



As America's Imperial Ambitions Collapse, Washington Should Ask: Who Lost Afghanistan?

Doug Bandow

August 16, 2021

America's 20-year war in Afghanistan is nearly over. Yesterday Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared: "This is manifestly not Saigon." Yet Associated Press reported:

"panic set in as many rushed to leave the country through the Kabul airport, the last route out of the country as the Taliban now hold every border crossing. Rapid shuttle flights of Boeing CH-47 Chinook helicopters near the embassy began a few hours later after the militants seized the nearby city of Jalalabad. Diplomatic armored SUVs could be seen leaving the area around the post.

The U.S. State Department did not immediately respond to questions about the movements. However, wisps of smoke could be seen near the embassy's roof as diplomats urgently destroyed sensitive documents, according to two American military officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the situation. The smoke grew heavier over time in the area, home to other nation's embassies as well.

Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, which typically carry armed troops, later landed near the embassy as well. At least one attack helicopter could be seen overhead as helicopters launched flares to distract possible missile fire. The US decided a few days ago to send in thousands of troops to help evacuate some personnel from its embassy."

President Ashraf Ghani later fled to Tajikistan. Soon thereafter Taliban fighters sat at his desk. The insurgency's leadership is reportedly heading for the capital.

Afghanistan's implosion is a tragedy. And blame falls on those who misled the American people while constructing castles in the Afghan sky. After sacrificing the lives of thousands of American and allied personnel and wasting trillions of dollars, Washington's War Party delivered ... nothing. At least, nothing the Afghan people believed was worth defending.

In deciding Afghanistan policy President Joe Biden did something different from his three predecessors: put the American people first. Eternally hawkish politicians, the Washington policy elite, promotion-minded military commanders, and the so-called international community all wanted the US to stay in Central Asia, forever if necessary. Biden concluded that 20 years was enough.

It was a brave decision.

Naturally, hysteria gripped Washington after his announcement. The clichés came fast and furious. Cynical politicians ever ready to betray colleagues for a trifle insisted that Americans fighting there who weren't even born when the US first intervened must "stand by" a government which its own people rejected. As usual, the War Party defined honor and heroism as making *other people* risk their lives thousands of miles from home in conflicts that long ago lost their original purpose.

Of course, what is happening is terrible, and many Afghans will go from the artificial world constructed in an American bubble back to an older, uglier reality. Women will be most at risk. The Taliban is known as cruel and intolerant, and we have glimpsed some of the worst behavior – war crimes, revenge killings, score-settling – in victory. The Taliban's advance on Kabul has been more restrained, a welcome development, but there is little reason to expect moderation once the movement has taken control.

The speed of collapse was shocking: the Afghan government possessed a larger military, better equipment, training and organization, an air force with command of the skies, and popular support, to the extent that such sentiment could be measured. Even many Afghan skeptics like me were surprised to see provincial capitals falling like bowling pins, with security forces surrendering en masse, sometimes without firing a shot. Desperate measures trotted out just a few days ago – such as reviving old ethnic militias and warlord armies – vanished as the Taliban advanced. Suddenly Kabul was surrounded, with surrender its only realistic option. Such is what the endless war crowd managed to achieve with 20 years, thousands of lives, and trillions of dollars.

The causes of failure were many. One factor was government incompetence, not resupplying and backing up vulnerable units. This was not a new problem, but it went unsolved, and left some troops unwilling or unable to fight. More fundamental, however, was the character of the government, and the cause it represented.

When I visited a decade ago, no Afghan I met had anything good to say about the government, except for those working for the government. In private allied military personnel and civilian consultants alike doubted the viability of the institutions they were creating. Years of inspector general investigations found endless waste, fraud, incompetence, ineffectiveness, and indifference. It should come as no surprise, then, that many of those who signed up as Afghan soldiers for a paycheck decided that the Kabul authorities were not worth fighting for.

This doesn't mean the Taliban is popular. The flight of panicked refugees illustrates what people ranging from religious minorities to secular liberals expect from renewed authoritarian fundamentalist rule. However, even those who prefer the current government in theory did not want it enough to defend it in practice. Alas, expecting Americans to forever fill that gap was never a viable strategy.

Although the Kabul government's future looked grim when Biden announced his withdrawal decision, there still were reasons for hope. The ruling regime was well-armed. Large urban areas previously were tough targets for insurgents. The Soviet-supported Mohammad Najibullah regime outlasted Moscow's withdrawal by three years, until money and fuel were cut off by the Soviet Union's collapse.

However, the Ghani government's survival required that security forces fight and protect major population centers at least until combat diminished in the winter. Then the Taliban might see reason to negotiate. As long as insurgents believed they could win with little or no effort, there was nothing to talk about. And it turns out they often didn't have to fight. In most places all they had to do was ask for the keys to the city.

Of course, as the collapse began the "war forever" crowd redoubled its criticism of Biden's decision to withdraw, urging a reversal. There is much to criticize about how he handled the withdrawal. Officials obviously were too sanguine that the process would be orderly. The president should have made his decision during the transition, ready for immediate implementation after he was inaugurated. The administration should have had evacuation plans ready for American nationals, foreign stragglers, and Afghan allies, to be put in effect when the decision to leave was made. Bagram Air Base should have been kept open for emergency use. From the start Washington should have pressed for regional talks among Afghanistan's neighbors, to bring them into the process, with the goal of stabilizing Afghanistan on America's way out.

Having failed to perform the most basic due diligence, the administration later was left to plaintively plead with the Taliban to not attack the embassy or airlift and warn them that they risked losing international support. Better to have simply indicated that the US was making exit plans and that any interference would be met with deadly force, something not in either party's interest. If insurgents wanted America gone, as they surely did, they most likely would allow Americans to go.

However, Biden's decision to end the 20-year war remains correct. Indeed, the experience of the last couple weeks demonstrates that there was nothing in Afghanistan to support. Two decades of effort created a Potemkin nation, illusory government, and faux armed forces. US political officials and military officers alike spent two decades dissembling to the American people, claiming progress and promising improvement, while squandering lives and money. These lies will soon be all that remains of Americans' and Afghans' experience.

Two years ago the *Washington Post's* Craig Whitlock reported on the "[Afghanistan Papers](#)." Using the results of a government investigation into the failures of the mission, he concluded: "senior US officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable."

The lies continued as Afghanistan hawks urged keeping troops on station for a few more months or years. For instance, *Washington Post* columnist and ultimate insider David Ignatius argued that "Leaving the modest remaining forces of 2,500 US troops there a while longer would have been a low-cost way of sustaining the shaky status quo." Virtually everyone defending America's presence similarly suggested just a little extra exertion on Washington's part. A minor effort for a little time, and all would be well, redeeming lives lost and money spent.

However, this was classic bait and switch, so famous in retail sales. The real plan was not another few months or years, but endless renewal of the formal plan to stay another few months or years. The Ghani regime's battlefield failures had one unmistakably positive effect: they clarified Washington's choice in Afghanistan. The current regime turned out to be more than a little "shaky," as Ignatius claimed. Sticking around just a bit longer than expected was not a

realistic option. It would mean no change on the ground, with continuing erosion in the government's position, loss of US lives, and waste of US resources. Kabul would continue to ignore its grievous flaws and rely on the US. The ultimate outcome would be the same. A political leadership that inspired no one and an army that melted away would not have revived with a few more pep talks by Washington.

Thus, the real alternatives were to leave or stay forever. Which was no choice at all. There is no justification for America to be allied to a political corpse, sucked dry by a corrupt and incompetent governing class, forced to fight on behalf of those who won't defend themselves, entangled in combat in a region of little geopolitical importance to America, and tasked with maintaining regional stability for US rivals Russia and China.

It is important to go back to September 11, 2001. Washington did not intervene because Central Asia mattered to America. It did not intervene to spread democracy. It did not intervene to end discrimination against women. It did not intervene to redress human rights violations.

To the contrary, years earlier Washington supported the Mujahedeen, who were mostly undemocratic, misogynistic, intolerant, antediluvian, and brutal, to kill Soviet soldiers and undermine the Evil Empire, as Ronald Reagan termed the Soviet Union. After the latter's withdrawal there was no reason for Washington to stick around. Moreover, the fiercely independent and Islamic insurgents who drove out the Soviets wouldn't have allowed outsiders to stick around either, including Americans. And Washington's presence would not have redressed any of the problems arising from the internecine conflict which followed Moscow's departure, and which spurred the Taliban's rise.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks the Bush administration sought to destroy al-Qaeda for its attack and punish the Taliban for hosting al-Qaeda. Having quickly achieved those objectives, the US could have left. What followed would not have been Western civilization atop the Hindu Kush mountains, but after 20 years of war Washington wasn't able to engineer that transformation either.

However, having convinced itself that it was the world's unipower, hyperpower, and essential power, Washington shifted into nation-building. After two decades that project finally collapsed, exposing the hubris of three successive administrations. And while the future is not set, the outcome almost certainly will be unfortunate from an American standpoint and awful from an Afghan perspective. However, sticking around forever would be worse for the US, and America's interest that counts the most when risking American lives and consuming American resources.

Unsurprisingly, Biden has the public on his side. Warmongering Neocons and right-wing hawks will always be willing to launch dubious crusades with other people's lives, but seven of ten Americans want the US troops out. Even a majority of Republicans take that position. As does Donald Trump, whose administration negotiated the withdrawal agreement with the Taliban. Majorities of military households, Afghan war veterans, and those currently in uniform also want Americans out. However, the Afghanistan forever crowd remains determined to support endless wars, at least as long as others do the serving and fighting. It should be named the Dick "I had other priorities" Cheney caucus.

The arguments for staying forever are unpersuasive. One was minimal US combat casualties over the last two years. But that is no thanks to war advocates who opposed negotiating with the Taliban. Insurgents wanted the Americans gone and realized that was more likely if they allowed allied forces to retreat undisturbed. Renewing America's combat role would have made American and allied personnel targets again.

Another contention was that keeping "2,500 US troops there a while longer," as Ignatius put it, would preserve Kansas City on the Kabul River, or however the endless war crowd views Afghanistan. To the contrary, the status quo only guaranteed failure. Despite America's continuing presence there was a steady erosion of the government's position that ensured Washington ultimately would have to either return to a combat role against the Taliban or abandon the Kabul government.

The Trump administration did its best to hide the ongoing deterioration by classifying figures on the performance of Afghan security forces. Two years ago Andrew Cordesman of CSIS reported that "Open source reporting on the course of the fighting is highly controversial – to the point where the U.S.-led command has canceled reporting on Afghan government vs. Taliban control and influence, and no longer reports on many aspects of ANSF operational capabilities." Thus did Washington attempt to hide its failure from public review.

However, there was still sufficient data available to assess the Afghan government's performance. Explained Cordesman:

"Afghanistan is still a 'failed state' at both the security and civil levels. The Afghan Security forces have only survived because outside aid provides 70% of all their funding, extensive train and assist efforts now extend down to the combat unit level, direct combat support is quietly provided by cadres of elite US combat troops, and a massive increase has taken place in US air strikes that provide direct combat support. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are an unknown number of years away from being able to stand on their own.

... the war may be officially reported as being be a [sic] close to stalemate, but is actually one that at least marginally favors the Taliban – and does so in spite of massive ongoing US air, financial, and advisory support. The survey also warns that the US has failed to help the Afghan government overcome its many critical military and civil limitations, and is still unable to choose and implement some form of consistent US strategy."

Endless war advocates ever willing to work with the most brutal movements, like Afghan warlords, and aid the most repressive nations, like Saudi Arabia, became born again human rights activists, with a special emphasis on the status of women, when withdrawal was mentioned. But that isn't why the US intervened. It isn't what Washington emphasized over the last two decades. And it wouldn't cause America to intervene today.

Moreover, after two decades Afghanistan was only minimally democratic, rated "Not Free" by the group Freedom House. Nor would Afghanistan rate very high in a global military campaign on behalf of human rights. Consider the state of human rights in *Afghanistan's neighbors*, including even India, the most democratic of all. And the many humanitarian horror shows beyond.

What about terrorism? It is a global, not an Afghanistan problem. The attacks of 9/11 had nothing to do with that nation other than the fact that Osama bin Laden had located there to fight

the Soviet occupation. The 9/11 planners, funders, and actors were all located elsewhere. Chief organizer Khalid Sheikh Mohammed refused bin Laden's request to move to Afghanistan. Bin Laden fled to Pakistan after the US attack.

In a world full of similarly ungoverned and badly governed territories, seeking to occupy every place where terrorists could operate would be a fool's errand – a strategy beyond America's resources that would create even more enemies and, ultimately, terrorists. Today the US is far more capable of discovering and thwarting terrorist plots and identifying and incapacitating terrorist movements. That, not treating Afghanistan as a military colony, is the best response to terrorism.

With the ongoing withdrawal, Washington's job is almost done. But two important tasks remain. The first is to extract as many Afghan allies and friends as possible. Americans should welcome anyone who wants to live in the 21st Century, values human life, liberty, and dignity, and desires to help build such a community here. The administration should mount a major effort and bring out as many Afghans as possible.

The second job is to hold accountable those responsible for the Afghan debacle. Political leaders and military commanders who planned, justified, and managed the Iraq invasion have oceans of blood on their hands. Yet few of them paid the slightest professional price for their policy malpractice. The architects of two decades of failure in Afghanistan should not be allowed to escape so easily.

At the top of the (professional) reprisal list should go Iraq war advocates now lecturing the rest of us about the necessity of continuing to fight the longest conflict in US history. In this case two strikes are enough. Of course, many of them also were cheerleaders for the disastrous Libyan and Yemen interventions. Such wannabe policymakers should be escorted to the exit and barred from participation in future foreign policy discourse.

Also deserving Maoist-lite "self-criticism" sessions are former military commanders seeking to keep America entangled in Afghanistan to preserve their reputations. For instance, retired general David Petraeus, who commanded allied forces in Afghanistan, has been a leader of the "blame Biden" brigade. John Allen, who succeeded Petraeus when US military strength was at its peak, wants the US back in. Joseph Dunford, who followed Allen and later served as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, was co-chair of the Afghanistan Study Group, which – of course! – recommended that American forces remain in Afghanistan.

How did these officers perform while in charge there? How about the rest of the commanders and senior brass? Who recognized the problems and sought to solve them or at least alert their civilian superiors? Who followed the easy path of claiming success and predicting victory? Who sought to prevent the mission's disastrous denouement? And whose poor decisions sped the collapse? With the military careers of past commanders mostly over, the primary objective should be improve incentives for future combat generals. And to shame those now profiting after working to please their political masters rather than promote America's interest.

Afghanistan is both disaster and tragedy. US forces went in for the right reasons and almost immediately achieved their objectives. Then they stayed for the wrong reasons and failed spectacularly. Evidently Americans too quickly forgot Vietnam's painful lesson. Washington

policymakers must better absorb the meaning of Afghanistan, lest they again tragically repeat history.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.