



## Yes, they Died in Vain in Afghanistan

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Gold Star families are dealing with the tragic reality of the collapse of America's mission in Afghanistan: their loved ones died in vain. Some 6300 Americans, military personnel and civilian contractors, were sacrificed for nothing.

The geopolitical wreck known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan delivered distressingly little in return for the service, sacrifice, and death of so many Americans – and others, both allied military members and Afghans. Almost overnight a government that turned out to be an international fraud, unable to call upon the loyalty of those it was supposed to serve, disappeared. This could not help but leave friends and family of the dead, as well as the wounded, many of whom continue to suffer from their service, feeling that they lost much, and perhaps everything, for nothing.

Unfortunately, for some the intense pain is made more intense by criticism of the war. To them questioning the value of the cause seems to denigrate the service of those who sacrificed for their country. A plea for peace is seen as an insult to those in uniform.

The Washington Post quoted one service widow, who, ironically, agreed that the war should end: "You better believe the mama bear comes out in me if you're going to start telling their kids that their dad died for no reason." The wife of one of the conflict's last two American casualties before the airport bombing tried to reassure herself that "since 2001 those who went over there to fight served our country with honor."

Yet Washington's failure in Afghanistan is a sad truth that cannot be ignored. Nor should it be. Especially as the political and military architects of this misbegotten war rush forward to denounce President Joe Biden. Perhaps none has been more visible than retired general David Petraeus, whose presumed presidential hopes were derailed by illicit pillow talk with his mistress. Escaping with the usual slap on the wrist for influential Beltway offenders, he now is making the rounds of Washington, hailed by fawning think tank hosts and obsequious media interviewers while saying nothing was amiss that couldn't have been solved by continuing the forever war ... forever.

This tactic is characteristic of Washington's War Party, which repeatedly launched new conflicts promising that the latest effort would bring peace, thwart terrorism, and yield security. The accompanying interventionist Greek Chorus equally routinely shouted down any opposition. Never mind the lies they told and the errors they made. "Support the troops" was deployed to insulate politicians and generals from their flawed decisions. Criticism was denounced for undermining the war and undercutting the military.

Such tactics might be rationalized at a time when the nation and even world seemed to hang in the balance – say, World War II. However, certainly not for a military campaign that was creating far more casualties and greater carnage abroad than terrorism would ever cause America. Especially when the policy was surrounded by lies, with much of official Washington in on the secret but determined to prevent the American people, including those with relatives and friends in uniform, from knowing the truth.

Two years ago the *Washington Post's* [Craig Whitlock](#) broke "The Afghanistan Papers," based on government documents which, wrote Whitlock, revealed "that senior U.S. 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 American people were lied to. Continuously. For almost two decades.

Those misled included members of the military. Contractors serving the U.S. and Afghan governments. Families and friends of those at risk. And others who were sacrificing on behalf of a mission that was supposed to make America safer and more secure.

Accountability is long overdue.

Certainly, both the administration and Congress should review how the withdrawal was handled. However, that is not nearly enough. With America's participation in the forty-year Afghan civil war over – assuming the War Party is not able to plunge the U.S. back into conflict by backing whatever disparate opposition to the Taliban emerges – Washington's objectives and management also should be reviewed.

Did the Bush administration develop any alternatives to an invasion? Why did the administration reject the Taliban offer to negotiate a de facto surrender? How badly did the administration's decision to downgrade the Afghanistan conflict and invade Iraq undermine the war effort, especially the attempt to capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora?

What accounted for the fateful decision to shift to nation-building? Did the Bush administration imagine that Afghanistan, too, would be a "cakewalk"? Why did successive administrations insist on creating a government and military along American rather than Afghan lines? How high did the tsunami of deceptions go? To the Cabinet? The President? Members of the congressional War Party? In short, who lied and who was lied to?

Although the most important purpose of such an investigation would be to learn what really happened, another objective would be to ruin reputations. A score of retired generals headed the U.S. mission in the endless Afghan war. A multitude of Pentagon officials were involved. Plus three presidents and a generous retinue of aides, assistants, confidantes, and more.

Until now all have escaped being held accountable for the lives and wealth they squandered. The truth should be told. And those responsible should be treated accordingly.

Of course, even that wouldn't bring back friends and family. However, this process would highlight where fault for the failed mission lies. Not with men and women dispatched to fight in a war that should not have been waged. But those who made the disastrous decisions, all the while collecting accolades, decorations, favors, and promotions. Others, usually on the frontline, paid the price. Such an accounting is long overdue.

Thousands of Americans died in vain while attempting to transform Afghanistan. Painful though that statement might be to families of those killed or injured, no longer should those who have done so much harm to so many be allowed to use faux patriotism to shield their conduct from review. The best way to honor those who have died would be to prevent a repeat of needless and endless wars.

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