

## Can the War in Afghanistan Still Be Won?

**Opposing arguments in a debate as old as the conflict itself.**

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Jared Moosy / Redux

A commander on a hillside in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan

Only those who were in the room know what was said in the series of White House meetings about America's policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it's likely that at least some of the views expressed paralleled those heard at last week's Intelligence Squared US debate at New York University, because the six speakers among them counted decades of experience in defense, intelligence, diplomatic, and think-tank circles. The topic, "America Cannot and Will Not Succeed in Afghanistan/Pakistan," put the question about as bluntly as possible.

*intelligence*<sup>2</sup>  
DEBATES

*Those arguing for the motion were Steven Clemons, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation; retired Col. Patrick Lang, a former military-intelligence officer; and Ralph Peters, a retired Army officer, author, and Fox News strategic analyst.*

Arguing against the motion were Steve Coll, CEO of the New America Foundation; retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. John Nagl, president of the Center for a New American Security; and James Shinn,

assistant secretary of defense for Asia in 2007–08. The moderator was John Donvan of ABC News. Excerpts:

**Lang:** General [Stanley] McChrystal [the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan] evidently wants 40,000 more people. I would say that's how we started in Vietnam too. The reason I don't think we can win with a counterinsurgency strategy is because three or four years down the pike all you good people are going to say, "Are the Taliban really our enemies, in the sense that Al Qaeda was? Is this really what we want to do?" And when that happens I suspect you're going to tell Congress you've had enough of this, and they will vote to end the war as they did in Vietnam.

**Coll:** We too often talk about Afghanistan as a primitive land that has been at war for centuries. Afghanistan [before the Soviet invasion in 1979] was a coherent and mainly peaceful independent state. After 2001 Afghans returned to their country from refugee camps and exile to reclaim their state. A strong plurality of Afghans still want to finish that work, and they want the international community to stay and help. Most Afghans are sick of war, and afraid of the Taliban's return. We have an obligation and a national interest and we have the capacity to stand by them.

We've heard much anxiety about the allegations of fraud in the recent presidential election, and for good reason. But consider what has not happened. No opposition protesters have taken to the streets; not a single rock has been thrown. The opposition leader has spoken freely, but within the constitutional system. In Kenya a couple of years ago the incumbent president stole his reelection and the entire country burned down. The great majority of Afghans want security and normalcy.

The ultimate exit strategy for the United States from South Asia is Pakistan's success. This is not assured, but the prospects are improving. The best way for the United States to support this momentum is to stay in Afghanistan, stabilize that country, marginalize the Taliban through population security and negotiations, and broaden and deepen its engagement in Pakistan.

**Clemons:** A few years ago in China I went to see [the government's foreign-policy planners], and I said, "What are you folks working on?" And they said, "How to keep you guys distracted in small Middle Eastern countries." The issue today is whether the United States after eight years of failing to move the needle, in fact seeing the needle come back very dramatically, is convincing the world it can achieve the objectives it sets out for itself. We are convincing China that we're a basket case. China would have to finance this war. We're paying \$65 billion a year just in military [costs] in Afghanistan. That number is bigger than the entire GDP of Afghanistan. We could buy the entire place and put everyone to work. At some point you have to pull the plug and begin to move in a different direction.

**Nagl:** Many of the Taliban insurgents today are economic insurgents; there is no other way for them to feed their families than to take money to [fight]. So for a very few dollars, well invested, we can peel away the less committed parts of the insurgency. We were able to do this in al-Anbar [province] in Iraq. In March the Pakistani government decided because of extraordinary

American pressure to fight against the insurgents [in] the Swat River Valley, just 60 miles from the capital, and in a not very sophisticated but very effective counterinsurgency they cleared the Taliban out. Pakistan is about to do the same thing in South Waziristan. The most important thing we can do to help them is to continue counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

**Peters:** Eight years on, the Taliban have no trouble attracting volunteers; in fact, their numbers are swelling. And we can't get the Afghan Army to show up. The Taliban are willing to give their lives for their cause; the Afghan Army and police are not willing to die for the woefully corrupt and incompetent government of Hamid Karzai.

Now, John Nagl said the Taliban are economic soldiers. You do not sign up to stand against the greatest army in history, and give your life, for the Afghan equivalent of a minimum wage. And we pay better than the Taliban. Why aren't they lining up to join the Afghan Army? Why do our soldiers and Marines have to go into battle alone, or, worse, watching over their shoulders to see if the Afghans with them are going to shoot them in the back?

Why did we go into Afghanistan in 2001? Because of Al Qaeda. To punish them, to smash them, and to punish those who harbored them. Afghanistan was a low-budget terrorist motel. So the Feds raid the motel, kill some of the bad guys, capture some, and others escape. And instead of going after the ones who escaped, we [stay to] renovate the motel!

**Shinn:** The intelligence we get about Al Qaeda and their fellow travelers comes from the networks run by the Afghans and the Pakistanis. If we walked away, why on earth would they share that intelligence with us? Let's assume you have intelligence about a cell that is planning another attack in New York. How do you strike at them? Right now the way we do it is with [unmanned] Predators. They have a range of about 400 miles. It's 600 miles from Waziristan to [American warships in] the Indian Ocean. Fundamentally, to protect ourselves from terrorism we need access and cooperation in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. We don't need to stabilize the whole country. This is about as stark a statement of national interest that I can think of.

**Lang :** I don't really care who controls most of Afghanistan. What I'm interested in doing is disrupting the people who might use Afghanistan as a base for planning operations against the United States. We have to stop thinking about improving the lot of the average Afghan and start thinking about protecting people here, and nothing else.

**Nagl :** And you believe it's possible to do that.

**Lang :** Well, you may believe it's possible for us over a sustained period to have a couple of hundred thousand troops in Afghanistan and maintain in power a government like Karzai's. But I'm telling you, people will make a rational decision and tell Congress, "Let's knock this stuff off."

**Coll :** What you're really talking about is whether or not it is worth attempting to hold on to the Afghan state long enough to allow the Afghan National Army to take the lead in the security of that state. I mean ...

**Peters :** Steve, for God's sakes. Eight years. When is the Afghan Army going to show up?

**Nagl :** Ralph, I took great exception to your statement that the Afghans are not fighting and dying. More than 100 Afghan police are being killed every month by the Taliban. So these guys are showing up for the fight.

**Peters :** John, John ... the Afghan police are dying because they're hiding in their police posts and the Taliban are surrounding them and killing them.

**Audience members were polled before and after the debate. The first vote agreed with the proposition that America cannot succeed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by 48 percent to 25 percent. After the debate, the audience split 45 to 43 percent against the motion.**

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