



Episode 439: Afghanistan Is a Fiasco, But Can you Explain Why?

Guest: Ray McGovern

WOODS: As I told you before we went on, I'm interested in talking about Afghanistan because of the number of people who seem to be of the opinion — along with the president, I might add — that although we can all see what a disaster the war in Iraq turned out to be, we have to prosecute the war in Afghanistan, because that was the good war, so to speak, in the War on Terror. And after all, what else could we do, given that this was the headquarters of Osama bin Laden. He had taken up residence there; he was being protected by the regime there, and after what happened on 9/11, what else could we do but invade Afghanistan and try to clear out all the terrorist training camps. I mean, this is what people read in the *New York Times*, and I perfectly well understand why they would hold such a view, but I would suspect that your view is that the reality is a little bit more nuanced than this.

MCGOVERN: Well it is, Tom, and whether the *New York Times* really had that view or not, it was really proceeding from talking points from the White House, which it did for the entire time from 9/11 until today. When you say that Osama bin Laden or the al Qaeda terrorists were being protected by Afghanistan, well, we didn't really quite get that. We got that from the *New York Times*, but it isn't quite right. The regime in Kabul, the Taliban, offered Osama bin Laden. They offered him on a silver platter to the United States. All they required, as is their custom, was proof that Osama bin Laden was behind the attacks of 9/11.

That request was dusted off, because we were hell-bent on attacking Afghanistan as a kind of warm up — yeah, right — as a kind of warm up for Iraq. It's very clear — it's very clear — that on the evening of 9/11, Bush already showed his hand. They were going to use this to attack Iraq. So it was kind of a warm up, and you know, the rationale adduced — oh, we had to make sure that al Qaeda or terrorism in general would have no place to operate from, would have no base. Well, that was a canard from word one. My former colleague, Paul Pillar — was about as senior as you can get on the analyst side of the CIA — wrote very clearly that it doesn't have to do with having space.

And actually, 9/11 was not funded from Afghanistan. It was rather plotted from Germany, Spain, and flight schools in the United States. So he put that the issue is not preventing such a haven — that was the big thing: we can't have a haven for Afghanistan. That wasn't the issue, says Paul. It was a matter of a balance here.

Thwarting the creation of a fiscal haven in one country — was that going to do the trick? Well, you know, look at the situation now. It's not that you attack one country, because by attacking one country, we encourage the spread of these people, and now they're all over the place. They have their own quasi-country in the center of Syria and Iraq.

So there must have been other motives for President Obama to go and "surge," as the saying goes, in Afghanistan. Now Obama thought he was really clever. He wanted to be sort of like Lincoln. So he picked the worst of the worst for his advisors. Robert Gates, for example, who had been head of the Defense Department under Bush, he asked him to stay on. And of course he lauded people like David Petraeus, the fellow with the ten rows of medals and merit badges, to the skies. But when he asked them for options — what to do about Afghanistan — when he asked specifically for one option, to draw down, well Robert Gates forgot to give him that option. In other words, by leaks to the press and by pressure in the White House, these people succeeded in sort of mousetrapping the president into doubling down in a fool's errand.

WOODS: So you mean this was not Obama's natural instinct, but that he was more or less cornered into this?

MCGOVERN: That's exactly right. Now Obama — that doesn't speak very well for a very weak president, does it? But you know, if you look back to the time in early 2009 when he was seized with what to do about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, what did he do? Well, he appointed a fellow named Bruce Riedel from Brookings Institute.

And then he sort of orchestrated this stage, and when he came out to announce that he was going to send 20,000 more troops there in sort of a quasi-surge — to be supplemented later that year by 30,000 more — the president was 20 minutes late in making the announcement. Why? Because just hours before, there had been Afghan soldiers that had shot up U.S. soldiers. There had been other terrorist events. And I dare say, my surmise is that Obama was saying, do I really want to do this? Do I really want to let the military and people like Bruce Riedel from Brookings sort of mousetrap me into this?

So in any event, he was 20 minutes late. When he came out, he said all the rhetorical things, but that was doubling down on a fool's errand. Look at the situation now. Has it improved any? No. If the objective was to stem terrorism, has that been stemmed? Of course not. Paul Pillar was right. You don't do this by closing down al Qaeda in one country. So in a very sorrowful sense, we've lost over 2,000 men and women in Afghanistan. There's no end in sight.

And when Obama commissioned the second review later in 2009, he got some good advice from General Karl Eikenberry. Now, who's Eikenberry? Well, he had been in charge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. He had also been in charge of training Afghan troops. And unlike Petraeus, he was not going to pretend that he had trained cracker jack Afghan troops. No, he said this was really not the way to go. They could not be trained to kill their cousins. He also said that Hamid Karzai, the president of

Afghanistan, was not a "reliable partner." He also said that if you think you can dissuade the Pakistanis from supporting the terrorists in Afghanistan, you don't know anything about how the Pakistanis look at their primary objectives, which always and everywhere are to stem Indian influence. And so they're not about to desist in Afghanistan, as long as there's the slightest chance that India could become a major power there, as it has in the past.

So Eikenberry warned — *warned* — Obama about all this. And how do we know this? Well, some gutsy soul — I don't know who it was — leaked two cables from November of 2009 to the *New York Times*, and there Eikenberry sets out the whole rationale, but Obama was not strong enough politically to accept his sensible recommendations. What happened was Eikenberry came back; he made nice with everyone else, and indeed, to his discredit — but very much in keeping with the senior military — he went up on the Hill; he went to Congress, and he argued for this course in Afghanistan, which he already told the president was a fool's errand. That's the kind of thing you get in Afghanistan.

And you know, when you look at it in historical terms — well, let me just say a word about the first fellow that tried to pacify Afghanistan, or at least get through it to China. His name was Alexander the Great. Now, Tom, do you know why they call him "the Great?" It was because when he started taking numerous casualties on his flanks from these Afghan tribes — we don't understand it. Alexander was just there to help them, right? And they didn't understand that when people invade your country, they mean well. And so he called a council of his elders and his senior generals, and they looked at the mountains between Afghanistan and China, and they looked at the casualties that they already had suffered, and they said, you know, maybe we ought to go back to the Middle East where we know what we're doing. And they did. Now that's why they call him "the Great."

What happened after that? We had a series of the Indians, the French, the British, the Americans, the Russians. Everybody tried to subdue Afghanistan. Nobody knew what they were doing. We're not going to be able to succeed in doing that either.

WOODS: What about this Taliban regime? What can you tell us about them? Because it seems that as time went on, we started to see headlines that were getting us used to the idea that the U.S. may in some way have to collaborate with these people after all.

MCGOVERN: Well, actually, that is realpolitik. That is what's going to have to happen, and the sooner they come up to that and face up to it, the better. But the Taliban has a checkered history. Back in the late '90s, they came to Houston, and they got a very nice, warm letter from then-Governor George W. Bush.

Why were they in Houston? Because there were plans for the TAPI natural gas pipeline — that's Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. This was a pipeline that had been engineered; it was on the books. Why Turkmenistan? Because Turkmenistan has more natural gas — well, let's put it this way — natural gas worth more than all the oil

in Iraq. The problem is, you can't get it here from there. So they had this Caspian Sea pipeline, which would take that gas, as I said, to Afghanistan, Pakistan, India. And it would be called the TAPI Pipeline.

Now, that was on the books. Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador later in both Kabul and Iraq, was one of the prime movers. Well, I asked him 10 years later at a public forum; I said, "What happened to the TAPI Pipeline?" He said, well, there's too much violence there now. It doesn't look like it's going to work out. And then I was removed before I could ask him a follow up question, like, oh is that why we stayed in Afghanistan? Is that why all U.S. troops are pretty much all positioned along the route that the pipeline was going to take?

So there's that as well. There's the interest in their natural resources. That's not going to work out. So it's time we folded our tent like Arabs do and silently steal away.

WOODS: What do you think would have to happen? What would the situation in Afghanistan have to look like before the U.S. government would say we're actually satisfied with the situation now, so we can withdraw with honor? What would it have to look like?

MCGOVERN: Let's face facts, Tom. There's no withdrawing with honor. We can try to disguise the withdrawal, and the mainstream press here in this country would cooperate in that.

But what needs to happen is what always happened in the past, and I'm old enough to remember that when you get an international conflict that's like this, with such ramifications, what you do is you convene the stakeholders. You bring them to Geneva or to Paris or to Vienna; you sit them around the table, and you say, all right, look. None of us want this to get completely out of hand. All of have some interest in stopping the bloodletting. Let's see if we can make a deal, okay?

And that would include Russia; it would include China; it would include Iran; it would include all the Middle Eastern countries — Iran especially — because they suffer greatly, especially from the drug trade from Afghanistan. So that's what needs to happen.

Will anybody get their maximum demands? No, but that's what a negotiation is all about. It would stop the bloodletting, and it would give Afghanistan a reasonable chance to have a more peaceful future and is in the courts the way things stand now.

WOODS: So in other words, diplomacy before the last, I don't know, 30 years or so, the way it used to be handled. The way it was handled at the Congress of Vienna or the way it would have been handled in almost any other situation is that you bring the great powers together and you hash it out.

MCGOVERN: Yeah, even on Vietnam, we began talks in Paris, and after a while, we were able to work it out. So it's very odd to me, Tom, that this is the last option

considered. And you know, I've been trying to figure out for the last several years, what lies behind these U.S. policies? Now, it seems to me that an oversimplification would say, well, it's either one: stupidity, a complete lack of knowledge of what goes on in that part of the world and the ability of the U.S. to influence things. And you know, as my colleague from the FBI Coleen Rowley keeps reminding me, look Ray, there's no underestimating the stupidity of the bureaucracy in Washington. Okay, that's number one.

The second is more sinister. I'm beginning to believe that my aversion to saying, "U.S. imperialism! U.S. imperialism!" — well, I didn't want to sound like a nutcase, right? But you know, when you think of General Eisenhower, President Eisenhower warning us as he left office about what he called the "military industrial complex," and your listeners would probably like to know that he wanted to include "congressional." So what he wanted to say was I warned about the military industrial congressional complex, which, left unrestrained, would cause havoc.

Okay now, what did he mean? Well, what he meant quite simply was that peace is really bad for business, Tom. I mean, there's no gain saying the fact that peace is bad for business. Now, war or tension such as we have in the Ukraine now? Very good for business. So what am I saying? I'm saying that the corporate interests here, which profiteer — I'm not saying "profit"; I'm saying "profiteer" — on wars. Take Haliburton, take all the big firms that made billions — not millions, but billions — on the war in Iraq, well they're still around. They're still profiteering. And Obama does not seem able to call them out and to restrain them.

Take, for example, the rise of ISIS. Now, ISIS is a prime example of what Paul Pillar was warning about. They didn't need to be in Afghanistan. And so there they are in Iraq and Syria; they have their quasi-state, and what happens? A year ago, the cracker jack Iraqi troops that General Petraeus armed and trained, 300,000 of them — what did they do when ISIS shot a couple of AK-47s in their direction in northern Iraq? They ran away. *They ran away*. Okay, well, I exaggerate. They didn't all run away. The officers took helicopters out of the area, okay?

Now, what happened to the weapons? What happened to the tanks and the artillery pieces and the armored personnel carriers? What happened? They left them on the field. Whoa. And so what did the U.S. military, the U.S. Air Force have to do? Well, you can't let them fall into the hands of ISIL or ISIS, right? So you have to destroy them. So they bombed the heck out of the U.S. military-provided equipment.

And now what are they doing? Well, you have to replenish the supplies in Baghdad, right? And so billions and billions of more equipment are being given to the very fragile, inept regime in Baghdad. So hey, look, part of those profits go into the pockets of congressmen and senators who are running for office. They are guaranteed victory, because they have all manner of wealth to devote to TV ads and everything else.

So it's a really, really — I mean, is this a great country or what? I mean, you appropriate the money. The military industrial congressional complex makes huge, huge profits. You take part of those profits and you give them to the candidates who have to run every two or every six years, and they get reelected, and they give you more money. I mean, is this a great country or what?

WOODS: Allow me to offer a friendly amendment to one thing that you said.

MCGOVERN: Sure.

WOODS: You said that peace is bad for business, and war is good for business. Well, maybe it's that peace — I think that peace is very, very good for businesses that actually make a real contribution to society, who produce things that you and I couldn't live without. Peace is exactly what they want. They want stability, and they want uninterrupted flows of supplies, so that they can provide the things that you and I need.

It is the businesses that are connected to this complex that, as you say, do benefit from it. And I think it doesn't sound crazy to say they benefit from it. I think it would be incredibly naive to think that, given there's a massive opportunity to supply huge quantities of military equipment, and given that cost is not always the top priority when it comes to the Pentagon, it would be crazy not to think that people think this way, that they think in terms of these profits, and that politicians always wind up doing very well.

I always wonder, Ray, why it is or how it is that some politician who came out of nowhere — Dennis Hastert could be an example; I mean, I could think of really almost anybody; a lot of them are nobodies when they start out — and then after they leave office, they are multimillionaires. (laughing) Something happened in between there; I'm not quite sure what it is.

MCGOVERN: You know, Tom, I've thought about this a lot. This happens not only in Congress, but would you believe it, among senior officials of the intelligence community. Now, what happened to all those senior intelligence officials like George Tenet, head of the CIA, who deliberately lied to get us into Iraq? And again, I would warn your listeners, this was not a mistake. This was fraud. Bush wanted to make a war; he said to George Tenet, head of the CIA, dig up some evidence "that will justify this war." And he did. Now where is he? Wall Street.

Where is the Head of Analysis in those days? She's on Wall Street. Where is Mike Morell, who was the deputy? He's working for Wall Street. And so my appeal would be, let's pass a law that says if you want to be a top intelligence official, you have to forego working for Wall Street once you leave. Pretty simple. You can't do that in Congress, obviously, but you might be able to do that, because it makes such eminent good sense in the intelligence community.

WOODS: Ray, tell me exactly why the U.S. can't win in Afghanistan. It's one thing to say we've had all these great powers that have tried their hand at it and failed, but a typical member of the neocon electorate would say we could just flatten the country; we could win if we really wanted to win, and certainly we can't leave if there are terrorists still there, so we've got to just keep on keeping on. Why is that not possible? Why can't it be done? It seems — people are frustrated that the U.S. seems to be impotent. It's supposed to be the great, indispensable nation, and it can't win in Afghanistan? Why can't it win exactly?

MCGOVERN: Well, Tom, it could win if it were prepared to do what we tried to do in Vietnam with the villages, you know, destroy them to save them from communism. We can destroy Afghanistan to save it from insurgents or terrorists. But you know, that would take — well, the easy way to do that would be to use small nuclear weapons. Now, I don't think anybody is going to suggest that.

I'm a former Army intelligence and infantry officer, and I know that no matter how many troops — 500,000, if you wish — that you insert into Afghanistan, you're not going to be able, number one: to persuade Afghans to kill their cousins, and number two: you're not going to be able to subdue what these people — these very, very fierce people, the Pashtos and the others — that feel that it is their sacred ground. We learned that, I thought, in Vietnam. And you can't win.

One of the things that is never mentioned, and this comes out of my infantry training, is that you need secure LOCS. Okay, I'm from New York, but I'm not talking about bagels and lox. I'm talking about L-O-C-S: lines of communication and supply. No one, from the smallest squad leader to the division commander, should enter battle without having secure LOCS, lines of communication and supply.

Now, I don't know why Petraeus and those other guys — maybe they didn't go to Fort Benning, like I did — but why they didn't look at the map, for God's sake, and see what it would take to supply an army over those mountains from Pakistan into Afghanistan. The ships go from the west coast; they go to Karachi; they unload; they go on trucks through the Khyber Pass and other passes, down into Afghanistan. They're sitting ducks for insurgents, and by the time a gallon of gasoline gets to Kabul, it costs \$600.

Now, granted, Americans think that we have unlimited means. I don't believe that's the case. But the money is not the problem. It's just physically impossible. And now we have a situation where we had persuaded the Russians to let us use the back door to exit or to insert military equipment via the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Well, they've closed that off. So where do we stand? We stand in a feckless position that any infantry officer should have known would not work when you don't have secure LOCS, secure lines of communication and supply. So unless you're prepared to nuke 'em, it's not going to work, no matter how many hundreds of thousands of troops you put in there, and we should have known that from Vietnam.

WOODS: One last thing, Ray: suppose you were in charge after 9/11 — I'm sure people have objected in this way — well, what would you have done, Mr. Smartypants?

MCGOVERN: Well, I certainly wouldn't have appealed to the basest instincts of the American people: revenge. I would've said, "Let's think about this, American people: why? No one asks why. Well I'm going to tell you why, American people. Why do they hate us? Well, I lied when I said they hate our democracy, that they hate our freedom. That was made up by my speechwriters. What they hate is our policies. They hate our support for dictators like those in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and Pakistan. And they hate the fact that, as our policy makers describe it there as 'no daylight between the foreign policies on one hand, and the foreign policies of Washington on the other.' And so if you look for the reasons why they did this, you need to address the U.S. policies that in the final analysis are responsible for why they hate us.

"Now, John Brennan, my CIA head, has implied that Muslims come out of the womb, after their first scream, they say, 'I hate America! I hate America!' Now fellow Americans, they're not hardwired to hate America. They don't hate America because of what we stand for. They hate America for what we do, what we do to the Palestinians and what we do to other people who are oppressed by these dictatorial Saudi and other regimes, to whom we sell the arms and enable them to suppress. So you know, it's really more complicated than hating our freedoms or hating our democracy. We need to address the causes.

And for you Americans who need a simple analogy, let me just tell you that the way to defeat terrorism is the same way that you defeat malaria. Okay, this is a stretch. Let me explain. How do you defeat malaria? Well, what you do is you find out where the mosquitos are, right? And you trace them back to where they breed, the swamp where they breed. Then what you do is you station three platoons of sharpshooters around that swamp, and you try to shoot, shoot, shoot all the mosquitos, and they leave, right? Wrong. You drain the swamp.

Now, what's the analogy? These terrorists, so called, breed in the swamp of grievances that is deeper than any swamp you can imagine. And so if you want to stop terrorism, you need to drain the swamp of those grievances and not appear to be exasperating situations under which they have to exist, but rather ameliorating them. And so that's the answer, my fellow Americans. We're going to sell less weapons; we're going to sell more clean air, clean water, things to these folks, in hopes that over the years they'll forget our policies of the past and realize that we'd like to have a better world for all citizens."

WOODS: I'm inclined in that direction myself, but I want to at least raise the other side's argument, which would be that it may be — now, I'm going to present the other side's argument as reasonably as I can. I've never heard it presented quite this way.

Maybe it's possible that they could concede that yes, U.S. government policy has made things worse, in terms of these people's attitudes toward the United States. And yes, as recently as the mid 20th century, the United States had an excellent reputation throughout the Middle East. They were not viewed as being dishonest brokers, but as being a model for other people. After World War I, Syria wanted to be governed — when its people were consulted — they wanted to be governed by the United States as

a League of Nations mandate. That would be inconceivable today, that they would think that. So obviously something changed. And what seems to have changed was the policy.

But on the other hand you could say that in the intervening years, there was another phenomenon happening simultaneously, that Wahhabism was on the rise; radical Islam is on the rise, and there are people who seem to be against the West, no matter what the West does. So it seems to be hard to disentangle these two ingredients: the grievances and the radicalism.

MCGOVERN: Well, Tom, that's well presented. The problem as I see it is that the radicalism in large measure comes from the grievances. And you know, people are totally confused, with respect to who the U.S. is supporting in the Middle East right now. Are we supporting the people trying to overthrow Assad in Syria? Do we really want ISIS to be in control of Syria? Or do we pretty much want Assad? And do we think that the Saudi-Israeli alliance, which is what it amounts to now, is a good thing, for what they're doing in Yemen? It's totally confusing.

But what I would suggest is this: there's a very simple syllogism that explains this or can explain it. And that is — major premise: U.S. and Israeli policy are identical in that part of the world. Minor premise: Israel, as it has said, sees its preferred outcome in Syria, for example, as "no outcome." And they explained that as long as the Sunni and Shia are killing each other off, Israel feels more secure. Conclusion: what you see in terms of the variegated, the inconsistent U.S. policy toward that whole area can be explained by the overwhelming desire by Israel that there be no outcome to the hostilities that exist there. That's the only thing that makes any sense to me.

And when you talk about what motivates terrorists, well, they caught Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, right? He was the inspiration — the mastermind, as they say — behind 9/11. And you know, when they caught him, the 9/11 Commission study was nearing completion. And I know some of the young people on that staff, and they said, hey wow; we caught him. We're supposed to find out why they did it — let's ask him!

Well, of course, the CIA would not let them ask him, so the CIA asked him. And on page 147 of the 9/11 Commission Report, you get what Khalid Sheikh Mohammed told his interrogators. Now, the background here is that he has an engineering degree from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. So the initial thought was, well, maybe he had an affair of the heart that went bad, or maybe people called him a "towel head" or something in Greensboro. Well, no. This is a quote from page 147: "Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's animus toward the United States stemmed not from any experience he had as a student in the United States, but from his deep hatred of U.S. policy favoring Israel."

Now, why didn't they try this guy in New York? Because he might have said that. Why do they have him in Guantanamo? Because they can keep his mouth shut there. That's a little bit too simple, but it goes a long way toward explaining why people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed — and his nephew before him, who was responsible for the attacks

on the Twin Towers in '93 — why they have said that the animosity that they feel toward U.S. support for Israel lies behind a large part of their motivation and their terrorist activities.

WOODS: Ray, before I let you go, I want to tell you one thing I appreciate about what you're doing, in particular. You take a distinctly non-partisan approach to what is obviously a bi-partisan problem. I was thinking back as we were talking to a remark I heard that had been made by Bill Kristol, the king of the neocons, back in 2009, after the president had apparently given a speech on Afghanistan in March of that year. He was asked by a staffer at the *Weekly Standard* what he thought about the speech. And his response was, all hail Obama. You know, we're just in big trouble, when we got to that point that Bill Kristol is saying all hail Obama. The problem goes beyond one person or one party. It's the whole regime that has given us this disaster of a policy, and I'm grateful that we have truth tellers out there like Ray McGovern, and I'm grateful for your time this morning. Thank you, Ray.

MCGOVERN: You're most welcome, Tom.