

# RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

## Symposium: Was withdrawing from Afghanistan the right thing to do?

August 25, 2022

A year ago this month, the world dramatically changed for the Afghan people: after the U.S. military began withdrawing in the summer of 2021, the central government in Kabul fell in August and the Taliban completed its takeover. While the evacuation at the end of the month was chaotic and painful to watch — 13 American service members, mostly in their 20s, [perished in Aug. 26 in a terror attack](#) outside the airport — the festering humanitarian crisis left behind has been a source of growing frustration among observers here, and even worse for those still living there.

Meanwhile, questions about the wisdom of the 20-year war and foreign occupation persist among Americans, particularly veterans who sacrificed life and limb for something they sense had no lasting impact on Afghanistan at all.

So we asked more than 20 scholars, journalists, veterans and advocates on both sides — Afghan and American — if they think the 2021 military withdrawal was the right thing to do, or not.

[Andrew Bacevich](#), [Obaidullah Baheer](#), [Michael C. Desch](#), [Torek Farhadi](#), [Sara Haghdooosti](#), [Nadizila Jamshidi](#), [Ann Jones](#), [Sahar Khan](#), [Charles Kupchan](#), [Joshua Landis](#), [Anatol Lieven](#), [Jessica Tuchman Mathews](#), [Alexander McCoy](#), [Aaron David Miller](#), [Arta Moeini](#), [Paul Pillar](#), [Haroun Rahimi](#), [Will Ruger](#), [Masuda Sultan](#), [Katrina Vanden Heuvel](#), [Adam Weinstein](#), [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), [Arash Yaqin](#)

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**Andrew Bacevich**, *president of the Quincy Institute, professor emeritus, Boston University*

Was President Biden right to pull the plug on the U.S. war in Afghanistan? The honest answer is that only time will tell. Ten or fifty years from now, the wisdom or unwisdom of President Biden's decision to complete the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan may well appear different than it does today. But given the facts available to Biden in 2021 — above all, the abysmal results achieved after 20 years of nation-building — prolonging the effort was unlikely to serve any useful purpose. Persisting in folly is not a strategy.

With defeat comes bitterness. Those who served in Afghanistan have every right to feel bitter about the outcome of their war. Yet only by acknowledging our defeat does it become possible to learn from this sad and costly episode.

The fact is that Afghanistan had become an unaffordable distraction — a massive “burn pit” that consumed time, attention, and resources to no purpose. Rarely in American history has the disparity between interests and effort been so great.

In the wake of our failure in Afghanistan, the need to recalibrate U.S. strategic priorities is manifest. Unfortunately, distracted by ongoing and prospective wars elsewhere, the Biden administration shows little capacity to undertake that essential task.

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**Obaidullah Baheer**, *an adjunct lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan and visiting scholar at the New School.*

There are many stakeholders to keep in mind while answering such a question. However, the answer to whether it was right for the United States to leave Afghanistan is one that receives an affirmative answer on all stakeholders' fronts. The withdrawal helped stop the U.S. from bleeding resources and losing its soldiers to a war that should have never been started and it eliminated the central motive for insurgency in Afghanistan. Stability in Afghanistan would also help the region prosper as well.

The more pertinent question though is whether the U.S. left in the right manner? The answer to that has to be negative. The United States missed many opportunities after its initial invasion to reconcile with the Taliban but took two decades to arrive at that conclusion. The lack of coordination with the Afghan Republic in power made them lose legitimacy and a chance at setting any terms with the Taliban for a possible peace settlement. The Doha deal between the United States and the Taliban became more of a surrendering of Afghanistan back to the Taliban. A peace settlement would have been a great start for a process of reconciliation, one that is now at the mercy of the Taliban.

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**Michael C. Desch**, *Packey J. Dee Professor of International Relations and Brian and Jeannelle Brady Family Director of the Notre Dame International Security Center*

A year after America's chaotic withdrawal from Kabul, critics are still using the club of an earlier ugly American departure from Vietnam to beat the Biden Administration and other proponents of cutting our losses in a failed war in Afghanistan. The historical comparison they make is fair; the implications they draw from it are flat out wrong!

Critics suggest that the United States' disorganized exit from Afghanistan was unnecessary and it emboldened our adversaries Russia (in Ukraine) and China (Taiwan). We heard the same charges in the mid-1970s: the fall of the Vietnam domino was not inevitable, if only America had stayed the course; and it would lead to further victories by our adversaries. Few serious analysts, then or now, think that there was a real road to victory in either war; but a surprisingly large number of people wrong-headedly think that we nonetheless should have persevered to preserve our credibility with our adversaries.

True, Cambodia almost simultaneously fell to the murderous Khmer Rouge, but that did nothing to further the Communist monolith, with Vietnam subsequently invading the country to oust its former allies and then China invading Vietnam, and losing badly. China's Soviet frenemy scored some quick but fleeting gains in Africa and even Central America in the late 1970s but it did little to stem the inexorable shift in the balance of forces favoring the West in the Cold War.

Indeed, less than 20 years after Vietnam, the Soviet Union would throw in the Cold War towel despite America's helter-skelter departure from Indochina in the mid-1970s. While the post-

post-Cold War United States will no longer bestride the World like a colossus, its inevitable return to great power normalcy will have nothing to do with our disorganized retreat from Afghanistan.

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**Torek Farhadi** *was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and served as a former adviser to the IMF, World Bank, and U.N.*

U.S. intelligence probably knew as early as 2007 that the Afghan government was corrupt and without support it would fall apart. This assessment was obviously not shared with the American public and U.S. media. Perhaps not even with all members of Congress. After the death of Bin Laden, the United States didn't have much reason to remain in Afghanistan and support a corrupt government there.

Once the Taliban Doha office was opened in 2013, “the writing was on the wall” that the United States was ready for an arrangement where the Taliban would be part of the power structure in Afghanistan. But this was not clearly communicated to Afghan leaders. The Pentagon kept pumping support to the Afghan National Army. Only in the United States of America can the White House think one thing, the intelligence community know other things, the Pentagon act differently, and Congress and media advocate and speak yet another way altogether.

The result was that Afghan leaders misinterpreted all these mixed signals. Continued financing of the ANA was understood by Afghan leaders as a vote of confidence and proof of continued U.S. support in the long-term. The alarm bell was rung by Secretary Pompeo when he cut \$1 billion from US military aid to Kabul. But by then, it was too late. Afghan leaders were in denial, and from signals they had received from Congress members and former U.S. generals, the Ghani camp was hoping that with Biden in the White House everything would turn to Kabul's favor again. In the case of the Afghan war, the U.S. democracy spoke for two decades with all its brilliant but non-aligned voices, especially in the last few years in the ears of Ghani.

When the Trump administration decided to cut the losses and leave, it was too late to recast the ANA as an independent entity capable of defending Afghanistan. The ANA was a money spending machine addicted to an air force it could never maintain and operate itself. The United States was right to leave Afghanistan, a money pit for the U.S. taxpayer with no consequential geostrategic interest.

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**Sara Haghdoosti** *is Win Without War's Executive Director.*

Yes, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan absolutely was the right thing to do. The longest war in U.S. history should have ended long ago, and after 20 years, the speed of the Taliban's takeover showed us a truth that many had ignored. The United States was fighting a war it could not win and our military occupation was strengthening the very extremists we claimed to be fighting in Afghanistan.

However, given the scale of harm caused by waging decades of war and fueling massive corruption in Afghanistan — taking troops out was only ever a first step. The United States owes a much more strategic and restorative approach to the people of Afghanistan, including genuine reparations, not simply humanitarian aid. That can only be achieved by centering diverse voices

from Afghanistan and its diaspora to create a clear plan on how we work towards some semblance of justice after decades of horror.

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**Nazila Jamshidi** *is a gender equality and human rights specialist who worked for years in Afghanistan's development and democracy programs.*

I think a complete U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan was not the right decision. In the last few years, only 2,500 U.S. troops were in Afghanistan before the complete withdrawal. Yet, their presence could keep the Afghan National Army organized and the Taliban at bay, which prevented the collapse of the Islamic Republic and a painful defeat for the United States.

Something that the Trump and Biden's administrations branded as a "forever war" prevented any potential large-scale terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its allies across the world from emerging from Afghanistan for 20 years. By keeping 2,500 soldiers or more on the ground, the U.S. could have preserved a growing democracy and stood with a population that supported Afghanistan's constitution. The mission could have thrived if President Biden's decision of a complete withdrawal had not demoralized an army that was not ready to defend the country by itself. Instead, it caused the educated and young population to start fleeing the country even before the collapse. Just because Bin Laden is dead and Al Zawahiri was recently killed does not mean Al Qaeda and jihadists cannot influence Afghanistan. It is also too early to translate the murder of Al Zawahiri in Kabul as Biden's over-the-horizon counterterrorism being a success.

Moreover, the U.S. now has far more to explain and justify to Americans, the world, and its allies trapped inside the country. The poorly executed withdrawal only caused the U.S. more responsibility toward its partners inside Afghanistan and the obligation to find a way to preserve what was built through billions of taxpayers' dollars and thousands of American lives.

In the last two decades, the entire world has observed the American power to transform a post-conflict society, with a will to support the human rights of the most vulnerable members of another country with a long history of violence and to reconstruct a society devastated by 20 years of war. Suppose the U.S. wants to keep that reputation among its allies and adversaries. In that case, the U.S. cannot simply abandon 40 million people in the worst humanitarian crisis and on the brink of starvation. Thus, the U.S. now has much more to do diplomatically, economically, and perhaps militarily than it had one year ago.

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**Ann Jones**, *author of "They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars: The Untold Story"*

Regrettably, yes. Withdrawing American troops was the right thing to do, but it should have been done more thoughtfully and much earlier, say about 2004 to 2005. Then, Hamid Karzai, in his multi-ethnic garb, was a popular president, and Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's Minister of Foreign Affairs, had come straight from the right hand of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the assassinated leader of the Northern Alliance, the martyred hero of the nation. During those years, girls returned to real schools and women went to work, even in Parliament.

Why didn't the U.S. leave then? Ask our Military, Industrial, Congressional complex. Our own military contractors have been cheating Afghanistan and bilking American taxpayers for 20

years. Who knows how many zillions they banked even as they imported cut-rate workers from Pakistan. But America's chaotic exit from Kabul last year, deadly for so many Afghans, revealed our government's inattention to the facts of its forgotten war.

Humaira Rasuli, the celebrated Afghan human rights lawyer, reminded me that the U.S. is also blind to the Taliban. She writes, "We Afghan women are shocked to see global leaders naively hoping that the Taliban will ultimately put an end to global terrorism." You might as well expect contrite U.S. contractors to give back the cash. Rasuli writes: "The Taliban thrive upon global insecurity. The Taliban is a terrorist group and terrorist groups ultimately serve each other."

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**Sahar Khan**, *Research Fellow, Defense and Foreign Policy Studies, Cato Institute*

Yes, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan was the right thing to do, and there are three reasons why.

First, the United States had achieved its goals. The George W. administration had set out to dismantle al Qaeda, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, and that was done within weeks of the invasion in November 2001. If the Bush administration had stuck to its initial goals and withdrawn, then that would have been a "victory." Instead, by changing the goal to "nation-building" President George W. Bush set the stage for endless war.

Second, the U.S. government was in Afghanistan to ensure that it would not become a haven for terrorist groups that want to attack the US homeland ever again. This goal was also achieved after al Qaeda dispersed. While there are several militant groups operating in Afghanistan, such as Islamic State Khorasan and the Haqqani Network, neither of them has global aspirations that involve attacking the U.S. homeland. Also, all open-source US intelligence assessments claim that al Qaeda is no longer powerful enough to plan and execute another 9/11-ish attack.

All of this is related to the third and final reason, which is that since the United States did not/could not/would not define "nation-building," the only smart choice left was to withdraw. This notion of nation-building is also inherently racist and neocolonial, based on the assumption that there is no "nation" in Afghanistan, when of course, that is not true. The Afghans are a proud, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious nation that has been a victim of great power politics and empire since the 1800s.

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**Charles Kupchan**, *senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and professor of international affairs at Georgetown University in the Walsh School of Foreign Service and Department of Government.*

Biden was right to withdraw from Afghanistan last summer. The nation-building mission was failing, undermined by the country's intractable divisions. The continued presence of coalition forces showed no signs of ultimately producing a salutary outcome. Washington fell short when it came to nation-building, but it succeeded in the narrower mission of preventing extremist groups from using Afghanistan to launch terror attacks against the West. Yes, the Taliban retains links to Al-Qaeda even as it battles the Islamic State. But Al-Qaeda's presence in the country remains limited, and Washington has retained effective intelligence and long-distance strike capabilities — as the recent drone attack against Ayman Al-Zawahiri demonstrated.

To be sure, the U.S. withdrawal did not go according to plan, producing a frantic exit that, according to many critics, did permanent damage to U.S. credibility. The critics were wrong. On the contrary, Washington has effectively led NATO's resolute response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. No longer distracted and drained by the post-9/11 "forever wars," the administration has focused its attention on core geopolitical priorities in Europe and Asia and on the critical investments needed to speed domestic renewal. Directing resources to infrastructure, technology, climate solutions, and other domestic priorities will advance economic and political repair at home, which in turn strengthens the nation's hand abroad.

The humanitarian nightmare that has unfolded in Afghanistan since the U.S. withdrawal is the greatest policy challenge facing the Biden administration. Washington is right to keep its distance from a Taliban government that has failed to adhere to minimum standards of decency. But the United States urgently needs to work with the international community to get frozen Afghan assets into the country, sidestepping the Taliban and instead disbursing funds to technocrats and other Afghans who can help sustain a functioning economy and state apparatus.

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**Joshua Landis**, *Director, Center of Middle East Studies & Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies, University of Oklahoma*

The U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan was the right thing to do. America's understanding of Afghan society and politics was deeply flawed from the start. But Afghanistan was not unique. The U.S. effort to transform the Greater Middle East must be seen as a piece. American efforts to reshape state structures and the political culture of Iraq, Libya, and Syria failed as well. Each of these interventions increased the death toll and suffering of local inhabitants without advancing America's interests or shifting the geopolitics of the region in America's favor. On the contrary, Washington has little influence in any of these countries today. All of them are in a shambles. America's moral and political leadership in the broader Middle East is in decline, even if its military continues to be feared.

In retrospect, Washington's original decision in 1979 to draw the USSR into a losing war in Afghanistan in coordination with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia must be reevaluated. The U.S. spent between \$6 and \$10 billion to "suck the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire." The blowback from this ill-conceived effort was immense. Over one million Afghans perished in the Soviet Afghan War of 1979-1989, and the civil war that dragged on for years after. Six million Afghans were made refugees. Radical Islam was given a major boost. The September 11 attack on the U.S. would not have taken place had America not fired up Islamic resistance fighters in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida might not have formed. The U.S. would not have invaded Iraq.

Today we know the tragic knock-on effects of America's intervention in 1979. Millions of lives would have been saved by restraint.

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**Anatol Lieven**, *Director of the Eurasia Program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.*

The American and Western experience in Afghanistan illustrates something that political and intellectual fashionistas too often forget: that clichés usually become clichés because they are

based in truth. In the case of Afghanistan, this refers to the cliché that the Afghans, and the rural Pashtuns in particular, are extremely resistant both to foreign occupation and to modern state building; and that this resistance is deeply rooted in ancient cultural norms. The failure to learn from Afghan history reflected the decline of historical and area studies in the West; but also U.S. and European exceptionalism: a refusal to compare America to other countries, today or in the past.

In a conversation back in the 1990s with General Alexander Lebed, who had served in Afghanistan as a Soviet officer, I asked him why the USSR did not learn from repeated British imperial disasters in Afghanistan. He gave a bitter laugh: “According to us, you were wicked exploiters, while we were bringing socialist progress to the people of Afghanistan. So how could we learn anything from you?”

In the years after 2001, I heard very similar words about America bringing democracy to Afghanistan from U.S. officials and soldiers who rejected outright the idea that they might have anything to learn from the Soviet experience. We may hope that they have now learned their lesson — but then, we hoped that after Vietnam.

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**Jessica Tuchman Mathews**, *distinguished fellow and former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

This anniversary of the end of the war is another opportunity for Americans to focus on the wrong thing: tactical errors made in the last months of the war rather than the much larger ones of the twenty preceding years. Acting on the recognition that more years of military effort would not produce a different outcome, President Biden had both the strategic clarity and the political courage his three predecessors lacked. The first decade of the war brought the US nearly full circle to Bush’s limited “no boots on the ground,” approach relying on special forces and air power.

Then came a broad counterinsurgency strategy, aimed at improving “military, governance and economic capacity” of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. As that failed, the US shifted back to a counterterrorism strategy narrowly focused on killing. Along the way, Washington embraced and abandoned Kabul’s central government, tried a civilian surge, paid intermittent attention to combatting crippling corruption, tried to craft a regional strategy, focused on and then ignored the critical importance of the sanctuaries Pakistan afforded Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and spent roughly \$100 billion trying to build an Afghan army on the US model which, had that force not evaporated, would have had to be indefinitely financed by foreigners. The US wasn’t stupid or feckless. It was trying to achieve something that ignored the history, culture and values of what it had embarked upon and refused to see that clearly for far too long.

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**Alexander McCoy** *is a Marine Corps veteran and co-founder of the veterans organization Common Defense*

*A year ago, when U.S. military troops were heroically working to evacuate vulnerable Afghans from the airport in Kabul, there was a common sentiment among troops and veterans that this was the first time in years that we had a clear and morally-just mission in Afghanistan which we*

*could understand and rally behind. President Biden was absolutely right to withdraw from the country, and though I have been critical of the delay before he began the process of also evacuating those Afghans who worked and fought alongside us, I will always respect the bravery he showed for making the decision to end what veterans called the Forever War.*

We should not be sending young Americans to fight, suffer wounds and moral injury, and give their lives for an unclear or unachievable mission. Nor should we tolerate our young men and women in uniform being sacrificed when top Pentagon officials can't articulate a strategy for long-term success, or tell the truth to the American people about the conditions our troops experienced.

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**Aaron David Miller**, *senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was a strategic imperative delivered with a frightening degree of incompetence, lack of preparation, and confusion. The resulting chaos — which left too many Americans and thousands of Afghans who had cooperated with U.S. forces behind — badly undermined America's credibility and left Washington's aspirational vision of a prosperous stable country where the rights of women and minorities were guaranteed in tatters.

Still, a year in, if measured against the most important U.S. interest in Afghanistan — denying terrorists sanctuary to carry out attacks against the homeland — an interim assessment would suggest the decision to withdraw was the right one.

There is little doubt that the U.S. capacity to do effective over-the-horizon counter-terrorism — despite the success of the strike against al-Qaeda head Ayman Zawahiri — has been degraded. And yet the decision to leave Afghanistan must be weighed not only against the formidable costs of maintaining a significant military presence on the ground but also the assessment of the risks to the homeland in the two decades since the terror attacks of 9/11. Jihadi terror will likely remain a threat; and we must be vigilant. But if the last two decades have revealed anything, it's the need for a more expansive definition of homeland security that encompasses pandemics, climate, the rise of white nationalist extremist violence, and pernicious polarization that pose a far greater threat to America's security and prosperity than jihadi terror attacks.

When measured against these threats, the decision to withdraw from a failed 20-year war costing thousands of lives and trillions was not only a strategic imperative but a fundamental recognition and rethinking of the real challenges that confront the Republic.

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**Arta Moeini**, *Director of Research, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*

Withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan after two decades of war in that country remains the soundest policy decision by a U.S. president in years. America's original objective in Afghanistan was tactical and morally defensible: capturing Osama bin Laden and dismantling Al-Qaeda. That mission was accomplished in 2011. The broadening of the mission to utopian targets such as democracy promotion, nation-building, and counter-insurgency was a recipe for strategic failure.



It was the pinnacle of hubris to try to socially engineer a foreign nation according to Western standards, and this was always going to backfire. The lament is that by prolonging our presence in Afghanistan and propping up a dysfunctional and corrupt Afghan government that was seen as a U.S. puppet by many locals outside of Kabul, we practically ensured the Taliban's resurgence. At that point, the choice facing a U.S. commander-in-chief was to either stay another decade to fight the second coming of the Taliban in a vicious cycle that would put more American troops at risk for unclear aims or bring to an end, at long last, U.S. involvement in a country that is of quite minimal strategic importance to American security.

Both presidents Trump and Biden made the prudent choice to leave. By breaking with the policy consensus on Afghanistan, they saved America's next generation from a costly and permanent foreign entanglement. U.S. retrenchment has also had a secondary benefit. With America gone, the Taliban is now a thorn in the side of America's rivals in the region—including China, Russia, and Iran—as evidenced by the recent clashes on the Afghan-Iranian border.

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**Paul Pillar**, *Senior Fellow at the Center for Security Studies of Georgetown University, former senior U.S. intelligence officer.*

The swiftness of the collapse of the Ghani government and its security forces one year ago testifies to the futility of what the United States had tried to accomplish in Afghanistan during the previous twenty years. U.S. forces had been propping up a house of cards. There is no reason to believe that the eventual collapse would have been much different if the props had remained for another twenty years. The understandable U.S. response to a horrible terrorist attack in 2001 needs to be distinguished from how, after Al Qaeda had been roused from its Afghan residence, the U.S. expedition was allowed to turn into a nation-building effort that was bound to fail. This was one of the costliest instances ever of mission creep.

Counterterrorism was not a reason to remain in Afghanistan. Physical havens thousands of miles from the U.S. are not the most important determinant of terrorist threats to Americans. Even if they were, Afghanistan is hardly unique. And the Taliban have every reason not to let any terrorist guests cause a repeat of what happened to them in 2001.

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**Haroun Rahimi** *is assistant professor of law at the American University of Afghanistan*

Considering the 20 years of American military engagement, I disagree with those who argue the United States failed because it did not allocate enough troops and money, or even how the military and aid were used — the latter criticism assumes that the Americans know how to, or can, create a sustainable state or economy in another country. The United States should have assumed a smaller role in Afghanistan. This would have made it possible for a more sustainable state and economy to emerge in Afghanistan where local dynamics, and not proximity to the U.S. forces, determined the distribution of power and patterns of economic activities.

Considering the last phase of the war however, it was wrong to completely disassociate the military withdrawal from any progress towards a political settlement. The Doha process should have been multilateral involving all stakeholders: the Afghan government, Taliban, and regional countries. If the United States had credibly demonstrated its willingness to leave, the multilateral

process might have worked, but admittedly it would have taken longer and would have come at a higher cost. Lastly, President Biden should have linked the final phase of withdrawal to minimal progress in intra-Afghan negotiation. I believe the risk of Taliban retaliation against such a minimal conditionality was exaggerated when compared to knock-off effect it had on the military and political dynamics inside Afghanistan.

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**Will Ruger**, *President of the American Institute for Economic Research.*

Absolutely. But it is important to make clear what I mean by “right.” In judging this decision and all others in the realm of statecraft, the standard should be the national interest. Doing right in foreign policy isn’t defined by an “ethic of ultimate ends” but by an “ethic of responsibility.” It requires leaders acting prudentially *for us* even if that means outcomes that are less desirable or harmful for others.

So with Afghanistan, the right thing was to fully withdraw from a war that no longer served our vital strategic ends. We had accomplished what we needed to long before; we punished the Taliban, decimated Al Qaeda, and killed bin Laden. Other war aims had been smuggled in via a false theory of what Afghanistan needed to become for our security or due to their intrinsic desirability. But those aims were disconnected from our core national interests, thus unnecessary and not worth continuing to fight and die for. We can efficiently serve our remaining counterterrorism needs without a military presence in-country, as shown by the al-Zawahiri strike.

Those who say it wasn’t “right” to leave Afghans to suffer under the Taliban or that we had to protect fragile gains in human rights or democracy are looking at the war and the state the wrong way. It isn’t the role of the American government to fight wars to secure goods or undermine evils unless required by our vital interests. We were right to exit the Afghanistan war.

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**Masuda Sultan**, *women’s rights activist and co-founder of Unfreeze Afghanistan.*

After 20 years, the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of troops was long overdue. The U.S. was spending \$50 billion per year and there was no winning. In the initial years it was thought the Taliban were defeated but in the last few years of the war they had steadily been making gains. Poverty was increasing, and the war economy which had been driving much of the gains in income was slowing down. By the time the U.S. signed the Doha agreement, 50 percent of Afghan territory was in the hands of the Taliban according to SIGAR. The Afghan Presidential election was fraught with fraud and both President Ghani and his chief executive Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory, holding competing inaugurations on the same day.

The overwhelming majority of Afghans wanted a peace deal and Americans were also not in favor of continuing the war. However, while the U.S. had come to agreement with the Taliban, the Afghan government had not. Although the intra-Afghan dialogue had begun, it was unclear if the sides could come to an agreement. On August 15th, President Ghani fled the country along with most of his cabinet, and the Taliban took control of the country. While the legacy of the withdrawal will always be tainted by the chaotic events of those days, it was for Afghans an end to the fiasco that was the war itself.

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**Katrina Vanden Heuvel**, *publisher of The Nation magazine*

Ignore the dark warnings from armchair warriors, hidebound strategists, and establishment architects of past disasters as to how withdrawal from Afghanistan was a blow to U.S. credibility.

Surely, U.S. credibility has suffered more from sustaining the Afghan debacle for years than ending it. Ruinous and wrongheaded intervention — destabilizing the Middle East in Iraq, discrediting humanitarian intervention in Libya — have eroded our credibility far more.

Rather than focusing on how we got out of Afghanistan, it would be wiser to focus on how we got in. The accounting can draw from the official record exposed by The Washington Post's Afghanistan Papers project. (The papers come from an internal investigation by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.) The report is a savage and telling indictment of abject failure, metastatic corruption, squandered trillions, American and Afghan lives destroyed and lost.

After the debacle in Afghanistan, the nation's security demands a broad reckoning and a fundamental reassessment of U.S. priorities and direction. We need a new generation of security experts, thinkers and political activists, versed in pandemics, proliferation and poverty, in climate change and alternative energy, and in 21st century human rights and political economy. We need a strategy of restraint and realism that focuses on diplomatic and economic engagement over military intervention. Let's address the true security threats we face rather than continue the failed effort to police the world.

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**Adam Weinstein**, *research fellow at the Quincy Institute and a veteran of the war in Afghanistan where he served as a U.S. Marine.*

The decision to leave Afghanistan militarily was the right one for the American people and it is their interests that the president is ultimately accountable to. Too much commentary presumes that U.S. leaders were ultimately accountable to the Afghan people. This is simply untrue. Rather than ask how Washington broke its promises to Afghans, which it most certainly did, we should instead consider what business U.S. leaders had making those promises in the first place. The United States created dependencies in Afghanistan that it never intended to sustain.

Nevertheless, the Doha process handed the Taliban a serious advantage and their takeover of the country was a foreseeable consequence of a U.S.-led diplomatic effort even if nobody predicted the rapidity of events. Therefore Washington has an obligation to remain engaged through diplomacy and humanitarian aid. Luckily, it is also in the U.S. interests to do so.

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**Sarah Leah Whitson**, *Executive Director, Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)*

The Biden administration's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, after twenty painful, costly years of

failed war and state-building, has been its most important foreign policy achievement to date. But our debt to the Afghan people and the American soldiers who fought this war, based on the reckless, fraudulent decision-making of senior American officials, remains unpaid. By any measure of justice and fairness, we owe the Afghan people reparations, but our government instead is collectively punishing them, contributing to hunger and poverty with overbroad, country-wide sanctions.

Without accountability for the American government and military officials who deliberately misled us and tethered us to decades of death and destruction in Afghanistan, and without reforms to the broken war power rules that allowed them to get away with it, we can expect endless entanglements in new wars – as we’ve seen in Yemen, and are now seeing in Ukraine. We urgently need to ban the financial incentives that reward government officials who promote war-spending and war-making – with campaign contributions from, and jobs in, the defense industry after they leave their government jobs. We must end the conflicts of interest that contributed to such disastrous decisions by American officials in Afghanistan and continue to undermine the public’s faith that our leaders are truly acting in the interests of the American people.

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**Arash Yaqin**, *former Senior Cultural Affairs Advisor for the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and senior communication advisor of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

The legacy of American foreign policy towards Afghanistan is full of irony, miscalculation, broken commitments, and strategic failures. For the second time in less than half a century, the United States has lost its diplomatic mission in Kabul, leaving Afghans in the dark and an unpredictable future. Everything that was built with American blood and treasure has fallen, proving how unsustainable a U.S.-security-centered strategy in Afghanistan was.

Aside from misinforming the American public about the ground reality in Afghanistan, Washington and Afghan leaders didn’t keep their commitments to ordinary Afghans to bring peace, prosperity, and democracy. While corrupt Afghan elites left Kabul with large sums of aid money and Washington looks to close its failed chapter of so-called democracy exportation, the war for Afghans continues, particularly for Afghan women. The U.S. war in Afghanistan has been compared by many experts to the U.S. failure in Vietnam. Although there are many parallels, in the case of Vietnam, the U.S. failed only once, while in the case of Afghanistan, it has repeated the same scenario again and again, proving that Washington is unable to learn from recent history. While Washington is now focused on disengagement, Afghanistan is ironically headed towards another dark age.