



LOSING AFGHANISTAN TOGETHER



Text

A Collective
American
Defeat and a
Call to Civic
Action

Commentary

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Executive Summary: A Call for Introspection

We failed to achieve our main strategic objective in Afghanistan: to permanently prevent international terrorists from using Afghan soil. We have abdicated to a Taliban insurgency we repeatedly vowed to defeat. With our hasty flight, we have launched Afghanistan from a state of insurgency to a state of nationwide chaos. Over the next few years, we are likely to see that chaos spread beyond Afghanistan's borders.

But for now, most Americans remain ambivalent about Afghanistan. This major strategic defeat is being treated like a mild distraction. It has not evoked the crisis of conscience generated by our defeat in Vietnam. Disinterest in losing a war is probably a uniquely American luxury. But disinterest will not protect Americans forever. If we fail to learn from our strategic defeat in Afghanistan, the next loss might hit closer to home.

Blaming any or all of the recent American presidents for this defeat is an easy but counterproductive way to avoid useful introspection. No one person or small group of people lost this war: We all lost this war. With very few exceptions, we lost it together with our failure to pay attention or to stay consistently engaged in a way that would force meaningful policy change.

With a few exceptions, our professional officers and staffs, and our nongovernmental analysts, failed to consistently speak truth to power. We, collectively, failed to force senior policymakers to face the reality that Afghanistan was never going to be won in any traditional sense of the term. We failed to convince them to accept the fact that we were going to have to stay indefinitely, or leave and accept the consequences.

Most of us found ways to get by, do our jobs, and to express mild, palatable, but (given the outcome) ultimately irrelevant opinions on Afghanistan war policy. I include myself in this collective failure to help influence meaningful policy change. Passively allowing our servicepeople to be put in harm's way for two decades, and allowing our policymakers to string along a series of false premises and promises to meet their own short-term agendas, is a collective failure of American citizenship.

Fixing this requires Americans to refocus on international affairs and to hold policymakers to account. Policymakers must find a way to build a constituency for foreign policy and to set more realistic expectations for war. Most wars take many years to resolve. Some, like the 70+ year war in Korea, require us to keep troops in place for decades. In those cases—and arguably, in Afghanistan—firmly not losing is better than fumbling about and then quitting.

Losing Afghanistan Together

“The U.S. has power...but do we have staying power?”
- Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr., on Afghanistan, June 26, 2002

It is 2021 and we just lost a war. In 2017 I had a simple if not terribly new or imaginative plan to prevent this outcome. Given my strictly limited ability to change the course of world events, I wrote an op-ed. I encouraged then-President Trump to commit to an indefinite small-footprint operation in Afghanistan. Here's an excerpt:

If President Trump wants to avoid the errors of previous administrations, he should plainly state what has become ground truth. The United States will stay in Afghanistan indefinitely because leaving all but guarantees state collapse, which will most likely reset the conditions that allowed for 9/11.

It was a fairly bold article, and one that I might even be proud of if I had seen it through to publication. But I didn't try to push past the first round of edits. I had no confidence that my words would have impact on either the president or any other Americans. I didn't want to risk posing such a contentious policy. I thought it might even close off access to some policymakers, putting my other work at risk. So, I chose reticence over moral courage.

I'm under no illusion my words would have changed the outcome of the war. But my failure occurred in sequel and parallel with thousands of similar failings in the analytic community, in the military officer corps, and on policy staffs. My apathy fit in nicely with the broader American apathy towards our war in Afghanistan.

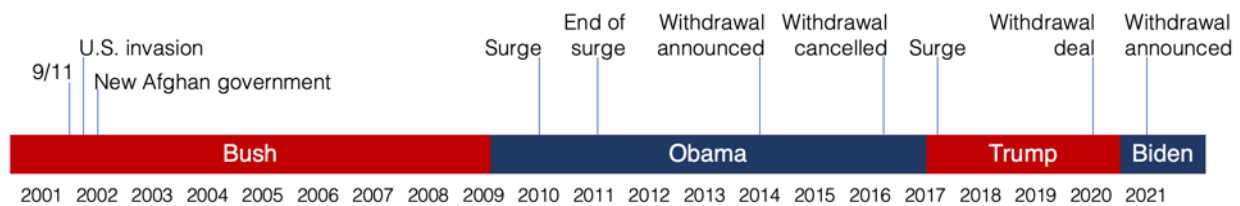
We just lost a war; all of us. We did so despite the tremendous sacrifices made by our servicepeople and our dedicated government civilians. Every little failure to pay attention, to ask intelligent questions, to spend even a bit of time to learn about Afghanistan, or to speak up thoughtfully and honestly, contributed to our collective defeat. Our presidents are culpable and they provide us with easy targets for retroactive blame. But it takes a village to lose a war.

If we're going to avoid this tragic outcome again, we all need to reassess our actions and nonactions over the past two decades. This article is intended to help jumpstart a much needed and unvarnished American self-examination.

In the first section I review presidential flip-flopping on Afghanistan. Next I address U.S. military, policy staff, and public failures on Afghanistan. I conclude with recommendations to generate the kind of reengagement we'll need to prevent another, and perhaps more damaging, strategic defeat.

Our Presidents and Afghanistan

Current blame for the defeat in Afghanistan is being laid at the feet of America's presidents. At least three successive U.S. presidents have declared a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan: Barack Obama in 2014, Donald Trump in 2020, and Joseph Biden in 2021. It looks like Biden's decision will stick. By the end of August, having been morally defeated by lightly-armed insurgents, the NATO alliance that faced down the Soviet Union will be reduced to circling its few remaining wagons in Kabul. The 650 U.S. troops securing the embassy presumably will entertain themselves by betting on the timing of their evacuation.



These decisions to withdraw from Afghanistan have been called disastrous, an “own goal,” a preventable catastrophe, and just strategically [illogical](#). It is easy to criticize both the decisions and the men who made them. All three presidents—Obama, Trump, and Biden—had world-class intelligence reporting and advisors on call. But ultimately, they appeared to draw their policy choices from the gut rather than from a clear ideological grand strategy or set of evidence-informed priorities. All three shifted over time from supporting the war to opposing it and then trying to withdraw American troops. The cumulative end result of all of their decisions is strategic defeat.

President Obama 2009-2016

Obama entered his presidency [declaring](#) that Afghanistan was “a war that we have to win.” Then throughout his presidency, Obama clearly signaled to the Taliban that Afghanistan was not a war that the United States would have to win. He proposed a counterinsurgency strategy to defeat the Taliban and to stabilize Afghanistan's weak democracy. But while he poured tremendous energy into choosing the best strategy, Obama soured on his own plan when he perceived that General Stanley McChrystal and his staff were railroading him into a bigger commitment than he had envisioned. It didn't help matters when that same military staff got drunk and personally [insulted](#) then-Vice President Biden in front of a reporter.



In 2009, Obama announced the timed drawdown of his military surge at the same time he announced the surge. This was counterproductive and tactically unsound. It is not wise to tell adversaries you're going to start to quit on a specified date if you want to break their will to fight. Colleagues in Afghanistan reported to us that the surge withdrawal announcement shook the already limited confidence of the Afghan military.

In 2014, Obama announced full military [withdrawal](#) from Afghanistan would occur at the end of 2016. A year later, in 2015, he [cancelled](#) his planned withdrawal. Given his waffling and his perfunctory strategy, it is hard to [believe](#) that Obama [really](#) wanted Americans to fight the good war in Afghanistan any more than he wanted them to remain in Iraq.

President Trump 2011-2020

Trump's withdrawal proclamations also look more like uncertain, gut-instinct hip shots than a coherent strategy. Many analysts assumed he was simply trying to reflect what he perceived to be the national zeitgeist. If that was the case, then he was misreading polls that suggested fairly consistent public [ambivalence](#) over the war in Afghanistan.

From [2011](#) through 2017, Trump argued that Afghanistan was unwinnable and that leaving was the right move. Then, in 2017, during the announcement of his new U.S. South Asia [Strategy](#), Trump [argued](#) that a hasty withdrawal would be disastrous and unacceptable. In a speech he almost certainly did not write, he also stated that the United States would shift from a time-based to a more gradual, conditions-based withdrawal, and (perhaps ad-libbed) that "...in the end, we will win." He then sent more than 3,000 troops to reinforce the Afghanistan mission.



Less than three years later, Trump cut a spurious peace [deal](#) with the Taliban—a deal that amounted to a signed declaration of American defeat—and pursued a [hasty](#) withdrawal knowing that the consequences almost certainly would be disastrous. In May 2020, he [hinted](#) that he might withdraw all U.S. troops in November, just before the 2020 presidential election, backed off that thought, drew down more troops through early 2021, and then passed along an [untenable](#) security situation to Biden.

President Biden 2002-2021

Biden has been straightforward about his [distaste](#) for the war in Afghanistan since the late [2000s](#). He reportedly argued for a drawdown while serving as Obama's Vice

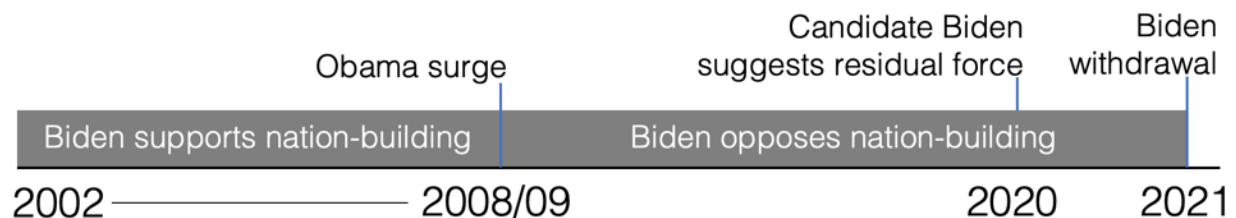
President. In a 2020 political campaign [interview](#), he bluntly stated that he would not feel any responsibility for the plight of the people of Afghanistan if the Taliban took over and abused them:

Margaret Brennan: But then don't you bear some responsibility for the outcome if the Taliban ends up back in control and women end up losing the[ir] rights?

Biden: No I don't.

In September 2020, he [suggested](#) that the United States would keep a small residual counterterror force in Afghanistan indefinitely. In April he [announced](#) the full withdrawal. In July 2021, Biden [stated](#) that we never intended to nation build in Afghanistan, and that all our missions there were complete.

But his 2009-2021 positions are remarkably different from the ones he took while chairing a June 2002 Senate [hearing](#) entitled, *Afghanistan: Building Stability, Avoiding Chaos*. In his opening remarks, then-Senator Biden called President George Bush's reference to the post-World War II Marshall Plan for Afghanistan "particularly apt." He argued for an enduring security and development plan for Afghanistan, challenging the Bush administration to come up with its own long-term strategy. Failing to presage the irony of the moment, he stated "The U.S. has power—but do we have staying power?"



In 2008, Biden was still on board with nation building in Afghanistan. That year he [co-sponsored](#) the Afghan Freedom Support and Security Act, calling for a range of non-military funding and actions to aid the development of Afghan democracy. In his 2021 reversal, President Biden answered Senator Biden's 2002 question—do we have staying power?—with an unequivocal *no*.

Credit for Losing Where Credit is Due

How did each of these men come to give up on America's mission to support Afghanistan's foundering democracy, the same democracy that the United States and its Western allies had created after plunging Afghanistan into ungoverned chaos in 2001? This is arguably the most important question for future generations of Americans if they seek to learn from this strategic failure.

In practice, American presidents are ultimately responsible for American foreign policies. Each of the post-9/11 presidents, including George W. Bush, will have to live with the consequences of the 2021 withdrawal. Each will share in taking blame or,

depending on perceptions, bask in the glory of rescuing the United States from Afghanistan. Each policy decision is, and will continue to be personalized in the historical record. But personalization gives each of these men too much credit.

They reached these wavering and ultimately self-defeating decisions—to support, to reinforce, to draw down, and to quit—in great part because we failed them. By we, I mean American military officers, the American policy community, and the American public. I include myself in all three categories.

Afghanistan and Malaise in the U.S. Officer Corps

From 2009-2021 I observed and supported Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan policymaking and operations. Government sponsors paid me and my colleagues to help military and political leaders think through their campaign assessment processes and contribute to strategy debates. In Kabul, in Baghdad, in Amman, in Europe, across American military bases, and from Washington, D.C., I supported the NATO staff and U.S. military units, interviewed insurgent commanders, analyzed special operations, and engaged with policy staffs and policymakers. I witnessed profound cultural changes in the U.S. military beginning in 2009.

I engaged with hundreds of our military officers from all services as they rotated in and out of Afghanistan for years on end. Many of them lived in remote outposts in blazing heat or bitter cold, under constant threat from Taliban mortars, rockets, snipers, and improvised explosive devices. They spent years away from their families. They risked their lives, lost people close to them, incurred post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, and sometimes came home blinded, burned, missing limbs, or otherwise disfigured. Many even had to worry about their own Afghan partners turning on them. Whether or not they supported staying in Afghanistan (many adamantly did not), the way in which their war ended will almost certainly play on them for the rest of their lives.



Cultural Shift

Even while these dedicated professionals made sacrifices most of us can only remotely imagine, the cultures of their respective military services changed. Sometime between the fading first-round mess in Iraq (2003-2008) and the looming second-round mess in Afghanistan (2009-2021), I observed a normative shift in U.S. military culture. Warning signs of what I can only describe as malaise started to emerge early in 2009. A longstanding U.S. military standard—that non-commissioned and commissioned officers express moral courage and, when appropriate, speak truth to power—had partly devolved into a sour mix of aggressive passivity and, too often, dissembling. This shift was particularly evident in the officer corps.

Professional officers continued to ask all the right questions about the war in Afghanistan: How long will we have to stay, and why? What are the root causes of the insurgency? What is the best way to succeed? But while they listened thoughtfully to the answers, in many cases their responses revealed hopelessness about Afghanistan itself, and even more about the chances of sustaining public and presidential interest in staying.

For the first time in my then 20-year professional career, I heard military officers openly use the terms, “that’s too difficult” and “it can’t be done.” Prior to 9/11, and even through the first years of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, any military officer who used those phrases would have been ostracized. By 2009 both terms were in common and accepted use by experienced and well-respected majors, colonels, and generals.

Not Speaking Truth to Power

I observed that increasing numbers of military officers were loath to recommend military options that senior leaders—and particularly senior policy staffs and the President—might not want to hear. I had heard and seen lying and false reporting firsthand in Iraq and in the Beltway while serving as an intelligence officer from 2003-2007. But at least from my perspective, outright lies had been exceptions in a community of generally straight-shooting military professionals.

By 2009, the post-9/11 dissembling from some at the top gradually oozed its way down to the middle ranks. In 2009 I was surprised to learn of a respected mid-level officer rewriting a facts-driven report to avoid making policymakers uncomfortable. In the early 2010s, a colleague [witnessed](#) a general in Kabul changing the ugly curves on a chart to make the trends in violence look less demoralizing. In 2015, the senior intelligence officer at U.S. Central Command [allegedly](#) altered negative reporting on the fight against the Islamic State, apparently to avoid sending the Obama Administration bad news. Events like these became less shocking over time.

Losing One Year at a Time

The best example of this newfound (or perhaps post-Vietnam War era recurrent) military reticence to speak truth to power was the phenomenon of the one-year-at-a-time war in Afghanistan. With only a few exceptions, generals in charge of the war would recognize that presidents had no interest in staying in Afghanistan for the 50 years or more it might take to achieve an enduring peace. If your stomach flipped reading that last sentence, you understand their hesitation.



Policymakers wanted quick success, so every year in Afghanistan became the most critical year in the war. Building this stutter-step narrative laid bare a few practical truths. Some generals were open about the facts that the Afghan government was corrupt and weak and that the armed forces were a long way off from being able to stand on their own. But too often they used these facts to [describe](#) a war that was [tough](#), [but](#) generally [winnable](#). They would dangle a light at the end of a rather short tunnel, apparently in the hope that sitting presidents would hang on for just a bit longer rather than quit outright.

This Faustian bargain—trading away the frank necessity for a very-long-term, no-certain-ending policy in exchange for one more year of American commitment, one more year to stave off post-withdrawal chaos—played out again and again.

Petraeus Doesn't Rock Afghanistan

Arguably, this trend started with [former](#) “[rock-star](#)” [General](#) David [Petraeus](#). Petraeus was the master of counterinsurgency policy messaging in the 2000s. When his turn came to take the helm in Kabul in 2010, he tried to reprise his Iraq performance.

During my trips to Kabul, Petraeus' outer-circle staff poked fun at him behind his back for repeating the Iraq veterans' mantra, a phrase I have also used to the point of retrospective embarrassment: “When we were in Iraq...” Meaning, I'm going to cut-and-paste my Iraq experience to fix Afghanistan, or Syria, or the Philippines, et al. In [this](#) August 2010 interview on Afghanistan, given from his headquarters in Kabul, Petraeus referred to his experience in Iraq eight times (“...This is the same as what happened in Iraq...,” etc.). But the cut-and-paste trick didn't work in Afghanistan.



Petraeus and Obama at the NATO Summit, 2010
Photo [credit](#)

In the same 2010 Kabul [interview](#), Petraeus stated his plan would allow NATO to hand control of Afghanistan to the Afghan government and security forces “over the course of the next year.” Muddying the waters in another [interview](#), he let slip that winning in Afghanistan would be a “long-term proposition.” As he did in Iraq, he stated that the rise in violence was a good sign that the [Afghans](#) were taking the fight to the enemy, and that they were moving towards transition. It is not clear if he believed this narrative. If he did, he experienced a very lonely understanding of the situation.

None of the officers or civilians I worked with on Afghanistan during this period had any hope that the so-called [Inteqal](#), or joint Afghan-NATO transition plan, would play out as advertised.

Gaslighting in Broad Daylight

While the one-more-year narrative was deceptive, it was also *transparently* inaccurate. Neither Petraeus, nor any other officer could stop anyone with even modest curiosity from piecing together the need for a very-long-term commitment.

In fact, NATO governments—including the U.S. Government—[were paying hundreds](#) of [analysts like](#) me to [catalogue and critique the many risks and failings](#) of [the campaign](#) for the [general public](#). Many government leaders found a way to be honest and transparent with the facts, paying and encouraging others to speak openly on their behalf. [Thousands and thousands](#) of [pages](#) of [privately](#) and publicly funded analyses and evidence contradicting viability of the one-more-year military narrative were readily available to anyone with a laptop or even a decent mobile phone.

Therefore, when the Washington Post published the so-called [Afghanistan Papers](#) in 2019, [analysts](#) shared a moment of communal (if somewhat bitter) laughter. Apparently the Post’s editors were hoping for a [Pentagon Papers](#) event. They wanted to reveal a high-level cover up over the true and terrible nature of the war in Afghanistan. Given the unkind facts and often brutally-honest, government-funded analyses on Afghanistan available to the general public from at least 2010, the Post might as well have revealed that ice is cold.

Why Did This Happen?

Given the ready availability of facts, why did so many serious, well-respected professional military officers feel the need to gaslight policy staffs, presidents, and the American public? Why did they repeat the fallacy that we could safely draw down forces in a year, or even five years? Why didn't they just acknowledge the near certainty that the United States was going to have to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely to avoid chaos, or leave and accept the chaos that would follow? Why did so many other good, professional officers stay quiet—another phenomenon I observed countless times over a decade—when they had opportunities to speak up and help change policy?



I can't claim to understand the causal basis for these individual choices. Some officers may really have believed that we could decisively win the war and safely withdraw in a short period of time. But it appeared most of these officers were trying to make the best out of a bad situation, to find compromises with mercurial policymakers to help stave off defeat. In many cases, officers were told to "shut up and color," or toe the party line, and did so out of a sense of professional duty. But in retrospect, neither gaslighting nor reticence made things better. I argue that the unwillingness of many (again, not all) officers to speak unvarnished truth to power about the very-long-term nature of this fight contributed to our attenuated strategic defeat in Afghanistan.

Many policy leaders and staff members should rethink their roles as well.

Afghanistan and Our Policy Staffs

From what I was able to observe, working on Afghanistan policy at the Pentagon, State Department, or White House, was rarely fun or rewarding. American government civilians who gave up a few years or a decade or more of their lives from 2009 to 2021—or even from 2001 through 2021—to help improve Afghanistan mostly did so in windowless rooms under the relentless glow of fluorescent lights. Often they rotated in and out of Kabul or small villages in the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan, sharing the same deprivations and dangers as their military colleagues. For their troubles, these civilians got to own a small part of what will arguably be the most significant American military defeat since the Vietnam War. There wasn't much glory to go around. But the level of overall commitment by these staff members was remarkable.

Like some of their peers in the military, some civilians plainly argued that the United States should leave. [Some](#) quietly stood their ground behind closed doors. Others were [blunt](#) about the need for an indefinite commitment, even if they weren't sanguine about our prospects. But, as in the military officer corps, too many professional and political staff members fell into the trap of bargaining for one more year of commitment, one year at a time. They helped set false expectations for short term success that, when dashed, fed the cascading cycle of war weariness.

Mind-Guarding

From 2009 through 2021 I observed the same creeping reluctance to speak truth to power in parts of the civil service and from some political appointees I observed in the military officer corps. Some civilians actively mind-guarded their senior policymakers, keeping the harshest realities from reaching the most important levels of discourse. It wasn't just the generals who were gaslighting the presidents.

I heard some civilians respond with “that's too difficult” and “it can't be done” to even modestly risky strategic recommendations. But a more revealing phrase also emerged in these higher-level policy discussions with civilian staffs: “They won't want to hear that.” In other words, policy recommendations and even some factual reports on Afghanistan (and also on Iraq, Syria, et al.) that didn't fit the preconceived notions or political needs of the most senior leaders were likely to be rebuffed or sidetracked by the staffs.

In one discussion with a senior policymaker, I was asked to provide advice on improving the campaign to defeat the Islamic State. I replied that a successful campaign would take many years and that it would have to help address [root cause](#) issues that fed extremism. The policymaker replied, “No, that's not what I mean, nobody wants to hear that. I mean tactically, right now.” I could not help to convince that person to think beyond the most surface-level issues. I didn't bother to follow up.

Making Difficult Words Go Away

In a separate discussion, a group of otherwise thoughtful, professional, mid-level policy staffers told an assembled group of experts that the term *root causes* was outdated. In other words, we would not discuss the underlying social, economic, and cultural factors that tend to set conditions for and drive insurgencies for decades. Talking about root causes implied a very-long-term challenge, rather than the quick policy win staffers had been told to achieve.

The term *insurgency* was also informally blacklisted across the U.S. government, along with *counterinsurgency* and its dirty little pseudo-acronym, *COIN*. If we weren't fighting an insurgency in Afghanistan, then perhaps dreary historical counterinsurgency [trends](#)—many years of war with often inconclusive endings—might not apply.

But by [every relevant definition](#), the war we were fighting in Afghanistan was a counterinsurgency war. Generally, counterinsurgents need to address [root causes](#) to succeed. Policy staffs were torpedoing phrases and terms they thought their bosses didn't want to hear, creating an atmosphere of unreality in most of the meetings I attended on Afghanistan, and also on Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic State.

Beltway analysts like me fell into this habit as well. After a few years of bruising rebuffs by policymakers and their staffs, we started using *irregular warfare* when we really meant *counterinsurgency* so we would have a slightly better chance of having someone read our work. To some extent we all gaslighted one another to avoid giving perceived offense to senior policymakers.

Spinning Our Way to Failure

Many officials, including some who have selflessly dedicated their professional lives to helping Afghanistan and the Afghan people, spun the war [narrative](#) with almost hyperbolic enthusiasm while quietly and unconvincingly expressing their doubts and counternarratives. It is all too easy to find [examples](#) of administration officials dangling promises of short-term, absolute success in Afghanistan. Promising success that was knowingly unachievable became a cultural norm on our policy staffs.

Broadly, these culture shifts in the civil and political workforces in the U.S. Government had insidious effects on Afghanistan policy. Civilian reluctance to receive best military advice fed the declining interest in moral risk taking in the military officer corps. Military officers working on policy staffs were particularly subject to psychological containment.

And too many discussions on Afghanistan policy options *started with* constraints and restraints. In other words, before anyone could propose what might be the best and most realistic policy, a list of can't-dos, must-dos, and won't-dos were laid out. This approach to policymaking stifled honesty and effectiveness.

These cultural shifts in the military officer corps and amongst civilian policy experts were affected by, and probably in turn affected, public interest in and perceptions of the war in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and the American Public

David Brooks is particularly adept at identifying and describing broad shifts in American culture. This is a section from his mid-July 2021 [commentary](#), “The American Identity Crisis”:

For most of the past century, human dignity had a friend — the United States of America. We are a deeply flawed and error-prone nation, like any other, but America helped defeat fascism and communism and helped set the context for European peace, Asian prosperity and the spread of democracy. Then came Iraq and Afghanistan, and America lost faith in itself and its global role... On the left, many now reject the idea that America can be or is a global champion of democracy, and they find phrases like “the indispensable nation” or the “last best hope of the earth” ridiculous. On the right the wall-building caucus has given up on the idea that the rest of the world is even worth engaging.

Surely the Vietnam War, the lack of purpose at the end of the Cold War, and many other factors contributed to this phenomenon. And it's always dangerous to attribute broad sentiment to all Americans. Phrases like “the American people feel...” or “the American people believe...” are too often used like cheap ammunition in Sophist policy pitches; they are not to be taken at face value. It will be many years before sociologists and historians are able to better understand the nature and causes of the cultural shifts that accompanied the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. But I still think Brooks is spot on.



A Dominant Disinterest

American presidents are individuals with human agency. Sometimes they buck popular trends and select risky policies that might hurt them in the next election. But it seems unlikely that Obama, Trump, or Biden would have chosen to quit Afghanistan if a notable majority of Americans visibly and consistently supported a long-term strategy.

It also seems unlikely that Obama and Trump would have bothered to flip-flop if a notable majority visibly and consistently demanded a withdrawal. To some unmeasurable but undoubtedly powerful effect, broad American disinterest in

Afghanistan left Obama and Trump to flip-flop, and Biden to act on his current feelings rather than on fact-driven [strategic](#) planning.

Military officers and civilian policy staffers working on Afghanistan policy didn't grow comfortable with terms like "that's too difficult," "it can't be done," and "they won't want to hear that" in a vacuum. There are no cultural islands in the real world. Military and government organizational cultures are always interacting with popular culture, feeding reciprocal signals that change perceptions and cultural norms. Achieving malaise has been a group effort.

Malaise, moral defeat, and strategic defeat are also intrinsically linked, reciprocal phenomena. From 2001 through 2021, malaise and detachment set in as prospects for clear victory in Afghanistan and Iraq (2003-) faded. Repeated one-year-at-a-time failures in Afghanistan, framed by military officers' and policy leaders' misleading going-in expectations, got everyone accustomed to losing.

For these and many other reasons, foreign policy became increasingly uninteresting and many Americans detached from debates over war policy. So, when Obama, Trump, and Biden announced their respective withdrawals, reflexive outcries mattered less and less.

Our Broken Will to Fight

Whether or not it is safe to say, "all Americans feel" anything, it is safe to say that collective American will to fight on Afghanistan was broken. The Taliban may deserve some credit for playing the long game with American public opinion. It appears they defeated us primarily by waiting for us to defeat ourselves. And as Brooks argues, we defeated ourselves in part by giving up on our imperfect, rarely-well-articulated, too-often-cynical, but longstanding commitment to international idealism.

More Difficult Words: Ideals and Moral Obligation

Ideals and *moral obligation* are subjective terms that must be applied independently by every American. I and an unknown number of other Americans *believe* that we, collectively, had a moral obligation to prevent the Taliban from retaking Afghanistan. The time to reckon with that obligation is now passed. We are left to consider our moral obligations to other countries that desperately count on our promised support. And, with the most powerful military on earth at our collective fingertips, we are left to reconsider our broader moral obligations towards our practice of war.

It is quite a luxury not to care all that much about losing a war. It is also shockingly irresponsible. We, collectively, attacked and destroyed the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001. We, collectively, voted for presidents who carried our commitment to the Afghan people forward for nearly two decades. We, collectively, had the power

to change our presidents' behavior with the strength and persistence of our voices and with our votes. And with our collective disinterest, we let them lose on our behalf.

Whether or not this was a failure of moral obligation to the Afghans, it was a failure of American citizenship. We'd better start paying attention to our wars and consistently holding our presidents to account. If we don't, we may wind up losing a war that won't go away with the flick of a finger on a mobile phone screen.

What Can Citizens Do?

It is difficult to encourage Americans to pay more attention to foreign policy without resorting to what are now generally considered platitudes: When our nation commits to organized acts of violence like the war in Afghanistan, we should all stay well informed, ask hard questions of our elected representatives, and constructively, legally, and persistently express our informed opinions.

It is too late to help change the course of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. But it is not too late to help Afghans. [No One Left Behind](#) accepts donations to help Afghan interpreters and their families. [Save the Children](#) accepts donations to help Afghan children improve their opportunities for a safe, healthy, happy, and productive life. [Many other options](#) are available, **all** require some basic vetting on your part.

I am not formally affiliated with any organization that receives individual donations to assist Afghans in need.

We have clearly demonstrated our ability to break malaise and engage in debates over domestic policy. We owe it to our veterans, to our partners overseas, and to each other to apply that same energy to foreign affairs. It is incumbent upon each of us to rethink our responsibilities and reapply ourselves to share in the burdens of war, whether that means pushing back or contributing. Our leaders also need to improve.

Three Responsibilities for American Policymakers

Defeat in Afghanistan suggests that American political and military leaders in our executive branch of government can take at least three important steps towards building a better informed and engaged citizenry: (1) set more realistic expectations for warfare; (2) reconnect national strategies to genuine intent; and (3) build a foreign policy constituency.

(1) Set Realistic Expectations for War

We need to radically change our expectations for war to avoid losing another one.

Sometimes conventional wars like World War II, the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or the more recent Azerbaijan-Armenia war give a false impression that war is a brief, straightforward affair with a finite ending. The Vietnam War (1960-1975) and the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, shocked our collective

understanding of war and left American policymakers floundering. Two culture-shaping doctrines emerged to help right the ship.

Most Americans are probably unaware of the Weinberger Doctrine and the Powell Doctrine. [Together](#), they set in place the idea that wars should always be fought for “vital national interests,” that our commitment should be wholehearted and focused on winning; that we should have a clear ending and end-date in mind; and that the American people should support the war.

But this surreal and unachievable set of standards set an equally surreal and unrealistic American expectation for war. Even short conventional wars are often just high-intensity flareups of much longer conflicts. Military victory of any kind is rarely absolute. In a great many cases, root cause issues take generations to sufficiently address.

False expectations for war have hamstrung U.S. military operations for decades. Many Americans, including our presidents, fail to put the 20-year effort in Afghanistan into the context of similar wars. They have not successfully compared Afghanistan with the tens of multi-decade wars fought just over the past century (including U.S. counterinsurgency support operations in Colombia, the Philippines, et al.). Perhaps there is a better explanation of war for the American people:

War is uncertain and dynamic, and therefore inherently unpredictable.

War always, without exception, carries the risk of failure.

Most wars last for many years, and complex wars often last many decades.

Our national interests that guide our path to war are continuously debated, not fixed.

In most wars, we won't have a clear pathway to victory.

Some wars worth fighting will have no clear ending and may require indefinite commitment.

We may not withdraw our military forces for quite some time...

...but even if we can't win outright, it may be good not to lose.

(2) Reconnect National Strategies to Genuine Intent

Presently, there are nearly twenty U.S. national security [strategies](#) and a range of defense and regional strategies available online. National strategies are intended to help focus collective American effort towards achieving objectives like defeating the Soviet Union, defending global democracies, achieving regional security, and

protecting human rights. Honest, well written strategies can be useful communication tools for building foreign policy constituencies (see below).

While no public strategy can ever be completely straightforward—it is not helpful to reveal all plans, or admit all failings in a document designed to help achieve national security objectives—the first strategies in the late-1980s were generally direct and were applied with at least some general consistency. Recent strategies do not appear to reflect the genuine intent of our presidents.

While the 2010 to 2021 strategies clearly describe our support for Afghan democracy, our intent to stave off the Taliban, and to prevent al-Qa’ida from residing on Afghan soil, our presidents have not been committed to these policies. Obama did not commit to applying his [2010](#) or [2015](#) strategies. Trump’s many comments and his 2020 actions contradicted his [written](#) 2017 strategic commitment to Afghanistan. In March 2021, one month before announcing the withdrawal, Biden published an interim strategy in which he [pledged](#) to end the war in Afghanistan “responsibly” and to “ensure Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven” for international terrorists.

Staffs, not presidents, write our nation’s strategies. Presidents sign strategies. Some may take a red pen to a draft; each pays relatively more or less attention to the content. Processes differ by administration. But for Afghanistan strategies, one of two dynamics has been at play since 2010: either the strategy accurately matched presidential intent and we failed, or the strategy did not truly align with the president’s intent.

Given the observable gaps between the strategies and the respective presidents’ words and deeds, it seems there was a misalignment. This is, arguably, a disingenuous way to run a war. It raises hopes even as we plan to dash them. It sets false expectations that can undermine popular support. It is also counterproductive because it presents our actions to the world—and to our global adversaries—as self-defeating. Presidents and their staffs owe the United States, our partners, and our allies a more direct approach.

(3) Build a Foreign Policy Constituency

Disinterest in the Afghanistan war was debilitating, but it was not a unique phenomenon in post-Vietnam America. This is a quote from President Ronald Reagan’s 1987 [National Security Strategy](#). I added emphasis to the last line.

Public opinion polls consistently find that two-thirds of the American electorate normally take no interest in foreign policy. Moreover, only a bare majority today believes that this country needs to play an active part in world affairs-and that majority is eroding. **There is no natural domestic constituency for foreign policy-we must build one.**

Some [recent polls](#) showed that a majority of Americans may be enthusiastic about activist foreign policies. But a 2019 Center for American Progress [report](#) suggests that

Americans are also confused by contemporary foreign policy issues. The research team found that President Trump's America First message resonated at least in part because many Americans could not understand the *why* behind interventions in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, et al.

Setting realistic expectations for war and publishing strategies that align with real-world intentions and plans will go a long way towards alleviating this confusion. Our leaders—military officers, policy staffs, and presidents—need to clearly explain rationales for commitment to war. They need to give Americans a good, defensible reason to believe in and rally behind their decisions to put their children, parents, partners, and friends in harm's way.

Stay Engaged to Help Prevent Our Next Failure

As of July 2021, the United States has troops deployed to, or conducting combat training missions in *at least* Syria, Iraq, the Philippines, Jordan, Kuwait, Kenya, Honduras, Djibouti, Burundi, Ukraine, [Colombia](#), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Mozambique, the United Arab Emirates, and Kosovo. This does not include the tens of thousands of troops stationed overseas in Japan, South Korea, Germany, Turkey, Bahrain, Cuba, the United Kingdom, et al.

Thousands of our deployed troops are in harm's way. Our servicepeople in Colombia were [reportedly](#) on board a base that was attacked with a car bomb on June 15th, 2021. Our servicepeople and government civilians in Iraq and [Syria](#) come under [intermittent](#) rocket fire. [Advisors](#) in [Ukraine](#) live within range of thousands of Russian missiles and aircraft, and live under [threat](#) of a Russian invasion. Our [special](#) operators are reportedly [advising](#) Philippines armed forces in combat operations against the Islamic State, including during major battles like the one in [Marawi City](#) in 2017.

This month, the United States appears to be ready to [commit](#) to ending its combat support mission in Iraq. While this may turn out to be a distinction without a difference—troops may stay on as advisors—it is redolent of other presidential announcements preceding untimely withdrawal in Afghanistan, and also in [Iraq](#) in (at least) 2003, 2008, and 2010.

American public and policy focus on Iraq has ebbed and flowed in series with focus on Afghanistan. We paid some attention to Afghanistan from 2001-2002. Then we paid some attention to Iraq from 2003-2009. Then we paid some attention to Afghanistan from 2009-2014. Then we paid some attention to Iraq from 2014-2017. Then we paid some attention to Afghanistan from 2017-2021, preceding our withdrawal and defeat. We will hit our 20 year mark in Iraq in 2023. It is logical to assume that Iraq might be next on the full withdrawal agenda.

As of late July 2021, we have about 2,500 troops in Iraq. My analysis shows that their presence demonstrates [American commitment](#) and helps keep the Iraqi government

and armed forces relatively stable. These Americans are in harm's way, but we have minimized risk and sharply [reduced](#) casualties. We have found a way to operate effectively with a low profile. I encourage readers to learn more about our ongoing Iraq commitment and express their informed opinions, even if they disagree with my conclusions and recommended policy actions.

All Americans are free to agree or disagree with the rationales behind these military deployments. But I argue that it is the profound and unremitting civic obligation of all Americans to spend time reading and watching reliable sources of information, and to express thoughtful, informed opinions about them to elected and appointed officials.

It is the sacred duty of our military officers, staffs, and appointed officials to speak plainly and without moral reservation to the presidents who will decide the fate of our soldiers, and of the people they are tasked to protect.

Our presidents have a moral obligation to help the American people, our military officers, and our government officials understand why we fight, or advise, or support, whether it is to coldly pursue their interpretations of our best interests; to idealistically defend democracies; or to simply preserve a favorable and responsible status quo.

Appendix: For the Record, My 2017 Draft Op-Ed on Afghanistan

President Trump is currently thinking through his options on Afghanistan. If the [Washington Post](#) is correct, the new plan calls for about 3,000 additional troops and relaxed limits on combat engagement. That would be a good start to help push back the [Taliban resurgence](#) that failed to catch any Afghanistan-watchers by [surprise](#). Allowing the U.S. military to determine the right force level and force mix in Afghanistan is another good step. In 2009 the Obama administration fell into the trap of [negotiating](#) a palatable round number. Satisficing troop levels is unwise and typically [unsuccessful](#). The same warning applies to strategy and timelines: lack of clarity and half-measures [portend failure](#). This is where President Trump should focus his attention.

Any increase in troops for Afghanistan should support a clearly articulated strategy for Afghanistan. Ideally, this would mirror the [legacy U.S. strategy](#) for the Middle East, emphasizing long-term democratic stability. But the timeline should be purposefully indeterminate. If President Trump wants to avoid the [errors](#) of previous administrations, he should plainly state what has become ground truth. The U.S. will stay in Afghanistan indefinitely because leaving all but guarantees state collapse, which would most likely reset the conditions that allowed for 9/11. The U.S. will stay in Afghanistan because staying gives the U.S. a crucial strategic foothold in one of the most dangerous areas of the world. There will be no time- or conditions-driven withdrawal for decades.

This will be a painful pill to swallow for many Americans who hoped that Mr. Trump's presidency would auger the end of overseas entanglements. But disappointment and new expectations can and should be managed. There is no need to send tens of thousands of troops back to Afghanistan, or to "do COIN," if the U.S. commits in spirit to supporting the Afghan government and its security forces indefinitely. Strategic commitment can go a long way towards steadying allies, just as [wavering support](#) can undermine will to fight. Inversely, strategic commitment should undermine Taliban will to fight. Ideally a rededicated commitment to Afghanistan would lead to a negotiated settlement and the end of the Taliban insurgency.

But even this ideal outcome will not allow for a U.S. withdrawal. While the Taliban may recede, the Islamic State has emerged and may absorb hardline Taliban who refuse to accept a negotiated settlement. Other groups, including al-Qa'ida, persist. Chaos along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border presents an enduring threat to regional and global security and stability. There is no sure end state to the current conflict other than withdrawal, its incumbent guarantee of defeat, and then a likely down-the-road requirement to go back in to Afghanistan under even less ideal conditions (see: Iraq).

In the meantime, there is no magic formula for troop numbers. The much-vaunted 20:1,000 troop-to-population ratio popularized in the 2006 [counterinsurgency manual](#) is practicably specious. While [reviewing](#) and supporting the International Security

Assistance Force (ISAF) assessment cells from 2010 through 2013 I watched researchers from many offices and agencies apply every possible formula to troop-to-population ratios, troop-to-insurgent ratios, and troop-to-task ratios. None of these was ever proved valid, and results were often politicized to the point that they undermined the very decisions they were meant to inform.

There is no need for President Trump to get caught up in the troop number debate. The nation should be able to count on James N. Mattis, Joseph F. Dunford, and H.R. McMaster—all veterans of the campaign in Afghanistan, and all expert strategists—to determine appropriate troop levels to achieve national strategic objectives. Instead, the president should focus on validating strategy, strengthening the resolve of our allies, and sending a clear message to America's enemies in South Asia that we are there to stay.