

America's self-defeating cycle in Afghanistan

By **Jeremi Suri**, Special to CNN
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A villager points to a spot where a family was allegedly shot by a rogue U.S. soldier in Alkozai, Afghanistan.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

A killing spree in Afghanistan follows Quran-burning incident
Jeremi Suri says the U.S. has had its worst month in the long Afghan war

He says it's reminiscent of Vietnam War, when soldiers turned against population

Suri: U.S. leaders are failing to set and pursue achievable objectives

Editor's note: Jeremi Suri holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a professor of history and public affairs and a Distinguished Fellow at the Strauss Center for International Security and Law. Suri is the author of numerous books, most recently "Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama."

Austin, Texas (CNN) -- The past month has been the worst for the United States in Afghanistan since the war began after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

There have been more difficult periods of combat against the Taliban, al Qaeda and other insurgents. There have been more fragmented and confused moments in allied strategy. There has, however, never been a time when American soldiers acted with such obvious and offensive disrespect for Afghan citizens.

The past month has witnessed a string of incidents, including the alleged killing of 16 civilians by a U.S. soldier and the burning of

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Qurans, the holiest touchstone of the Islamic faith, at a NATO air base. The United States has crossed a self-defeating threshold in Afghanistan where our soldiers are seen as attacking the very people and culture they are deployed to protect. We are destroying villages in order to save them.

We have witnessed this dynamic before. In early 1968, it became apparent that American soldiers in South Vietnam were fighting a stubborn communist enemy without the support they expected from South Vietnamese citizens. To the contrary, residents of South Vietnam frequently gave assistance to the insurgents killing Americans.

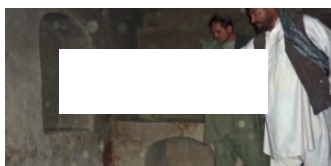


Jeremi Suri

Frustrated and desperate, particularly after the Tet Offensive in January 1968, American soldiers took the war to the population with devastating consequences. Counterinsurgency warfare meant burning rural villages, bombing crowded areas and killing innocent civilians. The My Lai massacre of March 16, 1968, was the most notorious example, but it was not unique. After failing to catch insurgents who fled the village, angry American soldiers killed more than 300 women, children and elderly

residents in cold blood. The United States was massacring the same South Vietnamese it was fighting to save.

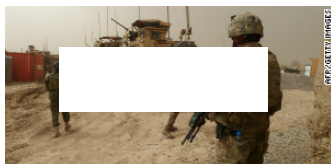
We do not know what motivated the American soldier who is accused of going house-to-house, murdering Afghan families, on Sunday.



How can troubled troops be helped?

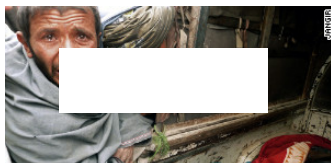
Based on the patterns of the past month, the question arises: Was he acting in ways that echo My Lai?

The U.S. military might be the strongest fighting force in the world, but it is still a collection of emotional and fragile human beings who react to the circumstances, pressures and incentives around them.



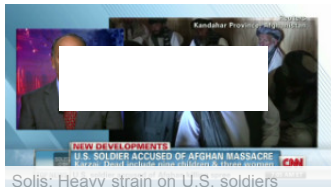
Pentagon officials feel 'punched in gut'

As in Southeast Asia more than 40 years ago, the American soldiers in Afghanistan are fighting a war against an elusive enemy amidst a population that is increasingly resistant to American demands for assistance. Afghan citizens know that the United States is planning to leave soon, and they sense that the Americans they meet care more about an "exit strategy" than the welfare of their society. Afghan intransigence furthers the frustration and resentment among American soldiers, fueling violent behavior directed at innocent civilians.



Public trial for Afghan killing spree?

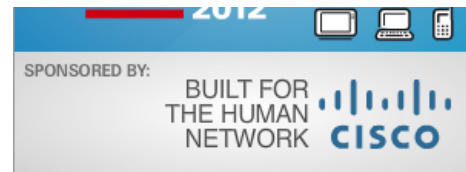
This self-defeating cycle reflects specific policies. President Barack Obama has acknowledged the corrupt Afghan leadership of Hamid Karzai, but he is doing nothing serious about it.



Solis: Heavy strain on U.S. soldiers

The U.S. government has told its more than 80,000 troops in Afghanistan that they must help create a stable and secure Afghan nation, despite rampant corruption, in less than a year. Young American soldiers are under enormous pressure, in hostile circumstances, and they are increasingly isolated from support networks within the

United States.



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For all the talk of "supporting the troops," the Afghanistan war receives little serious attention in American public debate. Obama rarely mentions the war, and his Republican challengers say little about it either. The American soldiers in Afghanistan are under orders to do the impossible at light speed, and they are ignored by their fellow citizens. We have re-created the conditions of extreme stress, isolation and victimization that were evident in Vietnam. We have turned a frustrating war into a breeding ground for American atrocities.

This is what happens when our national leaders try to fight a war and exit a war at the same time. We cannot do both. Our soldiers cannot build a functioning nation when they are told that we are not doing nation-building. They cannot defeat an enemy when we refuse to engage fully. They cannot work peacefully with local citizens when they are told that local citizens are the problem.

The choice is not to use more firepower or withdraw. The real choice is whether the United States is committed sufficiently to Afghanistan and willing to invest in supporting long-term efforts that will give our soldiers and local citizens a reason to believe that things will get better.

If the United States is unwilling to make these commitments, then it should admit it and reduce the demands on its soldiers. Either way, Americans must create a realistic basis for their activities in Afghanistan and end the fiction of a smooth transfer of authority from our overburdened soldiers to Karzai's corrupt administrators.

Realism will not please many Americans, but it will at least help to reduce the cycle of atrocities in Afghanistan. The time has come to escape the worst dynamics of Vietnam and re-learn the limits of American power.

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drowlord

The problem in Vietnam is the same as the problem now. Women and children are involved in the fighting and militants masquerade as civilians. The enemy pretends to be the people we can't kill, and the people we can't kill are openly hostile. They use our honor and our ethics against us. Quite frankly, I don't see why we agree to play by rules that our enemies will not. Ultimately the same thing ended up happening to the USA in the Revolutionary war. We didn't want to fight like soldiers, so they torched homes and murdered/imprisoned anyone sympathetic to the enemy or hostile to the crown.

Just now

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Mark Burns Springer

I am sure that the Russians hate it when bad things happen to us.

Just now in reply to scrappyike

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



LocoPerro

Afghanistan has ceased being a "war" and is now a "police action." Just like the Russians of the 80's the U.S. is stuck in the quagmire of Middle East doom (again) - there are so many parallels to Afghanistan/Iraq to Vietnam that historians should be wagging their fingers saying "Shame, shame, shame" - ANOTHER police action?" The U.S. military is not made for prolonged police action. The current situation is a continuation of the "no brain-er" decisions of the Bush administration by forcing the military to conduct operations half-assed. No western government can truly influence or expect favorable, long-term outcomes when dealing with Muslim (regardless of the sect) countries. They (Muslims) can never, deep-down in their hearts, accept any non-Muslim belief system and even within the community there is great strife interpreting the religion. I don't blame the soldier - I blame the situation. Killing's not pretty under any circumstance.

10 minutes ago 1 Like

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TomTuckerGod

So...when is burning a book an atrocity? Don't get me wrong, I love to get into a new book and let my imagination run wild. But there comes a time when someone says that burning a certain book is an "atrocity" and I have to step back a little bit and say 'whoa'. That's utter nonsense because you should be able to burn any book that you feel like burning, especially one that breeds ignorance, violence, and hatred towards others.

27 minutes ago 1 Like

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



scrappyike

War is dirty business and there is no such thing as a good way or morale way to conduct a war. If you try, then you'll lose lives for no reason. In unconventional warfare, giving the enemy the same rights as

a civilian in court is just asking for disaster. War is dirty and should be conducted that way. The other side does not assign such civil rights to our troops or even the civil population. Why should they have any rights at all. They burn our flags and other items sacred to our culture yet we get berated for accidentally burning their sacred book. If a nation is not committed to conducting a war to win, then it should not commit at all. In the 70's when the rash of airline hijackings took place, did anybody notice that there was only two known cases of Soviet planes being hijacked? Why no more? Because they stormed the planes and killed all of the hijackers (including some civilians). Point is, they did what they had to and there were no more hijacking whereas western airline hijackings continues. Just my two cents.

36 minutes ago 2 Likes

Like Reply

**Ziggy46**

The U.S, all western democracies apparently don't get it. There are nations/cultures that are not suited to become democracies... and never shall. Afghanistan is one of them. Our leadership may have honorable intentions but in the end, it will end in abject failure; it has been thus throughout history. I fear these honorable intentions have cost too many lives of troops and innocents. The Taliban will never be expunged: they and their predecessors have been through this before, numerous times. They will wait us out; re-establishing the old order when we do.

39 minutes ago

Like Reply

**Heythomas**

Yes, why don't we supply rifles and helmet to all those in-favor of being in Afghanistan - and since their obviously leaders, by being politicians - have them lead the troops into battle - accepting their share of the risk?

46 minutes ago

Like Reply

**Hangtownie**

Couple things - I think we should limit the number of tours of duty combat soldiers can do in a set amount of time. My opinion only but I would think that soldiers that are around so much violence that they could de-sensetise to it.
Afghanistan - We can never win the trust/heart of the average Afghan because we are so different in too many ways. They will always see us as infidel occupier. Some might hate the Taliban but they are Afghan and we are not.

48 minutes ago

Like Reply

**Malfean**

This is why I think the Politicians should LEAD by example.... and do a front-line tour in any war they wish to start. That way, they'll be more mindful.

59 minutes ago 2 Likes

Like Reply

**Charles10034**

We never learn.....Korea. Viet Nam, Afghanistan or any other place since WWII....You cannot be victorious waging a limited war. If you want to win you have to defeat the entire country. If you are not willing to do this, then stay out.

1 hour ago 3 Likes

Like Reply

**littletodd64**

agreed

11 minutes ago in reply to Charles10034

Like

**Malfean**

Agreed.

58 minutes ago in reply to Charles10034

Like

**southernsuga**

We showed disrespect for the Afghans? Listen Mr. Suri, we are dying in your country, day and night. We don't want to be there. Your government is corrupt and I don't understand what we're getting out of this. Don't write another article for CNN again. Trash.

1 hour ago 1 Like

Like Reply

**Steventd**

Lets invest in getting out of there. Invaders of Afghanistan include Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Timur, the Mughal Empire, Russian Tsars, the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and currently a coalition force of NATO troops, the majority of which are from the United States, following the US-led invasion which began on October 7, 2001. This has always been a looser and we have only added our name to a long list. You would think someone in our Government could have come to this conclusions before we started?

1 hour ago 3 Likes

Like Reply

**matt4414**

When we transferred resources from Afganistan to Iraq is when we lost the peace. We do not and will not have enough boots on the ground to swash the gorillas and maintian peace.

Bush Blew it and it is up to Obama to cut our losses in a dignified manor.

1 hour ago 3 Likes

Like Reply

**bigham89**

crap, we're fighting gorillas too?

51 minutes ago in reply to matt4414

Like

**southernsuga**

W is an air head. What are we the people getting out of this war in Afghanistan? Nothing.

1 hour ago in reply to matt4414 1 Like

Like

**lidetector**

We cannot fight and win a guerilla style war by trying to play police man. Furthermore, the so-called religion of the middle east is steeped in terrorism, it is not going away, so there will always be new terrorists to replace the ones who are killed. As long as they continue to practice the teachings of their cult, the middle east will never know freedom as we westerners know it, so there is no point in attempting to introduce decocracy. We should fence it all in, hand out weapons to every one and let them fight it out because fighting and killing amongst themselves is what they do.

1 hour ago 4 Likes

Like Reply

**Bing Jou**

Agreed. We should hand out weapon to our Congress too, as well as Foxnews and liberal news. If President Lincon handed out weapons to blacks after Civil War, Afro-Americans might not have to wait 100 years for Civil Right movement to succeed. Indeed only we Westerners knowwhat freedom means. Those poor souls locked up in Japanese internment camp during World War II had no idea what we Westerners mean by freedom.

1 hour ago in reply to lidetector

Like

**syncopator**

I wish I could access my comments back when President Obama announced he was not ending the war as promised, but rather switching the emphasis to Afghanistan. I look like friggin Nostradamus.

1 hour ago

Like Reply

**gatordave**

"Obama has acknowledged the corrupt Afghan leadership of Hamid Karzai, but he is doing nothing serious about it." And exactly what is he supposed to do about it? Assassinate him? Encourage Afghans to overthrow him? You obviously believe that "something" could be done, and that then we would be successful. You are living in a fantasy world. Besides killing Bin Laden, Afghanistan is truly mission impossible. If you don't believe it, do some historical reasearch before you open your pie hole.

1 hour ago 1 Like

Like Reply

**Heythomas**

If every American was expected to serve in the defense of our country, we would not be having these special interest wars. Repeated tours of duty and trauma for the few who do serve are only undermining our national honor and strength.

1 hour ago 3 Likes

Like Reply

**EngFuture**

Just like Vietnam, we're fighting a war to help people who just pretend to be victims. They're gaming the system. They want our money and aid so that they can get the pleasure of having an enemy. In the end, they're just going to end up being under Taliban rule again. If they didn't want they - they could stop it.

1 hour ago 2 Likes

Like Reply

**hendersonNV**

This is truly sad. It was an indefensible act by one of our "heros".

I am waiting for the WH statement to be consistent with Ft Bragg.

The soldier in question was technically at work. We are calling this tragedy a "Work related incident of violence in the work place"

1 hour ago

Like Reply

**RogueDiplomat**

Having apparently learned none of the lessons of Vietnam and WWII, the U.S. has made myriad mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, not the least of which was trying to do aid, development, and nation-democracy-building while the wars were/are still "hot." Billions of dollars have been wasted on infrastructure in Iraq over a decade and still huge swaths of the country don't have power. Tens of millions in taxpayer money-- most of which went to U.S. companies and contractors-- were spent on "democracy and governance" programs in Afghanistan and Iraq that failed miserably as corrupt and inefficient puppet governments were more interested in lining their pockets with aid money than helping their beleaguered people. In WWII-- admittedly a different type of war-- we did not do rebuilding or nation-building in Japan and Germany until AFTER all hostilities had ceased. The suffering of civilians-- not to mention the sacrifice of our men and women in uniform-- has been criminal. Training Afgans to take over security and military operations recalls "Vietnamization" and it will fail just as it did when South Vietnam was over-run as Americans fled in helicopters off the Embassy roof in Saigon. As other readers have said, we should just get out and let Afghans sort things out. We have done enough harm....

2 hours ago 8 Likes

Like Reply

**HPUCK**

We are failing because just like Iraq and Vietnam, we should have never been there! Will we ever learn that we cannot impose our way on the rest of the world. They have been living with their cultures and fighting for hundres of years. Why do we think we are going to change that.

2 hours ago 3 Likes

Like Reply

**DarkStarWNY**

Your right, on 9/12 we should have turned it all into one giant glass parking lot, but then you would have probably objected to that as well.

32 minutes ago in reply to HPUCK

Like

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By *Jeremi Suri*, Special to CNN
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