

Afghanistan Slides Into The Abyss

Memories of trips past and thoughts of a dark future.

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President Joe Biden has done what his three predecessors could or would not do: end America's longest war. What was supposed to be a measured U.S. withdrawal has turned into an Afghan rout. Kabul now has the feel of Saigon in April 1975. The Taliban has achieved in a few weeks what it had been unable to do over the last 20 years.

The tragedy is enormous. The original objective, both moral and necessary, to wreck Al Qaeda and punish the Taliban was almost immediately accomplished. Unfortunately, the sirens of nation-building bade the American ship of state forward to its doom.

The Bush administration imagined planting centralized, democratic government in Central Asia. That project did not crash and burn quite as quickly and badly as the invasion of Iraq. However, at least the latter nation today has what passes for a modern democracy, despite its manifold and manifest flaws. Afghanistan appears to be heading back to the seventh century. The country's nadir might prove to be very low indeed.

A decade ago I visited Afghanistan twice. The first time was with a couple Cato colleagues, one of whom knew the country, having provided logistical support there for a consulting firm. We spent much of our time in Kabul, but also flew to Herat, to the west near the Iranian border, and Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north, near Uzbekistan. On the second visit, a NATO press trip, we also spent a majority of our time in Kabul, staying at Camp Eggers. However, we traveled to Lashkar Gah. NATO had planned to take us elsewhere, but our equipment was needed for military missions—after all, there was a war going on—stranding us in the capital.

Today Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Lashkar Gah all have been seized by the Taliban. Kabul also has fallen, as people still try to get out. When I was there all but the third seemed secure. The first two were distant from concentrations of Pashtuns, usually friendliest to the Taliban. The latter two were closer to Taliban strongholds, but Kabul was the nation's capital, long filled with foreign as well as Afghan forces.

Herat had a lively expatriate community, with which we connected. The Great Mosque is beautiful and worth a visit. Indeed, earlier this year UNESCO announced that it was going to list Herat as a World Heritage Site. No word on how the Taliban will treat these cultural treasures, but the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues during its first time in power bodes ill.

Although nowhere in Afghanistan could one let down one's guard, the atmosphere in Herat was much more relaxed than in Kabul.

Mazar had a vibrant commercial sector and hosted the famous Blue Mosque, or Hazrat Ali Mazar, which includes the supposed tomb of the important Sunni figure Ali ibn Abi Talib. We met an Afghan friend of our former expat worker, happily now in the U.S., who took us around the city and got us a special tour of the Blue Mosque. We were accompanied by heavily tattooed Willy, a Maori from New Zealand. He organized security for our trip and was the self-labeled "shooter" on the team. After talking with his contacts about Taliban activity—then minimal—he took us outside the city to visit the ruins of an old fortress. It felt like a normal tourist stop. Then as we were enjoying ourselves clambering about, I noticed Willy a level below, armed and alert, patrolling the grounds and scrutinizing the surrounding area. No, Afghanistan never was normal.

My trip to Lashkar Gah in the south was in the company of the U.S. military, so it was all business. Home to Pashtuns, the region was a battleground. Our military escort was on alert as we wandered about and spoke with some shopkeepers. We were left with the eerie feeling that while the U.S. and its Afghan allies ruled the day, at night the city might answer to a different master.

Kabul was crowded and bustling, with annoying traffic typical of a big city. The Afghan military was everywhere, making picture taking dangerous—someone with a gun always wins in an argument over the appropriateness of photos. Streets were lined with garishly colored mansions called "poppy palaces." The owners weren't necessarily in the drug trade, though drug money coursed through the economy. Contracting with the U.S. or other foreign governments was another generator of great Afghan wealth. The endless abuses of Western generosity were detailed in excruciating detail by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

The city also hosted manifold offices of contractors, NGOs, journalists, and governments. The U.S. embassy and U.S. AID headquarters sat on opposite sides of a street with a military checkpoint at each end, but employees still were ordered to use an underground passageway between the two. Although I was driven to the airport on both trips, an embassy friend recently stationed there told me that during his time the streets were judged too unsafe for travel and a helicopter was used instead. After a two-decade long campaign to build a Western-style state in Afghanistan the capital's streets were not deemed safe for travel by Americans. Today choppers are the only sure way to get to the airport.

Camp Eggers was its own world, self-contained. Although America was in charge, the base was multinational. Our NATO group stayed in guest quarters, ate with military personnel, used the gym, and purchased provisions like any soldier or consultant. While Willy emphasized blending in by driving a standard issue SUV, the military took the opposite approach. They decked us out in body armor and helmets and took us everywhere in a heavily armed convoy. We never had any incidents, but some Americans on one of our routes were bombed shortly after our trip. The base closed six years ago as allied forces were being drawn down.

Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport (there's a name not long for this world!) yielded an otherworldly experience. There were three or four checkpoints along the road to the terminal where the guards searched our luggage, again and again. Perhaps this was low-tech security.

Having a dozen or more people handle your bags made it more difficult for a terrorist to bribe or cow everyone. If he missed just one person, any dangerous contraband might be found.

Once at the terminal it was a bit like a concert mosh pit to get inside the building. Then there was a customs check, where one of my colleagues suffered a shakedown. We both bought war rugs. They were simple and cheap, but my friend was ordered to cough up some cash to be allowed to take hers through. At the final security check at the gate the guard insisted on completely emptying my carry-on bags, nearly causing me to miss my flight. I suspected he was enjoying the moment when he had authority over some of the foreigners who flowed through Afghanistan.

The trips were challenging but rewarding. There is nothing like seeing what you've been reading about. Talking to the sort of people quoted in stories. Engaging with people who are simultaneously so like you and different from you. Getting a feel for a country, a culture, a people, and a war. And going where most people cannot.

My greatest frustration was the difficulty in meeting "real" Afghans. American personnel in Afghanistan had a record of rarely talking with Afghans who did not work for the U.S. government, private NGOs, or the Afghan government. What normal Afghans wanted and expected was essentially irrelevant. And it looks like my opportunity to meet them in the future is equally bleak, or even worse.

My most serious regret was the recognition even then that the vision of a better, liberal future was a chimera. City residents overwhelmingly preferred the Kabul authorities to the Taliban and welcomed the freedoms of a liberal society. Even in more traditional areas most families wanted daughters to go to school, believed in public accountability, and desperately desired peace. However, the entire system appeared to be working to yield a very different result.

Watching events unfold in Afghanistan today is a melancholy experience. I was filled with anticipation when I first flew in a decade or so ago. I looked forward to better understanding the conflict and foreseeing the future. I left disappointed. Not about what I had seen, but regarding my conclusion. I didn't believe that anything close to the Afghan government of the time would survive an American departure.

Unfortunately, today that reality appears to be playing out. Americans lost, especially those who gave their lives in this unnecessary war. But the Afghan people have been the greatest victims. For them President Joe Biden should insist never again: never again will lives and wealth be sacrificed for so little gain. Never again will Americans and other peoples be sacrificed for so little purpose.

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