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After 20 Years and \$2.26 Trillion, the US has Lost Its Longest War in Afghanistan

Another lost war! Another denial!

The US actually began its war on the people of Afghanistan back during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who foolishly followed the advice of his Russia-hating, rabidly anti-Communist Polish emigre National Security Director Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Brzezinski, in mid-1979, successfully convinced the gullible Carter to launch Operation Cyclone, a \$20-billion, 10-year CIA effort to fund and train the Islamic Mujahideen—largely ethnic Pashtun fighters based in neighboring Pakistan — to undermine the Soviet-backed Communist government in Afghanistan.

A brutal bunch of armed religious zealots, these CIA-backed Mujahideen fighters were successful in undermining the Communist government led by a series of Communist leaders. That, as “Zbig” had hoped and anticipated, led a reluctant Soviet Union to invade the country to prevent the government’s collapse.

Reportedly, that invasion was Brzezinski’s goal. He admitted years later that he had gotten Carter five months before the Soviet invasion, to sign a secret executive order authorizing Operation Cyclone, in hopes of “sucking” the Soviets into “their own Vietnam.”

The cost of that bloodthirsty bit of realpolitik was Afghan chaos and the rise of the Taliban. Another fanatic Islamic group of fighters based in Pakistan, but one not controlled by the CIA, the Taliban managed to win control over much of Afghanistan, including the capital of Kabul, over the next decade. The Taliban government also offered sanctuary to Al Qaeda, a Saudi-based group of Islamic radicals that was overtly anti-America. We know the rest.

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Following the 9-11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September 2001, the Bush-Cheney Administration launched a major Special Forces invasion of Afghanistan, allegedly to destroy Al Qaeda. In the process, while Al Qaeda wasn't destroyed, the Taliban were driven from Kabul as its fighters retreated into the countryside and into sanctuary in Pakistan.

The US Afghanistan War was on.

While US forces quickly took control of the country's cities, and drove Al Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden into the mountains, Bush and Cheney quickly lost interest in that country and shifted troops away to Kuwait and the UAE with plans to invade Iraq. Afghanistan became a "back-burner" war, never fought with more than 100,000 troops — and most of the time with far fewer — but with lots of bombs, helicopter and fixed-wing flying gunships, and a virtually non-stop aerial bombardment campaign.

"Zbig" got his Soviet quagmire, but the US ended up in an even worse Afghan quagmire — a conflict that stretched out longer than the US war against Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. But it was mostly Afghans who did the bleeding and dying.

The Taliban were never beaten despite all the weaponry including high-tech remote weaponized drones, and the brutality of US forces over the ensuing two decades. Like the Vietnamese who defeated the US in 1974 after over 10 years of even more brutal fighting, the Taliban didn't try to conquer major cities. They operated in the countryside, harassing US forces and their supposed allies, the US-funded Afghan military, with bombings, roadside IEDs, mines and surprise attacks.

In the end, the US last week pulled most of its remaining forces out in the dead of night from Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul, slipping away quietly to avoid attack without even informing the Afghan military. They left locals to pick through the weapons, supplies and other materiel for hours like locusts landing in a wheatfield. It was a more disorderly and cowardly exit even than the panicky helicopter evacuation of the US Embassy in Saigon ahead of victorious Vietnamese freedom fighters heading through cheering streets of the city to capture the last vestige of US power in that long-suffering country.

In the years after Vietnam, a series of US governments has sought to rewrite the history of that genocidal US debacle, trying to create a new false narrative that it had just been a noble attempt to "defend freedom," one that was "fought with one-hand behind our backs" by a US military that was "constrained" from using all its forces and weapons. (Apparently killing three million civilians and Vietnamese patriots was just not enough.)

President Biden isn't waiting to change the Afghan narrative. He is already claiming the US "achieved its goals" in Afghanistan, and saying that is why he is bringing the last troops home. As he put it at a press conference on July 8:

"The United States did what we went to do in Afghanistan: to get the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 and to deliver justice, to get Osama Bin Laden, and to degrade the terrorist threat to keep Afghanistan from becoming a base from which attacks could be continued against the United States. We achieved those objectives. That's why we went. We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it's the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country."

Of course, if that had actually been the US goal when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001 then the troop pullout could have happened in late 2001, not a generation later in mid-2021. (Some of the US soldiers being shipped home now weren't even born when the US invaded Afghanistan!)

Actually, the US did pull out of Afghanistan in 2001. That was when the US had Al Qaeda forces, including Bin Laden, trapped in the mountains of Tora Bora. Instead of capturing them, though, Bush and Cheney began at that point pulling troops out of Afghanistan and shifting them and America's war focus to Kuwait, in preparation for a ginned-up and much larger war on the people and government of Iraq.

The trouble is they didn't stay out after they left for Iraq. Instead, the US changed the goal in Afghanistan to destroying the Taliban (while nurturing Afghanistan's opium trade). For the next 20 years, American troops, drones and planes destroyed and killed in Afghanistan in an orgy of violence that saw the slaughter of some 875,000 Afghan civilians, the deaths of 2400 US troops, and the expenditure, so far, of over \$2.26 trillion for US military operations.

And we still aren't truly leaving, as Biden says bombings will still continue, as will "over the horizon" attacks on the Taliban.

Dave Lindorff is a founding member of [ThisCantBeHappening!](#), an online newspaper collective, and is a contributor to [Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion](#) (AK Press).

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