

5. 9/11 and the War Against the Taliban Government

It is not clear what al Qaeda's leaders thought would happen in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. Perhaps, judging from recent practice, al Qaeda thought the Bush administration, like some of its predecessors, would conduct a lengthy investigation and be slow to take action. The United States had failed to take significant retaliatory action after other terrorist attacks: the 1983 bombing of the Marine Barracks in Lebanon, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, the 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia, and the bombing of USS *Cole* in 2000. Other terrorists no doubt believed that the United States would strike with its airpower and cruise missiles, as it had done frequently in Iraq, and once in Afghanistan after the Embassy bombings in 1998. Realists among the terrorists might have believed that ultimately the United States would attack but that it would get bogged down just as the Soviet Union did. Others, after the fact, including Osama bin Laden, suggested that drawing the United States into the Middle Eastern and Central Asian wars and draining its power was an integral part of the al Qaeda strategy.¹

In any case, al Qaeda did not fully understand the passions that they would raise in the United States and among its allies by the murder on 9/11 of 3,000 innocent people from 90 countries. Washington asked the Taliban to turn over bin Laden. Mullah Omar refused again as he had in 1998. The President then went to Congress for support. Congress authorized the President in a Joint Resolution:

To use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized,

*committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.*²

U.S. air attacks began on October 7, 2001. By month's end, CIA paramilitary and SOF teams had begun to operate with the Northern Alliance and friendly Pashtun tribes in the south. Pakistan was an anomalous feature in this war. Desirous of influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan had at first supported the more religious mujahideen groups, and then the Taliban. After 9/11, American officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, gave senior Pakistani officials an alternative to either support America or to be at war against it. With great prodding, Pakistan came around, put pressure on the Afghan regime, and provided the United States the logistic space and facilities needed to go to war. This worked well at the time, but James Dobbins, the Bush administration's representative to the resistance and Special Envoy for the post-Taliban conferences, made a valuable observation about U.S. cooperation over the years with Pakistan:

This setup has proved a mixed blessing. While providing the United States [in the 1980s] a conduit for guns and money, it had allowed the Pakistanis to determine who received the aid. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate had tended to favor the most extreme and fundamentalist mujahidin groups. After the Soviets' withdrawal in 1989, American assistance had ceased. The ISI, however, continued to support the more religiously extreme factions in Afghanistan and from among them fostered the

emergence of the Taliban. After 9/11 the American and Pakistani intelligence services found themselves suddenly aligned again, this time in seeking to overthrow the very regime the ISI had installed in Kabul. Many on the American side now questioned the sincerity of Pakistan's commitment to this new goal.³

For their part, the Pakistanis questioned America's short attention span, its strategic relationship with India, and its loyalty and reliability as an ally for the long haul. For many Pakistanis, the United States had betrayed them three times. The first two came when Washington failed to support them in their wars with India. The third was in October 1990, not long after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, when the United States under the Pressler Amendment stopped all aid to Pakistan over Islamabad's failure to live up to nonproliferation agreements. In light of these perceived betrayals, some Pakistanis asked how long Washington would remain allied after completion of a war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. How would helping the United States in Afghanistan impact Pakistan's existential competition with India? From a Pakistani perspective, it made perfect sense to hedge their bets on the future of Kabul. The Taliban was hard to work with, but it was a sure thing, while the United States was an extremely powerful but fickle ally.⁴

Operation *Enduring Freedom* has had two phases in its war in Afghanistan. The first—from October 2001 to March 2002—was an example of conventional fighting, and the second of an evolved insurgency. In the first phase, despite remarks about the “transformation of warfare” and Green Berets on horseback calling in precision-guided bombs “danger close,” the initial phase of Operation *Enduring Freedom*

was a conventional, network-centric military operation.⁵ It featured the Northern Alliance—a united front of Tajiks, Hazarra, and Uzbeks—and anti-Taliban Pashtun forces fighting a war of maneuver against the Taliban and its foreign-fighter supporters, many of whom were trained in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. The U.S. contribution came in the form of airpower and advice from Special Operations Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary personnel. The CIA had provided an important service before 9/11 by maintaining close relations with Massoud and his Northern Alliance. These CIA and SOF teams—approximately 500 warriors—also connected Northern Alliance and friendly Pashtun ground power to the awesome effects of American aircraft and UAVs. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld heralded the U.S. contribution:

On the appointed day, one of their teams slipped in and hid well behind the lines, ready to call in airstrikes, and the bomb blasts would be the signal for others to charge. When the moment came, they signaled their targets to the coalition aircraft and looked at their watches. Two minutes and 15 seconds, 10 seconds—and then, out of nowhere, precision-guided bombs began to land on Taliban and al-Qaeda positions. The explosions were deafening, and the timing so precise that, as the soldiers described it, hundreds of Afghan horsemen literally came riding out of the smoke, coming down on the enemy in clouds of dust and flying shrapnel. A few carried RPGs. Some had as little as 10 rounds for their weapons. And they rode boldly Americans, Afghans, towards the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. It was the first cavalry attack of the 21st century. . . .

Now, what won the battle for Mazar [in early November 2001] and set in motion the Taliban's fall from power was a combination of ingenuity of the Special Forces, the most advanced precision-guided munitions in the U.S. arsenal delivered by U.S. Navy, Air Force and Marine crews, and the courage of the Afghan fighters. . . . That day on the plains of Afghanistan, the 19th century met the 21st century, and they defeated a dangerous and determined adversary, a remarkable achievement.⁶

The last battle in the first phase, Operation *Anaconda*, was fraught with tactical difficulties, but it broke up a hardcore Taliban and al Qaeda stronghold in the Shahi Kot valley, northwest of Khost.⁷ It also exposed defects in unity of command, which were later corrected.

Overall, post-9/11, U.S. conventional operations were successful but not decisive. The United States neither destroyed the enemy nor its will to resist. The Taliban field forces were defeated, and the regime ousted, but Osama bin Laden, much of the leadership of al Qaeda, as many as 1,000 of its fighters, Mullah Omar, and much of the Taliban's senior leaders escaped to safe havens in Pakistan and other nearby countries.⁸ For many radicals, the United States and its allies soon became a Western occupier of Islamic lands.

With help from the international community, the United Nations called a conference at Bonn, Germany.⁹ The United States and its allies did not invite even the most moderate of the Taliban—and there were a few—to participate in the Bonn Process to establish a new government. In retrospect, this may have been a mistake, but it was understandable. No one was in a mood to sit down with the discredited allies of al Qaeda, who had covered themselves with human rights abuses and brought ruin

down on themselves by supporting al Qaeda. As a result of the conference, Afghan leaders formed an interim government without Taliban participation. Hamid Karzai, a Durrani Pashtun, was appointed president. The powerful, Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance controlled the power ministries: Defense (Mohammad Fahim Khan), Interior (Yunus Qanooni), and Foreign Affairs (Abdullah Abdullah).¹⁰ The United Nations Security Council has recognized the legitimacy of the government and renewed the ISAF mandate each year since the Bonn Accords.¹¹

In Afghanistan in 2002, there were two salient conditions: it was socioeconomically in the bottom 10 countries in the world, and it had almost no human capital to build on. The international community soon pledged over \$5 billion in aid and began the tough work of helping to rebuild a devastated country. The aid did not meet Afghanistan's needs. Compared to allied programs in Bosnia and Kosovo, per capita aid to Afghanistan the first few years was very low.¹² Aid donors and NGOs had to find ways of building up or working around a skeletal, low-performing interim Afghan government. The latter proved to be easier, but that caused another problem: the provision of assistance outpaced capacity-building. Afghanistan rapidly became dependent on aid that it did not control.

Early in 2002, with the help of the United States, the government created a new Afghan National Army (ANA), with a target of 70,000 troops. An international peacekeeping force, the International Security Assistance Force, at the start consisting of about 4,000 non-U.S. soldiers and airmen, secured the Kabul region, which included about 250 square miles of territory in and around the capital. The Bush administration had a limited appetite for nation-building and only wanted a small presence for counterterrorism and limited aid. Around 8,000 U.S. and allied

troops—mostly based at either Bagram Airbase, north of Kabul, or near Kandahar—conducted counterterrorist operations across the country. Lead nations—the United States for the Afghan National Army, the British for counternarcotics, the Italians for the Justice sector, the Germans for police training, and the Japanese for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of combatants—moved out to help in their respective areas but at a very slow pace.

The U.S. Department of Defense did not want to talk about its efforts there as counterinsurgency. Some in the Bush administration were concerned specifically about limiting expectations for nation-building, which was not a Presidential priority in the first Bush administration, especially after its main focus shifted to preparation for war in Iraq. In all, the Bush administration was not in favor of using the U.S. Armed Forces in peacekeeping operations and long-term postconflict commitments. Over the years, the Bush team begrudgingly came to terms with the need for nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the latter, progress was slow but steady, and in the 3 years after the U.S. intervention the Taliban appeared to be relatively dormant. Kabul, which was guarded and patrolled by ISAF, remained reasonably calm. After more than two decades of war, many believed that peace had come to the Hindu Kush.

The Taliban and al Qaeda, however, had other plans. They intended to launch an insurgency to regain power in Kabul. Their hope was that the international community would tire of nation-building under pressure and would ultimately depart, leaving Karzai to the same horrible fate that befell Najibullah when they seized Kabul in 1996. The Taliban had sanctuaries in Pakistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the Northwest Frontier Province (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Baluchistan in Pakistan, and other countries. Other Taliban leaders found refuge

among their coethnics in Karachi. The Taliban also had strong points in a number of Afghan provinces, such as Helmand, where there were few coalition or Afghan government forces until 2006. Along with the demise of the Taliban had come the rebirth of the narcotics industry, a mark of poverty but also an indicator of a new atmosphere of lawlessness. The Taliban, which had ended the cultivation of poppy in the last year of their reign, encouraged its rebirth and supported the movement with charity from the Gulf states, “taxes,” and profits from the drug trade.

Given the U.S. record in Vietnam and Lebanon, as well as the recent U.S. response to terrorist incidents, the Taliban had some reason to believe that time was on their side. One familiar saying epitomized their approach: “the Americans have all the watches, but we have all the time.” To understand what happened after 2004, it will be important to interrupt the narrative and turn to the study of the nature of 21st-century insurgency.