

# The New York Times

## End the War in Afghanistan

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On Sept. 14, 2001, Congress wrote what would prove to be one of the largest blank checks in the country's history. The Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists gave President George W. Bush authority to attack the Taliban, the Sunni fundamentalist force then dominating Afghanistan that refused to turn over the mastermind of the attacks perpetrated three days earlier, Osama bin Laden.

In the House of Representatives and the Senate combined, there was only one vote in opposition: Barbara Lee, a Democratic representative from California, who warned of another Vietnam. "We must be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target," she said. "We cannot repeat past mistakes."

Days later, Mr. Bush told a joint session of Congress just how broadly he planned to use his new war powers. "Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there," Mr. Bush declared. "It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."

More than 17 years later, the United States military is engaged in counterterrorism missions in 80 nations on six continents. The price tag, which includes the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and increased spending on veterans' care, will reach \$5.9 trillion by the end of fiscal year 2019, according to the Costs of War project at Brown University. Since nearly all of that money has been borrowed, the total cost with interest will be substantially higher.

The war on terror has been called the "forever war," the "long war," a "crusade gone wrong." It has claimed an estimated half a million lives around the globe.

It is long past time for a reappraisal.

More than 2.7 million Americans have fought in the war since 2001. Nearly 7,000 service members — and nearly 8,000 private contractors — have been killed. More than 53,700 people returned home bearing physical wounds, and numberless more carry psychological injuries. More than one million Americans who served in a theater of the war on terror receive some level of disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The blood was spilled and the money was spent based on the idea that war abroad could prevent bloodshed at home. As Mr. Bush explained in 2004: "We are fighting these terrorists with our military in Afghanistan and Iraq and beyond so we do not have to face them in the streets of our own cities."

But hatred is borderless. It is true that since 9/11, no foreign terrorist group has conducted a deadly attack inside the United States. But there have been more than 200 deadly terrorist attacks during that period, most often at the hands of Americans radicalized by ideologies that such groups spread. Half of those attacks were motivated by radical Islam, while 86 came at the hands of far-right extremists.

When Donald Trump ran for the White House, one of his central promises was to rein in overseas military adventurism and focus the country's limited resources on its core strategic priorities. While Mr. Trump's foreign policy has been unwise if not self-defeating in many areas, he is right, as was Barack Obama, to want to scale back a global conflict that appears to have no outer bound.

That retrenchment needs to start where it all began: Afghanistan, which has remained for more than 17 years an open-ended war without an exit strategy or a focused target.

At the peak of NATO involvement in 2011, around the time Bin Laden was killed in Pakistan, there were more than 130,000 soldiers from 50 nations fighting the Taliban and building up the Afghan national army, so it could stand on its own.

There are now 16,000 soldiers from 39 countries in the NATO force. More than 14,000 of them are American. Their mission now includes less combat and more training. But the result remains the same: The intelligence community's 42-page "Worldwide Threat Assessment," released last week, devotes only a single paragraph to the war in Afghanistan, labeling it a "stalemate."

This page has been supportive of the war in Afghanistan since it began. We criticized NATO countries in Europe for not sending enough soldiers. And we were critical of the Bush administration for its lack of postwar planning and for diverting resources to the war in Iraq.

Events have shown us to have been overly optimistic regarding the elected Afghan government, though we were rightly critical of its deep dysfunction. We have raised concerns about military tactics that cost civilians their lives and been skeptical of the Pentagon's relentlessly rosy assessments of the progress made and the likelihood of success.

We were supportive of Mr. Obama when he promised to end the war, we called for the faster withdrawal of forces and were disappointed when he fell victim to the sunk cost fallacy and sent in more troops late in his presidency. "It's unlikely that keeping a few thousand American troops in Afghanistan for an extra year will do anything other than delay the start of that nation's post-American era," we wrote in 2015.

Mr. Trump repeatedly called for ending the war in Afghanistan. In 2012, for instance, he said the conflict there was not in the national interest. Once in office, however, he was persuaded by his military advisers in 2017 to increase the American presence in pursuit of a new "plan for victory." The plan, Mr. Trump said, would defeat the Taliban and other terrorists "handily."

The rules on airstrikes were relaxed, and their number skyrocketed. The Pentagon sent in 4,000 more troops, to augment the 10,000 that Mr. Obama left behind.

The plan is failing. More bombs and boots haven't brought victory any closer. Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed, maimed and traumatized. Millions of people are internally displaced or are refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

Poppy cultivation is up four times over 2002. Despite years of economic and military aid, Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Afghan security forces, which were supposed to take over from NATO troops, have lost a staggering 45,000 soldiers in battle since 2014 and can't fill their recruitment targets.

Mr. Trump's administration — which announced it would withdraw 7,000 troops but has yet to do so — is now negotiating with the Taliban, talks that are scheduled to continue this month. That's a promising sign of a much-needed acknowledgment of reality.

It is time to face the cruel truth that at best, the war is deadlocked, and at worst, it is hopeless. The initial American objective — bringing Bin Laden to justice — has been achieved. And subsequent objectives, to build an Afghan government that can stand on its own, protect the population and fight off its enemies, may not be achievable, and certainly aren't achievable without resources the United States is unwilling to invest.

Walking away from a war is not a strategy. But an orderly withdrawal of NATO forces can be organized and executed before the year is out and more lives are lost to a lost cause. Two Americans have been killed in combat already in 2019. No American soldiers should be fighting and dying in Afghanistan in 2020.

Recent talks between the United States and the Taliban appear to have made encouraging progress. Those talks might be most accurately described as a negotiated capitulation by the international forces. The Afghan government hasn't been party to the discussions because the Taliban doesn't consider it a legitimate entity — just a puppet of the United States. In any case, once NATO forces leave, any treaty with the Taliban would be difficult to enforce.

But as part of any withdrawal discussions, it should be made clear to the Taliban, the Afghan government and neighboring nations that if the country is allowed to again become a base for international terrorism, the United States will return to eradicate that threat. The Taliban have paid a very high price for harboring Bin Laden and — whatever their role in the future of the country — are unlikely to trigger a return of American forces by making a similar mistake in the future.

The eventual withdrawal of American forces might be the only thing that all the parties to the conflict want to see happen. A majority of Americans want an end to the war. If Mr. Trump doesn't end the war by the end of the year, Congress can repeal the 2001 authorization of military force. Congress needs, in any event, to reconsider its blank check.

Congress should also make it easier for Afghans who worked with NATO forces and want to immigrate to the United States to do so. Many have already been waiting for years.

No one can pretend that a withdrawal, even with an agreement, is likely to make life better for the Afghan people in the short term. That's an agonizing consequence that anyone who supports

withdrawal must acknowledge. Some experts predict an even fiercer civil war as the Kabul government and its army weaken and warlords gain new power. That could mean more deaths, new refugee flows and cuts in international aid that could cripple the Afghan military.

The plight of women and girls in Afghanistan has been perilous in wartime, and it could become far bleaker if the Taliban topple the current government and reimpose their barbaric pre-2001 regime.

Yet it's also possible that a decision to withdraw could prompt the Afghans, the Taliban and regional players like Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India and China to work together on a cooperative solution to stabilize Afghanistan and deny terrorists a regional base. Such a solution that preserves some of the civil society gains that the Afghans have made, while keeping the country free of international terrorists, is in the interests of all those parties.

The failure of American leaders — civilians and generals through three administrations, from the Pentagon to the State Department to Congress and the White House — to develop and pursue a strategy to end the war ought to be studied for generations. Likewise, all Americans — the news media included — need to be prepared to examine the national credulity or passivity that's led to the longest conflict in modern American history.

The military has given honorable service. It is not the soldiers' fault that their country sent them on a mission that was not achievable and failed to change course when that fact became apparent.

Any reckoning with the longest war in this country's history must also grapple with one of its gravest miscalculations. We need to recognize that foreign war is not a vaccine against global terrorism. In fact, the number of Islamist-inspired terrorist groups has grown worldwide since 2001, often in response to American military intervention.

Nearly two decades of terrorist attacks — here and abroad by attackers both foreign and domestic — have shown the obvious: that terrorism is a tactic, not an enemy force that can be defeated, and it knows no borders. It can be thwarted in certain instances, but it cannot be ended outright.

If efforts to deal with international terrorism are to be sustainable indefinitely, they need to rely principally on intelligence and interdiction, diplomacy and development — not war without aim or end.

The troops have fought bravely in Afghanistan. It's time to bring them home.