



## 9/11: The War On Terror Wasn't Supposed To End This Way

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Washington's sole success in the 9/11 wars was Afghanistan. Barely two months after the destruction of the Twin Towers and strike on the Pentagon, U.S. forces had wrecked al-Qaeda and defeated the Taliban.

With a little more effort, Osama bin Laden might have been captured during the battle at Tora Bora; with a little more negotiation the Taliban leadership might have surrendered and joined in a political settlement. However, the Bush administration treated 9/11 not so much as an atrocity in its own right but as an excuse to do what the Neoconservative cadre influencing administration foreign policy most desired: invade Iraq.

That was only the first of the ancillary wars which ended up superseding the initial response to 9/11. The US stayed in Afghanistan to forcibly transform the traditional, rural society and create a centralized national government in America's image, leading to a revived Taliban resistance. Washington helped overthrow Libya's government, destroying another nation and triggering years of civil war; underwrote civil war in Syria, supporting jihadists and adding to the hundreds of thousands of casualties; and backed Saudi Arabia's criminal war against Yemen, creating a humanitarian catastrophe.

Equally pronounced though less visible were America's pervasive drone campaigns. These strikes degraded the capabilities of insurgent and terrorist organizations. However, drones killed more than a few noncombatants. And continue to do so, as evident in a spectacular misfire during the final US evacuation from Afghanistan.

Under political attack for its botched withdrawal, the Biden administration aggressively struck back in Kabul, claiming success in preventing another terrorist bombing. However, the US killed an aid worker and nine family members, seven of whom were children, apparently with no connection to terrorism. Reported the *New York Times*, its video investigation "along with interviews with more than a dozen of the driver's co-workers and family members in Kabul, raises doubts about the US version of events, including whether explosives were present in the vehicle, whether the driver had a connection to ISIS, and whether there was a second explosion after the missile struck the car."

After two decades of constant conflict and a million or more deaths, killing ten people seems barely worth noting. Yet that highlights how the global war on terrorism coarsened America's

debate and deformed its policies. Even the deaths of thousands or *hundreds of thousands* of foreigners matter little to American policymakers. When Madeleine Albright, then-U.S. ambassador to the UN, was asked about a *half million* babies killed by Washington's economic sanctions on Iraq, she replied: "We think the price is worth it." As if mass starvation was little different than a supplemental appropriations bill for a few million dollars.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan offers Americans an opportunity to reassess the 9/11 wars. The attacks of that tragic day 20 years ago demanded action. However, the response should have taken into account the fact that the US was "under attack" as a result of Washington's always meddling, often brutal, and sometimes murderous interventions abroad. Droning, bombing, invading, and occupying other nations naturally created blowback, including the 9/11 attacks.

This does not mean those who died on 9/11 deserved their fate or that the killers were moral heroes. Far from it. The terrorists were responsible for their actions, committing murder by targeting civilians who had committed no wrong. However, US policymakers also bear blame. And it is essential not to allow them to deploy faux patriotism to divert attention from their responsibility for the consequences of attacking countries and peoples around the world.

This is particularly important because two decades of war appear to have *increased and expanded* terrorist attacks. Thankfully, there have been no additional mass casualty incidents in the US, but America's relative isolation makes such attacks difficult. And increased domestic security, though often abusive, overwrought, and misguided, made such plots even more difficult. In contrast, there is little reason to believe that Washington's promiscuous war-making played an important role.

However, the latter resulted in great harm. It should surprise no one that whacking a hornet's nest increases the likelihood of being stung. Droning, bombing, invading, and/or occupying Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Somalia, and elsewhere was sure to create enemies who see terrorism as the only practical way to retaliate. Today there are more terrorists, insurgents, and attacks as a result.

What did the US pay for such dubious benefits? Far too much. The best numbers come from the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Its latest estimate is that Americans eventually will spend more than \$8 trillion on the 9/11 wars. More than a quarter of that is to care for veterans. The American people will be paying for the 9/11 wars for a long time.

The human cost is even greater. More than 15,000 Americans have died – military personnel, contractors, and Pentagon civilians – as well as about 1,500 allied troops and 1,500 journalists and NGO workers. Tens of thousands have been wounded, many grievously.

Worse has been the impact on foreign peoples. Roughly 400,000 civilians have been killed. Actually, that number almost certainly is too low, given other estimates ranging up to a million-plus dead in Iraq alone. Moreover, millions of people have been driven from their homes. Indeed, counting all of America's wars over the last two decades, an incredible 38 million people have been displaced within and without their own countries. Cost estimates also grow substantially looking beyond the last two decades alone; promiscuous US military intervention is not new.

Dead government security forces and insurgents, around a half million according to the Watson Institute, constitute another important cost. Americans understandably focus on US casualties, while unfortunately paying virtually no attention to foreign deaths, especially combatants. Even the lives of America's opponents matter: for instance, most Taliban fighters are not terrorists determined to commit global mayhem, but traditional Muslims opposed to foreign occupation. Their deaths greatly impoverish their societies.

Extending these wars increases the losses in other countries. Consider the (almost) endless war in Afghanistan. Usual suspects in the War Party, including the egregious Sen. Lindsey Graham, insist that Washington should underwrite the incipient Afghan resistance, extending a conflict which already runs back more than four decades. It is easy for comfortable American officials living large in the imperial capital to ignore the impact on peoples in foreign lands – Graham even dismissed the threat of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula as being "over there" – and encourage others to sacrifice for US policy objectives. They "think the price is worth it," to quote Albright. They *always* think the price is worth it when foreigners are dying.

It is time to reject the blood lust particularly evident among Republican Party solons, especially the chickenhawks who avoided combat when younger, and ask Afghans if they want to impose more death and destruction on future generations. The Brookings Institution's John Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown detail the differing interests of urban and rural women, explaining that: "peace is an absolute priority for some rural women, even a peace deal very much on the Taliban terms." It is long overdue to start treating foreign peoples as ends rather than means, whose deaths and suffering are more than incidental costs to implementing US government policy.

Despite America's departure from Afghanistan, the 9/11 wars rage on. The benefits remain limited, inflated by successive presidents for political gain. The costs remain high, especially for those targeted by Washington. Ultimately, the war on terrorism as fought turned out to be a bad bargain.

Indeed, the cost of the endless wars have been much greater than the underlying threats. Despite the Sturm und Drang triggered by the terrible attacks two decades ago, the dangers always fell far short of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Yet myopic, counterproductive US policies continue to create terrorists faster than the US military can kill or capture them. With final victory ever further away, Washington should shift direction in addressing potential terrorism at home and abroad.

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