

# **Beyond Troop Levels: Policy Possibilities for Afghanistan**

A Citizen Discussion in Wisconsin—Chronology and Supporting Documents

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## **Background**

On 11-23-09 I was approached by a member of an ecumenical grassroots organization (previously known to me through election campaign reform efforts) and was asked to moderate a discussion on Afghanistan. They were extremely mindful that the Administration would soon make a major announcement on this topic. They were chiefly concerned that public discussion of the topic had not been at a very high level and that it had tended to focus on the number of troops deployed instead of the goals behind the deployment and the approaches toward those goals.

It turned out that they had spent some time developing some draft possibilities to discuss. These possibilities seemed mostly at the level of approaches to Afghanistan policy that implied certain goals, but were not entirely clear on them. I asked for and received permission to share the draft possibilities with others and clarify and supplement them based on feedback.

## **Soliciting Initial Feedback**

On 11-24-09 I forwarded the draft possibilities to 27 individuals (none who were affiliated with the sponsoring grassroots organization) for comment and feedback. I explained what I had been asked to do and asked for their help. Response was almost immediately forthcoming from slightly over half of those asked, with some responding three and four times over the course of three days (as they thought of additional observations). They shared many concerns about the possibilities, but felt that whatever possibilities were to be discussed needed to occur in “mindful context” that took into account some general questions:

- What do we hope to accomplish in Afghanistan and what are preferred and acceptable results?
- Do we know enough about Afghanistan to make informed decisions and should these matters be decided on the basis of majority opinion?
- What are our responsibilities to a people who have seen us wage war within their territory for eight years?

My “consultants” also provided a wealth of feedback on the implications of various approaches and offered assessments of the likelihood of success or lack of same. Many links and attachments were also offered as possible aids to discussion. I offered this material to the discussion organizers and they made efforts to distribute it to discussion prospects ( it turned out that close to half of the participants had read the material, though there were several complaints that it was not balanced).

## **Organizing Phase**

It was soon apparent that the organizers did not have a good handle on the number of expected participants. They offered projections that ranged from ten to fifty participants. Based on past experience I felt that this absence of a good feel for numbers made the range more like zero to a hundred. The event was publicized in an internal newsletter and they had received many indications of interest. At one point they considered a public announcement and an open meeting. In the end they concluded that there was more likelihood of candid discussion if they had a feel for the discussants. I think there was some last minute fear of a high-jacking of their discussion. But I was comfortable with this decision as it made it more likely that they could maintain decorum.

Because of the indefiniteness of numbers I asked them if I could develop a back-up plan that went beyond my initial small group proposal. In a 11-25-09 conference call, they approved a plan with the following components:

- I was authorized to split up attendees into whatever subgroups seemed best at the discussion.
- I would recruit discussion leaders to facilitate those sub-groups if needed from among people I already knew in the group.
- We would look for a discussion flow of brief introductory remarks, review of the “over-arching” questions (not to be answered, but with brief opportunity to add a meta-question or two), up to five minute summaries of the prepared possibilities, initial group discussion of the possibilities for two hours, and wrap-up and critique of one hour.
- They authorized the use of an evaluation survey prepared by the Interactivity Foundation if I could secure access to the survey mechanism in a timely way.

In developing the above plan I consulted with several contacts from the NCDD and with faculty who have participated in IF Summer Institutes. But I bear the responsibility of the plan as I tried to execute it.

## **Citizen Discussion**

On 11-30-09 the participants started to arrive at 5:30pm and helped themselves to the snacks and beverages that were kept available throughout the evening. Twenty-seven participants signed in by 6pm. A number of others may have failed to sign in and there was some movement in and out of the discussion during the course of the evening. Several other people were present as part of a “host committee” and may have participated in portions of small group discussion, but probably not to a significant degree.

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds. Ages were well-distributed from early 20s to mid 80s. Slightly more than half were male (with women mentioning that some of their friends considered this a “male topic”). My eye-ball of the racial composition was 21 European Americans, 2 African Americans, 2 Latinas, 1 Asian, and 1 American Indian. They were about evenly split between blue collar and white collar occupations (and retirees of these groups), along with two grad students. Of the 15 men, 11 were veterans of military service (including two National Guard members recently back from Iraq). Of the 12 women, two were also veterans recently returned from deployments and two others had served in humanitarian aid capacities in developing nations. I overheard several participants mention that they had family members who had been deployed or were likely to be.

I should add that 1 participant had previously been a panelist in an IF project discussion leading to a report and 2 participants had been part of citizen discussions of IF reports. There were very few political party members in this group ( 3 Democrats and 2 Republicans), with “independent” being the chief self-identifier. Wisconsin does not have partisan voter registration, but I would add that participants were drawn from traditionally Republican area that more often votes Democrat in national races.

I started off with introductory remarks, explained my background (and made clear that this was a volunteer venture on my part, not an official IF discussion). Pre-selected individuals made short summary statements of the possibilities ( I stood in to make one of those summary statements due to an absence). We then did a brief round on each possibility and that suggested some clarifications to the possibilities.

At this point two individuals announced that they would not participate in the remainder of discussion. One was a young woman who said she could not participate in good conscience in any discussion where the use of force was considered. The other was a 50-ish male who said the discussion was flawed because it did not consider the roles of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. With those departures we were left with 25 core participants. We broke down into 3 groups of 6 participants and 1 group of 7 participants.

Each group had a discussion leader who would try to move discussion along through the possibilities to encourage comment on them, to reframe them as appropriate, and to add possibilities that were thought relevant. I made rounds of the four tables to help with process and questions. I made suggestions to the discussion leaders and participants. I also acted as a “information transmission device” (their term), spreading insights heard at one table to the other tables.

It probably comes as no surprise that this was not a tidy affair. There was much uncertainty about how this would turn out—for me and among the participants. Some of my function was closer to that of dispute resolution than facilitation. I had several occasions where I asked participants to move on from an argument or

where I asked someone to allow an assumption for the sake of discussion. Where “facts” seemed clear to me I said so. More often I suggested the facts were in dispute and that multiple scenarios should be considered. The group was very generous in allowing these interventions and this participant response contrasts greatly with the tone of discussions at the past Summer’s health care town halls.

The discussion leaders made some efforts to take notes, but the main device for capturing a sense of the discussion was large sheets of plain white paper on each table (sort of World Café style). Each participant had their own marker. Recording of insights and developmental renderings of possibilities started off very slow, but picked up rapidly after the first hour. Younger participants seemed less inhibited about recording their observations, though those with strong points of view soon discovered that their volume of voice and vehemence was no substitute for timely wielding of the marker (something to consider as a way of dialing down arguments).

After about 3 hours of discussion at each table the discussion leaders (supplemented by participants) summarized the main points of discussion at their tables. When this brought out a sense that participants at various tables were devoted to development of some possibilities more than others, there was some playful movement of some individuals who switched tables.

We then held an open review of the discussion itself. About two-thirds found it to be a worthwhile exercise, with several claiming it was the best discussion they had ever participated in. About two-thirds also felt that the discussion worked because it had **both** the starting point possibilities and the room to develop other possibilities.

A smaller grouping (three) found that they had many new insights and came to appreciate the complexity of the issued involved so much that they despaired of any possibility working (I’m calling this “overwhelmed by consequences”). Almost all (minus two) thought the approach of discussing possibilities was potentially useful tool in decision-making at all levels.

A significant minority (10) found that their perspectives had shifted during the course of the discussion, with 6 who were pro-military intervention becoming more inclined toward US withdrawal (mostly on grounds that goals in Afghanistan were unclear and/or unattainable) and 4 who were initially pro-withdrawal becoming more inclined to support military intervention in support of humanitarian ends (mostly on the grounds that the US had made the mess and was responsible for cleaning it up).

Twenty-two participants picked up copies of the IF evaluation form and instructions on how to use the online evaluation at [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com) .

## Insights from Participants

It is difficult to generalize from one discussion on a controversial topic with very adept and aware participants. But I would like to share the following impressions:

- This group definitely appreciated the “starting points” for discussion, even where they took issue with the form and substance of those starting point possibilities.
- There also seemed to be majority sentiment that starting points need not be highly developed if participants are encouraged to re-imagine them and develop ones of their own design.
- The group also appreciated that there was sufficient structure and process for the discussion to move it along and go beyond “just talk”, especially in the way that it wrapped up with a “lessons learned” session and an evaluation.
- It seemed like that there was more sympathy for those who must make the tough decisions in deciding approaches and implementing them in a dangerous area like Afghanistan policy. A frequent comment: “I’m glad I’m not in \_\_\_\_\_’s shoes”.
- There seemed to be a common belief that citizens should do more of this sort of thing –especially in the areas of foreign policy and military commitments—and that the run-up to major decisions should be filled with “deliberation days” and teach-ins.
- Almost all thought the idea of preliminary discussion of alternative policy possibilities would be useful in some governance settings. Most thought the approach works best in local and more highly democratic settings. Some thought it was useful in all but time-constrained decision-making. A few even thought that it would work even in highly structured settings (corporate and military leadership) with certain modifications.

## Facilitator Insights

While I found the discussion of Afghanistan interesting and helpful in developing my own views, I also feel that I learned quite a bit about discussion process and how citizens are capable of developing ideas and providing background for decisions. Here are some that pop out at me in the immediate aftermath of the discussion:

- This turned out to be something helpful to citizen discussion and did not become “town hall fiasco” because of the structure and ground rules that the organizers made quite clear.
- Citizens can have a civil and productive discussion of a potentially divisive issue where they admit their own limited information and the importance of getting a decision right.
- Citizens seem not to need professionally developed possibilities or background papers in order to have a reasonably informed discussion of an important policy matter.

- The particulars of prepared options to discuss seem less important than the fact that they are open-ended and invite expansions and additions to the possibilities discussed.
- I observed people shifting in their preference somewhat because of listening and room to develop their thinking in a different direction, attitudes hardened when people found their starting position attacked.
- The “who” of who is in the room makes an incredible difference and these folks were very civil and eager to hear other opinions.

## **Development of Possibilities**

The discussion process developed the possibilities in the following steps:

1. Draft Possibilities (very early thoughts by the organizers of the discussion)
  - a. Defeat terrorists in Afghanistan and rebuild Afghan society (referred to as the “All-In” approach)
  - b. Withdraw in an orderly fashion and evacuate vulnerable populations (referred to as the “All-Out” approach)
  - c. Consolidate within secure areas and rebuild infrastructure in those areas to serve as model and magnet.
  - d. Ease human suffering by switching to peacekeeping and relief model that rely on Red Crescent/Red Cross, international agencies, and troops from moderate Islamic and neutral countries.
  - e. Stress localized strategies that recognize that Afghanistan is not a nation and relies on tailored and adaptive approaches over an extended period within modest expectations.
2. Expanded Possibilities (result of feedback from sources consulted by the facilitator and informed by the sources’ questions relating to the desired end result, the degree and willingness to commit resources, the roles of citizens, “public opinion”, the Congress, and the President in reaching the decision)
  - a. The War Options: traditional military operations focused on killing and defeating the enemy or counter-insurgency operations focused on protecting Afghans and helping their military and police develop.
  - b. The withdrawal options: withdraw as soon as logistically possible, withdraw after efforts to secure truce and ceasefire, withdraw incrementally as replacement by other international forces allows.
  - c. Let the people decide: American citizens should have opportunities to directly indicate their preferences via a national referendum or other neutral consultative device.
  - d. Peacekeeping model: support efforts to place neutral peacekeepers between Afghan government areas and Taliban areas.
  - e. Relief model: humanitarian assistance would be provided as security situation permits.

- f. Recognition of failed state status (the “forget-a-bout-it” option: admit that little can be done or focus only on those enclaves that can be defended)
3. Possibility Development Arising From Discussion (result of editorial effort to summarize results of large group and small group discussion, with result from facilitator notes and table notes from participants)
  - a. War options as above, with addition of enclave approach from 2f.
  - b. Withdrawal options as above in 2b, with addition of timetable and threshold events.
  - c. Let the people decide as in 2c above, with expansion to broad societal discussion of war powers and civilian control of military.
  - d. Peacekeeping model as above in 2d, with addition of an approach adjusted to distinct tribal conditions in local areas.
  - e. Relief model as above in 2e, with enlargement to include more ambitious plans as conditions on the ground allow.
  - f. Failed state concession as above, with addition of carving up Afghanistan as happened with Yugoslavia.
  - g. Add “Infrastructure Focus” possibility that takes advantage of improved security to build civil society around improved transportation, agricultural support, and economic development.
  - h. Add “Peacemaker Approach” that employs creative non-violent methods to build different type of Islamic leadership.

## **Discussion Notes**

### Flip Charts by DB

1. What are preferred and acceptable results in Afghanistan?
  - Improved national security for US
  - Better conditions in Afghanistan
  - Isolate and defeat Islamic terrorists
  - Avert humanitarian disaster
  - Cooperation with Pakistan
  - Build a nation
  - Bring about a peaceful resolution
  - Divide into more stable small nations
  - Reach accommodation with some Taliban elements
  - Recognition that all of the above are hard to achieve
  - Recognition that many opportunities have already been lost
2. Do we as a nation know enough about Afghanistan to make long-term decisions?
  - You never know everything
  - You hope you know enough
  - Decisions like this press on you whether you are ready are not

- You do the best you can with what you know and stay flexible as you learn more
  - We are hopelessly naïve when it comes to understanding different cultures
  - Quick poll: we know enough for needed decisions (8), we don't know enough (9), unsure (everyone else)
3. Are these decisions that citizens should be involved in?
- Yes, it's a democracy (5)
  - No, it's a foreign policy matter for the president (6)
  - Elected officials should be mindful of public opinion, but make informed judgment (8)
  - Unsure (everyone else)
4. What are our responsibilities to the people of a territory where we have waged war for eight years?
- None, they started it
  - Considerable, we broke it –we own it
  - Owe something to those who take our side
  - We need to leave it better than we found it
  - At least no worst off than we found it
  - We need to position them so they at least have a chance
  - No matter what the outcome, we are morally obliged to fund reconstruction
  - Responsibilities may differ based on roles (support democratic forces, oppose drug dealers and profiteers, assist those willing to defend themselves, encourage and protect those who switch to our side)

### Table Notes

#### Table One

- Even if going with war option, it must be continually re-evaluated for results and changed when necessary
- We have no good choices
- We have few promising choices
- Withdrawal options start to have more appeal when difficulties are appreciated
- Whatever we do it must be given some time to work
- How much time is enough?
- Are we looking at Cold War timeline?
- If we follow war option now, can we credibly follow relief options later?
- We will need to have Plan B for humanitarian relief (UN?)
- But we need to pick up the tab for that too
- Might make more sense to go direct to Plan B
- Some of us can support All-In or All-Out as long as president decides and explains and shows us next step in countering terrorists

- Peacekeeping model has some appeal, but hard to see where peacekeepers would come from
- Peacekeepers would be overrun by Taliban unless there is a ceasefire
- DB note: do you have another possibility here concerning political settlement?
- Possible addition: Peace conference involving major and regional powers, negotiated settlement
- Need to gain upper hand over Taliban and stabilize Pakistan in order to get parties to the table
- Infrastructure focus depends on military defeat of Taliban in an area before it can proceed

Table Two

- We need more information on a peacemaker approach
- These methods are always underdeveloped and rejected
- Hard to see how peacemakers get in at this stage
- What do we do with failed states?
- We let them fail and pick up the pieces when they bottom out
- We could let Afghanistan's neighbors carve it up
- It is a fictional country anyway
- But the suffering will be immense
- We always pick what suffering is important to us
- Suffering of Europeans is always important, suffering of Africans less so
- DB note: Table One has raised possibility of peace conference and negotiated settlement
- Hard to get suicide bombers to the table
- Get the forces who are war weary to the table and hope that's enough
- May need to work options through trial and error
- As we learn of difficulty, withdrawal seems more compelling
- As we learn of dangers, cost of defeat seems more dangerous
- Easing human suffering is attractive, if there were "forces" for that equally developed as military establishments
- What about an "aid surge": massive building of roads, clinics, and schools
- Is this different than infrastructure focus?
- Not different in type, but different in intensity, treat it like a massive D-Day type operation
- Localized strategies attractive, but likely to increase timeline
- Modeling useful, provides living example of alternative way of living, but likely to be a target for Taliban
- Try intensified military effort for a while, judge results, if situation not improved get out.

Table Three

- More discussion and testing of public opinion before escalation would be helpful
- Delay could give Taliban further momentum

- Possible, but should not sacrifice our democracy for expediency
- Roosevelt went to Congress to get a declaration, what's bigger than WWII?
- This topic goes way beyond what to do in Afghanistan, it's a matter of who gets to decide where and when we go to war.
- But we are at war
- Do we just accept that and say better ask us next time?
- Don't think the Yugoslavia carve up approach fits Afghanistan
- What about the warlords and the drug lords?
- Buy them off
- Could buy all the opium, suck up entire market, and mix it in the pavement
- Then over time pay them not to farm opium
- Expensive, but cheaper than war
- Need more policing, possibilities are missing that
- DB note: others have raised negotiations
- Negotiations needed in order to withdraw
- Or negotiations are needed after some areas are secured and Taliban sees results that improve those areas
- We need more partners, with more muscle if we are using the war option
- This problem shows what a joke NATO is, little armies with no real war capacity
- If NATO lets us down we should walk away from them
- We need specialized partners, give Brits and Aussies bigger special forces role, let Canada work on Ag development, somebody else on education, somebody else on health
- Concern that war option is only way to create conditions for these other approaches
- We are holding bad cards in this game
- We need a mechanism to replace corrupt Afghan government with trustee operation that can get things running again
- Get some of these things in place and get the hell out! Amen. I second that.

Table Four

- We see need to arrange combinations of these possibilities
- Push back Taliban>build infrastructure>build civil society>more democracy and human rights
- DB note: others mention negotiation
- Depends on scope and terms: ceasefire and partition maybe, coalition government no
- What if Taliban would accept elections?
- What if they would agree to more moderate approach in some areas?
- Our view doesn't seem to allow that they could get war weary
- They seem to have more patience than we do
- This discussion should have taken place in 2001
- But at any time it is important to say we should change course if the current course is not working

- More a matter of timeliness, some of the most important possibilities might have worked better earlier in the game
- Reverse is also true, some possibilities that do not seem workable at present may have openings at future stages
- The war option is the one with momentum, can't change that
- We can question it and if we don't believe in it we have a duty to challenge it
- Challenges undermine the troops
- Troops are so worn out that we are the least of their problems
- Every member of the military is a volunteer, everyone took an oath to defend the constitution, and all know that they are accountable to a democratic process
- We should have a national advisory referendum
- Or TV show voting where you call 800 numbers or contact a web site
- In the end we need to be there for the Afghan people, we have left them down several times before
- Relief option would be most attractive if we could get it in the right hands and protect those delivering it
- Tough decisions to be made, with high probability of things going wrong