Beyond Good and Evil: The Sources of US Strategy in Post-Invasion Afghanistan

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Across two decades, the War in Afghanistan lost its moral purpose. The US went from taking the battle to the terrorists to propping up a dysfunctional Afghan regime in the face of an ever-resilient Taliban insurgency. In this paper, I shall analyze the roots of this nation-building struggle, namely the Bush administration's grand strategy after toppling the Taliban in late 2001. My timeframe of interest is from the Bonn Conference of December that year, wherein the US and its Afghan partners agreed to pursue a democratic political order, to that order's ostensible realization with Hamid Karzai's election to the Afghan presidency in October 2004. The US ultimately embraced primacy, although said strategy came about through a complex interaction of perceptual, bureaucratic, and threat environment-related factors. In particular, post-9/11 anxieties and post-invasion hubris among top decision-makers led to a forceful yet open-ended mission with lofty and vague objectives. The result was reactive, bottom-up policymaking by officials in the field, resulting in expanding commitments with no coherent plan.

So, come election time, Afghanistan was spiraling towards insurgency. I argue the US may have avoided this fate through a more restrained, less unrest-prone strategy — first, it would have embraced reconciliation with the Taliban, and second, it would have allowed for an illiberal Afghan regime. Whether perceptual factors would have permitted this approach is up for debate.

I begin by defining primacy as a grand strategy. Primacy, in my view, has three pillars — liberalism, unilateralism, and militarism — each having theoretical foundations with prescriptive implications. All three are tied to hegemonic stability theory, which posits that the public good of peaceful world order is best supplied by a hegemon that actively checks rising powers in core regions.[1] However, primacy qualifies this with its first, liberal pillar. It departs from the realist rational actor model, seeing state behavior as influenced by domestic institutions. Regime type becomes a national security concern. Unlike liberal democracies, which share peace-producing interests like human rights and free trade, weak, autocratic regimes suffer from limited domestic legitimacy, which they account for through ideology-driven aggression on the world stage.[2] Moreover, said "rogue states" enable, either through grievances or state incapacity, the rise of extremist non-state actors or sponsor such transnational groups to serve their irrational ends. Insofar as there are revisionist powers, primacy forwards revisionist solutions — democracy promotion is a central objective, facilitated by regime change and nation-building. The hegemon ought to impose representative, liberal institutions to eliminate state and non-state radicalism, their capacity to channel and redress grievances rendering them legitimate and stable.[3]

To pursue democracy promotion and other national interests, primacy forwards a unilateral approach. International institutions constrain the liberal hegemon's freedom of action by demanding consensus-building, and they afford a membership to rogue states that seldom adhere to their conventions.[4] At the same time, the hegemon's interests (e.g., promoting free trade and democratic peace) are effectively benevolent, yielding prosperity and security not only for itself but the entire world. Consequently, it should be free to abrogate multilateral agreements and shape the world order in its image — the externalities of doing so will confer its policies legitimacy in the eyes of other states with no need for an institutional seal of approval.[5]

In this respect, unilateralism blends somewhat with the final pillar, militarism. Primacy sees the liberal hegemon's use

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of military force, especially by itself, as upholding its credibility vis-à-vis liberal allies and illiberal adversaries. Indeed, its forcefulness will compel the latter to bandwagon (if not reform domestically) rather than balance.[6] However, it also takes rogue states and extremist non-state actors to be un-coercible insofar as both are irrational or radical in their foreign policy aims. Primacy, therefore, prescribes the exercise of power in a preventative, decisive manner, well before the enemy can amass capabilities. The opportune use of force makes this strategy ideally low-cost, but an offense-as-defense approach still entails a large force structure with globe-spanning troop deployments.[7] So, in the end, gunslinging, not diplomacy, keeps the liberal hegemon preponderant while liberalizing, and thus pacifying the world order.

Whether grand strategy is conceptualized as something latent in state planning or behavior, primacy undoubtedly characterized the early post-invasion phase of the War in Afghanistan.[8] As for the former conception, the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy, published in September of that year, espoused all three pillars. The NSS singled out "terrorists and tyrants" as America's enemies and forwarded the liberal cure-all of "encouraging free and open societies on every continent." Strong institutions would deny terrorist recruitment.[9] Onto militarism, the NSS underscored deterrence through defense buildup but dismissed "rely[ing] solely on a reactive posture." Rather, the US had to embrace "anticipatory action," even if it was uncertain where and when terrorists or tyrants would strike, a loose (if not preventative) interpretation of legitimate preemption under international law.[10] Unilateralism was further evidenced by the NSS' downplaying of existing international institutions and preference for threat-specific, US-led "coalitions of the willing." That said, if need be, the superpower had to be "prepared to act apart" given so many "shadowy," immediate threats.[11] Thus, at least on paper, the Bush administration embraced primacy's assumptions on a global scale. The NSS justified this on moral grounds, not just national security concerns. America had "unparalleled responsibilities" by virtue of its "unparalleled strength" and "principles of liberty," the truth of the latter substantiated by its victory in the 20th century "struggle over ideas."[12]

Traces of primacy could also be found in the four-phase plan for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) drafted by US Central Command (CENTCOM) in October 2001. OEF was to be unilateral, enlisting only America's anglophone allies — not all of NATO, despite the alliance invoking Article V post-9/11 — and militaristic, seeking the complete eradication of al-Qaeda and the Taliban by its third phase.[13] As for liberalism, the final phase imagined 3 to 5 years wherein the US would "prevent the re-emergence of terrorism" and "provide support for humanitarian assistance efforts," not nation-building per se. Beyond ambiguous goals like these, CENTCOM and the White House had no plans for stabilizing post-invasion Afghanistan when OEF began.[14]

Perhaps a more concrete way to ascertain grand strategy in post-invasion Afghanistan may be to adopt a "grand behavior" lens and identify primacy in practice. For one, the US mission remained primarily force-oriented after the collapse of the Taliban. It had 4,000 troops in Afghanistan by early 2002 tasked with counterterrorism, or eliminating remnants of al-Qaeda and their Taliban sponsors, lumped together by US officials as "the enemy."[15] They did so heavy-handedly: in March 2002, the US launched Operation Anaconda along Afghanistan's eastern border, its largest ground offensive since the Gulf War, eliminating hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. Later search and destroy missions failed to identify the enemy due to poor intelligence.[16] Yet, the US appeared eager to eradicate potential threats as soon as possible, as primacy would have it. The military, assisted by the CIA, carried out interrogations at its main bases in Bagram and Kandahar to fill gaps in intelligence. While interrogators used increasingly harsh (if not illegal) techniques, broad detention criteria meant that few detainees had ties to the Taliban or al-Qaeda.[17] This prevention-despite-uncertainty logic was further evidenced by the high collateral damage of combat operations. American special forces raids often targeted ex-Taliban that sought to live in peace, and in July 2002, an airstrike killed dozens of Afghan civilians after a wedding party was mistaken for enemy gunfire.[18] Hence, despite a limited troop presence and narrow mission early on, US trigger-happiness reflected primacy's militarist pillar.

The conduct of this mission was consistent with unilateralism as well. Other countries had personnel in Afghanistan by late 2001. Beyond the coalition the US had invaded with, a 4,500-strong UN-authorized International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed to Kabul under a peacekeeping mandate. The Bush administration did little to coordinate the two forces' chains of command and instead confined ISAF troops to the capital. Even then, heavy-handed US raids came at the expense of ISAF's hearts-and-minds outreach.[19] As for non-military efforts,

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Washington delegated reconstruction-related tasks to its allies in early 2002, indicative of multilateralism. Yet, as the guarantor of security beyond the capital, the US asserted itself over the influx of aid dollars. International donors resented this, fearing they would become targets by deploying US troops.[20] In October 2002, tensions between these groups and the military worsened with the latter's rollout of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). PRTs involved US forces and Afghan officials conducting "quick impact projects," like infrastructure repairs in unstable provinces, their tactical focus at odds with donors' desire for sustainability.[21]

Thus, unilateralism spilled over from military operations to civilian ones related to nation-building. Throughout 2002, however, the Bush administration proved reluctant to helm reconstruction efforts. It set liberal objectives at the Bonn Conference in December 2001 — US diplomats pushed for a pluralist settlement among the Afghan warlords it had enlisted to rout the Taliban. The agreed-upon Bonn process aimed at a multiethnic constitutional democracy — an emergency loya jirga, or "great council," would appoint a transitional government the following June, which would draft a constitution and hold elections two years later.[22] With the exception of 3 PRTs on the ground by late 2002 (which, in part, sought to extend the influence and legitimacy of the interim regime), the US directed few resources toward democratization that year.[23] When the international community met in Tokyo in January 2002 to coordinate development aid, the US pledged $296 million, just 5 percent of total donations, mostly short-term humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, the White House's proposed budget for 2003 allocated just $151 million to Afghanistan (for comparison, the invasion had cost $4.5 billion). Finally, the US limited its initial large-scale nation-building efforts to training a 70,000-strong Afghan National Army (ANA) rather than governance-related matters more relevant to the liberal pillar.[24]

Nevertheless, as Afghanistan proceeded through the Bonn process, liberalism became manifest, particularly in 2003, with the US departing from a purely force-oriented approach. First, CENTCOM began ANA training in earnest in spring 2003.[25] Then, that June, the White House approved a $1 billion package known as "Accelerating Success," wherein it would sponsor economic and institutional development and crack down on factionalism within the interim government, then led by Hamid Karzai. This was to enable free and fair elections. By 2004, the US had removed Karzai's rivals within the Afghan government and coerced the warlords it had once partnered with into complying with the regime.[26] The Bush administration also took part in designing the Afghan state, forwarding a democratic but centralized regime. In doing so, it absorbed its allies' nation-building tasks. So, by the elections, the US was entrenched in Afghan politics, advising Karzai toward "good governance."[27] With this new politically-focused mission, 2003-2004 also saw US forces embrace counterinsurgency. Rather than enter and retreat from unstable provinces to eliminate threats, the military now sought to "sustain area ownership," patrolling fixed areas of operation to protect Afghan population centers. This was accompanied by an increase in PRTs, with 12 on the ground by summer 2004.[28] With a stabilization-focused mission came a larger troop presence, from 12,000 in October 2003 to 20,000 at the elections. The US also continued to carry out heavy-handed counterterrorism operations of its own accord, with three large-scale offensives in 2003 and two more in early 2004.[29]

On a final note, perhaps all three pillars were evident in the Bush administration's refusal to negotiate with the Taliban throughout this timeframe. Concurrent with the Bonn Conference, the movement's leader, Mullah Omar, then under siege by coalition forces, offered to discuss terms of surrender with Karzai, the soon-to-be interim president. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld vetoed these talks the next day and threatened to pull support if Karzai proceeded with them.[30] Later Taliban overtures in 2002 were equally ill-fated — US forces detained, then interrogated delegates. Eventually, in 2004, the National Security Council banned the Afghan government from pursuing negotiations and placed kill-or-capture orders on practically all known peace-seekers.[31] As primacy would have it, al-Qaeda and their former Taliban hosts were both treated as irrational, ideological actors that should be eliminated rather than bargained with.

On balance, US behavior in post-invasion Afghanistan reflected primacy, although it was realized in a gradual and lopsided manner, especially on the nation-building front. Of course, US military and economic power under Bush were unequaled, its great power rivals declining or yet to rise (something the 2002 NSS acknowledged). Due to this so-called "unipolar moment," its capacity to project that power was practically unchecked. This meant that grand strategy could concern itself with regions of lesser strategic importance, such as South-Central Asia, and given a lack of existential threats, it could pursue normative aims such as democracy promotion.[32] Still, these aims would

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not be structural in origin, so unipolarity was simply a necessary condition for Afghan nation-building.

Another possible explanation for US grand strategy was the Afghan threat environment in late 2001. Before delving into this, a few remarks should be made on the invasion itself. The Bush administration improvised OEF in the aftermath of 9/11, having no prior plans to invade Afghanistan. It was minimalistic, unprecedentedly so — US special forces deployed to the country bought off then-anti-Taliban warlords, mainly those in the Northern Alliance (NA), and, with air support, took on the Taliban and al-Qaeda province by province.[33] The invasion phase ended with the Battle of Tora Bora in December, wherein the US and allied Afghan militias failed to eliminate Osama bin Laden. Thereafter, the enemy fled over the border into Pakistan or went into hiding in the south and east.[34] With neither al-Qaeda nor the Taliban destroyed, each posed a particular threat. Regarding the former, bin Laden could (and would) recruit, fundraise, and plan terrorist attacks while sheltered by the rough borderland terrain.[35] The Taliban had similar means to recuperate, including Pashtun sympathizers in Pakistan and ties to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Islamabad's security agency.[36] Whether it could do so depended on the security situation in Afghanistan. Following the invasion, the country had no monopoly on force, its state capacity was lost to three decades of conflict. Plus, Afghans lacked a national identity to unite them, save for Islam and a history of repelling foreign invaders, the latter in tension with OEF. Holding it together was a fragile interethnic power balance between Pashtun warlords in the south and NA-aligned Tajik and Uzbek warlords in the north. A civil war was likely to erupt, amid which the Taliban could return.[37] The security vacuum in itself might explain why the US had to remain in the country into 2002, but not its militaristic approach nor the lofty objectives it set for Afghan governance. Why, for example, did it forward full-on centralization and democratization as solutions when Afghanistan had a history of neither?

Therefore, a better explanation may lie in how the Bush administration perceived these aforementioned threats. Most notably, the shock of 9/11 was still on the minds of White House officials and voters at the end of 2001, and the emotional impact of that day's atrocities cannot be understated. Even before the attacks, most top US officials were ex-cold warriors holding onto the view that the world was a dangerous place populated by subversive actors. Bush himself entered office distrustful of Russia and China, striving to resume great power competition.[38] 9/11 heightened said insecurities but directed them toward new enemies — terrorists and their rogue state enablers. Somewhat analogous to the Cold War, the war on terror was conceptualized as good-and-evil from its inception, as moral as it was emotional. Amid all of this, al-Qaeda, a transnational, Arab-led group, was conflated with the Taliban, an Islamist movement embedded in and particular to Afghan society.[39] Plus, given the attacks, neither group was seen as having logical, strategic interests beyond "[t]hey hate our freedoms." Some of this Manichaeism might be ascribed to the president, whose earlier conversion to Christianity paralleled the "sacred mission" posed by 9/11.[40] The media also did its best to equate the evils of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, publicizing the former's oppression of women. In the years ahead, politicians would oft-justify foreign aid to Afghanistan and the war effort more generally as advancing women's rights (as liberalism would have it).[41] However, for its part, the Taliban did little to distinguish itself as a non-extremist actor leading up to the invasion, refusing to comply with the Bush administration's late September 2001 ultimatum to hand over bin Laden out of fear of appearing weak.[42]

Said good-and-evil worldviews translated into militarism during the post-invasion period. In particular, the sheer evil of the enemy lent itself to paradoxical anxieties wherein US reputation meant everything and nothing. In the former case, top decision-makers, such as Vice President Dick Cheney, saw 9/11 as a product of the Clinton administration failing to respond forcefully to earlier terrorist attacks like the late 2000 USS *Cole* bombing.[43] To restore its credibility as a hegemon and deter future opportunists from attacking the homeland, the US had to pursue bin Laden and al-Qaeda to the fullest extent, and it had to do so alone (ergo, unilateralism was imperative as well). This would also prove its resolve vis-à-vis allies, which the Bush administration regarded as needing reassurance following 9/11.[44] But neither of these perceptions of perceptions was true. For example, bin Laden likely anticipated US retaliation and hoped to draw it into a conflict that would rally the Islamic world against it.[45] That said, after Tora Bora, al-Qaeda was underground, so the much larger Taliban bore the brunt of US firepower despite not having global ambitions. This may explain the administration's refusal to negotiate with Mullah Omar — reputation was too important for the US to accept peace. According to Rumsfeld and Cheney, "war without compromise" would show Taliban affiliates the consequences of sponsoring terror. In this regard, credibility concerns overlapped with moral ones, with White House officials framing counterterrorism as a matter of "justice."[46]

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At the same time, however, reputation meant nothing. Given how radical an act 9/11 was, it appeared as if conventional deterrence would be of no use against the enemy. Fear of another attack also was rife among the American public. So, counterterrorism could not be scaled down after the Taliban fell, and US forces felt pressured to act on any and all leads despite spotty intelligence and unfamiliarity with the Afghan periphery.[47] The then-commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, desired "a rolling series of operations" in suspected hotbeds to preclude al-Qaeda or the Taliban from returning, despite recognizing that these search and destroy missions eliminated few fighters and led to collateral damage. Indeed, warlords often exploited US resolve by telling troops that their local rivals were affiliated with the enemy.[48] Regardless of the risks, 9/11-related anxieties demanded preventative warfare.

In addition, both dimensions of this reputation-related paradox resulted in incomplete planning for the post-invasion period (i.e., the third and fourth phases of OEF). The plans themselves were rushed because Bush wanted to go after bin Laden as soon as possible, getting him to flee so he could not plot another attack.[49] Moreover, since there was an immediate need to uphold the US resolve vis-à-vis extremists and satisfy calls for justice post-9/11, planning focused on combat operations. Beyond preparations for a humanitarian crisis, the Bush administration did not anticipate the security vacuum when OEF was launched, nor did it expect to nation-build.[50]

This may clarify why liberalism took time to come to fruition, but a more thorough explanation lies in how the US defined the good side in the war on terror. With the enemy consisting of freedom-haters, per the president's sacred mission, the solution was to "restructure the world toward freedom."[51] While Bush had pledged to avoid nation-building before entering office, 9/11-related Manichaeism led him to call for a democratic post-invasion settlement in Afghanistan, but little else beyond that. So, at Bonn, US diplomats shut down alternative approaches to reconstruction, including the widely-supported return of the then-exiled Afghan monarch.[52] In part due to the consensus reached at the conference, the Bush administration took its sort of freedom to be a self-evident, universally-desired good. It thereby overestimated the willingness of Afghan elites to go through with the transition process and build a representative, capable state. In truth, tribal and ethnic rivalries, particularly between Pashtuns and Tajiks, fractured the interim regime from its inception.[53] The arrival of donor money in early-mid 2002 led to graft throughout the state and worsened infighting. The US kept its faith in Karzai — Bush became personally acquainted with the interim president over time, hoping to turn him into a "great politician."[54] Karzai nonetheless embraced corruption to co-opt rivals, so patronage politics endured at the expense of state capacity. The Bush administration turned a blind eye, seeking to maintain good relations and remaining ever-hopeful about a liberal Afghan future.[55]

To some extent, the US shirked nation-building because it thought the Afghans could do so on their own. However, it also placed the international community firmly on the good side and anticipated their assistance. There was an outpouring of sympathy following 9/11: the UN passed a resolution condemning the attacks, and, again, NATO had invoked Article 5 for the first time in its history.[56] The US concluded it could instrumentalize this solidarity in service of its interests. For example, ahead of OEF, Bush assured both voters and his cabinet that the UN would helm post-invasion nation-building, freeing US forces to hunt down the enemy.[57] Yet, following its failures in the Balkans, the UN Secretariat lacked the resolve to do so, nor did it have the capacity or funding.[58] The US then attempted to pass the buck of reconstruction to its allies, getting Germany to run police training, Italy to supervise judicial reforms, the UK to head counternarcotics, and Japan to demobilize militias and run job training programs.[59] The Bush administration overestimated the resolve and competence of these countries, and each went on to mismanage its tasks. As much as it exacted commitments from other states, the US exempted itself from such proceduralism. Again, US decision-makers saw further terrorist attacks as imminent — adhering to UN or even NATO consensus-building would deprive it of the ability to swiftly respond to these threats. Therefore, the war on terror came with an expansive view of the hegemonic stability theory that America's self-interested policing would not only be tolerated but reinforced by other countries given the righteousness of its cause.[60]

Perceptions of scot-free unilateralism and a good-and-evil struggle were likewise applied to Pakistan. Immediately after 9/11, the Bush administration applied pressure on its president Perez Musharraf who agreed to sever ties with the Taliban, share intelligence, hunt down al-Qaeda, and grant US forces overflight rights and access to Pakistani military bases. These concessions proved instrumental in toppling the Taliban and impressed the White House, which took Pakistan as a reliable strategic partner.[61] Yet, domestic opposition to the invasion and sympathy for the

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Taliban and al-Qaeda (particularly in the tribal areas along the Afghan border) meant that extensive coordination with the US could destabilize the country. Pakistan, therefore, refused to take out top-ranking leaders from either group, although Bush took its limited efforts as firmly signaling its resolve.[62] Likewise, Musharraf could not credibly control the ISI, whose cells were setting aside munitions to rearm the Taliban. Their CIA counterparts overlooked this heading into OEF, claiming the ISI to be "more moderate" and "cooperate fully." And, even as the ISI intensified its support for the Taliban post-invasion, the Bush administration did nothing, funneling billions of dollars in economic and military aid to Islamabad.[63]

In sum, good-and-evil worldviews led the US to expect that its allies and the Karzai regime would support democratization. Yet, it also abstained from nation-building (and opted not to monitor partners like Pakistan) out of complacency — as much as the Bush administration held the Taliban to be evil, they also regarded it as "decisively defeated" at the time of Bonn. This view had its origins in the unexpected success of OEF, the enemy crumpling so easily that US officials insisted it had discredited itself in the eyes of Afghans.[64] Therefore, it seemed unnecessary to incorporate the Taliban into post-invasion governance, nor did the US have to fill the security vacuum with counterinsurgency operations. Perceptions of an easy victory further resulted in the White House diverting its attention to Iraq, the foremost member of the "axis of evil" per Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address. Perhaps this was due to enduring credibility concerns, the US needing to strike a target more formidable than the Taliban to bolster its reputation post-9/11. Afghanistan had proven the viability of a minimalistic invasion force, so decision-makers also anticipated that Baghdad would fall with comparable ease.[65]

Thus, insofar as perceptual factors led to militarism, unilateralism, and liberalism (in theory), they resulted in an absence of high-level planning after Bonn. Filling this strategic void was left up to the bureaucracy, and without White House mediation, it fell into interagency conflict. The main rift was between Colin Powell's State Department and Rumsfeld's Defense Department.[66] Powell, who felt the US was obligated to rebuild what it had bombed, wanted to stabilize Afghanistan with a model like that of the 1989 invasion of Panama. The military would secure the country, enabling a fast-paced political transition. Reflective of his department's diplomacy-first culture, he also sought coordination with the UN and NATO.[67] In contrast, with its conservative, routinized culture and preference for simplistic, force-oriented solutions, the Pentagon wanted only counterterrorism. Rumsfeld took this a step further, fearing that Powell's counterinsurgency proposal would stoke perceptions of occupation and, thus, insurgency like that of the Soviet-Afghan War. Rumsfeld was also an architect of transformation, a military doctrine that saw precise, mobile, high-tech capabilities (rather than conventional forces) as the future of US power.[68] The ostensible success of this doctrine in OEF, along with the public favor and increased funding for the war on terror afforded to the military, meant that Pentagon had won over Bush by late 2001. Still, much to the chagrin of Rumsfeld, the diplomatic establishment managed to saddle the Pentagon with training the ANA and got additional humanitarian aid funding from the White House by the end of 2002. The military, nevertheless, remained in the driver's seat.[69]

The outcome of this, particularly Rumsfeld's aversion to entanglement, was a strategic concept known as "light footprint." The militaristic urge that came about due to 9/11 was to be satisfied by an economy of force approach.[70] The Pentagon capped deployments at 8,000 in spring 2002, and, per Rumsfeld, these troops had to "do two things: pursue terrorists to capture or kill and build an Afghan National Army." Upon completing these objectives, they would withdraw, ideally the following year, avoiding a Soviet-style quagmire.[71] The Pentagon was so keen on this latter point (and so confident that "major combat activity" was over) that it left US forces in Afghanistan under-resourced and Dan McNeill's command understaffed.[72] Both "things" proved difficult to complete. Early offensives like Operation Anaconda stretched troops thin, exacerbating logistical difficulties posed by the rough borderland terrain. Moreover, the Pentagon initially allocated only $4 million towards ANA training despite setting ambitious timetables, just 10 weeks per battalion compared to a year or more typically.[73] Shortages only worsened into 2002 as preparations for Iraq came to preoccupy the military establishment, McNeill soon losing his best units, including special forces trainers.[74] On top of this, Rumsfeld's light footprint deemed cooperation with regional warlords as a low-cost, alternative to the ANA in stabilizing the security vacuum, which would further reduce perceptions of occupation by giving the conflict an "Afghan face."[75] The US military, therefore, contracted tribal militias to provide security around their bases and patrol the provinces for Taliban affiliates. But, by bankrolling the warlords, the Pentagon contradicted its attempts to build a monopoly on violence, the militias depriving the ANA of recruits and tribal loyalties harming unit cohesion.[76]

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In this respect, "light footprint" also undermined the US-imposed liberal objectives of the interim government. Warlords set up fiefdoms across the Afghan periphery, engaging in extortion, opium trafficking, and other livelihoods at odds with the rule of law sought by Bonn.[77] In Kabul, elites such as Defense Minister Fahim Khan — a Tajik who retained control over the NA militias — posed a coup risk to Karzai. The interim president subsequently spent his early tenure safeguarding his rule, the 2002 emergency loya jirga balancing power rather than facilitating good governance and cultivating legitimacy.[78] In addition, against Rumsfeld's expectations, the military-first approach demanded by the Pentagon (and spurred on by post-9/11 anxieties) bred Afghan resentment. Indiscriminate US raids became symbolic of its broader mission, and Pashtun honor codes demanded revenge for civilian casualties. Plus, there was a general expectation among Afghans that the US would do more to rebuild the country.[79]

These grievances, coupled with a stagnant, fragmented Karzai regime, resulted in a worsening Afghan threat environment heading into 2003. Not only were warlords on the verge of fighting one another, but the Taliban started to regroup, running recruitment and fundraising efforts in southern Afghanistan and the Pakistani tribal areas. It enjoyed increased ISI funding as well, its officials hoping to counterbalance India, which had fostered relations with Karzai through foreign aid.[80] And after restructuring the Taliban leadership in early 2003, Mullah Omar called for preparations for a large-scale offensive, including a switch to insurgency tactics. In the meantime, the group struck "soft" government targets to reduce confidence in the Karzai regime, and attacks rose from 10 in the first quarter of 2002 to nearly 40 in the fourth quarter of 2003.[81] But Washington remained focused on Iraq and its quick-to-erupt insurgency, and the NSC met just twice in 2003 to discuss Afghanistan. Rumsfeld, meanwhile, declared the majority of Afghanistan "permissive" and "secure" that May. The Pentagon even covered up signs of instability, claiming that an aircraft blown up by insurgents in June 2002 had simply crashed.[82]

Still, officials in the field saw instability for what it was and, despite scarce resources, enjoyed some autonomy with higher-ups looking elsewhere. The result was reactive, bottom-up policymaking.[83] One example was the PRTs, which came out of a need to generate goodwill in unstable provinces. In theory, these would involve agencies like the State Department or USAID with greater local expertise, but their limited capabilities and pressing security concerns led the military to take charge.[84] Another development was TF Phoenix, which set plans for building the ANA, including logistics and command structures, albeit with low training standards given top-down demands for quantity over quality and little concern for Afghan customs. 6,000 troops were ready by 2003, but absenteeism and corruption hindered their combat effectiveness.[85]

Neither policy was enough to address deteriorating conditions, nor were they major departures from the light footprint. Rather, it took a well-connected bureaucrat, Zalmay Khalilzad, Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan, to reorient the war effort. The Afghan-born Khalilzad was unmatched among administration officials in his expertise in the country, and after the invasion, he cultivated a close relationship with the interim president. Khalilzad had nominated Karzai to head the transitional government, admiring him as a unifying figure. The former then became an advisor to the latter, with the two meeting daily in Kabul.[86] Whereas Rumsfeld had ignored Karzai's requests for a crackdown on warlords as "green-on-green," Khalilzad was sympathetic. With the US moving toward nation-building in Iraq by spring 2003, he saw an opportunity to lobby Bush for similar commitments in Afghanistan.[87] Note that Khalilzad was well-respected in Washington as a long-time political insider, and his charisma appealed to Bush. He got his way, the result being "Accelerating Success," which, in general, sought to safeguard Karzai's rule (yet it also expanded development assistance via USAID).[88] With his broad mandate, Khalilzad, who soon became the ambassador to Afghanistan, would meddle in the constitution drafting process, designing the Afghan presidency to have a near-absolute power and a monopoly on political appointments, all for Karzai's sake. He also pushed for provisions like women's rights.[89]

Accelerating Success further coincided with a change of command on the military side. In October 2003, Lieutenant General David Barno took control of US forces in Afghanistan. With light footprint failing, he reached out to Khalilzad, relocating his headquarters to Kabul to facilitate coordination. The two devised a new strategic concept, wherein Karzai's armed rivals like Fahim Khan would be converted into "political figures," forced into the government at gunpoint, their militias demobilized accordingly, while US troops would fill the resultant vacuum with counterinsurgency operations.[90] Per Barno, there was a new "center of gravity" in strengthening support for the democratizing Afghan state, not just eliminating the enemy. If the US gave Afghans "hope…for their future," they

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would reject the Taliban and the warlords, curtailing rising violence.[91] Initially, the White House was unaware of this shift, with these plans all drafted in the field. Regardless, due to bureaucratic power-plays, largely on Khalilzad's part, the US was switching from a force-oriented mission to one with political, liberal aims.[92]

With that, the US embraced full-on nation-building, and, thus, primacy in its entirety. But, heading into and following the 2004 elections, the said-grand strategy did not deliver. In 2006, the Taliban launched their offensive, which the ANA proved incapable of containing.[93] With US forces under pressure, the White House soon asserted itself over the bureaucracy, seeking to stabilize Afghanistan through a whole-of-government approach, but even that was inadequate. Perhaps Bush could have avoided this reactive spiral by embracing primacy in its entirety after Bonn.[94] If it applied the proactive logic of the 2002 NSS to nation-building, OEF would not have been as open-ended and bottom-up. Yet, even with a more coherent, Powell-esque campaign plan, the US would have lacked the requisite capabilities. The military did not have enough advisors to train the ANA in early 2002, while the State Department and USAID had limited Afghan-specific expertise, relying on contractors when they joined stabilization efforts later on.[95]

Therefore, the alternative grand strategy I forward is a more restrained one. In particular, it eschews primacy's bundling of extremism and illiberalism, an assumption central to its militarist and liberal pillars. For example, rather than treating the Taliban as a rogue actor for sponsoring al-Qaeda, the US could have understood the group as having parochial interests (namely, a fundamentalist Afghan society). Doing so would have limited the scope of its military operations — light footprint-sized forces would not be overwhelmed by a preventative war against a broadly-defined enemy, its counterterrorism directed toward al-Qaeda, a group whose ambitions still threatened the US homeland. This would lessen the risks of collateral damage, and thus, unrest.[96] Moreover, these adjustments would have likely led to lesser ISI troublemaking, for the intelligence agency intensified its support for the Taliban to retain influence over post-invasion Afghanistan.[97] As an aside, Pakistan's behavior during this timeframe presented a challenge to hegemonic stability theory, the ISI balancing rather than bandwagoning vis-à-vis US militarism.

As for addressing the Taliban threat, this restrained strategy would have allowed for reconciliation rather than dismissing the group for its less-than-liberal aims. The US eventually embraced negotiations under Obama in 2010, near the height of the insurgency.[98] But, during and right after Bonn, the Taliban was at its weakest, giving the US and Karzai much leverage over whatever political settlement would have arisen. Peace talks would also have been in line with Pashtun norms of reconciliation, rendering them legitimate in the eyes of Afghans. Whether the deal would have been honored is another question, there being al-Qaeda-sympathizing factions within the Taliban. Still, at the very least, the US would have driven a wedge between militants and the war-weary while keeping the door open to the former.[99] The Bush administration had countless opportunities to do this. In early 2002, CIA operatives even held talks with the group's former foreign minister to create a "Taliban for Karzai" political party, although Cheney vetoed this proposal. Effectively, US calls for pluralism stopped with the Taliban, and, excluded from the interim regime, the movement had to resort to violence to get their way.[100]

Now, onto nation-building, this restrained strategy would have been far more flexible, not prescribing a liberal Afghan regime. It would only seek to preclude al-Qaeda's return. Reactive US policymaking after Bonn was in part due to the lofty objectives set at the conference. With constitutional democracy being at odds with Afghans' strong ethnic and tribal loyalties, Accelerating Success-style coercion was needed for it to come to fruition. Instead, the US could have sponsored a state more congruent with indigenous institutions, parting ways with liberalism.[101] This would include permitting the return of the Afghan king at Bonn — historically, the country had enjoyed stability under a monarchy that exercised limited jurisdiction over the periphery. It would also include tolerating Islamism by involving the Taliban in politics — Islam is among one of the few things capable of unifying the country.[102] Reflective of Afghan identity, these modes of governance would likely be legitimate in themselves. In contrast, liberal democracy only enjoys legitimacy insofar as there is good governance, something predicated on pluralism and state capacity. Neither was attainable after Bonn without significant investment, as demonstrated by the unsustainability of a light footprint.[103] To secure Afghanistan into and beyond withdrawal, the US would have committed itself to the warlords, creating a balance of power rather than integrating them into the state by force (or building the ANA). Fahim Khan and other NA leaders endorsed a similarly decentralized model, fearing a Pashtun-dominated regime.[104] This lower-cost, more realpolitik approach to stabilization would have produced a fragile order, the warlords being ambitious actors with

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violent livelihoods. Yet, in doing so, the US would have respected Afghan institutions and avoided insurgency-prone resentment post-invasion.[105] Hence, if the US held off from conflating Taliban illiberalism with al-Qaeda extremism, this "light footprint plus" strategy would have been available. Then again, 9/11-related emotionality solidified the war as a good-and-evil effort for the White House, with moral convictions supplanting strategic planning. Afghans and other allies would rally 'round "the forces of freedom," and with the former liberated from illegitimate Taliban rule, they would seek democratic nationhood sans US nation-building.[106] Likewise, the need for justice and the need for America to prove itself as a hegemonic sheriff lent themselves to monolithic threat perceptions and concern for force above all else. When these assumptions led to instability, a reactive, bottom-up scramble ensued. Overall the emergence of primacy in the early post-invasion phase of the US War in Afghanistan attests to the interaction between morality and grand strategy, rendering the latter a less-than-rational concept. As demonstrated by Washington's strategic drift in the months after Bonn, short-term righteousness trades off with long-term considerations. And, by reducing decision-makers' appreciation of on-the-ground realities, it may set the stage for forever war.

Notes

[1] Avey, Markowitz, and Readon, "Disentangling Grand Strategy."

[2] Daadler and Lindsay, "The Bush Revolution."

[3] Avey, Markowitz, and Readon.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Daadler and Lindsay.

[6] Avey, Markowitz, and Readon.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Silove, "Disentangling Grand Strategy."

[9] U.S. and Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

[10] Daadler, Lindsay, and Steinberg, "The Bush National Security Strategy."

[11] U.S. and Bush.

[12] Daadler, Lindsay, and Steinberg.

[13] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 40-48.

[14] Lebovic, *Planning to Fail*, 129-133.

[15] Whitlock, *Afghanistan Papers*, 29-44.

[16] Coll, *Directorate S*, 184-187; Wright, 223-229.

[17] Wright, 220-223; Coll, 253-260.

[18] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 230-234.

[19] Lebovic, 134-136; 141-143.

[20] Wright, 189-195.

[21] Ibid., 195-200.

[22] Malkasian, 147-150.

[23] Suhkre, "The Case for a Light Footprint."

[24] Malkasian, 190-195; Coll, 187-195.

[25] Whitlock, 106-123.

[26] Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 229-237.

[27] Whitlock 122-125.

[28] Jones, 237-240; Wright, 239-254.

[29] Whitlock, 91-98.

[30] Coll, 152-154.

[31] Malkasian, 209-215.

[32] Montiero, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, 61-77.

[33] Jones, 174-187.

[34] Malkasian, 161-166.

[35] Jones, "Lessons from the Tribal Areas."

[36] Malkasian, 254-260.

[37] Ibid., 169-174; Mukhopadhyay, "Building a Theory of Strongman Governance in Afghanistan," 24-32.

[38] Daadler and Lindsay; Dobbins, "The Costs of Overreaction."

[39] Whitlock, 46-62.

[40] Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine."

[41] Malkasian, 175-179, 188-189, 459-461.

[42] Ibid., 119-126.

[43] Daadler and Lindsay.

[44] Dobbins.

[45] Malakasian, 113-114.

[46] Coll, 153-154, 204-210.

[47] Malkasian, 229-235.

[48] Ibid., 235-239; Wright, 209-218.

[49] Malkasian, 124-130.

[50] Lebovic, 122-129; Dobbins.

[51] Jervis.

[52] Nojumi, *American State-Building in Afghanistan and Its Regional Consequences*, 51-53; Whitlock, 23-30, 41-45.

[53] Lebovic, 139-143.

[54] Coll, 262-267.

[55] Mukhopadhyay, 40-48; Lebovic, 140-141.

[56] Daddler and Lindsay; Lebovic, 141-143.

[57] Whitlock, 65-72.

[58] Suhkre.

[59] Wright, 181-200; Whitlock, 72-80.

[60] Daddler and Lindsay.

[61] Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 168-174.

[62] Malkasian, 254-258.

[63] Coll, 134-142.

[64] Malkasian, 147-149, 171-173; Whitlock, 56-63.

[65] Daadler and Lindsay; Butt, "Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?"

[66] Keane, 74-86.

[67] Jones, 196-204.

[68] Ibid., 224-225; Keane, 56-68.

[69] Whitlock, 99-104; 112-115.

[70] Suhkre.

[71] Coll, 196-198; Lebovic, 133-137.

[72] Wright, 209-216.

[73] Ibid., 229-237.

[74] Jones, 240-247.

[75] Wright, 43-46, 211-217.

[76] Jones, 223-226; Malkasian, 195-200.

[77] Mukhopadhyay, 30-32; Coll, 199-204.

[78] Wright, 231-236; Malkasian, 181-184.

[79] Malkasian, 234-237.

[80] Ibid., 221-229, 240-252.

[81] Wright, 239-242.

[82] Ibid., 237-239; Coll, 196-198.

[83] Lebovic, 129-137.

[84] Wright, 223-228.

[85] Malkasian, 191-203.

[86] Nojumi, 57-60.

[87] Coll, 192-195, 261-267.

[88] Ibid., 265-275; Jones, 229-236.

[89] Malkasian, 184-189.

[90] Coll, 276-282.

[91] Wright, 242-260.

[92] Lebovic, 143-146.

[93] Jones, 263-284.

[94] Keane, 1-11; Nojumi, 2-9.

[95] Keane, 63-70.

[96] Malkasian, 236-240; Lebovic, 133-135.

[97] Coll, 208-212; Malkasian, 254-256.

[98] Dobbins and Malkasian, "Time to Negotiate in Afghanistan."

[99] Munoz, "A Long-Overdue Adaptation to the Afghan Environment."

[100] Coll, 204-210.

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[101]Munoz.

[102] Ibid.; Mukhopadhyay, 19-22; Fukuyama, "20/20 Hindsight."

[103] Suhkre.

[104] Malkasian, 183-186.

[105] Fukuyama.

[106] Jervis; Jones, "Lessons from the Tribal Areas."

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