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What Not to Learn from Afghanistan

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“For you all love the screw-guns—the screw guns they all love you!
So when we take tea with a few guns, o’course you will know
what to do—hoo! hoo!
Jest send in your Chief an’ surrender—it’s worse if you fights or you runs:
You may hide in the caves, they’ll be only your graves,
but you can’t get away from the guns!”
— Rudyard Kipling
“The Screw Guns”

The “screw guns” to which Kipling refers were rifled artillery pieces with longer range and more penetrating power than the older smooth-bore guns. They gave British troops a substantial edge over local forces in the colonial wars of the Victorian empire, just as American bombers do for US troops today. Artillery would continue to improve in explosive power, versatility (gas, smoke), and indirect bombardment, leading to its dominant role in World War I. Yet no serious military strategist of Kipling’s day would have suggested that the British Army disband its infantry and cavalry regiments and reorganize into only artillery brigades.

The great wars of the 20th century were won by maneuver, not just firepower. Technology has increased the range and precision of firepower, but the question about maneuver force planning posed by the prominent German tactician of World War I, General Wilhelm von Balck, is still central: “How much infantry will be required to utilize the success of the fire of the artillery?” Nothing in the violent decades since has changed von Balck’s conclusion, “There are no longer principal arms. Each arm has its use, all are necessary.”¹

The principal lesson of modern war is the need to operate in combined arms teams to win decisive victories that yield beneficial political change. There are

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no “silver bullets” that can win wars by themselves, even if fitted with satellite guidance. Nor is war just about blowing things up. War is “politics by other means” with the aim to determine how territory and people are governed, and to what ends rulers direct their resources. This cannot be done from 15,000 feet in the air.

Yet there are those who would argue, on the basis of the air campaigns in the Balkans and Afghanistan, that the United States should restructure its armed forces to rely almost entirely on bombers, with some special forces and perhaps some other light troops (preferably foreign) as auxiliaries. This line of argument has been around since Billy Mitchell claimed in his 1925 book *Winged Defense*, “It is probable that future wars again will be conducted by a special class, the air force, as it was by the armored knights in the Middle Ages. Again, the whole population will not have to be called in the event of a national emergency, but only enough of it to man the machines that are the most potent in

national defense.”

Airpower did play a major role in the wars that followed, but as part of a larger war effort that aimed at the destruction of enemy regimes by conquest, and the remaking of their societies in the image of the liberating armies. From World War II to Vietnam, democracies were established where American troops prevailed and dictatorships where communist troops took hold. But nowhere was the promise of “victory through airpower” alone borne out.

In the Gulf War, which airpower advocates cite as the rebirth of their doctrine, the decision to halt the ground offensive after only four days and without advancing on Baghdad left Saddam Hussein in power. A decade of air strikes and “no fly zones” has not prevented Hussein from undermining the Gulf War coalition by diplomacy while developing weapons of mass destruction.

Mitchell might well have considered his own analogy of fighter pilots to medieval knights more carefully. Though the armored horseman was singularly the most powerful “weapon system” of his day, performance on battlefields from the Holy Land to Crecy did not always support his claim to glory. The knight was often frustrated, even defeated, by steadfast infantry, archers, and more agile light cavalry. He was at his best when he fought in an army that had its own contingents of these other arms in mutual support.

Unfortunately, the unreflective appeal of Mitchell continues to be strong and may be infecting the future military planning of the Bush Administration.

President Bush purged the strategic malaise of the 1990s when he said at The Citadel on 11 December 2001, “When the Cold War ended, some predicted that the era of direct threats to our nation was over. Some thought our military

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would be used overseas—not to win wars, but mainly to police and pacify, to control crowds and contain ethnic conflict. They were wrong.” He reiterated the stand he took immediately after 11 September: “Every nation now knows that we cannot accept—and we will not accept—states that harbor, finance, train, or equip the agents of terror. Those nations that violate this principle will be regarded as hostile regimes.” And he noted that many of these “rogue” nations are developing missiles and weapons of mass destruction. “For states that support terror,” he vowed, “it’s not enough that the consequences be costly—they must be devastating.”

The problem arises from relying too much on the “lessons” of the recent military campaign in Afghanistan as providing the template for meeting these future threats. President Bush noted that the combination of “real-time intelligence, local allied forces, Special Forces, and precision air power” shattered the Taliban regime. Fair enough. He was too hasty, however, in saying that this kind of strategy had not been used before, and that “the conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue-ribbon panels and think tank symposiums.”

America is fortunate that Osama bin Laden chose to locate in Afghanistan, a country without ballistic missiles or weapons of mass destruction—or for that matter, even a conventional army of any size. Taliban and al Qaeda forces numbered about 50,000, one-tenth the size of the Iraqi forces engaged in Desert Storm, but about the same size as Serbian forces in Kosovo. US forces could attack Afghanistan with impunity. The only real challenge was the remote geography and lack of existing agreements with neighboring states regarding base rights. The military victory over the Taliban rabble looked easy because it was.

This is not to diminish in any way the valor of those Americans who fought and died in the campaign, because war is never easy at the individual level. But in terms of national effort, the war was as one-sided as anything in the annals of Queen Victoria’s “little wars” of the 19th century. American leaders should not expect the next war to be as undemanding.

There may be the temptation to group the Afghan war with the Balkan interventions of the 1990s, but it would be a case of mixing apples and oranges, as the war aims were different. The US-led NATO air campaigns against Serbia in 1995 and 1999 were acts of coercion in support of diplomatic settlements. The first air campaign, lasting from 30

August to 20 September, led to the Dayton Accords, which effectively partitioned an independent Bosnia into Serbian, Muslim,

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and Croatian sectors under a confederation government. The second, and longer, air campaign (24 March to 9 June 1999) was meant to force Serbia to accept the terms of the Rambouillet agreement for autonomous Albanian rule in Kosovo. Both air campaigns were exercises in limited war.

The campaign in Afghanistan, in contrast, was an exercise in decisive warfare. As a result of the strategic review Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld conducted upon taking office, a new paradigm of “winning decisively” was emerging even before 11 September and had been incorporated into the Quadrennial Defense Review. Winning decisively has been defined as the ability to march on an enemy capital, with the intent of overthrowing its regime. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz added to this concept at a 16 August 2001 press briefing, saying, “We want to have a major war capability to impose whatever terms—‘win decisively,’ I guess is the terminology. It was called ‘unconditional surrender’ in World War II.”³

The objective in Afghanistan was the elimination of the Taliban regime and the destruction of the al Qaeda terrorist network which had been built with Taliban cooperation. The scale of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which killed some 3,000 people, required nothing less. There was no question from the start of the campaign that ground forces would be needed to overthrow Taliban rule and sweep the country of al Qaeda terrorists.

Ground troops had also played a role in the Balkan campaigns. The offensive by Croatian troops from May to early August 1995 recaptured substantial territory and changed the balance of power. The offensive was renewed in western Bosnia during the NATO bombing campaign. Though the air campaign is widely credited with breaking Serbian resistance and bringing the Milosevic regime to the peace table, the resulting distribution of land between the Croat, Muslim, and Serb factions in Bosnia was little different from what the armies of each factor had been able to seize or hold during the ground campaign preceding the Dayton conference.⁴

By the end of May 1999, the threat of a NATO ground invasion was increasing as impatience grew about the indecisive effects of the bombing campaign and the mounting humanitarian costs of the massive refugee flight from Kosovo.⁵ The introduction of NATO troops could have shifted the war from the limited objective of a negotiated settlement to the “decisive” objective of the removal of Slobodan Milosevic from power and his arrest on war crimes charges. Subsequent events have certainly proven out any fears Milosevic may have had about the escalating hostility of NATO toward him personally.

In Afghanistan, the decision was made to support local forces in a civil war against the Taliban. The difficulties of deploying American forces were both physical and political. The United States had no bases in Central Asia, nor was there sufficient infrastructure to support a major deployment. There was also a political risk that introducing American troops would provoke an anti-Western backlash favoring the Islamic extremists. Though the resulting operation looked similar to the 1995 Bosnian strategy, it was not the same. In 1995, NATO air

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strikes were not integrated with the Croat-Muslim offensive, let alone directed by US special forces serving with the local combat units.⁶

Afghanistan was not the first time this strategy was used. Indeed, it was one of the first strategies ever used by the United States in an overseas operation.

Taking a Longer Historical View

When President Thomas Jefferson decided to confront the Barbary pirates 200 years ago, US strategy also relied on offshore bombardment and local forces led by only a handful of American “special operators.” In 1804, after the pirates had seized the frigate *Philadelphia*, Navy Captain Stephen Decatur led a commando raid in Tripoli harbor to

burn the ship. Commodore Edward Preble later sailed into the harbor and bombarded the town and the Barbary fleet. The most notable parallel of that war with the current conflict, though, is the land campaign.

A former Army captain, William Eaton, was US consul to Tunis. With only eight marines, a Navy midshipman, and 100 mercenaries, Eaton left Alexandria, Egypt, to restore Hamet Karamanli to the throne of Tripoli and overthrow his usurper brother. Picking up more adherents along his 600-mile march, Eaton's force stormed the city of Derna with the support of a naval bombardment. This direct threat to his rule persuaded the bashaw of Tripoli, Yousuf Karamanli, to make peace and ransom the crew of the *Philadelphia*.

The campaign against the Barbary pirates was interrupted by the War of 1812, a much larger and more important conflict, for which the United States was ill prepared. President James Madison had taken a harder line in foreign policy, but had not created the military muscle to back up his diplomacy. An Army deployed to defend against marauding Indians and a Navy oriented toward protecting commerce from pirates was not ready to face a major power like the British Empire. In 1814, the British captured Washington, D.C., and burned several government buildings, including the White House.

A century later, the British themselves would find that armed forces designed for colonial warfare were inadequate—both in numbers and in doctrine, to meet the army of Imperial Germany in a contest for European supremacy. The British Empire was defended mainly by native troops, with a hard core of veteran

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British professionals armed with more advanced weapons. They were in action almost continuously. Yet the Boer War at the turn of the century surprised the British as to its scale and duration, taxing the empire's military resources and calling into question its military capabilities in the eyes of other powers.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) sent to France in 1914 was well trained and well equipped. On a man-for-man basis it was arguably the best fighting force in Europe, but at only four infantry divisions plus some cavalry brigades, it was smaller than the army of "neutral" Belgium. Though the BEF gave a good account of itself, it was chewed up in high-intensity combat. The hastily mobilized mass army that followed in 1915 suffered heavy losses due to inadequate training and lack of support from a defense industry that had found mobilization even more difficult than had the military.

The lesson that should be learned by those who have been urging a restructuring of the US military toward lighter forces, whether for peacekeeping duties during the years of the Clinton Administration or anti-terrorism operations now, is that it is difficult to rapidly upgrade forces designed for the low end of the conflict spectrum to handle larger wars. And it is usually the larger wars that have the higher stakes.

World War I found the United States as well as Great Britain unprepared for large-scale war. General John J. Pershing was given command of the American Expeditionary Force. Pershing had just come back from chasing Pancho Villa's guerrilla band, which had made raids into New Mexico and Texas.

Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico initially involved only 5,000 Regular troops, while homeland defense was entrusted to the Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona National Guard. Pershing pioneered the use of his era's high-tech systems: biplanes, radios, and trucks. When his command reached 11,000 soldiers, it became the largest body of troops any then-active American officer had ever led. The US Army did not have a single active unit of division size when President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war.

The Germans knew resorting to unrestricted submarine warfare would bring the United States into the conflict, but they believed that American unpreparedness would give Berlin time to win the war before US troops could intervene. The Germans were wrong in their analysis, but not by much. American troops went into combat armed with French machine guns, tanks, and fighter planes because US industry could not gear up fast enough to supply such weapons. And American troops suffered heavy casualties because they lacked adequate training for large-scale, high-intensity operations.

The Afghan operation was more of a punitive expedition than a real war. The outrage Americans felt in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—which killed more people than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—does not change the fact that terrorism is the tactic of the weak. There was no surge of enemy conquests across vast areas of the world like those the Japanese launched after 7 December 1941. Al Qaeda was not a major

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power, nor could it upset the balance of power in the world. Osama bin Laden did have a plan to change the face of the Middle East, by driving the United States out of the region and overthrowing those Muslim states which had cooperated with Washington, but his resources fell far short of his mad ambitions.

The United States must make sure its resources do not fall short of its needs when confronting menaces that do threaten the balance of power or the security of entire regions. Osama bin Laden is not America's only adversary. The threats that existed before 9/11—from rogue states to a rising China, are still there and still need to be faced.

Shaping the Future Force

There was already talk of further downsizing the US armed forces, particularly conventional ground forces, even before the Afghan campaign. A review of strategy conducted by the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment emphasized the military leverage afforded by long-range bombers and space systems. Early drafts of the review didn't even mention ground forces.⁷ The Army has already been cut from 18 divisions at the time of the Gulf War to ten divisions today. Some would like to see it cut further, to eight divisions or even six. The money saved would be reallocated to fund more long-range, precision-strike systems.

The opinion fad of the moment holds that only Special Forces are needed to serve as target spotters for the bombers and as liaisons to local ground forces. Yet the notion that the United States doesn't need an Army with the capability of imposing decisive defeats on enemy forces, marching on capitals, and overthrowing hostile regimes falls into the same category as those opinions of myopic critics who say that the threat of terrorism means resources should not be spent on missile defenses despite the fact that many of the states that support terrorism have missile programs.

The United States cannot always rely on local troops to prevail in combat, even when supported by American airpower. In Korea, Vietnam, and Kuwait, American intervention—numbering in each case around 500,000 men, was needed precisely because local allies could not halt aggression from more powerful neighbors on their own. There were no local, armed allies available when Washington intervened to remove the regime of Manuel Noriega in Panama, nor could massive bombing be used since the general population was friendly.

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The Bush Administration is contemplating deposing other regimes that support terrorism or are developing weapons of mass destruction. In his speech on 17 April at the Virginia Military Institute, the President again talked of the "axis of evil" and said that the Taliban was only "the first regime to fall in the war against terror." Taking the war to larger, more established states will be even more difficult. At the top of the list is Iraq, but Iran is not far behind with its support of terrorist groups operating in Lebanon under the protection of Syria. North Korea also remains a menace. Battles waged against the forces of any of these rogue states would be of a scale and intensity far beyond what has been seen in Afghanistan, and well beyond the capabilities of any ad hoc local "militia."

It should be remembered that the first Bush Administration expected local forces (Kurdish and Shiite rebels or a military coup) would finish off Saddam Hussein after his defeat in Kuwait. US ground troops did not advance on Baghdad to remove the Iraqi regime, but relied on others to finish the job. That outcome did not happen.

Even in the Afghanistan operation, reliance on local forces had its disappointments. Many Taliban leaders and their followers evidently were allowed to escape through battlefield deals that exchanged the peaceful surrender of territory for the safety of defeated commanders. Such deals may have been necessary because the Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban Pashtun tribes were too weak to win a decisive battle. This seemed particularly true at Kandahar. The anti-Taliban forces lacked the numbers, weapons, and training to either take or besiege a stoutly defended city. Islamic

militants consequently have been able to withdraw back into sympathetic communities in Afghanistan or escape to neighboring Pakistan, to fight another day.

Belatedly, US ground troops were deployed to make up for local Afghan deficiencies. Marines established a base south of Kandahar to interdict escape routes to Pakistan, and then were rushed forward to occupy Kandahar airport. Soldiers from the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne divisions were then brought in to help bring the conflict to a successful political conclusion by hunting down enemy leaders and remnant forces.

Airpower in support of Northern Alliance fighters had led to the initial retreat by Taliban and al Qaeda forces from Kabul back to Kandahar. Air strikes also harassed that retreat, but without better armed and more mobile ground troops to encircle Kabul, the enemy could not be “bagged” while still concentrated. The deployment of even one airmobile brigade, or the equivalent of one of the Army’s proposed fast-moving interim brigades, would have made a major difference in the campaign right then.

In 2000, the Quadrennial Defense Review Working Group at the National Defense University prepared a report on the use of allied forces in major theater wars. It concluded that “very few allies possess substantial combat capability (ground maneuver brigades, combat aircraft) that would allow for a reduction of US combat forces.”⁸ The United States has the best-trained, best-armed,

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and most-capable military on the planet. As Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz has said of adversaries, “They have learned from the Gulf War that challenging American forces head-on doesn’t work—so they have turned increasingly to developing asymmetric capabilities,” like terrorism.⁹

It would be foolish to dismantle those elements of national strength that have pushed adversaries into the margins. Indeed, the strategy of “decisive warfare” plays to America’s conventional strength. It is the basis for the strategy of taking the war to the enemy, rather than trying to defend every US asset from every possible form of attack.

To improve the Army’s capabilities to win wars, not just “police and pacify,” the Afghan campaign has served to speed up the transformation process. The Army must be able to field a balance of units effective in operations from the heavy to the light ends of the conflict spectrum. Some lighter-equipped units are needed for certain missions and as a rapid reaction/deterrent/vanguard force. At the same time, larger, heavier-equipped units also must be retained and be capable of timely deployment. The Army transformation initiative is designed to achieve just that. By reequipping a number of interim brigades with light armored vehicles to provide a rapidly deployable, highly lethal, mobile ground force, while also retaining heavier armored units, the Army will be able to quickly deploy reinforcing units of increasing combat power.

Victories are precious things, paid for in blood and treasure. They must not be thrown away. When the enemy is beaten or in retreat, they cannot be allowed to survive and regroup. Enemies with determined leaders and an indomitable agenda must be destroyed when the opportunity exists to do so, because such opportunities are fleeting—and expensive to recreate.

Asymmetrical strategies cut both ways. It is still better to be strong than weak, and to be rich rather than poor, when waging war. And when vital interests are at stake, America should be ready and willing to take matters into its own hands, which means the use of ground troops. Only then can the United States be sure that the outcome of the struggle is a victory that fulfills American objectives.

NOTES

1. Jonathan H. House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2001), p. 60.

2. William Mitchell, *Winged Defense* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925), p. 19.

3. Paul Wolfowitz, Briefing on the Defense Planning Guidance, 16 August 2001, internet, http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Aug2001/t08162001_t0816dsd.html.
4. Mark C. McLaughlin, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Deliberate Force: Harnessing the Political-Military Connection," in *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning*, ed. Robert C. Owen (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, 2000), p. 195. This is the Final Report of the Air University Balkan Air Campaign Study.
5. *Operation Allied Force: Lessons for the Future*, Rand Research Brief RB-75-AF (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), internet, <http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB75>.
6. According to the Final Report of the Air University Balkan Air Campaign Study, any support the air campaign gave to anti-Serbian ground operations was "unintentional." McLaughlin, p. 195.
7. Loren B. Thompson, "Saved by Reality: The Army Finds a Future," *Defense Week*, 9 October 2001.
8. Robert Holzer, "Report: Allies No Substitutes for U.S. Troops," *Defense News*, 28 August 2000, p. 1.
9. Paul Wolfowitz, "Building a Military for the 21st Century," Prepared Statement for the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, 3-4 October 2001.

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