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Rebuilding before retreat

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Tim Soutphommasane | October 10, 2009

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Do occupying military powers, such as American and allied forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, owe a moral duty to rebuild the countries they invade before withdrawing their troops? - D.A., South Yarra, Victoria

AS with most things in life, geopolitics abides by the rule of playing the cards you are dealt. This will offer little consolation to President Barack Obama, who has inherited his predecessor's troubled legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The reality is that US and allied powers have committed to nation building in both countries. The Obama administration has been left with the unenviable task of making the best of a bad situation.

Even so, there is now serious pressure for an exit strategy in Afghanistan (the US is already gradually withdrawing from Iraq). The problem is that should US and allied troops withdraw any time soon, they will leave behind a country rife with conflict, corruption and instability.

According to the US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, an additional 30,000 to 40,000 troops may be required for a full-blooded counter-insurgency strategy against the Taliban.

On the face of things, conventional theories about just wars offer limited guidance on the moral question of withdrawal.

Although the ethics of war has long preoccupied philosophers going back to classical and medieval times, from Aristotle to Cicero to Augustine and Aquinas, just war theory has typically been concerned with moral questions about just cause (*jus ad bellum*) and just conduct in the midst of battle (*jus in bello*).

However, contemporary wars in the Middle East do not resemble traditional conflicts. In conventional wars, nation building, the creation of a society governed by a legitimate and just regime, occurs in the post-war phase, as in the paradigmatic cases of Japan and Germany. In Afghanistan and Iraq, though, what began respectively as exercises in self-defence and pre-emptive intervention have morphed, for better or worse, into nation-building occupations. In these circumstances, military success is measured as much by an army's ability to protect the local population and facilitate good government as by its success in wiping out the enemy.

All this has implications for what constitutes a just withdrawal. Once an occupying power commits to nation building, it incurs obligations to the people of the country it invades. As Michael Walzer and Nicolaus Mills have argued recently, a just war theory implies that an occupying power must make a good-faith effort to leave behind a stable government that is capable of meeting basic needs. Failing this, on departure an occupying power may well owe a duty to provide asylum to people most at risk in the country (as the US did to thousands of South Vietnamese in the 1970s and 80s).

This seems in principle about right; it is also where the moral clarity ends. Withdrawal on just terms will necessarily carry a high price, not least the loss of many more lives and limbs. Whatever the duties owed to the people of occupied countries, leaders of occupying powers also owe it to their citizens not to send soldiers into futile wars.

In the theatre of war, moral responsibility involves, as we are learning yet again, a tragedy of hard choices.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address: philosophercolumn@gmail.com

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