

Wounded Paternalism: Biden and the US Imperial Complex

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Civilisation has tended to be seen like a gift by those claiming to grant it. It is done, in the sense Rudyard Kipling intended it, with solemn duty. It is a task discharged as a burden borne heavily. In its modern form, notably in the hands of the US, it comes with fast food, roads, schools and blue chip stocks. Civilisation, in this context, is also unsolicited, imposed upon a country, whether they would wish it to be. Autonomy comes into it superficially: the custodianship of a puppet regime, often rapacious.

The results of such unsolicited gifts are there to be seen by the proclaimed civilisers who eventually leave, of which Afghanistan is simply another example. They create classes and groups of citizens who risk being compromised by the forces that seize power. They cause discord and disruption to local conditions.

When the paternalism of civilisation’s builders goes wrong, the only ones blamed are those who either did not understand it, or ignored its beneficent properties. This was the implication in the [August 16 speech](#) by President Joseph Biden. To be fair, Biden had never believed in a “counsterinsurgency or nation building” mission to begin with. Being in Afghanistan had, in his mind, only one purpose: counterterrorism. And the threat had changed, “metastasized” to include a global consortium of challenges: al-Shabaab in Somalia, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Nusra in Syria, the efforts of ISIS.

While the speed of the Taliban’s advance had surprised the president, he noted those Afghan “political leaders” who “gave up and fled the country.” The US-armed Afghan military had “collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight.” All of this provided firm reassurance to him “that ending US military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision.” US troops “cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves.”

An acknowledgment was also made about the money, training and material provided – those attributes of imperial supply – to local soldiers who simply would not pull their weight. “We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong – incredibly well equipped – a force larger in size than the militaries of many of our NATO allies.” Such a picture of ingratitude!

The paternalists, stricken by a misplaced sense of duty of care, insist that more must be done to save personnel who worked for Coalition forces and Afghans who served their projects. Washington's allies have been scolding, accusing Biden of not carrying the standard of Western values high enough, let alone long enough. Norbert Röttgen, chairman of the German parliament's foreign relations committee, [assessed](#) the withdrawal as fundamentally damaging "to the political and moral credibility of the West." These were "bitter events" for the believers "in democracy and freedom, especially for women".

German politicians had gone so far as to see the mission in Afghanistan in moral terms. It was meant to be an invasion without those historically militarist overtones that had characterised previous uses of German military strength. "The security of the Federal Republic of Germany," [declared](#) former Defence Minister Peter Struck in justifying the troop presence, "is also being defended in the Hindu Kush."

Tom Tugendhat, Conservative chair of the UK parliament's foreign affairs committee, put a touch of Britannic gloss on the episode, [using all the themes](#) that come with benevolent, and eventually departing empire. "Afghanistan is the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez. We need to think again about how we handle friends, who matters and how we defend our interests."

In the US itself, the worried paternalists on the Hill are many. Democratic Senators Bob Menendez of New Jersey, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire have women's rights on their mind. In a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, the signed parties "strongly" urged the creation of "a humanitarian parole category especially for women leaders, activists, human rights defenders, judges parliamentarians, journalists, and members of the Female Tactical Platoon of the Afghan Special Security Forces and to streamline the paperwork process to facilitate referrals to allow for fast, humane, and efficient relocation to the United States."

For these worried souls, the demonic Taliban is responsible for war crimes, summary executions, public beatings and flogging of women, sexual violence and forced marriage, as well as a press "clampdown". There is no mention of a restoration of order, the reining in of banditry, and the protection of property. Their version of the Afghan conflict is one resolutely cockeyed.

Shaheen of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees [issued](#) a plea to Biden for "swift, decisive action" lest Afghan civilians "suffer or die at the hands of the Taliban." Massachusetts Democrat Rep. Seth Moulton [chastised](#) the leaders from both parties who refused to go on with the occupation. They had "failed to hold the votes for re-authorizing this conflict for the last two decades since we invaded to find Osama bin Laden. For that, all of us in Congress should be ashamed."

The subtext to all of this: we should be telling the Afghans what to do, how to sort out squabbles and how to march to the beat of our nation-building tune. Like fans of the deceptively named "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine, [it is left to powerful states](#) to determine the conditions under which such responsibility is determined, and when the gift of civilisation shall be provided. The line between the duty to protect and the idea of might is right is not only crossed but rubbed out altogether.

Amidst the warnings, pleas and bleeding heart urgings, the apologists ignore that the mission civilisatrice in Afghanistan came with its own barbarisms: atrocities, torture, the use of drones and an assortment of devilishly lethal weapons. But these were seen as a necessary toll. The events unfolding over the last few days should be offering US lawmakers and Washington's allies firm lessons. These promise to be ignored.

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Featured image: Today President Biden spoke with Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan about the ongoing efforts to safely drawdown the civilian footprint in Afghanistan. ([White House photo](#))

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