

Testimony for the Afghanistan War Commission
July 19, 2024
By
Ronald E. Neumann

Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Chairman,

I am honored to appear before you today. Reflecting on and learning lessons from Afghanistan is an important endeavor in which I am keenly interested. While I take some pride in having served my country in four wars, one as a soldier and three as a diplomat, I am also keenly aware that two of those wars ended in failure and one, Iraq, is still being evaluated.

After failed wars our national response has been something between amnesia and a firm conviction that we will “never do it again.” But, in fact, we do “do it again.” From Mexico to the Truman administration in Greece, to Panama, to Afghanistan and Yemen, today America is, has been, and is likely to continue to be involved in various forms of interventions. Thus, I believe your mission is important.

As one looks back, even to Vietnam as you have asked me to do, it is important to remember that memory alone can distort events over time. When I wrote my book on Afghanistan, and later a memoir, I had access to many personal letters written close to the events in question. Frequently, I found that my memories had changed over time. Things, such as historical conflicts between political leaders that were to understand in order to get them to work together, which I thought I had understood at one point in time turned out to reflect knowledge I gained only months later. Thus, while drawing on current recollections of participants is valuable, it should not be accepted without also fact checking contemporary records.

Recollections also require a need for honesty. Politically and bureaucratically honesty is difficult in our culture, whatever one may say about the need for accountability. In the private sector one can fail and go bankrupt, come back and still come out as a success. That is scarcely true in politics or bureaucracy where a “got you” culture tends to repay error with permanent career failure. Careers do not recover. The natural consequence of this is that it makes learning from mistakes extremely difficult because the tendency is to either deny the mistake, insist it was someone else's fault, or that there was no mistake to begin with. Yet if we do not learn then there are many lessons observed but few learned.

We need to go beyond bumper stickers.

You will also have to deal with a tendency to extract simple answers and catch phrases from a complex 20-year history. The desire to boil a lesson down to a phrase may be one of the most pernicious dangers you will face. This is because such phrases, bumper stickers of policy, lead to more misunderstanding than to learning. As simple

example from the Iraq war may illustrate the point. The US troop surge has been given great credit for the success of the so called “Anbar” revolt. The lesson has been drawn that a military surge empowered the politics. Yet close study shows¹ that most of the surge did not go to Anbar and the reasons for the success was only slightly related to the surge. Simplifying and mislabeling the lesson of the past may lead to new dangers in the future.

The same is true about the pursuit of democracy. Recently, when speaking to a university class, one student asked me whether Afghanistan does not finally prove that it is a mistake to try to create democracy as a policy goal. Whether or not supporting democracy is a worthy goal is a big question. But the fact remains that in Afghanistan the quest for democracy was never the reason for the war. It started as an invasion caused by the attack of 9/11. Once the United States was in Afghanistan the question became how to leave. Four administrations dealt with this in different ways. I do not believe a single one of them chose democracy as its ultimate policy goal. Rather, democracy was part of the strategy to try to build a country that could stand on its own feet. It was always part of the larger question of how to substantially disengage. Misunderstanding the difference between a policy goal and a strategy will not help.

Whether or not democracy can be part of a successful strategy is a large issue in many places, not just Afghanistan or Vietnam. It requires considering the circumstance and the time needed to change. Comparison with the time needed for democracy to arrive in Korea, or Taiwan may be helpful to considering whether the problems in Afghanistan lay in the objective or in the time given to achieve it. In this connection, you may find it useful to consider whether the American propensity to try to shorten a required time frame with more funding always makes sense.

You will no doubt look in some detail at the first days of the war. My understanding is that the simplistic lesson from the Balkans against nation building was part of the reason that many opportunities may have been lost in the first year of peace in Afghanistan. This is simply one more illustration of the responsibility you bear to seek complete and complex answers rather than simple labels.

Policy vs Implementation

A particularly difficult area, which I hope you will look at, is the difference between policy and implementation or execution. In my experience, when things are not going well, Washington reverts to a policy review. Yet, such policy reviews rarely raise the question of whether the problem is in the policy goal itself, the strategy, or the execution of the strategy. The execution may be flawed, but it may also be that much more time or resources are required for proper execution. Yet, the policy review usually results in a shifting and changing of goals, which often confuses local allies and makes long term strategy impossible.

By my count, we had ten different policies in our 20 years in Afghanistan. The average life of each policy was two years. Policy changes from Washington were particularly problematic when they occurred without support, or sometimes even consultation with host government officials. This was the case in both Vietnam and Afghanistan and was probably destructive in both.

Realism

A particularly difficult area that calls for your judgment is to be realistic about what was politically possible in the context of a specific time. One of the most frequently cited errors regarding Afghanistan is the failure to have the Taliban invited to the peace conference at Bonn. Yet I wonder how realistic this criticism is. None of the other Afghan groups at the conference would have welcomed the Taliban so the political pressure required of the United States to include the Taliban would have been extremely large. Much of the Bonn conference was taken up with trying to work out a division of power and ministerial responsibility for the interim government. Reviewing that record, how realistic is it to think one could have injected the Taliban into that mix? I am not trying to answer this question but, rather, to illustrate the need to attach a lesson learned to a realistic understanding of possibility. Without that there is no lesson, but only an observation that it would have been nice if the world had been different.

In your very kind invitation, you asked me to reflect on lessons that might be drawn in common from Vietnam and Afghanistan. Obviously, my experience of each war was vastly different, having seen a part of one from the ground level view of an infantryman and the other from a much more strategic view. Still, I think there are a few things one can say. One, of course, is the importance of sanctuary for the insurgents. Without solving that, success is very difficult. Much has been written on the issue of sanctuaries in insurgencies, so I will not linger except to note one difference between Vietnam and Afghanistan. In Vietnam, the strategic importance of the sanctuaries was understood and there were repeated efforts to solve the problems through bombing the north to force a policy change. In Afghanistan, there was no comparable effort to end Pakistan's support for sanctuary during the Obama Administration. You may wish to examine whether there was any detailed consideration of the likelihood of success without dealing with the problem. The Trump administration did adopt a policy of pressure on Pakistan but gave that up when it began the Doha negotiations.

Perhaps the larger point to start with in considering the two wars is that there were almost no valid lessons carried over from one war to the other.

Short tours and revolving policies

For example, a clear problem in Vietnam was the short tour. Combat officers generally spent 6 months at the company level and then moved on to a staff job. There was no effective transfer of knowledge. I still remember that just as I left Vietnam, my infantry company was going back to a difficult area in which we had operated before. With great effort and some loss, we knew every trail, where we had found enemy bunkers and so

on. I was the last officer in the company who still retained this knowledge, and I was getting on a plane. The company would have to relearn the hard way.

In Afghanistan the short tours of senior officers and generals were devastating. I have referred to it elsewhere as the institutional equivalent of a frontal lobotomy. If one carried away only one lesson from Vietnam and Afghanistan I believe it would be the need for longer tours for senior military and civilian officials.

The short tour was not only devastating to continuity of planning and execution but also to building support among host government officials. After they have experienced several years' changing plans and priorities and often the abandonment of previous plans, host officials tend to become skeptical of any American idea. They have learned that even a good idea may cease to have support when personnel change. And local government officials may accept a bad idea if it is the enthusiasm of the Americans who are going to fund it. For example, in Afghanistan local Afghan NGOs were heavily dependent on foreign funding to keep their organizations going. The result was that they would develop projects that fit what foreigners wanted but not push for their own sense of priorities. There was a multiplicity of gender projects, some very good and some, as shown in later analysis, with almost no impact. At the same time, Afghan ideas on how to advance the status of women, particularly in rural areas, received less traction.

In the provinces, US military commanders with Commanders Emergency Response Program funds would move priorities as commands rotated. When the funding moved, projects or plans often died. Such swings in project emphasis were detrimental to effective implementation of any idea. In fact, I have often thought that even a mediocre policy carried out consistently over time would outperform the greater brilliance which is buried in swings of policy from one idea to another.

Vietnam and Afghanistan were both marked by highly unrealistic assumptions about how rapidly progress could be made when it depended on institution and cultural change. The problem lies less in whether the analysis of the situation. Including the changes that needed to occur for policy success, was accurate, and more in whether it was complimented by analysis of whether the means employed, and the time being given for success were likely to reach the desired result. Post World War II history does show examples of countries that went from essentially kleptocratic corrupt autocracies to functioning States with a degree of democracy. Taiwan, Korea, and Greece after the American intervention in its civil war have all done rather well. And each took 20 or 30 years or more to get there. Were these experiences ever drawn on in considering what was likely to be required to bring about similar changes in Afghanistan? Or were assumptions allowed to stand without more critical examination or simply forced into the Procrustean bed of the time the policy makers thought they had to give to a problem?

Even where there appear to be useful lessons from Vietnam it is not clear that we are able to draw on them very well. The provincial reconstruction teams that were deployed in Afghanistan and later in Iraq were often said to draw on the experience of CORDS

(The Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support) in Vietnam. Yet the strength of theCORDS operation was partially in having a unified chain of command. State Department, USAID officials, and military officers were in an integrated chain of command where the officers of one agency were positioned to give orders to the entire operation including civilian to military even in military operations. Nowadays, we are told that such crossing of command lines is legally not possible. Yet no one has been able to tell me whether what was done in Vietnam was on the basis of some legal interpretation or whether the law has actually changed since those days. It is another example of how superficial lessons need to be examined at some depth to make real use of them. Since unity of command is an important part of success, this reflection may also suggest an area for eventual recommendations.

Working with local allies

Another area which invites comparison between Vietnam and Afghanistan is the vexing problem of how to work with local leaders when they do not seem to meet our sense of what is needed. In the Afghan case, I hope you will engage with the need to find a balance between the responsibility for American actions and those of our Afghan hosts. Neither worked in a vacuum. Each was heavily influenced by perceptions and misperceptions of the other. Responsibility will have to be judged in a difficult matrix of looking at both sides.

How much responsibility to take and how much to leave with local leaders is not easily resolved, but the problem is long standing. As former CIA station chief in Vietnam and later CIA director William Colby ruefully noted about Vietnam, "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."ⁱⁱ

In Afghanistan, I frequently saw Americans quote from T.E. Lawrence's WWI advice, "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them." But as often as I saw this written on a paper or a briefing slide, I never saw it put into action.

Instead, our default reaction to problems of local effectiveness is to try to develop our own policy and convince the locals to accept it, or simply to do it ourselves. At senior levels, this led us to seek the replacement of leaders. In Vietnam this included backing for a coup that led to the murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem and a later series of coups as one general replaced another. In Afghanistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke totally alienated President Hamid Karzai by seeking the latter's replacement in numerous conversations with other potential candidates.ⁱⁱⁱ As then ambassador Karl Eikenberry noted in his famous NODIS telegram, a central flaw in the conclusions of President Obama's 2009 policy review was that we did not have a local partner and President Karzai was unlikely to accept the plan.

The American reaction to the lack of local buy-in is to come up with a policy and do it ourselves. An interesting example of this is a study of CIA field operations in Vietnam.^{iv} Time after time, field operators identify problems, often correctly, and design solutions. But the solutions rarely had a top-level Vietnamese buy-in and when US priorities changed or funding slipped the programs ended.

A somewhat similar example comes from Afghanistan. The Obama policy review of 2009 led to a large surge of money and district support teams as well as troops. Ambitious plans were developed for local progress. US provincial and district teams developed projects and policies on their own as I saw in 2010 while traveling in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Many of these efforts had no support from Afghan authorities in Kabul. But as I traveled, I was repeatedly told, “Kabul doesn’t matter.” Of course, Kabul did matter. As did the lack of Afghan ability to develop in short order the necessary personnel to replace the teams. Those teams are long gone. They had all the lasting effect of plunging one’s fist into a bucket of water and then withdrawing it.

But if our efforts to craft policies without local acceptance largely failed; if our repeated, almost knee-jerk response, to local incapacity is to keep making such plans, and if local incapacity is real, *how are we to stem this cycle?* I don’t know if there is an answer. Yet I hope it is a problem on which you will reflect. It has large strategic implications for the future and yet it remains essentially unaddressed in political science theory as much as in policy.

I want to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to reflect on the experiences of two wars and the chance to suggest some things that you may want to look at. I hope these ruminations may be useful to you. Of course, I will be glad to return for a more detailed discussion of my own period as ambassador.

ⁱ Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱ William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam*, Contemporary Books, 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ Private conversations with President Karzai and then UNAMA head.

^{iv} Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: the DIA and Counterinsurgency*, The University Press of Kentucky, 2010.