

The Yankees Are Coming Home: The Taliban Won. Get Over It

American soldiers can still win wars, but it has to be a real war where there is something genuine at stake, like protecting one's home and family.

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Global Research, April 09, 2021

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 8 April 2021

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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It hardly made the evening news, but the New York Times [reported last week](#) that after twenty years of fighting the Taliban are confident that they will fully control Afghanistan before too long whether or not the United States decides to leave some kind of residual force in the country after May 1st. The narrative is suggestive of The Mouse that Roared, lacking only Peter Sellers to put the finishing touches on what has to be considered a great humiliation for the U.S., which has a “defense” budget that is larger than the combined military spending of the next seven countries in order of magnitude. Those numbers include both Russia and China. The Taliban, on the other hand, have no military budget to speak of. That enormous disparity, un-reflected in who has won and lost, has to nurture concerns that it is the world's only superpower, admittedly self-proclaimed, which is incapable of actually winning a war against anyone.

In fact, some recent wargaming has suggested that the United States [would lose](#) in a non-nuclear conflict with China alone based on the obsolescence of expensive and vulnerable weapons systems that the Pentagon relies upon, such as carrier groups. Nations like China, Iran and Russia that have invested in sophisticated and much cheaper missile systems to offset U.S. advantages have reportedly spent their money wisely. If the Biden foreign policy and military experts, largely embroiled in diversifying the country, choose to take on China, there may be no one left around to pick up the pieces.

Those who are warning of the apparent ineffectiveness of the U.S. armed forces in spite of their global presence in more than one thousand bases point most commonly to the historical record to make their case. Korea, fought under United Nations auspices, was a stalemate, with the peninsula divided to this day and a substantial American military force continuing to be a presence along the DMZ to enforce the armistice that not quite ended the war. Vietnam was a defeat, resulting in more than 58,000 Americans dead as well as an estimated 3 million Vietnamese, most of whom were civilians. The real lesson learned from Vietnam was that fighting on someone else's turf where you have no real interests or stake in the outcome is a fool's game, but the Pentagon instead worked to fix the mechanics in weapons and training at great cost without addressing why people fight wars in the first

place. The other lesson was that the United States' military was perfectly willing to lie to the country's civilian leadership to expand the war and keep it going, a performance that was repeated in 2001 with the "Iraq is supporting terrorists and will have nuclear weapons" lies and also with the current crop of false analogies used to keep thousands of Americans in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

As a veteran of the Vietnam War army, I can recall sitting around with fellow enlisted men reading "*Stars & Stripes*," the exclusive in-house-for-the-military newspaper that was covering the war. The paper quoted a senior officer who opined that the Soviets (as they were at that time) were really envious of the combat experience that the United States Army was obtaining in Vietnam. We all laughed. That same officer probably had a staff position away from the fighting but we draftees knew well that the war was a very bloody mistake while he may have tested his valor post-retirement working for Lockheed-Martin. The "Soviets" in any event demonstrated just how much they envied the experience of combat when they fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s, eventually withdrawing with their tails between their legs just as the U.S. had done in Vietnam after they lost 15,000 men. The "Grave of Empires," indeed.

Since Vietnam there have been a number of small wars in places like Panama and Grenada, but the global war on terror has been a total disaster for American arms. Afghanistan, as it was for the Russians, is the ulcer that keeps on bleeding until it ends as a major defeat for the United States with the Taliban fully in control, as they are now predicting. Likewise, the destruction of a secular Iraq, regime change in Libya, and a continuing war against a non-threatening Syria have all failed to make Americans either safer or more prosperous. Iran is next, apparently, if the Joe Biden Administration has its way, and relations with major adversaries Russia and China have sunk even lower than they were during Donald Trump's time as president. The White House has recently sent a shipload of offensive weapons to Kiev and the Ukrainian government has repeated its intention to retake Crimea from Russia, a formula for a new military disaster that could easily escalate into a major war. What is particularly regrettable is the fact that the United States has no compelling national interest in encouraging open warfare between Moscow and Kiev, a conflict that it will be unable to avoid as its is supplying Ukraine with weaponry.

There was almost no discussion of America's wars during the recent election. One should take note, however, of [a recent article](#) by former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence Korb that appeared on *National Review* which seeks to provide an explanation for "The Real Reason the U.S. Can't Win Wars Anymore" in spite of the fact that it is "the most powerful country in the history of the world." To be sure, Kolb largely blames the policymakers for the defeat in Vietnam, aided and abetted by a culture of silence in the military where many officers knew that the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which escalated the conflict, was a fraud but chose to say or do nothing. He also observes that the war itself was unwinnable for various reasons, including the observation by many working and middle class Americans that they were little more than cannon fodder while the country's elites either dodged the draft or exploited their status to obtain national guard or reserve commissions that were known to be mechanism to avoid Vietnam. Kolb notes that "...the four most recent presidents who could have served in Vietnam avoided that war and the draft by dubious means. Bill Clinton pretended to join the Army ROTC; George W. Bush used political connections to get into the Air National Guard, when President Johnson made it clear that the reserve component would not be activated to fight the war; Donald Trump, of course, had his family physician claim he had bone spurs, (Trump himself cannot remember which foot); and Joe Biden claimed that

the asthma he had in high school prevented him from serving even though he brags about his athletic exploits while in high school.”

Kolb also reveals how America’s presumed prowess on the battlefield has distorted its “democracy building” endeavors to such an extent that genuine national interests have been ignored. When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, success in overthrowing the Taliban was derived from critical assistance from Iran, which correctly regarded the extremist Sunni group as an enemy. But the Bush White House, far from showing gratitude, soon thereafter added Iran to its “axis of evil” list. A golden opportunity was wasted to repair a relationship which has poisoned America’s presence in the Middle East ever since.

One might add something else to Kolb’s assessment of failure at war. Most American soldiers have been and are proud of their service and consider it an honor to defend their country but the key word is “defend.” There was no defending going on in Vietnam nor in Afghanistan, which did not attack the U.S. and was willing to turn over Osama Bin Laden if the White House could provide evidence that he was involved in 9/11. Nor was there anything defensive about Obama’s destruction of Libya and the decades long “secret” wars to overthrow the Syrian and Iranian governments. Soldiers are trained to fight and obey orders but that does not mean that they can no longer observe and think. Twenty years of “Reconstruction” duty in Afghanistan is not defending the United States and the morale of American soldiers in the combined Democratic and Republican Parties’ plan to reconstruct the world is not a sufficient motivator if one is being asked to put one’s life on the line. Sure, American soldiers can still win wars, but it has to be a real war where there is something genuine at stake, like protecting one’s home and family. That is what the people who run Washington, very few of whom are veterans and most of whom first ask “But what’s in it for me?” fail to understand.

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