

(Un)Happy Anniversary! 17 Years of War (and More to Come)

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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We're already two years past the [crystal anniversary](#) and eight years short of the silver one, or at least we would be, had it been a wedding — and, after a fashion, perhaps it was. On October 7, 2001, George W. Bush [launched](#) the invasion — “liberation” was the word often used then — of Afghanistan. It was the start of the second [Afghan War](#) of the era, one that, all these years later, still shows no signs of ending. Though few realized it at the time, the American people married war. Permanent, [generational](#), [infinite](#) war is now embedded in the American way of life, while just about the only part of the government guaranteed ever more soaring dollars, no matter [what it does](#) with them, is the U.S. military.

This October 7th marked the 17th anniversary of that first of so many still-spreading conflicts. In league with various Afghan warlords, the U.S. military began moving into that country, while its Air Force launched a fierce campaign, dropping large numbers of precision munitions and [hundreds](#) of cluster bombs. Those were meant not just for al-Qaeda, the terror outfit that, the previous month, had dispatched its own [precision air force](#) — hijacked American commercial jets — to take out iconic buildings in New York and Washington, but the Taliban, a fundamentalist sect that then controlled most of the country. By early 2002, that movement had been ejected from its last provincial capital, while Osama bin Laden had fled into hiding in Pakistan. And so it began.

The 17th anniversary of that invasion passed in the heated aftermath of the Kavanaugh hearings, as the president was rallying his base by endlessly bashing the Democrats as an “[angry mob](#)” promoting “[mob rule](#).” So if you weren't then thinking about Afghanistan, don't blame yourself. You were in good company.

On October 8th, for instance, the front page of my hometown newspaper had headlines like “Court Showdown Invigorates G.O.P. in Crucial Races” and “20 Dead Upstate as Limo Crashes on Way to Party.” If you were old like me and still reading the paper version of the *New York Times*, you would have had to make your way to page seven to find out that such an anniversary had even occurred. There, a modest-sized [article](#), headlined “On 17th Anniversary of U.S. Invasion, 54 Are Killed Across Afghanistan,” began this way:

“Kabul, Afghanistan — At least 54 people have been killed across Afghanistan in the past 24 hours, according to a tally based on interviews with officials on Sunday — 17 years to the day [after] American forces invaded the country to topple the Taliban regime. The violence was a reminder that the war has only raged deadlier with time, taking a toll on both the Afghan security forces and the civilians caught in the crossfire...”

And that, really, was that. Little other mention anywhere and no follow-up. No significant commentary or major op-eds. No memorials or ceremonies. No thoughts from Congress. No acknowledgement from the White House.



Source: New Eastern Outlook

Yes, [3,546](#) American and NATO troops had died in those long years (including [seven](#) Americans so far in 2018). There have also been Afghan deaths aplenty, certainly [tens of thousands](#) of them in a country where significant numbers of people are regularly uprooted and [displaced](#) from their homes and lives. And 17 years later, the Taliban controls [more](#) of the country than at any moment since 2002; the U.S.-backed Afghan security forces are [reportedly](#) taking casualties that may, over the long run, prove unsustainable; provincial capitals have been briefly [seized](#) by insurgent forces; civilian deaths, especially of women and children, are at their [highest levels](#) in years (as are U.S. and Afghan [air strikes](#)); al-Qaeda has [grown](#) and spread across significant parts of the Middle East and Africa; a [bunch](#) of other terror outfits, including ISIS, are now in Afghanistan; and ISIS, like al-Qaeda (of which it was originally an offshoot), has also [franchised](#) itself globally.

In other words, 17 years later, what was once known as the Global War on Terror and is now a set of conflicts that no one here even bothers to name has only grown worse. Meanwhile, the military that American presidents repeatedly hailed as the [greatest fighting force](#) in history continues to battle fruitlessly across a vast swath of the planet. Afghanistan, of course, remains America's "[longest war](#)," as articles regularly [acknowledged](#) some years ago. These days, however, it has become so eternal that it has evidently outgrown the label "longest."

(Un)Happy Anniversary indeed!

Wedded to War

If you consider this the anniversary of a marriage made in hell, then you would also have to think of the war on terror that started in Afghanistan as having had a brood of demon children — the invasion of Iraq being the first of them — and by now possibly even [grandchildren](#). Meanwhile, the first actual American children born after the 9/11 attacks can

now [join](#) the U.S. military and go fight in... well, Afghanistan, where about [14,000](#) American military personnel, possibly [tens of thousands](#) of private contractors, and air power [galore](#) (as well as the CIA's [drones](#)) remain active indeed.

And keep in mind that Americans aren't the only people wedded to war in the twenty-first century. However, when it comes to the others I have in mind, it's not a matter of anniversaries ignored, but anniversaries that will never be. Let's start with a recent barely reported incident in Afghanistan. On October 5th, either the U.S. Air Force or the Afghan one that [has been](#) armed, trained, and supported by the U.S. military destroyed part of a "wedding procession" in Kandahar Province, [reportedly](#) killing four and wounding eight, including women and children. (By the way, on the day of the 17th anniversary of the war, an Afghan air strike reportedly killed [10 children](#).) We don't know — and probably never will — which air force was responsible, nor do we know if the bride or groom survived, no less whether they will marry and someday celebrate their 17th anniversary.

All we know and probably will ever know is that, in the melee that is still Afghanistan, the obliteration of that wedding procession was just one more scarcely noted, remarkably repetitive little nightmare to which Americans will pay no attention whatsoever. Admittedly, when directly asked by pollsters 17 years later, a near majority of them (49%) do think that U.S. goals still remain [unmet](#) in that country and, according to other recent polls, somewhere between [61% and 69%](#) of Americans would support the withdrawal of all U.S. forces there. That, however, is anything but a stunning figure given that, in 2011, a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll [indicated](#) that two-thirds of Americans believed the Afghan war "no longer worth fighting." Evidently it's now simply no longer worth giving a moment's thought to.

Essentially unnoticed here, the destruction of wedding parties by U.S. air power has, in fact, been a relative commonplace in these years of endless war across the Greater Middle East. The [first time](#) American air power obliterated a wedding in Afghanistan was in late December 2001. U.S. B-52 and B-1B bombers mistakenly took out much of a village in Paktia Province killing more than 100 civilians while wedding festivities were underway, an event barely noted in the American media. We do not know if the bride and groom survived. (Imagine, however, the non-stop media attention if a terrorist had attacked a wedding in this country and killed anyone, no less the bride or groom!)

The second incident we know of [took place](#) in Khost Province in Eastern Afghanistan in May 2002 while a wedding was underway and villagers were firing in the air, a form of celebration there. At least 10 people died and many more were wounded. The third occurred that July [in Oruzgan](#) Province when the U.S. Air Force dropped seven 2,000-pound bombs on a wedding party, again evidently after celebratory firing had taken place, wiping out unknown numbers of villagers including, reportedly, a family of 25 people. In July 2008, a missile from a U.S. plane [took out](#) a party escorting a bride to the groom's house in Nuristan Province, killing at least 47 civilians, 39 of them women and children, including the bride. The next month in Laghman Province, American bombers [killed](#) 16 Afghans in a house, including 12 members of a family hosting a wedding. In June 2012, in Logar Province, [another wedding party](#) was obliterated, 18 people dying (half of them children). This was the only one of these slaughters for which the U.S. military offered an [apology](#).

And that's just what I happen to know about wedding parties in Afghanistan in these years. Don't forget Iraq either, where in May 2004 U.S. jets attacked a village near the Syrian border filled with people sleeping after a wedding ceremony, [killing](#) at least 42 of them,

including “27 members of the [family hosting the wedding ceremony], their wedding guests, and even the band of musicians hired to play at the ceremony.” Of that attack, the man who was then commander of the U.S. 1st Marine Division and is now secretary of defense, James “Mad Dog” Mattis, [said](#) dismissively, “How many people go to the middle of the desert... to hold a wedding 80 miles from the nearest civilization?”

And don’t forget the 15 or so Yemenis on the way to a wedding in December 2013 who were “[mistaken](#) for an al-Qaeda convoy” and taken out by a U.S. drone. As I’ve [written elsewhere](#), since September 11, 2001, we’ve been number one... in obliterating wedding parties. Still, we’ve had some genuine competition in recent years — above all, the Saudis in their brutal [American-backed](#) and [-supplied](#) air war in Yemen. From an incident in September 2015 in which their missiles killed [more than 130](#) Yemenis at a wedding reception (including the usual [women](#) and children) to a strike on a [wedding](#) in April of this year that took out the groom, they’ve run a close second to the U.S. And then there’s ISIS, which, from [Afghanistan](#) to [Turkey](#), seems to have a knack of its own for sending its version of a precision air force (suicide bombers) to take out weddings.

All of these, of course, represent anniversaries that will never be, which couldn’t be sadder. In truth, if you live in any of the battle zones of the still-expanding war on terror, you should probably think twice about getting married or at least having a wedding ceremony. Since Americans don’t focus on such moments in our never-ending conflicts, they have no way of seeing them as the heart and soul of the twenty-first-century American way of war. And of course there’s always the question that General Mattis raised to take into account: What are you going to do with people who insist on getting married in the desert — other than slaughter them?

Afghan Previews?

Only days after the 9/11 attacks, every member of Congress but one voted in favor of the Bush administration’s [authorization of military force](#) that opened the way not just for the Afghan invasion, but so much else that followed. The sole no vote came from Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA), who [warned](#) that “a rush to launch precipitous military counterattacks runs too great a risk that more innocent men, women, children will be killed.” How right she proved to be.

By now, there is the equivalent of unending “towers” of dead women and children in the Greater Middle East, while millions of Afghans and [others](#) have been [displaced](#) from their homes and [record](#) millions more sent [fleeing](#) across national boundaries as refugees. That, in turn, has helped fuel the “populist” right in both Europe and the U.S., so in a sense, Donald Trump might be said to be one result of the invasion of Afghanistan — of, that is, a twenty-first-century American push to unsettle the world. Who knows what else (and who else) America’s wars may produce before they end, as they will someday?

Here, however, is one possibility that, at this point, isn’t part of any thinking in this country but perhaps should be. In the wake of America’s first Afghan War (1979-1989), the Red Army, the stymied military forces of the other Cold War superpower, the Soviet Union, finally limped out of that “[bleeding wound](#)” — as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called Afghanistan. They would return to a sapped, fragmenting empire and a country that would implode less than two years later.

In that post-Afghan moment of victory — the end of the Cold War — nothing of the Russian

experience was recognized as instructive for the last superpower on planet Earth. Here's my question, then: What if that first Afghan War was the real-world equivalent of a movie preview? Someday, when the second Afghan War finally ends and the U.S. military limps home from its many imperial adventures abroad as the Red Army once did, will it, too, find an empire on the verge of imploding and a country in deep trouble?

Is that really beyond imagining anymore? And if it were so, wouldn't that be an anniversary to remember?

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Tom Engelhardt is a co-founder of the [American Empire Project](#) and the author of a history of the Cold War, [The End of Victory Culture](#). He is a fellow of the [Nation Institute](#) and runs [TomDispatch.com](#). His sixth and latest book is [A Nation Unmade by War](#) (Dispatch Books).

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