

# THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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## 20 YEARS LATER

*Where Does Diplomacy Stand?*



# THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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# GETTING OFF THE

In a compelling personal account of the 9/11 attacks, one FSO offers tactics for surviving when catastrophe strikes.

BY NANCY OSTROWSKI

**I**n September 2001 I was an industry economist attending a National Association for Business Economics conference (themed “In a New York Minute”) at the Marriott World Trade Center. The 22-story hotel was situated between the twin towers and was connected to the north tower. My boyfriend and I were also guests of the hotel, having come up from Virginia the weekend prior. We were still in our room on the 18th floor when the first plane struck the building.

The lessons I learned from this experience have served me well in the Foreign Service through subsequent terror attacks, civil unrest and evacuations.

**1) HAVE AN EXIT PLAN.** Just before my trip to New York, there was a fire in the high-rise condo building where I lived in Alexandria, Virginia. As a result, the first thing I did when check-



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ing into the Marriott was to locate the nearest emergency exits. When I heard the loud rumble of the first plane’s impact, I didn’t have to waste time figuring out where to go, and was able to exit my room immediately and with less panic.

**2) LISTEN TO YOUR INSTINCTS.** In researching the hotel prior to my trip, I came across an article about the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. That was the first time I had heard of Osama bin Laden. The night of Sept. 10, I was walking



back from dinner with my boyfriend and a colleague from my office. My colleague was saying how happy he was to have come on the trip. I offhandedly commented: “Yes, everything is perfect, although three words come to mind.” I paused dramatically and joked, “Osama bin Laden.” We laughed it off and continued our walk to the hotel.

The next morning, as soon as I heard and felt the rumbling from the plane’s impact, my first thought was that we were

being bombed. My boyfriend and I looked out of the window and saw the large, swirling pieces of debris sailing past. We locked eyes, didn’t say a word and immediately exited the room. I left everything behind: laptop, wallet, phone and even my shoes, thinking: “Get out now, we can always come back for our possessions later.”

Many years later in Foreign Affairs Counter Threat (FACT) training, I would hear the need to move quickly away from a danger zone or attack site, referred to as “getting off the X.”

**3) BELIEVE YOUR EYES, NOT WHAT PEOPLE TELL YOU.** We took the emergency stairs down the 18 flights to the lobby. Surprisingly, there were just a handful of people in the stairwell at this point. Once in the lobby, we heard people saying not to worry, it was just an explosion in the hotel kitchen. I knew from the intense rumbling and from the swirling debris that this could not be the case.

The hotel employees were trying to get us to go back to our rooms and not panic, but I knew something big was afoot. We walked out the front door to another Marriott we had spotted across the street. I used the opportunity to call my father (collect, since we had left our cell phones behind) to say: “You are going to see something on the news, just know that we are OK.”

**4) KNOW WHEN TO BREAK THE RULES.** In an effort to maintain order, the hotel staff requested that everyone stay in the lobby and not leave the building. However, I felt the need to put more distance between myself and whatever was happening across the street. Usually I am a rule follower extraordinaire—with not even a parking ticket to my name—but this time was different. I tugged on my boyfriend’s arm and ushered him out a back entrance. Almost immediately afterward, the second plane hit. Given the size of the buildings and how close together they were, it was impossible for us to see very far up, so we still didn’t know what was happening. We only pieced it together once we saw some of the wreckage and heard others saying they had seen planes.

**5) KNOW WHEN AND WHOM TO ASK FOR HELP.** We kept moving south, away from the towers, trying to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and the attack. The news was starting to travel, and people on the street were beginning to panic. I realized that there would be no going back to get our possessions, and that we would need money to get back home. We stopped in a bank to ask about a wire transfer, but they started to shut down almost as soon as we walked in. We left and kept moving farther from the attacks, walking carefully and



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/USER86000D38\_58 (BACKGROUND)/AKIASHIM (STAIRS)

Something inside of me knew that if I allowed myself to cry, I would never stop and might not survive.

looking mostly at the street since we were both shoeless. At one point, the smoke got so bad my boyfriend took off his socks, and we used them as makeshift filters. I found a bottle of water on the sidewalk and moistened the socks so that we could breathe better.

We ended up near the Staten Island ferry office, but I was hesitant to go inside any buildings for fear of being trapped in rubble. (By now we knew there were planes involved, and the continuing explosions from the collapse of the buildings made it seem as if the attacks were ongoing and that there could be multiple planes.) For a few moments, I sat on the dock, breathing through the sock with one hand, the other firmly grasping a nearby life preserver. I felt momentarily safer. A man came up and handed my boyfriend an extra pair of sneakers from his gym bag, which he gratefully accepted even though they were several sizes too big. Then the wind shifted, and even with our makeshift filters, we could no longer breathe. We had no choice but to follow the others into the ferry office.

I will never forget walking into the ferry office: It was possibly the most terrifying moment of my life. I was still so afraid of being trapped in a collapsing building, and I couldn't fathom that the air inside a building would be better than outside. As I walked in and saw so much dust swirling in the air around the entrance, I felt a surge of panic and almost broke down crying. Something inside

of me knew that if I allowed myself to cry, I would never stop and might not survive. I pushed down on my rising panic and somehow found the strength to walk in.

The low ceiling of the dimly lit entrance immediately gave way to a spacious, bright interior, and the air was clear. A woman approached me and handed me what I later learned were her friend's shoes. They had been shopping, and her friend had been struck by some falling debris when they stopped in the street to stare at the collapsing buildings. She likely didn't survive. I took the shoes and numbly went into the restroom to remove my shredded pantyhose and wash my feet before putting them on. They were high-heeled evening sandals and, unlike the shoes that had been handed to my boyfriend, were exactly my size. As I put them on, I remember feeling that I was going to make it. I called my father once more, this time arranging for a wire transfer, and then we took the ferry to Staten Island.

**6) EXPECT OTHERS TO ACT ERRATICALLY.** As the ferry pulled away, I remember looking back incredulously at the black destruction in the distance in the middle of an otherwise beautiful, sunny day. I was still holding the sock, although I didn't need it anymore.

Once on Staten Island, we picked up the wire transfer (via a prearranged password) and started to make a plan to head back to Virginia. I realized my boyfriend was starting to feel the effects

of shock when he asked me if I would like to stop at a salon to get my hair done since we were covered in dust. I looked at him and gently told him we needed to prioritize finding shelter and getting home before worrying about getting cleaned up. We walked across the Bayonne Bridge to New Jersey, the straps from the sandals cutting into the tops of my feet, but it was still better than walking barefoot.

When we arrived on the other side, I felt a surge of hope when I met a group of businessmen traveling in a limo back to D.C. They offered us a ride, and I was thrilled ... until their driver refused to take us. I even offered him the \$1,000 I had just received, but he said he was afraid of getting a ticket because he wasn't licensed to carry more than four passengers. It was now 8 p.m., nearly a full 12 hours later. As it began to get darker, I was accosted by some inebriated individuals, and I worried about how we were going to get through the night, let alone back home. I eventually spotted a police officer, told him that we were survivors from the building, and he arranged for a squad car to take us to a makeshift shelter. My boyfriend called his family in Pennsylvania; and by 1 a.m. we were in their car and headed to safety.

**7) BE MINDFUL OF WHAT YOU CARRY WITH YOU, AND WHERE THAT INFORMATION IS BACKED UP.** While I don't regret leaving the hotel room as quickly as I did, not even just to reach for my wallet, I do regret what I had brought with me on the trip in the first place. Since I had just been to a friend's wedding in Italy, I had my passport in my purse, as well as my driver's license. I was also in the habit of carrying my Social Security card in my wallet. Losing all three of those documents at once made proving who I was an exceptional challenge once I returned home. In addition to my wallet and ID, I left behind my cell phone, laptop and day planner.

Essentially, all of the contact information I had for everyone in my life was gone (these were the days before cloud backups). As a result, I sadly lost contact with several of my international friends and to this day have not been able to reconnect with some of them.

Today, I keep my Social Security card locked in a safe, and I think very carefully about what I carry with me and where it is backed up. I also keep a "go bag" with cash, flashlight and first aid kit. Contact information is stored on the cloud or backed up across as many systems as possible. Finally, I also make sure to always carry a pair of easy-to-slip-on, comfortable walking shoes, keeping them close at hand.



**A New York City firefighter looks up at the remnants of the twin towers on Sept. 13, 2001.**

**8) MOST IMPORTANT: KNOW THAT IT'S NOT OVER WHEN IT'S OVER.** Recovery may take a long time, and that's OK. It should be no surprise that I suffered from PTSD for many years after the fact. Loud noises and planes overhead would often send me suddenly to the floor, in a "duck and cover" position. It was two years before I was willing to travel on a plane, visit a high-rise or even just be in a large city. My father, a highly decorated Vietnam combat veteran, was instrumental in my recovery, as was my writing career.

I did things at my own pace, sought counsel when needed and gave myself grace with the healing process. I resumed my travels and have fulfilled my bucket list, visiting 83 countries. I joined USAID in 2010 and served in Moldova, South Sudan (from which I was evacuated in 2013), South Africa and, most recently, at the Pentagon.

Every day of my three-year tour at the Pentagon, I walked by the portraits of those they lost on Sept. 11, 2001—a perpetual reminder of how far I've come and why I serve. ■



# The GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR and Diplomatic Practice

**The war on terror fundamentally changed U.S. diplomacy, leaving a trail of collateral damage to America's readiness for future challenges.**

BY LARRY BUTLER



*Ambassador Larry Butler served for 40 years with the State Department, starting in Finland and the People's Republic of Bulgaria during the Cold War and finishing his career in the Greater Middle East with postings in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has a*

*track record of involvement in peacemaking, including working for President Bill Clinton at the White House for the Northern Irish Good Friday Accords and with Richard Holbrooke in Belgrade for the Dayton Accords. A Balkans expert, he served in Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and as U.S. ambassador to Macedonia (2002-2005). After retiring from the Foreign Service in 2013, he now provides interagency operational expertise to U.S. military organizations from his home bases in Maine and Virginia.*

**T**wenty years ago, jetliners crashing into New York City's twin towers and the Pentagon shocked America out of its post-Cold War complacency, ushering in the global war on terror (GWOT) and a surge in international support for the United States. A senior State Department official, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security Francis X. Taylor, speaking to the American Bar Association in late 2002, answered a question on how long the war on terror would last: "As long as it takes. Years, maybe decades."

Taylor was prescient. This summer's withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan after 20 years is a controversial coda to two decades of GWOT-dominated foreign policy that fundamentally changed American diplomatic practice and arguably left a trail of collateral damage to America's standing in the world and readiness for future challenges. In the two decades of the war on terror, we squandered the goodwill America enjoyed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Although the multilateral diplomacy that had fallen by the wayside with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 came back into currency, the comeback was only partial. Our forays into, first, Afghanistan, then Iraq, came at a huge cost. Our shortcomings and abrupt departure from Afghanistan now will cause foreign decision-makers to reconsider aligning themselves with us again.

Moreover, the emergence of “fortress embassies” in response to Washington’s increasing aversion to physical risk and Diplomatic Security’s expanded influence on policy and over-seas operations since 9/11 has left our diplomats physically and psychologically isolated from the societies they have to influence, and playing catch up in public diplomacy.

Today, as we are tested by the People’s Republic of China and its predatory foreign policy, as well as a series of problems that require global solutions supported by a stable, rules-based international order, we are scrambling to recoup.

### **From Multilateral to Bilateral**

In the years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, the Cold War mentality of reliance on international alliances and “one team, one global fight” morphed into country-specific stovepipes. Per American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, “history ended” in December 1991 with the presumed eternal triumph of liberal democracy. Colleagues may disagree, but the reality I experienced is that many members of the Foreign Service who joined after 1991 came with a different set of expectations for what they were there to do.

This “interwar” decade was a period of euphoric exuberance, the dawn of American hubris, aka Pax Americana. In those 10 years, American embassies and diplomats went from being aligned globally in containing and confronting the USSR to focusing largely on single-country, bilateral diplomatic efforts. This was accompanied by the fragmentation of foreign policy and the growth of single issue / special interest envoys and offices that number around 55 today.

In an example of the absurdity of this period, as deputy chief of mission (DCM) in Copenhagen in 2000 I invested substantial time trying to implement my then-chief of mission’s campaign to reimagine how an embassy does business, protesting the Danish government’s treatment of Scientology and coping with local derision of the annual Human Rights Report blasting Denmark for failing to have a 50-50 gender balance in its parliament. This kind of to-do list was not unique to Denmark.

Whether counting our peace dividend chickens before they hatched, or blithely expanding NATO (a suddenly obsolete organization in search of a reason to persist) eastward to avoid a political and security vacuum in the former Warsaw Pact space, we were blindsided by the Rwandan genocide, civil war in Somalia, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the rise of global religious extremism. And seeing

## **The legacy of our Cold War multilateral diplomacy was now paying dividends, with our allies and friends rising to the occasion with words and deeds.**

how ineffective the United Nations was in responding to international crises—Bosnia being the most extreme—we doubled down on U.S.-led bilateral efforts.

That changed on 9/11. In Copenhagen, I watched the TV in my office in real time as the second aircraft hit the second World Trade Tower in New York. My staff panicked. We closed the embassy early that day. The next day, Danes arrived in growing numbers to light candles and place flowers and teddy bears. The queen presided over a moving memorial service at a local church for us. Until then, American foreign policy had been widely unpopular among ordinary Danes who strongly opposed our many interventions in places such as Vietnam and Central America. In an instant, all was forgotten. The legacy of our Cold War multilateral diplomacy was now paying dividends, with our allies and friends rising to the occasion with words and deeds.

### **Back to Multilateralism, Sort of**

Global wars require partners and alliances. We refocused on reengaging and reenergizing alliances and kludging together coalitions to deal with al-Qaida globally. After a decadelong hiatus, we were all rowing in the same direction. At the same time, however, because the cooperation we sought was strictly, even

## The influence of combatant commanders grew as we fought the war on terror primarily with lethal operations that had little oversight or control by individual chiefs of mission or State.

narrowly, tied to the anti-terror effort, many other issues and concerns fell by the wayside. We also needed diplomats (and an institution) prepared to take physical discomfort and risks in combat zones. Hardly new to us Balkan hands, this was definitely not something most of the Foreign Service had experienced or welcomed.

The speed with which American diplomacy worked at the United Nations for authorities and created a coalition for Afghanistan (the Danes went with us) and then a follow-on NATO mission with partners from as far away as New Zealand and Singapore, was as astonishing as how fast we drove the Taliban out of power. Initially, this was a public diplomacy triumph that reinforced our influence in multilateral institutions. Rinse and repeat with our adventure into Iraq in 2003, with more than 35 nations sending troops (“flags in the sand”) to serve with us, though this latter intervention plus “drone wars” would eventually come at a high cost.

A notable exception to the return to multilateralism was the George W. Bush administration rejection, based on concerns for the erosion of our sovereignty, of the International Criminal Court in 2002 and insistence that our embassies negotiate bilateral deals exempting U.S. military personnel from its jurisdiction (so-called Article 98 agreements). As chief of mission in Macedonia in 2004, I succeeded in cutting an Article 98 deal, but was left with a nagging doubt. Did our rush to demand immunity from our partners undercut our moral authority in emphasizing commitment to international norms, rule of law, human rights and multilateralism?

I found myself hoisted on my own petard in insisting on legal accountability in (North) Macedonia on gross violations of human rights while insisting that we not be held to the same standard. We became infamous for drone strikes, extraordinary rendition, black sites and Guantanamo to the world. And we diplomats had to defend these practices as necessary to win the global war on terror we had declared.

## Militarization of Diplomacy— Mars Rising, Venus Falling

With the rise of the Pentagon and the four-star generals dictating foreign policy, the State Department was sidelined. Much ink has been spilled on this that need not be spilled again here, but clearly the late Donald Rumsfeld’s driving President George W. Bush to invade Iraq without a day-after plan stands out. The decision to remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan was not controversial; but the decision to stay 20 years reflected the Pentagon’s desire not to be seen as losing another war more than anything else.

The influence of combatant commanders (the Special Operations Command and the geographic commands) grew as we fought the war on terror primarily with military operations that had little oversight or control by individual chiefs of mission or State. One ambassador lost his job when he tried to exert control over drone strikes from the country in which he served (on paper) as the president’s personal representative. Around 2010, State’s Office of the Inspector General bowed to the Special Operations Command when it failed to insist that its personnel assigned to an embassy in Southeast Asia submit to the NSDD-38 staffing process (which puts U.S. government personnel under chief-of-mission authority). A recent Congressional Research Service report on State’s personnel challenges highlighted challenges to chief of mission authority as an issue Congress should look at.

## Expeditionary Diplomacy

Prior to the global war on terror, unaccompanied tours overseas were rare. Belgrade in 1994 with the Bosnian war raging next door was a downsized, but accompanied, tour. But in the wake of 9/11, “expeditionary diplomacy” came to the fore as the United States serially invaded or caused regime change in the greater Middle East and a growing number of failed states and unaccompanied tours proliferated in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and South Sudan. Unaccompanied service in a war zone became very controversial during the 2007 surge (AFSA leadership vigorously opposed directed assignments to Iraq at the time). But the Foreign Service then adapted, accepting the new rule that any officer expecting a promotion to more senior ranks had to serve an unaccompanied tour at least once.

Of course, since the Foreign Service personnel pool is more like a puddle, the cost for the Iraq surge was stripping other posts of critical staff. According to a Reuters report, in 2013 more than 1,000 Foreign Service personnel were serving at unaccompanied posts. Today, while Afghanistan and Iraq staffing has shrunk or is shrinking, Pakistan and difficult spots like the Central African

Republic and South Sudan still host employees who serve a year or two in a dangerous location while their families stay stateside.

### **Whole of Government: Agencies Everywhere!**

“Whole of government,” another concept born of 9/11, briefs well, but it is hard to put into practice in the diplomat’s Westphalian world of nation-states and Washington’s federal system. A foreign policy meeting at the White House these days is very likely to have a dozen or more domestic agencies represented, each with its own agenda. I recently reviewed the staffing at several larger embassies in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East as part of prepping the U.S. military to work with our embassies. They were surprised to see how many agencies can be present overseas.

While some agencies have long been part of the Foreign Service family, others are GWOT newcomers, like the many Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice law enforcement entities. These agencies have their own communications channels and legal authorities, and often have many regional responsibilities. And they are a serious problem for the chief of mission, who may not have visibility into, much less control over, their activities.

### **Diplomatic Security and the Fortress Embassy**

When DS Assistant Secretary Taylor explained the global war on terror to the American Bar Association in 2002, after the Taliban had been driven from power in Afghanistan, he said this: “We must also fight terror with every diplomatic, economic, law enforcement and intelligence weapon we have in our arsenal. We are using all these weapons in a coordinated, comprehensive campaign against the terrorist menace.” The fact that GWOT and its whole-of-government approach was articulated by the head of DS should not be lost on anyone. It signaled the ascendance of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, previously focused on protecting embassies and investigating passport/visa fraud, as a policy force at State and ushered in a culture that was inward-looking, preoccupied with security, suspicious of locals and unwilling to take risks.

With GWOT, new terms entered our diplomatic practice lexicon: personal security details (PSDs), bad guys / violent extremist organizations (VEOs), things that blow up (VBIEDs, IEDs, EFPs). Crash-and-bang courses became a part of FACT (Foreign Affairs Counter Threat) pre-deployment to war zones training. DS got funding to build its own counterpart to the Foreign Service Institute on the grounds of a Virginia National Guard base. New embassies were built, often outside city centers, with substantial

## **Since the Foreign Service personnel pool is more like a puddle, the cost for the Iraq surge was stripping other posts of critical staff.**

setbacks, anti-ram barriers, blast-proof walls and layers of local security guards. Diplomats began to operate from fortress chanceries, insulated from the local population, sallying forth only with an RSO-approved security package. American ambassadors, with some exceptions, cannot even drive themselves while in country. The days of informal meetings at cafes and restaurants, or just sauntering among the local people, are rarer than in the past depending on the threat profile of one’s post.

### **Mission Creep, aka Nation-Building**

We Americans are cursed with the belief that our purpose in life is to remake the countries to which we are assigned more like our own. This stems from our post-World War II successes in Germany and Europe at large, Japan and, later, Korea. Once the U.S. military had succeeded in regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, instead of declaring victory and going home, American diplomats went to work on nation-building. In none of the three cited cases did we prepare for this mission; nor did we succeed. In all three, this was mission creep, taken on as a follow-on to consolidate the military’s battlefield successes. And all three cases displayed a failure to take the long view of our core national interests.

Today we are witnessing the lamentations from U.S. diplomats who served in Kabul about how all the good things we did there at great sacrifice of Afghan and American blood, financed with American taxpayer money, are going to be lost with our withdrawal. One should recall that we went to Afghanistan to deal with al-Qaida, not transform the country. The latter is a diplomatic practice that needs to be discontinued.

Similarly, eight years of U.S. military and civilian presence in Iraq with 150,000 troops and, at one point, 25 provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and a massive USAID effort, left little to brag about. Or take Libya: A well-intentioned effort to avert a massacre of civilians in Benghazi ended up making matters far worse, with a flood of weapons and mercenaries ensconced in Syria and North Africa / Sahel and an American presidential bid derailed by the death of an ambassador.

## GWOT's So What?

The most important effect of the 9/11-driven imperative from Washington to take on global terrorism was that we relearned the principal lesson of World War II and the Cold War: Allies matter. The risk today—in a policy context defined by “great power competition” (GPC)—is that we will revert to prioritizing country-specific policies, however well intentioned, without seeing the bigger picture. China sees the big picture. So does the U.S. military’s geographic command structure. One Middle Eastern embassy’s integrated country strategy is no match for Central Command’s theater campaign plan, which sees the region as a whole, not a collection of pieces. And this gives the military the policy high ground.

Second, the hubris of invading Iraq, followed by the well-intentioned but poorly-thought-through intervention in Libya in 2012, badly damaged our international image and led to even more death and destruction than we averted. With international relations, and conflict, conducted at the speed of tweet, public

diplomacy has reemerged (as it was during the Cold War) as our most used, and useful, weapon to combat violent extremist rhetoric. We have to resist the temptation to intervene everywhere, while shifting to a better-coordinated, agile and effective public outreach if we want to prevail.

Third, with GWOT giving way to GPC, American diplomatic practice needs to adopt a more balanced model of multilateral and bilateral foreign policy if it wants to contend with China’s more effective version of “whole of government” diplomacy—namely, the Belt and Road Initiative. Even as we compete and confront China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, we will still have to contend with networks of violent extremist organizations while resisting proliferating demands emanating from American special interest groups for niche policy initiatives that stretch our limited resources and “talent puddle,” diluting a cohesive and coherent diplomatic strategy and practice. An apt adage for this comes to mind: If everything is a priority, then nothing is. ■



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AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION

# AMERICA AND 9/11

## The Real-World Impact of Terrorism and Extremism



**In retrospect, 9/11 did not foreshadow the major changes that now drive U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy.**

BY ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN



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**T**here is no doubt that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, were one of the most traumatic events in modern U.S. history, and still have a major impact on U.S. perceptions of the risk from terrorism.

At the same time, the United States is today withdrawing from Afghanistan with only limited regard to the consequences, phasing down its small remaining cadre of forces in Iraq and reducing its counterterrorism efforts in most of the rest of the world. The central focus of U.S. strategy has now shifted to competition with China and Russia, adversaries such as North Korea and Iran, and important hostile nonstate actors.

The fear of some form of massive Islamist extremist attacks on the United States and the West has faded, and the focus of U.S. strategy that still deals with terrorism and extremism has shifted to a wide range of relatively small and splintered movements seeking to win power in a number of largely Islamic states.

In fact, from today's vantage point, the events of 9/11, traumatic as they were, amounted to an episode, a "one-off," rather than a new fundamental threat to U.S. national security.

# The critical transitions that now affect U.S. national security interests, and the main elements of U.S. strategy, have little to do with terrorism and extremism.

## America's "Long Wars" in Perspective

In retrospect, America's "long wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq were never wars against terrorism or extremism, per se. They were instead the result of rather faltering efforts to transform the political and economic system of each country. It is unclear whether letting Afghan factions try to shape a working government or peace after the Taliban was initially defeated would have worked, but it is all too clear from reporting by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the Lead Inspector General and the World Bank that the U.S. has failed to create a successful, honest or effective Afghan regime and now seems committed to leaving without a credible peace plan.

The U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 to meet a threat that did not exist and without a plan for what would happen after the fall of Saddam Hussein. As was the case in Afghanistan, it engaged in a haphazard and constantly changing exercise in nation-building. It then left Iraq prematurely in 2011 and seems to be repeating the process there in 2021. It has fought two major wars in Iraq—first against Sunni rebels and then against ISIS—without creating a truly functional Iraqi government and a successful pattern of Iraqi development.

The U.S. fight in Afghanistan against the Taliban has been guerrilla and irregular warfare, rather than counterterrorism. Its fight against Islamic elements in the first war in Iraq was, again, more a war against hostile factions than against terrorism or extremism; and its second war in Iraq was fought against a hard-line Islamic "caliphate" proto state, rather than an extremist or terrorist movement.

Like Vietnam, both were U.S. ground and air wars that attempted with very mixed success to create effective governance and nation-building. They, too, are likely to be seen as expensive failures. While the U.S. has never issued a credible official estimate of the full civil and military costs of both wars, these costs clearly exceeded a total of \$2 trillion dollars—and estimates by Brown University put the cost as high as \$6.4 trillion.

Ironically, as any close reading of the State Department coun-

try reports on terrorism will show, the real U.S. successes in fighting terrorism came from much lower-level efforts to help other countries create effective national counterterrorism forces, and from supporting international agreements and bodies designed to fight terrorism. In fact, diplomacy and more routine efforts at security assistance had far more success than the two vast expenditures on warfighting.

As for the broader patterns in global terrorism since 2001, they have scarcely been dominated by Islamic extremism. They have instead been characterized by state terrorism and the violent repression of legitimate civil unrest on the part of secular regimes such as Syria, China, Iran, North Korea and, now, Myanmar.

Syria is a particularly grim example. While casualty estimates differ, most United Nations and nongovernmental organization estimates of the number of civilians that the Assad regime and its supporters alone have killed, injured or made into refugees since 2011 exceeds the casualty number for all of the world's nonstate extremist or terrorist movements since 2001. The same seems true of nonstate actors who have sought to seize power in various states, most of which have not been hard-core Islamist movements.

## Broader Directions in U.S. Strategy

As for the broader directions in strategy and national security efforts, one of the few areas of consensus in a deeply partisan United States is a general agreement that U.S. strategy must shift back toward deterring and competing with secular major powers and "rogue" states. Moreover, though with notably less consensus, the focus on terrorist and extremist threats to the U.S. is largely on domestic and secular movements; and the primary defense against this domestic threat is the FBI and state and local law enforcement—not foreign policy, military action, security assistance or the Department of Homeland Security.

The critical transitions that now affect U.S. national security interests, and the main elements of U.S. strategy, have little to do with terrorism and extremism. As both the Trump and Biden defense budgets and national strategy show, the primary threats the U.S. and its strategic partners now focus on are regimes such as China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.

The optimistic hopes of the 1990s have largely vanished. Russia has not evolved as a democracy or a partner, but has rather become a revived authoritarian challenge led by Vladimir Putin. Progress in nuclear arms control may not have failed but has certainly faltered; and nuclear forces are again making radical improvements, along with the rise of hypersonic and precision conventional strike capability. Russian regular military forces,

mercenaries and “little green men” have been active in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, Libya and the Mediterranean, and pose a gray zone threat that is real even if it is one of a very different kind.

China’s potential for reform has given way to Xi Jinping and a massive military buildup and efforts to compete on a global level. The South China Sea may have at least partially replaced the Middle East—and certainly any form of terrorism—as the key threat for U.S. strategic and military planning. As the Fiscal Year 2022 defense budget proposal shows all too clearly, the funds for counterterrorism and counterextremism have shrunk to very low levels by defense spending standards, and China and Russia have become the key focus.

As for other powers and threats, North Korea is a nuclear power, and Iran’s nuclear status is unclear. Some 70 years after the Korean War, North Korea is more of a threat than at any time since the cease-fire. Iran has now been hostile for nearly half a century, and the net impact of U.S. security efforts and sanctions has been the continuation of a hard-line regime that has now developed major links to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Assad in Syria and important elements in Iraq and Yemen.

Planning for deterrence and warfighting in these conflicts involves many elements of irregular warfare by state and nonstate actors, but extremist and terrorist groups are comparatively minor players. Moreover, warfighting and deterrence are undergoing radical change in all of the world’s major military powers. Joint all-domain warfare, long-range precision conventional strike capabilities, other forms of precision strike systems and new military efforts in space, cyber and artificial intelligence are all making major changes in the character of military forces.

Irregular and “gray zone” warfare, the role and manipulation of nonstate actors, and civil wars are also significant ongoing threats. In most cases, however, these threats are not dominated by terrorists or extremists. They are dominated by factions and regimes that pursue irregular warfare because it is their best option for competing with the more conventional military resources of larger and more developed powers like the United States. Here, the U.S. also faces threats from nations like China that so far seem to compete more effectively on a civil-military level. Here the U.S. needs to focus more on Sun Tzu than Clausewitz.



In Barwana, Iraq, Marines search a house for insurgents, weapons caches and explosives during a patrol on June 16, 2006.

ROE SEIGLE/WIKIMEDIA

## America’s “long wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq were never wars against terrorism or extremism per se.

### Hopes for Global Unity

More broadly, the United States must now deal with the near collapse of hopes for the kind of “globalism” that would unite the world and a shift to stable, functional democracies that would mark the “end of history.” Potential models of global unity such as the European Union have not only lost a key country like Britain, but have also seen several Eastern European states shift away from democracy. U.S. efforts to forge a Trans-Pacific Partnership have ended up benefitting China. And, for at least the last four years, the U.S. focus on burden sharing, gaining economic advantage and avoiding issues such as climate change made the country more of a “nationalist” entity than any form of “globalist.”

Efforts such as those of the World Bank to assess the quality of governance, the “Fragile States Index,” the U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights, the U.N. demographic estimates and Human Development Indicators, and Transparency International’s corruption ratings all highlight the growing number of nations that face serious internal divisions, domestic economic challenges and have failed or corrupt governance. Some countries have made real progress, but these indices show that more states have declined in capability than gained. Moreover, the hopes for change triggered by various political upheavals—especially broader upheavals like the “Arab Spring”—have instead led to a world in which many governments pose a broader

## One of the ironies of the so-called war on terrorism is that it focused on treating the symptoms of failed or “fragile” states, not the causes of their violence and unrest.

threat to their own people than Islamist extremist and terrorist movements do.

So far, the United States has done little to address these problems and the mix of civil and security challenges that drive them. One of the ironies of the so-called war on terrorism is that it focused on treating the symptoms of failed or “fragile” states, not the causes of their violence and unrest. The U.S. did initially put serious resources into nation-building in Afghanistan and

Iraq, but such efforts faded to minimal levels as military spending dominated. The United States is still a key source of humanitarian aid and seems to have renewed its focus on human rights, but its response to the lasting problems in governance and development remains minimal.

None of this means the United States will not face real threats from terrorism and hard-core extremist movements in the future. An open and democratic society will always be vulnerable in some ways, as recent cyberattacks on U.S. agencies and companies have made all too clear.

In retrospect, however, the trauma of 9/11 was more an incident than a major shift in the threat to the United States, and it was not a harbinger of the major changes that now drive U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy. It also seems all too likely that America’s long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—like the war in Vietnam—will be judged as failed and expensive side shows, gross overcommitments of resources to achieve limited objectives that ended in failure. ■



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# The Proper Measure of the Place

## REFLECTIONS ON THE AFGHAN MISSION

**Drawing from two tours, a decade apart, a veteran diplomat explores the competing visions for Afghanistan.**

BY KEITH W. MINES



*Keith W. Mines retired from the State Department Foreign Service in 2019 after a career including tours in Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. He was interim economic counselor in Kabul in 2002 and consul general in Mazar-e Sharif from*

*2012 to 2013. His book *Why Nation-Building Matters* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020; discount code 6AS20) recounts these experiences, along with seven other conflicts in Colombia, Grenada, El Salvador, Haiti, Somalia, Iraq and Darfur.*

**I**n his account of travels in Afghanistan in 1984 during the civil war against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, British travel writer and novelist Jason Elliot describes being “captive of an unexpected light,” entering a world “in some way enchanted, for which we lacked the proper measure.”

“Enchanted” is not a word one often associates with Afghanistan, but most would agree we have never taken the proper measure of the place. It is a land that has captured the heart of many diplomats and soldiers, smitten by the stunning landscapes and fierce determination of a people who have for centuries watched foreigners arrive to great fanfare with their “national interest,” only to leave sooner or later in frustration.

The United States went through this cycle in 1989, when it turned its attention away from Afghanistan after building up the mujahideen resistance to Soviet occupation. As a new cycle of abandonment and self-doubt is upon us, a flood of questions descends, starting with “How did it come to this?”

### **Kanishka and Arif: A Clash of Visions**

Within a month of my arrival in Kabul in the spring of 2002 as interim economic counselor, I met a Pashtun from Paktika province in the Loya Jirga (general assembly). Mohammed Arif was in his early 40s, tall and slender, with hands that evinced a life of farming, fighting and prayer. He still had a crumpled ID card from the fight against the Soviets that described him as a “model jihadi fighter.”



A USAID-funded midwife graduation ceremony in Sheberghan, a city in Jawzjan province of Afghanistan, in December 2012.

KEITH MINES

the first time in decades, the Afghan nation, represented by 1,700 delegates from every part of the country and every slice of society, came together with vital international support for 10 days to accuse, hope, rant, plan, commiserate and select their new government. With the immediate humanitarian crisis over, Afghans were streaming home from exile. Everyone, it seemed, had something to sell or harvest or build.

Looming over these successes, though, were the seeds of the unraveling. The Taliban was not allowed representation in the Loya Jirga; the Pashtuns were frustrated with their relative lack of power; the

periphery of the country continued to function with near total autonomy; unstructured aid flows led to corruption and distortions in the economy; and the larger conflict between a modern vision and a traditional one was not resolved.

Arif was open to a relationship with foreigners, but at one point stated clearly that there were limits to what his people would accept, especially if the foreigners sided with the “Panjshiris”—his name for the Northern Alliance. Fighting was clearly always an early option to preserve his vision of a traditionalist Afghanistan. One evening after the Jirga deliberations, I invited Arif to an embassy photo exhibit on the 9/11 attacks at the National Gallery in Kabul, a way to raise awareness of what brought America to Afghanistan in the first place. My translator at the time provided a stark contrast in the range of Afghan society. Kanishka Bakhshi, a Tajik, spoke fluent English and had been a translator for CNN before coming to work for the embassy.

Kanishka sought an Afghanistan in which his very spirited wife and young daughter would have opportunities for education and a profession. He was comfortable with foreigners and hopeful and bold about the future, and just as willing as Arif to take risks for his vision; several years later he was almost killed in a terrorist attack.

As we encountered the exhibit together, I realized we Americans had inserted ourselves between two worlds: one seeking a progressive modern existence for the country and one determined to impose a narrow version of tradition. And it was a complex struggle, not one that could be comfortably divided between regions or tribes; in many cases it was a raw fight for power. The Taliban would give military expression to the traditionalists, but they were hardly the only ones involved. As the struggle ground on for decades, it came to encompass technocrats vs. warlords, youth vs. elders, the periphery vs. the center, insular Islamist vs. pluralistic multiculturalists, militias vs. the army—and, significantly, the Taliban vs. the flawed democratic state.

The contest played out initially in the Loya Jirga itself. For

**Nation-Builders and Sheriffs: Afghanistan as Partner or Platform?**

These competing visions of Afghanistan, we soon learned, would be caught up in an equally fraught contest between two tribes in the United States. On the one side were the nation-builders, who concluded after diverse experiences, most recently in the Balkans, that the only way to guarantee American security interests in a country as shattered as Afghanistan was by reestablishing all the functions of the state while facilitating a process for the Afghan people to cohere around a vision for their nation.

Ambassadors James Dobbins and Ryan Crocker were reflective of this tribe, arguing for a robust peacekeeping mission, a rapid buildup of the security forces and a reset of the moribund economy. The nation-builders were a minority tribe that had no vote and little voice.

The tribe in power was the sheriffs. Their vision was that when America is threatened, the sheriff will put on his badge, pick up his six-shooter and round up a posse. The posse will seek and find the outlaws, kill some, jail others and return home. The late Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was a sheriff by disposition, as was then–Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. This tribe was bolstered politically by campaign rhetoric about not “using the military to escort little girls to school” and by eschewing any cooperation with the United Nations or even other allies.

The Noh Gumbad Mosque restoration project, shown in April 2013, in Balkh province was funded by the U.S. embassy.

The embassy was at this time building up to receive the dozens of new staff needed to manage U.S. interests. But already our attention was drifting. Like many of my colleagues, I would be in Iraq nine months later.

For a decade the sheriffs and nation-builders vied for primacy in U.S. policy, with Afghanistan at times treated like a partner and at others used as a platform. After the willful neglect of the post-2002 period led to whole swaths of the country falling to Taliban control, the U.S. and NATO adopted more of a nation-building model starting in 2006, with a surge in forces that by 2009 totaled 100,000. Diplomats, agricultural advisers and aid workers conducted their own surge, increasing from 340 in 2008 to more than 1,300 in 2012, many working on provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) across the country with their military and NATO colleagues. PRTs were led by a military contingent providing security and mentoring local security forces while their civilian counterparts carried out development and agricultural assistance, institution building and local engagement, and political and economic reporting.

The Afghans could do little more than hold on to the roller coaster we had strapped them to, realizing that the seat belt did not unbuckle until the end of the ride.

### Warlords and Youth: A Decade of Progress

I returned to Afghanistan as consul general in Mazar-e Sharif in the spring of 2012, the peak of “expeditionary diplomacy,” to manage U.S. efforts across the nine provinces of northern Afghanistan. Ambassador Crocker had returned, as well, structuring our presence around four regional consulates in Herat, Mazar, Kandahar and Jalalabad.

Frustrated by the persistent complaint that we had not done enough, we produced a fact sheet on the country’s progress over the last decade: four democratic elections; Afghanistan’s first two appearances in the Olympics in 20 years, with its first two medals ever; telephone use from 1 million to 12 million; a tripling of access to electricity; education from a million boys and zero girls to 5.4 million boys and 3 million girls; and a wheat harvest that went from 2 million to 3.8 million metric tons a year.

It was, by any measure of human progress, extraordinary. And yet it was all very tenuous, and it was matched on the negative side by persistently high levels of violence, a grinding political



KEITH MINES

**We Americans had inserted ourselves between two worlds: one seeking a progressive modern existence for the country and one determined to impose a narrow version of tradition.**

instability born in large measure of corruption that included high levels of drug trafficking, and structural dependence on outside funding and support. Significantly, the struggle for political primacy between the Pashtuns and Panjshiris, and for cultural primacy between traditionalists and moderns, remained unresolved.

During my travels to each of the nine provinces, I always visited the local university and met with youth, who as part of the Afghan university network came from all over the country, a natural mixing pot of ethnic groups and social classes. The students were bright, hopeful and determined, often traveling at great personal and family cost to attend school. In one encounter we tried to explain the U.S. electoral system, which they found both baffling and encouraging; certainly their much simpler system, they thought, would one day yield a good outcome. Afghans’ determination to pursue an education was not new, but it was something that finally found expression.

We also spent a good deal of time with the power brokers and warlords who had controlled the country for the past decades, generally with ruinous results. In one engagement I spent a day



GETTY IMAGES/NATALIE BEHRING

The 2002 Loya Jirga brought together 1,700 Afghans from all parts of the country for 10 days of deliberation to choose a new government. Inset: Hamid Karzai, at right, was chosen president.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

at the compound of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek commander who had led the key forces that collapsed the Taliban in 2001. Dostum retained a brutal but effective control in parts of the north but was convincing in his assertion that the “new AK” (or Kalashnikov) for the Afghan family was the voting card, promising that going forward he would put his efforts into developing an effective electoral strategy, not marshalling fighters.

I mused in a cable about a “post-warlord” society. But, like the Taliban and other ethnic leaders, Dostum had a very difficult time giving up the raw expression of power he had been accustomed to and continued to hold an absolute lock on the Uzbek voting bloc. The youth would have to wait until his generation faded from the scene.

### The Kabul Museum and Noh Gumbad

During my first tour, Kanishka and I visited the Kabul Museum, which had suffered the depredations of the Taliban against anything that smacked of religious pluralism or celebrated the country’s multiethnic heritage. The curator had heroically tried to preserve as many of the objects as possible, with boxes full of the crushed pieces of statues and a showcase full of the shredded canvas of paintings. He had built a false wall to hide the films from Afghanistan’s once-active movie industry.

A decade later, one of our quiet projects in the north was the restoration of the Noh Gumbad Mosque, Afghanistan’s oldest religious building, dating to the 9th century CE. It was a beautiful structure, laced with wonderful stonework and a graceful architecture, but what remained was in danger of collapse and it was deteriorating quickly. Our funding, along with other donations, allowed the Aga Khan Foundation to save the mosque and recover this piece of Afghanistan’s heritage.

The contrast between these two experiences hit hard on a soul-crushing day in April 2013, when we received word that Foreign Service Officer Anne Smedinghoff (my former intern) had been killed in Zabul province along with six others while traveling to a school for a book donation. By then cynicism had set in, many expressing doubt that the Afghanistan mission could have ever been worth the life of a young diplomat or soldier. Even our measure of time was affected by pessimism; a decade had somehow become “forever.”

But to many of us on the ground, it was the continuation of the struggle that had been going on for decades, a struggle, as I wrote home at the time, “between two competing models for civilization—one violent, ignorant, depraved; the other enlightened, hopeful, just. Where one kills educators and those who support them, there one will also kill the future; where one destroys millennia-old cultural monuments, there one will also destroy cities.”

By the time I left, five of our PRTs were closed and “transition” was the order of the day. Policymakers had never been honest about the length of time required for political consolidation in a broken state, so the mission—even at a time when casualties were extremely low—was to withdraw, a long process that has now reached its natural conclusion.

I wrote in a 2013 cable of the ambivalence many of us felt: “It is debatable whether Afghanistan will ever be a fully functional, inclusive country; it is simply hard work to pull a medieval country into the modern age. But it is nearly guaranteed to fail without our continued focus and resources.”

The Afghan mission was always cursed with a blinding self-doubt and persistent impatience. As the late Ambassador Lawrence Pezullo told *The New York Times* in 1981: “We’re a developed nation that is accustomed to quick answers because we produce quick answers in almost every other area. But when you throw yourselves into a revolution, there are no quick answers.”

Several thousand diplomats have now served in Afghanistan. For most, the experience will turn bittersweet as it is increasingly difficult to see the future portending anything other than yet another civil war. Few could have done more than they did. But with or without us, the struggle between Afghanistan’s competing visions will go on, and the Afghan people, tenacious to a fault, will continue to fight for the future they believe in. As in so many other parts of the world, on a tightly globalized planet there is no guarantee that we won’t once again be drawn in. If you still have your Dari-language CDs, you might want to hold on to them. ■

# INTERVENTION

## Unlearned Lessons, or the Gripest of a Professional

**The State Department's failure to effectively staff and run interventions requiring close civil-military cooperation in the field has a long history. Four critical lessons can be drawn from the post-9/11 experience.**

BY RONALD E. NEUMANN



*Now president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, Ronald E. Neumann was a 37-year career FSO who served in Senegal, Iran, Yemen and Iraq. He was ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain and Afghanistan. Before joining the Foreign Service, he was an infantry officer in Vietnam.*

**I**raq and Afghanistan were the latest in a 170-year history of American and State Department failure to figure out how to staff and run State's part of military interventions. For the curious, I date State's failure from 1848, when the department could not fill the U.S. Army's request to send diplomats to help the Army manage civil affairs in conquered Mexican territory. Providing diplomatic personnel remained a problem in the latter half of the 20th century when every administration since President Harry Truman's had foreign interventions that required diplomatic assistance. Nadia Schadlow has told much of this story in her book, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory* (Georgetown University Press, 2017).

The staffing problem is an example of the persistent unwillingness to learn from our own past. I have lived some of the latest chapters of this story while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The difficulties in staffing interventions are many, but the underlying issue is that every intervention has been treated as a unique occurrence, often better forgotten than studied. Yet with more than 70 years of repeated military interventions requiring close civil-military operations in the field since the close of World War II, it is plainly unreasonable to assume that "never again" is a sufficient response.

The literature on stabilization is now extensive. It is not my purpose to try to summarize it all in a short article. Rather, I would like to reflect on a few large lessons that seem to me critical, drawn primarily from the post-9/11 years but reaching back also to my first experience of war in Vietnam and fairly extensive reading and study over the half-century that I have lived with, watched and sometimes tried to grapple with these issues.

Out of many lessons worth discussing, four stand out to me. One is the lack of tours of duty sufficient to master problems. Second is the confusion of policy with implementation. Third is the intellectual arrogance that Americans bring to critical policy-making. And fourth is the need for the State Department to find a dependable mechanism for surging staff in a crisis.

### **Tour Lengths: Undermining Effectiveness**

The problems of tour lengths bedeviled both the military and the civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. I arrived in Afghanistan in the summer of 2005. Within months, most of the U.S. Embassy Kabul staff had turned over: It was the equivalent of an institutional frontal lobotomy that was repeated yearly. That this was scarcely a new problem is illustrated by the scathing comment attributed to John Paul Vann, the USAID deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in Vietnam: that we didn't have 12 years' experience, we had one year's experience 12 times.

Some people do extend or return for additional tours, but the overall result of our practice is that few are knowledgeable or effective until well into their tours, by which time they are starting to think about an onward assignment. In *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Professor Lise Morjé Howard identifies the lessons that made for effective United Nations missions. One of her fundamental points is the need to develop a "learning culture"—a deep understanding of the political and social factors that need to be taken into account to make progress in complex interventions. Developing such a learning culture takes time. It is not compatible with the rapid replacement of staff. The few who do develop deep knowledge find themselves repeatedly fighting uphill battles to explain, particularly to Washington, how what they have learned needs to be considered in the formulation of new policies.

This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty of using failure as a basis for learning. In the United States, some 30 percent of startups fail within two years, and the rate is higher in the first year. In business, there is a rich body of study about why businesses fail and what can be learned from failure. But in our bureaucratic culture, failure is usually condemned, and failed

projects are abandoned rather than studied to learn how to improve. The fear of failure and the resulting criticism, especially from Congress, leads particularly to two unfortunate results.

One is the adoption of extensive provisions for design and oversight to try to prevent failure, which in turn make it slow and difficult to experiment. Yet when we plunge into chaotic situations, as we did in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is little time to sit back and study issues before making decisions. Something must be done. Decisions must be made, and it is inevitable that some of the decisions will turn out poorly. The need is often for rapid experimentation and adjustment as lessons are learned; but that is not the way we operate. Second, the fear of criticism creates a bureaucratic reflex to defend projects and policies rather than to identify problems and make adjustments.

### **Confusing Policy with Implementation**

These problems are reinforced by our propensity to confuse policy with implementation. Of course, sometimes policy does need changing. But often the policy isn't the problem; it's how we're trying to implement it. Consider a hypothetical example. One could have a policy of using local tribesmen to secure roads. One could pick good leaders, reinforce them when attacked, and the result would be more secure roads and better trust between the tribal leaders and the government that supports them. Or one could find that the leaders were corrupt, money was stolen, and arms were used to repress rivals. Little security would be achieved, and the result would be failure. Yet the policy was the same.

All too often, however, our reaction to failure is to throw out the policy without studying whether the problem lies there, or in implementation. The result is a great deal of wasted time and little learning. One real-world example comes from the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's decision to redo the justice program in Afghanistan. Without a doubt, the program had problems. Holbrooke's answer was to stop the program cold so that it could be redesigned. The executing contractor demobilized, let go of staff, got rid of equipment and gave up office space.

It took about a year until USAID, after several efforts, got Holbrooke to approve a new concept and was able to rebid new contracts, one of which was won by the same contractor who had previously demobilized. During that year, nothing was accomplished. I believe that focusing on and fixing specific problems would have been far more effective than the stop-and-start process we followed. This is but a micro example of the cost of not understanding that the hard work is often in policy execution.

## All too often, our reaction to failure is to throw out the policy without studying whether the problem lies there, or in implementation.

Sometimes policy does need to change. Getting this right is definitely hindered by an intellectual arrogance that designs foreign policy with no regard for foreigners. The result is a policy that cannot be executed successfully. Two examples across time illustrate the point. The first is from Vietnam, where one U.S. policy decision after another failed because of the inability to understand the local conditions. Speaking of one set of recommendations to Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, William

Colby, a CIA official who spent 15 years involved with Vietnam, wrote: “We defined the necessary psychological shock in terms totally counter to Diem’s personality and the realities of the Vietnamese power structure and society.”

As Colby ruefully noted: “The conviction [was] widespread among the Americans that the failures of the various American formulas for success in Vietnam could be due only to the unwillingness or inability of the Vietnamese to perceive their validity—indeed, their brilliance—and then apply them as indicated.”

### Intellectual Arrogance

Fifty years later, a similar disregard for understanding a foreign leader was evident in one element of President Barack Obama’s decision for how America would manage the Afghan war. One of the goals of the military surge decided on in 2009 was to stabilize important areas of Afghanistan. Washington’s combination of arrogance and ignorance jumped out at me from the strategy memo, attributed to President Obama him-



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self, addressing how to strengthen subnational governance and counter corruption. In considering how to accomplish this with the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the memo says the work will be done “working with Karzai where we can, working around him when we must.”

This approach was absurdly unrealistic, but it was often followed in the field. Visiting military teams scattered about Afghanistan in 2010, I frequently found Americans depicting the Kabul government as irrelevant to their operations. They had the money and the power in the field, and they would establish the policies they thought best. In many conversations, I tried to point out that this would not work because President Karzai had the ultimate power to hire and fire provincial officials. He would use that power when he felt the foreigners were going too far in undermining him.

Further, Karzai was engaged in a complicated game of political maneuvering to keep various competing Afghan political leaders and tribes under his control and to prevent others from becoming too strong. A local governor might be incredibly corrupt, inefficient or both; but if he was in place for a political purpose Karzai deemed essential, Karzai would retain that official. In this case, as in so many others, Kabul politics trumped policies made in Washington. Today, little remains from an incredible amount of work by military and civilian teams in the districts of Afghanistan.

Clearly, some policymakers have avoided the tendency to conceptualize policy without regard to the ground reality. Former Secretary of State James Baker was noteworthy for his ability to listen to others closely enough to understand how to close a deal. And it is the realistic perception of how to work with foreigners that is one of the strongest attributes of good diplomats, if our leaders will only make use of it.

### **A Mechanism for Surging Staff**

Of the lessons unlearned despite repeated examples, the most glaring involves the State Department’s inability to surge staff, the failure with which this essay began. America’s diplomats are fully deployed. There is no reserve, nor even an excess over positions to allow for much long-term training. Then, when emergencies arise that need large increases in staff in the field, State will have to augment its personnel.

This problem has come up over and over. With the possible exception of President Donald Trump, who added military personnel to existing interventions but didn’t start a new one, every administration since Truman’s has undertaken foreign interventions. The usual conclusion is that we won’t do it again, so we

**It is the realistic perception of how to work with foreigners that is one of the strongest attributes of good diplomats, if our leaders will only make use of it.**

don’t need to learn anything from the experience or prepare for the next one—and then we do it again.

Even in the overlapping Afghanistan and Iraq wars few lessons were imported from one theater to another. A single example is the history of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). Despite these having begun in Afghanistan several years before PRTs were initially fielded in Iraq, virtually no effort was made to import lessons learned from one war to the other. The initial problems of staffing, organization and support in Iraq were generally treated as new problems with new efforts at solution uninformed by reflection on what had worked or not worked in Afghanistan.

When the Afghan and Iraq staffing surges ended, there was no effort to study either the problems or successes of the efforts to field large numbers of civilians. The so-called 3161 mechanism (named after the section of law that provided the hiring authority) produced some very gifted and talented officers, and some who had to be sent back as unfit. The length of time needed to hire staff varied widely, with some moving quickly to deployment and others waiting months to be hired. There is a certain amount of legend about the causes of problems, but no systematic study has been done to identify ways to improve the process should the need arise again.

State’s one major effort to provide a contingency mechanism, the creation of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), now transformed into the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, has gone through repeated changes of mission and organization without settling on clear goals. The reasons for this are many and outside the focus of this article, but the bottom line is that State still lacks a clear organizational model for how to staff interventions.

The two decades since 9/11 have brought many changes in the world and in the practice of diplomacy. We will manage the challenges of the changes better if we study and learn from the past. Considering the examples above, we have some way to go. ■

# 9/11, War on Terror, Iraq and Afghanistan

## From the FSJ Archive



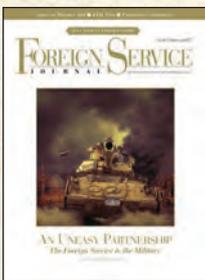
### Outpourings of Sympathy and Support

The outpourings of sympathy, condolence and support were immediate and widespread. The president issued a strong letter and declared a day of mourning during which all flags in the country were flown at half-mast. Countless government officials and Ghanaians

from all walks of life phoned, faxed and mailed in messages of sympathy. The American Chamber of Commerce organized a memorial service at which two local youth groups—a choir and an orchestra—performed.

Although there have been no demonstrations, editorial comment has been universally sympathetic, while urging the United States to temper any tendency to react emotionally, to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally and to avoid actions that could inflame Christian-Muslim tension. Much concern has been expressed about the impact on developing nations' access to credit and development assistance.

—Brooks A. Robinson, FSO, Embassy Accra, in Part I of a compilation, “FSOs and FSNs Recall 9/11,” in the November 2001 FSJ.



### Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map

Bob Pope sums up the Iraq PRT program this way: “The PRT concept is both too early and too late—too early because you can’t do development and institution-building in live-fire zones and too late because, four years into this war, it’s way past the time when we have any hope of winning the hearts and minds of the

Iraqis. They have been disappointed too many times to believe much of what we say. After hundreds of millions, if not billions, spent on a laundry list of projects, most Iraqis still don’t have

potable water, reliable electrical service, operational sewer systems, jobs, a functioning economy or, most important, personal security. Building a few more wells and creating a few more short-term cleanup projects will not impress these people.” ...

Unarmed diplomats flanked by armed personnel on military teams in active combat zones, outside of an embassy structure, in the Iraqi provinces—these may be the faces of the “expeditionary Foreign Service” that is called for by Secretary Rice. But while the Foreign Service is expected to “step up” and serve in Iraq, they should, in turn, be able to expect to be sent only to places where they can actually do their jobs and meet with key interlocutors, where there is a chance that they can play an effective, meaningful role. They should be able to expect that they will not be used simply as “pins on a map” for PowerPoint presentations back in Washington.

—Shawn Dorman, FSJ editor and former FSO, from her article of the same title in the March 2007 FSJ.

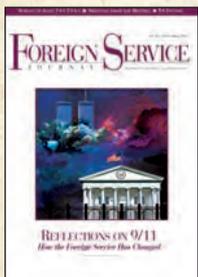


### Salvaging the Afghanistan Venture

Afghanistan remains a victim of international intervention that has empowered some of the worst elements of society and trapped its people in a foreign-made political system that ignores their history, tradition and political realities.

While some of this intervention has been well meaning, much of it has been self-serving, reflecting the national ambitions and interests of other countries. Afghanistan was the first victim of Taliban misrule and al-Qaida brutality. It deserves another chance in a new political system mandated by a traditionally organized loya jirga that reflects the nation’s history and reality and is perceived by Afghans as legitimate.

—Edmund McWilliams, FSO (ret.), from his article of the same title in the July-August 2008 FSJ.



## Life Choices Shaped by That Day

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was a blond-haired, green-eyed, slightly naïve college student from a small town in southern California who knew very little about Afghanistan and even less about al-Qaida. The events of that day irrevocably altered the shape of my dreams and the course of my life.

I was fortunate enough not to lose any loved ones in the attacks, but the force of the change in my perception of the world blew the doors of my cozy, safe, insular world wide open and brought with it the realization that nothing would ever be the same again. For those of us who became adults post-9/11, our life choices have been indelibly shaped by that day.

I eventually joined the Foreign Service and, when bidding on my second tour, readily volunteered for service in Afghanistan. I will spend the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks posted to Kabul as an assistant information officer in the public affairs section.

The story of Afghanistan over the past few decades has been saturated in blood and punctuated by displacement and destruction. I hope that our work here will ensure that the next chapter is one of hope, reconstruction and reconciliation.

—Erin Rattazzi, FSO, Embassy Kabul, from her note in the compilation, *“The Foreign Service a Decade After 9/11,”* in the September 2011 FSJ.



## The Dust of Kandahar

It was the youth of those around us that was so striking. One lieutenant who directed my security on several trips to Kandahar had only recently graduated from West Point. One private seemed so young that I was tempted to ask him: “Do you have a note from your parents giving you permission to participate in this war?”

As the senior civilian representative for the U.S. embassy in southern Afghanistan from August 2012 until August 2013, I covered four provinces with a collective population of more than three million people, scattered over an area the size of Kentucky or South Korea that was mostly desert.

Our efforts at outreach followed in the footsteps of those who preceded us. But now, more than a decade after we had helped Afghans overthrow the Taliban, our task had evolved to paving the way for our own pending departure while dispelling any

sense of “abandonment.” We told our local contacts that it was now time for them to write their own narrative and achieve their nation’s destiny.

Five of us flew up early that morning to meet our civilian colleagues on the Zabul Provincial Reconstruction Team, discuss education issues with Governor Naseri and visit a local school. ... Anne Smedinghoff was only 25, young for an FSO who was already well into her second overseas assignment.

We talked briefly on the tarmac as we waited for our helicopter against the early morning sun, the sky a perfect blue. This was Anne’s first trip to Kandahar. ... She mentioned that during a recent vacation, she had cycled across Jordan. I also chatted with my translator, Nasemi, who was supporting a large extended family stretching from New York to New Zealand.

Within hours both Anne and Nasemi were dead. Two other civilian State Department employees—Abbasi ... and Kelly Hunt ...—were injured, Kelly critically. Three soldiers walking beside us were also killed that day: Staff Sergeant Christopher Ward ... Sergeant Delfin Santos ... and Corporal Wilbel Robles-Santa. All three were born in 1988. ...

Not a day goes by when I don’t relive what happened on that cloudless morning, recalling every moment as it unfolded, reliving endlessly what might have been. ...

The next day I attended the ramp ceremony for my colleagues, accompanying their remains on the long journey home. We started with five flag-draped aluminum boxes in Kandahar and added four more in Bagram, bringing the American death toll for that day to nine.

Three days later, I returned to Kandahar for the remaining 20 weeks of my tour. But I have never quite left Afghanistan behind, and probably never will.

—Jonathan Addleton, FSO (ret.), from his article of the same title in the October 2015 FSJ.



## The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS: A Success Story

Sometimes a truth spoken resonates so organically that it prompts a collective sigh of relief from its listeners—relief that someone has emerged from the crowd to suggest a path forward, allowing us all to shift our footing from collective outrage to collective action. That is the essence of

the story behind U.S. leadership of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

During the first six months of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq

and Syria ... made a dramatic debut on the world stage by capturing a wide swath of Syria and Iraq. It rolled seemingly without resistance through Fallujah, Raqqa, Tikrit and Mosul, even threatening the gates of Baghdad, before announcing the establishment of a *caliphate* (Islamic state) and declaring Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as *caliph*—the successor to the Prophet Mohammed.

The speed of the advance, the confidence portrayed through their polished media arm, and the stories that emerged about the horrors of life under ISIS and the persecution of innocents shocked and horrified the world. ...

On Sept. 10, 2014, President Obama ... announced “that America will lead a broad coalition to roll back” ISIS. The campaign would seek to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”

Concluding his address, President Obama said, “This is American leadership at its best: We stand with people who fight for their own freedom, and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity.”

—*Pamela Quanrud, FSO (ret.), from her article of the same title in the January-February 2018 FSJ.*



## The Practice of Leadership at Every Level

A huge bang with the weight of a freight train bore through the room, throwing me back. The building swayed; I thought I was going to die. I blacked out for a moment, came to and descended the endless flights of stairs with a colleague. Only when we exited the building did I see what had happened to the embassy. I realized in an instant that no one was going to take care of me, and I had better get to work. ...

I would like to pass on the following advice for those who may become survivors and helpers in the future.

- Get involved in the community and help to grow teams that learn how to do things together. This will be essential in catastrophes and highly satisfying otherwise.
- Be kind to yourself, and be kind to one another.
- Take care of your people—and take care of yourself, too.
- Allow spouses, family and friends to take care of you.
- Seek professional help to stay resilient.
- To help after a crisis, be clear about your mission and adapt to reality.
- Build a bridge between “we” and “they” to create the trust that will make recovery easier.

- Don’t expect this to end any time soon. Catastrophes breed crises, and some go on for years.
- Find meaning in the event—the “treasures among the ashes.”
- Do not depend on the media or our political leaders to keep the story alive or create change; both have short memories.
- Remember, it will get better.

—*Prudence Bushnell, FSO and U.S. ambassador to Kenya, from her essay of the same title in the compilation, “Reflections on the U.S. Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania 20 Years Later,” in the July-August 2018 FSJ.*

## For further related reading, go to these archive editions at [www.afsa.org/fsj-archive](http://www.afsa.org/fsj-archive):

- “Are We Losing the War on Terror?” by Philip C. Wilcox Jr., September 2004
- “Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Arab Reaction,” by Khaled Abdulkareem, March 2004
- “Reality Check in Iraq,” by David L. Mack, March 2005
- “Iraq Service and Beyond,” by Shawn Dorman, March 2006
- “The Implications of Iraq and Its Impact on the Region,” by Edward Walker, December 2006
- FOCUS on “An Uneasy Partnership: The Foreign Service and the Military,” March 2007
- “Remembering USAID’s Role in Afghanistan, 1985-1994,” by Thomas H. Eighmy, December 2007
- FOCUS on “Slogan or Substance: The Legacy of Transformational Diplomacy,” January 2009
- “Counterterrorism: Some Lessons to Consider,” by Alan Berlind, June 2009
- “The Diplomat as Counterinsurgent,” by Kurt Amend, September 2009
- “Microdiplomacy in Afghanistan,” by Matthew B. Arnold and Dana D. Deree, January 2011
- FOCUS on “Reflections on 9/11—How the Foreign Service Has Changed,” September 2011 ■