

# The Real Lesson of Afghanistan Is that Regime Change Does Not Work

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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*The trove of U.S. [“Lessons Learned”](#) documents on Afghanistan published by the Washington Post portrays, in excruciating detail, the anatomy of a failed policy, scandalously hidden from the public for 18 years. The [“Lessons Learned”](#) papers, however, are based on the premise that the U.S. and its allies will keep intervening militarily in other countries, and that they must therefore learn the lessons of Afghanistan to avoid making the same mistakes in future military occupations.*

This premise misses the obvious lesson that Washington insiders refuse to learn: the underlying fault is not in how the U.S. tries and fails to reconstruct societies destroyed by its “regime changes,” but in the fundamental illegitimacy of regime change itself. As former Nuremberg prosecutor Ben Ferencz [told NPR](#) just eight days after 9/11, “It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done. If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don’t approve of what has happened.”

The “Lessons Learned” documents reveal the persistent efforts of three administrations to hide their colossal failures behind a wall of propaganda in order to avoid admitting defeat and to keep [“muddling along,”](#) as General McChrystal has described it. In Afghanistan, muddling along has meant dropping [over 80,000](#) bombs and missiles, nearly all on people who had nothing to do with the crimes of September 11th, exactly as Ben Ferencz predicted.

How many people have been killed in Afghanistan is [contested](#) and essentially unknown. The UN has published minimum confirmed numbers of civilians killed since 2007, but as Fiona Frazer, the UN human rights chief in Kabul, [admitted to the BBC](#) in August 2019, “more civilians are killed or injured in Afghanistan due to armed conflict than anywhere else on Earth...(but) due to rigorous methods of verification, the published figures almost certainly do not reflect the true scale of harm.” The UN only counts civilian deaths in incidents where it has completed human rights investigations, and it has little or no access to the remote Taliban-held areas where most U.S. air strikes and “kill or capture” raids take place. So, as Fiona Frazer suggested, the UN’s published figures can be only a fraction of the true numbers of people killed.

It shouldn’t take 18 years for U.S. officials to publicly admit that there is no military solution to a murderous and unwinnable war for which the U.S. is politically and legally responsible. But the debacle in Afghanistan is only one case in a fundamentally flawed U.S. policy with worldwide consequences. New quasi-governments installed by U.S. “regime changes” in country after country have proven more corrupt, less legitimate and less able to control

their nation's territory than the ones the U.S. has destroyed, leaving their people mired in endless violence and chaos that no form of continued U.S. occupation can repair.

“Regime change” is a process of coercion designed to impose the political will of the U.S. government on countries around the world, violating their sovereignty and self-determination with an arsenal of military, economic and political weapons:

1. **Delegitimization.** The first step in targeting a country for regime change is to delegitimize its existing government in the eyes of U.S. and allied publics, with targeted propaganda or [“information warfare”](#) to demonize its president or prime minister. Painting foreign leaders as villains in a personalized Manichean drama psychologically prepares the American public for U.S. coercion to remove them from power. One lesson for those of us opposed to regime change operations is that we must challenge these campaigns at this first stage if we want to prevent their escalation. For example, [Russia](#) and [China](#) today both have strong defenses, including nuclear weapons, making a U.S. war with either of them predictably catastrophic, or even suicidal. So why is the U.S. stoking a [new Cold War](#) against them? Is the military-industrial complex threatening us with extinction only to justify record military budgets? Why is serious diplomacy to negotiate peaceful coexistence and disarmament “off the table,” when it should be an existential priority?
2. **Sanctions.** Using economic sanctions as a tool to force political change in other countries is **deadly and illegal**. Sanctions kill people by denying them food, medicine and other basic necessities. UN sanctions killed [hundreds of thousands](#) of Iraqis in the 1990s. Today, unilateral U.S. sanctions are killing [tens of thousands](#) in Iran and Venezuela. This is illegal under international law, and has been vigorously condemned by UN special rapporteurs. Professor Robert Pape's research shows that economic sanctions have only achieved political change in [4% of cases](#). So their main purpose in U.S. policy is to fuel deadly economic and humanitarian crises that can then serve as pretexts for other forms of U.S. intervention.
3. **Coups and proxy wars.** Coups and proxy wars have long been the weapons of choice when U.S. officials want to overthrow foreign governments. Recent U.S.-backed coups in Honduras, Ukraine and now Bolivia have removed elected governments and installed right-wing U.S.-backed regimes. The U.S. has relied more heavily on coups and proxy wars in the wake of its military disasters in Korea, Vietnam, and now Afghanistan and Iraq, to attempt regime change without the political liability of heavy U.S. military casualties. Under Obama's doctrine of covert and proxy war, the U.S. worked with [Qatari ground forces](#) in Libya, [Al Qaeda-linked groups](#) in Syria and [military leaders](#) in Honduras. But outsourcing regime change to local coup leaders and proxy forces adds even more uncertainty to the outcome, making proxy wars like the one in Syria predictably bloody, chaotic and intractable.
4. **Bombing campaigns.** U.S. bombing campaigns minimize U.S. casualties but wreak untold and uncounted death and destruction on both enemies and innocents. Like “regime change”, [“precision weapons”](#) is a euphemism designed to obscure the horror of war. Rob Hewson, the editor of the arms trade journal *Jane's Air-Launched Weapons*, told the AP during the “Shock and Awe” bombing of Iraq in 2003 that the accuracy of U.S. precision weapons was only 75-80%, meaning that thousands of bombs and missiles predictably missed their

targets and killed random civilians. As Rob Hewson said. "... you can't drop bombs and not kill people. There's a real dichotomy in all of this." After Mosul and Raqqa were destroyed in the U.S.-led anti-IS campaign that has dropped [over 100,000](#) bombs and missiles on Iraq and Syria since 2014, journalist Patrick Cockburn described Raqqa as "[bombed to oblivion,](#)" and revealed that Iraqi Kurdish intelligence reports had counted at least [40,000 civilians](#) killed in Mosul.

5. **Invasion and hostile military occupation.** The infamous "last resort" of full-scale war is predicated on the idea that, if nothing else works, the U.S.'s trillion-dollar military can surely get the job done. This dangerous presumption led the U.S. into military quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan despite its previous "lessons learned" in Vietnam, underlining the central unlearned lesson that war itself is a catastrophe. In Iraq, journalist Nir Rosen described the U.S. occupation force as "lost in Iraq...unable to wield any power except on the immediate street corner where it's located." Today, about 6,000 U.S. troops remain in Iraq, confined to their bases, under frequent [missile attack](#), while a new generation of [Iraqis rises up](#) to reclaim their country from the corrupt former exiles [the U.S. flew in](#) with its invasion forces 17 years ago.

Any responsible government Americans elect in 2020 must learn from the well-documented failure and catastrophic human cost of U.S. regime change efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Somalia, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, Venezuela, Iran and now Bolivia.

These "lessons learned" should lead to U.S. withdrawal from the countries we have wrecked, opening the way for the UN and other legitimate mediators to come in and help their people to form sovereign, independent governments and to resolve the intractable secondary conflicts that U.S. wars and covert operations have unleashed.

Secondly, the U.S. must conduct global diplomatic outreach to make peace with our enemies, end our illegal sanctions and threats, and reassure the people of the world that they need no longer fear and arm themselves against the threat of U.S. aggression. The most potent signals that we have really turned over a new leaf would be serious cuts in the U.S. military budget - we currently outspend the next seven or eight militaries combined, despite our endless military failures; a reduction in U.S. conventional forces and weapons to the level needed to meet our country's legitimate defense needs; and the closure of most of the hundreds of U.S. military bases on the territories of other nations, which amount to a global military occupation.

Maybe most vitally, the U.S. should reduce the threat of the most catastrophic of all wars, nuclear war, by finally complying with its obligations under the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty, which requires the U.S. and other nuclear-armed countries to move towards "full and complete nuclear disarmament."

In 2019, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists kept the hands of its Doomsday clock at two minutes to midnight, symbolizing that we are as close to self-destruction as we have ever been. Its [2019 statement](#) cited the double danger of climate change and nuclear war: "Humanity now faces two simultaneous existential threats, either of which would be cause for extreme concern and immediate attention." So it is a matter of survival for the U.S. to cooperate with the rest of the world to achieve major breakthroughs on both these fronts.

If this seems far-fetched or overly ambitious, that is a measure of how far we have strayed from the sanity, humanity and peaceful cooperation we will need to survive this century. A world in which war is normal and peace is out of reach is no more survivable or sustainable than a world where the atmosphere gets hotter every year. Permanently ending this entire U.S. policy of coercive regime change is therefore a political, moral and existential imperative.

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