
RESPONSE

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Before I begin I'd like to make a modest suggestion. The military refers to Afghanistan as Af/Pak, Af-Pak or sometimes simply Afpak. I think scholars and commentators should avoid using the term and indeed all military acronyms, except in direct quotation. Afpak is not a place, just as COIN is not a word. Of course, the implications of the terms are in each instance an important subject for discussion and analysis.

All of the papers consider US policy in the shifting, uncertain light of the immediate present. The House of Bush has fallen but the foundations remain: the largest military in the world, two active armies in the field, an unprecedentedly large and growing private army of mercenaries, many of the old staff still at their jobs and liberal hawks eager to take up the tasks bequeathed to them by their neo-con predecessors. Giles Scott-Smith reminds us of the 2006 Princeton Project on National Security, written by Anne-Marie Slaughter and John Ikenberry. It is a troubling document, especially now that Slaughter has been appointed Director of Policy Planning in the State Department. Its call for a Concert of Democracies bypasses the UN, calling for, in Scott-Smith's apt phrase, "formal values-based alliances" that can be mobilized when the US sees fit. Slaughter has declared that states which, by the standards of the US, fail to live up to their obligations "lose their right to insist that others not intervene in their internal affairs." This is as full a statement of American power as any neo-con could wish for.

Thus the Obama administration, like its predecessors, exacerbates the ongoing erosion of other national sovereignties, aided and abetted by new military technologies which, in Scott-Smith's view, are built "to cross borders and violate sovereignty with impunity." Yet as unpiloted drones, launched from somewhere in Nevada, assassinate the enemies of the US in Afghanistan or Pakistan, they also kill large numbers of civilians, undermining the regimes in both countries and "increasing the likelihood that individuals choose for the insurgency..." My only disagreement with Scott-Smith is with the importance he assigns the new technologies. To be sure, quoting Peter Singer, he also indicates their limitations. I am more struck by how each new technological development reproduces the same dilemma. Aerial warfare of all sorts, when employed against countries without adequate air defenses, as has frequently been the case, crossed borders and violated sovereignty with impunity. Like the drones, it also created resistance in the attempt to erase it. I think the real advantage of drones is that they contribute to the domestic invisibility of warfare. While enthusiastic support for a war would be pleasant, all a government really needs is public acquiescence or indifference. Drones, which eliminate the possibility of American casualties and at the same time claim absolute precision, make the war in Afghanistan easier for the public to ignore.

Andrew Johnston, while recognizing all of the contradictions discussed by Scott-Smith and adding a few more, observes as well that Obama's foreign policy represents a "ratcheting down of goals and rhetoric..." It sounds, Johnston writes, "like the final days of the Vietnam War, perhaps even a confession that the object now is merely not to lose." I would add that the final days of the Vietnam War were not just about not losing, they were about the US getting out altogether. For some time, critics and supporters

alike have compared Obama to Kennedy in the early days of the Vietnam War. I've always thought things were further along. Obama is caught in LBJ's predicament. Like Johnson he has an ambitious domestic agenda but must at the same time deal with the demands of two inherited wars. The analogy cannot be pushed too far. The war in Afghanistan is not as much of a domestic liability as the war in Vietnam was for Johnson, and this gives Obama more flexibility than Johnson had. At the same time, as Artemy Kalinovsky's essay makes clear, getting out of Afghanistan may prove both difficult and politically costly. Johnston moves the Afghanistan/Vietnam analogy along to the Nixon period and if that means the effort to create a "decent interval" and get out, then I hope he's right.

I found his account of the specific contradictions that plague not only American policies, but those of Pakistan, China and, in terms of domestic politics, Canada, most valuable. They are the material for a future international history of this war. Johnston concludes by citing Obama's recent speech in Cairo as an example of the possibility of a 'transnational, non-state coalitions across borders' in support of those who seek the liberation of women and the establishment of democratic institutions in the region. I agree. But first the war must end. Chris Hedges has put it very well:

What do you say to those who advocate war as an instrument to liberate the women of Afghanistan or bring democracy to Iraq? How do you tell them what war is like? How do you explain that the very proposition of war as an instrument of virtue is absurd? How do you cope with memories of children bleeding to death with bits of iron fragments peppered throughout their small bodies? How do you speak of war without tears?¹

With the wealth of citation to which we have become accustomed from the editor of www.enduringamerica.com, Scott Lucas moves the reader efficiently through the early months of Obama's presidency. He notes its contradictions, ambiguities, equivocations, its inability to outline a coherent strategy, its collapse into tactics—and there he leaves us. I would have appreciated knowing his thoughts on a way out of the morass.

Artemy Kalinovsky's discussion of the lessons of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, like his rich account of the Soviet Union's endgame in "Old politics, new diplomacy: the Geneva accords and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan" is a daunting reminder of the difficulties the Soviets faced in disengagement—with or without honor.² There is little reason to imagine Obama will have an easier time. Kalinovsky discusses the succession of difficulties the Soviet Union faced as, like the Obama administration, it increased the number of troops, the level of funding for development and reconstruction schemes and the effort to negotiate some way out.

As I followed Kalinovsky through his account of failed Soviet tactics and their resemblance to those the Obama administration is currently either employing or contemplating, it seemed to me that the main difference between the Soviet dilemma in Afghanistan and that of the US is that there is no major power funding the anti-US insurgency as the US once funded the anti-Soviet insurgency. Kalinovsky believes that studying Soviet failure "could be of great help [to the Obama administration] in reassessing options and shaping strategy." Indeed, his account could be very useful in bringing the administration to a

¹ Chris Hedges, "What War Looks Like," *New York Times Book Review*, May 20, 2009

² *Cold War History*, 8:3 (August, 2008), pp. 381-404

realization that its only option is full disengagement.

It is too soon to know what the Obama administration will do in practice. Rhetorically, the president has largely awakened us from the nightmare of George W. Bush's America. I recognize the shortcomings of Obama's Cairo speech, but it has been a long time since any serving American president denounced Israeli policy on settlements so sharply, and to my knowledge no serving American president came as close to apologizing to Iran for the role "the United States played...in the overthrow of a democratically-elected Iranian government." The Netanyahu government was quite justified in being rattled.

Obama renewed his commitment to troop withdrawal from Iraq and promised not to pursue bases there or in Afghanistan nor, indeed to make any claim to their territory or resources. William Pfaff has written on the promise of the speech:

"It would seem a renouncement of the American military program of world-girdling strategic bases, pursued for the past 30 years. It comes as more of a surprise than the Obama statement concerning Israel. It could be much more important to America and its future. One awaits elaboration".³

But while awaiting elaboration and indeed to ensure that it comes about, it might be good to bring to bear such pressure as sharp analysis can offer. Kalinovsky has drawn on the Soviet experience; an American, inevitably, looks to the lessons of Vietnam. I do not believe that a shift in tactics can salvage the current US war in Afghanistan anymore than it did in Vietnam. The US can provide neither a military nor a political solution in Afghanistan, any more than it could in Vietnam or than it has in Iraq. The best the US can do in both Afghanistan and Iraq is to withdraw all of its military personnel, including the tens of thousands of military contractors, and protect those whose association with Americans have made vulnerable.⁴ In addition, the US should pay reparations to Iraq, perhaps in the form of funding for the rebuilding that will be necessary. There is an ongoing debate about the speed with which US forces should be withdrawn from Iraq. George Packer urges that the US "withdraw as slowly as domestic political pressure, military requirements elsewhere, and Iraqi opinion allow."⁵ This formulation leaves room for a rather long stay. Moreover, the speed of withdrawal isn't just a matter of Iraqi opinion, but of the Status of Forces Agreement, which commits the US to withdraw all troops by 2011. Given the current state of factional tension in Iraq, it may well be that a peacekeeping force would be desirable. If so, it should not be an American force, but international and at the request of the Iraqi government.

I find it harder to imagine Afghanistan's future. The mandate of the government in Kabul does not extend much beyond the city limits; the countryside has been devastated by three decades of war; the capacity of any outside power to construct a functioning administration for the country is doubtful. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is massive international aid to ease the suffering and freedom from US drones, helicopter gunships and search missions.

³ "Obama's Cairo Speech," www.truthdig.com, posted June 4, 2009.

⁴ On this, see George Packer's article in the spring 2009 issue of *Dissent*, "It Isn't Over." Packer outlines a reasonable way for the US to fulfill its obligations to Iraqis who have worked for it, as the Danes and the British have already done. I should think the same approach could apply in Afghanistan.

⁵ *Ibid.* Stephen Biddle, quoted in Packer's essay, believes the US forces in Iraq now serve as a peacekeeping force in the model of the Balkans.