

Afghanistan

myths and legends

Jim Molan

As a practitioner of counter insurgency with experience in Iraq, I often find myself discussing the Afghanistan insurgency and what can be learned from Iraq. In my discussions, I have noticed that popular legends and urban myths often divert discussion on countering the insurgency in Afghanistan, just as they did in Iraq – and often with as little validity. A few of these rhetorical flourishes and conceptual mirages should be addressed.

'Victory will not be achieved by military means alone'. No military person of any credibility ever said that it would. But the military has overwhelming responsibility to counter insurgencies especially in their initial stages, which often last for years. The Iraq counter insurgency is now just out of its initial stage after six years. Social and infra-structural reconstruction, and political compromises and reform, can now succeed without physical interference. The full range of counter insurgency measures and techniques aimed at 'hearts and minds' can now be applied.

'This is a "civil war" so foreigners should not be involved in it'. This implies that, even if it was a civil war (whatever that is), foreign involvement is somehow prohibited. There is no such moral rule or legal prohibition and neither should there be – each involvement should be judged on its merits. The alternative is for the international community to ignore intra-State problems even where they are likely to fester into inter-State ones. Not to mention ignoring the humanitarian responsibility to try and prevent genocide, terrorism or other atrocities. Such as in Kandahar a few weeks ago, where the Taliban spurted battery acid into the faces of schoolgirls as part of their longstanding opposition to the female half of the population receiving an education – or indeed having any civil and political rights.

'Western forces are the problem so remove them and the problem will go away'. This naïve belief ignores Afghan history after the Soviets left. Not only were the Afghan people subjected to over a decade of vicious conflict but Afghanistan became a sanctuary where al Q-aeda trained Islamist terrorists for attacks across the world. The perpetrators of the 9/11, Bali and London attacks all received their command, control and training in and/or from Afghanistan.

Offering a false and lazy analogy between the Soviet invasion and the UN-endorsed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) also ignores that ISAF is supporting Afghanistan's first ever elected government (however imperfect this government may be as it develops) rather than propping up a brutal communist dictatorship. ISAF also makes great efforts to comply with international humanitarian law (IHL). The Taliban and al Qa'eda in contrast ignore IHL and regard Western compliance with it as a vulnerability to be exploited ruthlessly, not respected or reciprocated.

'The Soviets could not do it, so how can we be successful'. This ignores that the Soviets were an occupying army propping up an unelected dictatorial regime, not a UN-endorsed assistance mission. Moreover, there are no guarantees in war – if the West became as involved or used the same methods as the Soviets in Afghanistan, we too might fail. The more advanced technology that we now possess is not the answer but it is a factor. The quality and experience of US troops, and their restraint in counter insurgency, is now far higher than the Soviets. One of our greatest advantages is our morality and our openness to scrutiny.

'Australia does not have a strategic interest in Afghanistan'. This reflects an interesting view of the challenge from Islamist extremists for a country living next to the largest Islamic nation in the world, (and where 88 Australians were murdered by Islamist terrorists). It is a narrow view in the extreme, and denies our humanity and our responsibilities as relatively wealthy and lucky citizens of this interdependent world.

'There is only one course of action, and it is to: talk to the Taliban; or conduct a diplomatic offensive; or change the nature of the government'. There are any number of purported simple answers to the Afghanistan problem and all of them are wrong. Insurgencies are only amenable to a comprehensive strategy and it is never easy.

'Western democracies are incapable of long term commitments'. The US (and a few of its allies) stayed the course in Iraq. Our enemies may now not be so certain that we will 'cut and run' when it gets tough or they get even nastier.

'The financial crisis now means we cannot afford it'. The financial crisis is the greatest own goal of the fight against extreme Islamism. If the issues are acknowledged as big enough, the costs of a commitment to Afghanistan can still be met.

'Australia is so small we could not make a significant contribution'. The US and the UK, the bulwarks of our world security system, are desperate for usable and professional military assistance. Australia can make a significant contribution and as a minimum should look to the Dutch and Canadians as a benchmark. What does a defence budget of \$A22 billion actually buy us if we cannot provide a range of strategic and moral options to government? Our strategic guidance has been telling us for years that we must be able to make and sustain the kind of deployment that could be appropriate for Afghanistan, and now we somehow cannot do it?

'Australia went to Afghanistan to prevent international terrorism – we are already strategically successful'. This is a popular official self-delusion used for ending discussion at Senate Estimates hearings. It is meant to reinforce a view that Australia has done enough, but confuses rhetoric with actual results. It certainly wins some discussions but ignores the reality of the entire world outside Canberra.

'Australian troops are fighting well – we are tactically successful'. There is no denying that Australian troops are fighting well at the tactical level in Afghanistan. If nothing changes it should be expected that, like, Vietnam, they will continue to perform brilliantly at the tactical level until the day that we lose the war strategically.

There can be no certainty in war. Winning is never guaranteed. Troop commitment in such foreign interventions is about probability. More troops only decrease the probability of being defeated, and increase the probability of winning. Similarly, to think and talk clearly about Afghanistan may increase the probability of making a right decision. But the other thing that Iraq teaches me is that, regardless of our understanding, we always reserve the right to make extraordinarily stupid decisions.

All wars are ultimately contests of will and end when one side gives up. Most wars involve tough choices, moral dilemmas and considerable sacrifice. Quitting just because the course of the war has seemingly become hard is simply defeatism or escapism rather than intellectual or moral fortitude. Quitting in the face of an enemy who despises international law and our whole way of life will only postpone further confrontations not prevent them on terms acceptable to the international community. ♦

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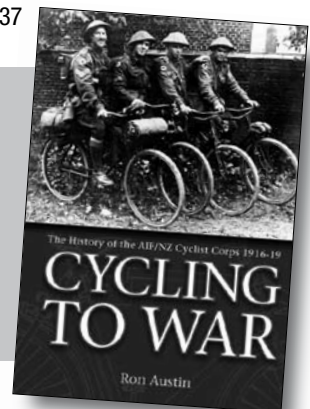
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