

The Strategy of Graceful Decline

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In his detailed and thoughtful essay in this issue of *Ethics & International Affairs*, Professor Richard Miller complains that “just war theory does not provide sufficient guidance” for a thorough and reliable moral assessment of the arguments for and against continuing the American and NATO military presence in Afghanistan (p. 103). His appropriate concern for the enormous “moral costs” of the war (in terms of the continuing toll of death, injury, and widespread suffering it inflicts on the population at large) constitutes a serious objection to prolonging it in terms of the disproportionate harm it does, relative to any conceivable justifications that might be proposed for its continuation. Such considerations of proportionality, however, which infuse the greater portion of his analysis, fall squarely within the purview of conventional just war doctrine, and do not themselves suggest any fundamental inadequacy or inability on its part in providing a powerful moral critique of proposals to prolong the American and NATO presence in Afghanistan.

His principal objection, rather, is that the doctrine’s “standard lists of just causes” for war seem to preclude, almost as a matter of principle, any moral evaluation whatsoever of what emerges (on Miller’s analysis) as the principal underlying strategic justification for continuing that military presence. That “strategic justification,” as Miller summarizes it, amounts to the devastating consequences of a perceived U.S. and NATO defeat or mission failure in Afghanistan on the current global balance of power, and on prospects for sustaining America’s role as the sole dominant political power in that current international arrangement.

Much of Miller’s essay is given over to demonstrating how background anxiety over the eventual fate of the existing global balance of power, and the attendant desire to continue America’s presumably benevolent hegemony (in lieu of allowing it to decline gradually to a lesser status of merely “first among major powers”, is indeed the sole underlying, operational justification broadly shared by this nation’s governing elite for continuing the Afghan war. He demonstrates this in

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large part by systematically considering and discrediting every alternative explanation and justification for that war. He argues convincingly, for example, that none of the more conventional claims or “failed causes” concerning the purpose of this counterinsurgency—such as national self-defense (achieved through defeating the Taliban militarily), or “rescue from grave and systematic injustice” (by protecting the basic human rights of Afghan citizens, especially women, who would otherwise be victimized by the Taliban’s return to power), or even establishing the rule of law and reconstructing the nation’s civic infrastructure—could remotely justify the continuation of the death, suffering, and widespread human misery that have plagued Afghanistan for over three decades (pp. 113–14). Neither could such failed causes serve to justify the increasing toll of deaths, injuries, and general misery imposed upon the individual members of U.S. and NATO military forces in their efforts to attain them.

On the one hand, Miller himself seems to appeal in part to familiar just war categories (proportionality and last resort) to delegitimize these alternative failed causes. On the other hand, however, he finds it lamentable and ultimately unacceptable that this doctrine traditionally precludes (as Miller argues it does) a similar, thorough moral evaluation of the larger strategic aims that might still justify inflicting this continuing degree of misery in their pursuit.

In fairness, it is not strictly the case that the just war tradition precludes *any consideration whatsoever* of the putative moral value of political stability achieved through some existing balance of power as a possible just cause for war. Witness the discussions by Alberto Gentili (1612) and Emer de Vattel (1758) of morally justifiable preemptive—and even preventive—wars that might presumably be fought to maintain and defend such benevolent, or at least propitious, international arrangements.¹ It also seems somewhat odd to criticize the alleged inadequacies of an admittedly provisional conceptual framework (I hesitate to elevate just war doctrine itself to the status of a “theory”) that Miller himself otherwise presupposes to great effect in his own essay to evaluate several of the admittedly tenuous “failed causes” for continuing the Afghan war at present. What is certainly true, especially after the dawn of the nuclear era, is that just war doctrine, particularly as formulated by Michael Walzer, converged to a rather dim view of “just causes” for war that were grounded in arguments about the preservation of some existing (and presumably beneficent) balance of power. Walzer, for example, in *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977, chap. 5) considers and rejects the moral adequacy of a number of historical examples, of the sort Gentili and Vattel themselves might

have licensed, as speculative, vacuous, and hopelessly self-serving. But that leaves entirely open the question of whether such arguments, in the present case, are similarly deficient.

Miller is right to demand that we take these oft-expressed concerns for the preservation of American hegemony seriously, and subject them to rigorous cross-examination, especially if (as he demonstrates rather convincingly) these are, in fact, the kinds of justifications that are being advanced and otherwise accepted and acted on by the current governing elites. Anthony Lang reminds us that, in both international law and the older just war tradition, the formal or procedural authority of elected officials, diplomats, and statesmen to determine the course of state affairs (including the declaration and prosecution of war) must constantly be challenged by what he terms the “theoretical authority” exercised by philosophers, political theorists, and other intellectuals who publicly cross-examine the adequacy of that policy and propose viable alternatives.² Francisco di Vitoria (1539), in the midst of savage wars of conquest and religious Reformation, likewise eloquently explained that in such matters the sovereign authorities urgently require wider public guidance, so as not to err in their prudent conduct of state affairs.³ Thus, if we now simply ignore or dismiss these “global hegemony” arguments out of hand, we fail to discharge our public function in the political order to offer sound advice and proper guidance.

For his part, Miller cites an overwhelming body of data suggesting that the strategic case for continued American “benevolent” hegemony is deeply suspect. A careful consideration of the evidence will, he argues, demonstrate that, on balance, our continuing effort to support that hegemony contributes far more in the way of suffering, misery, violence, and death, especially in developing countries, than it does in the way of benefits in the forms most frequently cited in its defense (human rights protection, education, health care, and eradication of poverty). Our continuing presence in Afghanistan, at least, cannot be justified by such broad and long-term strategic considerations, any more than by the failed causes he earlier dismissed. Hence, working “outside the corridors of power” (as most persons invariably do), “our foremost responsibility is to call for an end to America’s Afghan war, contributing to a movement that imposes maximum pressure to cease fire, make concessions, reduce forces, and depart (p. 126).”

What is to be said in response? On the one hand, I am inclined to agree with Miller that predicating our continuing presence in Afghanistan, with all the attendant suffering for everyone concerned that this entails, on some sort of

sweeping strategic assessment of either the moral or political superiority of continued American hegemony is grandiose and probably inaccurate. I believe it is also largely irrelevant to the tactical decision to wind up the American-led NATO campaign sooner, rather than later, the timing of which will (and should) depend instead upon more immediate and urgent regional considerations.

With regard to this “strategic thinking” about America’s continued global dominance itself: I am continually dismayed at the grip such thinking has on the imaginations of otherwise brilliant, if sometimes haughty and invariably condescending, political “insiders.” It manifests a kind of star-chamber groupthink that is all but unassailable, utterly impervious to reason or evidence, despite considerable (some, like Miller, would say “overwhelming”) quantities of both to the contrary. This kind of supposedly “strategic” thinking is less a result of considered judgment grounded in historical evidence or hard-nosed, data-driven political analysis than it is a litmus test of political orthodoxy, delineating the politically savvy Beltway insiders from irrelevant or naïve “outsiders,” stifling alternative or dissenting voices who (as argued above) are otherwise crucial to the process of constructive policy formulation. These perspectives constitute a pernicious and ultimately destructive ideology that blinds rather than informs prudent political judgment—of a piece with the once dominant and ever-pretentious domestic economic ideology concerning market discipline, property values, and risk assessment that has now all but brought the nation to its knees.

Such global posturing is also irrelevant to the decision about whether or not to “stay the course” in Afghanistan. Read the president’s lips: “we are *leaving!*” NATO forces are already drawing down, and the Americans are going home. The only question is when: 2014? A bit earlier, or later? This situation has not and could not embolden America’s adversaries any more than they already are, since this outcome was already a foregone conclusion. The only question is what will remain in the wake of this eventual evacuation. The fondest hopes of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan were, of course, to leave behind the legacy of a stable national government with an army sufficiently strong to secure the nation’s borders, a police force sufficiently well trained and uncorrupted to ensure domestic safety and security, and an infrastructure sufficient to ensure adequate food, water, education, transportation, and jobs.

In light of rampant corruption in the Afghan national government (which Transparency International now ranks as among the worst in the world), coupled with the long-standing, simmering ethnic animosities and distrust that Miller

describes, these hopes were probably overly ambitious. Afghanistan (as pundits remind us) is not Iraq, and Iraq is not going all that swimmingly at present. Still, if the Chinese build a railroad, and if India improves the (virtually nonexistent) highway system to facilitate trade in energy and mining, then this cannot but represent an improvement for Afghan citizens, who currently have neither, and who would unquestionably benefit from the jobs and income such construction and trade would produce.

Significantly, Miller is well past the first third of his essay before mentioning, if only in passing, the single most stunning development in this conflict over the past several years: the effective disappearance of al-Qaeda from the public eye. Virtually without comment in the media or from the public generally, the military's focus has shifted almost entirely to "the Taliban" as the principal adversaries in the insurgency. The significance of this is twofold. First, unlike al-Qaeda specifically, and Islamic militant extremists generally, the Taliban have genuine political interests and ambitions, and so are amenable to some sort of political settlement. They were not, after all, within the original purview of the American and NATO attack, and were encompassed within that attack only when they refused to cooperate in bringing a halt to al-Qaeda's illicit and criminal enterprise within their own borders. As this issue goes to print, Osama bin Laden has finally been caught and killed, and Al-Qaeda has all but disappeared (though some expect its resurgence, or replacement by another, equally malevolent organization). The Taliban, meanwhile, have more immediate interests and concerns of their own, such as stopping Predator attacks. This generates a guardedly hopeful situation in the south, not unlike that of the insurgency in the Sunni Triangle in Iraq, which may yet prove amenable to General David Petraeus's brand of political (as well as military) counterinsurgency.

That is significant, in turn, because despite whatever fantasies are harbored among Washington intelligentsia concerning a perpetual global hegemony, the more immediate concern is the political fragility of Afghanistan's immediate nuclear neighbor, Pakistan. Miller does not mention the problem of nuclear proliferation, either through the stated aspirations of Iran, or through the not-unlikely disintegration of the Pakistani government (with an attendant dismembering of its nuclear arsenal). Those are not trivial or specious concerns, and have little to do, one way or another, with the United States' (or at least its governing elite's) alleged global aspirations or with our allegedly partial and one-sided political affiliation with Israel. Instead, these are grave and serious contingencies whose very real

threat is of a kind and degree that may justify staying put, if just a little longer, to help in some way achieve a political stasis that would offset their eventuality.

Those are among the real and immediate (and, I submit, morally legitimate) concerns that I suggested earlier were more germane to our immediate policy in Afghanistan, and which I felt were largely ignored in the debate Miller constructs between himself and advocates of continuing American global supremacy. There remain the considerations of public welfare and individual preferences within Afghanistan itself. Here again, despite careful attention to statistical detail and to the testimony of authoritative experts, such as Gilles Dorronsoro of the Carnegie Endowment, I believe Miller's analysis strays wide of the mark. There can be little doubt about the frustration and exhaustion among the rank and file with decades of persistent war, conflict, and misery, coupled with the desire to put an end to it, and for the occupation forces to "go home." Yet there is an additional refrain often added, which neither Miller nor Dorronsoro credit: ". . . but not quite yet!" If, as Miller acknowledges, despite some success in providing stable local government in the south, "most Afghans do not want to live under Taliban rule (p. 106)," then there is reason (as well as desire, voiced among large segments of the population) for the ISAF forces to remain in place at least until that matter is satisfactorily resolved.

That, of course, may seem merely to recur to the broader concerns about regional stability and nuclear nonproliferation summarized above. But for the moment there is another, very surprising demographic dimension to this reluctance to send the ISAF troops home. Miller cites the tragic statistic concerning the abnormally high death rate among members of the population under the age of five, and the equally tragic statistic concerning the average lifespan in Afghanistan itself (less than forty-five years). Coupled with statistics on age distribution in Afghanistan from the CIA's *World Factbook* (for example: the median age of both males and females is about eighteen, while 42 percent of the population is under the age of fourteen), one concludes that an astonishingly large percentage (somewhat more than 70 percent) of the population are youth—that is, children, teenagers, and young adults.⁴

Our conclusions from the numerous surveys that Miller cites concerning "what Afghans themselves want" are subject to considerable reinterpretation in light of such demographics. Colleagues well versed from long acquaintance with local customs, and fascinated by popular culture, report that in a typical village on Friday evening, neighbors gather outside the home of whoever is fortunate enough to

own a television and satellite dish. The television is set up on the hood of a truck or other suitable location, a long cable is run to a nearby generator, and everyone proceeds to watch the most popular television show in Afghanistan: *Afghan Star*, Afghanistan's homegrown version of *American Idol*.⁵ This kind of data does not figure large in the prognostications of the Council on Foreign Relations, of faculty at the Sorbonne, or, for that matter, of contributors to, or readers of, this journal. (Other favorite programs apparently include Bollywood movies and a new program, *Eagle Four*, depicting honest Afghan police battling crime at all levels of society.)

This suggests that the majority of the Afghan population harbor aspirations that are not altogether unfamiliar to those of us in the West, but which nonetheless tend to escape the over-intellectualized conceptual frameworks of moral philosophers and political theorists from an older generation. It is hardly surprising that young persons, possessed of such interests and aspirations, do not want a return of Taliban rule! Nor is it surprising that they are not the least bit interested in whether or not America continues its dominant role in the global political order. Their aspirations, and their political impact, can be read in the ongoing upheavals in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Libya. They apparently share much in common with what P. W. Singer and his 21st Century Defense Initiative team at Brookings Institution report among the United States' own population of the same age: a desire to attain meaningful jobs, status, and prospects, and thereby finally make something of themselves at home, along with less precisely formulated desires to reduce poverty, encourage internationalism, and foster respect for individualism and human rights (in lieu of unilateral hegemony) abroad.⁶ Whatever one privately thinks of the substance, depth, or coherence of such views, we can hardly dispute their pervasiveness, their profoundly transformative impact, and the right of Afghan youth to share in them.

This prompts a concluding reflection on the adequacy of just war doctrine itself—specifically, the neglected category of “right intention.” Professor Miller's discussion follows recent trends in just war discourse by focusing primarily on just cause and proportionality as the principal factors to consider when assessing NATO efforts in Afghanistan. The primary triad of traditional just war categories, however, did not elevate either proportionality or even last resort (which has a surprisingly checkered history in that tradition) to positions of priority. Instead, alongside just cause and legitimate authority (still the most vexed remaining question in our own nation's recent decisions to resort to war), the third overriding

consideration, reflecting the influence of Ambrose and Augustine, was right intention.

To be sure, intentionality has suffered of late at the hands of philosophers in particular, who wonder at the lingering folk psychology that seems to allow the moral permissibility of an act (as in the medieval “doctrine of double effect”) to vary as a function of the thoughts inside an agent’s head.⁷ Naturally, those thoughts continue to matter in some sense, both in law and in morality. What the killer was thinking or hoping to accomplish when he took the life of the victim, for example, determines the degree to which we condemn him, and the extent to which we sentence or punish him. Intentionality bears on the very meaning of agency itself, whether individual or collective, as well as on our moral evaluation of that agency. Notwithstanding the consternation of philosophers, that moral evaluation may at times extend to determining the very permissibility of an act (such as an act of war), as well as the degree of culpability assessed for undertaking it. Immanuel Kant, rightly renowned for recognizing this crucial point, but confronted simultaneously with the obvious difficulties of directly discerning the “unknowable depths of the human heart” as a reliable basis for rendering such complex moral judgments, concluded famously that the morally salient dimensions of our intentions, as these bear on the permissibility of our actions, are reflected objectively in (and therefore ought to be judged strictly according to) the *strategies* we formulate and the *policies* we finally pursue, whether in individual actions or in statecraft.

In this precise sense, the just war tradition, with its ancient, Augustinian category of right intention, neither neglects nor precludes, but instead focuses precisely on the central question of Miller’s essay: our current *policy* in Afghanistan, and the *strategy* that lies behind it. If our strategy or intention was (and remains) to enable the individual liberties of impoverished and long-oppressed peoples to restore a modicum of order and security to their region so that they might pursue their individual paths to happiness, then our corresponding policy should be to remain as long as our presence enables that permissible and morally worthy strategy. If our policy was instead (or has now evolved) to ravage the countrysides of Afghanistan and Pakistan (as Miller accuses) in pursuit of the strategic goal of maintaining some privileged status in the global balance of power, then such a strategy, and its corresponding policy, must be found impermissible, and we ourselves found culpable for a cynical betrayal of the good faith of the young men and women in uniform whom we sent there.

They did as we asked, and went willingly for the morally worthy reasons we claimed to embrace at the time: with rifles to avenge slain countrymen and pursue the criminal perpetrators of murder and mayhem after 9/11, as well as with picks and shovels to rebuild a war-torn land, in order (they believed) to afford their young counterparts in Afghanistan a chance at the aspirations they apparently share in common. Our military personnel did this, I add, because that is who they are, and that is always what they do. Perhaps it was naïve of them simply to accept our assurances regarding the moral purposes for which we claimed to deploy them. But it will surely prove reprehensible of us if we are found to have manipulated their moral earnestness for what turn out to be profoundly less justifiable ends.

They would, in any event, remain blameless for their actions, lawfully undertaken in good faith. But we who had sent them under false pretences would not. Hence, if we can no longer endorse the morally worthy strategy we originally espoused, then we should depart—with as much dignity as we can muster under the circumstances—and gracefully hasten the strategic decline that, in any case, has evidently long since begun.

NOTES

- ¹ Alberto Gentili, *On the Laws of War* (c. 1612), Book I, Ch. 14, in T John C. Rolfe, trans., *The Classics of International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), vol. 2, pp. 61–66; and Emer de Vattel (c. 1758), *The Law of Nations*, Book III, Ch 1(5); Ch 3 (42, 44), in Charles G. Fenwick, trans., *The Classics of International Law* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1916), pp. 280–340.
- ² I owe this distinction to an unpublished paper by Anthony Lang, St. Andrew's University.
- ³ Francisco di Vitoria, “De Juri Belli: Q2, Article 2” (1539), in Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance, eds. *Vitoria: Political Writings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 233–29.
- ⁴ See www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html.
- ⁵ Jeffrey D. McCausland, “Present Status of ISAF Efforts in Afghanistan” (report delivered at the U.S. Naval Academy, February 17, 2011). McCausland, a former Dean of the Army War College, is currently a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Council, a CBS News correspondent, and a frequent visitor to Afghanistan. For an account of the popular impact of this program, see Aryn Baker, “Afghan Idol: A Subversive TV Hit,” *Time Magazine*, March 24, 2008; available at www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1725113,00.html. For an account of more recent programming, such as *Eagle Four*, see www.tolo.tv.
- ⁶ P. W. Singer, Heather Messera, and Brendan Orino, *D.C.'s New Guard: What Does the Next Generation of American Leaders Think?* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, February 2011); available at www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/02_young_leaders_singer/02_young_leaders_singer.pdf. For corroborating data, and opinions of Afghans of all ages on a variety of salient issues, see the statistical snapshots featured in Ian S. Livingston, Heather L. Messera, and Michael O'Hanlon, eds., *Brookings Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, February 28, 2011); available at www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.
- ⁷ For example, T. M. Scanlon, “The Proper Role of Intention in Military Decision-Making,” in Roger Wertheimer, ed., *Empowering Our Military Conscience: Transforming Just War Theory and Military Moral Education*, “Military and Defence Ethics Series” (London: Ashgate Press, 2010), pp. 77–92, esp. pp. 82–83. Tim Scanlon and Judith Thompson are among the prominent moral philosophers who have long questioned the sense in which a moral agent's intentions can be said to affect not merely the degree of culpability or blameworthiness attached to an action, but the very moral permissibility of the action itself. Examples of the latter problem, and of skepticism concerning the traditional role of an agent's intentions according to the “doctrine of double effect,” include strategic or “terror” bombing,

and physician-administered lethal doses of pain-relieving drugs to terminally ill patients. How (these philosophers wonder) do otherwise impermissible acts in these contexts suddenly become permissible (and not just excusable) solely on the basis of what the agent performing them *thought* at the time? Without going into detail, I hold in response that acts of war are among a species of acts whose moral permissibility *does* plausibly (and not mistakenly) hinge on the agent's individual or collective intention in undertaking them.