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Afghanistan Exit Is the Right Call

Doug Bandow

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It appears that President Joe Biden is determined to make at least one good decision in his presidency: leaving Afghanistan. Unlike his predecessors, he does not plan on letting American personnel die far from home while kicking the geopolitical can down the road, hoping to shift blame for a failed military invasion onto his successor. An unnamed aide explained to the *Washington Post*, “If we break the May 1st deadline negotiated by the previous administration with no clear plan to exit, we will be back at war with the Taliban, and that was not something President Biden believed was in the national interest.”

After 9/11, President George W. Bush acted rightly to destroy al-Qaeda for killing thousands of Americans and oust the Taliban for hosting the terrorist group. This necessary and proper use of military force quickly succeeded. Indeed, Osama bin Laden might have been captured or killed in the fight over Tora Bora in December 2001 had the administration not even then been shifting attention and resources to prepare for its disastrous Iraqi misadventure.

Unfortunately, Bush then made a common mistake, engaging in mission gallop. He radically transformed America’s presence from killing enemies to nation-building, social reconstruction, democracy expansion, and progress promotion. The result has been a disaster.

Washington is long overdue in ending this doomed nation-building attempt.

Afghanistan is a wreck and a failed state. The national government’s writ extends only tenuously beyond Kabul in a country always governed in the valley and village. After two decades, the bulk of the security forces remain incapable, inefficient, or absent, unable to defend the Afghan regime. Expensive but failed development projects litter the land. Corruption drained public finances, looted aid, and created a class of nouveau riche living in garish “poppy palaces” in Kabul with families and bank accounts secured overseas. Opium production undergirds the rural economy and insurgent activity. The Taliban controls or contests almost half of the country, with the government steadily weakening.

Even the streets of Kabul, the capital city, on which I traveled safely a decade ago, are no longer secure.

All this despite combat support from allied forces ranging up to 140,000. For two decades. That’s longer than the Mexican–American War, Civil War, Spanish–American War, World War I, World War II, and Korean War combined — and with no end in sight.

Absent a U.S. troop withdrawal — the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban are best seen as useful cover for getting out — Americans could spend another 20 years dying as presidents keep

pushing the tough decision to their successors. Washington is long overdue in ending another doomed nation-building attempt to install a never-before-tried system of centralized governance and liberal democracy.

None of the common objections to departing make sense. One is that the U.S. is finally at the point when the stars have aligned and a bountiful future for Afghanistan is within reach. Sticking around just a little longer will unlock the dream as former enemies, however reluctantly, join hands. In contrast, leaving, as in Iraq, would toss away this opportunity and risk America's forced return in the future.

Yet assuming success to be just a short time away is a pipe dream, repeated by every U.S. administration, allied military commander, and Afghan apparatchik. Even some advocates now exhibit doubt. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., co-chair of the Afghanistan Study Group and one of the debacle's many architects as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently opined, "If we take advantage of the opportunity we have right now then there is at least a prospect of achieving that end state [a U.S.-friendly outcome] even as we recognize how difficult it will be." That's it? There is "at least a prospect of achieving" a positive outcome? That is the justification for tossing away more cash and lives, potentially forever?

This presumes that sticking around — about 3,500 Americans and 7,000 Europeans are still in Afghanistan — would be simple and cheap. U.S. casualties are way down because the few troops there do little fighting and the Taliban did not target them during negotiations. Break the agreement reached by the Trump administration and all bets would be off: U.S. forces likely would be at the top of the target list in an attempt to drive them out. Yet 3,500 personnel aren't likely to achieve what 100,000 Americans a decade ago were unable to do.

Nor was America's departure from Iraq discretionary. President George W. Bush was unable to convince the Iraqi parliament to approve a status of forces agreement, necessary for any continuing U.S. military presence. And a small force could have done little to prevent larger social collapse without being placed in combat, which would have turned Americans into targets. Indeed, ousting America's garrison was a shared objective of nationalistic Shia and antagonistic Sunnis alike.

Another claim is that America has invested too much to quit: \$2 trillion in cash, more than 7,000 lives (about 6,000 U.S. service members and contractors and 1,100 allied soldiers), thousands more wounded, many grievously, and enormous effort and emotion. These costs must not end up being incurred in vain. The emotion behind this argument is powerful. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez observed, "I just am concerned that after so much blood and national treasure that we don't lose what we were seeking to achieve."

But this is the fallacy of the sunk cost. The money and lives are gone and cannot be returned or redeemed. The question is whether or not the endeavor is worth future costs. Afghanistan is not. The best, indeed the only, way to honor those sacrificed by a succession of myopic political leaders is to stop wasting more lives and money. This presumably is why the vast majority of Afghan vets back withdrawal.

No doubt the air will be filled with complaints about lost resolve, trust, and reputation. A couple years ago several Rand Corp. analysts warned that leaving Afghanistan in defeat "would be a blow to American credibility, the weakening of deterrence and the value of U.S. reassurance

elsewhere.” Such claims were constantly tossed at Donald Trump, who questioned the bloody conventional wisdom, by insulated, pampered Blob members who sent Americans from across the country to fight and die in multiple endless wars that damaged rather than advanced U.S. security.

The problem is not that America failed, however — the U.S. quickly dispersed al-Qaeda and ousted the Taliban — but that Washington unrealistically expanded its objectives. Moreover, the belief that America must sustain every stupid, peripheral undertaking lest adversaries believe Washington will not keep serious, central ones ignores history and reality. No country can be forever bound by zombie commitments.

The U.S. has always “cut and run” when necessary, without causing a global cataclysm. Washington abandoned efforts to liberate North Korea in 1950, failed six years later to back its encouragement of Hungarians to revolt against the Soviet Union, fled South Vietnam with the last Americans escaping via helicopter from atop the embassy in 1975, and dropped support for various friendly dictatorships and insurgencies over the years. None of these actions left the Soviet Union in doubt that America would defend itself or Europe. Indeed, the USSR and other nations acted similarly — the Soviets, too, left Afghanistan in humiliating defeat.

Of course, these are all arguments against withdrawing. Inertia tends to dominate policy. What has always been must always be. Doing what we have always done seems safer than making changes. Indeed, that’s why the last three presidents pushed the problem to their successors. Let someone else make the difficult decision!

But it is time to ask: Are there any reasons for *staying*? No. Not any good ones, at least.

Imagine we were looking at Afghanistan on September 10, 2001. Who would have advocated an invasion and 20-year occupation? Not even the neocon cabal pushing so hard to target other nations, such as Iraq and Iran. Even for Washington’s activist war lobby, Afghanistan made no sense. And that lack of enthusiasm persisted as the Bush administration rapidly shifted troops to the conflict that they really wanted: Iraq. Afghanistan was just a convenient sideshow, unexpectedly dropped in their laps by Osama bin Laden’s location.

So why invade Afghanistan? Not because it is critical for Washington to dominate Central Asia. Of course, Uncle Sam tends to think he is akin to God in the sense that he is interested if anyone anywhere is doing anything just as God is concerned if a sparrow falls to Earth. But while being a superpower means having interests all over, few are important — such as in Central Asia. It is too far from America and too close to several powerful states. What happens there is of interest to Washington, but not vitally so, and certainly not worth decades of war. In fact, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia all have reason to promote stability in Afghanistan even though they prefer the U.S. to handle the problem.

There is also the broader call for nation-building as a positive good. For instance, Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote about

the undoubted risk to all of the Afghans who have risked life and limb to build a new country since 2001. Think of all the girls going to school, all the women in the workforce, all the brave soldiers and police officers fighting the Taliban despite heavy casualties, all the young entrepreneurs starting businesses, all the government officials trying to build a fragile democracy.

Yes, and there are many nations around the world in which an American invasion and occupation might be similarly seen as a virtuous act: South Sudan, Haiti, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Venezuela, Yemen, and more. Alas, as America has learned, creating a modern liberal order in other countries is no easy feat. Why do Afghanistan instead of the others? And how long should the U.S. persist if the wonderful transformation promised continues to remain but a glint in a Washington policymaker's eyes? If not 20 years, then 40? Sixty? One hundred? Or as long as it takes? As a Biden aide observed, "The president has judged that a conditions-based approach ... is a recipe for staying in Afghanistan forever."

The status of women in Afghanistan has understandably gained special attention. If that is a casus belli for America, however, then Washington should be bombing Riyadh, Tehran, and several other Muslim nations. There is much injustice, unfairness, and hardship around the world. The U.S. government's chief responsibility is to its own people, to protecting them — their security, liberty, and prosperity — not acting as a social avenger for whatever cause happens to dominate Washington's zeitgeist at the time.

Nor is Afghanistan likely to end up where it was before even after the U.S. departs. Two decades of invasive international contact have changed the country. And the Taliban is unlikely to be strong enough to replicate its prior monopoly on power nationally. It might even decide that treating urban and rural rule is in its interest.

Might leaving Afghanistan without a strong, friendly government in control of the entire country result in terrorists overrunning America? Trump once noted that his staff said that "if we don't go there, they're going to be fighting over here." That fear assumes al-Qaeda and other groups would turn Afghanistan into a terrorist haven and target America.

But the Taliban is made up of insurgents, not terrorists, and it has no interest in again suffering the wrath of the U.S. by tolerating attacks from al-Qaeda or anyone else. Even today much of Afghanistan is relatively uncontrolled by either the Kabul government or America, and thus it presumably could act as a "terrorist haven."

As could many other areas on Earth. Given the world's size, trying to occupy every ungoverned or badly governed territory would be an impossible strategy. Off-shore counter-terrorism operations, in conjunction with other similarly minded states — in this case India, Pakistan, and even China and Russia share America's anti-terrorism objectives — is the better practice.

More important, terrorism is not tied to geography. The 9/11 plot was conceived, planned, prepared, and carried out almost entirely outside of Afghanistan. The man labeled by the 9/11 commission as the "principal architect" of that attack, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, rejected Osama bin Laden's entreaties to move to Afghanistan. Bin Laden later escaped to Pakistan, where he remained active until U.S. SEALs dropped in uninvited.

Finally, along with its strategy of killing or incapacitating its enemies, the U.S. should create fewer foes. Ending foreign bombings, occupations, and wars would help. America must stop making enemies faster than it kills them.

Afghanistan is a tragedy by any measure. The civil war has entered its fifth decade. Withdrawal creates "awful danger," complained *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius. Perhaps. But Washington's participation only spreads the pain and loss to Americans. The U.S. spent much

treasure and sacrificed many lives in a heroic effort to transform Afghanistan into a stable modern state. That campaign failed. Now it is the time to focus on Americans' needs.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.