

# The Ecology of War in Afghanistan

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often for Americans, Afghanistan is simply a war. Here's a pacific slice of life. Donkeys and horses are the main source of transport in the mountains (Photo by Anna M.)

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There are many ways of looking at war: as a continuation of politics by violent means, as a biological imperative, as the extreme end of a continuum of violence that defines human existence, morally as a sin that is only justified in self-defense, as a business in which profits are the main motive, as criminal activity writ large, as a response to human fears and memories of predation, as a mobilizing force that conveys meaning and a sense of belonging, as a practice that conveys masculinity, the list goes on. War, in sum, is an ecology of death that is arguably as complex as the ecology of life.

But you wouldn't know this from American commentators talking about war. Consider the Afghan war, now in its sixteenth year and with no end in sight. It's termed a "generational" war by American generals, a long war, a war that may require a Korean-like commitment by the U.S. military, [according to](#) retired General David Petraeus.

A commitment to the "long war" in Afghanistan, seen by Washington as the height of sobriety, is taken apart by

Major Danny Sjursen at [TomDispatch.com](http://TomDispatch.com). MAJ Sjursen, who saw combat in Afghanistan, has this to say about the latest mini-surge being contemplated by Washington:

*One look at U.S. military attempts at “nation-building” or post-conflict stabilization and pacification in Iraq, Libya, or — dare I say — Syria should settle the issue. It’s often said that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Yet here we are, 14 years after the folly of invading Iraq and many of the same voices — inside and outside the administration — are [clamoring](#) for one more “surge” in Afghanistan (and, of course, will be clamoring for the predictable surges to follow across the Greater Middle East).*

*The very idea that the U.S. military had the ability to usher in a secure Afghanistan is grounded in a number of preconditions that proved to be little more than fantasies. First, there would have to be a capable, reasonably corruption-free local governing partner and military. That’s a nonstarter. Afghanistan’s [corrupt](#), unpopular national unity government is little better than the regime of [Ngo Dinh Diem](#) in South Vietnam in the 1960s and that American war didn’t turn out so well, did it? Then there’s the question of longevity. When it comes to the U.S. military presence there, soon to head into its 16th year, how long is long enough? ...*

*And what could a new surge actually do? The U.S. presence in Afghanistan is essentially a fragmented series of self-contained bases, each of which needs to be supplied and secured. In a country of its size, with a limited transportation infrastructure, even the 4,000-5,000 extra troops the Pentagon is reportedly [considering](#) sending right now won’t go very far.*

*Now, zoom out again. Apply the same calculus to the U.S. position across the Greater Middle East and you face what we might start calling the Afghan paradox, or my own quandary safeguarding five villages with only 82 men writ large. Do the math. The U.S. military is already [struggling](#) to keep up with its commitments. At what point is Washington simply spinning its proverbial wheels? I’ll tell you when — yesterday.*

Yet U.S. military actions are worse than wheel-spinning. To explain why, consider an article I wrote in 2014, when I called upon Charles Darwin’s [wedge metaphor](#) to explain how U.S. actions were hammering the “face of nature” of Afghan societal ecology, aggravating unrest and creating new enemies.

The U.S. military keeps hitting the terrorist “wedges” in Afghan society, without really thinking about the larger ecology and the ripple effects. In the violent struggle for existence in Afghanistan, the U.S. compounds the violence, serving to strengthen the very enemy we say we’re seeking to weaken. (Indeed, the Taliban is gaining strength, hence the call for more U.S. troops). At the same time, the U.S. military’s foreign presence is serving to legitimate the indigenous enemy while simultaneously forcing it to learn and adapt.

By surging again and again, i.e. hitting the enemy harder, this is what the U.S. military has succeeded in doing:

1. The enemy has spread along new fault lines created by U.S. military-led hammer blows.
2. The enemy has adapted to force, becoming fitter in its struggle for existence against us.
3. The enemy has gained legitimacy from the struggle.
4. The wider societal ecology has become more radicalized as well as more unstable.
5. A complex and more chaotic ecology has become even less tractable in American hands.

Despite this, the U.S. military still thinks more hammer blows are the answer. The only answer that makes sense — withdrawal from Afghanistan — is the one that is not on that table in Washington where all options allegedly reside.

We’re already living in a new reality of alternative facts, so let’s just declare victory, America, and leave. With or without the U.S. military, the Afghan people will find their own way.