

Mistakes of the intervention in Afghanistan: what lessons can we learn?

1. Counterinsurgency and security sector mistakes
2. Political mistakes
3. Aid and cash-flow mistakes
4. Social and cultural mistakes

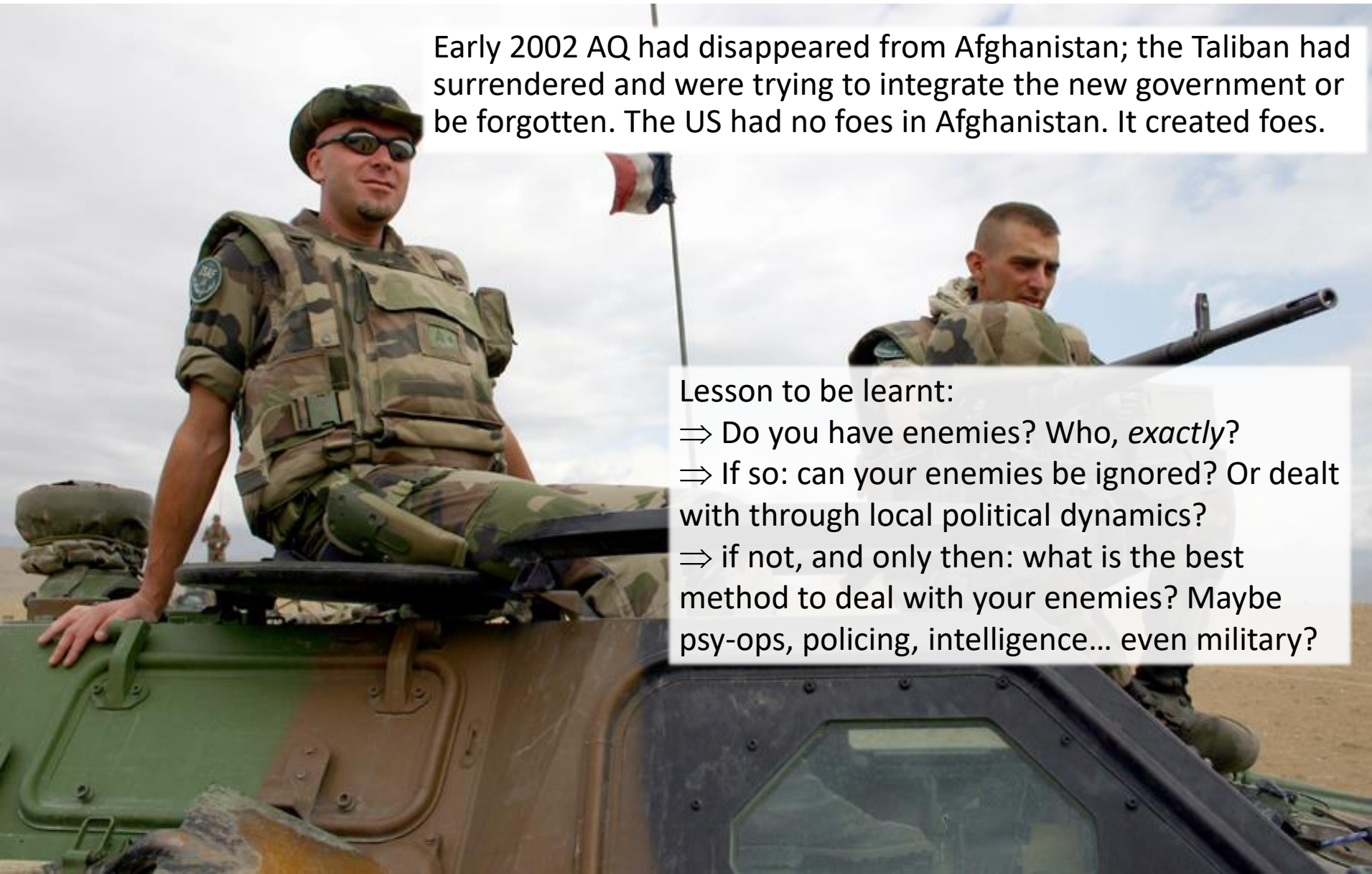


The Counterinsurgency Mistake

Early 2002 AQ had disappeared from Afghanistan; the Taliban had surrendered and were trying to integrate the new government or be forgotten. The US had no foes in Afghanistan. It created foes.

Lesson to be learnt:

- ⇒ Do you have enemies? *Who, exactly?*
- ⇒ If so: can your enemies be ignored? Or dealt with through local political dynamics?
- ⇒ if not, and only then: what is the best method to deal with your enemies? Maybe psy-ops, policing, intelligence... even military?



The Cultural Mistake in the War on Terror or *What the West in general, and the Americans in particular, did not understand about Afghan culture*

- That culture is *important*.
- That switching loyalties is perfectly OK in Afghan political culture. The US, in its search for enemies, followed the logic that people that used to have ties with the Taliban were still 'enemies', even though they now had vowed to support Karzai
- House searches, proximity to women, humiliation (nakedness) and sacrilege: not matters of much importance to Americans, but extremely sensitive to Afghans
- Because the Americans knew so little about Afghanistan, they were easily fed bad intelligence and trapped into local rivalries.



Security Sector Reform Mistakes 1: Security Forces

The USA has spent 62 billion of total of 104 billion USD congressional appropriations for Afghanistan on training the Afghan National Army. The Afghan gvt has a revenue of 2 billion a year; at least that amount, or double, must be spent on maintaining the ANA: **unsustainable reforms**

Disarmament turned out to be impossible and implemented very impartially

Policing is more important than the army. Preference for community police. Counterinsurgency is also mainly a policing task. The creation of 'tribal police'

⇒ There is no point in building an army that the host nation cannot sustain by itself.

⇒ Rather than disarm, avoid rearming (limit the amount of new weaponry entering the country).

⇒ Let communities police themselves, with their own means, and build up the police as a national institution on the basis of these local police forces. Arbaki (tribal police) or municipal police in the cities. Asayish example from Rojava

Security Sector Reform Mistakes 2: Justice

Khushal Khan Khattak, the 18th C Afghan pashto poet, wrote, “one day of justice by a ruler is the equivalent to 40 years of praying.”

The neglect of the judicial sector cost the intervention and the new government a lot of legitimacy, and was arguably the driving force of the insurgency. The Taliban set up shadow courts in every district immediately to bring justice.

While the justice sector was abandoned to its corruption and inefficiency, impunity quickly became the norm in Afghan politics.

- The ‘National Reconciliation, General Amnesty and National Stability Law’ was passed to preclude any attempt at bringing war criminals to justice.
- Human rights defenders were demoralized and cast as non-Afghan vectors of Western values

‘The fish starts rotting from its head’. Not only ‘warlords’: Increase of torture by, and impunity of, government forces, protected by international forces and organizations. Karzai’s brother Ahmed Wali was well known to be heavily involved in the narcotics trade, smuggling and assassinations but remained on the CIA payroll until the Taliban finished him off.

- ⇒ Justice is essential for peace and must receive SSR priority – but targets must be set locally, not to some international standard. Examples of cutting hands and, v-v, economic (contracting) injustice. Don’t push TJ.
- ⇒ Allow micro-justice, or innovation in justice. Integrating customary law, bottom-up. Justice is not an exclusively Western concept. Justice ≠ Human Rights.

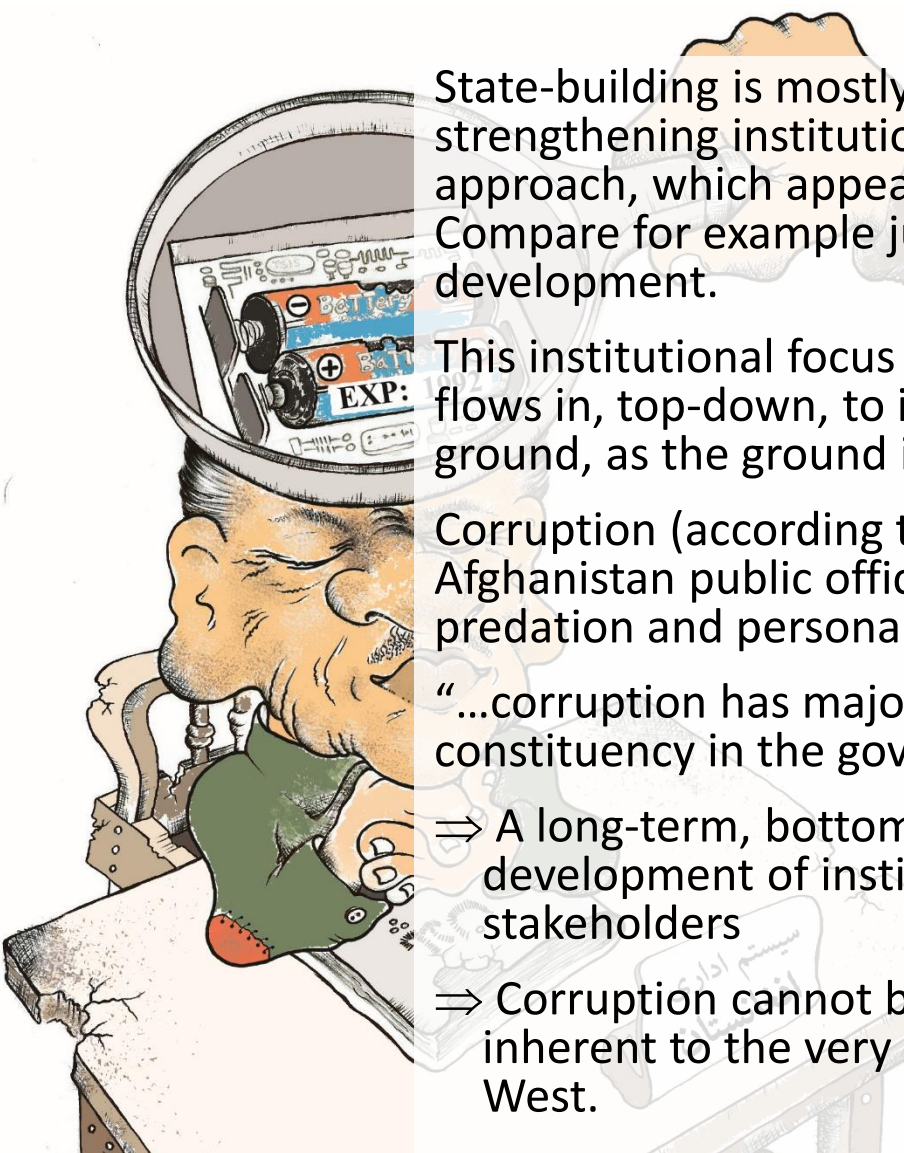
Political 1: The Kingmaker's mistake

- Without US military support, no local group could aspire to absolute hegemony, as Gul Agha Sherzai or JMK had; where there were no GIs, a balance of power between local contenders was sought after.
- **Light Footprint vs Boots on the Ground:** The UN and the US elevated to power different constituencies; this came to the fore with a clash in the first political process, the Emergency Loya Jirga. The democratic (UN) forces had to compromise with the warlords fighting the US' war on terror.
- As a result Karzai had to include these warlords in his regime. Over time, however, the US dictating of Afghan policy became untenable for his position, and he started reacting against it. He refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement with the USA.

- ⇒ Study the existing power balance and play it carefully instead of selecting one group as allies
- ⇒ The UN should not give in to US pressure. No country must be allowed to pursue its national interests in detriment to the host country's interests
- ⇒ Know when to back off, operate from the shadows



Political 2: The institutional focus mistake



State-building is mostly considered as an exercise in setting up and strengthening institutions. It follows a top-down, often abstract approach, which appears to confuse real life with PowerPoints. Compare for example justice reform in Afghanistan with media development.

This institutional focus seems to foster corruption as a lot of money flows in, top-down, to implement reforms, but fails to reach the ground, as the ground is not such as posited in the reform plan.

Corruption (according to Ashraf Ghani: 10-year framework): “In Afghanistan public office is increasingly seen as license for predation and personal gain.”

“...corruption has major stakeholders while reform has no visible constituency in the government”.

⇒ A long-term, bottom-up approach must be taken to the development of institutions. Citizens and practitioners = stakeholders

⇒ Corruption cannot be tackled as an isolated phenomenon. It is inherent to the very approach of state-building favored by the West.

The basic mistakes of the International Intervention according to Ashraf Ghani

“the stovepipes of security, politics, and development operated separately, without being unified by a consensus on a larger strategy(...)”

“When UN agencies acquired \$1.6 billion from the initial Tokyo donor conference in January 2002, the Afghan government received \$20 million”

“As each UN agency and bilateral aid agency set up offices, their higher salaries drew the best of Afghan talent and skills away from the government and key public services such as health, education, and police, further weakening the government’s ability to function effectively. ”

⇒ The international community must let the host government take the lead in coordinating its activities, instead of following its own programs and drawing financial and human resources away from the host government.

* For a criticism of this opinion, see next class

The Aid Flow Mistake

The question is not how much aid, but how it is used. Absorption capacity.

The subcontractor chain not only = great waste of money, but also dilutes responsibility. Who's to blame for an expensive road that crumbles after five years?

Which population groups will receive the money, how will it spread through society? Previous research into these questions is never done.

Aid can be the source of much conflict. Examples from Anand Gopal: Role of contracting business for US base in abetting local rivalries and allowing hegemony of one local group over another in the Pech valley.

- ⇒ Plan carefully, incrementally and locally, with minimal amounts of funding
- ⇒ Take into account the social economy and how the aid flows will impact it. Use its channels
- ⇒ Transparency is needed, from the top of the chain to the bottom. In fact, a full overhaul of the aid system is required

The Reconstruction & Development Mistake

- Reconstruction of infrastructure is seen as a technical issue. Get that road built, even if it's by US Engineers with Turkish oversight and Chinese laborers.
 - National Solidarity Program vs Afghanistan Stabilization Program
 - Development NGOs need long term plans and to gain confidence of population. Avoid bureaucratization of aid (increases office overhead and encourages corruption). 'The Cost of Accountability'
- ⇒ A Maoist approach to reconstruction (by the people, for the people), even if technically less perfect, is preferable to the top-down technocratic approach. Make host nation citizens stakeholders and exploit their every capacity.
- ⇒ Don't wait for 'drip-down'. Sprinkle the aid very low to the ground, at the community level, letting them decide on how to use the aid.
- ⇒ The emphasis on quantification hurts development work and abets corruption.

The Failure of Airborne or Top-Down Democracy

A census never took place in Afghanistan.

Without a census, voter registration allowed and even encouraged fraud

The West did not trust the democratic hopes and aspirations of many ordinary Afghans and reduced 'broad-based gvt' to factional participation – called 'ethnic' as if the armed factions represented the democratic will of 'their' particular ethnic groups.

Integration of war criminals and human rights abusers into the new parliamentary system, delegitimizing it from the very beginning.

Real defeat: Afghans have become cynical about democracy.

- ⇒ The developed democratic countries should stop acting as if they have a monopoly on democracy. Democracy must be seen as a universal and truly open concept, needing for its evolution input from other participative traditions
- ⇒ There should be no imposition of specific democratic forms (institutions) such as parliament and elections; rather a search for participative traditions in the host society.

The Elections Mistake



“Elections have essentially become a means of securing and freezing in place a fragile political settlement, rather than an instrument to expand political representation.”

(p25)

Democracy = Elections? or: elections without democratization?

The cost of elections and the electoral institutions is too high for Afghanistan. 2009 Presidential elections cost 300 million USD

ELJ delivered very few 'warlords'; parliamentary elections did...

⇒ Local elections (for executive and representation) may be held in the population's own style. They need not be an expensive national bureaucratic exercise.

Emergency Loya Jirga = 5 million USD. Local electoral processes are much cheaper and may deliver better results.

⇒ Elections are only one tool of democracy; pay more attention to other tools

The Mistake of Enforced Modernization

Reverse of the Orientalist Mistake, which is just as damaging.

Story of Jalalabad staff member's father, sisters and daughters.

Gender balance/mainstreaming and many other social reforms, such as enforcement of ban on child labor, obligatory education, freedom of opinion and media, etc., can be seen as examples of enforced modernization.

- ⇒ In the case of gender balance, main mistake made is to think that men are conservative and against progress of women, and women their victims. The women are the first perpetrators of what we see as gender imbalance.
- ⇒ Modernization cannot be enforced. Be careful with backing local allies in favor of modernization as your support can delegitimize them.
- ⇒ Your values may well be universal (or they may not) but you must be patient: Change comes slowly and over the generations, and is subject to external factors at least as powerful as education (such as media access).



Meena: young Afghan female artist



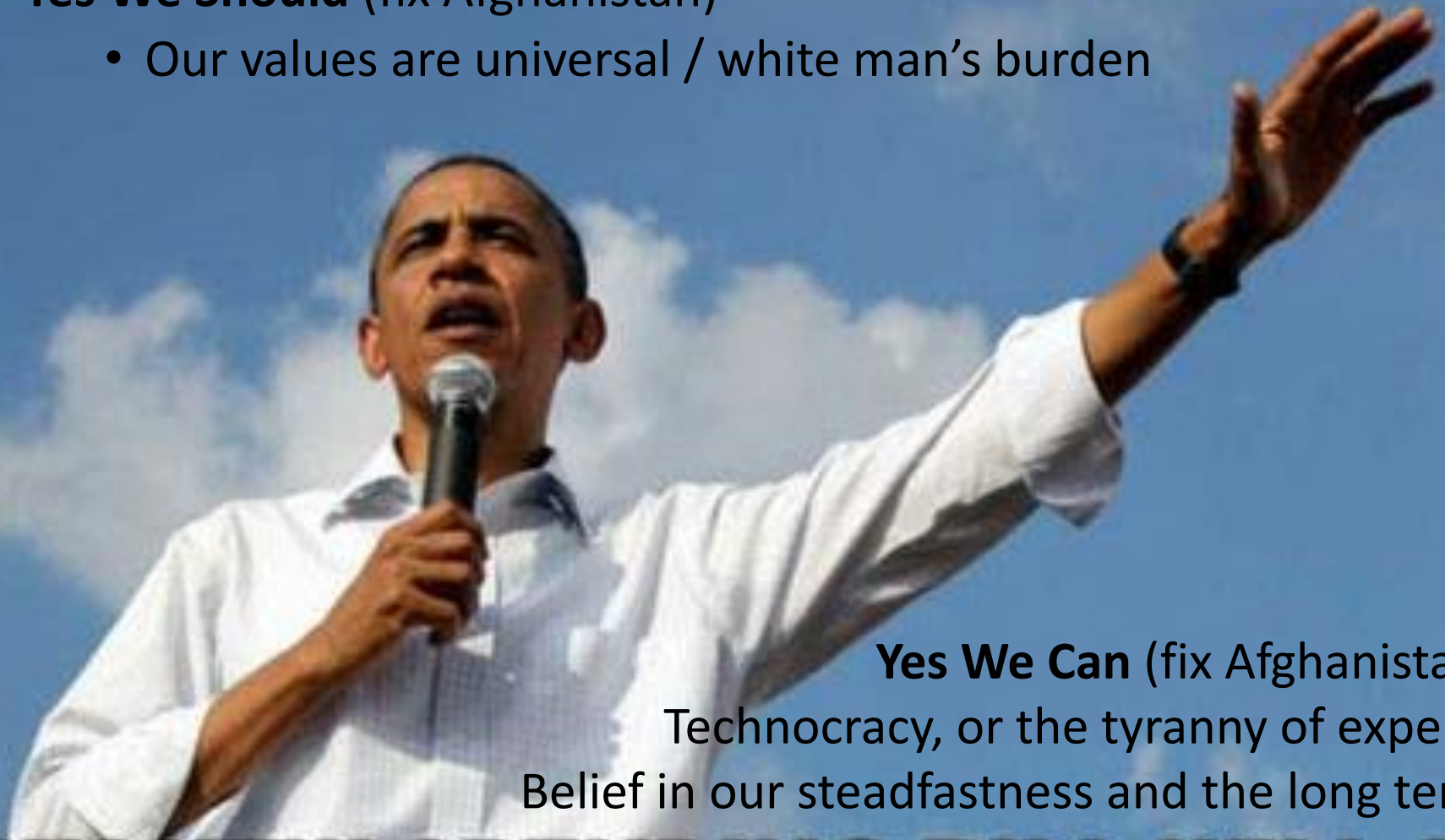
Insights from Rory Stewart's article: "Afghanistan: What Could Work?"

- Against the all-or-nothing approach. Rory Stewart: "We would prefer to believe that any war in which we engage is a vital threat to our very existence—in which case the odds of victory are irrelevant and any sacrifice is justified."
- A senior Afghan official warned me this year "to stop referring to us as a humanitarian crisis: we must be the number one terrorist threat in the world, because if we are not we won't get any money."
- Obama: "the nation that I'm most interested in building is our own."
- Rory : "we don't have a moral obligation to do what we cannot do".

Part 2: Western Delusions

Yes We Should (fix Afghanistan)

- Our values are universal / white man's burden



Yes We Can (fix Afghanistan)

Technocracy, or the tyranny of experts
Belief in our steadfastness and the long term

The Tyranny of Experts

- The Genesis of the Development Idea: focus on material suffering > political rights. New Deal vs Civil Rights movement. Development to stop immigration.
- The Blank Slate vs Learning from History: notion that GDP/capita and other such indicators are essential and that sociocultural factors can be ignored; example of governance, tackled with technical (institutional) solutions.
- Nations vs Individuals: support to technocratic autocrats (Ethiopia) rather than democratic states. Development aid helps these autocrats suppress their population in return for better macroeconomic indicators. Belief in the benevolent autocrat. History: support of right wing military South American governments, Chicago School
- Conscious Design vs Spontaneous Solutions. Example of Somaliland, successful but unrecognized and un-aided.

Short versus long-term

1. The arc of international involvement in Afghanistan
 - a) gradual awareness that spurs over-reaching measures
 - b) cold reminders of the limits of influence
 - c) attempts at pragmatic partnership with the government
 - d) the recognition that 'shared goals' were not shared after all
 - e) ...and, finally, resignation
 2. The 4 or 5-year political cycle of democracies: long-term goals often unattainable. Problem more acute where parliaments have more say over foreign policy. Positive example: Obama's surge calculated within two presidential mandates.
- ⇒ Plan for a long-term presence and strategy, being realistic about domestic political cycles.

Ideals versus forms

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- **Democracy versus democratism.** There is a growing need in Western democracies to reform and deepen democracy and tackle the problem of *representative* democracy. Are political parties, general elections, even parliaments, necessary attributes of democracy? Why not look towards other participative political traditions?
 - **Justice versus the Rule of Law.**
 - **Peace versus peace-keeping.** Conflict is a natural element of change
 - **=> We must not confuse the ideal with the institutional and historic form it has taken. Take into account culture without cultural relativism**

A new paradigm for expat security

- For more than a decade since the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in the United States, western and regional powers have viewed Somalia from the prism of counterterrorism. State-building processes and political strategies have been dictated by the imperative of containing, countering and defeating Somali groups deemed to be or formally designated as terrorists.
- By dividing Somali political actors into two categories, extremists and moderates, this approach has produced a distorted understanding of the conflict and undermined the political and military effort to resolve it and rebuild the Somali state.

(Life and Peace Institute)

What can *you* do?

Personal involvement with the country and its people: sympathy & empathy. You may be here for the long term, your destiny may be tied up with this country.

Learn the local language(s) and customs, adapt to the culture (without going native). Walk the streets, eat the local food, go to the houses of your staff or new friends and watch local media with them.

Learn to be a mediator between the international community and your target audiences. You are a bridge, neither here nor there.

Invest in individual people. Share with them (and they will share with you). These personal ties are what changes the world.

...?