



ALJAZEERA

That time the Vietnam War led to the war in Afghanistan

A. Craig Copetas

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And so 7,267 days of rage in Afghanistan have ended on the darkest of riddles: Who was responsible for this multi-trillion-dollar bewilderment, leaving some 241,000 dead and a televised asylum of accomplices quarrelling about who is to blame for the war's toxic afterglow?

It was me.

I am the culprit, so cease and desist upbraiding former US Presidents George W Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

Stop heaping opprobrium on the 20 years of blundering Pentagon timelines that resulted in the epic catastrophe of America's attempt to cultivate Jeffersonian democracy in soil where opium poppies and crooked politicians flourish.

And do not accuse the Taliban of screwing the Afghan pooch; those guys (reports indicate there are no women involved) already have too much explaining to do.

I did it.

But I cannot take all the discredit. President Richard Nixon helped, because he for the first time in his life followed my advice and, on January 27, 1973, ended the military draft.

Nixon instead gave birth to an all-volunteer army, in which bipartisan political pressure and public obeisance ostracised anyone who did not applaud the career path as an act of unquestionable patriotism.

The gung-ho efforts of the post-9/11 army, recruitment shortfalls filled with mercenaries euphemised as "private military contractors," sidelined any possibility of the enormous and ceaselessly reported middle-class anti-war protests that helped and hallmarked the end of America's misadventure in Southeast Asia.

Very few young people then were willing to die for their country. As one popular FM radio protest song of the era pointed out: "I'd rather have my country die for me."

There were no anti-Afghanistan war songs on Spotify, perhaps because America's big three television news networks – which incessantly transmitted the Vietnam War on their evening news programmes and whose audience today amounts to some 22 million households, four times the number of those who rely on cable news – did not see any reason to turn Afghanistan into another living room war.

To be sure, ABC, CBS and NBC in 2020 devoted a total of five of their 14,000 minutes of prime time coverage to Afghanistan, according to the Tyndall Report, which has monitored America's nightly news since 1988. Between 2015 and 2020, network news coverage of the war in Afghanistan totalled 362 minutes.

My college pal Rick Spencer was fond of saying that war had no fury like a non-combatant. So an entire generation with passion marched on everything, from local draft boards to the White House in Washington.

At one protest in front of the Pentagon, the poet Allen Ginsberg promised our chants could levitate the place and there was a precedent to give it a try.

“In the council of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex,” President Dwight D Eisenhower forewarned in his 1961 farewell speech. “The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

Millions of mums, dads, sons and daughters knew Ike was right. Ending the carnage was important but our primary motivation was self-preservation.

What Spencer did to avoid wearing jungle fatigues pretty much frames the story of why millions of 21st century Americans failed to vigorously protest the country's 20-year debacle in Afghanistan.

The draft board told Spencer it was time for his physical examination. He prepared himself by bathing in garlic juice and popping amphetamines instead of sleeping. A theatre major at our university constructed a stage-prop denture of gnarled and blackened teeth for him to wear during the examination.

Spencer looked awful and smelled worse. He completed his ensemble with a feather boa around his neck and clutching a letter from a psychiatrist confirming he had genuine mental health problems. The rehearsals were standing-room only.

But Nixon's order to end the draft brought the curtain down on Spencer and thousands of other similar performances.

A few years later, President Jimmy Carter authorised amnesty for all those who had left America to avoid the war. The protests were so effective and the body count of that ill-conceived and wretchedly executed mission-creep war so deep that American politicians guaranteed there would be no more Vietnams.

The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, widely recognised as the father of modern political philosophy, warned us not to believe a word the politicians said about war. “Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues,” Hobbes wrote in *Leviathan*, a guidebook on how to build a legitimate government that avoids the use of “over-the-horizon capabilities.”

War is nuance and ambiguity. One can only speculate whether America’s mismanaged post 9/11 wars and the global terrorist cascade effect of those ghoulish escapades would have turned out this way had Nixon not ended military conscription.

It is a legitimate and prickly question.

According to a recent survey by the Cato Institute, we will likely never get a straight answer, because 62 percent of the Americans polled said they were afraid to share their political views.

One of the new silent majority, a former official in the Carter Administration and now a senior policy adviser to the Democratic Party, spent 1971 driving the foreign policy solon W Averell Harriman from his Georgetown home to meetings with anti-war senators on Capitol Hill.

The former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union was a member of a core unit of foreign policy elders known as the Wise Men.

“The streets were filled with protesters on a near-daily basis,” Harriman’s draft-age chauffeur recalls. “The ambassador told me, ‘Make no mistake, it’s the body bags of the involuntarily drafted, not the voluntarily enlisted, that end wars’.”

That certainly was the thinking on May 3, 1971, when this then-young student reporter covered the May Day March on Washington, part of a large-scale nationwide strike and protest against the Vietnam War.

Some 45,000 people of all ages, races, creeds and colours assembled in Washington. More than 12,000 of us were arrested, the largest mass incarceration in US history.

At the time, we all thought it was a small price to pay to end the draft and oh brother, were we wrong. As Hobbes warned, “Hell is truth seen too late.”