

Commentary...

When do we learn?

By **Jim Cornelius**
Editor in Chief

A few days ago, a friend and I were talking about the U.S. abandonment of Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and the parallels with the evacuation of Saigon, South Vietnam, in 1975.

“When do we learn?” my friend asked.

It was a rhetorical question, because my friend knows that we don’t learn from our history. We just... don’t.

It brings to mind a passage from Cormac McCarthy’s novel “All the Pretty Horses,” in which Doña Alfonsa tells the young cowboy hero John Grady Cole:

“It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don’t believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God — who knows all that can be known — seems powerless to change.”

At this point, withdrawal from Afghanistan is our only option. We can’t stay indefinitely trying to recover an

unrecoverable situation; there hasn’t been any “will to win” in Afghanistan for years, and there never has been a coherent description of what victory there would look like anyway.

But we shouldn’t try to whitewash what we’re leaving behind after 20 years, 2,300 American military personnel killed, more than 20,000 wounded, lives disrupted and deformed, and nearly \$1 trillion in national treasure expended — to say nothing of the estimated 71,000 Afghan civilians and 64,000 Afghan security forces who have died since October 2001. No matter how President Biden attempts to spin our exit, the Taliban most assuredly *will* take control of the country. They’ve been picking off administrative districts like ripened fruit for months, and just last week secured border crossings with Iran — “dry ports” for goods that end up being shipped overseas. That means they’re not just chasing off demoralized security forces; they’re strategically strangling the Afghan government’s revenue.

Trump Administration Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put lipstick on the pig of a “peace” deal

he struck with the Taliban, insisting that they’ve “broken” with al Qaeda. That assertion drew snorts of derision from people who know better, and the evidence continues to pile up that not only have the Taliban not broken with al Qaeda, their ties are stronger than they were in 2001 due to inter-marriages and two decades of shared combat.

American officials, military and civilian, Republican and Democrat, have made a lot of ridiculous assertions about Afghanistan over the past two decades, engaging in what counter-terrorism analysts Thomas Jocelyn and Bill Roggio of FDD’s Long War Journal call “wishcasting.”

It would be foolish to weaponize blame for our failure in Afghanistan merely to deploy it in our tribal politics. Afghanistan has been a bipartisan disaster; every administration from Bush to Biden has had a wolf by the ears: You can’t hold on forever, and it’s dangerous to let go. We might have learned that lesson from the Soviets, who couldn’t control the wolf even by deploying a level of brutality the U.S. never approached.

Would things have gone differently if we had captured or killed Osama bin Laden in Tora Bora in December 2001? If the Bush Administration had not shifted all of its focus and attention to Iraq in 2003? If the Afghan national government had been less corrupt? If the Obama-era “surge” had not become entangled in Afghan politics? It’s impossible to know. All of these questions should be pondered and examined in the (perhaps vain) hope that we can learn something from understanding what went wrong.

Right now, what is most needed is a clear-eyed assessment of what threat might emanate from a resurgence of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate and a restored haven for al Qaeda and/or other Islamist militant terrorist organizations.

We need a clear understanding of how our government and military plan to contain it.

It may be that the Taliban will keep its focus internal and constrain the terrorists on its soil from projecting terror outward.

But al Qaeda has never given up its determination to attack the “far enemy” — the United States — in our homeland.

The United States faces myriad other strategic threats, but we can’t simply turn away and ignore the shadow that is growing again in Afghanistan. Underestimating the resilience and long-game determination of our radical Islamist enemies is dangerous.

We’ve done that before, and paid a heavy, heavy price.

When do we learn?



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