

# When You're Wounded and Left on Afghanistan's Plains

by George Friedman - August 19, 2021

I was shocked by what happened in Afghanistan in the past week or so. Not because I didn't expect it – President Joe Biden had in fact announced that the military would leave – but because people seemed to expect the withdrawal to be somehow orderly. The Taliban and the United States had fought a war for 20 years. The U.S. was leaving in defeat. The Taliban rapidly retook control, capturing those who collaborated with the enemy with an apparent joy that the war was over and victory was theirs. I was shocked that people didn't understand that this is what defeat looks like.

Also shocking was America's decision to go to war in the graveyard of empires, as were the decisions of successive presidents to stay there for two decades. Wars are not gestures. Staying in a war is the most significant decision a leader can make, and losing is a terrible outcome.

The war began before the dead and wounded on 9/11 were counted. It is remarkable that anyone 25 or younger is too young to remember. The rest of us remember that day. It was the Pearl Harbor of our time, an attack by an enemy that we did not think had the cunning to carry out such an attack. The attack, well organized and brilliantly conceived, was executed by men who were willing to calmly perform in the face of certain death. That sort of will was utterly alien to our own sense of duty, and it raised the question of how to stop people who attack like this. Such men, if they plan as carefully as they planned 9/11, could mount more unanticipated attacks.

I know many who claim they were not terrified by 9/11. They are lying to themselves. The nation as a whole was terrified, and those who actually weren't were out of touch with reality. The worst part was that we didn't really know what al-Qaida was, or how many more cells it had living among us. We feared that the next attack might be far worse, using chemical or nuclear weapons. If 9/11 could happen, then anything could happen.

This is how the war in Afghanistan began: in a wave of terror that gripped the country. I remember going to a meeting the day the airlines started flying again, sitting and watching my fellow passengers. They, like me, were planning what they might do if someone rose and headed for the cockpit. In those early days, we were all living lives that could not be sustained. We all wanted to do something. Since we are Americans, we went to meetings.

The people demanded action from the president, who, rightly or wrongly, had been blamed for failing to protect the country. So he did the only thing anyone could think of: He tried to capture Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaida, who was believed to be in Afghanistan. The U.S. knew a lot about Afghanistan, having worked with the mujahedeen to defeat the Soviets. It picked up bin Laden's tracks and sent in CIA operatives who had been part of the war against the Soviets, some special operations forces, and a few Marines far away from the action. There was no plan for a war, only a raid to get him, dead or alive.

The operation was never going to work. Bin Laden's intelligence network was better than Washington's. Warned of the operations against him, he escaped into Pakistan at Tora Bora. That told me two things. The first was that the Pakistani ISI, its intelligence service, was prepared to provide sanctuary to bin Laden. And that told me that a significant part of the Pakistani government would be prepared to influence events in Afghanistan, particularly since the geography of the Pashtun people spilled over the Afghan-Pakistani border. The United States had allied with the Pakistanis to create the mujahedeen to defeat the Soviets. Now that group, still linked to Pakistan, was moving against the United States. Whether the Pakistanis lied to the United States or drifted into opposition to the United States, Washington's only potential ally, and a critical one at that, was not going to provide its full support.

The second thing it told me was that the U.S., having failed in its primary mission of capturing bin Laden, was not going to do the logical thing and move the fight elsewhere, but would follow its rule book of "nation building." It worked in Germany and Japan after World War II, the leaders thought, so it would work in Afghanistan too.

When the U.S. goes off on one of these moral reform missions and fails, the logic is to leave. When it leaves, it looks like the United States was defeated – because the United States was defeated. Leaving after losing bin Laden's trail would have been logical, but then people would be demanding to know how the president lost him, as if presidents are more than onlookers in a covert war. Still, putting the distance of time between the failure at Tora Bora and leaving, the action was transformed from a manhunt into a war of transformation and redemption – of the Afghans.

The media has condemned Biden for his supposed incompetence. Implicit in that is that there was another way to handle ending the war. The thing is, there is no competent way to end a really stupid war. One day you just end it. Ideally, the president makes a rout look like victory. Talking heads like me might marvel at how incompetent he is, without saying how we would have done it differently. In the end, the only way to have avoided the final fiasco was to continue the war. Once it was clear we were leaving, the Taliban were going to open an all-out offensive. What else would they do?

The entire national strategy was each president keeping the war going so the next president had to bite the bullet. After 20 years, the bullet was bitten, and the end looked the only way it could. The chaos of the end was hard-wired into the system. We all believe we could have done better.

The amazing thing is that having made Afghanistan as hard as possible for the Russians, we didn't grasp that Afghanistan is not a place to devastate and nation-build. The Taliban believe in what they believe and are prepared to die for it. They do not have our moral values, not because they don't know them, but because they have contempt for them. And beating them on their own turf won't happen. They live there. They are not going anywhere, not in 20 years or 100. We can cite the fate of women or those who worked for us, but we lost the war, and we don't get a vote.

Rudyard Kipling would have had fun with American policymakers and their critics. He wrote a basic truth about Afghanistan: "When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains, and the women come out to cut up what remains, jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains and go to your gawd like a soldier."

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