

*“Ok...But here we are; so what do we do now?”*

That is the most dangerous question asked in discussions of public policy.

I say that because in most cases, by the time it is asked, the answer is, “unfortunately, now there is no good answer.”

That reply stifles any other answer. But of course, the timing is wrong. The answer should have been preceded by such questions as,

“what do we know about the people involved?

“what were we really trying to do to them?

“how would those affected by our actions view them?

“was what we were doing appropriate?

“how did our actions fit into the world we thought we were trying to build?

“what were the costs of our actions in life, property and civil institutions?

“how important was the issue or country to us and in what terms?

“what could have been the alternatives?

“would the policy our actions entailed work?”

Like so much of what we face today, leaping before looking avoids the truly important question: “Why did we not think about consequences before we acted?”

The answer to that question is, partially, ignorance. But this is only a partial answer. And clinging to it does not, apparently, get us very far. So, at the risk of duplicating what I have written in the past and what others have written and are writing today, let me pose some of the questions that should have been asked. I will do so on the issue of Afghanistan. They could, of course, be applied much more widely, indeed on any issue of public policy. Others, I am sure, will think of better ones. I start with these:

*“what do we know about the people involved?”* At least up to about the end of the twentieth century, Americans as a whole and officials as a group knew little about Afghanistan. Information was available, but it was little accessed and even less disseminated. The number of State Department and CIA officers, who should have been the most enlightened group, who could read any of the Afghan languages, probably did not exceed a dozen or so. And those with an intimate or professional knowledge of Afghan society, politics, economic affairs and culture almost certainly was not more numerous. Good works on Afghan history were available in Russian, French and English, but those of real quality were rare. When I set out in 1962 to write an analysis of Afghanistan for the Secretary of State, I found few useful

accounts. In general terms, however, most students of world affairs knew that Britain had tried three times to conquer Afghanistan and Russia had tried, but much more intensively, once. Available knowledge is now more available and there are more people who are trained to read it. Intervention has had at least this benefit. We have now hundreds of Americans who, weighed in the scale I saw in 1962, can be regarded as “experts,” although one must question their empathy for the people.

*“what were we really trying to do to them?”* In my inquiry in 1962, I found that the key officials in the American aid program, the embassy and the intelligence “station” could not express an intelligible policy objective. Moreover, their activities, while severally fairly large-scale and sometimes beneficial had been undertaken piecemeal and did not add up to a coherent policy. The three main activities, the Helmand Valley project, the construction of the Qandahar airport and the building of the Kabul-Qandahar expressway either made no impact or very little on either the Afghan economy or society. In my projected strategy paper, I argued that America had minimal national interest in Afghanistan and that what we should aim to accomplish was to keep Afghan society and civic structure healthy and independent. Such a policy was supplemental rather than intrusive, prudent rather than lavish and, above all, not provocative of the Soviet Union. That remained, in large part, our policy until the Soviet intervention in 1979 and was completely overturned by American invasion of 2001. The Russians first and then we tried to remake the society in our image. The Russians fought for ten years and we have been fighting for seventeen years to destroy a religious-led tribal system. Both of us failed.

*“how would those affected by our actions view them?”* We can go back at least to the first British invasion to see the Afghan devotion to the simple idea of being left alone. When the British invaded the country in 1838, they entered a wasp’s nest. The Afghans wiped out a whole Anglo-Indian army, giving the British their greatest defeat of the nineteenth century. The British fought two more major engagements and spent decades fighting guerrilla/tribal forces on the southeastern (what the British called the North West) frontier. The Afghans never gave up and never changed their attitude.

But, when India became independent and we and the Russians left the Afghans *briefly* alone, travelling around the country was a delight. And safe. Everywhere I went in a 2,000 mile trek around the country in 1962, I was treated as an honored guest. Then the Russians invaded in 1979 and created two disasters: they destroyed much of the country and killed huge numbers of Afghans and they bankrupted the Soviet Union and virtually destroyed its army. We followed them and created a similar disaster. Moral: The Afghans don’t want any foreign

interference and are willing to fight and die to preserve their independence. They are willing to take our money but they won't accept our control. They felt the same about the British, the Russians and the Americans.

*“was what we were doing appropriate?”* That question must be refined: *appropriate to whom and by what standard.* Invading another country was defined by the Nuremberg Tribunal as a war crime. It became operational *under United States law*, as specified by the Constitution, because it was anchored in the treaty under which the United States joined the United Nations. At the demand of the major powers, the definition of “aggression” has always been legally ill-defined; in political terms it has depended on the acquiescence of the strong; but in the political terms of the victims and in moral terms, it is self-evident. In the view of the Afghans the British, Soviet and U.S. invasions were crimes of aggression. The United States justification of occupying Afghanistan at the request of the Afghan government will not survive as it did not in Vietnam. It is probably a legal crime and is certainly a political crime. When the current regime is overthrown, the incoming new government, just as in Vietnam, will repudiate its acts.

*“how did our actions fit into the world we thought we were trying to build?”* Realistically, the answer to this question is “time dependent.” What one generation accepts its successor may disavow. The notion of a better world dominating policy gave way twice in the last century – once in 1919 and once just at the end of the Second World War. In the first instance, it was replaced by the quest for wealth behind the moat of the Atlantic Ocean and, from roughly 1947, by the belief that we could assure security by an aggressive foreign policy. The latter trend continues. It has landed us in war after war with no end in sight. Yet, we continue to believe that what we are trying to do works.

*“what were the costs?”* Cost is the ultimate four-letter word. It covers a variety of acts and usually makes us think of only in financial terms and thinking in that way tends to focus our attention on the cost to us. But if evaluate costs in broader terms -- *in life, property and civil institutions* –we get a truer picture. In Afghanistan, that picture is ugly. No one really knows how many people have been turned into refugees, been incapacitated, been “dwarfed” or been killed. Scattered over those categories is virtually the entire population. Physical destruction has been large-scale but somewhat less than the tragic costs in Iraq and Syria because Afghanistan had less to lose. The same might be said of civic institutions. Afghanistan was evolving from a primitive but coherent mainly tribal society into a true nation-state. Repeated and long lasting wars – a decade of Soviet dismemberment, twelve years of the warlord-ridden strife and going-on twenty years of American counterinsurgency – have

brought out the worst of the past and mingled it with more modern forms of tyranny. So, as fragile native institutions are destroyed or collapse, they are replaced either by completely foreign structures or by thinly disguised substitutes led by puppets. In everything from getting fresh water to buying a house, the law is a mafia. And the mafia is itself fragile so it acts like a pump to suck out of the society its capacity to survive beyond the current chaos. Much of the cost is hidden, but in sum we can say that it amounts to a generation of Afghans. And, of course, the contagion spreads not only to neighboring societies but also to us and our institutions, concepts of law and order and civil liberties.

*“how important was the issue or country to us and in what terms?”* One of the several ironies of Afghanistan is that America had almost no national interests in it. The British had. They wanted to protect the crown jewel of their empire, India. The Soviet Union had lesser and more intangible interest but even the Politburo could not add them up as a convincing case for involvement. I doubt that anyone in Mr. Bush’s camp could have made a better case. If we had a serious issue, it was that everyone leaves the Afghans to run their own affairs.

*“what could have been the alternatives?”* In so far as there was a reason for our attack, it was not strategic; rather it was anger. The Afghan government would not release to us the man we blamed for the 9/11 attack, Usama bin Ladin. The Afghans did, however, indicate a face-saving way around that issue. If we had been willing to negotiate, we could have accomplished what we said was our requirement without invasion. But, for domestic political reasons, in Afghanistan as in Iraq, we opted for war.

*“would the policy diplomacy entailed have worked?”* Of course, we cannot be sure since we refused to try in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq. But the downside cost of diplomacy not working would have been trivial while the cost of mounting an invasion and multi-year occupation have been monumental. In Iraq, both sides of this divide were even more pronounced. I personally met with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz on the eve of our invasion and found his government ready to meet almost any demand. But, as he told me, his government thought an attempt to keep the peace would be in vain because the US government was determined on war. When I returned from Baghdad and met with senior officials of our government, I found that Tariq Aziz had judged us aright. Are we more serious in Afghanistan? The answer is not yet clear.

So, back to my main point: *unless we ask the right questions in advance*, the answers we will get will show *little room for intelligent, effective and economical policy*. And, failing to ask the right questions in advance and acting in that frame of mind and therefore blindly, we will take Step One. Having taken that step, we narrow the range of our options and find that it

is logical to take as its offshoot, Step Two. Then, Step Three is likely to seem the only feasible next move. So, in the process we become not the masters of our fate but the captive of events that possibly never needed to have been begun and are likely to lead us in a direction opposite to our interests.

Only half in jest, I suggest that every would-be statesman be required to follow the latest fad: he should submit to being tattooed – perhaps on his forehead -- with the phrase *LOOK BEFORE LEAPING*.

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