

Bombing to Victory in Afghanistan?

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“The United States dropped a combined total of 7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia . . . It didn’t work. America bombed Vietnam for six years longer than it bombed Japan — and it still lost.”

— [The Atlantic](#), January 2016

“Our troops will fight to win. We will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition, attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan...”

— [Donald Trump](#), August 2017

Donald Trump has introduced a military policy aimed at winning the war in Afghanistan. So far, this has involved an increase in US combat troops and expansion of the aerial bombing campaign. [According](#) to the US Air Force, 3,554 bombs and rockets were directed at targets in the first ten months of 2017, including 653 in October, the greatest number since November 2010. Some of the most recent strikes were on 10 supposed drug-production facilities in Helmand Province, and the complexity and expense of the operation were considerable. (The number of airstrikes officially notified does not include those by US Army attack helicopters.)

The commander of foreign forces in Afghanistan, US General John Nicholson, [told the media](#) the attacks were “a demonstration of our new authorities . . . And specifically, in striking northern Helmand and the drug enterprises there, we’re hitting the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances.” [Nicholson says](#) there are 400-500 opium production facilities in Afghanistan, so there is some way to go before the drug evil is eradicated at the factory stage, and if the effort to destroy them is confined to air power, the cash cost is going to be prodigious.

The bombing included strikes by some Afghan air force *Tucano* aircraft, but the main assault was by the US Air Force which for the first time in Afghanistan used its F-22 Raptor aircraft, [flown from](#) the United Arab Emirates, and B-52 strategic nuclear bombers based in Qatar. F-16s [joined in](#) from the Bagram base near Kabul, and the operation [also involved](#) KC-10 and KC-135 refuelers, surveillance aircraft and command and control aircraft.

General Nicholson [explained](#) that the Raptor was used “because of its ability to deliver precision munitions, in this case a 250-pound bomb, small-diameter, that causes the minimum amount of collateral damage.”

It has been [calculated that](#) Raptors “[cost \\$68,362 an hour to fly](#)” and thus the expense of its

mission, including tankers, “could have approached \$400,000” exclusive of bombs. The Pentagon’s budget for [2015](#) shows that 246 of these bombs cost 219.1 million dollars. This means the US taxpayer pays \$890,000 for each one, which makes the cost of the Raptor strike a remarkably expensive operation. Then General Nicholson [said](#) that one of his B-52s dropped “six 500-pound, low-collateral-damage, precision-guided munitions” in order “to keep the collateral damage to an absolute minimum, and we did.”

While it is laudable that General Nicholson wanted to minimize collateral damage by using 250 and 500 pound bombs, he then veered off course and [showed a video](#) of “another B-52 strike on another Taliban narcotics production facility. Now, this particular facility was the largest one we struck last night [November 19], with over 50 barrels of opium cooking at the time of the strike . . . So this was a B-52 strike, several 2,000-pound bombs, and it completely obliterated the facility.” Presumably the 2000 pound bombs were also precision-guided, in order to avoid collateral damage in accomplishment of complete obliteration.

The general [noted](#) that in Afghanistan “We’ve dropped more munitions this year than in any year since 2012. These new authorities give me the ability to go after the enemy in ways that I couldn’t before” and he intends to expand the bombing campaign next year. The “new authorities” are the [orders](#) of President Trump to increase the intensity of the war because “I took over a mess, and we’re going to make it a lot less messy,” and General Nicholson is pleased that “we’re hitting the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances,” although he [did say](#) “we are not going after the farmers that are growing the poppy.”

Of course the US Air Force should not target Afghan farmers — but bombing opium factories will not result in financial ruin of the Taliban. The heroin industry is extremely lucrative, and in Afghanistan the beneficiaries include very many more people other than Taliban adherents. It is, after all, the eighth [most corrupt country](#) in the world, and as noted by [The Diplomat](#) “many sub-national government officials, particularly law enforcement agents, in key strategic border provinces and border crossing points, are inextricably associated with drug trafficking networks and transnational criminals.”

After the Helmand blitz, Reuters [reported](#) a poppy farmer, Mohammad Nabi, as saying that

“The Taliban will not be affected by this as much as ordinary people. Farmers are not growing poppies for fun. If factories are closed and businesses are gone, then how will they provide food for their families?”

Has General Nicholson got an answer to that?

The Voice of America [reported](#) in May 2017 that “Since 2002, the US has spent more than \$8.5 billion on counternarcotics in Afghanistan — about \$1.5 million a day” while “only 13 of the country’s 34 provinces were reported poppy-free in 2016, and this number has dropped into single digits this year.” The UN Office on Drugs and Crime published its [Afghanistan Opium Survey](#) on November 15, and observed that “many elements continue to influence farmers’ decisions regarding opium poppy cultivation. Rule of law-related challenges, such as political instability, lack of government control and security, as well as corruption, have been found to be main drivers of illicit cultivation.”

What a shambles. And Washington’s solution is to bomb it.

Nicholson [said that](#) farmers “are largely compelled to grow the poppy and this is kind of a tragic part of the story.” Of course the farmers are “compelled to grow” a crop for sale. And it’s more than “kind of tragic.” It’s a catastrophe, because Afghanistan remains the world’s [leading producer of opium](#).

The farmers would stop producing poppy if there were markets for other crops whose cultivation would provide them a decent living. As long ago as 2004 the US Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics, Robert Charles, [told Congress that](#)

“To destroy Afghanistan’s opium economy, alternatives to the pernicious cycle of opium credit, cultivation and harvest must be available to rural communities.”

So billions of dollars were poured into anti-narcotics campaigns and [the result is](#) that after twelve years “the level of opium poppy cultivation is a new record high.”

In March 2012 Donald Trump [tweeted](#) that

“Afghanistan is a total disaster. We don’t know what we are doing.”

Little has changed, except that 45 percent of Afghanistan’s districts are now [controlled or contested](#) by the Taliban, while General Nicholson [acknowledges](#) that “we are still in a stalemate.”

So Trump has declared that the US will “[fight to win](#)”, and the campaign of airstrikes will continue so that the United States can bomb its way to victory in Afghanistan.

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