v Afghánistánu a možným následkům jejich předčasného stažení.

Klíčová slova: Spojené státy, 11 září 2001, terorismus, Bushova doktrína, operace Trvalá svoboda, Afghánistán, válka, koaliční jednotky, civilní ztráty, povstalci, Taliban, Al-Káida, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Hámid Karzaj, Usáma bin Ládin, "válka proti terorismu", provinční rekonstrukční týmy, obnova.

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis charts and analyzes the past eleven years of the ongoing war in Afghanistan. It explores the events that lead up to the war, and the strategies used. Moreover, it documents the various achievements, as well as failures of the coalition forces during Operation Enduring Freedom. It also deals with the non-military aspects of the Afghan conflict, and points out the importance of reconstructing the war-torn country. Ultimately, this thesis focuses on the issues connected with the presence of coalition troops in Afghanistan and the potential consequences of their premature withdrawal.

Keywords: United States, 11 September 2001, terrorism, Bush Doctrine, Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan, war, coalition troops, collateral damage, insurgents, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Hamid Karzai, Osama bin Laden, "war on terror", provincial reconstruction teams, reconstruction.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! …And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!"[1] These are the words of George W. Bush, shouting into a bullhorn and standing on a pile of rubble, surrounded by rescue workers amidst the wreckage of the World Trade Center. The day was September 14, 2001, and the United States had yet to recover from the shock brought about by the most destructive attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. However, one thing was already clear - Americans were determined to find the perpetrators of this act of terror and to bring them to justice.

To that end, less than a month after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan, quickly dismantled Al-Qaeda's base of operations, and overthrew the Taliban regime which sheltered it. Yet, despite the initial success, the fighting was far from over. A Taliban-led insurgency emerged. By employing guerilla tactics, this insurgency dragged the American troops into a drawn-out battle of attrition. It became more and more apparent that this war was unlike any the USA had waged before.

At the time when the United States embarked on the Afghan campaign, the vast majority of Americans approved of it, for they considered it a rightful retribution against those responsible for 9/11. Nowadays, the situation is wholly different. The enormous public support is long gone, and exhaustion over the lengthy and costly war is setting in. The presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, which was a decade ago perceived as more or less justified, is now a source of much controversy. Some argue that without them the security situation in Afghanistan would get out of control. Others claim that they only further destabilize the region, and that their departure is long overdue.

This thesis will argue that the presence of U.S. troops is, for the time being, essential, despite the many problems it causes. It will also suggest that military force alone is not enough to put an end to the conflict, and that efforts of a non-military nature are necessary to bring lasting peace to the war-torn country.

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[1] George W. Bush, "Bullhorn Address to Ground Zero Rescue Workers," American Rhetoric Website, Windows Media Player video file, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911groundzerobullhorn.htm (accessed October 21, 2012).

1 A THEATER OF WAR

"There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare."[2]
–Sun Tzu, Art of War

Afghanistan has a long history of strife and conflict. It has earned a foreboding nickname 'Graveyard of Empires', for the Afghan people, despite all their ethnic rivalries, always tend to band together against foreign invaders. Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., the British in the nineteenth century, and the Soviets in the twentieth century, all were either driven out or eventually gave up on the idea of conquering the rugged country.[3]

The events of September 11, 2001 condemned Afghanistan to once again become a battlefield, but this time it would not be a war of conquest. It would be a new kind of war, a 'war on terror', spearheaded by the United States. Now, after eleven long years the involvement of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is slowly coming to an end, and with that comes the time to reflect on what the war has accomplished, and to ponder the question that many have been asking since the very beginning: will the United States emerge victorious where so many have failed before?

1.1 The Aftermath

In the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America was in a state of shock and disbelief. The day started like any other, but everything changed when a hijacked passenger plane hit the first tower of the World Trade Center. At first, it appeared to be a tragic accident, but then the second plane struck and everything became clear - this was a deliberate act of terror. America was under attack. People all over the United States stood transfixed as they watched the television footage of planes crashing into the twin towers. Still struggling to understand who would attack them and why, they learned of two more hijacked planes: one of them crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C., the other one, also heading for Washington D.C., crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after brave American passengers attempted to retake control of the plane.

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[2] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 45.
[3] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), PDF e-book, 626-627.

Americans were terrified not just by the scale of the attack but also by the fact that the nation with the most powerful military in the world was not able to prevent it. For nearly thirty years, the twin towers of the World Trade Center stood as a proud monument to the success of the 'American way of life'. The attack that reduced them into a pile of rubble also shattered the illusion of invulnerability. The world's superpower was no longer unassailable.[4]

As the initial shock subsided, however, most Americans did not give in to despair. Other emotions prevailed: anger and defiance. Many started calling for justice and some for revenge. These sentiments were best illustrated by the response to President Bush's bullhorn speech on Ground Zero three days after the attacks. It was greeted with deafening cheers and thunderous chanting of "USA! USA! USA!"[5]

In the uncertain days after September 11, American citizens rallied behind their government. The Bush administration enjoyed the unprecedented support of the vast majority of the populace. In terms of public approval, Bush was virtually granted a blank check. The Bush administration, well aware of its power, used this latitude to implement an array of controversial security precautions, including the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act.[6]

However, the sheer audacity of the terrorists called for a far more resolute response than just the strengthening of homeland security. Almost immediately after the attack, intelligence agencies pointed their fingers at the Al-Qaeda network as the prime culprit, Osama bin Laden as the mastermind behind it, and Afghanistan as their base of operations. George W. Bush made one of the defining decisions of his presidency: he declared a war on terror, and stated his intention to wage it on the offense by taking the fight to the terrorists overseas, before they could threaten the United States yet again. Mere days after September 11, the U.S. Congress unanimously authorized the use of force against the perpetrators of the attacks and anyone who harbored them. The United States was getting ready to retaliate, and to bring those responsible for the deaths of nearly three thousand innocent civilians to justice.[7]

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[4] Robert G. Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (2006): 972-973, http://www.jstor.org/pss/4017735 (accessed October 24, 2011).

[5] Bush, "Bullhorn Address to Ground Zero Rescue Workers."

[6] Carl Conetta, "Strange Victory: A Critical Appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan War," *Project on Defense Alternatives Research Monograph #6*, Cambridge: Commonwealth Institute, 2002, 10-11.

[7] Bush, *Decision Points*, 499-501, 614, 1297-1298.

At this critical juncture, President Bush laid the basis of what would later on be known as the Bush Doctrine. In addition to the proactive approach in dealing with the terrorist threat, it also stated that there is no distinction between the terrorists and those who supported them. Furthermore, it insisted that all nations choose a side in the upcoming conflict. In Bush's words "Every nation, in every region has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."[8]

Bush essentially characterized the war on terror as a struggle between 'good and evil'. As he put it: "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them." In this manichaeistic division, the United States naturally assumed the leading role of the 'good' side, whereas the terrorists and all who would not condemn them were the proverbial 'evil'.[9]

However, this simplistic perspective does not translate very well into reality, especially in the complicated Middle East, and even less so in Afghanistan. At the onset of the war, the Bush administration virtually identified Al-Qaeda with the Taliban, despite the many differences between the two. Al-Qaeda is a global network of terrorists driven by radical beliefs. The Taliban, on the other hand, are a regional movement, seeking to enforce their own austere version of Sharia law in Afghanistan. Although they are, by most accounts, a despicable regime, and have much to answer for, they posed no direct threat to the United States.[10]

In retrospect, the Bush Doctrine might have been effective in the short term: it helped to set the boundaries early on, and coaxed reluctant allies, as was the case with Afghanistan's neighbor, Pakistan. But in the long run, this simplistic approach only caused more problems. As it turned out, Pakistan was not particularly steadfast in its cooperation with Washington. Moreover, as the war against the Taliban-led insurgency dragged on, and the originally combat mission turned into a nation-building one, many started wondering if the United States would have been better off had it focused solely on Al-Qaeda. Ultimately,

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[8] George W. Bush, "Address to Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks," American Rhetoric Website, Windows Media Player video file, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm (accessed October 21, 2012).

[9] Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," 972-973.

[10] The Afghanistan Study Group, "A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," August 16, 2010, 10.

this failure, or rather unwillingness, to distinguish between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban shaped the fate of Afghanistan for years to come.

1.2 Boots on the Ground

In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom. On October 7, less than a month after that fateful day, the U.S. military and its NATO allies conducted a series of air raids and cruise missile strikes against Al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan. They were effective, but served merely as a precursor to a larger engagement.[11]

Although the primary objective of this campaign - to disrupt the base of operation of Al-Qaeda - could have probably been accomplished by subtle means, such as deployment of special forces, and precision air strikes, Bush insisted on a more direct approach. He viewed putting "a million-dollar missile on a five-dollar tent" as too feeble a reaction, which is understandable in the light of the events of September 11. He presumed that a lack of resolute response would only embolden the terrorists and encourage more attacks against the United States, and therefore, the only appropriate course of action was to "put boots on the ground, and keep them there until the Taliban and al Qaeda were driven out and a free society could emerge." The codename 'Enduring Freedom' clearly implied that George W. Bush's concept of war on terror on the Afghan battlefront encompassed not only the dismantling of Al-Qaeda and the overthrow of the Taliban regime, but also a long-term effort to prevent the re-emergence of these radical movements once rooted out.[12]

With the course set, one dilemma remained: what should be the size of the task force sent to invade Afghanistan? The United States had to walk a fine line between deploying too many troops, which would make them look like occupants, and too few, which would hamper their capacity to pursue Al-Qaeda and depose the Taliban. Since the Afghans would have probably risen against an outright occupation, as they did during the Soviet incursion, the U.S. command opted for a 'light footprint' approach.[13]

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[11] Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," 974.
[12] Bush, *Decision Points*, 430, 614-616, 620-621.
[13] Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 24-25, http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.7 (accessed October 24, 2011).

The United States joined forces with an anti-Taliban coalition, known as the Northern Alliance, which controlled the northern part of Afghanistan. This cooperation has, at least to some extent, assured that the U.S. troops were not perceived as conquerors, but rather as liberators. The U.S. special forces and CIA operatives worked in concert with the Northern Alliance, and in merely two months they managed to rout the Taliban, who then, along with the remnants of Al-Qaeda, retreated to remote tribal areas on the Afghan-Pakistan border. This joint victory was an important first step in gaining the trust of the Afghans and paved the way for conventional forces to secure the country. This initial phase of the operation was regarded as a resounding success.[14]

Were it not for the long-term aspect of the Bush Doctrine, the mission would have probably been considered completed and over. However, an immediate withdrawal of troops at this point would have certainly plunged the country into chaos, as various ethnic and tribal factions vied for dominance in the power vacuum created by the Taliban's displacement. The United States prevented this from happening by helping to establish an interim government and maintaining security until the fledgling administration could handle it on its own. Unfortunately, the nation-building in Afghanistan proved to be an arduous and lengthy task.

As Bush stated in his address to the nation one week after the September 11 attacks, "Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen." Only much later did he probably realize just how right he was back then, and that the 'boots' would have to be 'on the ground' for more than a decade.[15]

1.3 A Step towards Victory

Over the course of Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S.-led military coalition accomplished much, including the ousting of the Taliban. During their reign, the Taliban enforced a strict adherence to their own orthodox interpretation of Islam. Women were forbidden to attend schools and could not leave the house without a burqa, a garment that cloaks the entire body. Men were required to grow beards. The Taliban also closed cinemas and banned music, television and radio. Crimes and offenses resulted in harsh and severe

[14] Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," 974.
[15] Bush, "Address to Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks."

punishment, according to Sharia law. Those found guilty of adultery were stoned to death. Theft was usually punished by amputating a hand of the thief, and convicted murderers were publicly executed.[16]

The fall of the Taliban regime marked a notable improvement of conditions for the majority of Afghans. Even though the Taliban did return later on, in the form of a resilient insurgency that opposed the newly established Afghan government, they are to this day in no position to uphold the aforementioned restrictions and excessive punishments. And although the new administration has its flaws, it offers a prospect of a better future for the people of Afghanistan.

The initial onslaught of coalition forces also impacted heavily on Al-Qaeda, depriving it of its foothold in Afghanistan. The leaders of Al-Qaeda managed to narrowly escape during the battle of the Tora Bora cave complex, but since then they have essentially been on the run, under constant threat of being captured or killed by an air strike. This limited their ability to plan more terrorist attacks and to communicate with their clandestine cells abroad. Furthermore, the coalition bombardment has taken its toll on Al-Qaeda's chain of command, as many high ranking members and deputies have fallen prey to air raids.[17]

The loss of a refuge in Afghanistan has to some extent impeded Al-Qaeda's operations. However, due to the loose and decentralized structure of the network, its capability to carry out terrorist attacks across the globe was only partially diminished. As defense analyst Carl Conetta noted:

> The capacity of Al Qaeda 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.[18]

Indeed, as Conetta also pointed out, there is a profound irony in the fact that "the 11 September terrorist cells were less dependent functionally on Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan than on flight schools in Florida." Nevertheless, even though the training

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[16] Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency," 27-28.

[17] Stephen Van Evera, "Assessing U.S. Strategy in the War on Terror." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 607, Confronting the Specter of Nuclear Terrorism (September 2006): 12, http://www.jstor.org/pss/25097833 (accessed October 24, 2011).

[18] Conetta, "Strange Victory," 5, 31-32.

grounds in Afghanistan were not vital for Al-Qaeda's nefarious schemes, the network's efforts are still somewhat hindered by the loss of a safe haven, where they could freely and with impunity recruit and indoctrinate new volunteers for their cause.[19]

Probably the most notable achievement of the counter-terrorism campaign was the elimination of the leader of Al-Qaeda, which took place beyond the borders of Afghanistan. After an extensive investigation, the CIA discovered the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the September 11 attacks and the most wanted terrorist in the world, who had managed to elude the U.S. military for almost a decade. He was, contrary to popular belief, not hiding in a cave but in a safe-house in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad. On May 1 2011, U.S. special forces covertly raided the compound and eliminated their target without suffering a single casualty and with minimal collateral damage.[20]

On the same day, President Obama, who succeeded George W. Bush both in the White House and at the helm of the war on terror in 2009, announced the news, declaring that "justice has been done." Immediately following the announcement, thousands of jubilant Americans took to the streets to celebrate. From their spontaneous reactions, it was clear just how important this 'justice' was for them, even almost ten years later. So important, in fact, that the United States was willing to intrude on the territory of a sovereign state without its consent. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, were it not for this violation, bin Laden would most likely still be at large. His residence in Abbottabad was only several hundred meters from a Pakistani military academy, and it is doubtful that the proverb 'the darkest place is under the candlestick' is applicable in this scenario.[21]

It has been widely speculated, that some echelons of the Pakistani intelligence services and military are, at best, lenient towards members of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, or, at worst, in league with them. This unreliability of Pakistan as an ally alludes to the shortcomings of the Bush Doctrine and should be taken into account when assessing potential threats to Afghanistan's stability in the future. Whereas the Taliban may not have

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, and Mark Mazzetti, "Bin Laden Is Dead, Obama Says," *New York Times***,** May 1, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/asia/osama-bin-laden-is-killed.html?hp&_r=1& (accessed March 2, 2013).

[21] Ibid.

the capacity to overthrow the Afghan administration, a Pakistani-backed Taliban insurgency might be an entirely different story.

For many American citizens, the demise of Osama bin Laden represented a full circle in the war against terrorism that began on September 11, 2001. However, although his death marked a significant milestone in the war, it definitely was not the end of it. Shortly after his escape from Tora Bora back in 2001, bin Laden said: "My life or death does not matter." In a way, he was right. His death did not put an end to the threat of global terrorism, and the insurgents in Afghanistan carried on, largely unfazed. Al-Qaeda may have lost its cherished leader and icon, but bin Laden's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, soon succeeded him as the head of the organization.[22]

Regardless, by killing Osama bin Laden, the United States sent a clear message to all who would want to walk in his footsteps: 'You cannot outrun the inevitable; eventually you will have to face the consequences of your actions.' Whether they will be deterred by this remains to be seen. What is already certain, though, is that the United States will go to great lengths to emerge from the war against terrorism a victor.

1.4 A Fool's Errand

Early on in the campaign, the coalition forces succeeded in dismantling Al-Qaeda, and drove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. However, this victory was only short-lived. The remnants of the Taliban retreated across the border to Pakistan, where the U.S. army had no mandate to conduct combat operations. Having found a safe refuge, the Taliban used the much needed respite to regroup and recover. With the aid of other like-minded jihadist groups, and very probably even the Pakistani military, they were able to re-arm and recoup their personnel losses through aggressive recruiting.[23]

After a brief period of relative peace, the Taliban returned to Afghanistan in force. The ensuing surge of violence destabilized the country and threatened to topple the frail Afghan government. With the security situation rapidly deteriorating, it became obvious that the light footprint approach was no longer viable. The United States decided to counter the

[22] Jason Burke, "Osama bin Laden's Death: What Now for al-Qaida?" *Guardian***,** May 2, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/02/osama-bin-laden-future-of-al-qaida (accessed March 2, 2013).

threat of a Taliban takeover by increasing the number of troops, but the deployment of more troops inevitably led to escalated fighting, which in turn resulted in more casualties.[24]

In a conventional conflict, the lightly armed insurgents would have stood no chance against the highly trained troops and state-of-the-art weaponry of the world's most powerful military. However, the Taliban learned from their initial defeat and adapted to fight against the overwhelming odds. Using flexibility and knowledge of the local terrain to their advantage, they managed to endure and turn the fight into a lengthy battle of attrition and, eventually, a bloody stalemate.

By employing guerilla tactics, the insurgents have inflicted considerable casualties on the coalition forces. The 'evolved' Taliban favored roadside bombs, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and even suicide bombings over direct combat. These crude but effective methods were a novelty on the Afghan battlefield. For instance, there was not a single confirmed suicide bombing during the entire 1980s Soviet occupation. On the other hand, there were numerous cases in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003. Therefore, it is more than likely that the insurgents in Afghanistan adopted this new style of combat from their Iraqi counterparts. Regardless of their origin, the Taliban's new 'weapons of choice' have put the coalition troops into a precarious position - they were now faced with an invisible adversary. Indeed, the majority of casualties they sustained were not due to firefights with enemy combatants, but rather to IEDs.[25]

The protracted counterinsurgency campaign has taken its toll on coalition forces, yet they were not the ones taking the brunt of the casualties. In almost every conflict, the ones who suffer the most are civilians, and the Afghan war is no different. Although the U.S. military prides itself on precision warfare and strives to limit collateral damage, some is unavoidable. While the attempts to prevent civilian casualties are in sharp contrast with the reckless brutality of the Soviet incursion, they were only partially successful, and the ongoing campaign has nonetheless brought about a reprehensible loss of life. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld responded to a reporter's inquiry about collateral

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[23] Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency," 29-32.

[24] Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Staying Power: The U.S. Mission in Afghanistan Beyond 2011," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 5 (September/October 2010): 65-68.

[25] Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 65-66, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/IS3204_pp041-077_Johnson_Mason.pdf (accessed March 7, 2013).

damage by saying, "War is ugly. It causes misery and suffering and death, and we see that every day. But let's be clear: no nation in human history has done more to avoid civilian casualties than the United States has in this conflict." [26]

However, commendable as that effort might be, it is of little consolation to the Afghans whose relatives have been killed by aerial bombardments. Those who have lost their family or homes are unlikely to ponder the horrific nature of war. Instead, they are prone to sympathizing with the extremist, if not outright joining their ranks. The insurgents are well aware of this and try to capitalize on the public outrage whenever possible, even though they themselves are responsible for more than three-quarters of all recorded civilian casualties, mostly due to the IEDs. Regardless of who has caused it, the death of innocents is ultimately used by the insurgents as propaganda.[27]

Not only was it the collateral damage inherent to combat operations that severely undermined the counter-insurgency efforts. Over the course of the Afghan campaign, several major incidents occurred involving members of the coalition forces, yet all were overshadowed by probably the worst single atrocity committed by a U.S. serviceman in the last few decades. The tragedy, sometimes referred to as the 'Kandahar Massacre', occurred on March 11, 2012. Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, a decorated soldier, father of two, left his base in the middle of the night and proceeded to a nearby village, where he gunned down seventeen civilians, including women and children, while they slept. The shocking killing spree was reminiscent of the massacre in the Iraqi city of Haditha in 2005, the main difference being that Bales acted alone and unprovoked. His motives remain a subject of speculation, but whatever the cause, the consequences remain the same: more dead innocents and the growing frustration of the local populace over the presence of foreign soldiers. One such misdeed can undo months or years of efforts to gain the trust of Afghans.[28]

Other incidents have seriously harmed the relations with the locals. Only several weeks before Sgt. Bales's rampage, several copies of the Quran were inadvertently burned at the

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[26] Conetta, "Strange Victory," 15-16.

[27] Caroline Wadhams et al., "Realignment: Managing a Stable Transition to Afghan Responsibility," *Center for American Progress*, November 23, 2010, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/11/afghan_leadership.html (accessed October 23, 2011): 8.

[28] Cheryl Pellerin, "Army Identifies Afghanistan Shooting Suspect," U.S. Department of Defense Web Site, http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67591 (accessed March 5, 2013).

U.S. base in Bagram. The Quran is considered the literal word of God by the Muslims, and they treat each book reverently. The copies in question were supposedly used by detainees to pass messages, but their 'desecration' infuriated Afghan citizens and sparked riots all over the country. Even though Obama and other U.S. officials promptly apologized for the offense, more than thirty protesters and policemen, as well as six U.S. soldiers, were killed in the outburst of violence. While this may seem as an inconceivable overreaction by the Western standards, it goes to show that Afghanistan represents a wholly different cultural setting. Every failure to abide by its rules discredits the coalition forces in the eyes of the Afghans, and provokes overall resentment to their presence.[29]

The aforementioned incidents were water on the mill for the Taliban, who readily exploited them to rouse anti-American (or, in general, anti-Western) sentiments. These basically fuel the insurgency, as they provide the extremists with a flow of recruits eager to take up arms against the 'infidels'. Given the consequences, the fact that such incidents are bound to happen occasionally, and that there is very little that can be done to prevent them, presents a rather valid point in an argument for a complete withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan.

Further reasoning against the continuation of the military campaign is based on the presumption that the ongoing presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is actually increasing the risk of a terrorist attack on the soil of the United States rather than decreasing it. As the argument stands, there is a flaw in the underlying concept of the Bush Doctrine, which aimed to draw attention of the extremists from targets in America to their home front. By invading Afghanistan, the United States would essentially create a battlefield of sorts, where the various jihadist movements would have ample opportunity to pursue their anti-Western agenda. This scheme has seemingly worked, at least to some extent. While U.S. troops in Afghanistan are being attacked on a daily basis, there has been no stateside terrorist attack even remotely comparable to September 11. However, this can probably be ascribed to intelligence agencies being more alert, and tightened security measures in America, rather than to the disruption of Al-Qaeda's base of operations overseas. Moreover, the combat mission may have partially prevented the network's leaders in

[29] Patrick Quinn and Rahim Faiez, "Official: Mistakes Led to Afghan Quran Burnings," *Yahoo! News*, March 3, 2012, http://news.yahoo.com/official-mistakes-led-afghan-quran-burnings-053758916.html (accessed March 7, 2013).

Afghanistan from orchestrating coordinated attacks abroad, but it cannot neutralize the threat of terrorist plots by likeminded individuals living in the United States. It, in fact, provokes them.[30]

Despite all the security precautions, there were several attempted terrorist strikes. Some of these failed utterly, as was the case with Faisal Shahzad's abortive bombing of Times Square in 2010, but there were also successful attempts, including the worst post-9/11 terrorist attack in the United States, carried out by army psychiatrist Nidal Hasan in 2009. At Fort Hood in Texas, he shot and killed thirteen servicemen, wounding nearly thirty others. Shahzad and Hasan, both of them American citizens and adherents of Islam, were reportedly motivated by their indignation over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[31]

Although U.S. officials have repeatedly stated that the war on terror is not a war against Islam, certain aspects of it are perceived by some Muslims to be definitive proof to the contrary: the civilian casualties in the prolonged war in Afghanistan; the Quran burning incident; the falsified evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that served as a pretext for an invasion; and the mistreatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. All give credibility to the extremists' narrative, which depicts the United States as an enemy of Islam and the wars as neo-crusades. While such rhetoric is nothing short of far-fetched, the ongoing presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan does little to refute it.[32]

1.5 Enduring Freedom?

Operation Enduring Freedom has brought some indisputable accomplishments, but each success came at a price. Aside from the staggering financial expenses, the military campaign is every bit as costly in terms of mounting casualties. The rising death toll gradually alienated a number of those who were at first in support of an uncompromising response to the September 11 attacks. Critics of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan argue that

[30] Bush, *Decision Points*, 1297-1298.

[31] Ashley Hayes, "Is the U.S. Safer Today than before the 9/11 Attacks?" *CNN*, May 3, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/05/02/bin.laden.is.us.safer/index.html (accessed March 7, 2013).

[32] Conetta, "Strange Victory," 28.

the proactive approach dictated by the Bush Doctrine is counterproductive and claim that the war on terror has actually created more terrorists than it has eliminated.[33]

Indeed, the collateral damage likely radicalized many ordinary Afghans who would not have sympathized with the jihadists otherwise, and strengthened the resolve of those who already were radical. When the coalition forces commenced the aerial bombardment in October 2001, Osama bin Laden proclaimed:

> Just as they are killing us, we have to kill them so there will be a balance of terror. This is the first time that the balance of terror has been close between the two parties, between Muslims and Americans in the modern age. We will do as they do. If they kill our women and innocent people, we will kill their women and innocent people until they stop.[34]

Thereby he proved once again the universally acknowledged truth that violence begets more violence. Yet, as Mohandas Gandhi noted, "an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." Though the war on terror will hardly be won by virtue of pacifism, it clearly cannot be won solely by force of arms either. After years of futile efforts to uproot the cross-border insurgency, even U.S. commanders admitted that the Afghan conflict will not be resolved through the application of brute military force. As Maj. Gen. John Campbell put it, "we can't kill our way out of this thing." Ultimately, a long-term solution will require other kinds of efforts - efforts of non-military nature.[35]

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[33] Philip H. Gordon, "Can the War on Terror Be Won? How to Fight the Right War," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 53-54, http://www.jstor.org/pss/20032508 (accessed October 24, 2011).

[34] Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam and the Future of America,* 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006), 275.

[35] Rachel Martin, "General: We Can't Kill Our Way Out Of Afghanistan," *NPR*, May 28, 2011, http://www.npr.org/2011/05/28/136750687/general-we-cant-kill-our-way-out-of-afghanistan (accessed March 14, 2013).

2 NATION-BUILDING

"If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend."[36]

–Abraham Lincoln

To counter the threat posed by militant radicals in Afghanistan, it is necessary to understand the underlying causes of extremism. Generally, extremists take advantage of a sense of injustice brought about by poverty, lack of education, and desperate living conditions. These symptoms have been pervasive throughout the recent history of Afghanistan. In fact, the war-torn 'failed state', the economy and infrastructure of which have been decimated by decades of conflict, remains to this day one of the least developed countries in the world. The need to address the bleak state of affairs in Afghanistan became more than apparent after the events of 9/11, not only because the country at that time served as a sanctuary to Al-Qaeda, but mainly because the years of civil war and instability virtually turned it into an incubator of terrorism.[37]

The restoration of Afghanistan soon proved to be an overwhelming task, requiring concerted international cooperation. Maintaining security in the wake of the Taliban's displacement was a prerequisite for the reconstruction to have any chance of success. To that end, an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established, comprising of troops of forty-nine nations around the world under the command of NATO. ISAF would play a crucial role later, when the insurgency became a serious impediment to the international community's progress in uplifting Afghanistan.[38]

The nation-building effort was all the more complicated by the absence of dependable political structures. The ISAF peacekeeping mission facilitated the establishment of a new government, but it would take years before the fledgling administration learned how to exercise control over its country. And although the 2004 election of Hamid Karzai, who became the first democratically elected president in Afghanistan's history, signified a huge

[36] Chester Burger, "Master Persuader," The Museum of Public Relations Website, http://www.prmuseum.com/burger/chet_lincoln.html (accessed April 26, 2013).
[37] Conetta, "Strange Victory," 44-45.
[38] Bush, *Decision Points*, 666-667.

step forward, his authority was somewhat lessened by the corruption running rampant throughout his government.[39]

Despite the complexity of the task at hand, the United States had a strategic interest in attending to the lasting stability of Afghanistan, as it would deprive the extremists of a sphere of influence. Moreover, Bush felt that helping to build a free society there was America's duty. In his own words: "We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better."[40]

2.1 A Clash of Ideologies

The commitment to bring democracy to Afghanistan goes hand in hand with the 'City upon a hill' mentality so intrinsic to the United States. As Bush stated in his address to the nation on the evening of September 11, 2001, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."[41]

Even though this may sound egotistical and self-conceited to some, phrases like 'this is the greatest nation in the world' are commonly used by American politicians, especially during election campaigns. This self-perceived exceptionalism stems from the religious and historical context, and the apparent success of the 'American way of life'. International relations analyst Robert G. Patman describes the phenomenon as "an informal ideology that endows Americans with a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations." The prevailing notion of exemplarity fuels America's belief in being predestined to become the paragon of civilization. Considering itself the 'chosen nation', the United States not only views its ideology as superior to all others, but also strives to imprint its underlying democratic values on the rest of the world.[42]

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[39] Raphael Veit, "Afghanistan: War on Terror / War in Error?" *Australian Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 8, http://www.jstor.org/pss/20638100 (accessed October 24, 2011).

[40] Bush, *Decision Points*, 660.

[41] George W. Bush, "9/11 Address to the Nation," American Rhetoric Web site, Windows Media Player video file, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothenation.htm (accessed October 21, 2012).

[42] Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," 964-965.

In a way, the vision of the extremists is fundamentally based on a similar principle. They, too, are convinced that their cause is just, and their goal, to ensure the sovereignty and independence of Muslim nations, may indeed be noble at its core. However, the methods of the two ideologically-motivated groups are diametrically opposed. Whereas the Americans mostly propagate theirs by trying to 'lead by example', the extremists are more straightforward in their approach, and more often than not resort to violence. The most obvious manifestation of this is jihad - the holy war, which the radical Islamists regard as a duty warranted by their faith. They believe that in order to return Muslim societies to the idealized state at the time of the Prophet Muhammad by establishing a new caliphate, they first have to drive the United States and other westerners out of the Middle East by any means necessary, including the killing of innocents.[43]

The religious self-righteousness of the jihadists stems from their interpretations of the Quran. Accordingly, they are not only entitled but also obliged to impose their beliefs on others, by force if need be. This creed is best illustrated by the words of radical Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki: "We will implement the rule of Allah on Earth by the tip of the sword whether the masses like it or not."[44]

Regardless of whether the extremists believe that the end justifies the means or not, their doctrine will eventually prove to be their undoing. The wanton violence they employ will hardly attract a significant number of adherents in the long run. In fact, it is much more likely to provoke a backlash among Muslims, many of whom have denounced the 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. Moreover, due to the Quran explicitly forbidding the killing of fellow Muslims, the collateral damage caused by the jihadists' recklessness will ultimately discredit fundamental Islamism.[45]

Although the current conflict in Afghanistan has been on numerous occasions compared to the U.S. engagement in Vietnam, the war on terror is on the whole more akin to the Cold War. Foreign policy expert Philip H. Gordon characterized both as "long-term,

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[43] Gordon, "Can the War on Terror Be Won? How to Fight the Right War," 57.

[44] Brooks Egerton, "Imam's E-mails to Fort Hood Suspect Hasan Tame Compared to Online Rhetoric," *The Dallas Morning News*, November 29, 2009, http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20091129-Imam-s-e-mails-to-Fort-7150.ece (accessed March 7, 2013).

[45] Gordon, "Can the War on Terror Be Won? How to Fight the Right War," 62-63, 66.

multidimensional struggles against insidious and violent ideologies."[46] Gordon proceeds to draw a parallel between the two as follows:

> Just as the Cold War ended only when one side essentially gave up on a bankrupt ideology, the battle against Islamist terrorism will be won when the ideology that underpins it loses its appeal. The Cold War ended not with U.S. forces occupying the Kremlin but when the occupant of the Kremlin abandoned the fight; the people he governed had stopped believing in the ideology they were supposed to be fighting for.[47]

By this analogy, the war on terror, just like the Cold War, will not be won by direct application of military power. Instead, the United States will have to maintain its moral high ground and outlast the extremists' violent ideology, which offers poor long-term prospects and is bound to crumble sooner or later. Gordon predicts that:

> Victory will come … when political changes erode and ultimately undermine support for the ideology and strategy of those determined to destroy the United States. It will come not when Washington and its allies kill or capture all terrorists or potential terrorists but when the ideology the terrorists espouse is discredited, when their tactics are seen to have failed, and when they come to find more promising paths to the dignity, respect, and opportunities they crave.[48]

The last part of Gordon's argument is especially interesting, as it hints at one possible way to contain the threat of terrorism – by offering an alternative. While the extremist hard-liners will probably cling to their beliefs regardless, many of their potential followers might see liberty and freedom as a better alternative to the oppressive religious rules dictated by Sharia law.

Some have already found the appeal of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, where it was introduced after the U.S. invasions in 2001 and 2003, respectively. The democratic systems there are still fragile and nowhere near their western counterparts, perhaps because neither of the countries has strong democratic traditions. Afghans in particular have a long way to go, due to their fragmented tribal society and inherent distrust of foreign influences, but it seems they are headed in the right direction.[49]

The political and economic development will take time and considerable effort, but if the international coalition does not relent in its support and manages to turn Afghanistan

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[46] Ibid., 55.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 54.
[49] The Afghanistan Study Group, "A New Way Forward," 4.

into a stable and prosperous country, it may then serve as a model for other states in the region that are facing internal struggles. It could eventually alter the Muslims' perception of liberal democracy, and with another flare-up of the Arab Spring, the new mindset would transform the entire Middle East. Such a change will for the most part have to come from within, and it will certainly not happen overnight, but in the end, if given the choice, not just the Afghans will prefer their lives to be governed by democratic principles, rather than by the violent philosophy of radical Islamists. As Ronald Reagan said in 1988, "a people free to choose will always choose peace."[50]

2.2 Hearts and Minds

In order to gain the trust of ordinary Afghans, which is vital for any kind of long-term cooperation, the international coalition first had to prove that their lives would improve with the Taliban gone. In an impoverished country ravaged by war, this meant resolving numerous social and economic issues. Addressing the enormous unemployment rate was critical, since jobless and desperate people are susceptible to extremism. For those not reached by foreign aid, joining the insurgents was sometimes the only way to make a living.[51]

The importance of providing an alternative is further highlighted by the plight of Afghan agriculture, which is the backbone of the country's economy. For years, many farmers have depended on poppy cultivation as their only source of revenue. However, they were often abused by the Taliban, who use the profits from opium production to fund their insurgency. By offering incentives to encourage planting of other crops, the coalition gave the farmers a better way to make their livelihood, while at the same time alleviating the negative impacts of the drug trade and depriving the insurgents of a source of income.[52]

Afghanistan's infrastructure was also in a dire need of attention, as the decades of war and neglect left it in a state of total disrepair. Occasionally, the reconstruction task force

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[50] The Forerunner Editorial Staff, "President Reagan's Speech at Moscow State University," The Forerunner, http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/X0692_Reagans_Speech_in_Mo.html (accessed March 22, 2013).

[51] Barnett R. Rubin, "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 1 (January/February 2007): 66-67, http://www.jstor.org/pss/20032211 (accessed October 22, 2011).

[52] William Maley, "Afghanistan in 2010," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 91, http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1525/as.2011.51.1.85 (accessed October 24, 2011).

would find out that there is nothing to reconstruct, and that they have to build from scratch. Billions of dollars were funneled into the country by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in a variety of assistance programs. The finances were used to repair and expand basic services, such as the clean water supply network and the electricity grid. Irrigation systems were refurbished, and healthcare facilities were built, as well as hundreds of kilometers of new roads. Particular focus was given to the construction and staffing of schools, and as a result, access to education improved rapidly. The number of children enrolled in school increased nearly eightfold in comparison with the Taliban era. More than a third of them were girls, who were not previously allowed to attend schools.[53]

At the forefront of the reconstruction efforts in the remote areas of Afghanistan are the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). Consisting of both military personnel and civilian experts, the PRTs carry out various development projects in joint cooperation with the locals. They are irreplaceable in their capacity to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people by directly attending to the needs of rural communities. In addition to building mutual trust with tribal elders and councils, and bridging the gap between the indigenous populace and the foreign ISAF troops, the PRTs also support minor businesses and provide jobs in the outlying villages. The presence of the reconstruction teams is essential, for without them vast regions of Afghanistan, out of the reach of the central government, would be left exposed to Taliban influence.[54]

It is worth noting, however, that little of the progress made in rebuilding the country would have been possible without the support of coalition forces. The insurgents have repeatedly shown that they will not hesitate to attack unarmed reconstruction workers or even members of international aid organizations. Although not affiliated with the Taliban, lawless warlords and criminal bands, too, pose a threat to the civilian personnel. While the military components of the PRTs are capable of providing security to some extent, they are not equipped to engage in escalated combat, and rely on the support of the ISAF.[55]

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[53] USAID, "USAID/Afghanistan Strategy," USAID/Afghanistan Website, last updated March 20, 2013, http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/about/country_strategy (accessed March 23, 2013).

[54] Peter V. Jakobsen, *PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but not Sufficient*, (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2005), 11-12.
19.http://www.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/Reports2005/pvj_prts_afghanistan.pdf (accessed March 24, 2013).

[55] Ibid., 35.

Negative aspects of their presence notwithstanding, the coalition troops play a key role in maintaining security throughout Afghanistan and safeguarding its government. Without a peacekeeping force able to keep the insurgency and other subversive elements in check, the country would surely fall into chaos and disarray. Since ISAF was never intended to fulfill this role indefinitely, one of the priority objectives of the nation-building mission was to build up the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) into a functioning security apparatus.

This naturally proved to be no small task. Both the ANA and ANP suffered from high desertion rates, and the training of enlistees was rather complicated due to the majority of them being illiterate. Despite many setbacks, they were eventually forged into a somewhat competent security force, mainly thanks to the invaluable guidance of the ISAF military instructors and advisors. The coalition troops not only shared their expertise and provided equipment but also helped to boost the confidence of their Afghan counterparts by conducting joint patrols with them. With the threat of the Taliban still looming, further mentoring and training assistance will certainly be needed, for the operational readiness of the ANA and ANP will undoubtedly be put to the test in the upcoming years.[56]

2.3 Lessons from the Past

The nation-building efforts, along with the military mission that facilitates them, entail immense financial expenditures. This is particularly troublesome given the current economic downturn in the United States and Europe. The billions of taxpayers' money spent on the reconstruction of Afghanistan significantly add to deficits of the coalition states, straining their budgets and further increasing internal political pressures to cut down on their participation. Most, if not all of them, would clearly find it preferable to focus on their own national priorities and redirect the spending to solve their domestic issues. Regardless, they understand that it is necessary to weigh the costs of saving Afghanistan against the price of inaction, and take into account the consequences of leaving the country to its fate.[57]

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[56] O'Hanlon, "Staying Power," 71-72.
[57] The Afghanistan Study Group, "A New Way Forward," 5.

The roots of the present-day Afghanistan's predicament can be traced back to the Cold War. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the United States, determined to prevent the spread of communism in the region, reacted by covertly supporting the local guerrilla forces (or 'mujahedeen', as they were called). The CIA provided the mujahedeen with a considerable amount of weapons, funds and also military intelligence. However, once the Soviet troops finally gave up and withdrew, the U.S. government took no interest in the war-torn country and left it to its own devices. This turned out to be a rather short-sighted decision, when the ascent of the Taliban transformed Afghanistan into a bastion of radical Islamism.[58]

It is uncertain whether the current conflict could have been avoided altogether, had the United States made an effort to stabilize Afghanistan after the Soviet incursion. Nevertheless, the outcome of the aforementioned U.S. policy at the very least signifies the importance of not following in the footsteps of the American government in the late 1980s. It serves as an indication of what might happen now if the coalition members prematurely disengage and the country is once again left to fend for itself.

The international community, and especially the United States, as the main contributor, will have to strike a balance between their budget constraints on one hand and the sufficient backing of the Afghan administration on the other. At the same time, they will need to keep an eye on where their money is going. Oversight is vital, since the international aid is frequently misappropriated by corrupt local officials or warlords, and sometimes even diverted to the insurgents. The United States should take heed not to repeat its past mistakes in the Afghan scenario, for the same weapons with which it supplied the anti-Soviet opposition were twenty years later turned on its own troops.[59]

While indefinite financial support may be ultimately unsustainable, maintaining the current volume of assistance will hopefully not be necessary in the long run. After all, the general purpose of the reconstruction and development was to pave the way towards Afghanistan's self-sufficiency. For instance, with adequate foreign investment, the country's considerable mineral resources could sustain its economic growth and reduce its dependence on international help.[60]

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[58] Rubin, "Saving Afghanistan," 62-65.

[59] Wadhams, Cookman, Katulis, and Korb, "Realignment: Managing a Stable Transition to Afghan Responsibility," 24-25.

[60] Ibid., 17-18.

3 THE CROSSROADS

"It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it."[61]

–General Douglas MacArthur

After more than eleven years since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, exhaustion over the Afghan war is inevitably setting in. More and more voices call for the end of the lengthy campaign, but the opinions on how to do so vary, from those advocating a complete withdrawal of troops as soon as possible, to others which propose staying the course until the time is right. The ISAF members are no longer unified in this regard, and whereas some have pledged to stay until the very end, others are promptly heading for the exit or have already pulled out their contingents.

The Taliban might not pose a direct threat to the Western nations, but they are still capable of destabilizing Afghanistan. A rushed withdrawal of international peacekeeping forces before the ANA and ANP are prepared to handle the security situation on their own could have dire consequences for the country, as it would probably result in a period of ceaseless violence between the government and the insurgents. In the event of a collapse of the Afghan administration and a resurgence of the Taliban's regime, the conditions there would likely return to the woeful pre-9/11 state. The oppressive Sharia law would be reinstated, women would be removed from the schools, and Islamic extremists would thrive in their renewed sanctuary.[62]

The international coalition now stands before the proverbial fork in the road. One of the paths is seemingly shorter and more convenient, since it involves abandoning the Afghans to deal with the Taliban themselves, but it might very well turn into a slippery slope ending with another September 11. The other path is much longer and requires ongoing commitment, perseverance, and perhaps even worse, sacrifices. However, it leads to a stable and possibly democratic Afghanistan.

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[61] Daniel Pipes, "Victory: An Obsolete Concept?" *Gatestone Institute*, July 31, 2009, http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/713/victory-an-obsolete-concept (accessed April 26, 2013).

[62] Bush, *Decision Points*, 713-714.

3.1 Saving Face

As the key member of the ISAF, the choices the United States makes will largely determine Afghanistan's future, but the war is becoming increasingly unpopular among the American people. President Obama is well aware of these sentiments. In fact, putting an end to the drawn-out conflict was one of the core themes of his presidential campaign. Yet, despite his pre-election promise to bring the troops home, their number in Afghanistan has more than doubled during his first term in the White House. Both political and strategic reasons necessitated this. Early on in his campaign, Obama had declared the Afghan battlefront his national security priority, and although the war was well underway when he took the office, it has since become 'Obama's war'. He could not afford to lose it if he were to have any chance of getting re-elected. Pulling back from Afghanistan at a time when the security situation there was deteriorating and the Taliban-led insurgency was gaining momentum would have been all too reminiscent of the Soviet Union's humiliating withdrawal in 1989. More importantly, it would have forced the Americans to relive the bitterness over their defeat in Vietnam, which was not an option, given the events that lead up to the Afghan war in the first place.[63]

Obama has decided to walk the middle ground in formulating his exit strategy. In a major speech on December 1, 2009, he simultaneously announced his plan to send additional forces to Afghanistan in the first half of 2010, and to finally begin withdrawing troops in the mid-2011. The temporary military buildup was intended to quell the insurgency and to facilitate the transition of security-maintaining responsibilities from the ISAF to the ANA and ANP.[64]

Nevertheless, the announcement might have been a mistake. First, it has probably left many Afghans wondering, whether the surge of troops is not merely an attempt to save face before the scheduled withdrawal, rather than a genuine bid for stabilization of their country. Uncertain about what will happen once the U.S. forces are gone, they would think twice about openly siding with the government, when there was still no guarantee it will survive on its own. Secondly, the announcement may have invigorated the Taliban, who do

[63] O'Hanlon, "Staying Power," 64-65, 77-79.

[64] The White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan (accessed April 7, 2013).

not have the strength to drive the coalition troops out by force of arms and instead strive to outlast the international will to remain in Afghanistan. With the timetable conveniently set, they only have to hold on and bide their time.[65]

Obama has anticipated criticism and responded to it in his speech by saying:

> [T]here are those who oppose identifying a time frame for our transition to Afghan responsibility. Indeed, some call for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort -- one that would commit us to a nation-building project of up to a decade. I reject this course because it sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests. Furthermore, the absence of a time frame for transition would deny us any sense of urgency in working with the Afghan government. It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan.[66]

His reasoning does have merit, but there are probably better ways to motivate the Afghan administration to speed up its reforms than a publicly announced deadline. It is likely that Obama's announcement had another purpose: to appease his war-weary electorate, which was truly necessary, considering that he was under increasing pressure to fulfill his promises and end the two wars which he 'inherited' from his predecessor.

However, the manner in which the United States departs from Afghanistan will have consequences reaching far beyond Obama's presidency. Fortunately, he seems to realize that listening to his military commanders in the field and making decisions based on current developments is more important than earning political credit for sticking to a rigid timetable. U.S. officials have already admitted that the final drawdown scheduled for 2014 will not be as complete as foreshadowed earlier, and that some of the troops will remain in Afghanistan, mainly in support and advisory roles. Moreover, the reduction of troops has been gradual and reasonable so far. It is a testament to Obama's commitment to bring the war to an end responsibly that even the elimination of Osama bin Laden, although a major achievement in itself and thus frequently touted during the president's re-election campaign, did not serve as a pretext to put up a 'mission accomplished' banner and hasten the withdrawal.

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[65] Maley, "Afghanistan in 2010," 85-86; Peter Bergren, "U.S. Intelligence Briefing: Taliban Increasingly Effective," *CNN*, January 25, 2010, http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/01/25/afghanistan.taliban/index.html (accessed April 7, 2013).

3.2 Bargaining With the Devil

Since the coalition and Afghan national military forces have proved to be incapable of rooting out the insurgency, and overcoming it in the ideological struggle will take time, the only prospect of peace in the near future lies in reconciliation with the enemy. The Taliban are not a unified movement entirely comprised of fundamentalists, but rather a group of loosely affiliated individuals and factions, each with its own motivations and goals. It is estimated that up to 70 percent of the insurgents are the so-called 'economic Taliban', ranging from warlords and tribal leaders ostracized by the central government, to poor, unemployed Afghans who joined the insurgency to provide for their families. Not embracing the jihadist ideology, some of these 'disaffected brothers', as they are occasionally referred to by President Karzai, could be, with sufficient incentives, persuaded to lay down their weapons and reintegrate into the society. While this would not dissolve the insurgency, it would significantly weaken it.[67]

Due to its long-maintained policy of not negotiating with terrorists, the U.S. administration would first have to relinquish the moral duality brought about by the Bush Doctrine, which made no distinction between the terrorists and anyone who harbored them. Indeed, it seems that Obama is not at all opposed to the notion of reconciling with the moderates. He proclaimed: "We will support efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens."[68]

However, it is debatable whether negotiations with the Taliban are even possible. Given its fragmented structure, the chances of coming to a peace agreement with the insurgency as a whole are virtually non-existent. Whereas the moderate factions may be open to peace talks, the hardliners steadfastly refuse to take part in any form of dialogue and threaten those who would do so.

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[66] The White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

[67] Caroline Wadhams and Colin Cookman, "Assessing Peace Prospects in Afghanistan," *Center for American Progress*, June 2, 2010, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2010/06/02/7919/assessing-peace-prospects-in-afghanistan/ (accessed October 23, 2011).

[68] The White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

On September 20, 2011, former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani was assassinated by two Taliban suicide bombers, who pretended to be willing to negotiate. Rabbani was the head of the High Peace Council, and as such was in charge of leading the negotiations. This brutal display of Taliban's 'diplomacy' represented a clear message that the radical core of the insurgency is not interested in reconciliation whatsoever, but also signaled its intent to undermine the peace process. Unsurprisingly, mutual distrust among all involved parties remains high.[69]

There are other reasons why negotiating with the ideology-driven Taliban leaders is simply not an option. Firstly, they do not accept Karzai's corrupt government as a legitimate authority worth dealing with. Secondly, they will not settle for political reintegration, as they are bent on re-imposing the rule of Sharia law. Similarly, the United States will hardly condone the Taliban's treatment of women and violation of human rights in general, and any sort of compromise is therefore unlikely. Furthermore, the hardliners probably do not see the point in reconciliation, since they feel that time is on their side because of the impending withdrawal of international forces.[70]

The coalition troops play a critical role in this regard. Their military power can be used as a leverage to force the moderate insurgents to the negotiating table, and to eliminate those who cannot be reasoned with. Some of the uncooperative factions could be suppressed by conducting targeted strikes against their prominent leaders, whose influence radicalizes the rank-and-file. Ultimately, sufficient military pressure may be more useful as a bargaining chip in potential negotiations rather than an actual way to defeat the insurgency. The Taliban are deeply embedded in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and some sort of reconciliation with them is a prerequisite for a lasting peace.

3.3 Staying the Course

With the departure of the ISAF forces drawing near, it will soon be up to the ANA and ANP to maintain security in Afghanistan. While some of the U.S. troops are going to stay beyond 2014, it will likely be just a 'light footprint' once again. Consequently, they would

[69] John Wendle, "Rabbani's Killing Pushes Peace with the Taliban Further Out of Reach" *Time*, September 21, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2094186,00.html (accessed February 20, 2013).

[70] Wadhams and Cookman, "Assessing Peace Prospects in Afghanistan."

be hard-pressed to assist their Afghan allies, should the Taliban step up their efforts and threaten to destabilize the country.

A feasible solution to this would be an increased deployment of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as 'drones'. Although their use has been widely criticized, mainly due to them operating in the airspace of sovereign states without prior consent, the drones have considerable potential. The United States could continue to support the Afghan forces by conducting precision strikes against the insurgents without risking the lives of American soldiers. It would also diminish the possibility of further incidents by coalition troops, as well as 'green on blue' attacks (rogue Afghan security forces attacking the ISAF troops) that have been on the rise lately. Furthermore, the UAV strikes could be directed by the local intelligence assets, which might be more motivated to avoid collateral damage.[71]

As the plan stands, the ISAF mission will no longer carry out combat operations after 2014, and the ANA and ANP will fully take over the security-maintaining responsibility. This transition definitely ought to be executed when and if the current situation permits. One of the many determining factors will be the progress made by the U.S. drillmasters and advisors in training and building up the Afghan national forces. Once the military is capable of keeping the insurgency in check, the country will be one step closer to being independent of foreign assistance. In the end, the future of Afghanistan will be in the hands of the Afghans.

[71] U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (December 2012): 33-36, http://www.defense.gov/news/1230_Report_final.pdf (accessed April 14, 2013); Jeremiah Gertler, *U.S. Unmanned Aerial Systems*, CRS Report for Congress (January 3, 2012): 1-4, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42136.pdf (accessed April 13, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In light of the events of September 11, 2001, the decision to invade Afghanistan was altogether not surprising. However, as a result, the United States has since been embroiled in a war that many have deemed unwinnable. While its final outcome remains unknown, the war clearly cannot be won through military force alone.

Operation Enduring Freedom has brought some indisputable accomplishments: it has driven the Taliban from power and denied Al-Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan. Yet, each success was dearly paid for with the lives of both coalition soldiers and Afghan civilians. The collateral damage inherent to combat operations continues to fuel the insurgency and thus perpetuates the struggle. Nevertheless, despite all its negative aspects, the ongoing presence of coalition troops is necessary to facilitate the long-term nation-building efforts, which are crucial in resolving the Afghan conflict.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan offers the best, and perhaps the only, prospect of lasting stability. Sooner or later, the ‘better alternative’ it provides will deprive the extremists of their sphere of influence. The newly built schools will hurt the insurgency more than any cruise missile ever could.

One of the main goals of the nation-building mission at this point is to build up and further strengthen the Afghan national military and police. Their sufficient capacity to maintain security is a precondition for the complete withdrawal of the ISAF troops. Therefore, those making the decision to pull the rest of the coalition forces from Afghanistan should first and foremost take into account the current security situation, and the overall operational readiness of the ANA and ANP. Time will tell whether the drawdown scheduled for 2014 was overly optimistic in this regard.

A long and perilous road still lies ahead for Afghanistan. The much needed development in terms of economy, security, and political apparatus will take time and considerable effort. All the while, the Taliban remain a clear and present threat - a fact that is unlikely to change in the near future. Nevertheless, if the United States, the international community, and the Afghans themselves persevere and ‘stay the course’, eventually they will turn Afghanistan into a reasonably stable country that can guarantee its citizens a chance at better life in relative peace. Only then will the United States emerge victorious from the Graveyard of Empires.

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