



## Time To Halt America's Endless War in Afghanistan

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It isn't easy to analyze President Donald Trump's foreign policy. It is at times reckless and foolish. And the president has failed to fulfill his promises to halt America's "endless wars." Yet, unlike his predecessors going back to Ronald Reagan, Trump has not started any new or joined any old conflicts. Today that passes for a major achievement.

In Afghanistan the president has an opportunity to close out America's involvement. He apparently intends to nominate Will Ruger, a vice president at the Charles Koch Institute who has worked to promote nonintervention and restraint in the academic and policy worlds.

As a Naval Reserve intelligence officer Ruger served in Afghanistan. He recently pressed the administration to end America's almost 20-year participation in the Afghan civil war. He warned against allowing "a withdrawal deal to be bogged down by conditions that aren't necessary for America's safety."

The US currently has about 8000 military personnel in Afghanistan. That number is supposed to fall below 5000 by election day, but the Pentagon is desperate to retain a presence in the country. And being there makes it a lot easier for a future president to reverse direction. The result could be another 20 years or more.

Afghanistan demonstrates how war is precisely the sort of "big government" program that conservatives should hate: disruptive, inefficient, expensive. Filled with bad incentives. Attempted social engineering on a massive scale. Harmful to human life. And almost impossible to end, no matter how foolish.

If Washington cannot quit Afghanistan after two decades, the US is destined to be at war forever. It is hard to imagine a commitment less relevant to American security.

Looking at a map is enough to demonstrate that Central Asia is not particularly important for America, certainly not something worth fighting over. Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan all are a lot closer to Afghanistan and are much more likely to be affected by events in that country. Indeed, the fact so many well-armed adversaries or frenemies are interested makes it particularly unwise for Washington to try to control events there.

The US fought a proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan primarily because it was the Cold War and Washington hoped to bleed the U.S.S.R. American officials did not want to occupy Kabul. They just wanted to prevent Moscow from doing so.

When General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev pulled Soviet troops home, the US lost interest in Afghanistan. Complaints that Washington did not stick around to fix Afghanistan made no sense. It wasn't America's responsibility to try to rebuild the country. And Washington could not have created liberal US mini-me even had it tried: the Mujahedeen would have been as willing to fight the US as the USSR

The 9/11 attacks forced an American response, but that should have been a brief campaign to wreck al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban. Both of these objectives were achieved within a few weeks. Washington then could have left, without attempting to build a liberal order and centralized government in a land that never had either.

Transforming Afghanistan is a worthy goal, to be sure, and there are plenty of good, decent people there who would like to live in such a society – I met some of them when I twice visited the country a decade ago. However, that isn't a good reason to send Americans off to fight and die, nor is it a realistic goal, as nearly two decades of fighting have demonstrated. Most of Afghanistan is ruled at the valley and village level. And that part of the country remains tribal, a traditional, conservative, insular, and Islamic society. The US remaining to play the outsider and attempt to impose Western rule won't change that.

The other arguments for staying are no better – actually, they are far worse. Perhaps most embarrassing, since it has been articulated by the president, legislators, and generals, is that if we don't fight "them," meaning Islamic radicals, over there, we will have to fight them here. That is, if we don't occupy Afghanistan, they will occupy Chicago, or whatever other city name pops into the head of the person making this bizarre claim. It is a charge that is impossible to take seriously.

The Taliban are not friendly to America or the West but have no interest in conquering the world. They just want to expel the foreigners attacking them and get on with imposing their ugly variant of Islamic rule locally. Al-Qaeda obviously is otherwise, but the Taliban were surprised by 9/11 as well and would not likely welcome guests who were busy attacking the US and thereby bringing its wrath down upon the Islamic movement again. The Taliban has spent 19 years attempting to reclaim what it once had. It doesn't want a replay.

The fact that it apparently has cooperated with what remains of al-Qaeda in fighting the US simply reflects the time-honored maxim that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. That is why Washington otherwise inexplicably indirectly aided, armed, and cooperated with Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, against the Assad regime. In Afghanistan, America's presence is the unifying influence. Moreover, both groups are hostile to the Islamic State, perhaps the most dangerous radical Islamic organization these days, which grew out of Washington's Iraq invasion.

Anyway, the last two decades proved that geography does not confine terrorism. Osama bin Laden absconded to Pakistan, Washington's barely even nominal ally, which neighbors Afghanistan. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who planned 9/11, refused bin Laden's entreaties to relocate to Afghanistan. The most effective al-Qaeda affiliate long was viewed as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, located in Yemen; ironically, by backing Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' attack on the Houthi movement, which opposed AQAP, Washington again indirectly aided, armed, and cooperated with an al-Qaeda confederate.

Support for continuing the war also reflects an attitude that the US must always win: losing is not an option, runs the slogan. But that nonsensical notion ignores the other side, which has a vote in the outcome. If the adversary believes the same, no conflict can end without the destruction of at least one side, irrespective of the cost. That might be a sensible position if the very existence of one's society was at stake. That obviously is not the case for America in Afghanistan. However, the outcome matters far more to the Taliban. It is time for US officials to balance costs and benefits: after two decades of war, the former is far greater than the latter.

There also is the perennial argument of credibility. That is, Washington must always persist in a manifestly foolish policy irrespective of cost, interest, and rationality in order to convince the world that it will do the same in the future. Alas, the perception that insanity has replaced logic in Washington is more likely to cause other nations to better arm themselves than to sacrifice their most important interests to America. A far better US approach would be to demonstrate cool, dispassionate, thoughtful decision-making, including a willingness to abandon lost causes and determination not to waste lives and resources on peripheral, even foolish causes.

The win-at-all-costs argument is given an emotional character when presented as ensuring that those who have died so far have done so in vain. But they already have. Creating a liberal, democratic state in Central Asia never was worth the cost. That is not the fault of those who have been killed, maimed, and scarred by the conflict. To the contrary, their sacrifice further underscores the stupidity of America's elected officials: President George W. Bush for embarking on a futile nation-building exercise, President Barack Obama for twice doubling down on the mission, and President Trump for doing the same during his first couple years in office.

Staying in now would sacrifice more lives to push the political impact of "losing" onto the next president. Which would be a moral scandal as well as human waste. The best way to honor the dead is not to sacrifice more of the living. In fact, in a recent poll 71 percent of Afghan veterans and 69 percent of their families want the troops home.

There also has been an enormous financial cost. Include interest on the money borrowed and America has spent more than \$2 trillion on the Afghan war. Even after the US exits the outlays will continue to increase for veterans who suffered in the conflict. Washington's fiscal future was bleak even before the coronavirus pandemic. Americans face a debt tsunami in coming years as the baby-boomers retire. Uncle Sam must begin making tough decisions to avoid financial collapse. Unnecessary wars should be the first to go.

In response some of the war's supporters argue that Washington should stay because the commitment really doesn't cost that much. In fact, it is a long-term drain in lives and resources. And neither, especially the first, should be wasted. The price is especially high given the poor results. By almost every measure – violent attacks, size and effectiveness of Afghan security forces, territory controlled or contested by the Taliban, safety of urban areas including Kabul, political stability – the situation has been worsening. America's small presence won't stop what the much larger garrison, about 140,000 total U.S. and allied personnel, a decade ago could not repair.

Moreover, the fact that Afghanistan is of interest to important neighbors who sometimes are at odds with the US increases the risk. Unconfirmed claims that Russia and Iran have paid the Taliban to kill Americans, possible retaliation for the US attacking Iranian forces and aiding

nations or groups fighting against Russian, illustrate how Washington's unnecessary intervention in Afghanistan puts US personnel at risk because of confrontations beyond Central Asia. The potential for escalation, given domestic pressure to retaliate, could prove quite dangerous, even with a smaller garrison.

The last refuge of the war-forever crowd is that Washington must remain to enforce whatever final agreement emerges from ongoing negotiations. However, that would require a substantial US presence when the objective of the talks is to escape a long-term commitment which is not worth the cost. The Afghan people have been at war for almost a half century, much of the time with their territory occupied by foreigners. The negotiations are a means, not the end. After nearly two decades, longer than World War II, World War I, the Korean War, and the Civil War combined, America should leave Afghanistan to the Afghan people and their neighbors, who care far more about what follows.

Rarely does a US ambassador make policy. In this case, however, the president's choice is well-qualified to help shape America's future strategy toward Afghanistan. Whether Ruger's tenure will be months or years, he could help spur Washington's long overdue exit.

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