

We Do Not Need To Defend Afghanistan

The only group to which Uncle Sam has transcendent moral and practical obligations is the United States' own citizens.

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The dramatic collapse of Afghanistan demonstrates yet again that the best way to be acclaimed a humanitarian in Washington is to advocate sending young Americans to fight other peoples' wars. It doesn't matter much for whom. As long as the proposal is made with passion and certitude.

Today it is Afghanistan, which must, it is claimed, be defended forever. A couple years ago it was the Syrian Kurds, to whom, it was said, America had an eternal defense obligation. Next week, month, or year the liberation cause du jour will be someone else, perhaps the Ukrainians or Taiwanese, who, Americans will be told, must be safeguarded until the end of time.

But today the sacred duty is to Afghanistan. Asked a splenetic Bret Stephens at the *New York Times*:

is there any reason we should care more about the fate of Afghans than we do of desperate people elsewhere? Yes, because our inability to help everyone, everywhere doesn't relieve us of the obligation to help someone, somewhere—and because America's power and reputation in the world are also functions of being a beacon of confidence and hope.

The belief that America has a moral obligation to act—and keep on acting, apparently without end—permeates the thinking of the blob, the foreign policy establishment that shapes and implements U.S. foreign policy. One of the finest representatives of this perspective is former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who once proclaimed that “we” thought sanctions against Iraq worth the death of a half million children.

Of course, that claim was derived from a broader principle, that members of the blob are uniquely anointed to rule. For instance, Albright also asserted that “we” stand taller and see further into the future. Unfortunately, the Iraq war exposed the utter inanity of her position, after which she should have joined a nunnery for a time of extended repentance and then change in vocation. Instead, she remains a celebrity, regularly inflicting her hubris upon the rest of us.

Even more infamous, for instance, was her comment on the use of force, when she asked Colin Powell: “What’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?” For her, U.S. military personnel are but gambit pawns in a global chess game, to be sacrificed as needed. She evidently was frustrated that some Americans believed that the U.S. military should be primarily used to defend *America* from attack. Hence her consuming desire to send service members off to “do good” elsewhere around the world.

Her tenure preceded America’s Afghanistan intervention, which began with an emphasis on what was important, responding to attack. U.S. forces entered Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago, in October 2001, for practical reasons: to destroy Al Qaeda, responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and punish the Taliban for hosting the terrorist group. These objectives were achieved within weeks. Later attempts to rationalize continuing the mission on security grounds fell flat.

Yet the U.S. did not leave. Instead, Washington decided to build democracy atop the Hindu Kush. And there was good done for the Afghan people: improved economic and social development, greater equality for women, increased education, and more political liberties. But the cost was high, with thousands of dead and tens of thousands of wounded American and allied military personnel and contractors, and about \$2.6 trillion spent.

Afghans also paid a high price. There were tens of thousands of Afghan casualties, most at the hands of the Taliban, but in a conflict extended by the U.S. As John Allen Gay of the John Quincy Adams Society observed, in judging its actions the U.S. tends to fixate on the views of English-speaking elites in foreign capitals: “It is unsurprising that the media’s parachute regiment thus found a country eager to continue the war, eager to have American forces remain and American airstrikes continue—and a country that would change profoundly under new rulers.” However, citing field work studying the opinion of rural Afghans, women in particular, he noted that peace was a greater imperative for them: “The war was costing Afghanistan tens of thousands of lives and regular mass displacement, and many Afghans had come to favor peace at any price.”

Moreover, though the allies constructed an impressive Potemkin government and military, these institutions were what the U.S., not the Afghan people, wanted. Although the Western-oriented regime was backed by a modernizing and liberalizing urban elite, members of the latter rarely joined the military to defend the system. And the ruling institutions had scant impact on life in the village and valley, where most decisions of importance were made. Ultimately, Afghan political and military leaders failed to fulfill their responsibilities and too few Afghans were prepared to defend a government which did so little for them. Blame for the Afghanistan state’s failure ultimately lies with the regime and its creators, both Afghan and foreign.

Now this 20-year project has crashed and burned in spectacular fashion. That the Biden administration blundered in execution is clear—Washington should have been issuing visas and withdrawing allied citizens and Afghan friends before any decision regarding withdrawal was announced, let alone implemented. However, the collapse came faster than expected by almost anyone, including the president’s critics. Even as provincial capitals fell, the Washington war lobby was dreaming up new castles to build in the Afghan sky. The president was correct that departing at any time would have been difficult, though not necessarily this bad.

However, the president’s decision to withdraw remains correct. Afghanistan was never an important, let alone vital, U.S. interest. Central Asia is about as distant as possible from America.

The claim that Washington should have maintained bases in Afghanistan for use against China or Russia assumed that Kabul's rulers would treat their neighbors as enemies and America's military could protect an exposed outpost in an adversary's neighborhood.

Moreover, Afghanistan has nothing to do with terrorism other than the happenstance that Osama bin Laden ended up there to fight the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan. None of the planning, financing, or staffing of the 9/11 attacks occurred there. And occupying every ungoverned and under-governed spot on earth would not be effective counterterrorism policy.

Perhaps the most appealing argument was emotional, that the U.S. had a moral obligation to continue the fight. This contention was advanced with special urgency by younger Afghans, many of whom were looking forward to a modern life. Afghanistan has an exceptionally young population: the median age is below 16 and nearly two-thirds of Afghans are under 25. None of them have any memory of 7th-century life under the Taliban pre-2001.

Despite the readiness of the war lobby to embrace human rights, this issue rarely has motivated U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, Washington most often used the issue as a gloss for policies decided on other grounds. In fact, administrations both conservative and liberal routinely supported bad, sometimes terrible, and occasionally even criminal regimes for political reasons. At its worst, the U.S. government has helped murderous dictatorships—such as highly oppressive Saudi Arabia.

U.S.-backing for human rights violators in war include the Soviet Union in World War II, South Korea and South Vietnam in two very hot Cold War conflicts, the Afghan Mujahideen against the communist government in Kabul and its Soviet ally, Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons-wielding Iraq against Iran in the 1980s, assorted Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Kosovars in the Yugoslav civil wars, radical Islamist groups, including an Al Qaeda affiliate, against Bashar al-Assad's Syria, and the brutal Saudi monarchy's invasion of Yemen. In these and other cases Washington proclaimed its fidelity to human rights generally while consciously sacrificing those principles and values, sometimes making Americans accomplices to war crimes, as in Yemen.

Similarly, Washington's involvement in Afghanistan had nothing to do with human rights. In the 1980s the Reagan administration cared not one whit about which century the Afghan Mujahideen lived, so long as it directed its fire at Soviet troops. When Americans became the target of similar Islamist extremism, the U.S. suddenly affirmed its hopes for a liberal Afghanistan. However, all Washington really cared about was creating a stable and friendly government to discourage terrorism and expand American influence.

That the Afghan people indirectly benefited was convenient, but ultimately unimportant in Washington. These positive developments gave Afghans opportunities they otherwise would not have enjoyed. However, that did not create a duty for Americans to continue fighting, potentially forever, to create what had never before existed, a liberal, centralized, democratic state in Central Asia.

The only group to which Uncle Sam has transcendent moral and practical obligations is the United States' own citizens. That duty trumps the government's responsibility to foreign peoples. That doesn't mean American lives are more valuable than others or that U.S. officials are entitled to needlessly sacrifice others to benefit their citizens. All human beings have transcendent moral value as well as obligations to one another. However, *the government in Washington has greater affirmative duties* to those in its own political community than to other peoples.

Imagine if having once intervened on another nation's behalf created a permanent duty to never to stop fighting. In May 1945 the U.S. would have been obligated to declare war on the Soviet Union and fight to liberate Eastern Europe. In 1949 the U.S. would have had to invade the Chinese mainland to support the otherwise defeated Nationalists. In 1953 Washington would have had to continue its battle with North Korea and China to liberate the Korean peninsula.

After the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion the Kennedy administration would have had to try again (and perhaps again and again) to oust the Castro regime from Cuba. Washington would have had to continue the wars in Cambodia and Vietnam even after the collapse of both regimes in April 1975. America would have had to continue backing Angola's UNITA insurgency rather than cut off aid in 1992; the death of Jonas Savimbi a decade later would have been a reason to redouble U.S. efforts. Washington would never have ended its occupation of Haiti after invading in 1994—or first in 1915.

Finally, the post 9/11 endless wars would have been truly endless. American troops would have dug in permanently in Iraq, to forever protect Baghdad from foes internal or external. Washington would never leave Syria, but instead promise to forever back a wide range of groups, including Islamic radicals, against the Damascus government and protect that country's Kurds from Turkey, the Syrian government, ISIS, Iranian forces, Russian military, and perhaps even space aliens. The U.S. would still be bombing Libya. And American administrations would never stop supporting Saudi Arabia's attempt to conquer its neighbor, Yemen (publicly disguised as defending the supposedly helpless, beleaguered Saudi monarchy from retaliation by its neighbor, though much poorer and weaker, for Riyadh's initial aggression). And, of course, the U.S. military would have made its first two decades in Afghanistan merely the beginning of decades or even centuries more of combat.

Such a policy would be inane.

The U.S. did what was necessary by intervening in Afghanistan. Noted the John Quincy Adams Society's Gay:

we must remember that the United States went to Afghanistan in the first place because we were victims. The de facto government of Afghanistan hosted a notorious international terrorist group. That group then killed thousands within the United States. We drove out this government and replaced it with a better one. We then spent nearly two decades strengthening the new government and providing reconstruction aid. We sacrificed thousands of our troops' lives. We went above and beyond any reasonable duty that could be imposed on a victim of aggression.

Along the way the U.S. spent two decades attempting to improve the lot of the Afghan people and to empower them to decide their own fate. Washington should bring out Afghans who risked their own lives and futures to help the U.S. But then Americans owe the country of Afghanistan no more. Responsibility for the enduring tragedy of Afghanistan ultimately rests with that nation, not America.

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