Our perception of the past determines how we understand and frame the present. This is the central contention to studies of cultural memory and the politics of history and remembrance. The work of fashioning a cultural memory of violence, then, has stark consequences when the remembrance is called upon to demand violent retaliation and retribution.

Gillie Collin’s essay analyzes the Taliban’s use of national, ethnic, and religious history to persuade Afghans and the world at large that their cause is historically rooted, motivated, and justified. Sorting through Taliban propaganda, media representations, and speeches, Gillie goes beyond simply critiquing the “truth” in these representations to ask the more challenging question: what are the consequences of these historical interpretations, accurate or not? In her words, “The Taliban is not a dormant relic of history; instead, the movement engages history to accrue authority in contemporary socio-political contexts.”

In particular, Gillie challenges us to look beyond bound studies of cultural memory, nationalism, and “imagined communities” to assess the role of memory in international and intercultural exchange. The texts she analyzes are not nationally bound, produced for and by Afghans. Instead, they are cultural productions by individuals aware of their global resonance to invoke varying international memories of violence. Recognizing this, Gillie questions what it means to expand our binary conception of an American or Afghani cultural memory of the War on Terror. She takes cultural interaction seriously and asks that we consider an American-Afghani dual view that informs the inspiration, production, circulation, and reception of these historical analogies.

At every stage in her work, Gillie remains attentive to how these texts make the past relevant to the present and fundamental for imagining possible futures. Security strategists call this sort of fruitful analysis “actionable intelligence.” Here, consider it scholarship at its best, concerned with thinking critically about the world in order to make it better by reducing human suffering.

—Brian Johnsrud
The Neo-Taliban’s Neo-History: Re-Cognition in Resurgence

Gillie Collins

“Afghans have, throughout their history, lived in brotherhood and exhibited intense integrity, solidarity and unity as a single nation under the name Afghanistan.”

—The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Taliban Website

“Their goal seems to be to take the Muslim world in particular back to a sort of medieval, fanatical view of life. And progress is their enemy and freedom is their enemy.”

—Paul D. Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, on the Taliban and Al Qaeda

Whether the Taliban is a barbaric anachronism or a legitimate incarnation of traditional Afghan nationalism, these claims ground their arguments in the same rhetorical warrant: history—or historical memory—matters. The past defines us.

American politicians have long construed the Taliban as a backward-looking, “medieval” entity. In 2001, the U.S. declared the Taliban a historical relic. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced an end to “major combat activity” in Afghanistan, and


2 Bruce Holsinger, Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007), 47.
Deputy Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz claimed “we have accomplished our major objective, which is the defeat of the Taliban government.”

Four months later, President Bush proclaimed that “as a result of the United States military, the Taliban is no longer in existence.” The Taliban’s dissolution seemed to affirm the Bush administration’s caricature: modernity defeated barbarism, progress uprooted fundamentalism. The trajectory of history was saved; that is, until the Taliban was resurrected.

Beginning in 2003, the Taliban demonstrated signs of recovery, destabilizing regions of central, eastern, and southern Afghanistan. “Neo-Taliban” resurgence mocked the so-called “post-Taliban order,” claiming international headlines and forcing Americans to remember a “forgotten war.” In fact, U.S. casualties in Afghanistan have largely escalated since that time; 2010 saw the most U.S. military deaths yet. Given ongoing military and civilian casualties in Afghanistan, the U.S. must ask new and urgent questions about the resurgence. If Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz is correct in his assessment that the Taliban offers a “medieval, fanatical view of life,” how has the regime continued to thwart America’s “nation-building” agenda? More fundamentally, how has the Taliban survived into the twenty-first century? And what role does history and historical memory play in the process?

The Taliban is not a dormant relic of history; instead, the movement engages history to accrue authority in contemporary socio-political contexts. In order to reconcile the processes of nation-building and statecraft in Afghanistan, we need to investigate the cultural hegemonic agency of the Taliban. In this paper, I argue that the neo-Taliban attracts popular support and new recruits by reworking Afghan historical memory. By weaving NATO’s occupancy into a historical narrative of colonial victimization, the neo-Taliban appeals to diverse constituencies, securing a sustainable foothold in Afghanistan’s dynamic sociopolitical fabric. Of course, when considering the neo-Taliban’s memory-making capacities, we need to bear in mind that every interpretation of the past is subjective. If we acknowledge that the construction and reconstruction of collective memory is ongoing, then we can begin to evaluate the origins and limitations of Taliban authority.


Taliban Beyond the Beard: Understanding the Enemy

To definitively oust the neo-Taliban, the U.S. must understand the Taliban beyond simplistic caricature. Operation Enduring Freedom has suffered because of historical myopia; ongoing U.S. failure to account for the complex roots of Taliban sociopolitical authority has cost American and Afghan lives. Since the 1990’s, U.S. media and leadership have depicted the Taliban as a historical anachronism, neglecting to sufficiently investigate and represent the movement’s complicated history. In this sense, exploration of the neo-Taliban’s recent resurgence must begin with an appreciation for the movement’s historiography and contend with the U.S. media’s tendency to muddle the historical narrative describing it.

In the 1990’s, New York Times reporter John Burns sought to interpret the Taliban’s ascent to power for a popular audience, winning a Pulitzer Prize for his efforts. That said, even Burns’ award-winning reporting suffers from historical shallowness. In 1995, for instance, Burns claimed the “Taliban formed barely six months ago in the southern city of Kandahar,” when the Taliban actually materialized in the 1980’s, as madrassa students organized armed opposition to Soviet occupancy. Following the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the Taliban emerged as victors of civil war among mujahedeen factions. When the Taliban first seized Kabul in 1995, Burns heralded the regime as a welcome “respite from war,” representing the Taliban’s obsession with law and order as a “peaceful” watershed in Afghanistan’s violent history. Similarly, in 1996, the Clinton administration, which was invested in procuring pipe-line routes through Afghanistan, endeavored to collaborate with Afghanistan’s new leadership. As Burns’ reporting suggests, the Taliban initially drew favor from U.S. political leaders and media outlets; by and large, U.S. rhetoric legitimized the regime as emergent victors of Afghan’s civil war.

A year later, Burns’ story changed. In October 1996, he reported that Kabul was “plunged into the medieval labyrinth,” as Taliban gunmen enforced their strict interpretation of Sharia law. Around

9 Burns, 1995.
the same time, human rights and aid groups decried the Taliban’s repressive gender policies, compelling President Bill Clinton to sever ties with the regime in 1997. As the Taliban engaged a gory campaign to “purify” Afghan Islamism—targeting non-Pashtun minorities, stoning women, and banning technological “idolatries”—Americans recoiled. Unable to reconcile the Taliban’s sociopolitical appeal or fathom the movement’s atrocious human rights record, Burns deemed the Taliban a “backward” and “medieval” anomaly in an otherwise modern world. Burns’ reporting, in conjunction with the Clinton administration’s policy of blanket disengagement, epitomizes the U.S.’s deep-seated tendency to misunderstand the origins of Taliban authority and underestimate the movement’s ability to adapt and survive.

Such inattention to Taliban history especially undermined U.S. policy in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001. Nine days after al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks, President Bush declared a new kind of war—a crusade against an amorphous enemy. Presenting the Taliban and al Qaeda as vaguely and equivalently inimical, Bush argued that a “war on terror” necessitated a war against the Taliban because “the leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country.”

Again, U.S. leadership neglected to consider the movement’s complex origins and ongoing popular support base; by exclusively attributing Taliban political control to al Qaeda’s support, Bush failed to fathom the movement as a discrete entity, a specific outgrowth of Afghanistan’s sociopolitical context. Even when the Taliban proposed to surrender bin Laden to a third party country for trial, the U.S. rejected the notion. As Wendy Chamberlin, Ambassador to Pakistan, told President Musharraf, “there was absolutely no inclination in Washington to enter into a dialogue with the Taliban.” In neglecting to exhaust—or even explore—diplomatic alternatives to invasion, the Bush administration grounded its post-9/11 policy in warrants similar to the faulty simplifications underlying John Burns’ reporting; figuring the Taliban a fleeting figment of history, U.S. oc-

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12 Coll, 363.
15 Bush.
cupancy failed to account for the movement’s sustainable sociopolitical agency. Without acknowledging the Taliban’s history or future, the Afghanistan invasion left the U.S. blindsided.

While the U.S.’s “shock and awe” strategy reaped short-term successes, Operation Enduring Freedom proved wishful thinking. The Neo-Taliban’s resurgence since 2003 indicates that U.S. air and ground offensives have failed to effectively target and thwart neo-Taliban cultural, political, and military strongholds; as a result, Taliban resurgence maintains popular support today. In order to reconcile—and ultimately uproot—the Taliban’s influence in Afghanistan, the U.S. must first recognize the movement’s complexity. While Burns’ 1990’s reporting represents an important attempt to understand the Taliban, his writing also demonstrates the U.S. tendency to reduce the Taliban to a self-defeating, simplistic rubric. Where Burns failed to reconcile the Taliban’s ideological appeal, he reverted to caricature; similarly, because the U.S policy did not recognize the Taliban as a competitive cultural and political entity, American operations in Afghanistan were not prepared for a “nation-building” operation. Given U.S. tendency to misinterpret opponent and mission in Afghanistan, how can the U.S. evolve a more effective “nation-building” strategy?

Gauging the Analytical Framework: Imagined Memories to Imagined Communities

In reevaluating policy in Afghanistan, the U.S. must construe the Taliban as a cultural entity, remediating collective memory to consolidate sustainable national authority. In his recent memoir Decision Points, President Bush claims “Afghanistan was the ultimate nation building mission.”18 Ironically, the Bush administration underestimated the Taliban’s nation-building capacities. In Afghanistan—where state boundaries “forget” primordial ethno-cultural traditions—statecraft is the business of nation-building and memory re-cognition. Nationalism is a competitive enterprise.

To forge a competitive insurgency and undermine NATO’s nation-building operations, the neo-Taliban proffered alternative “memories” of Afghan nationhood. Political scientists, historians, and anthropologists have long acknowledged the role of collective memory in “nation-building.” In the 1980’s, Benedict Anderson canonized nations as “imagined communities,” claiming that nationalism is a social construct facilitated by propaganda.19 Nearly a hundred years earlier, political scientist Ernest Renan argued that selective

remembering (and forgetting) contrives a precedent for sustained national unity.\textsuperscript{20} Especially in regions of contested histories—such as post-colonial, ethnically heterogeneous, and religiously divided countries like Afghanistan—political authority hinges on refiguring collective memory and contriving a common past.\textsuperscript{21}

The Taliban’s memory-making agency is also a function of the regime’s cultural hegemony. Antonio Gramsci coined the term “cultural hegemon” to characterize a “ruling class” that accumulates political authority by re-crafting cultural memory. “Ethico-political history,” he argues, “is an arbitrary and mechanical hypostasis of the movement of hegemony, of political leadership.”\textsuperscript{22} According to Gramsci, hegemons generalize values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that solidify status quo power systems.\textsuperscript{23} Importantly, Gramsci also contends that hegemony is contingent on popular “consent” and hegemonic “coercion.”\textsuperscript{24} In this sense, he figures the process of memory-making as inherently dynamic—an ongoing conversation between the societal elite and subordinate populace.\textsuperscript{25} By Gramsci’s assessment, the neo-Taliban’s political and cultural influence depends on Afghan civilian support, especially popular willingness to embrace the movement’s remediation of history.

Granted, this vision of cultural hegemony is not seamlessly applicable to contemporary sociopolitical fabrics; in particular, Gramsci’s theory does not account for grassroots resistance. In this vein, John Chalcraft and Yaseen Norrani argue that resistance and “counter-hegemony” threaten the political agency of hegemons in post-colonial states, where competing historical narratives challenge hegemonic conceptions of the past.\textsuperscript{26} Sustainable nation-states are not necessarily those that deploy national memory to indoctrinate subordinate masses. Often, stable states are those that embrace popular ideologies and opinions, generalizing both “state society” and “civil society” from the bottom up.\textsuperscript{27} In other words, cultural hegemony is not invincible—national-state stability is often contingent on popu-

\textsuperscript{20} Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” (Toronto: Tapir Press, 1996), 47.
\textsuperscript{21} Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides, Statecraft in the Middle East: Historical Memory, and Popular Culture (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), 37.
\textsuperscript{24} Buttigieg, Gramsci, 236.
\textsuperscript{26} John Chalcraft and Yaseen Noorani, Counterhegemony in the Colony and Post-Colony, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12.
lar sovereignty. As NATO state-building operations aim to promote democratic government in Afghanistan, the U.S. must invest in the Afghan population itself, bolstering civilian resistance to Taliban hegemony. In order to facilitate transition from unstable cultural hegemony to stable popular sovereignty, the U.S. must assess—then destabilize—the Taliban’s cultural hegemonic influence.

Analyzing Taliban hegemony requires pursuing, intercepting, and scrutinizing the regime’s communication. Because the movement does not command a stable “state apparatus” to legally impose influence, Gramsci’s rubric suggests that media and informal cultural communications are foundational conduits of Taliban authority.28 International Crisis Group, a leading conflict-resolution NGO, agrees: “The Taliban…lacks control over territory or state institutions. As a result, communications and media coverage assume greater importance.” 29 That said, accessing Taliban cultural rhetoric is a dangerous endeavor; a number of reporters have been kidnapped seeking interviews with Taliban figures.30 The process of accumulating and interpreting representative texts is also challenging. For instance, Radio Voice of Sharia, the Taliban’s radio station, is broadcast exclusively in Pashto. While radio is probably the most effective mode of communicating with a rural, illiterate population, these verbal communications are nearly inaccessible to the outside world.31 More broadly, US analysis should consider that the neo-Taliban depends extensively on informal (and virtually untraceable) community networks to propagate the movement’s message. While neo-Taliban propaganda is difficult to obtain and analyze, the U.S. needs to devote resources to studying available texts precisely because the movement’s communicative capacities are so enigmatic. Though such evaluations may not unequivocally define the neo-Taliban’s ideological message, or conclusively monitor public reception of resurgence rhetoric, the U.S can begin to analyze the movement’s methods of recruiting new forces and procuring popular support.

In this sense, studying Taliban propaganda is valuable, so long as we remember the communication’s intended audience. Where the multilingual Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan website targets inter-

28 Buttigieg, Gramsci, 157.
national readership, night letters (shabnamah) are hand-delivered or posted in rural Afghan communities.\textsuperscript{32} Because \textit{Al Samoud}, an Arabic-language monthly magazine, is released both online and in print, articles are accessible to a transnational Islamic community.\textsuperscript{33} Increasingly, DVDs, audio cassettes, or MP3’s are distributed among potential recruits, especially in urban centers.\textsuperscript{34} If analysis of Taliban communication accounts for specific contexts and associated rhetorical agenda, the “Fog of War” is no longer impenetrable. Insurgence communication offers insight into the movement’s strategies for procuring recruits and civilian support, especially the neo-Taliban’s efforts to rework Afghan historical memory. Thus, in order to facilitate transition towards popular sovereignty in Afghanistan, the U.S. must first evaluate neo-Taliban rhetoric.

\textbf{Yesterday, Today: Taliban Re-Mediation of the Past}

To explain the neo-Taliban’s sustained political authority, the U.S. must study the movement’s construction and re-construction of Afghan historical memory. In particular, neo-Taliban propaganda figures U.S. invasion as the latest instance of western imperialism, working NATO occupancy into a longstanding memory-scape of colonial abuses. In a song published online, the Taliban re-mediates memory of the Second Anglo-Afghan War: “We will remind them of the Battle of Maiwand, and we will teach Washington / we are the soldiers of Islam, and we are happy to be martyred.”\textsuperscript{35} Here, the neo-Taliban contrives collective conceptions of historical continuity and reduces NATO aims to conform to imperialist rubrics. In particular, the neo-Taliban remembers the Battle of Maiwand as testament to Afghan capacity to confront and overthrow colonial affronts to Afghanistan’s sovereignty. The Battle of Maiwand, which took place in 1880, was one of the foremost conflagrations of the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Though Afghans incurred greater casualties during the conflict, Afghan militias ultimately defeated the British army. Thus, in resurrecting collective memory of the Battle of Maiwand, the neo-Taliban not only reminds Afghans of longstanding imperialist injustices perpetrated by the West, but also reinforces Afghan capacity


\textsuperscript{35} “We are the soldiers of Islam”, \textit{Al Emarah}, 1 January 2007, excerpted, International Crisis Group “Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?” July 2008, 27.
to resist such abuses. Likening Americans in “Washington” to British colonialists in the nineteenth century, the neo-Taliban uses historical memory to depict U.S. occupancy as an imperialist vendetta. The neo-Taliban also uses memory of the battle to persuade Afghans that victory against the U.S. is imminent, even as the neo-Taliban suffers severe casualties. Colonel Imam, a Taliban crony who trained the movement’s most preeminent leader, Mullah Omar, also cites the Battle of Maiwand as a touchstone for Afghanistan’s history of colonial victimization, claiming that “when people...heard the British were coming back, the cry went up all over...‘Remember Maiwand?...Then everyone, Taliban and non-Taliban joined together.”\textsuperscript{36} Colonel Imam invokes historical memory of Maiwand to bolster his argument that the “Taliban can never be defeated.”\textsuperscript{37} He figures historical precedent for Taliban victory, contending that Afghans can once again oust Western forces corrupting Afghan homeland. Importantly, he portrays collective memory of British colonialism as a source of national unity—all Afghans, by Colonel Imam’s estimation, share this traumatic and glorious past. According to Colonel Imam, collective memory helps accrue wider support for the Taliban cause, uniting both Taliban allies and neutral civilians in opposition to U.S. occupancy.

While the neo-Taliban certainly draws from distant history to consolidate authority, collective memories of Soviet occupancy in the 1980’s are probably more foundational to the neo-Taliban insurgence. In 2003, the neo-Taliban published a night letter entitled “Message to the Mujahed Afghan Nation!”, which re-mediated Afghanistan’s colonial heritage as a source of nationalism: “you have served Islam a great deal throughout history and have defeated the non-Muslims of the world...after one and half million martyrs of Jihad against Russians...be happy”\textsuperscript{38} Here, the neo-Taliban proffers a rendition of Afghan’s national history that exclusively includes legacies of Western abuse and unified resistance. In designating Afghanistan a “Mujahed” nation, the neo-Taliban promotes collective memory of cohesive opposition to past and present Western oppression (“mujahed” roughly translates to “those engaged in jihad”). Just as the Battle of Maiwand was portrayed as a source of national pride, “victory” against Soviet forces is reason for Afghan’s to be “happy,” to willingly sacrifice for a common Afghan future. When Graeme Smith conducted interviews with neo-Taliban militants in Kandahar in 2009, his subjects’ responses also demonstrated a similar tendency to conflate

\textsuperscript{36} Christina Lamb, “The Taliban will ‘never be defeated,’” \textit{The Sunday Times}, 7 June 2009.

\textsuperscript{37} Lamb.

memory of Soviet and NATO invasions. When Graeme’s reporters asked neo-Taliban militants whether “foreigners had bombed their families,” respondents of all ages complained about casualties from Soviet bombings, in addition to those caused by U.S. airstrikes. In other words, where interviewers assumed neo-Taliban fighters would understand “foreign bombings” to mean NATO operations over the last decade, subjects spontaneously remembered violence perpetrated by Soviet forces more than twenty years ago. While limited sample size and selective regional representation renders this anthropological data anecdotal, Graeme’s studies suggest that the neo-Taliban garners recruits by blending together collective memory of Soviet and NATO occupation. The neo-Taliban leverages Afghanistan’s historical victimization to justify insurgency as vengeance. The neo-Taliban blends together Afghan traumatic memories, promising a means to avenge past injustices and guaranteeing collective victory.

In order to further highlight the tragedy of longstanding imperial exploitation, neo-Taliban remembers colonialism as a religiously motivated crusade. The neo-Taliban reworks collective memory of British, Soviet, and American occupancies, constructing a history of Western assaults on Islamic order and faith. As Abu Ahmed, creator of Al-Samoud magazine, described, “My father and grandfather told me: ‘You have to fight the Russians’. Now I tell my son: ‘You must fight the Americans’. The first thing we teach our children is ‘Allah’. The second is fighting the Americans.” Clearly the neo-Taliban identifies a violent, Afghan patrimony that legitimizes—even necessitates—continued violence. Tapping into both nationalist and Islamic identities, the neo-Taliban uses the past to accrue popular support in the present. By infusing “Allah” into rhetoric rejecting foreign occupancy, the neo-Taliban raises the stakes of resistance: NATO not only jeopardizes Afghan political autonomy, but also challenges Afghan religious sovereignty. In this vein, an al-Samoud article entitled “Sacrifice” reads as follows: “Our fathers knocked down great, great forces in history with the help of God. In this century our grandfathers gave a jaw-breaking response to England and our fathers to the Russians, and God willing we will give the Americans a similar response.” The Taliban defines Afghan nationalism as an inherited obligation to “sacrifice” for “the homeland.” Here, the neo-Taliban imagines a primordial Afghan ancestry—a nation committed to resisting secular, Western influence. Notably, the neo-Taliban remembers victories against Britain, Soviet, and US militaries as divinely

ordained; the neo-Taliban attracts support and recruits by suggesting participation is a religious duty and claiming every imperialist will be expunged “with the help of God.” Thus, to doubt the Taliban’s imminent success and “jaw-breaking” power is to doubt God’s authority. The Taliban uses imagined memory to define an “imagined community,” bolstered by religious, nationalist, and familial duties.

To frame the Taliban’s deeply embedded practices of collective memory manipulation, the U.S. must also reconcile the regime’s use of history to address in-country adversaries. In particular, the U.S. must consider how the collective memory of political dynamics within Afghanistan relates to collective recognition of international opposition. While the neo-Taliban manipulates a historic obligation to defend Afghan and Islamic sovereignty, the movement also identifies multiple enemies. Claiming that rival domestic authorities are appendages of the West, the Taliban styles itself as a movement to purify polluted government. In particular, the Taliban remembers the mujahedeen civil war in the early 1990’s as a fight to restore good governance and consistent rule of law. In My Life with the Taliban, a memoir by Abdul Slam Zaeef, the Taliban minister recollects the Taliban’s first formalized meeting in 1994: “Each man swore on the Qur’an...to fight against corruption and the criminals.” Zaeef claims that the Taliban consolidated popular authority as an alternative to morally and fiscally corrupt mujahedeen warlords. As Zaeef’s interpretation of the movement’s foundation suggests, the Taliban remembers any alternative Afghan leadership as inherently “corrupt” and “criminal.” Today, the Afghan national government’s blatant corruption under President Karzai only substantiates the Taliban’s rendition of Afghan national history; the Taliban easily claims divine and historic ordinance to rout domestic fraud and secular impurity. To this end, the neo-Taliban redefines national governmental corruption as a byproduct of colonialism. Al-Samoud and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan website exclusively refer to the Afghan National Army and government as “Puppets”—recalling the same label used to describe purportedly pro-Soviet “Mujahedeen” opponents in the 1990’s. Stripping their political adversaries of both humanity and self-sufficiency, the Taliban conflates traumatic memories of internal and external abuses. Any unjust and “un-Islamic” political alternative is a figment of the colonial memory-scape.

As the neo-Taliban portrays both U.S. occupancy and the Karzai administration as inextricably intertwined figments of a neo-colonial narrative, the movement uses news coverage to represent the U.S. invasion as another imperialist endeavor. While the neo-Taliban

42 Abdul Salam Zaeef, My Life with the Taliban, ed. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2010), 65.
43 Zaeef, 67.
reworks Afghani historical memory to accrue sustainable popular support, the movement also interprets contemporary violence to conform to this conception of Afghanistan’s history. In other words, the process of blending together Afghan national memory of imperial victimization and contemporary U.S. occupancy is two-fold: the neo-Taliban mediates collective perception of the past and attempts to script popular conception of the present. To this end, The “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” website contains a “news” section, which broadcasts Taliban military successes and underscores adversary vulnerability. The website typically releases ten to twenty updates daily, exclusively portraying Taliban victories. On March 8, 2011, for instance, the website released seventeen informs, claiming credit for killing fifty-nine US/NATO and Afghan National Military soldiers.\(^4\)

Taliban news coverage engages the memory-making process, persuasively refiguring ongoing violence to submit to colonial rubrics and reinforce its version of Afghanistan historiography. In particular, the website consistently refers to all NATO and US military personnel and political leaders as “invaders,” figuring foreign occupancy as an unsolicited, hostile breach of national sovereignty. In this way, the neo-Taliban attempts to ensure that reports of ongoing U.S. operations in Afghanistan trigger collective memories of Soviet (and British) imperialism. The neo-Taliban interprets current violence to substantiate its interpretation of past violence. The result is an ostensibly cohesive connection between Afghan past and present, which bolsters neo-Taliban claims that the U.S.’s “nation-building” agenda is a thinly veiled colonial initiative. Thus, the neo-Taliban taps into long-term Afghan resent for colonial injustices and capitalizes on Afghan traumatic memory of imperial violence; the neo-Taliban, in turn, attracts recruits and support as a viable opposition to this historical pattern of abuse.

The neo-Taliban’s sustained political authority must be evaluated in the context of its cultural hegemony, especially the movement’s capacity to mediate Afghan historical memory. Neo-Taliban rhetoric often imagines historical continuity among instances of perceived western imperialism, including British, Soviet, and U.S. occupancies over the course of the last two centuries. The movement capitalizes on Afghanistan’s traumatic history of imperial victimization, acquiring broadbased civilian support by equating these past and present adversaries. The Taliban uses history to characterize the Afghan national government’s corruption as an appendage of sustained Western imperialism. In order to link past and present in a continuous narrative of colonial victimization, the neo-Taliban mediates reports

of US operations, ensuring today’s news submits to yesterday’s imperial paradigm. Incorporating NATO occupancy and Karzai administration governance into a seemingly cohesive historical narrative, the neo-Taliban offers a version of Afghan nationalism that appeals to diverse and dynamic Afghan constituencies.

**Forget-istan: Collective Memories Un-Remembered**

Engaging both distant and recent history, the neo-Taliban re-writes—and un-writes—the past. As the neo-Taliban mediates national historiography, the movement necessarily induces historical amnesia. In order to sustain a political foothold in Afghanistan, the Taliban fosters *selective* remembrance. Because the neo-Taliban’s interpretation of Afghan history hinges on collective “un-remembering” of Afghanistan’s past, the neo-Taliban’s cultural and political influence is fundamentally fragile. Inconsistencies in the neo-Taliban’s mediation of past and present represent distinct opportunities for the U.S. to offer a historical counter-narrative that alienates the neo-Taliban from its popular support base. To this end, U.S. nation-building must include memory building and re-building; the U.S. must insert itself into the competitive craft of writing national history, using “real” (albeit forgotten) memories to undermine the Taliban’s selective perception of the past.

While the neo-Taliban represents itself as a just, humanitarian alternative to the post-Bonn Agreement Afghan national government, such rhetoric is not representative of reality. Though neo-Taliban propaganda manipulates memory of contemporary violence to assume a humanitarian guise, the movement neglects to admit responsibility for civilian casualties. While the United Nation reports that neo-Taliban insurgents were responsible for 75% of Afghan civilian deaths in 2010, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan foregrounds civilian casualties as a cornerstone critique of NATO occupancy. In this same vein, the neo-Taliban has recently sought to distance itself from school destruction. Despite engaging a large-scale campaign targeting teachers and schools, Al Emarah claimed that the Taliban “do not torch books, not the schools of Muslims, nor kill students or teachers.”

Zama Coursen-Neff, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, could not disagree more; while the Taliban vendetta against girls’ education is infamous, Coursen-Neff reports that the Taliban is now even “targeting boys’ schools and coeducational schools that offer the secular education promoted by the central government…they have killed teachers, threatened students…thousands


of students who were attending school are now shut out, especially in the south and southeast.” While Taliban rhetoric foregrounds NATO military failures to respect non-combatant immunity, the movement must “forget” its own egregious track record regarding civilian casualties. Thus, if the U.S. reduces conventional combat operations, which tend to incur civilian casualties, and instead reverts to securing rule of law, human rights, and popular sovereignty, the neo-Taliban’s representation of the U.S. “nation-building” as another imperialist endeavor will fall short.

Similarly, as the neo-Taliban re-mediates Afghan nationalism to procure political power, insurgence rhetoric “forgets” the Taliban’s historic efforts to exacerbate ethnic tensions. In order to appeal to a broad Afghan audience and enable diverse recruitment throughout the country, the neo-Taliban downplays tribal and ethnic rhetoric. Unlike the Taliban of the 1990’s, the neo-Taliban actively refrains from employing ethnic slurs. In spite of the neo-Taliban’s concerted efforts to “forget” the movement’s legacy of ethnic violence, memories of Taliban brutality are only superficially buried; mass graves of ethnic Hazaras, for instance, testify to the Taliban’s genocidal activity in the 1990’s. Today, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s website attempts to construct memories of Afghan unity, contending that Afghans should “heal rifts with each other to defend their country against oppositional forces...The people in Afghanistan, whether Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazarah, Baluch or Nooistani, have always joined common causes in safeguarding their common interests.”

Here, the neo-Taliban attempts “imagine” historical continuity and cohesion across Afghanistan’s diverse—and often adversarial—ethnic landscape. Using external threats to advocate internal cohesion, the movement also seeks to conflate Afghan ethnicity and nationality. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan website consistently appropriates the term “genocide” to refer to NATO occupancy—and perhaps distract from its own history of perpetrating genocide.

In order to classify the 2001 invasion as an effort to exterminate Afghan ethnic-

47 Zama Coursen-Neff, “The Taliban’s War on Education: Schoolgirls are still under fire in Afghanistan,” The LA Times, July 31, 2006
48 Giustozzi, 37.
49 Patrick Cockburn, “UN finds mass graves of Hazara killed by Taliban,” The Independent, 8 April 2002.
50 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Afghans should heal rifts with each other to defend their country against occupation forces...The people in Afghanistan, whether Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazarah, Baluch or Nooistani, have always joined common causes in safeguarding their common interests.”
ity, however, the neo-Taliban must remediate Afghan ethnicity to conform to state borders. In proffering a historical counter-narrative, U.S. “nation-building” operations must respect rather than suppress diverse and competing Afghan identities. Ironically, the U.S.‘s “nation-building” operations are more likely to succeed in conceiving a stable, cohesive Afghan nation-state if Afghanistan’s government recognizes, appreciates, and represents the complex and conflicting communities that comprise Afghanistan.

Furthermore, in defining Afghan nationality via map boundaries, the neo-Taliban “forgets” that Afghanistan’s nation-state status is actually the product of colonialism—the very “oppositional force” the neo-Taliban vilifies. In fact, “Afghanistan” was first imagined by Britain; the state’s boundaries were constructed to buffer British and Russian colonial domains. By reducing Afghanistan’s history to a state narrative, the neo-Taliban inadvertently legitimizes the country’s legacy of imperial victimization. More broadly, the neo-Taliban contrives a national identity that “forgets” association and dependence on the West. The Taliban’s emergence in the 1990’s was, in many respects, a product of international support from Pakistan, Iran, and, most contentiously, the US. Where Mullah Zaeef recalls that the Taliban fought among the ranks of mujahedeen in the 1980’s—and uses this memory to glorify the movement’s genesis—he fails to acknowledge that the mujahedeen’s capacity to resist and ultimately repel the Red Army was contingent on U.S. sponsorship. Similarly, Taliban sovereignty in the 1990’s was also enabled by the U.S., as Washington aimed to secure oil and natural gas transport for the American oil company Unocal. In fact, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency cooperated with the Taliban through summer 2001, brokering agreements to mitigate Afghanistan’s burgeoning opium industry. In order to acquire popular support and recruits from across Afghanistan’s diverse ethnic and geographic landscape, the neo-Taliban must reconstruct national memory in a vacuum, imagining Afghan history independent of international narratives. Again, the U.S. has a distinct opportunity to supply a compelling counter-narrative to neo-Taliban selective remembrance. The U.S. should facilitate Afghani re-remembering of national history in a global context, especially foregrounding collective memories of U.S.-Afghan cooperation. The U.S. should make an effort to promote memories of Afghanistan’s mutually beneficial engagement with other states.

Because the neo-Taliban’s rendition of Afghan national memory is revisionary, the movement’s popular support base is fundamen-

53 Coll, 305.
tally unstable. The U.S. must take advantage of the neo-Taliban’s relative decentralization and ideological incongruities, intervening in the process of engineering Afghan nationalism and historical memory. Recognizing the cultural battlefront of war in Afghanistan, the U.S. should devote resources to ensuring Afghans have access to constant news coverage and accurate historical information, so that neo-Taliban rhetoric is not considered legitimate by default. The neo-Taliban’s cultural and political authority survives where U.S. “nation-building” strategies fail to account for the effects of historical memory. The U.S. must compete with the neo-Taliban’s conception of Afghan nationalism and national history. To oust the Taliban, the U.S. must empower Afghans to learn and embrace their complete histories and identities.

Remembering to Remember: Learning from the Past, Figuring the Future

In his July 2010 “Counterinsurgency Guidelines,” General David Petraeus directed US and NATO forces in Afghanistan to “secure and serve the population.” To this end, General Petraeus advised troops to “be first with the truth” and “get accurate information...to the people.” In short, General Petraeus acknowledged that, especially in nation-building operations, “the decisive terrain is the human terrain.” By General Petraeus’ assessment, state sovereignty necessitates popular sovereignty.

In Afghanistan, popular sovereignty is an antidote to the neo-Taliban’s cultural hegemony. My research suggests that the neo-Taliban’s sustained political influence is partly a product of the movement’s commitment to reworking Afghan historical memory. The neo-Taliban incorporates collective memory of U.S. occupancy into a larger narrative of Western imperial abuses and Afghan resistance. In other words, the neo-Taliban employs imagined memories to contrive an “imagined community,” invoking Afghanistan’s past to solicit support and recruits in the present. Because the neo-Taliban’s mediation of Afghan historiography is inherently selective, its rendition of Afghan nationalism is also unstable and unjust. The U.S.’s “nation-building” operations must capitalize on the Taliban’s historical fallacies to secure a safer, fairer Afghanistan.

To this end, the U.S. should consider reducing conventional combat forces in Afghanistan and channeling resources towards cultural and popular sovereignty efforts. The neo-Taliban will undermine Afghanistan’s stability as a nation-state until civilians widely re-

56 Petraeus.
tract support for the movement. The neo-Taliban will not be routed militarily; U.S. “victory” in Afghanistan depends on Afghan popular will. War in Afghanistan is a competition for the “hearts and minds” (and memories) of everyday Afghans.

Since 2001, U.S. “nation-building” efforts in Afghanistan have been hindered by US failure to consider the influence of collective memory in constructing nations and nation-states. That said, historical memory does not always dictate popular opinion; at a certain point, the warrant that the past defines us begins to erode. For everyday Afghans, the present and future matters more than the past. If U.S. “nation-building” operations effectively invest in Afghan popular sovereignty, and the Afghan national government offers civilians a stable and representative future, the Taliban’s political and cultural influence will finally be relegated to history.

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