



Is Democracy Worth War?

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The collapse of America's Potemkin government in Afghanistan shocked Washington. After the U.S. fueled decades of civil war, sacrificed thousands of American lives, left tens of thousands of other Americans wounded, contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians, and wasted trillions of dollars, Washington's grand nation-building project disappeared almost without a trace in less than two weeks.

No surprise, then, despite the Biden administration's bungled withdrawal, an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that leaving was the correct policy. They backed the initial mission, debilitating al-Qaeda for conducting the 9/11 attack and punishing the Taliban for hosting al-Qaeda. But those objectives were fulfilled within two months.

The next 20 years were devoted to building a supposedly national state – which failed to reach much beyond major cities, provide basic services, field effective security forces, or win people's backing. Afghan elites, mostly urban, profited, using commercial connections with the foreigner occupiers and building garish "poppy palaces" from ill-gotten wealth. For rural Afghanistan, Washington and the Kabul government mostly meant more combat and death, truly endless war in a manner that Americans never experienced. For these Afghans, peace, not democracy, was the imperative.

Year in and year out, the US project was a disaster visible to the entire world. Yet American policymakers lied to each other and the American people, claiming progress that never occurred. The time is now for a policy witch-hunt, to ruin the reputations of those whose lies extended the conflict and careers gained from failure. Many of them – David Petraeus, H.R. McMaster, and Joseph Dunford immediately come to mind – took the lead in demanding that American forces remain in Afghanistan as long as necessary, meaning effectively forever, in an attempt to put off the Afghan implosion and consequent damage to their reputations.

Yet the unnecessary sacrifice of American lives and waste of American wealth appears to have only increased demands for more endless war on behalf of the abstract ideal of democracy. For instance, the lives of urban Afghan elites were improved by the thousands of lives lost and trillions of dollars dissipated by America. Rather than appreciate this effort, some Afghans blamed the US for not doing even more to preserve the regime, apparently irrespective of the cost.

For instance, journalist Farida Nekzed fled Afghanistan, where her family remains, and complained: "The international community and the US committed to building human rights,

women's rights and press freedom in the country" but "Then they killed it in a minute and destroyed all our achievements." Actually, *the Afghan people*, with their highly subsidized but equally corrupt and incompetent government and security forces, performed the political assassination.

"I feel absolutely betrayed," an unnamed Afghan journalist told Joel Simon of the Committee to Protect Journalists." Added the former: "Do you think anyone will ever believe in the promise of democracy again?" Undoubtedly yes. And hopefully with the recognition that the promise does not include someone giving it to you. Again, the "betrayal," if that is the right word, *was by Afghans*, who failed to use the opportunity provided. Leading Afghans collected abundant outside aid yet failed to create survivable institutions. The security forces alone received \$83 billion or more, yet last month folded within days, many units without firing a shot. Americans were not bound to forever sacrifice more lives and money on the altar of Afghan "democracy," as if it was the Aztecs' infamous Templo Mayor.

At least the frustration of Afghans is understandable. As the *Financial Times* put it: "The reinstallation of theocratic rule, the restoration of Afghanistan as a potential jihadi hub, a chaotic evacuation and a terrorist attack were not how the US mission there was supposed to end." The Afghan people tasted a better life, only to see it disappear with the victory of the Taliban, whose leadership claims to have moved from the 7th century to at least the 16th or 17th century. A tragic denouement, yes, but not something that justifies endless war for America.

Yet there is an equally if not more fervent lobby in America to literally fight for democracy. In the aftermath of the Afghan debacle the *Washington Post* complained that "around the world, dictators have been aggressively destroying the elements of any open and free society." Of course, it was up to the US to do *something!* Alas, noted the *Post*: "Most of these regimes – Myanmar, China, Russia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Belarus – have been sanctioned in some way by the United States and others. Yet neither sanctions nor scolding seems to deter them."

And this surprises anyone? That foreign dictators are immune to American rebuke? So what to do? Declared the *Post*, have the upcoming Biden democracy summit "identify practical measures to reverse this trend." Uh, sure. Like ... more sanctions and scolding? If not, what does the *Post* suggest?

The *New York Times* produced an even longer editorial insisting that "it's time to crack down on a new breed of authoritarian world leaders who regularly take their strong-arm tactics global." At least the paper offered some ideas, not that they would help much. For instance, targeting sanctions (which penalize individuals but don't deliver democracy), training federal employees "to recognize, understand and address" repression (but address *how?*), and easing the entry of refugees (a good step, but it wouldn't bring democracy either). Nor would the *Times'* proposed remedies for misuse of surveillance technologies and Interpol warrants, etc.

Which leaves bullets and bombs, highlighted by the Washington War Party's fevered criticism of President Joe Biden for bringing Americans home from Afghanistan. His decision to reject a policy of endless war for less than vital US interests generated genuine shock. As the advocates of constant conflict recognized, Biden's retreat (based, of course, on *their* unacknowledged policy failure) makes another round of war-making elsewhere more difficult, at least in the short-term. Indeed, al-Qaeda claimed as much in a statement declaring that "rubbing the noses of the

US and NATO the mud of Afghanistan has put an end to American and European arrogance, and to their greed in militarily invading Muslim nations."

Objectively, preventing Washington from starting new Mideast conflicts would be almost entirely positive – which of America's wars there have gone well? Not Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen. The US should bring its military home. However, this idea makes members of the War Party very unhappy. Especially *The Atlantic's* Anne Applebaum.

She flings contempt at those who claim war is no solution: defeating bad guys is "why the phenomenon of liberal internationalism – or 'neocon internationalism' if you don't like it – exists: Because sometimes only guns can prevent violent extremists from taking power. Yet many people in the liberal democratic world, perhaps most people, don't want to believe this. They have long found these tools either too distasteful or too expensive. Like Ban Ki-moon and his many imitators, they sometimes even pretend that these tools are not necessary at all, because conflicts can be resolved by 'talks' and 'dialogue' and 'cultural exchange.' They pretend that there are always peaceful solutions that have somehow not been considered, that there is always a nonviolent answer that has somehow been ignored."

The problem is not her understanding of means. Military action is sometimes necessary to use against evil people and powers. This sentiment is unexceptional and, ultimately, unhelpful without asking about ends. For what purposes should war be initiated?

All other things being equal, democracy is better than autocracy. People should be able to choose their own leaders. And force can properly be used to win or preserve that right. However, all things are not equal. Democracy, though valuable, should not be treated as *uber alles*.

The strongest case for war is to achieve self-government for oneself. However, prudential application is necessary along with theoretical justification of this principle. Consider the painful process of Irish liberation from British control. Negotiations with London initially led to autonomy but not full independence and not for the entire island. The Irish divided over whether this was enough, leading to a bitter civil war, the effects of which linger a century later.

More recent is the tragic plight of Hong Kong. Despite the moral appeal of the demand for independence, there was never the slightest chance that Beijing (remember Tiananmen Square?) would relinquish control. Tragically, democratic activists' unyielding demands ultimately triggered a brutal crackdown which delivered the opposite result, reducing the territory to the political status of any mainland Chinese city. What Hong Kongers lost was more important than they hoped to gain.

Ironically, despite its international image, the US has virtually never fought for the principle of freedom except for itself. That was the War of Independence. The War of 1812 was mostly a greedy play to seize Britain's colony of Canada, using legitimate grievances against Great Britain, such as impressment of American seamen, as legal cover. Most of the campaigns against Native Americans reflected a belief in "manifest destiny" to overspread the North American continent. The Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars were overtly imperialistic, thrusting Washington into the European game of empire which America's revolutionaries had revolted against. World War I was even more distant from the US and its interests, a testament to President Woodrow Wilson's megalomaniac and destructive ambition to reorder the globe.

World War II was defensive for America, though the Roosevelt administration's brutal economic sanctions against Japan and undeclared naval war against Germany lit the fuse for the geopolitical explosions which brought America into both the Asian and European conflicts. The wars in Korea and Vietnam were unconvincingly presented as vital for US security: America's defeat in Vietnam actually led to a period of extraordinary US dominance, not decline. Although all these conflicts had a moral component, it did not trigger Washington's entry and was primarily used for propaganda justifying the wars to others.

Applebaum ignored the critical role of choice. With great indignation she wrote: "The need to prevent violent extremists from creating structures like al-Qaeda or rogue, nuclear-armed regimes is precisely why North Americans and Europeans get involved in distant and difficult conflicts. That's why the US has military bases in Germany, South Korea, and Kuwait, among other places. That's why even the Dutch were persuaded to set up a base in Afghanistan."

But there is no "need" for the US to do so any of these things. They may be worthy objectives. However, they vary in importance and could be addressed by a variety of means. For instance, if America wants to prevent the next al-Qaeda and 9/11, it should stop provoking retaliation: bombing, invading, and occupying other nations; dropping drones on the innocent as well as guilty; backing aggressive regimes against their neighbors and repressive regimes against their peoples; and providing a blank check to friendly governments that occupy and oppress others. Washington is no innocent when it so often wars against so many other peoples and nations both directly and indirectly.

Being a distant superpower means most countries are neither vital strategically to the US. nor America's defense responsibility. Western Europe immediately post-WWII? Yes. Taiwan, Montenegro, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, South Korea, Ukraine, Philippines, North Macedonia, and many others today? Not so much. Moreover, what obligations might exist are shared: Other prosperous, populous democratic states also should be doing good around the world. If they are not interested in defending themselves and their neighbors, then the US has no duty to step in. Nearly eight decades after the close of World War II, the Europeans, led by the French and Germans, should stop expecting America to protect them. Also, the South Koreans, with more than 50 times the GDP and twice the population, of the North. And the Japanese who claim to fear China while spending about one percent of GDP on the military while relying on Washington secure their contested islands.

Of course, none of this means anything to those who favor "humanitarian" warfare. For instance, Applebaum made clear her expansive ambitions: "The need to prevent this from happening in other places – to prevent violent extremists from invading places where people would prefer to live in peace and in accordance with the rule of law – is precisely why we have armies, weapons, intelligence agencies, and spies of various kinds, despite all of the mistakes they make and the ugly things they sometimes do."

But that is not and never has been why "we" have all those things. "We" have those things to protect "us." Not to prevent problems for others. We might use our power to intervene, but usually because we believe that circumstances vitally affect us. Sometimes we pretend that they do even when they don't, for oddly inconsistent reasons – the US intervenes in the Balkans and Middle East, neither that important to America, while leaving Africans to die in the millions because everywhere in Europe is presumptively treated as vital even when it isn't and the Mideast has oil even if we don't need it.

At least such fictions, though hypocritical and dishonest, suggest some limits to humanitarian warmongering. After all, being serious about the latter would have the US busy rescuing people *from allies, friends, and partners* as well as adversaries: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and UAE are all varying degrees of brutal dictatorships. Turkey is headed that way and has killed tens of thousands of Kurds. Pakistan and all the "Stans" surrounding Afghanistan desperately need liberation. So do millions of Palestinians, suffering more than a half century under Israel's oppressive occupation. Plenty of African nations require relief: 5.4 million, yes, *million*, people died during years of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo around the turn of the century. The everlasting military junta in Burma/Myanmar has brutalized the population for six decades. Then there is the seemingly permanent communist dictatorship in Cuba and the continuing oppression in Venezuela.

Which of these "opportunities" would the War Party insist that Uncle Sam take advantage of? All of them? If not, then what is the standard for saying no? One idea advanced was intervening when foreign death rates were "greatly" above America's murder rate – a creative if utterly nonsensical, even nutty, idea. Anyway, invading and kicking out the bad guys would not be enough. After all, the US did that in Afghanistan. It turns out that transforming such nations into exemplars of free and liberal societies is much tougher, often requiring, yes, endless war. Following through, though, would turn America in a true imperial power, sacrificing American liberties and prosperity in a quixotic bid to transform the globe.

Equally important, whatever their intentions, liberal crusades prepared by Washington's ivory tower crusaders rarely turn out well. And war is usually not a humanitarian instrument. Consider Afghanistan – urban Afghans received the bulk of the admittedly real benefits while, as noted earlier, combat primarily occurred in rural areas, whose population was most vulnerable. The US never understood the people it was killing as much as protecting.

America's other endless wars have been no better. The best that can be said about Yemen is that even the worst enablers of the Saudi dictatorship, the Trump administration, made no pretense that humane principles were involved. In sharp contrast is Syria where the US has expressed endless pieties while supporting jihadists, whose other horrid acts included slaughtering religious minorities in Iraq, and is currently starving the population for political ends. In Libya America's cheery ouster of Muammar Khadafy led to a decade of on-and-off civil war, punctuated by the intervention of European, Middle Eastern, and African states. Worst was the horror of the invasion of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands – 400,000 is a good guess, though some estimates exceed a million – of Iraqi civilians died in the sectarian war triggered by US military intervention.

Such is the result of America's policy of promiscuous military intervention to spread a secular version of the Good News around the world. Perhaps realizing the poverty of her argument, Applebaum closed by arguing that violence anywhere is a threat everywhere:

"The fall of Kabul should refocus Americans – in the administration, in Congress, in the leadership of both parties, but above all, ordinary Americans across the country – on the choices that are now coming thick and fast. Afghanistan provides a useful reminder that while we and our European allies might be tired of 'forever wars,' the Taliban are not tired of wars at all. The Pakistanis who helped them are not tired of wars, either. Nor are the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian regimes that hope to benefit from the change of power in Afghanistan; nor are al-Qaeda and the other groups who may make Afghanistan their home again in future. More to the point,

even if we are not interested in any of these nations and their brutal politics, they are interested in us. They see the wealthy societies of America and Europe as obstacles to be cleared out of their way. To them, liberal democracy is not an abstraction; it is a potent, dangerous ideology that threatens their power and needs to be defeated wherever it exists, and they will deploy corruption, propaganda, and even violence to do so. They will do it in Syria and Ukraine, and they will do it within the borders of the US, the U.K., and the EU."

Yet this is simple nonsense. The Taliban is not interested in America, other than the extent to which the US tries to force its will on Afghanistan. Iran has paid little attention to what goes on in America. Tehran is more concerned about preventing Washington from acting against Iran – the US having staged a coup, supported aggression by Iraq, shot down an Iranian airliner, backed and armed hostile neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, imposed brutal economic sanctions, and constantly threatened military action. Russia's Vladimir Putin is a nasty piece of work but has shown no interest in war against America or even Europe; he seems far more interested in keeping the US away from his borders and out of his nation's politics. The same so far with China, which wants what America has, a Monroe Doctrine, to keep US ships and aircraft away from its coast and nearby waters. There are other reasons to worry about Beijing, but aggression against America is not one.

Anyway, anyone who worried about presumed threats by China and Russia should reject endless wars for purposes other than defense. Who doubts that if Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin could vote, they would support America staying in Afghanistan, invading Iran, occupying more of Syria, sending troops to Libya, and attacking a half dozen or more other nations for humanitarian ends? Yet such would be the sort of effort necessary to make the world safe for democracy.

Biden got Afghanistan right even if he executed his policy badly. It is easy to be humanitarian when using other people's lives and money. Afghanistan should trigger a dramatic rethink of US foreign policy. War should become a genuine last resort, limited to cases of genuine necessity for national defense, rather than careless efforts at social engineering. Just as we don't want any more Vietnams, we don't want any or more Afghanistans. Ever again.

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