

The Best Way to Honor Dead Soldiers Is Not to Create More

By [Natalie Dowzicky](#)

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Removing U.S. troops from Afghanistan by early 2021, or by Christmas as President Trump has [exclaimed](#), does not mean that the United States lost the war in Afghanistan. This wouldn't be an admission of defeat, rather an acknowledgement that we have exhausted all possible tactical avenues with forces on the ground.

Furthermore, the United States can no longer use the “[sunk cost](#)” excuse to perpetuate an unclear mission [described](#) in the Washington Post's [Afghanistan Papers](#) by Douglas Lute, a three-star Army General, when he [said](#), “we didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking.”

For years, proponents of staying in Afghanistan have been justifying their position in part by saying our men and women would have “died in vain” if we leave, that it would “dishonor” or “cheapen” their sacrifice if Washington pulled up stakes and called it quits militarily after 19 years. Just recently, former Army general and national security adviser H.R. McMaster reiterated that very sentiment on “[60 Minutes](#),” referring to American peace talks with the Taliban and the president's directives to leave.

When wars drag on, it is not uncommon for leaders and military personnel to cite lives lost and resources spent to argue against withdrawal. Some 50 years ago, [this rationale](#) pervaded arguments for staying the course in the Vietnam War, which lasted a decade.

In 2015, Gen. David Petraeus and Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution said “the United States must stay in Afghanistan to ensure that past sacrifices were not in vain and to ‘protect our [prior] investment.’” By investment they mean lives lost *and* over \$1 trillion already spent at the time.

In 2017, President Trump argued, “Our nation must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives.” Shortly after this statement, he increased troop numbers in the region by 10,000 as part of his “[mini-surge](#).”

Just this year, war hawk Sen. Lindsey Graham issued the following [statement](#): “We have fought too hard and sacrificed too much to allow our security gains to slip away.” And on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, former national security adviser Susan Rice said that Trump is cheapening “the sacrifice of the 3,500 American and NATO service members who perished in Afghanistan” by potentially leaving Afghanistan to its own devices.

Using the 2,352 American soldiers who died during this conflict as a reason to send even more soldiers into harms' way is not the best way to honor the ones who have fallen.

“I believe the ‘sunk cost’ view actually dishonors their sacrifice, because it converts them into a kind of political-emotional ‘currency’ that is used to gain argumentative advantage,” argued journalist and author Thomas E. Ricks [in response](#) to O’Hanlon and Petraeus in 2015.

John Glaser of the Cato Institute, in a [policy analysis](#) titled, “Overcoming Inertia: Why It’s Time to End the War in Afghanistan,” wrote that “a decision about where and whether to devote resources should be based on whether the investment will add future value, not on sunk costs.” Glaser goes on to argue that policymakers instead must be agile when it comes to ditching costly operations that no longer promise feasible conclusions.

This is not meant to be a discussion of whether or not soldiers have died in vain, which has been [argued](#) and [addressed](#) in myriad forums.

Rather, this is an opportunity to argue for not extending our losses and to reckon with the fact that there are better ways to honor service members than continuing to send them into doomed missions across the globe.

Especially since our very own officials have already acknowledged, according to the Afghanistan Papers, that we “clearly failed in Afghanistan.”

Honoring those who have fallen is not tied to strategic outcomes, and if the United States really cares about the soldiers lost during the war in Afghanistan, there is plenty to be done on the home front to pay homage to their sacrifices.

The military is reporting a 30 percent jump in active duty service member suicides since the beginning of the year (veteran suicides are [pegged at 17 a day](#), according to the Department of Veterans Affairs). While no specific reasons were cited, officials would not rule out COVID-related conditions, or the strain of [multiple deployments](#). In fact, senior officials told the Associated Press that they are considering shortening the combat rotations — something they probably should have done earlier in this 19-year war.

Meanwhile, veterans *have* been [hit](#) particularly hard by COVID-19. As the pandemic continues to spread, this puts a strain on the already tenuous availability of mental health programs and the VA’s ominous backlog for appointments and disability claims.

But even without COVID, after nearly 20 years of war, the VA is still [overrun](#) and [plagued](#) with inefficiencies, and in the worst cases, [fraud](#) and [corruption](#). Some [9 million veterans](#) are enrolled in VA healthcare programs today, with more than [1.2 million](#) veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan accessing the system since 2001. Efforts to modernize and improve both care and efficiency for veterans have struggled as more strain has been put on the system in the last two decades.

There is not a one-size fits all approach and lawmakers and advocates have [clashed over how to fix it](#). On one side, there are [demands](#) not only for more funding for programs, but a more comprehensive and targeted plan for where those funds are going. Many veterans live outside big cities, so there is a push to build more accessible facilities and clinics in rural areas. There are needs for caregivers, mental health, and specialized care for women veterans. Others say that despite budget increases every year, the bureaucracy has failed to adjust in order to accommodate current veterans’ needs and is riddled with red tape and inefficiencies. They have promoted extending veterans’ access to private healthcare, but that too, [has been problematic](#).

Both sides have complained about politicization, vacancies at the top, and not being able to fire top officials who fail. These issues are long standing and seemingly never resolved before each new administration, with their own crop of appointees, takes over. Congress, too, has revolving priorities, and despite real champions for veterans in their ranks, always seems willing to kick the can down the road.

As a country, we must come to grips with the fact that strategic efforts in Afghanistan stopped being worthwhile long ago, and turn to the immediate healthcare needs of our recent veteran population, which has now reached [2.7 million men and women](#).

If the United States doesn't see this as a noble cause to tackle, it's time for a reassessment of our own priorities. On the battlefield we preach "leave no man behind," but it seems that at home we don't hold ourselves to the same standard. Instead of talking about "sunk costs," continuing meaningless store discounts and special nights at the ballpark, the best way America can honor its veterans and fallen soldiers is to create fewer of them, and when they come home, do our best to take care of them.

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Featured image: A soldier presenting an American flag to the relative of a deceased veteran at the Tahoma National Cemetery, Washington, May 28, 2011. (The Old Major/ Shutterstock)

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