Reading While Contemplating the News from Kabul

Books by Innes, Maguire, Westbrook

A few days after the fall of Kabul, during the foreseeable yet chaotic evacuation, my editor Dean visited me in the mountains (the Rockies, not the Hindu Kush). "What are your thoughts on Afghanistan?" he asked.

I riffed and ranted a while, saying things unpublished and maybe unpublishable, until I had to leave the deck to fetch another beer. On reflection, I realized that Dean had really asked what I thought about our conduct of our longest war, and the implications of our defeat (loss of interest?), that is, the question was essentially concerned with how the "United States" handled itself. "Afghanistan," here, is mostly a setting, like the pandemic, the last election, Vietnam, what have you. Americans, myself included, tend to have difficulty understanding things in other terms, i.e., we are almost always talking about the United States. Of course, this parochialism, better, myopia, is part of the problem when projecting force thousands of miles away. Underneath such seemingly specific questions lies the mystery of what the US is, in some fundamental or transcendent sense, or at least, what we should believe it to be, and so how we should feel, legislate, fight. No ordinary nation, nor really an empire . . . and so how should we conduct our wars? Parochial they may be, but these are good questions, needful questions.

I've worried such questions for a long time, publicly if hardly influentially, and so three of "my" books came to mind. Maybe you will find them interesting, worth reading discussing, buying, perhaps even reviewing, to shill.

Mike Innes just published a fine book, [Streets Without Joy: a Political History of Sanctuary and War, 1959-2009](). You will recall how the US invaded Afghanistan in order to catch or kill Bin Laden (my circles presume kill, but I have on authority that catch was preferred), and to deny "sanctuary" to Al Qaeda and any like-minded terrorists, who of course can be difficult to keep apart. But as the US embedded itself in Afghanistan, the importance of neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, as "sanctuaries" became inescapable if hardly clear. In fact, bin Laden was found in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. I visited Pakistan in those days, speaking of butter not guns, and was billeted in a fortified luxury hotel that, it emerged, was quite close to bin Laden's compound. Good times.

As Innes demonstrates, the sanctuary discourse that structured much of our thinking about Afghanistan, and so our conduct of that war, not merely recalled but grew out of the earlier discourse of the Vietnam War, where Cambodia and Laos – nominally sovereign states – provided sanctuary for our adversaries. As my father, a paratrooper at the time, said, "We weren't supposed to be there, but there we were." You may recall the film *Apocalypse Now*, which takes place almost entirely in sanctuary, which is alleged and yet denied, violently. The word "sanction" itself is ambivalent, meaning both to punish and to allow, in either case holy, as in sanctify, which of course calls sacrifice to mind, of animals, and as in the "ultimate sacrifice."

This maelstrom of words is meant to suggest that we did not know a few generations ago, and did not know last week, what we were really doing.

From this perspective, the fact that we do not seem to have learned anything is perhaps not so surprising. People have jobs to do, and we can use words like "excellence" or "mission" to gesture towards such jobs, make assignments, run payroll, etc., without ever really saying anything. Innes shows how "sanctuary" and "denial of sanctuary" helped to describe the war without ever specifying just what political ends were to be accomplished by these means, to echo Clausewitz. Still less were we able to judge whether our means (a bizarre combination of kinetic action and the construction of soft and hard infrastructure) were capable of achieving our ends, collectively and vaguely referred to as "nation building." "Did we ever really think we could bomb them into the model?" as my coauthor Mark asks. My endorsement of *Streets Without Joy*:

A masterful account of how streets without joy are bordered by offices where thought is locally instrumental, language elides, and truth is elsewhere. In demonstrating problems endemic to bureaucracies (including universities), Innes suggests how the US can fight so long and so aimlessly. Quite literally surreal, illuminating, and depressing.

The key, I think, is bureaucracy. Perhaps you recall what is sometimes called the first Gulf War. Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990; the US threw Iraq out of Kuwait by force in early 1991. This was the war that gave us the phrase "shock and awe." What I remember most vividly was the "lead up" to the war. We (the United States) had not been attacked, there was no real anger, but a decision had been made. The *Vorkriegszeit* had begun. The border between Iraq and Kuwait would be restored. Certain administrative tasks had to be managed. It's a lot of work, mobilizing a division and more, invading a country on the other side of the ocean, even a small desert one. While things were made ready, the rest of us (sometimes called the *demos*) read, watched TV, and waited for the fireworks, when, it was presumed, we would be impressed and supportive. And so it was.

The lesson for me was that the projection of national force, and the conduct of security policy generally, was an essentially bureaucratic endeavor. Somebody had to tell the chief executive what was desirable, what was possible. Other staffers had to sell the decision to the legislature, the press, and so the people. Substantive decisions, however, had already been made, in an essentially bureaucratic context. It is true that a commander in chief has considerable power to force decisions in this or that direction, as Trump and the Biden appear to have done with regard to withdrawal from Afghanistan. But getting into Afghanistan, our conduct there, and the messy work of getting out are all the work of the "security community." Therefore, as a writer who thought he had something to say about Afghanistan, the "Global War on Terror," and the conflict with Islamist violence generally, I set out to address bureaucrats.

In [Deploying Ourselves: Islamist Violence and the Responsible Project of US Force](#), I wrote:

This book makes a fundamental claim and husbands a great hope. The claim is that politics, and hence an ethos of responsibility, can be used to judge, and so discipline, our exercise of military

power. The hope is that a politically responsible security policy will be more successful in the world, and in particular in the fight against Islamist violence, than our current efforts are. p.3

Then and now our warfare confused lethality with politics. We Americans have always been good at killing people, maybe because we practice so often on each other, but at any rate that is the relatively straightforward part, if not always easy. But did the killing *work*, did it accomplish something? Or did he/she/they just need killing? Was our violence politically (and, not to be a snowflake, morally) justifiable? If not, we should not be playing God, as my old man recently reminded me again.

My basic idea, in the first decade of the longest war, was that the way we were fighting made no sense in light of our circumstances. Our adversaries were not nation states, but people who told particular stories about modernity. (The idea that Islam was "medieval" and therefore did not need to be taken seriously impeded much thought.) We needed to tell better stories, but we could not do that while fighting a war essentially based on assassination, allowing us to be portrayed as murderous devils who would eventually leave. We lost control of the narrative, and with that, political possibility.

People cannot do politics with ghosts and phantoms and drones high in the air. We Americans should present ourselves, our government should present itself, more forthrightly. We should be responsible, even if all too human. p. 174

Shifting our gaze from "the terrorists" to ourselves, while our institutions of national violence, notably the CIA, may or may not have made sense for the Cold War, they did not make the same sense for the "GWOT." That is, a serious security community needs to think about what it was attempting to accomplish, the institutional capacity to pursue such goals, and whether such actions can be successful. Reforms after 9/11 notwithstanding, that is not what happened. We rarely take casualties. Our technologies work, but we have lost political credibility. What justifies the cost, and the casualties we do take? What justifies the violence we inflict? We don't lose battles but we do lose wars, at least in the conventional sense of cede control over territory.

The critique offered in *Deploying* was in some profound sense right, I still struggle to believe. But I also fear that the book perhaps too hopefully presumed a more or less rational nation state and its staff, articulated by Clausewitz for military purposes, but also entailed by Weber's definition of the state as the holder of a monopoly of legitimate force upon a territory, the idea of bureaucracy as a process of rationalization, and at the core of our understanding of the United States in particular as a project of the Enlightenment. But maybe all of this is wrong, or not right enough, or somehow passé already, even if we don't have good ways to discuss what we have become?

The usual move at this juncture is the invocation of "empire," but the fit is awkward. The United States has rarely wanted to rule spice islands. Instead we rotate our forces in and out. We go home, sooner or later. Our adversaries, in Vietnam and Afghanistan, were not wrong in branding us as foreign and the local government as corrupt puppets, unworthy of allegiance. Our victories

became crimes, and our presence became an insult, and "winning" became impossible. In this case, we held on for 20 years, and left. Small wars against a determined insurgency are said to be unwinnable. That is probably not quite correct on its terms. The Romans and the English in their day transformed polities, but they did so by conquest, colonization, breeding. All of that is now understood to be evil, indeed illegal, though edge cases, often on the ill-defined borders of great powers, exist. And by extension, had the US truly wished to own Vietnam, or Afghanistan, then history might have been changed, as it was by the British in India, or, for that matter, here.

Sometimes unruly areas can be quarantined by superior forces. I think of the Romans in the north of England – people who had grown up in Italy were unlikely to want to raise families and die in Scotland. The problem with Afghanistan was that Al Qaeda did not stay in its box, as discussed above. Similarly, peacekeeping sometimes has worked, notably in the Balkans, although not perfectly, of course. Maybe we could have considered Afghanistan like that, hung around another few decades, provided a modicum of order while we waited for modernity to take root. But there have been many such places. Consider Rwanda, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Haiti. The list of places that might benefit from low level occupation is long, but our moral authority, resources, and patience are not limitless.

So, what happens if we cannot "win" in places like Vietnam, or Afghanistan, and our patience runs out? We are left with war as punishment, often from the air where we have unquestioned superiority, or war by special forces, often "contractors." Assets. The economic idiom is unavoidable. We fight everywhere and nowhere, mostly in secret. We could have disrupted Al Qaeda, made the Taliban suffer, killed bin Laden, and left – and many people now wish that is what we had done.

What rationalities are at work here? In [Getting Through Security: Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy and a Sense of the Modern,](#) Mark Maguire and I suggest that the modern (since Hobbes) imagination of the sovereign, and so our imagination of war, ill describes the contemporary ecosystem in which political violence, including ours, occurs. States are both fragmented and imbricated. Non-state and quasi-state actors abound, from contractors to terrorists. States must, if they wish to remain states, respond to the insult of terrorist violence, but have few satisfactory ways to do so. We fortify public infrastructure, like airports, and track civilians, and assassinate in out of the way places, and presume that we are safer therefore. The bad guys do their thing, too, most recently a posse of suicide bombers killed a lot of folks trying to get out of Afghanistan and the US forces trying to help them do so. Where Weber saw bureaucrats working rationally to achieve well defined goals, we see confused public and private actors working, often at cross purposes, to achieve "security," a place holder for possible threats, an indeterminate horizon of fear, some of which is political in the old-fashioned sense, much of which seems criminal in the venal sense, some of which seems just simply nuts, racist massacres or sometimes just killing for . . . I don't know. And how to protect against such things, apart from militarizing society, and, more quietly, training brave young men to deliver violence of our own, generally "counterterrorism"?

For a while we thought that "state building" was the answer. Terrorists seek sanctuary in lawless places, like Afghanistan, or at least Al Qaeda did. In response, we should build states, integrate our adversaries into the peaceful world order. Germany and Japan, the Marshall Plan, win the

peace – a real advance, actually, even for somebody skeptical of the notion of moral progress. But building a modern state turns out to be very difficult, perhaps impossible without the iron pleasures and vast rewards and raw individual injustice of colonialism, as suggested above. And even if one were to succeed in building a country, like say Belgium or Britain or even the United States, we would not be rid of terrorists, who like places like Brussels, London, and even Nevada. States are no guarantee against terrorism.

Which leaves us with few options, conceptually. Practically, the situation is pretty clear, at least in the short term. As I write, *The Economist* asks whether the US will be able to hunt and kill terrorists without their bases in Afghanistan, "over the horizon." We'll know they are terrorists when they are dead, of course, but it's worth pausing to note that assassination has become normalized. Rather than cool rationality, we see paranoia within reason, and bureaucratic reason, as in Afghanistan, is often less than right.

There is much more, of course, but here I'll stop.