

MMITM Ep 19 - Dan Caldwell: Afghanistan, Part 1 - Can A Truce Lead To Peace?

Announcer: From Curtco Media, what are you gonna do about.

Bill Curtis: This is Politics. Meet me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis. And firstly, once again, I'm here with my co-host, Pulitzer Prize winning author, historian, professor, worldwide lecturer and veritable Google of everything historical, Ed Larson.

Ed Larson: Thank you very much. I just heard news today that my latest book made the bestseller list as of today. Franklin and Washington.

Bill Curtis: No kidding. Where can they find it Ed?

Ed Larson: Hopefully any bookstore and certainly any one of the online sellers.

Bill Curtis: So visiting us again today. Dan Caldwell, a distinguished professor of political science at Pepperdine University. He holds a Stanford Masters and a P.H.D., as well as a Masters degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. He's also taught courses at the Naval Postgraduate School, Stanford, UCLA and Brown University. And he is the editor of five books, the author of five, including two international relations textbooks. You've heard the expression "he wrote the book". Well, Dan really did. In the subject for today, he actually wrote the textbook on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. The book is called Vortex of Conflict, U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, which is published by Stanford University Press. Dan is also a frequent contributor to CNN. Welcome, Dan.

Dan Caldwell: Thanks very much, Bill. Good to be here.

Bill Curtis: Well, the U.S. has signed an agreement with, hold onto your socks, the Taliban. It includes a drawdown of U.S. forces and it also addresses the Afghan release of thousands of prisoners. So, Ed, before we tackle the details, maybe you can give us a quick history of Afghanistan and the United States role there.

Ed Larson: Afghanistan is, as our guest knows, a place apart. It has sat up there in the mountains above India and been the vexation of a whole series of Western powers, be they British, be they Russian, be they American. It has been the great game. And no matter what country, the British Empire at all of its might couldn't hold Afghanistan, the Russian empire or the Soviet empire at its might could not hold Afghanistan. It is a mountainous, remote, frustratingly individualistic land that totally bedevils whoever tries to control it. And the latest one has been us. And the result has been just endless warfare.

Bill Curtis: Our producer, Mike says that Afghanistan is Russia's Vietnam. Is that true?

Ed Larson: It was Russia's Vietnam. It was Britain's Vietnam.

Bill Curtis: And so did everybody get out of there with peace with honor?

Ed Larson: No, marginal honor. They ended up pulling out, but with marginal honor.

Bill Curtis: And why did Russia want to hold Afghanistan?

Dan Caldwell: Yeah, a lot of people don't realize this, but 20 percent of the Soviet population was Muslim and that population was centered in the so-called Stans- Kyrgyzstan Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan. Well, 1979, Islamic fundamentalism was sweeping across that area of the world and the American ambassador was killed. There was a occupation of Mecca by Islamic fundamentalists. And I think the Soviet leaders were fearful that this spread of Islamic fundamentalism would go from the Stans into Afghanistan and then sweep perhaps even into Russia itself. And so I think that was the real catalyst of the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Bill Curtis: And which basically took place through the 80s, didn't it?

Dan Caldwell: The Soviets were in Afghanistan for 10 years from 1979 to 1989.

Bill Curtis: How did that end? How did the the Russian occupation end in Afghanistan?

Dan Caldwell: Well, a visionary leader came to power, that is Mikhail Gorbachev. And Gorbachev realized that Soviet action in Afghanistan was going nowhere. It was a dead end street. And he embarked on a number of reforms, glasnost, which was openness. Perestroika was which was restructuring the economy and then new directions in foreign policy. And part of that third reform was to withdraw from Afghanistan and to cut the Soviet Union's significant losses at that point in 1989.

Bill Curtis: And then what happened to the country after that occupation?

Dan Caldwell: The United States withdrew almost completely and quickly because the CIA had been very active in Afghanistan supporting the Mujahideen, who were the, translated soldiers of God, who were the Islamic fundamentalists who constituted the core of opposition to the Soviet Union. But once the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, the United States withdrew almost completely and immediately,.

Bill Curtis: So we're gone. Soviet Union's gone. Who's running Afghanistan?

Dan Caldwell: Many of those who had fought the Soviets in the Mujahideen who were members of the Taliban, which means student of Islam, that were trying to drag Afghanistan back to the 15th century in terms of not modernizing. And in fact, taking Afghanistan back to a very retrogressive state, particularly in terms of the treatment of women.

Bill Curtis: Let's jump ahead then to 1998. al-Qaida bombed two American embassies in Africa. Clinton orders cruise missile attacks against bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan. And, of course, we missed.

Dan Caldwell: We didn't destroy all the training camps because at the time of 2001, there were 60 training camps throughout Afghanistan. And so the attacks that President Clinton ordered were, I think, accurately described as pinpricks. They were not substantial attacks.

Ed Larson: And that's why this area, even though it wasn't the Taliban that directly did 9/11, they gave the geographical ground that allowed the training where it could come from.

Bill Curtis: What was the relationship between al-Qaida and Taliban?

Dan Caldwell: The Taliban controlled the government of Afghanistan and essentially provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda to train terrorists from all over the world.

Bill Curtis: Why?

Dan Caldwell: I think they both were radicals and revolutionaries. And I think in that sense, they were kind of pariahs within the international community. And we've seen those.

Bill Curtis: not fond of us, by the way

Dan Caldwell: Of course, intensely anti-U.S..

Ed Larson: They were religious fundamentalists. And so they were, by their very nature, opposed to secular America. The Hollywood, the movies, the way the status that women have in America, they were fundamentally opposed to everything. America stood for justice. They were fundamentally opposed to communism and everything that Russia stood for.

Bill Curtis: And then 9/11 happened in 2001. We all remember where we were as the vision on the TV just completely changed who we are as people watching the towers come down in New York. So rather than going after bin Laden, who was given sanctuary in Afghanistan, we attacked Iraq.

Dan Caldwell: No, we went after Afghanistan first on, a month after the attacks on the United States in October of 2001. And it wasn't until March of 2003 that we went after Iraq. Yeah, Bill, let me clarify just a little bit, because the chronology was this. The United States was attacked on September 11th. To his credit, President Bush and his administration took a month to figure out who was responsible for the attack. They concluded it was al-Qaeda that was based in Afghanistan, given sanctuary by the Taliban government. On September the 10th, just the day before the attacks on the United States, the al-Qaeda sent two agents and assassinated the leader of the so-

called Northern Alliance in the northern part of Afghanistan and assassinated a man named Ahmad Massoud, who was one of the leaders of the Mujahideen during the Soviet Afghan war. So suddenly the Northern Alliance was very much on the side of the United States. And that's the people that the CIA agents and the some 400 special forces and CIA paramilitary forces met up with after the attacks. And then the United States demanded that the Taliban government turn over Osama bin Laden. And either Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban, didn't believe the ultimatum from the United States or didn't think the United States would act. But in fact, the United States then attacked Afghanistan, destroyed these 60 al-Qaeda terrorist training camps, and also overthrew the Taliban government with a little more than 400 American CIA operatives and special forces,.

Ed Larson: Coupled with the northern Alliance.

Dan Caldwell: With the Northern Alliance and U.S. airpower. It was one of the most impressive military operations, I think, in history.

Bill Curtis: So how did we go from that? That sounds highly organized and actually successful to 12000 troops, 2000 American soldiers dead and nothing other than what seems to be a mess.

Dan Caldwell: Well, I think the first thing to point out is that we have not had a second major terrorist attack in the United States for the last 18 and a half years. And I think the United States government.

Bill Curtis: You're saying this is where it would have killed from.

Dan Caldwell: I'm saying that's an interesting "what if" counterfactual question to ask is what if American forces had not been there? And I think it's factual that we have not had a second major terrorist attack in the United States. And I think part of the reason for that is American activity in Afghanistan, along with our NATO allies.

Bill Curtis: We go fight a war in Iraq, take our eye off the Afghan ball. During that time, who built up what in Afghanistan that we have ended up fighting for another, oh, 15 years?

Dan Caldwell: I think the United States fought a holding action to try to keep the Afghan government in control and to control certain areas around different provinces and to keep the government from falling and the Taliban coming back into power.

Bill Curtis: Tell me about the citizens. What's the population if in Afghanistan? Who were those people? Where are their loyalties?

Dan Caldwell: Well, they're about 17 million people in Afghanistan. They are mostly poor, mostly agrarian. And I think, quite frankly, at this point, they're probably just tired of not just 18 years of war that the United States has been involved in, but more like 40 years of war going back to the Soviet Afghan war. And you could go back even further back to the early 20th century and even the 19th century.

Bill Curtis: Ok. Well, we're going to take a very quick break, but when we come back, I'd like to ask you guys a little about what was Obama's strategy in Afghanistan. We'll be right back.

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Bill Curtis: Ok. We're back with Ed Larson and Dan Caldwell and Dan, I just want to hop into. Tell me about Obama's strategy with Afghanistan during those years, those eight years.

Dan Caldwell: Well, when Obama came into office in January of 2009, he inherited two wars, one in Afghanistan, one in Iraq. And toward the end of his term, George W. Bush had done two things in Iraq to try to snatch at least a stalemate from the jaws of defeat. First of all, he sent 30,000 troops to Iraq and.

Bill Curtis: The surge

Dan Caldwell: A program called the surge. And then secondly, building on the efforts of some mid-level army officers, he cut a deal with Sunni tribesmen. It was called the Sunni Awakening, where the United States paid these Sunni tribesmen about \$300 a month not to shoot at and kill Americans and American allies.

Bill Curtis: How did that work out?

Dan Caldwell: Very well. In the end there were about 100,000 Sunni tribesmen in this program and it enabled the United States to have a relatively successful withdrawal from Iraq. So then Obama comes into office and things have gone to hell in a handbasket in Afghanistan because of the resources shifted to the Iraq war. So Obama spends the first three months in office trying to figure out what to do. And it takes a page from George W. Bush's playbook and sends 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan ala the surge. And secondly, he starts looking around for indigenous partners that would be analogues to the Sunni tribesmen in Iraq. But there's no analogue. And so.

Bill Curtis: What do you mean by that?

Dan Caldwell: Well there was no group like the Sunni tribesmen that the United States could cut in on alliance or cut a deal with. And so really, since Obama, we've been looking for that group and we've settled on the Taliban as the group that the United States needs to cut a deal with in order to leave a somewhat stable Afghanistan to enable United States to withdraw.

Bill Curtis: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Dan Caldwell: Well, consider that irony. The United States goes to war in Afghanistan to, first of all, destroy the al-Qaeda training camps and then also to overthrow the Taliban government. Now, 18 and a half years later, we've circled back around to trying to attract the Taliban as our ally in Afghanistan so that we can withdraw American forces.

Ed Larson: And think of the difference with Iraq, where you had a plausible policy for a extraction of our troops that didn't look like a rout. And so you had the Sunni tribesmen and they were, you know, they weren't our traditional enemy. You could buy them off.

But here, the Taliban, these were the people that we have spent a generation criticizing, attacking and who have been attacking us. So the ones that we argue against, the ones that have enslaved women and prevented women from going to school, the ones that gave harbor to al-Qaeda are, unlike the Sunni tribesmen in Iraq, our active enemies. And are opponents of everything we've been trying to do and now we figured they're the only ones that will give us a safe withdrawal. You might want to compare that to South Vietnam, where we buy a safe withdrawal, where we pull out and leave the country back to where it began.

Bill Curtis: So before we get to the, you know, peace with honor concept, we lost 2400 Americans in Afghanistan. At whose hand?

Dan Caldwell: Mostly the Taliban.

Bill Curtis: The Taliban killed our people. They are now essentially our ally.

Dan Caldwell: Yes. And members of the military with whom I've spoken, who've served in Afghanistan are very ambivalent about withdrawing under these circumstances.

Bill Curtis: Is this ineptitude at the highest levels in the U.S. or simply a scenario that has no logical conclusion?

Ed Larson: I would love to hear Dan's answer to that. But my, rank hypocrisy is my answer.

Dan Caldwell: I think it reflects the complexity of the situation that we were discussing when we first started talking. It's just a very, very complicated region of the world. Has a very complicated social structure. And then it has a complicated history as well. So I think it's more a function of that than a rank hypocrisy or incompetence or anything like that. I think we had very competent people dealing with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And I would think, I think some of the most capable diplomats and military leaders of the last 50 years, David Petraeus, probably one of the greatest generals of his generation. Ryan Crocker, one of the greatest diplomats of his generation, as, these were competent people. And it was, I think, just the complexity and the difficulty, the situation, so it was tough to deal with.

Bill Curtis: Probably not knowing who to actually negotiate with. Am I negotiating with you? Are you trying to kill me? It just sounds like an impossible situation.

Dan Caldwell: Yeah. And I think the impossibility of it is demonstrated by us now negotiating with the Taliban, trying to reach an agreement with the Taliban that we had overthrown 18 and a half years ago.

Bill Curtis: A few months ago, we had a truce and some peace talks and it didn't go very well.

Dan Caldwell: President Trump wanted to invite the Taliban to come to Washington, D.C. and meet at Camp David to continue these discussions. And this was a very unfortunate time to choose because it was the anniversary of 9/11. In addition to that, the Taliban had killed an American contractor. And so those discussions were canceled.

Bill Curtis: Is the Taliban organized enough to have leaders that can actually speak for everyone? Because my understanding is there's so many different radical groups out there that we don't control and they don't control, that we're kind of negotiating with just one of the heads.

Dan Caldwell: I think the Taliban now has pretty firm control over the military operations in Afghanistan. And the lead negotiator is Haqqani, who published an op-ed just about a week ago sort of praising the negotiations and declared a cease fire that has generally been observed.

Bill Curtis: And what do they want other than us out of there?

Dan Caldwell: I think they're tired of the war. I think they also want to have more of a say in the Afghan government to create a kind of coalition government. And of course, the question is whether it will be a coalition or whether the Taliban will once again take over in Afghanistan.

Ed Larson: Well, the only place I differ with what you said is, I think they want total control. I think they want to take over this government just like North Vietnam didn't one

alliance with the South Vietnamese government. They didn't want a part. They wanted to make Vietnam one. And I think the Taliban, they may have the popular support. This may be the only solution that's alternative. Certainly the president of Afghanistan hasn't showed much support outside the capital, but I think they want to take over the country.

Ed Larson: I think that's a real possibility and perhaps even a probability.

Bill Curtis: My understanding is one of their first demands is going to be that the Afghan government release 5000 Taliban prisoners. Does that sound like a good idea to you?

Dan Caldwell: I think it depends on what the end result of the agreement is. It depends on what the Afghan government gets. What sort of assurances and guarantees they get from the Taliban.

Bill Curtis: But is any of that real? I mean, assurances and what I mean is, are we trying to figure out a way to get out of there where this month it looks great and we really don't care what happens next year or what does a deal look like?

Dan Caldwell: Well, the deal, as it's been described, although the text has not been released yet and it's supposed to call for withdrawal of about one fourth of the American forces from 12,000 down to eight thousand six hundred. And then for a cease fire between the Taliban, the Afghan government and the United States.

Bill Curtis: And they would put up with us maintaining almost nine thousand troops in country.

Dan Caldwell: I think that's uncertain. But I think that's very much in the United States interest,.

Ed Larson: I think in the long run, they'd want the American troops out. What America wants at the minimum is that Afghanistan will not again become a training base for international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, which will attack Europe, America, Saudi Arabia, other places in the world. So I think, and I would love to know Dan's thoughts on this, I think we'd eventually settle on a deal that would cut the legs out from under the,

our government in Afghanistan. And as long as we had assurances that Afghanistan would not again become a terrorist base.

Dan Caldwell: I think that's the overriding American objective, or at least one of them is to maintain a residual counterterrorism special forces in Afghanistan. Now, the second one is to provide the capability to do something about the 150 nuclear weapons in Pakistan. If a radical Islamic government was to come to power in Pakistan,.

Bill Curtis: And why would that happen? Now, we've jumped over from Afghanistan to Pakistan. And I do understand that there's something to the tune of a million four hundred thousand refugees from Afghanistan, in Pakistan. Are they now a force in Pakistan?

Dan Caldwell: When I started to write the book, Bill, that you cited at the beginning of our podcast, I was just going to write about Afghanistan. I quickly discovered in writing about Afghanistan, I could not write about Afghanistan without writing about Pakistan. The two countries are integrally related. For example, the Taliban was supported in its establishment and throughout the years by the Pakistani intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence Group. And as a consequence, the two societies are very closely related. And one can see those refugees you talk about from Afghanistan going to Pakistan because they are welcome there. And we know that the two who were most notorious, that was Osama bin Laden, who sought refuge in Abbottabad, Pakistan, which is essentially the equivalent of West Point for Pakistan. And then secondly, Mullah Omar, the former leader of the Taliban, sought refuge in Quetta, Pakistan. So a number of particularly of the radical element of Afghans have gone to Pakistan.

Ed Larson: It's really striking. I happened to be trekking up in that area last summer and the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is totally porous, porous because it's simply a mountain terrain where I was trekking. And I never crossed the Afghan border in theory. But in practice, you're talking about these narrow valleys. You're talking about these glacial valleys. I had dinner with one of the warlords up in Pakistan. And it's amazing how porous this border is, where Pakistan actually goes, it flows right into China on one end and into Afghanistan on the other. And there is no clear border up here. And this whole region, whether it's in Pakistan or in Afghanistan, is controlled by various groups of warlords. And the Taliban just flows back and forth. I didn't meet

anybody who expressed that they were Taliban, but I was staying at all these little villages. And we just can't think of it like we think of the border between, say, Germany and France.

Bill Curtis: We have Pakistan sitting there with 150 nuclear weapons. I'm not sure how we come to that that number, whether that's accurate or not, but roughly the same number of nuclear weapons that India has right now. What's the relationship has that between India and Pakistan these days?

Dan Caldwell: Not good. Both of them view the other as their preeminent enemy. And they've come close to exchanging blows which perhaps could even escalate to using nuclear weapons.

Bill Curtis: So using India as a watchdog for Pakistan and the 150 nuclear weapons is not a good idea.

Dan Caldwell: No. If India was to attack Pakistan, I think Pakistan would respond with nuclear weapons.

Bill Curtis: So are we really talking about keeping 8000 plus soldiers in Afghanistan so that we can keep an eye on nuclear weapons in Pakistan?

Dan Caldwell: In part, and the other one is for the counterterrorism capability to keep groups like al-Qaeda from rising up again. Or from ISIS from becoming significant in Afghanistan?

Bill Curtis: Well, it sounds awfully messy, Dan. And as you said, complicated, but it doesn't seem like there are any easy answers there either. And frankly, it sounds a bit like the blind is leading the blind in the region. But let's stay on top of this and talk again as the story unfolds.

Dan Caldwell: Great.

Bill Curtis: Ed Larson, thanks again for being the font of all things historical and in this case, international. And Dan Caldwell, we look forward to hearing more of your views

about the region next time on Politics. Meet me in the Middle. Thanks for listening everyone.

Bill Curtis: If you like what you hear, please tell your friend. And let us know how we're doing by leaving a comment. It really helps if you give us a five star rating and we really appreciate it. You can also subscribe to the show on Apple podcasts, Stitcher or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast. This episode was produced and edited by Mike Thomas. Audio Engineering by Michael Kennedy and the theme music was composed and performed by Celeste and Eric Dick. Thanks for listening.

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