

Testimony by Richard A. Boucher
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Chairman: Senator Rand Paul, KY
Ranking Member: Maggie Hassan, NH

Chairman Paul, Ranking Member Hassan, Senators, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for allowing me to testify before you today. While the fighting in Afghanistan is not yet over and Afghanistan cannot yet be said to have “stabilized,” we have been fighting there for coming on 19 years. It is time, as this Subcommittee knows, to think carefully about what lessons we can learn about our involvement, about our use of military force and about our ability to build stability in foreign lands. I believe that those lessons start with remembering that both the fighting and the subsequent assistance programs must be pursued with a tight focus on our campaign goals not in any desire to remake societies to our model.

At the Department of State, I was involved with Afghanistan policy steadily from 2000 to 2009. Before 9/11, As Spokesman for Secretary Albright, I discussed our sanctions pressure on the Taliban. I was with Secretary Powell on 9/11 as his Spokesman, then with him on his first trip to Afghanistan in January 2002 and subsequent trips. Secretary Rice asked me to become Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia and, after Senate confirmation, I worked intensely on Pakistan and Afghanistan for three years until the beginning of the Obama Administration in 2009.

Now a disclaimer: Since then I've had no connection to the US government. I've had no access to classified information or internal reports. Nor have I travelled to Afghanistan, although I've been back to Pakistan once. What I know, I know from news reports.

I'm glad that the Washington Post published their series on the Afghanistan papers. While I don't agree with many of their conclusions and characterizations, the series shows how a large number of the people involved over the years are thoughtfully assessing and reviewing what they did and what happened in order to come up with better answers for the future. Before we head into these conflicts and interventions, we rarely ask ourselves “so, how'd that work out last time?” Hopefully the Washington Post series and hearings like this one will help us.

So, let me turn to Afghanistan. First, let me say, this was a war of necessity. On 9/11, we were attacked for the second time (after Al Qaeda's attacks on our Embassies in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi) by Al Qaeda, a group located in Afghanistan. We knew they were dangerous and had been unable to push them out through a campaign of diplomacy and UN and other sanctions. After 9/11, we needed to make sure they could not remain in their sanctuary to attack us again.

That was the goal of the military intervention and, by working with Afghans, it was achieved fairly rapidly, even if we didn't capture Osama Bin Laden. By the end of 2002, Al Qaeda no longer had sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Second, we needed to ensure that Afghanistan would not be used again as a haven for terrorist groups. That required us to help Afghans institute a government that could control its territory. This was not an easy task. We were quite aware of the horrors of the Afghan civil war of the 1990s when militant and ethnic groups fought constantly for power and control. Indeed, we had contributed to this militancy during the 1980s when we funneled arms and money to groups fighting the Soviets. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, we contributed to a breakdown in traditional tribal structures and society in favor of supporting militants and mullahs who could fight the Soviets most effectively. Many of the familiar names of militants today, Hekmatyar and Haqqanis for example, grew their strength during "Charlie Wilson's War" of the 1980s and exercised it during the internal fighting of the 1990s.

So, in 2002, the goal was to help Afghanistan control the fighting and overcome its ethnic divisions. We focused on a balance of interests and ethnicities and democratic structures to keep the competition peaceful. President Karzai was a Pashtun. His cabinet was balanced with other leaders. We worked with various leaders --yes, the warlords-- in regional and provincial roles as long as they accepted the coordination of Kabul. We encouraged central leaders of different origins --Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah-- to cooperate. The goal was to support widespread participation and development that would overcome the tendency to fight.

Afghanistan's history tells us that government has worked best when a loose central government has coordinated regional and ethnic players. Revolts have happened when the central government tried to impose modernization and change; Amranullah Khan's reforms of the late 1920s led to a Pashtun revolt as did the reforms of the Communist Government before the Soviet invasion. One must tread carefully in Afghanistan in trying to impose change. Some were aware of this history in the early days of our intervention, but most knew Afghanistan only from the anti-Soviet days or from 9/11.

At first, we operated with a balance of power among leaders and ethnic groups in ministries and in regions. However, we progressively built more and more central control. Rather than helping rebuild Afghanistan from the ground up, we tried to do it from the top down. We sent our advisors, our aid workers, our NGOs, our technical personnel, and our accountants to impose a series of programs and bureaucratic structures that centralized power just like it was in Washington. Every agency in Washington had its counterpart in Kabul, and had programs to train and develop them. Governors in the Provinces exercised only limited powers and limited funds, and local government at the district level had no money and little power. People in the provinces and districts saw a government in Kabul that was distant, ineffective and corrupt.

Particularly in a dispersed, ethnic and agricultural society like Afghanistan, the government provides services to people from a local level not from their interaction directly with central ministries. Our focus on ineffective central control failed to provide services and thus stability. On my first trip to Afghanistan as Assistant Secretary in 2006, Governor Sherzai of Nangarhar said to me "I need five dams, five roads and five schools." When I asked "Why?" he said: "I need dams for irrigation and electricity, roads for farmers to get their goods to market and schools so that the children don't leave for education in radical madrassas in Pakistan." At the time, I thought that was a terrible plan for national development. Now, looking back, I think it was an excellent formula for stabilization.

We failed to provide stability and security from a local level. Training for local police fell behind. District level funding was almost non-existent and Provincial funding lagged. We focused on ministries and programs from Kabul like we had in Washington. We provided experts and advisors, often doing the work themselves rather than just "advising." We required project proposals, accounting and accountability, forms and audits that could only be managed at central levels and sent our Inspectors and Inspector Generals to trace every penny.

When you hear the headline numbers on our assistance for Afghanistan, remember the words of the Afghan finance minister who said to me: "80 or 90% of the money you spend never makes it to Afghanistan." Our contractors, subcontractors, NGOs, security consultants, technical experts and accounts, each take a salary and a cut. We focused on big centralized projects --the Kakajaki Dam or national school system, for example-- rather than the local stakeholders who needed roads, small dams and schools.

There were successes of course. Girls in school. An expanding health system that reduced infant mortality dramatically. Roads. Rebuilding institutions, colleges and hospitals. We built a lot of programs and buildings, trained a lot of Afghans, but we didn't build stability into the system.

Our failure to build stability was not just because we focused on the central rather than local levels. It was because we focused on our programs and our priorities. If the goal is to support an Afghan government that could provide security and development for its people, then the Afghan government should deliver the benefits of governance, not a US government employee, non-governmental organization or contractor. I visited aid workers, UN programs and military CERP programs which all seemed quite wonderful. Their inherent problem was that the foreigners were delivering programs and money, not the Afghan government. So the programs did little or nothing to build loyalty to the Afghan government and thus to build stability.

Over time we did “qualify” some ministries and Afghan programs like the Solidarity Program, to receive US funds. We did channel some money through programs like the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, run by the World Bank, that were better about supporting the Afghan government, but, overall, we were slow, bureaucratic, centralized and focused on our programs and our contractors. We failed to build stability because we failed to empower the Afghan government to deliver the benefits of governance to Afghans at the local level. The Taliban re-emerged as a local alternative.

We weren't the only ones. I had many conversations with President Karzai between 2006 and 2009 where it became clear that he relied on his own contacts and sources for information and didn't trust the programs of his own government. When we'd discuss Helmand province, for example, he'd say “let me tell you what's really going on” and then relate a story he'd heard from an acquaintance or relative. When I pushed him to empower local district chiefs and governors, he, along with the international assistance bureaucracy, would resist because those weren't really his people.

One difficulty with localized assistance is accounting. Local and provincial officials don't have the staff and the skills to provide the forms and accounting required by our programs. We're not the only ones. The Afghan finance minister also told me he had to manage something like 83 forms and accounting requirements from different donors. A “Common App” --like the one students use for college now-- would be a great improvement, but in the end it's not about forms and about audits --we have to work on trust and a more simpler set of rules. There is a great deal of corruption in Afghanistan as in all fractured developing societies, but we need to work out different methods of spending, incentives to achieve results, rewards for good governance and information, and a tolerance for losses that allows us to work through the government not around it. We'll lose some of our money in a system like this, but I'd rather see it lost in Afghanistan that spent on high-priced foreigners before it even arrives in the country.

Politically, the problem with local control is “warlords.” Afghan regional leaders had fought the Soviets, defended their ethnic groups and prevailed through the civil war. They were not technocrats or bureaucrats or even nice people. But, I believe that with enough internal politicking and a few basic systems we could work with regional powers to ensure that they spend money on local development and help coordinate their interests in Kabul.

Why couldn't I say all this at the time? In some ways, I did in terms of emphasizing local governance. But, overall, I, too, was caught up in the machine, caught in the triumph of hope over experience. I, too, spent too little time really listening to Afghans and too much time developing strategies in Washington.

You in Congress can help future generations by asking the simple but tough questions here and elsewhere. Not just, what happened to that million dollar program? But: are you spending money through the government? Are you building capabilities? Are you building stability? Are you supporting an Afghan government that can prevent its territory from being used by terrorists? Most important ask the Administration “how'd that work out last time? How's it really working out for you this time?”

A few words on Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor. Pakistan has been one of our strongest Allies in the war on terrorists. I believe it's still true that Pakistan has lost more men and suffered more attacks than any other country since 9/11. When our target was Al Qaeda, our cooperation with Pakistan was excellent. As we expanded our goals, from Al Qaeda to the Taliban to other groups, our interests and Pakistan's interests began to diverge. Pakistan wanted to maintain its influence in Afghanistan through groups like the Taliban. They can pressure the Taliban, circumscribe their activities, clip their wings but they won't turn on the Taliban or abandon them without a clear channel to secure their interests in Afghanistan. We can urge Pakistan to improve relations with Kabul, help them secure their border and enlist their help in pressing for negotiations. Rather than acknowledge their interests and negotiate, we try --without success-- to dictate what Pakistan must do. That leads to the resentments and accusations of duplicity that prevail today.

So, where does this all leave us today?

First, we are providing more of our assistance through the Afghan government, although as far as I can tell not through local levels that really touch the people and promote stability. President Ashraf Ghani is trying to build a coherent development program. Let us spend our money via the Afghan government and develop more flexible ways to account for the spending. We need to support the Afghan government, particularly at a local level, so that Afghans deliver benefits to local people.

Second, our military presence has been drawn down to focus on training and terrorism --although not yet to the point where our focus can be solely on ISIS and Al Qaeda. We should continue to draw down rapidly to a minimum level of training and support.

Third, we should support the negotiations being conducted by Ambassador Khalizad to secure a stable withdrawal of US troops and lead to a stable political result in Afghanistan after negotiations among Afghans. They need to decide the future of their country, not us.

Fourth, America must lead with diplomacy. Inside Afghanistan, we can work with politicians and local leaders --yes, the warlords-- to promote support for the government. Externally, we must work with Pakistan and with other neighbors to ensure their support for the government in Kabul as well.

Finally, we must always remember, as Clausewitz wrote, that wars are fought for political reasons. Most wars do not end like World War II with a clear surrender and a new constitution. Most wars end with a political deal and must be fought and managed with political objectives in mind. Certainly, the war to "eliminate the terrorists and all those who harbor them" will never be achieved by military means. It will be achieved by capable governments around the globe who are able to provide benefits to their populations. That requires more diplomacy, not more interventions. We need to lead with diplomacy backed by our military capability, not the other way around. We need to fund diplomacy to lead.

In Afghanistan, we achieved our initial goal: we rid Afghanistan of the Al Qaeda group that attacked us. Now, let us focus on how to assist the Afghan government to ensure Al Qaeda will never be able to attack us again from Afghanistan. Let's listen to Afghans about what they need and give them the wherewithal to provide for their people. It is time to convert our presence to diplomatic support, aid channeled through the Afghan government and a minimal military footprint. It's time to come home.