

# Why America Lost the War in Afghanistan

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## A Requiem Essay

**America lost the war in Afghanistan. All the blood and treasure expended was - in the end - largely for naught. I understand why many who fought there might feel differently. It is terribly difficult to walk away from the massive sunk costs. The assertion that US efforts were in vain is a hateful idea to those who lost comrades-in-arms or were horribly scarred physically or psychologically. Tragically, the same was true of those in the US Armed Forces who battled bravely in Vietnam. The national warfighting strategy adopted in Southwest Asia by the Bush Administration clearly failed, leaving his successors with the ultimate recurring foreign policy disaster. Everyone involved is the worse for it, especially the Afghans who supported the US and its allies for more than 20 years. In this special issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief* on multilateralism Afghanistan is also a recurring topic as America's lost war is also a lost battle for the international community and multilateral collaboration.**

The nation possesses one of the largest and best-funded militaries in the world. US troops are well trained and disciplined. US general officers are well educated and dedicated to task under constitutionally mandated civilian authority. Moreover, NATO stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their ally. So, how could America lose? Warfighting strategies are gauged through an analysis of three factors: suitability, feasibility, and acceptability. Hint: America's political and military leadership failed to appreciate all three. The US institutions of the Presidency, Congress and Pentagon should step up and shoulder the blame. I am concerned that they won't.

### AN ABSURD OBJECTIVE

The opening successful strategic raid into Afghanistan was conducted by the CIA-supported 5th Special Forces Group in the fledgling months of the conflict. They won battle after battle with the assistance of the US Air Force and by making allies of the Afghan Northern Alliance. America should have left following those victories, goal achieved. But she remained based on the wrong-headed notion that the transformation of a centuries-old war-torn tribal society into a semi-modern liberal democracy was possible. Change on such a fantastic scale would have required a multi-genera-

tional commitment that was unsustainable. Plus, any competent cultural anthropologist would have confirmed that first allegiances in such societies are to self & family, and village & tribe. The emotional abstraction of primary loyalty to the nation-state in the cultural context of Afghanistan was therefore always amorphous, lacking in both form and substance. The rapid success of the Taliban because of mass desertions within the Afghan Army and security forces are proof of this assertion. The progenitors of the conflict inside the Bush White House a generation ago confused deep pockets and a martial ideology with the development of an actual strategy that should have included an early exit ramp.

The US Armed Forces overmatched the Taliban in every category that mattered except patience and a capacity to suffer defeat after battlefield defeat without losing heart. They knew, from experience gathered over centuries of struggle against foreign invaders, that eventually the US and its allies would leave, even if it took decades. Simply put, the Taliban were - as were the North Vietnamese in another long war - willing to contemplate terrible losses over a prolonged period that successive White Houses of either political party never could.

**THE ORIGINAL SINS**

The primary goal of the war in Afghanistan was to end the Taliban’s support for Al Qaeda. That objective might have been accomplished early in the conflict. The Taliban was driven out of the national capital of Kabul more than two decades ago. But they survived to fight another day... and another... and another. Once the Taliban were removed from power, the senior US military officer on the ground should have then sent a no-nonsense message to the Taliban leadership stating that America would now withdraw, while stating unequivocally that if they again provided succor to Al Qaeda, America would loose an encore. The threat of departing, and the possibility of return, may have worked. The Taliban respect the exercise of raw power, and little else. We will never know in any case. It was never attempted. The White House of that era seems instead to have taken an absurd “we broke it... we bought it” position.

*America’s lost war is also a lost battle for multilateral collaboration*

It is critically important to point out that the national civil leadership of that day, President George W. Bush, advised by both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, made the ridiculous decision to remain in Kabul and attempt the insurmountable. This decision was reflective of both outrageous arrogance and incredible naïveté. But the decision to rush into war never should have been theirs in the first place. That authority, under the US Constitution, belongs only to Congress. The Framers’ intent was that such a critically important decision needed to be fully deliberative, to ensure right action, adequate funding, and the full support of the American people. Tragically, Congress has abrogated this authority to successive chief executives. The negative result - a failure of national institutions - should now be obvious to all.

Another point bears closer inspection: even the globe’s most powerful military has limitations, notwithstanding the much-abused American taxpayer. The Bush White House seems to have forgotten a key lesson from US domestic history: democracy cannot be bought. It must be earned by a country’s citizens. The price is always paid in blood. Afghans proved unwilling to fight for their own country. For this reason, perhaps more than any other, successive presidential administrations were foolhardy to remain in Afghanistan. This means that the various US strategies - mere variations on a common theme - were neither suitable to context nor feasible given the limitations regarding use of the military cudgel.

To add insult to injury, President Bush’s decision to fight two conflicts simultaneously - the war in Iraq - was always a fool’s errand on its face. Saddam Hussein had nothing whatever to do with the tragic events of 9-11, and the much-promised weapons of mass destruction were never found. Simply put, the Iraq War was a conflict that never needed to be fought, while having the net effect of draining resources away from the far more strategically important Afghan theater. Still, it may not have mattered. In terms of warfighting objectives, all the Taliban had to do was survive: a far easier goal to achieve than the wholesale transformation of a badly fragmented tribal society.

The US Armed Forces and NATO changed tactics, techniques, and strategies, and periodically swapped out senior generals over a two-decade period while attempting to accomplish an impossible mission. The American military’s senior-most leadership’s can-do attitude amplified by many billions of dollars failed to bring the Taliban to heel. The US, after all, was eventually fighting a war for “hearts and minds.” The Taliban killed anyone and everyone, women and children included, who might have, in time, developed a taste for freedom along with minds of their own. The original sins were committed by President George W. Bush and the Congress that continues to this day to fail in their duty - as demanded by the Framers - to fully deliberate the implications to the nation prior to a declaration of war.

**THE GENERALS’ PART**

It may be true that the nation’s most senior generals forcefully informed the Bush White House that remaining in Afghanistan was a bad idea. It may also be true that they informed the Bush White House that fighting two wars simultaneously was unwise. Finally, it may also be true that they informed the Bush White House that the national political objectives desired were unobtainable. If these aforementioned assumptions are proven false, then our nation’s most senior military leadership has much to answer for. It is a betrayal of the nation’s citizens in uniform - who fight and die in faraway lands - and their families, when the country’s elder flag officers fail to devise warfighting strategies that are within the realm of what is feasible. It was never acceptable for the country to remain engaged in what came to be known as America’s Forever War: an outrageously costly conflict lacking a foreseeable end point.

Some believe that the leadership of the US Armed Forces should be held to account for strategic failures in Afghanistan. According to retired US Army Special Forces Colonel Glenn Harned, “The U.S. military suffers from ‘Ludendorff Syndrome,’ after the German General who lost World War I. Like Ludendorff, we believe that tactically and operationally proficient formations can mitigate poor strategic plans, despite all the historical evidence that suggests that the op-



The US had already driven the Taliban out of Kabul, and out of power more than two decades ago. Regardless, then US president Bush jr. decided to maintain an American military presence in Afghanistan. Depicted here are former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, former President George W. Bush and former Vice President Dick Cheney from left to right (photo: Wikimedia / Cherie A. Thurlby)

posite is true.” In other words, dreadful decisions regarding war made by a sitting US President - advised by seemingly malleable senior generals - cannot be rectified by soldiers fighting and dying in strange lands.

#### MAJOR LIMITING FACTORS

The Geneva Conventions - largely a product of their experience in WWII - are the American military bible on what the US Armed Forces can and cannot do legally on the battlefield. The conventions reflect humanitarian values. The US Military followed them. The Taliban did not. America attempted to limit collateral casualties, especially during the Obama Administration. The Taliban did not. The Taliban knew an essential old-world war-fighting truth: the winner triumphs by embracing the idea that the ends justify the means. It is a brutal and bloody truth. The Taliban’s rag-tag light infantry wore no distinguishing uniform in violation. They used houses of worship to plan and implement their offensives in violation. They intentionally killed innocents via suicide attacks when it served their interests in violation, and more. Of course, the Taliban, being a sub-state actor, never signed the Geneva Conventions. The Taliban were resolutely ruthless in the prosecution of their war aims. America and her allies were not. The result is all too apparent.

Dexter Filkins in the *New Yorker* magazine makes a powerful case that humanitarian impulses might best be placed on hold until the fighting is done, and victory achieved. Filkins references Professor Samuel Moyn of Yale University suggesting that America’s warfighting methodology “...is so civilized that it has reduced our incentive to stop fighting.” Moyn, in his book *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Re-invented War*, goes on to theorize that, “The American way of war is more and more defined by a near complete immunity from harm for one side and unprecedented care when it comes to killing people on the other.” I would argue that his characterization of “near complete immunity from harm” seems so only from his classroom’s perspective in New Haven, Connecticut. However, this humanitarian focus may not be conducive to achieving victory.

In addition, and despite multiple denials over many years, the government of Pakistan sheltered the Taliban and Al Qaeda within its borders. That haven gave the Taliban ample opportunities to prosecute their kind of fight. In other words, the US Armed Forces largely respected, with some exceptions, Pakistan’s sovereign borders. Lawyers serve on warfighting staffs to advise commanders what is and what is not tolerated under the law. Therefore, America and its mil-

itary generally comply with what is legal. The Taliban clearly did not, nor did their covert supporters within Pakistan. America's limitations are joined at the hip to respect for law and humanitarian values. For the Taliban and Pakistan's government such concerns clearly mattered little or not at all. Was this a mistake - to have given so much importance to law and humanitarian values when the enemy did not? I can assure you that the Taliban see such concerns only as a weakness to be exploited.

### THE ARM-CHAIR GENERALS

I have read an avalanche of commentaries regarding the defeat in Afghanistan written by otherwise intelligent people who may have never heard a shot fired in anger; never worn a uniform; never carried a rifle; and never lost a friend or family member on a foreign battlefield. They make remarks such as, "Well, there was never a purely military solution to the conflict." This statement might be mistaken. Had America and its allies turned their full military might loose on the Taliban, I suspect that they would have been vanquished in short order. But that would have meant killing... lots of killing... the kind of killing that America has not engaged in since WWII. When the US and its allies last engaged in that sort of bloodletting in Europe - ending in 1945 - the result was approximately four million Germans dead or missing. The result was similar in the Asia-Pacific theater, heralded by the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two of the globe's most dynamic democracies rose from the ashes: both beneficiaries of American humanitarianism and economic largesse. However, those humane instincts came to the forefront only once victory was achieved. Is this a key lesson that the US needs to re-learn?

America's political leadership may have forgotten, if it ever knew, that war is death-dealing. War is supposed to be what happens when every other attempt to find accommodation with adversaries has failed. When that happens, the job of the nation's military is to carry out that mission - killing - in support of morally sound, ethically based, and hopefully feasible national objectives. Is America's political leadership no longer willing to countenance such bloodbaths to achieve victory? If not, future conflicts must - of necessity - be very carefully selected. Retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel and popular commentator Ralph Peters recently told me that we should "Either fight to win or stay home." His wisdom constitutes uncommon common sense. But is anyone listening?

### AN IGNOBLE END

Despite the hue and cry of the US Republican Party's right-wing war hawks, the Biden White House made a difficult but necessary call. He and his staff knew that there would be significant negative blow-back following the decision to depart Afghanistan. Also, and lest we forget, it was the Trump

Administration that negotiated the American withdrawal. It is therefore even more important to keep in mind that the key mistake was in staying. That original error - made by President Bush - could not be corrected. Remaining militarily engaged in Afghanistan for another 20 years would not have changed the outcome, but only delayed the inevitable. This lesson was supposed to have been learned once before in Vietnam. It seems that one titanic national catastrophe was not enough to drive the point home. America seems doomed to replicate some of the worst of its own history.

Could the implementation of the US withdrawal have been better handled? I believe so. But it was always going to be ugly, whenever, and however it was done. I was responsible for conducting the United Nations evacuation of Freetown in Sierra Leone, West Africa in May of 2000 ahead of invading Revolutionary United Front guerrillas. Trust me, there are no pretty evacuations. More to the point, defeat is a hideous orphan that nobody wants to take home.

Former US Ambassador to Kabul Karl Eikenberry's 2009 no-longer-secret cables to the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, were eerily prescient regarding the reasons behind the defeat. These same said cables were likely the reason why he was replaced by the Obama Administration. He apparently had the temerity to disagree with the then favored more-troops-is-better solution of that period. Eikenberry, himself a former US Army lieutenant general, was right. However, too much truth-telling and an appreciation for reality-on-the-ground is seldom career enhancing in times of armed conflict.

An entire generation in America grew to adulthood while the nation was at war in Afghanistan: a war that in no way was a response to an existential threat to the nation... a war that was far away... a war that touched only those who served there and their families... a war that was never declared by the American Congress in contravention of the US Constitution... a war that lacked resources because of the other fight in Iraq... a war with amorphous, unrealistic, and changing objectives... a war that resulted in the deaths of nearly 2,500 US Military with more than 20,000 wounded... a war that killed more than 1,000 of our NATO allies... a war that conservatively cost the American people over two trillion dollars (source: Brown University) - not to mention the surfeit of dead and wounded among the native populace that dwarves US and Coalition losses running into the many tens of thousands: an ignoble end indeed.

### CONCLUSION

Serious and deep introspection is required on the part of America's civil and military leaders. My maternal grandfather told me many years ago, "The fish stinks from the head down." So, it does. The Bush White House selected national



**The comparison between the US' involvement in Vietnam and Afghanistan is commonly made. Both missions saw Washington invest considerable funds, military force, and time, only to be disappointed by the end result. Depicted are Marines assisting the Department of State with a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) in Afghanistan (photo: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla)**

warfighting objectives in Afghanistan that were grossly unrealistic. The US Congress continues to abrogate its Constitutionally mandated duty to deliberate fully the implications of a declaration of war - with all the terrible accountability that entails - leaving a critically important responsibility to successive chief executives, who have not done well by it. Finally, the nation's corps of flag officers needs to conduct an in-depth review of their role in this all-too-Greek of tragedies. There is plenty of blame to go around. But beyond the fully expected political finger-pointing and chest-beating, some clear-eyed rationality is required. The moral courage must be found to squarely face the mistakes made, and then take appropriate corrective action to ensure that this sort of debacle never happens again.

One final point - in case you missed it - the US Military does not have the luxury of choosing their adversaries. That selection belongs to the national civilian leadership that made wrong and rushed choices in the case of Afghanistan. America must fight future wars in ways that are suitable to the context, feasible given understood limitations, and acceptable to the nation. Albert Einstein is credited with the remark that when addressing any problem "One usually spends 10% of their time thinking about the issues and 90%

trying to fix them." Einstein rightly suggests that those ratios be reversed. This is especially true regarding the political decision to engage in a foreign conflict. The stakes could not be higher. Once again, America won all the battles and still lost the war. A senior US soldier that I respect, and who prefers to remain anonymous, told me on this subject that, "The problem ultimately is us."

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