

From Vietnam to Afghanistan: America and the Dictators

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From Ngo Dinh Diem to Hamid Karzai

The crisis has come suddenly, almost without warning. At the far edge of American power in Asia, things are going from bad to much worse than anyone could have imagined. The insurgents are spreading fast across the countryside. Corruption is rampant. Local military forces, recipients of countless millions of dollars in U.S. aid, shirk combat and are despised by local villagers. American casualties are rising. Our soldiers seem to move in a fog through a hostile, unfamiliar terrain, with no idea of who is friend and who is foe.

After years of lavishing American aid on him, the leader of this country, our close ally, has isolated himself inside the presidential palace, becoming an inadequate partner for a failing war effort. His brother is reportedly a genuine prince of darkness, dealing in drugs, covert intrigues, and electoral manipulation. The U.S. Embassy demands reform, the ouster of his brother, the appointment of honest local officials, something, anything that will demonstrate even a scintilla of progress.

After all, nine years earlier U.S. envoys had taken a huge gamble: rescuing this president from exile and political obscurity, installing him in the palace, and ousting a legitimate monarch whose family had ruled the country for centuries. Now, he repays this political debt by taunting America. He insists on untrammelled sovereignty and threatens to ally with our enemies if we continue to demand reforms of him. Yet Washington is so deeply identified with the counterinsurgency campaign in his country that walking away no longer seems like an option.

This scenario is obviously a description of the Obama administration's devolving relations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul this April. It is also an eerie summary of relations between the Kennedy administration and South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon nearly half a century earlier, in August 1963. If these parallels are troubling, they reveal the central paradox of American power over the past half-century in its dealings with embattled autocrats like Karzai and Diem across that vast, impoverished swath of the globe once known as the Third World.

Our Man in Kabul

With his volatile mix of dependence and independence, Hamid Karzai seems the archetype

of all the autocrats Washington has backed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America since European empires began disintegrating after World War II. When the CIA mobilized Afghan warlords to topple the Taliban in October 2001, the country's capital, Kabul, was ours for the taking — and the giving. In the midst of this chaos, Hamid Karzai, an obscure exile living in Pakistan, gathered a handful of followers and plunged into Afghanistan on a doomed CIA-supported mission to rally the tribes for revolt. It proved a quixotic effort that required rescue by Navy SEALs who snatched him back to safety in Pakistan.

Desperate for a reliable post-invasion ally, the Bush administration engaged in what one expert [has called](#) “bribes, secret deals, and arm twisting” to install Karzai in power. This process took place not through a democratic election in Kabul, but by lobbying foreign diplomats at a donors' conference in Bonn, Germany, to appoint him interim president. When King Zahir Shah, a respected figure whose family had ruled Afghanistan for more than 200 years, returned to offer his services as acting head of state, the U.S. ambassador had a “showdown” with the monarch, forcing him back into exile. In this way, Karzai's “authority,” which came directly and almost solely from the Bush administration, remained unchecked. For his first months in office, the president had so little trust in his nominal Afghan allies that he was [guarded by](#) American security.

In the years that followed, the Karzai regime slid into an ever deepening state of corruption and incompetence, while NATO allies rushed to fill the void with their manpower and material, a *de facto* endorsement of the president's low road to power. As billions in international development aid poured into Kabul, a mere trickle escaped the capital's bottomless bureaucracy to reach impoverished villages in the countryside. In 2009, Transparency International [ranked](#) Afghanistan as the world's second most corrupt nation, just a notch below Somalia.

As [opium production soared](#) from 185 tons in 2001 to 8,200 tons just six years later — a remarkable 53% of the country's entire economy — drug corruption metastasized, reaching provincial governors, the police, cabinet ministers, and the president's own brother, also his close adviser. Indeed, as a senior U.S. antinarcotics official assigned to Afghanistan [described the situation](#) in 2006, “Narco corruption went to the very top of the Afghan government.” Earlier this year, the U.N. [estimated](#) that ordinary Afghans spend \$2.5 billion annually, a quarter of the country's gross domestic product, simply to bribe the police and government officials.

Last August's presidential elections were an apt index of the country's progress. Karzai's campaign team, the so-called warlord ticket, included Abdul Dostum, an Uzbek warlord who [slaughtered countless prisoners](#) in 2001; vice presidential candidate Muhammed Fahim, a former defense minister linked to drugs and human rights abuses; Sher Muhammed Akhundzada, the former governor of Helmand Province, who was [caught with nine tons](#) of drugs in his compound back in 2005; and the president's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, reputedly the reigning drug lord and family fixer in Kandahar. “The Karzai family has opium and blood on their hands,” one Western intelligence official [told](#) the *New York Times* during the campaign.

Desperate to capture an outright 50% majority in the first round of balloting, Karzai's warlord coalition made use of an extraordinary array of electoral chicanery. After two months of counting and checking, the U.N.'s Electoral Complaints Commission [announced](#) in October 2009 that more than a million of his votes, 28% of his total, were fraudulent, pushing the president's tally well below the winning margin. Calling the election a

“foreseeable train wreck,” the deputy U.N. envoy Peter Galbraith [said](#), “The fraud has handed the Taliban its greatest strategic victory in eight years of fighting the United States and its Afghan partners.”

Galbraith, however, was sacked and silenced as U.S. pressure extinguished the simmering flames of electoral protest. The runner-up soon [withdrew](#) from the run-off election that Washington had favored as a face-saving, post-fraud compromise, and Karzai was declared the outright winner by default. In the wake of the farcical election, Karzai not surprisingly tried to stack the five-man Electoral Complaints Commission, an independent body meant to vet electoral complaints, replacing the three foreign experts with his own Afghan appointees. When the parliament rejected his proposal, Karzai [lashed out](#) with bizarre charges, accusing the U.N. of wanting a “puppet government” and blaming all the electoral fraud on “massive interference from foreigners.” In a meeting with members of parliament, he reportedly [told](#) them: “If you and the international community pressure me more, I swear that I am going to join the Taliban.”

Amid this tempest in an electoral teapot, as American reinforcements poured into Afghanistan, Washington’s escalating pressure for “reform” only served to inflame Karzai. As Air Force One headed for Kabul on March 28th, National Security Adviser [James Jones bluntly](#) told reporters aboard that, in his meeting with Karzai, President Obama would insist that he prioritize “battling corruption, taking the fight to the narco-traffickers.” It was time for the new administration in Washington, ever more deeply committed to its escalating counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan, to bring our man in Kabul back into line.

A week filled with inflammatory, angry outbursts from Karzai followed before the White House changed tack, concluding that it had no alternative to Karzai and began to retreat. Jones now [began telling](#) reporters soothingly that, during his visit to Kabul, President Obama had been “generally impressed with the quality of the [Afghan] ministers and the seriousness with which they’re approaching their job.”

All of this might have seemed so new and bewildering in the American experience, if it weren’t actually so old.

Our Man in Saigon

The sorry history of the autocratic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon (1954-1963) offers an earlier cautionary roadmap that helps explain why Washington has so often found itself in such an impossibly contradictory position with its authoritarian allies.

Landing in Saigon in mid-1954 after years of exile in the United States and Europe, Diem had no real political base. He could, however, count on powerful patrons in Washington, notably Democratic senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy. One of the few people to greet Diem at the airport that day was the legendary CIA operative Edward Lansdale, Washington’s master of political manipulation in Southeast Asia. Amid the chaos accompanying France’s defeat in its long, bloody Indochina War, Lansdale maneuvered brilliantly to secure Diem’s tenuous hold on power in the southern part of Vietnam. In the meantime, U.S. diplomats sent his rival, the Emperor Bao Dai, packing for Paris. Within months, thanks to Washington’s backing, Diem won an absurd 98.2% of a rigged vote for the presidency and promptly promulgated a new constitution that ended the Vietnamese monarchy after a millennium.

Channeling all aid payments through Diem, Washington managed to destroy the last vestiges of French colonial support for any of his potential rivals in the south, while winning the president a narrow political base within the army, among civil servants, and in the minority Catholic community. Backed by a seeming cornucopia of American support, Diem proceeded to deal harshly with South Vietnam's Buddhist sects, harassed the Viet Minh veterans of the war against the French, and resisted the implementation of rural reforms that might have won him broader support among the country's peasant population.

When the U.S. Embassy pressed for reforms, he simply stalled, convinced that Washington, having already invested so much of its prestige in his regime, would be unable to withhold support. Like Karzai in Kabul, Diem's ultimate weapon was his weakness — the threat that his government, shaky as it was, might simply collapse if pushed too hard.

In the end, the Americans invariably backed down, sacrificing any hope of real change in order to maintain the ongoing war effort against the local Viet Cong rebels and their North Vietnamese backers. As rebellion and dissent rose in the south, Washington ratcheted up its military aid to battle the communists, inadvertently giving Diem more weapons to wield against his own people, communist and non-communist alike.

Working through his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu — and this should have an eerie resonance today — the Diems took control of Saigon's drug racket, pocketing significant profits as they built up a nexus of secret police, prisons, and concentration camps to deal with suspected dissidents. At the time of Diem's downfall in 1963, there were some 50,000 prisoners in his gulag.

Nonetheless, from 1960 to 1963, the regime only weakened as resistance sparked repression and repression redoubled resistance. Soon South Vietnam was wracked by Buddhist riots in the cities and a spreading Communist revolution in the countryside. Moving after dark, Viet Cong guerrillas slowly began to encircle Saigon, assassinating Diem's unpopular village headmen by the thousands.

In this three-year period, the US military mission in Saigon tried every conceivable counterinsurgency strategy. They brought in helicopters and armored vehicles to improve conventional mobility, deployed the Green Berets for unconventional combat, built up regional militias for localized security, constructed "strategic hamlets" in order to isolate eight million peasants inside supposedly secure fortified compounds, and ratcheted up CIA assassinations of suspected Viet Cong leaders. Nothing worked. Even the best military strategy could not fix the underlying political problem. By 1963, the Viet Cong had grown from a handful of fighters into a guerrilla army that controlled more than half the countryside.

When protesting Buddhist monk Quang Duc [assumed the lotus position](#) on a Saigon street in June 1963 and held the posture while followers lit his gasoline-soaked robes which erupted in fatal flames, the Kennedy administration could no longer ignore the crisis. As Diem's batons cracked the heads of Buddhist demonstrators and Nhu's wife applauded what she called "monk barbecues," Washington began to officially protest the ruthless repression. Instead of responding, Diem (shades of Karzai) began working through his brother Nhu to open negotiations with the communists in Hanoi, signaling Washington that he was perfectly willing to betray the U.S. war effort and possibly form a coalition with North Vietnam.

In the midst of this crisis, a newly appointed American ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge,

arrived in Saigon and within days approved a plan for a CIA-backed coup to overthrow Diem. For the next few months, Lansdale's CIA understudy Lucien Conein met regularly with Saigon's generals to hatch an elaborate plot that was unleashed with devastating effect on November 1, 1963.

As rebel troops stormed the palace, Diem and his brother Nhu fled to a safe house in Saigon's Chinatown. Flushed from hiding by promises of safe conduct into exile, Diem climbed aboard a military convoy for what he thought was a ride to the airport. But CIA operative Conein had vetoed the flight plans. A military assassin intercepted the convoy, spraying Diem's body with bullets and stabbing his bleeding corpse in a *coup de grâce*.

Although Ambassador Lodge hosted an embassy celebration for the rebel officers and cabled President Kennedy that Diem's death would mean a "shorter war," the country soon collapsed into a series of military coups and counter-coups that crippled army operations. Over the next 32 months, Saigon had nine new governments and a change of cabinet every 15 weeks — all incompetent, corrupt, and ineffective.

After spending a decade building up Diem's regime and a day destroying it, the U.S. had seemingly irrevocably linked its own power and prestige to the Saigon government — any government. The "best and brightest" in Washington were convinced that they could not just withdraw from South Vietnam without striking a devastating blow against American "credibility." As South Vietnam slid toward defeat in the two years following Diem's death, the first of 540,000 U.S. combat troops began arriving, ensuring that Vietnam would be transformed from an American-backed war into an American war.

Under the circumstances, Washington searched desperately for anyone who could provide sufficient stability to prosecute the war against the communists and eventually, with palpable relief, embraced a military junta headed by General Nguyen Van Thieu. Installed and sustained in power by American aid, Thieu had no popular following and ruled through military repression, repeating the same mistakes that led to Diem's downfall. But chastened by its experience after the assassination of Diem, the U.S. Embassy decided to ignore Thieu's unpopularity and continue to build his army. Once Washington began to reduce its aid after 1973, Thieu found that his troops simply would not fight to defend his unpopular government. In April 1975, he carried a hoard of stolen gold into exile while his army collapsed with stunning speed, suffering one of the most devastating collapses in military history.

In pursuit of its Vietnam War effort, Washington required a Saigon government responsive to its demands, yet popular with its own peasantry, strong enough to wage a war in the villages, yet sensitive to the needs of the country's poor villagers. These were hopelessly contradictory political requisites. Finding that civilian regimes engaged in impossible-to-control intrigues, the U.S. ultimately settled for authoritarian military rule which, acceptable as it proved in Washington, was disdained by the Vietnamese peasantry.

Death or Exile?

So is President Karzai, like Diem, doomed to die on the streets of Kabul or will he, one day, find himself like Thieu boarding a midnight flight into exile?

History, or at least our awareness of its lessons, does change things, albeit in complex, unpredictable ways. Today, senior U.S. envoys have Diem's cautionary tale encoded in their

diplomatic DNA, which undoubtedly precludes any literal replay of his fate. After sanctioning Diem's assassination, Washington watched in dismay as South Vietnam plunged into chaos. So chastened was the U.S. Embassy by this dismal outcome that it backed the subsequent military regime to a fault.

A decade later, the Senate's Church Committee uncovered other U.S. attempts at assassination-cum-regime-change in the Congo, Chile, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic that further stigmatized this option. In effect, antibodies from the disastrous CIA coup against Diem, still in Washington's political bloodstream, reduce the possibility of any similar move against Karzai today.

Ironically, those who seek to avoid the past may be doomed to repeat it. By accepting Karzai's massive electoral fraud and refusing to consider alternatives last August, Washington has, like it or not, put its stamp of approval on his spreading corruption and the political instability that accompanies it. In this way, the Obama administration in its early days invited a sad denouement to its Afghan adventure, one potentially akin to Vietnam after Diem's death. America's representatives in Kabul are once again hurtling down history's highway, eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror, not the precipice that lies dead ahead.

In the experiences of both Ngo Dinh Diem and Hamid Karzai lurks a self-defeating pattern common to Washington's alliances with dictators throughout the Third World, then and now. Selected and often installed in office by Washington, or at least backed by massive American military aid, these client figures become desperately dependent, even as they fail to implement the sorts of reforms that might enable them to build an independent political base. Torn between pleasing their foreign patrons or their own people, they wind up pleasing neither. As opposition to their rule grows, a downward spiral of repression and corruption often ends in collapse; while, for all its power, Washington descends into frustration and despair, unable to force its allies to adopt reforms which might allow them to survive. Such a collapse is a major crisis for the White House, but often — Diem's case is obviously an exception — little more than an airplane ride into exile for the local autocrat or dictator.

There was — and is — a fundamental structural flaw in any American alliance with these autocrats. Inherent in these unequal alliances is a peculiar dynamic that makes the eventual collapse of such American-anointed leaders almost inevitable. At the outset, Washington selects a client who seems pliant enough to do its bidding. Such a client, in turn, opts for Washington's support not because he is strong, but precisely because he needs foreign patronage to gain and hold office.

Once installed, the client, no matter how reluctant, has little choice but to make Washington's demands his top priority, investing his slender political resources in placating foreign envoys. Responding to an American political agenda on civil and military matters, these autocrats often fail to devote sufficient energy, attention, and resources to cultivating a following; Diem found himself isolated in his Saigon palace, while Karzai has become a "president" justly, if derisively, nicknamed "the mayor of Kabul." Caught between the demands of a powerful foreign patron and countervailing local needs and desires, both leaders let guerrillas capture the countryside, while struggling uncomfortably, and in the end angrily, as well as resentfully, in the foreign embrace.

Nor are such parallels limited to Afghanistan today or Vietnam almost half a century ago. Since the end of World War II, many of the sharpest crises in U.S. foreign policy have arisen

from just such problematic relationships with authoritarian client regimes. As a start, it was a similarly close relationship with General Fulgencio Batista of Cuba in the 1950s which inspired the Cuban revolution. That culminated, of course, in Fidel Castro's rebels capturing the Cuban capital, Havana, in 1959, which in turn led the Kennedy administration into the catastrophic Bay of Pigs invasion and then the Cuban Missile Crisis.

For a full quarter-century, the U.S. played international patron to the Shah of Iran, intervening to save his regime from the threat of democracy in the early 1950s and later massively arming his police and military while making him Washington's proxy power in the Persian Gulf. His fall in the Islamic revolution of 1979 not only removed the cornerstone of American power in this strategic region, but plunged Washington into a succession of foreign policy confrontations with Iran that have yet to end.

After a half-century as a similarly loyal client in Central America, the regime of Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza fell in the Sandinista revolution of 1979, creating a foreign policy problem marked by the CIA's contra operation against the new Sandinista government and the seamy Iran-Contra scandal that roiled President Reagan's second term.

Just last week, Washington's anointed autocrat in Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, fled the presidential palace when his riot police, despite firing live ammunition and killing more than 80 of his citizens, failed to stop opposition protesters from taking control of the capital, Bishkek. Although his rule was brutal and corrupt, last year the Obama administration [courted](#) Bakiyev sedulously and successfully to [preserve](#) U.S. [use](#) of the old Soviet air base at Manas critical for supply flights into Afghanistan. Even as riot police were beating the opposition into submission to prepare for Bakiyev's "landslide victory" in last July's elections, President Obama sent him a personal letter praising his support for the Afghan war. With Washington's imprimatur, there was nothing to stop Bakiyev's political slide into murderous repression and his ultimate fall from power.

Why have so many American alliances with Third World dictators collapsed in such a spectacular fashion, producing divisive recriminations at home and policy disasters abroad?

During Britain's century of dominion, its self-confident servants of empire, from viceroys in plumed hats to district officers in khaki shorts, ruled much of Africa and Asia through an imperial system of protectorates, indirect rule, and direct colonial rule. In the succeeding American "half century" of hegemony, Washington carried the burden of global power without a formal colonial system, substituting its military advisers for imperial viceroys.

In this new landscape of sovereign states that emerged after World War II, Washington has had to pursue a contradictory policy as it dealt with the leaders of nominally independent nations that were also deeply dependent on foreign economic and military aid. After identifying its own prestige with these fragile regimes, Washington usually tries to coax, chide, or threaten its allies into embracing what it considers needed reforms. Even when this counsel fails and prudence might dictate the start of a staged withdrawal, as in Saigon in 1963 and Kabul today, American envoys simply cannot let go of their unrepentant, resentful allies, as the long slide into disaster gains momentum.

With few choices between diplomatic niceties and a destabilizing coup, Washington invariably ends up defaulting to an inflexible foreign policy at the edge of paralysis that often ends with the collapse of our authoritarian allies, whether Diem in Saigon, the Shah in Tehran, or on some dismal day yet to come, Hamid Karzai in Kabul. To avoid this impending

debacle, our only realistic option in Afghanistan today may well be the one we wish we had taken in Saigon back in August 1963 — a staged withdrawal of U.S. forces.

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