

The True Meaning of the Afghan “Withdrawal”

Will the Nightmare of Saigon's Fall Return in Kabul?

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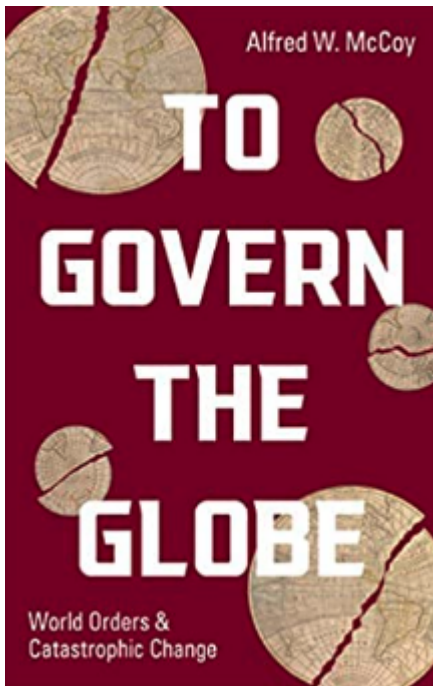
Many of us have had a recurring nightmare. You know the one. In a fog between sleeping and waking, you're trying desperately to escape from something awful, some looming threat, but you feel paralyzed. Then, with great relief, you suddenly wake up, covered in sweat. The next night, or the next week, though, that same dream returns.

For politicians of Joe Biden's generation that recurring nightmare was Saigon, 1975. Communist tanks ripping through the streets as friendly forces flee. Thousands of terrified Vietnamese allies pounding at the U.S. Embassy's gates. Helicopters plucking Americans and Vietnamese from rooftops and disgorging them on Navy ships. Sailors on those ships, now filled with refugees, shoving those million-dollar helicopters into the sea. The greatest power on Earth sent into the most dismal of defeats.

Back then, everyone in official Washington tried to avoid that nightmare. The White House had already negotiated a peace treaty with the North Vietnamese in 1973 to provide a “decent interval” between Washington's withdrawal and the fall of the South Vietnamese capital. As defeat loomed in April 1975, Congress refused to fund any more fighting. A first-term senator then, Biden himself [said](#), “The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese.” Yet it happened anyway. Within weeks, Saigon fell and some 135,000 Vietnamese fled, producing scenes of desperation seared into the conscience of a generation.

Now, as president, by ordering a five-month withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by this September 11th, Biden seems eager to avoid the return of an Afghan version of that very nightmare. Yet that “decent interval” between America's retreat and the Taliban's future triumph could well prove indecently short.

The Taliban's fighters have already [captured](#) much of the countryside, reducing control of the American-backed Afghan government in Kabul, the capital, to [less than a third](#) of all rural districts. Since February, those guerrillas have [threatened](#) the country's major provincial capitals — Kandahar, Kunduz, Helmand, and Baghlan — drawing the noose ever tighter around those key government bastions. In many provinces, as the *New York Times* [reported](#) recently, the police presence has already collapsed and the Afghan army seems close behind.



If such trends continue, the Taliban will soon be primed for an attack on Kabul, where U.S. airpower would prove nearly useless in street-to-street fighting. Unless the Afghan government were to surrender or somehow persuade the Taliban to share power, the fight for Kabul, whenever it finally occurs, could prove to be far bloodier than the fall of Saigon — a twenty-first-century nightmare of mass flight, devastating destruction, and horrific casualties.

With America's nearly 20-year pacification effort there poised at the brink of defeat, isn't it time to ask the question that everyone in official Washington seeks to avoid: How and why did Washington lose its longest war?

First, we need to get rid of the simplistic answer, left over from the Vietnam War, that the U.S. somehow didn't try hard enough. In South Vietnam, a 10-year war, 58,000 American dead, 254,000 South Vietnamese combat deaths, millions of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian civilian deaths, and a trillion dollars in expenditures seem sufficient in the "we tried" category. Similarly, in Afghanistan, almost 20 years of fighting, 2,442 American war dead, 69,000 Afghan troop losses, and [costs](#) of more than \$2.2 trillion should spare Washington from any charges of cutting and running.

The answer to that critical question lies instead at the juncture of global strategy and gritty local realities on the ground in the opium fields of Afghanistan. During the first two decades of what would actually be a 40-year involvement with that country, a precise alignment of the global and the local gave the U.S. two great victories — first, over the Soviet Union in 1989; then, over the Taliban, which governed much of the country in 2001.

During the nearly 20 years of U.S. occupation that followed, however, Washington mismanaged global, regional, and local politics in ways that doomed its pacification effort to certain defeat. As the countryside slipped out of its control and Taliban guerrillas multiplied after 2004, Washington tried everything — a trillion-dollar aid program, a 100,000 troop "surge," a multi-billion-dollar drug war — but none of it worked. Even now, in the midst of a retreat in defeat, official Washington has no clear idea why it ultimately lost this 40-year conflict.

Secret War (Drug War)

Just four years after the North Vietnamese army rolled into Saigon driving Soviet-made tanks and trucks, Washington decided to even the score by giving Moscow its own Vietnam in Afghanistan. When the Red Army occupied Kabul in December 1979, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, crafted a [grand strategy](#) for a CIA covert war that would inflict a humiliating defeat on the Soviet Union.

Building upon an old U.S. alliance with Pakistan, the CIA worked through that country's Inter Service Intelligence agency (ISI) to deliver millions, then billions of dollars in arms to Afghanistan's anti-Soviet guerrillas, known as the *mujahideen*, whose Islamic faith made them formidable fighters. As a master of geopolitics, Brzezinski forged a near-perfect strategic alignment among the U.S., Pakistan, and China for a surrogate conflict against the Soviets. Locked into a bitter rivalry with its neighbor India that erupted in periodic border wars, Pakistan was desperate to please Washington, particularly since, ominously enough, India had only recently tested its first nuclear bomb.

Throughout the long years of the Cold War, Washington was Pakistan's main ally, providing ample military aid and tilting its diplomacy to favor that country over India. To shelter beneath the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the Pakistanis were, in turn, willing to risk Moscow's ire by serving as the springboard for the CIA's secret war on the Red Army in Afghanistan.

Beneath that grand strategy, there was a grittier reality taking shape on the ground in that country. While the *mujahideen* commanders welcomed the CIA's arms shipments, they also needed funds to sustain their fighters and soon turned to poppy growing and opium trafficking for that. As Washington's secret war entered its sixth year, a *New York Times* correspondent travelling through southern Afghanistan [discovered](#) a proliferation of poppy fields that was transforming that arid terrain into the world's main source of illicit narcotics. "We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers," one rebel leader told the reporter.

In fact, caravans carrying CIA arms into Afghanistan often returned to Pakistan loaded with opium — sometimes, [reported](#) the *New York Times*, "with the assent of Pakistani or American intelligence officers who supported the resistance." During the decade of the CIA's secret war there, Afghanistan's annual opium harvest soared from a modest 100 tons to a massive 2,000 tons. To process the raw opium into heroin, illicit laboratories opened in the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands that, by 1984, supplied a staggering 60% of the U.S. market and 80% of the European one. Inside Pakistan, the number of heroin addicts [surged](#) from almost none at all in 1979 to nearly 1.5 million by 1985.

By 1988, there were an estimated 100 to 200 heroin refineries in the area around the Khyber Pass inside Pakistan operating under the purview of the ISI. Further south, an Islamist warlord named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the CIA's favored Afghan "asset," [controlled](#) several heroin refineries that processed much of the opium harvest from the country's southern provinces. In May 1990, as that secret war was ending, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that American officials had failed to investigate drug dealing by Hekmatyar and his protectors in Pakistan's ISI largely "because U.S. narcotics policy in Afghanistan has been subordinated to the war against Soviet influence there."

Charles Cogan, director of the CIA's Afghan operation, later [spoke](#) frankly about the

Agency's priorities. "We didn't really have the resources or the time to devote to an investigation of the drug trade," he told an interviewer. "I don't think that we need to apologize for this... There was fallout in term of drugs, yes. But the main objective was accomplished. The Soviets left Afghanistan."

There was also another kind of real fallout from that secret war, though Cogan didn't mention it. While it was hosting the CIA's covert operation, Pakistan played upon Washington's dependence and its absorption in its Cold War battle against the Soviets to develop ample fissionable material by 1987 for its own nuclear bomb and, a decade later, to carry out a successful nuclear test that [stunned](#) India and sent strategic shockwaves across South Asia.

Simultaneously, Pakistan was also turning Afghanistan into a virtual client state. For three years following the Soviet retreat in 1989, the CIA and Pakistan's ISI continued to collaborate in backing a bid by Hekmatyar to capture Kabul, providing him with enough firepower to shell the capital and [slaughter](#) some 50,000 of its residents. When that failed, from the millions of Afghan refugees inside their borders, the Pakistanis alone formed a new force that came to be called the Taliban — sound familiar? — and armed them to [seize](#) Kabul successfully in 1996.

The Invasion of Afghanistan

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, when Washington decided to invade Afghanistan, the same alignment of global strategy and gritty local realities assured it another stunning victory, this time over the Taliban who then ruled most of the country. Although its nuclear arms now lessened its dependence on Washington, Pakistan was still willing to serve as a springboard for the CIA's mobilization of Afghan regional warlords who, in combination with massive U.S. bombing, soon swept the Taliban out of power.

Although American air power readily smashed its armed forces — seemingly, then, beyond repair — that theocratic regime's real weakness lay in its gross mismanagement of the country's opium harvest. After taking power in 1996, the Taliban had first doubled the country's opium crop to an unprecedented [4,600 tons](#), sustaining the economy while providing 75% of the world's heroin. Four years later, however, the regime's ruling mullahs used their formidable coercive powers to make a bid for international recognition at the U.N. by slashing the country's opium harvest to a mere [185 tons](#). That decision would plunge millions of farmers into misery and, in the process, reduce the regime to a hollow shell that shattered with the first American bombs.

While the U.S. bombing campaign raged through October 2001, the CIA [shipped](#) \$70 million in bundled bills into Afghanistan to mobilize its old coalition of tribal warlords for the fight against the Taliban. President George W. Bush would later [celebrate](#) that expenditure as one of history's biggest "bargains."

Almost from the start of what became a 20-year American occupation, however, the once-perfect alignment of global and local factors started to break apart for Washington. Even as the Taliban retreated in chaos and consternation, those bargain-basement warlords captured the countryside and promptly presided over a revived opium harvest that [climbed](#) to 3,600 tons by 2003, or an extraordinary 62% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Four years later, the drug harvest would [reach](#) a staggering 8,200 tons — generating 53% of the country's GDP, 93% of the world's illicit heroin, and, above all, ample funds for a

revival of... yes, you guessed it, the Taliban's guerrilla army.

Stunned by the realization that its client regime in Kabul was losing control of the countryside to the once-again opium-funded Taliban, the Bush White House launched a \$7-billion drug war that soon [sank](#) into a cesspool of corruption and complex tribal politics. By 2009, the Taliban guerrillas were expanding so rapidly that the new Obama administration opted for a "surge" of 100,000 U.S. troops there.

By attacking the guerrillas but failing to eradicate the opium harvest that funded their deployment every spring, Obama's surge soon suffered a defeat foretold. Amid a rapid drawdown of those troops to meet the surge's use-by date of December 2014 (as Obama had promised), the Taliban [launched](#) the first of its annual fighting-season offensives that slowly wrested control of significant parts of the countryside from the Afghan military and police.

By 2017, the opium harvest had [climbed](#) to a new record of 9,000 tons, providing about [60% of the funding](#) for the Taliban's relentless advance. Recognizing the centrality of the drug trade in sustaining the insurgency, the U.S. command [dispatched](#) F-22 fighters and B-52 bombers to attack the Taliban's labs in the country's heroin heartland. In effect, it was deploying billion-dollar aircraft to destroy what turned out to be 10 mud huts, depriving the Taliban of just [\\$2,800](#) in tax revenues. To anyone paying attention, the absurd asymmetry of that operation revealed that the U.S. military was being decisively outmaneuvered and defeated by the grittiest of local Afghan realities.

At the same time, the geopolitical side of the Afghan equation was turning decisively against the American war effort. With Pakistan moving ever closer to China as a counterweight to its rival India and U.S.-China relations becoming hostile, Washington grew increasingly irritated with Islamabad. At a summit meeting in late 2017, President Trump and India's Prime Minister Modi [joined](#) with their Australian and Japanese counterparts to form "the Quad" (known more formally as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), an incipient alliance aimed at checking China's expansion that soon gained substance through joint naval [maneuvers](#) in the Indian Ocean.

Within weeks of that meeting, Trump would trash Washington's 60-year alliance with Pakistan with a single New Year's Day [tweet](#) claiming that country had repaid years of generous U.S. aid with "nothing but lies & deceit." Almost immediately, Washington announced suspension of its military aid to Pakistan until Islamabad took "decisive action" against the Taliban and its militant allies.

With Washington's delicate alignment of global and local forces now fatally misaligned, both Trump's capitulation at peace talks with the Taliban in 2020 and Biden's coming retreat in defeat were preordained. Without access to landlocked Afghanistan from Pakistan, U.S. surveillance drones and fighter-bombers now potentially face a 2,400-mile flight from the nearest bases in the Persian Gulf — too far for effective use of airpower to shape events on the ground (though America's commanders are [already searching desperately](#) for air bases in countries far nearer to Afghanistan to use).

Lessons of Defeat

Unlike a simple victory, this defeat offers layers of meaning for those with the patience to plumb its lessons. During a government investigation of what went wrong back in 2015,

Douglas Lute, an Army general who directed Afghan war policy for the Bush and Obama administrations, [observed](#): “We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan — we didn’t know what we were doing.” With American troops now shaking the dust of Afghanistan’s arid soil off their boots, future U.S. military operations in that part of the globe are likely to shift offshore as the Navy joins the rest of the Quad’s flotilla in a bid to check China’s advance in the Indian Ocean.

Beyond the closed circles of official Washington, this dismal outcome has more disturbing lessons. The many Afghans who believed in America’s democratic promises will join a growing line of abandoned allies, stretching back to the Vietnam era and including, more recently, Kurds, Iraqis, and Somalis, among others. Once the full costs of Washington’s withdrawal from Afghanistan become apparent, the debacle may, not surprisingly, discourage potential future allies from trusting Washington’s word or judgment.

Much as the fall of Saigon made the American people wary of such interventions for more than a decade, so a possible catastrophe in Kabul will likely (one might even say, hopefully) produce a long-term aversion in this country to such future interventions. Just as Saigon, 1975, became the nightmare Americans wished to avoid for at least a decade, so Kabul, 2022, could become an unsettling recurrence that only deepens an American crisis of confidence at home.

When the Red Army’s last tanks finally crossed the Friendship Bridge and left Afghanistan in February 1989, that defeat helped precipitate the complete collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its empire within a mere three years. The impact of the coming U.S. retreat in Afghanistan will undoubtedly be far less dramatic. Still, it will be deeply significant. Such a retreat after so many years, with the enemy if not at the gates, then closing in on them, is a clear sign that imperial Washington has reached the very limits of what even the most powerful military on earth can do.

Or put another way, there should be no mistake after those nearly 20 years in Afghanistan. Victory is no longer in the American bloodstream (a lesson that Vietnam somehow did not bring home), though drugs are. The loss of the ultimate drug war was a special kind of imperial disaster, giving withdrawal more than one meaning in 2021. So, it won’t be surprising if the departure from that country under such conditions is a signal to allies and enemies alike that Washington hasn’t a hope of ordering the world as it wishes anymore and that its once-formidable global hegemony is truly waning.

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