

OPINION

I Served In Afghanistan - We Don't Need To Send More Troops. We Need To Change Their Mission.



BY **JASON DEMPSEY**

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Afghanistan is at an inflection point. Again.

For anyone keeping track, this has become an annual ritual as our efforts over the last decade have been characterized by the sustained avoidance of outright failure. This point is similar to previous inflection points in that, despite previous reports of progress, the military is yet again asking for more troops – just enough to help Afghan security forces get on their feet and take the fight to the Taliban.

But before the Trump administration doubles down on doing more of the same, it is worth asking if what is needed is more troops, or rather a fundamental change in those tasked with the mission.

For starters, Generals Votel and Nicholson are [asking for more troops](#) to primarily ‘train and advise’ Afghan forces. We’ve been down this road before, and failed to get the Afghans on track when over 100,000 troops were in Afghanistan. Asking how and why those efforts fell short would therefore be prudent before we believe that increasing the current force to just over 10,000 will make any kind of lasting difference. We don’t just need more forces in Afghanistan, as [Senators McCain and Graham](#) have stated; we need the right forces.

The reason this surge will fail like the ones before it is because the United States military insists on a cookie-cutter approach to counterinsurgency, both in how it [mans the mission](#) and in the ‘[solution](#)’ we have laid out for the Afghans. Both are related, and reflect the unwillingness of the military to adapt to the mission at hand, despite public pronouncements by military leadership of the importance of the counterinsurgency mission.

The personnel we are going to send into this fight will, down to each man and woman, be dedicated and conscientious Americans. But what we know of the military personnel system is that the process for selecting them for this mission will be both highly bureaucratic and entirely irrelevant to the task at hand.

The driving factor for selecting these troops for deployment will primarily be where they are in the military's standardized career and assignment cycle. Absent from the selection criteria will be any consideration of prior experience advising Afghans, let alone language skills or knowledge of specific Afghan units and leaders - in short, nothing relevant to the ability to work with the Afghans to build a sustainable security solution to the problems they face.

Compounding this lack of experience will be rotations likely to last only nine months, barely enough time to understand which way is up, let alone to understand how Afghan security forces operate and how they might be made more effective. Instead, we will continue to try, and fail, to build a national Afghan army in our image.

If discussions of military personnel policy are too 'inside baseball' for most Americans, it might help to imagine how this effort might look domestically. Imagine that a city like Baltimore collapsed in a spasm of rioting and violence similar to what happened in 2015, but add in the idea that the Baltimore Police force completely dissolved and was not around to keep the peace. Now imagine a Chinese billionaire deciding that, to protect his investments in Baltimore, he is going to drive an effort to restore order.

The people that will run the effort will be Chinese military officers who will arrive to create a security force structured and managed like what they know: the Chinese military. None of the officers will have had experience doing this before, nor will they speak English, but will rely on local interpreters to communicate. They will also never stay in country longer than nine months, and will all rotate out on different timelines, ensuring there is never unity of effort or command.

But understanding that the long-term solution cannot be sustained by the Chinese military indefinitely, the Chinese will want to train and build American security forces, and therefore start recruiting police officers for Baltimore from places like Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

If there is anyone out there who thinks this might work in America, I've got an Afghan strategy to sell you.

Despite the absurdity of such an approach, there is a widespread belief that if Americans are pursuing something similar in Afghanistan, it must make sense. Part of this stems from our outsized confidence in the American military combined with an indifference to just how the military succeeds, or fails, with the missions it has been given.

But even if one were just setting up a business in a foreign country, let alone trying to build a national security force, such a plan for staffing the effort would get laughed out of any boardroom. Yet when briefed by military officers, no executive yet has had the courage to say, “You’re fired.”

It is past time to ask hard questions about the goals of our mission in Afghanistan and how the effort is structured. Manning the effort properly will require either fundamental changes to the personnel system, or the increased dedication of Special Forces, or ‘green berets’ – the only military element actually designed to stand up indigenous security forces.

Even this will require a concerted effort, as the Special Forces community has prioritized counter terrorism during the Afghan conflict and has drifted away from the mission of building internal defense capabilities for foreign militaries.

The effort will also require the kind of continuity, at all levels, that has been remarkably lacking in the American effort. Over the last decade there have been [eight overall commanders](#) of the effort in Afghanistan, with subordinate commands changing out even more often. This rotation system has both driven American solutions to Afghan problems and prevented us from holding any individual accountable for the long-term success or failure of the mission.

The Americans we are considering sending into the fight now will make no difference in enabling the Afghans to achieve a lasting peace, and at best will only postpone failure. Achieving success in Afghanistan will require the Trump administration to start asking the military the hard questions that President Obama would not. And if the military cannot adapt itself to the mission at hand, then it is past time to reconsider the mission.

Doubling down on this failed strategy will not fix the ‘mess’ that President Trump has inherited.

Jason Dempsey retired from the Army in 2015, last serving as special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 as the operations officer to an infantry brigade and again in 2012-2013 as a combat advisor to the Afghan Border Police. He returned again briefly in 2014 to assess the advisory mission. He is the author of [Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations](#). He currently serves as an adjunct Senior Fellow at the [Center for New American Security](#) and Director of the Military and Veterans Initiative at [Columbia University](#).

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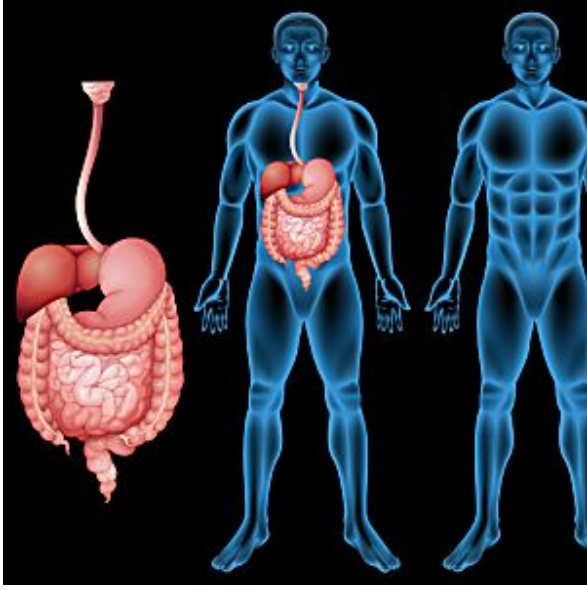
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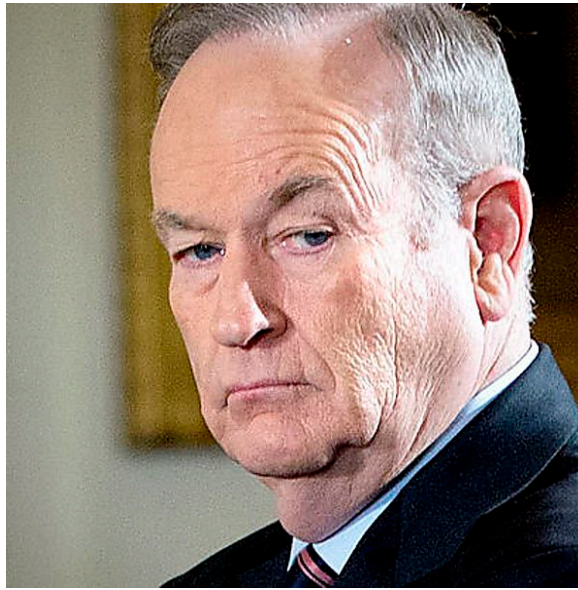
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