

Afghanistan: a lost cause?

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by Harry Lee

This fall's second to last Intelligence Squared debate took place last night at the Skirball Center. Speakers debated the motion that "Afghanistan is a lost cause."

Speaking for the motion were Center for International Policy senior fellow Matthew Hoh, who resigned from his State Department appointment in Afghanistan in protest over the U.S. combat strategy in the conflict, and Iranian-American journalist Nir Rosen, who has reported from Iraq, Afghanistan and a number of other regions paralyzed by conflict.

The opposing team was made up of journalist Peter Bergen, who conducted the world's first televised interview with Osama Bin Laden in 1997, and leading American historian Max Boot.

Prior to the debate, the audience was polled on their opinions of the motion. The results showed 46 percent of the audience voted in favor of it, 23 percent voted against and 31 percent was undecided. Speakers took a strong voice against corruption and ineffectiveness of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's administration.

Both Hoh and Rosen condemned the Afghan government and its army for failing to cooperate with American and NATO forces, despite enormous funding by the American government.

"The last thing we want to do is to ally ourselves with Afghan government, which is hated by most of the population," Rosen said. "The Afghan police are dealing drugs ... stealing from stores [and] the Afghan army never show[s] up."

But Bergen countered the claim, saying that given the leadership of "Afghanistan's neighborhoods" and of Afghan history, the Karzai government was "looking pretty good."

With the matter of national security in scope, Boot suggested that abandoning operations in Afghanistan "would create a safe haven" for Al Qaeda activity, thus exposing national security.

However, Rosen downplayed the Taliban as a potential threat and dismissed the notion that al-Qaeda was an issue.

"They are no threat to the U.S.," he said. "Al-Qaeda is not in Afghanistan. They are in Pakistan, Yemen, Internet cafes and slums around the world."

After the debate, a second poll revealed that 36 percent voted against the motion, while 51 percent of audience members were in favor. 13 percent remained undecided.

Stern sophomore Shany Penn said he harbored mixed feelings toward the debate.

"We were supporting and developing a corrupt government," she said. "I think we should be responsible for fixing it, and I don't think that to say it's a lost cause is the best way of going about it."