

OPINION

Afghanistan Vet: Don't Celebrate Dropping The 'MOAB' In Afghanistan - It's Just More Of The Same



BY JASON DEMPSEY

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Jason Dempsey retired from the Army in 2015, last serving as special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He served in Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division as an adviser to the Afghan Border Police.

Last week's utilization of a 21,000 pound bomb to destroy an ISIS cave complex in Afghanistan was oddly met with jubilation. But as the dust settles, both literally and metaphorically, it is worth asking what we are celebrating.

While large explosions are interesting in and of themselves, the act of dropping the 'Mother of All Bombs' was given greater importance than the impact of the ordnance itself. Many saw it as a 'turning point' in the war and a 'gloves off' moment in the fight against ISIS. Unfortunately, neither interpretation holds, and the utilization of this bomb is only indicative of our continuing failures in Afghanistan.

For one, we've been dropping large bombs on Afghanistan for nearly sixteen years, including similar yet smaller bombs on Taliban and Al Qaeda strongholds. Indeed, the overall tonnage of ordnance dropped makes the MOAB an exceptionally small rounding error in the overall total. In the process the United States has killed thousands of members of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and now regularly adds members of ISIS to that total. Yet despite all this bombing, transnational terrorist groups are still operating in Afghanistan.

Indeed, the use of this bomb reflects a truism of our efforts to train Afghan security forces to a point of self-sufficiency: **They are not**. Despite nearly a decade of concerted effort, the Afghans are still heavily reliant on American airpower, despite the fact that they face an enemy with exactly zero air assets.

This is the case because we, and I count myself among the guilty, have lazily attempted to create an Afghan force **in our own image** instead of working to build a security apparatus appropriate for, and **sustainable by**, the Afghan state. As a result, ISIS fighters are able to build fortresses in Afghanistan, while the Taliban increasingly takes back

territory that we once pushed them out of.

They are able to do so because they are often able to win the local battle for hearts and minds, and have the patience to work for years to build trust, and fear, among local leaders. Afghan security forces, on the other hand, are centrally managed, often ethnically distinct from the local population, and overly reliant on firepower and technology.

Compounding this problem is the rotation of American military advisors through Afghanistan. With **little time** in the country and no patience to work with the Afghans to effectively develop their capabilities, we are more than happy to pave the way for them with airpower and bombs. This gives a false sense of the capabilities of the Afghans, and lets us believe that increasing the body count will somehow change the underlying political dynamics of the conflict. The result is that we keep bombing, and convincing ourselves that this one success will make the difference, despite over a decade of evidence to the contrary.

So as we all bask in the reflected aftershock of the MOAB, it is worth emphasizing, again, that nearly sixteen years after the 9/11 attacks, transnational terrorist groups are still operating in Afghanistan. The idea that somehow larger bombs are the key to victory is only a variation on the old definition of insanity: "Maybe if we keep doing the same thing, but with more gusto, we'll get a different result."

Sadly, we won't. The MOAB augers no real change in Afghanistan, but rather an indication that we are due for years of more of the same.

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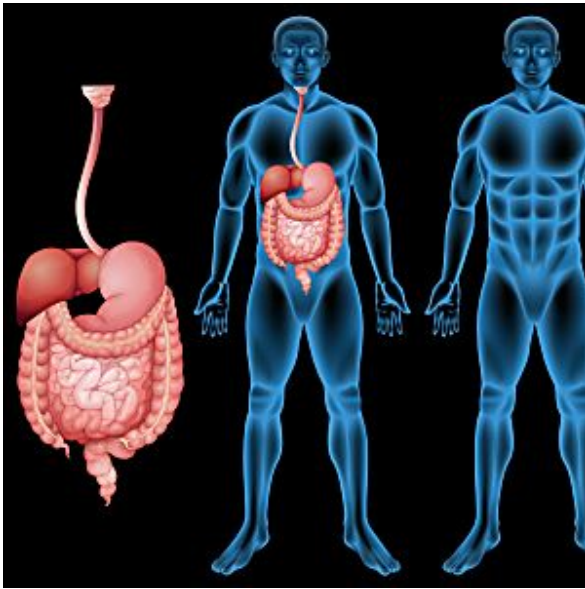
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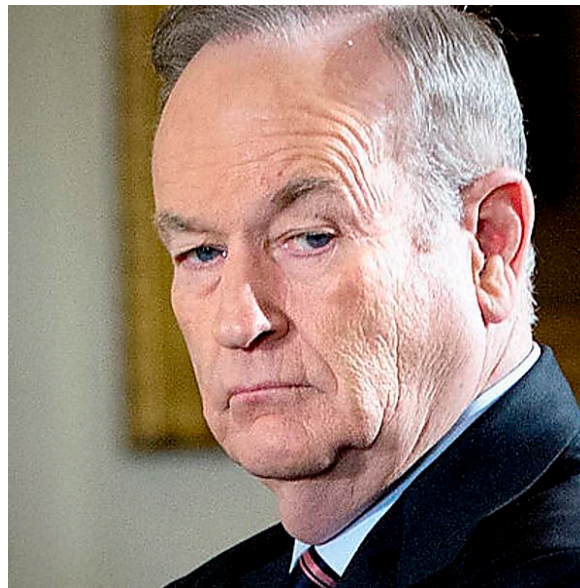
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