



Washington Should Learn Lessons From the Afghanistan Debacle

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Only two months ago Washington's 20-year Afghan experiment in nation-building collapsed both suddenly and ingloriously. The Biden administration would like to forget the entire disastrous experience.

President Joe Biden is not to blame for the disaster, however. The three previous administrations sought to make Afghanistan's government and military in America's image, rather than as representatives of the Afghan people. Moreover, argued Baktash Ahadi, a former interpreter for U.S. forces, Washington "mistook the Afghan countryside for a mere theater of war, rather than as a place where people actually lived," while relying upon the worst, most venal forces for support. For many Afghans, the Taliban seemed the lesser evil.

There are important lessons for Americans to learn before they forget that the US ever had troops in Afghanistan.

- **Moderate national ambitions.** The collapse of communism led to the brief but disastrous "what we say goes" era of US foreign policy. The Blob, Washington's infamous foreign policy elite, imagined America as the unipower, the hyperpower, the essential nation, the polity that gave the entire world its purpose and meaning. Having defeated communism and won the Cold War, nothing was believed beyond America's power.

Most dramatically, in Afghanistan's case this meant transforming a country historically ruled at the village and valley and dominated by a largely traditional, conservative rural population. Similarly ostentatious plans were made for the Balkans, in which warring ethnic and religious groups were to joyously live together in internationally endorsed multi-ethnic societies.

In Iraq a longtime émigré on the CIA payroll was to be appointed president, liberal American ideals were to be imposed through a new constitution, and Iraqi bases would be used against Baghdad's Shia neighbor, Iran. In Syria the US imagined fostering a moderate insurgency led by

Jeffersonian activists who would push aside murderous jihadists to make a new democratic society. Washington's War Party planned to foster liberal governance in Libya by ousting the leader of another sharply divided fake nation and allowing nature to take its course. None of these conflicts turned out as hoped.

Instead, Washington should have recognized its limitations, abandoned illusions about democracy promotion, and focused any military efforts on limited security objectives. For instance, wrecking al-Qaeda and punishing the Taliban for 9/11 in Afghanistan, and then leaving. Otherwise, the US should have employed non-military means and accepted the long odds against success.

- **Eschew nation building.** Social engineering almost always is an exercise in militarized hubris capped by depressing futility. Such attempts rarely advance vital American interests. And the results almost always turn out badly.

Social engineering is difficult enough at home. Consider the decades of effort and billions spent on America's inner-cities. Enduring poverty and family dissolution stubbornly resisted outside solutions. Illicit drug use endured and even increased during a half century long "drug war." And these failures occurred among countrymen sharing a common culture and life.

Moreover, "fixing" US society, if successful, would benefit Americans. Transforming other states, not so much. Although Washington social engineers assumed that a world of liberal democracies would be less aggressive than a bevy of autocracies, America is the most dramatic refutation of that argument. The US is the most aggressive nation on earth. In Washington's case, at least, power appears to be a more important determinant than form of government.

The alleged benefits of transforming other societies rarely matter much to America and virtually never warrant war. Anyway, US policymakers have exhibited extraordinary ineptitude in attempting to modernize and uplift other nations. Afghanistan turned out to be a bust both spectacular and catastrophic.

- **Tailor means to ends.** When Washington chooses to act, it should be cognizant of its limitations and adjust its conduct accordingly. To have any chance of replacing Taliban control without a permanent US occupation, Washington should have promoted a government and military that reflected Afghan desires and practices. Success should not have been predicted upon endless American support. Rule should have remained decentralized. Existing institutions, such as tribal adjudication of disputes, should have been respected. Financial transfers should have been limited to discourage corruption. Urban elites should have understood that the government would survive only if Afghans, including them, defended it.

Indeed, military intervention should be a last resort, with any presence expected to be temporary. Advocates of a permanent garrison in Afghanistan cited continuing deployments in Germany and South Korea, as if the latter two – peacetime garrisons supported locally as part of treaty alliances – were similar to putting units in combat in a seemingly endless civil war. Nor should bases established during the unique circumstances of the Cold War be treated as the new norm.

The cost to America of becoming a modern Rome, expected to patrol colonial outposts around the globe forever, is far greater than any potential benefit.

- **Don't lose the future seeking to redeem the past.** As more military personnel died and money was spent, advocates of "Afghanistan Forever!" claimed it was more important than ever to stay. Indeed, since leaving would demonstrate that previous losses were in vain, the US had to remain forever, *and beyond if necessary*, to redeem lives lost and cash spent. That became the new objective, transcending any assessment of whether the commitment was worth achieving or even achievable. The war went from means to end.

This is the age-old fallacy of sunk costs. Past losses should be irrelevant to deciding future conduct. Lives and wealth squandered are gone and cannot be redeemed. The only question that matters is whether the benefits of future action will exceed the costs. Once the immediate objectives of wrecking al-Qaeda and ousting the Taliban had been achieved in Afghanistan, the answer was no. The best way to honor those lost would have been to stop sacrificing more lives for no good reason.

- **Ignore credibility claims.** Just as patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, credibility is the last refuge of the discredited policymaker. Once it is evident that an intervention has failed and is unlikely to yield many, if any, benefits in the future, its advocates warn that US credibility is at stake. That the result of withdrawal is likely to be war, mayhem, and disaster around the world. Indeed, that not finishing off a distant insurgency in a failed state will encourage the global communist/jihadist/other conspiracy to take advantage and threaten the entire free world. Or whatever. The bottom line always is that if the appeasers, defeatists, simpletons, and turncoats have their way and withdraw from a distant conflict of little account against the War Party's advice, the result inevitably will be a new Dark Ages, Armageddon, or both.

This might make for a great theater disaster movie, but is a ridiculous claim. Great powers have more opportunity to abandon lost causes because they are great powers. Moreover, their opponents typically make similar judgments, considering the importance of interests in judging credibility. Afghanistan is an obvious example: the US spent 20 years involved in a conflict which offered little benefit in a region of minimal interest to America. If anything, Washington's bullheaded determination to stay represented extremely poor judgment.

In contrast, withdrawing recognized reality and thereby enhanced US credibility. Or would have, had the War Party not so assiduously talked down America's reputation to burnish its own. In any case, Washington has survived a long list of supposedly devastating hits to its "credibility," including the collapse of South Vietnam. Barely 15 years later the Cold War was over, Warsaw Pact had collapsed, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and Soviet Union was about to dissolve. So much for the role of "credibility."

- **Declare victory and move on.** Lost causes retain enormous support, sometimes for understandable, even honorable reasons. Lengthy conflicts, as in Afghanistan and Vietnam, created societies dependent on the US presence and attracted supporters who built their lives around America's presence and made themselves vulnerable by

supporting American objectives and personnel. Many other locals also benefited from the freer and more prosperous society that temporarily resulted from US intervention.

This was evident in both Afghanistan and Vietnam. And the collapse of both governments resulted in enormous human hardship. Alas, that could not be avoided, though military departures can be more or less competent, orderly, and thoughtful. While doing as much as possible to minimize the resulting damage and losses, the US must ultimately be ready to declare Fini! and depart. Rather than linger out of guilt, Washington should be more careful in the future not to intervene without overwhelming justification.

- **Recognize that trade-offs are inevitable.** Play-acting as an imperial power necessarily requires sacrificing other, likely more important objectives. On any list of serious military objectives, attempting to preserve a decrepit, corrupt, and incompetent government in a nation known for resisting outside control should rank low. Doing so in a region far from America while surrounded by a surfeit of regional and great powers – in Afghanistan’s case, Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China – should best be classified as foolish and reckless. Sacrificing decades of effort, thousands of lives, and trillions of dollars in such a campaign is moronic if not certifiably insane. Almost anything else the military could have done would have yielded more benefits.

However, the best alternative to war likely is peaceful, nonmilitary activity. The Pentagon already does far too much. There is no good reason to baby sit prosperous, populous European nations. Protect South Korea, which so far outranges the North. Subsidize the defense of Japan, which spends just one percent of its GDP on its defense. Protect Middle Eastern nations, most dictatorial monarchies, neither vital to America nor serious about doing more for themselves. Intervene in assorted civil wars, invade nations on fraudulent grounds, aid nominal allies engaged in brutal aggression, and remake failed societies. Strip away everything that the Pentagon presently shouldn’t be doing, starting with the (finally!) ended occupation of Afghanistan, and the military budget could be cut significantly. Oft forgotten in Washington is the fact that military spending is not the same as defense spending, which accounts for only a small portion of the Pentagon budget.

Indeed, it is even more necessary to reduce unnecessary military outlays because of the federal government’s impending fiscal implosion. Unsurprisingly, Uncle Sam, increasingly irresponsible as he falls more deeply in debt, is effectively bankrupt. Even without a fiscal crisis trillion-dollar deficits are expected for the coming decade and beyond. The US will soon break the debt to GDP record, 106 percent, set at the conclusion of World War II. By mid-century that number could be 200 percent, warns the Congressional Budget Office. With the American people unlikely to slash Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid, the biggest domestic programs, and debt payments likely to increase, perhaps dramatically, as interest rates rise, any real spending cuts will have to come from the Pentagon.

The outcome of the war in Afghanistan was a tragedy for all concerned. Americans fighting a needless war. Afghans suffering through years more of an unnecessary civil war. An entire country lost to tyrannical Islamist misrule. Better choices by US officials, going back to support for the Mujahedeen against Soviet troops, with aid funneled through Pakistan and the most

radical forces, might have yielded a better outcome. However, ultimately only the Afghans could decide their own destiny. The US just delayed that process. The cost to finally impose America's will was simply too great.

The only way to ensure that the Afghan war does not end up entirely in vain is to learn from it and not repeat history – again and again, as we have so often done in the past. The last two decades in Afghanistan was a tragic mistake. Washington policymakers, both civilian and military, failed dramatically and should be held accountable.

War is a blunt instrument that always generates blowback, often in unpredictable ways. The Washington War Party should be dethroned, with those now paying the cost insisting that military action be returned to its traditional role as a last resort, relied on only when there really is no alternative. Which never was the case with America's two-decade long misadventure in Afghanistan.

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