

By George Friedman

Bob Woodward has released another book, this one on the debate over Afghanistan strategy in the Obama administration. As all his books do, the book has riveted Washington. It reveals that intense debate occurred over what course to take, that the president sought alternative strategies and that compromises were reached. But while knowing the details of these things is interesting, what would have been shocking is if they hadn't taken place.

It is interesting to reflect on the institutional inevitability of these disagreements. The military is involved in a war. It is institutionally and emotionally committed to victory in the theater of combat. It will demand all available resources for executing the war under way. For a soldier who has bled in that war, questioning the importance of the war is obscene. A war must be fought relentlessly and with all available means.

But while the military's top generals and senior civilian leadership are responsible for providing the president with sound, clearheaded advice on all military matters including the highest levels of grand strategy, they are ultimately responsible for the pursuit of military objectives to which the commander-in-chief directs them. Generals must think about how to win the war they are fighting. Presidents must think about whether the war is worth fighting. The president is responsible for America's global posture. He must consider what an unlimited commitment to a particular conflict might mean in other regions of the world where forces would be unavailable.

A president must take a more dispassionate view than his generals. He must calculate not only whether victory is possible but also the value of the victory relative to the cost. Given the nature of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. President Barack Obama and Gen. David Petraeus — first the U.S. Central Command chief and now the top commander in Afghanistan — had to view it differently. This is unavoidable. This is natural. And only one of the two is ultimately in charge.

The Nature of Guerrilla Warfare

In thinking about Afghanistan, it is essential that we begin by thinking about the nature of guerrilla warfare against an occupying force. The guerrilla lives in the country. He isn't going anywhere else, as he has nowhere to go. By contrast, the foreigner has a place to which he can return. This is the core weakness of the occupier and the strength of the guerrilla. The former can leave and in all likelihood, his nation will survive. The guerrilla can't. And having alternatives undermines the foreigner's will to fight regardless of the importance of the war to him.

The strategy of the guerrilla is to make the option to withdraw more attractive. In order to do this, his strategic goal is simply to survive and fight on whatever level he can. His patience is built into who he is and what he is fighting for. The occupier's patience is calculated against the cost of the occupation and its opportunity costs, thus, while troops are committed in this country,

what is happening elsewhere?

Tactically, the guerrilla survives by being elusive. He disperses in small groups. He operates in hostile terrain. He denies the enemy intelligence on his location and capabilities. He forms political alliances with civilians who provide him supplies and intelligence on the occupation forces and misleads the occupiers about his own location. The guerrilla uses this intelligence network to decline combat on the enemy's terms and to strike the enemy when he is least prepared. The guerrilla's goal is not to seize and hold ground but to survive, evade and strike, imposing casualties on the occupier. Above all, the guerrilla must never form a center of gravity that, if struck, would lead to his defeat. He thus actively avoids anything that could be construed as a decisive contact.

The occupation force is normally a more conventional army. Its strength is superior firepower, resources and organization. If it knows where the guerrilla is and can strike before the guerrilla can disperse, the occupying force will defeat the guerrilla. The occupier's problems are that his intelligence is normally inferior to that of the guerrillas; the guerrillas rarely mass in ways that permit decisive combat and normally can disperse faster than the occupier can pinpoint and deploy forces against them; and the guerrillas' superior tactical capabilities allow them to impose a constant low rate of casualties on the occupier. Indeed, the massive amount of resources the occupier requires and the inflexibility of a military institution not solely committed to the particular theater of operations can actually work against the occupier by creating logistical vulnerabilities susceptible to guerrilla attacks and difficulty adapting at a rate sufficient to keep pace with the guerrilla. The occupation force will always win engagements, but that is never the measure of victory. If the guerrillas operate by doctrine, defeats in unplanned engagements will not undermine their basic goal of survival. While the occupier is not winning decisively, even while suffering only some casualties, he is losing. While the guerrilla is not losing decisively, even if suffering significant casualties, he is winning. Since the guerrilla is not going anywhere, he can afford far higher casualties than the occupier, who ultimately has the alternative of withdrawal.

The asymmetry of this warfare favors the guerrilla. This is particularly true when the strategic value of the war to the occupier is ambiguous, where the occupier does not possess sufficient force and patience to systematically overwhelm the guerrillas, and where either political or military constraints prevent operations against sanctuaries. This is a truth as relevant to David's insurgency against the Philistines as it is to the U.S. experience in Vietnam or the Russian occupation of Afghanistan.

There has long been a myth about the unwillingness of Americans to absorb casualties for very long in guerrilla wars. In reality, the United States fought in Vietnam for at least seven years (depending on when you count the start and stop) and has now fought in Afghanistan for nine years. The idea that Americans can't endure the long war has no empirical basis. What the United States has difficulty with — along with imperial and colonial powers before it — is a war in which the ability to impose one's will on the enemy through force of arms is lacking and when it is not clear that the failure of previous years to win the war will be solved in the years ahead.

Far more relevant than casualties to whether Americans continue a war is the question of the

conflict's strategic importance, for which the president is ultimately responsible. This divides into several parts. This first is whether the United States has the ability with available force to achieve its political goals through prosecuting the war (since all war is fought for some political goal, from regime change to policy shift) and whether the force the United States is willing to dedicate suffices to achieve these goals. To address this question in Afghanistan, we have to focus on the political goal.

The Evolution of the U.S. Political Goal in Afghanistan

Washington's primary goal at the initiation of the conflict was to destroy or disrupt al Qaeda in Afghanistan to protect the U.S. homeland from follow-on attacks to 9/11. But if Afghanistan were completely pacified, the threat of Islamist-fueled transnational terrorism would remain at issue because it is no longer just an issue of a single organization — al Qaeda — but a series of fragmented groups conducting operations in Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, North Africa, Somalia and elsewhere.

Today, al Qaeda is simply one manifestation of the threat of this transnational jihadist phenomenon. It is important to stop and consider al Qaeda — and the transnational jihadist phenomenon in general — in terms of guerrillas, and to think of the phenomenon as a guerrilla force in its own right operating by the very same rules on a global basis. Thus, where the Taliban apply guerrilla principles to Afghanistan, today's transnational jihadist applies them to the Islamic world and beyond. The transnational jihadists are not leaving and are not giving up. Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, they will decline combat against larger American forces and strike vulnerable targets when they can.

There are certainly more players and more complexity to the global phenomenon than in a localized insurgency. Many governments across North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia have no interest in seeing these movements set up shop and stir up unrest in their territory. And al Qaeda's devolution has seen frustrations as well as successes as it spreads. But the underlying principles of guerrilla warfare remain at issue. Whenever the Americans concentrate force in one area, al Qaeda disengages, disperses and regroups elsewhere and, perhaps more important, the ideology that underpins the phenomenon continues to exist. The threat will undoubtedly continue to evolve and face challenges, but in the end, it will continue to exist along the lines of the guerrilla acting against the United States.

There is another important way in which the global guerrilla analogy is apt. STRATFOR has long held that Islamist-fueled transnational terrorism does not represent a strategic, existential threat to the United States. While acts of transnational terrorism target civilians, they are not attacks — have not been and are not evolving into attacks — that endanger the territorial integrity of the United States or the way of life of the American people. They are dangerous and must be defended against, but transnational terrorism is and remains a tactical problem that for nearly a decade has been treated as if it were the pre-eminent strategic threat to the United States.

Nietzsche wrote that, "The most fundamental form of human stupidity is forgetting what we were trying to do in the first place." The stated U.S. goal in Afghanistan was the destruction of al

Qaeda. While al Qaeda as it existed in 2001 has certainly been disrupted and degraded, al Qaeda's evolution and migration means that disrupting and degrading it — to say nothing of destroying it — can no longer be achieved by waging a war in Afghanistan. The guerrilla does not rely on a single piece of real estate (in this case Afghanistan) but rather on his ability to move seamlessly across terrain to evade decisive combat in any specific location.

Islamist-fueled transnational terrorism is not centered on Afghanistan and does not need Afghanistan, so no matter how successful that war might be, it would make little difference in the larger fight against transnational jihadism.

Thus far, the United States has chosen to carry on fighting the war in Afghanistan. As al Qaeda has fled Afghanistan, the overall political goal for the United States in the country has evolved to include the creation of a democratic and uncorrupt Afghanistan. It is not clear that anyone knows how to do this, particularly given that most Afghans consider the ruling government of President Hamid Karzai — with which the United States is allied — as the heart of the corruption problem, and beyond Kabul most Afghans do not regard their way of making political and social arrangements to be corrupt.

Simply withdrawing from Afghanistan carries its own strategic and political costs, however. The strategic problem is that simply terminating the war after nine years would destabilize the Islamic world. The United States has managed to block al Qaeda's goal of triggering a series of uprisings against existing regimes and replacing them with jihadist regimes. It did this by displaying a willingness to intervene where necessary. Of course, the idea that U.S. intervention destabilized the region raises the question of what regional stability would look like had it not intervened. The danger of withdrawal is that the network of relationships the United States created and imposed at the regime level could unravel if it withdrew. America would be seen as having lost the war, the prestige of radical Islamists and thereby the foundation of the ideology that underpins their movement would surge, and this could destabilize regimes and undermine American interests.

The political problem is domestic. Obama's approval rating now stands at 42 percent. This is not unprecedented, but it means he is politically weak. One of the charges against him, fair or not, is that he is inherently anti-war by background and so not fully committed to the war effort. Where a Republican would face charges of being a warmonger, which would make withdrawal easier, Obama faces charges of being too soft. Since a president must maintain political support to be effective, withdrawal becomes even harder. Therefore, strategic analysis aside, the president is not going to order a complete withdrawal of all combat forces any time soon — the national (and international) political alignment won't support such a step. At the same time, remaining in Afghanistan is unlikely to achieve any goal and leaves potential rivals like China and Russia freer rein.

The American Solution

The American solution, one that we suspect is already under way, is the Pakistanization of the war. By this, we do not mean extending the war into Pakistan but rather extending Pakistan into Afghanistan. The Taliban phenomenon has extended into Pakistan in ways that seriously complicate Pakistani efforts to regain their bearing in Afghanistan. It has created a major

security problem for Islamabad, which, coupled with the severe deterioration of the country's economy and now the floods, has weakened the Pakistanis' ability to manage Afghanistan. In other words, the moment that the Pakistanis have been waiting for — American agreement and support for the Pakistanization of the war — has come at a time when the Pakistanis are not in an ideal position to capitalize on it.

In the past, the United States has endeavored to keep the Taliban in Afghanistan and the regime in Pakistan separate. (The Taliban movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan are not one and the same.) Washington has not succeeded in this regard, with the Pakistanis continuing to hedge their bets and maintain a relationship across the border. Still, U.S. opposition has been the single greatest impediment to Pakistan's consolidation of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and abandoning this opposition leaves important avenues open for Islamabad.

The Pakistani relationship to the Taliban, which was a liability for the United States in the past, now becomes an advantage for Washington because it creates a trusted channel for meaningful communication with the Taliban. Logic suggests this channel is quite active now.

The Vietnam War ended with the Paris peace talks. Those formal talks were not where the real bargaining took place but rather where the results were ultimately confirmed. If talks are under way, a similar venue for the formal manifestation of the talks is needed — and Islamabad is as good a place as any.

Pakistan is an American ally which the United States needs, both to balance growing Chinese influence in and partnership with Pakistan, and to contain India. Pakistan needs the United States for the same reason. Meanwhile, the Taliban want to run Afghanistan. The United States has no strong national interest in how Afghanistan is run so long as it does not support and espouse transnational jihadism. But it needs its withdrawal to take place in a manner that strengthens its influence rather than weakens it, and Pakistan can provide the cover for turning a retreat into a negotiated settlement.

Pakistan has every reason to play this role. It needs the United States over the long term to balance against India. It must have a stable or relatively stable Afghanistan to secure its western frontier. It needs an end to U.S. forays into Pakistan that are destabilizing the regime. And playing this role would enhance Pakistan's status in the Islamic world, something the United States could benefit from, too. We suspect that all sides are moving toward this end.

The United States isn't going to defeat the Taliban. The original goal of the war is irrelevant, and the current goal is rather difficult to take seriously. Even a victory, whatever that would look like, would make little difference in the fight against transnational jihad, but a defeat could harm U.S. interests. Therefore, the United States needs a withdrawal that is not a defeat. Such a strategic shift is not without profound political complexity and difficulties. But the disparity between — and increasingly, the incompatibility of — the struggle with transnational terrorism and the war effort geographically rooted in Afghanistan is only becoming more apparent — even to the American public.

Read more: [Pakistan and the U.S. Exit From Afghanistan | STRATFOR](#)

Reproduced with the permission of STRATFOR