

Afghanistan

By Rep. Marty Wilde

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The lives we lost in Afghanistan demand an accounting from our national leadership. We should not deceive ourselves: We failed in Afghanistan because we did not support an option better than the Taliban for the people of Afghanistan. Every counterinsurgency is a battle for the loyalty of the people. Our leaders did not insist on a government, services, or a military worthy of the people's loyalty. What we see now are the consequences of that choice.

I served as Chief, Rule of Law at the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters in Afghanistan in 2011. I volunteered to deploy in that role because I saw Afghanistan quickly turning into a new Vietnam; the US was again backing a predatory government that put the maintenance of its own power and privilege above service to the people. I supervised both policy and planning staff, as well as five US experts providing direct support in Afghan government ministries. My hope was to play a small role in helping the Afghan people find peace by developing ground-level governance that resolved their conflicts non-violently. Instead, I found an enterprise consumed with remaking the Afghan government in a manner not supported by the people and not responsive to their needs. To his credit, then-Vice President Biden recognized this problem at the time and recommended withdrawing most US troops. Unfortunately, we chose a darker path that has led to the loss of more US and Afghan lives.

A government can defeat an insurgency only if the people believe it provides them with a better future than the alternative. We bet big on the Karzai regime because it looked a lot like we believed a government should look, with a powerful "unitary executive" and authority centralized in Kabul. Our misplaced conviction about the usefulness of this model resulted in rampant corruption and untold suffering for most Afghan people. Afghanistan has no history of central government, nor well-established laws and traditions to protect national assets from personal greed. Government officials were taking pallets of Western aid cash directly to the airport to fly to Dubai, where most of former high-level officials now live in luxury off the looted proceeds. We finally had to pass a law to stop them.

I distinctly recall a meeting with the rule of law teams from the International Community. As it was at the US Embassy, the table seated us in order of protocol, with the US Embassy team at the head, followed by the other embassy teams, followed by the military contingent. All the way at the bottom sat the representative for the Agency for

International Development (USAID). The Department of State boasted of their anti-corruption court, which had no cases because the Karzai administration refused to refer them, and their judicial training academy, which had just graduated a record number of women, none of whom were permitted to actually serve as judges. The other big embassy teams talked about courthouses they had built, though few had judges and many were being used as barns. Finally, at the foot of the table, USAID described their efforts to train and support local Afghans in conflict resolution strategies that could be used outside of the formal justice system. This was the only fully successful program showing results for the Afghan people, but it received little attention because it did not support our vision of a highly centralized government.

At the heart of our failures was the unwillingness to accept the necessity of starting small and building local capacity. Small successes would offer real value to the Afghan people, who would then support the government that provided these services. We preferred meeting with highly educated people who talked like us and shared our belief in a hierarchical government structure, not the people actually doing the work on the ground in the districts and provinces. And, as in Vietnam, we refused to acknowledge when our choices failed the people.

We did not invest in development projects responsive to the needs of the people. No project symbolizes this better than the hydroelectric Kajaki Dam, built to provide power to southwestern Afghanistan. We struggled for years to get it up and running, but never acknowledged that the effort did not benefit the communities who needed power as much as it benefitted the insurgency, which charged for the power, and the central government, which rationed its output. The dam required endless amounts of Western support. We could have instead invested in small-scale wind, solar, and hydro power projects that are sustainable with local expertise. These projects might not provide 24/7/365 power, but they would allow local independence and a material improvement in peoples' lives, the kind of improvement that nourishes thoughtfulness about the government that provided it. That should have been our goal, not the empowerment of the Kabul kleptocracy.

As I served in Afghanistan, the restrictions on American support also became obstacles. In 2011, if the Taliban attacked local outposts of US troops, we could always get another platoon out to defend it—a response that cost lives and injuries as well as approximately \$40 million a year. What we could not do was provide the nearby communities with small-scale water, power, and sewer services – costing perhaps \$1 million/year – which would have made the people more invested in our presence there. We made a gesture toward sustainable development with our Provincial Reconstruction Teams, but never at the scale necessary to change Afghani's daily lives for the better.

Finally, our military efforts failed to produce Afghan security forces that could protect the people. The military task in a counterinsurgency is to protect the people from violence.

We focused on fielding as many Afghan soldiers and police as quickly as possible. We took shortcuts in training, failing to provide them with sustainable logistics and turning a blind eye toward corruption in their leadership. While I served there, we piloted a cell phone banking system to pay troops directly; otherwise, much of their pay would be stolen by their officers.

Similarly, we failed to recognize that building functional logistics and other forms of specialized expertise is not the work of weeks but the work of years, if not decades. A serious approach would have considered what technologies the Afghans could sustain, provided lengthy and periodically refreshed training, and had public, high-profile prosecutions of corrupt Afghan security sector officials in US courts for the diversion of US taxpayer funds.

At the most basic level, we provided Afghan soldiers and police with inadequate training, leaving them without the loyalty and unit cohesion to sustain a prolonged fight. We churned out Afghan trainees in 16 weeks – about the same time as it takes for training a US trainee – but, unlike US soldiers, the Afghans lacked basic literacy and numeracy. In a region where tribal affiliation was primary, they did not even have a common conception of their identity as Afghans. We put quantity of trainees over quality and appropriateness of training, and we reaped what we sowed when Afghan military members deserted en masse.

What's next for Afghanistan? No government will have the loyalty of the Afghan people until it puts responsiveness to their needs before its own interests. I doubt the diverse Afghan people will long tolerate an autocratic Taliban regime. Maybe a confederal government will arise from the ashes, with the Afghan people enjoying substantial regional autonomy. But I worry that the reality will be bloodier as the country devolves from a civil war with "sides" to a more general state of anarchy.

As for us, we will evacuate our people and, hopefully, those Afghans who helped us. We will probably conduct anti-terrorism operations from "over the horizon" to protect our citizens. To those who say that we should return in force, including General John Allen and Lt Gen HR McMaster, both of whom I served with and respect, I would simply reply, "You first." I'll always fight to help people exercise their right to democratic self-determination, wherever they may be in the world, but too many of my brothers and sisters died to support an Afghan government that was never worthy of the Afghan people's loyalty. Our mission now is to take care of those who fought the battle and to reflect on how we can prevent this from ever happening again.

Once during a high-level meeting in Kabul, I wrote in my notebook "KARZAI=DIEM," reflecting my growing conviction that the then-President of Afghanistan was like the former South Vietnamese autocrat. As in Vietnam, our leaders failed in Afghanistan

because they did not listen to the Afghan people. As in Vietnam, they believed that Afghanistan could only be remade in our image, not according to the vision of its own people. If there is a lesson we should take from it, it is this: We should never again put our troops in harm's way to support a government that its own people do not believe in.

If you know American citizens who are currently in Afghanistan, please share this [information from the State Department regarding repatriation assistance](#).

If you'd like to help people in Afghanistan, I encourage support for the [International Rescue Committee](#). Afghan Allies receive refugee resettlement services, so, if you'd prefer to act locally, the [Refugee Resettlement Coalition of Lane County](#) is another way to support them. If you'd like to support a veterans non-profit, I encourage you to do so through a charity that scores well through [Charity Navigator](#).

Sincerely,

Marty