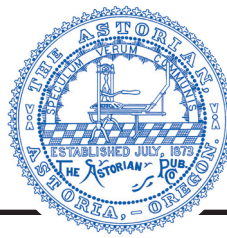


OPINION



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A tragic failure

In the end, there is exhaustion. And grief. “I have to tell our families who were left behind that there is nothing left to do,” wrote a friend and former military reporter on Facebook. “I told one last night but could not bring myself to tell the three others just yet. I need to do that this morning because the Taliban are already hunting people down. They need to scrub any trace of contact with me.”



MIKE FRANCIS

Now we know the answer to Gen. David Petraeus’ famous question, posed in 2003: “Tell me how this ends.”

It ends, sir, with all the good intentions a mighty nation could muster piled in a steaming heap at the Bagram airport. It ends, 20 years after it started, with too much blood spilled, too many lives upended and too many people desperate.

In that sense, it resembles the beginning, on Sept. 11, 2001, when hijacked commercial aircraft plowed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon and tumbled from the sky into a field in Pennsylvania. It didn’t look like exhaustion then, but we saw the grief right away.

Now, what is left, apart from our necessary and inevitable political and military postmortem, is to do all we can for the ones left behind.

I know people who were actively involved in helping Afghan people flee their country before the Taliban could smother the fragile liberties they had grown to embrace. Some succeeded — “This is a great day,” one told me, after getting his unit’s Afghan interpreter on a plane to Qatar — but others did not. Tens of thousands of Afghans who assisted America and its allies remain in the country, blocked by the raised drawbridge of an American exit.

This is a tragic failure. Blame for the deadly, inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be shared among four presidential administrations, but the heart-wrenching scenes that unfolded over the final weeks of August put an exclamation point on the tragically misguided 20-year episode.

It took America a generation to grapple with the tragedy of the Vietnam War, our nation’s first large-scale failed military venture. That war killed more than 58,000 U.S. troops and 1.4 million people total. It grew deeply unpopular at home and returning veterans were cast aside and left to reintegrate — or suffer — individually. In some ways, everything the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has done since is to compensate for the nation’s failings in Vietnam.

But the legacy of Vietnam will pale next to the shadows cast by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even in remote Oregon, where the military footprint is relatively small, the wars have spawned cycles of heartbreak and anxiety, as families waited to learn whether and when their loved ones would



Marines honor their fallen during a ramp ceremony at Hamid Karzai International Airport.

U.S. Central Command

THANK GOD, AT LEAST, U.S. TROOPS ARE NO LONGER FIGHTING. WE MAY HOPE AND PRAY THAT FAMILIES IN OREGON AND ACROSS THE COUNTRY — THE SINGULAR 1% THAT SERVE IN UNIFORM — CAN ENJOY A PERIOD OF RELATIVE PEACE ABROAD, WHILE WE WORK OUT OUR POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMAS AT HOME.

deploy and for how long. Most Oregon troops served with distinction, but almost every major deployment of the Oregon National Guard was punctuated by funerals, memorial services and periods of anger and grief. The divorce rate from the guard’s first large-scale deployment, in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004 to 2005, was above 90%. Decades later, every veteran who deployed seems to know someone who has taken his own life or drunk himself into oblivion or worse. Oregon will be reckoning with the effects of these wars for generations, in towns from Astoria to Ontario.

But at least most of the U.S. troops came home. The tragedy of those who were left behind endures to the present moment. Chief among these unseen victims of the war are those who served as military contractors, particularly interpreters.

To those who haven’t been in a combat theater, it’s difficult to appreciate just how critical a role was played by the local civilians who serve as interpreters

and fixers. An entire company of American soldiers, riding armored vehicles bristling with weapons, can be rendered useless if nobody is available to translate the local language or explain the local behaviors. And the unarmed people who did this dangerous work often were desperately insecure, risking their own lives and the lives of their family members to work for the American military. I know Iraqi interpreters whose children were abducted and killed by people opposed to the U.S. initiative. The insurgents were trying to force them to quit. Often, they succeeded.

It’s for these people that the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa program was introduced in 2006 and subsequently expanded, though never broadly enough. It was crippled in its early years by demagoguery from the likes of U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican who said he saw Special Immigrant Visas as a vehicle to bring terrorists into the United States — never mind that the visa holders are among the most heavily vetted

people to seek entry to this country.

Thankfully, there has been less controversy about the current surge of Special Immigrant Visa applicants from Afghanistan. And while the program is woefully insufficient to accommodate the thousands of people endangered by the sudden collapse of Afghanistan, it offers the very minimum protection this grateful nation should extend. If ever there was a time for this nation to throw open its gates and welcome the refugees of war, it’s now.

These blood-stained decades have taken thousands of U.S. lives, as well as the lives of allies, enemies and civilian families who had the misfortune of trying to live while a war convulsed their country. It has drained the U.S. treasury, eroded national credibility and contributed to the polarization of the American public.

Thank God, at least, U.S. troops are no longer fighting. We may hope and pray that families in Oregon and across the country — the singular 1% that serve in uniform — can enjoy a period of relative peace abroad, while we work out our political and psychological traumas at home.

And we can salvage some meager national virtue by working tirelessly to rescue those on whom we relied while conducting wars on the other side of the world.

Mike Francis is a longtime Oregon journalist who has extensively covered military and veterans issues. He resides on Astoria’s South Slope.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Return the favor

In November 2020, millions of voters like me went to the polls and cast a ballot for Joe Biden.

Now, with a relentless GOP attack on our voting rights underway, I’m asking President Biden to return the favor. It’s time for Biden to go further than talking about supporting voting rights legislation. We need him to come out and fully support ending the filibuster so the U.S. Senate can finally pass voting rights legislation like the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

With the filibuster intact, these bills stand little chance of passing. We need the president to use his power of office to pressure the Senate to end the filibuster and clear a path for voting rights reform.

We can’t out-organize voter suppression. History will remember how President Biden handles these attacks on our right to vote. I’m urging him to do the right thing.

DEBORAH ALBRECHT
Gearhart

Least we can do

Regarding the article on booster shots for COVID (The Astorian, Sept. 7), I applaud Clatsop County for moving ahead to reduce infections and protect citizens.

If it’s been safe enough to give boost-

ers to those with health risk factors (immunocompromised, cancer, etc.) outside the eight-month post-vaccination time frame, and without Food and Drug Administration approval, why is it unsafe for those with less health risk factors? This makes no sense.

As a health care worker, a senior and more than six months past my last vaccination, I was refused a booster by a local drugstore chain. Those who request a third booster should get it without delay so we can move our county out of double-digit positivity rates and give local hospitals a break.

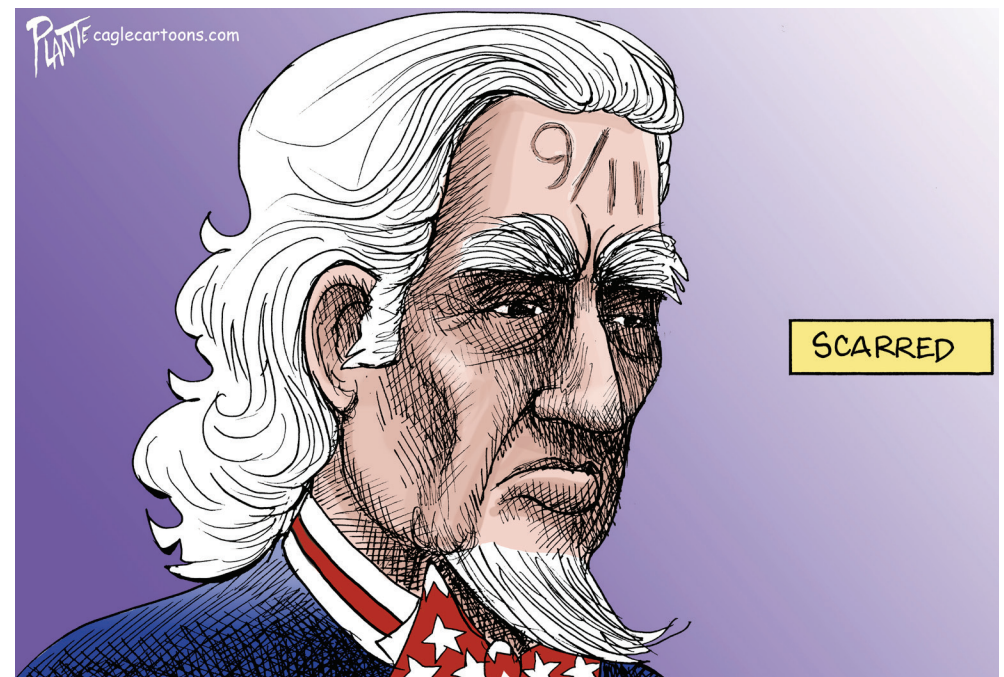
It’s the least we can do. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But this one is a no-brainer — a judgment call I invite local pharmacies to consider.

DELORES SULLIVAN
Gearhart

Mask-wearing visitors beware

In late August, my husband and I made a much-anticipated and long-overdue trip to Astoria to relax and reconnect with family after not visiting there since before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Two hours before we departed the chain hotel where we stayed, our visit turned into an extremely negative experience as a result of our encounter with a non-mask-wearing staff member work-



ing the front desk. A conversation with her on mask-wearing policy quickly became confrontational and ended with her shouting as she informed us repeatedly that we should be staying home and not traveling because of our viewpoint that she should be wearing a mask while on duty inside.

There was a sign on the entrance door of this hotel that stated that masks were required inside — as well as the statewide mask mandate in effect. It was our expectation that the staff would be observing that protocol for their safety and the safety of their guests.

This was the worst lodging experience that we have ever had in 50 years of extensive traveling and it happened in the city that I used to call home. As a native Astorian, I find it embarrassing for Astoria to have someone like this person representing the city and greeting and interacting with people who are visiting. After spending almost \$800 to stay at this hotel for two nights, we were then subjected to something that absolutely no one should have to experience.

SUSAN TAKKO
Oregon City