

Leaving Bagram Airbase: The Day the US Imperium Turned Tail

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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From the Bagram Airbase they left, leaving behind a piece of the New York World Trade Centre that collapsed with such graphic horror on September 11, 2001. As with previous occupiers and occupants, the powers that had made this venue a residence of war operations were cutting their losses and running.

Over the years, the base, originally built by the Soviets in the 1950s and known to US personnel as Bagram Airfield, became a loud statement of occupation, able to hold up to 10,000 troops and sprawling across 30 square miles. It was also replete with cholesterol hardening fast food restaurants (Pizza Hut, Burger King), jewellers, car dealerships and such amenities as swimming pools, spas and cinemas.

Bagram also had room to accommodate the unfortunates captured in that anomalously worded “War on Terror”: detainees, many al-Qaeda suspects, faced torture in what came to be known as Afghanistan’s Guantanamo. US forces [relinquished control](#) of the prison, now sporting the benign name of Parwan Detention Facility, to Afghan security forces in December 2014. Ill-treatment of prisoners continued.

After two decades, it seemed that the US armed forces could not wait to leave. The departure date, scheduled for September, was being brought forward, though President Joe Biden denied that anything had changed.

“A safe, orderly drawdown,” [stated](#) the Pentagon press secretary John Kirby, “enables us to maintain an ongoing diplomatic presence, support the Afghan people and the government, and prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists that threatens our homeland.”

There was little fuss in the way things unfolded on July 1 – at least initially. The *New York Times* [observed](#) that the final withdrawal “occurred with little fanfare and no public ceremony, and in an atmosphere of grave concern over the Afghan security forces’ ability to hold off Taliban advances across the country.”

The signal for chaos and mayhem had been given. Darwaish Raufi, Afghanistan’s district

administrator for Bagram, found himself confronting an ominous spectacle. There had been confusion and uncertainty about the logistics of the operation. With the base unsecured, around 100 looters capitalised, seizing gas canisters and laptops. “They were stopped and some have been arrested and the rest have been cleared from the base.” The district governor was left puzzled. “American soldiers should share information with the Afghan government, especially local officials, but they didn’t let me know.”

US military spokesman Colonel Sonny Leggett [disagreed](#).

“All handovers of Resolute Support bases and facilities, to include Bagram Airfield, have been closely coordinated, both with senior leaders from the government and with our Afghan partners in the security forces, including leadership of the locally based units respective to each base.”

Across the country, the Taliban are smacking their lips in anticipation of further gains. “We consider this withdrawal a positive step,” [said](#) Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid. “Afghans can get closer to stability and peace with the full withdrawal of foreign forces.” So far, the peace negotiations move at snail-like speed. The Taliban refuse to declare a ceasefire. Districts in the country have been falling with regularity to their forces. Demoralised Afghan soldiers have been leaving their posts, though this is justified on the basis of strategic soundness (urban centres need protection).

With a security vacuum gapingly prominent in parts of the country, regional militias have promised to mount resistance. “Having reached home,” Nishank Motwani, Deputy Director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation in Unit in Kabul [gloomily remarked](#), “Americans and allied forces will now watch what they fought so hard to build over 20 years burn down from afar and knowing that the Afghan men and women they fought with risk losing everything.”

Former UK chief of the defence staff Lord David Richards could hardly improve on that, telling the BBC that, “A country that we promised a huge amount to now faces ... almost certain civil war, with the likelihood that the Taliban will get back to where they were in 2001, occupying most of the major cities and the majority of the country.”

General Richard Dannant, formerly chief of the general staff, kept matters paternalistic; as with other civilising missions of imperial days past, [he wrote](#) of a task that had failed. “Taliban force of arms has prevailed, and the people of that country have been denied the chance to choose a better way of life.”

The Biden administration continues to offer its model of hollow assurance for an ally it has cut loose, accompanied by a [promise](#) to provide security assistance to the value of \$3 billion in 2022. The President’s [meeting](#) with President Ashraf Ghani and chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah on June 25 saw the recapitulation of unconvincing themes. All three “concurred on the need for unity among Afghan leaders in support of peace and stability”. Biden “reaffirmed the US commitment to fully support intra-Afghan negotiations.” Despite the departure of US troops, “the strong bilateral partnership will continue.”

In a State Department briefing on July 1, officials continued to patch up the façade of support. When asked by a journalist how the US could claim to be supporting the Afghan government “when we’re not going to be there”, department spokesperson Ned Price [was](#)

[prepared](#) with some casuistry: “we are withdrawing our military forces, as the President announced, but we intend to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul.” The country would not be abandoned; support would be undiminished.

At a White House press conference, Biden suggested how far down Afghanistan, and its fate, features in US policy circles. In a moment of frankness, he put a halt to questions on that doomed country and wished to “talk about happy things, man. I’m not going to answer any more questions on Afghanistan.” It was a matter of priorities. “It’s the holiday weekend. I’m going to celebrate it. There’s great things happening.” Just not in Afghanistan.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: This image shows aircraft of the Afghan Air Force during U.S. President Eisenhower’s visit in 1959. (Public Domain)

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