

Afghanistan: On Visiting an Unwinnable War

By [David Swanson](#)

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

I'll be visiting my nation's longest war next week in Afghanistan, thanks to a wonderful organization called [Voices for Creative Nonviolence](#) which seeks to build friendship and understanding between countries. I'll be meeting with ordinary and prominent Afghans and reporting on what they think of their country's future — often a more complex view than will fit into a television sound byte.

In preparation, I've been trying to ascertain what Americans think of Afghanistan. Two-thirds, the pollsters tell us, want to end the war and withdraw the U.S. military. But bigotry and potterybarnism ("you broke it, you own it") are still alive and well. Humanitarian imperialism has been given a boost through the U.S. corporate media's presentation of the bombing of Libya. And alternative approaches to nations like Afghanistan, other than warfare or complete separation, are still little discussed. That Afghans need food and jobs far more desperately than they need pacification or secularization is almost unthinkable in the United States.

Johan Galtung, "the father of peace studies," travels the world, and lives in Norway, Japan, and here in Virginia. It was here in Charlottesville in 1958, in the days when white people shut down the schools rather than let black kids attend them, that Galtung ceased to be a pure academic and took up a career in conflict mediation. I asked him on Tuesday, after he spoke at the University of Virginia, what he expected for Afghanistan. His view is arguably more informed than most. He has discussed the situation with both members of the U.S. government and the Taliban.

Galtung maintains that the Taliban makes some demands that are quite reasonable: 1) no secularization, 2) no centralization of governance in Kabul, and 3) no foreign occupation. Galtung argues that Islamic culture includes no concept of genuine capitulation in war with infidels. And he says that the entire Muslim community of believers (1.5 billion people) is more relevant than the national boundaries imposed by the West. That is to say: Muslims who come to Afghanistan to help fight non-Muslim occupiers are not foreigners, but fellow Muslims.

Now, I like many things about secularization and religious freedom, as does Galtung. His point is that the Taliban does not want cultural changes imposed from without. A Muslim resistance can be at least temporarily beaten and a population devastated and even segregated, all of which has happened in Iraq. But Galtung's point is that resistance will still flare up until a foreign empire departs, as the British and Soviet empires finally departed Afghanistan in the footsteps of others before them, and as the U.S. empire will eventually depart Iraq and 150 other countries.

If Afghanistan is to have peace, Galtung believes, it will need a loose federation of governments within and a confederation of allied countries without, including countries like Pakistan and Iran. And this will have to be achieved by Afghans, not be imposed on them by us. Galtung says that when he tells members of the Taliban that women should be permitted equal access to education, they reply that they understand that but want to learn it from Muslims, from Tunisia, from Indonesia, from Turkey. They want changes to be justified through the interpretation of Koranic verses, not laid down by the tracks of NATO tanks.

Afghanistan is a very violent country, Galtung says, and peacekeeping forces will be needed for any transition to new systems of governance, but such forces must come from Muslim countries. Only that can bring about an independent and neutral Afghanistan whose people control their own resources and pipelines and livelihood.

The United States will never win in Afghanistan and never lose, Galtung concluded, but will simply become irrelevant. In this assessment I hear an echo of the legalistic argument that some of us have been making for much of the past decade: you cannot win or lose an occupation or a crime; you can simply cease committing it.

I'm eager to see how my views change. For years I've opposed a long string of [atrocities](#) my country has committed in Afghanistan. But I have never before been to Afghanistan, seen it, and spoken with its people on their land. I'll be blogging daily on what I learn.

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David Swanson is the author of "War Is A Lie"

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