

The DoD Times (Redacted)



Twenty Years Gone: The Burnt End of the Bitter Waste of the Best Our Nation Has to Offer

Lt Col (Ret) Tony Carr (Retired, Air Force – Combat Pilot, Doctor of Law – JD, Harvard Law School), authored this article. He first published the article [HERE](#) on his Substack blog. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Walk the Talk Foundation and its members. (Published August 26th, 2024)

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It started with indignation. It ended with indignity.

I don't know anyone who feels good about the 20 years in between. It's hard to fathom how making no real difference can leave such a mark.

But that is the cold reality of our misadventure in Afghanistan. As cold and serrated and merciless a reality as the beautifully lethal land itself.

In pilot world, we say you don't know you've lost situational awareness until you regain it. Three years ago, we regained it.

It was painfully obvious that no matter how long we'd stayed, how much we'd invested, or how much we got legions of unselfish Americans to commit themselves, what we were doing was never going to work.

It became instantly impossible to deny the inevitable futility so long obscured. We couldn't fool anyone anymore. And we couldn't fool ourselves.

Like everyone else, I watched as the world's most powerful nation retreated from a mess of its own making. My stomach churned. It was disgraceful and embarrassing. Our credibility was bleeding out right in front of us.

The fact scrambling C-17s came to symbolize our bungled, Saigon-esque retreat managed to thicken my own sense of hollow mournfulness.

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What had it all been for?

I was one of the first airmen in the skies over Afghanistan in October 2001. I've never been more proud to be a part of something.

Our purpose was clear and righteous: destroy Al Qaeda, deny terrorists sanctuary, and simultaneously show that our quarrel was with a narrowly defined group of extremist assholes, not the entire Muslim world.

It was the first step in strategically resolving the horror of 9/11/01, even if we could never emotionally do so. Over the next dozen years, I committed a third of my life to the war effort, as did virtually all of my friends. As did all of our families.

Some gave much more, up to and including the rest of their lives.

And in that time, our mission went from a righteous exercise of force coupled with a responsible humanitarian campaign ... to a complete disaster.

An exercise in frustration poisoned by partisan pettiness and overfed by corruption and cynical lobbying. Our "good war" became just another disgusting budgetary feeding trough. A playground for greedy nihilist bastards in swaddling robes devising techniques to separate good-faith Americans from their wallets.

A strategic zombie animated at best by delusional beliefs about American values that aren't even heralded in America itself. Animated at worst by unspoken objectives that, if openly acknowledged, would have resulted in the immediate revocation of popular support.

Which explains why all the lies were necessary. Why politicians needed to pretend we were there to help. That we cared. That things were going well.

We were never going to succeed in building a western democracy in Afghanistan. Many have tried to impose their will on the country. Only to learn the bitter fact that foreign intrusion is the only thing that's ever been capable of uniting Afghanistan's tribes.

But in any case, the only way to impose a set of values on a foreign country is via colonial activity. You know, the stuff we outlawed as an international community after the Second World War.

Even if we were behaving imperially, we could never admit it. So we had to stop short of brute force imposition.

And in its absence, an external power seeking to remake a society relies upon a willing and capable host nation to partner. In Afghanistan, we never had that.

After 20 years, thousands of lives, trillions of dollars, and a US military force pushed to the edge of its own breaking point ... it's now painfully clear we were no closer on August 17, 2021 than we were on October 7, 2001 to creating a "better Afghanistan" ... whatever that is.

This was never supposed to be about defeating the Taliban. Classic mission creep. A repeat mistake from the previous generation's failed attempts at "hearts and minds" combat.

The entire concept is contradictory. You don't win people over by conducting violence in and around their country.

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Oh, and you can't expect Afghanistan's people to fight for a unified and tranquil state. They don't care to build a country. This isn't a value judgement. It's just a matter of fact, history, and culture. Afghanistan has always been politically and socially fragmented. Its politics have always been local rather than national.

The absence of a decision is itself always a decision. Afghanistan's tribes float along as a loosely connected but disunited federation of closely-held interests. This non-decision creates a vulnerability to the Taliban.

We can't want something enough to compensate for a partner who doesn't want it for themselves.

We over-invested and persuaded others to do the same. Because we were fool enough to buy the notion of an Afghan consensus for unitary government. This was never going to be the case.

Many knew it, but had an interest to say the opposite or nothing at all. Many sensed it, but were powerless to withhold their contribution. But most believed the proffered fictions they were fed, by choice or by dormancy of wit.

And this is what led us to spend two decades shooting ourselves in the foot. When the right move was to spend six months hunting terrorists to extinction before scorching the poppy fields and going home.

History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. This is just the latest example of a Western power wanting something for Afghanistan which the evidence clearly shows it doesn't want for itself.

It was heartbreaking to watch it all fall apart. It is heartbreaking still today. I am especially sad for those who found themselves participating in a chaotic retreat from a war they gave the best years of their lives supporting. But this is what was always going to happen. It's what happens. We knew all along this is how it would end, whether we stayed two years or two hundred.

Which is why we should have annihilated Al Qaeda, established surveillance over the region, and gotten the Hell out of there. The instant we chose to stay beyond these objectives, without debating and declaring how we would get out of what we were getting into, our fate was sealed.

And for the next twenty years, we split our time between burying people who didn't need to die and pretending it was for a good cause.

A legion of politicians, many wearing military garb, got together made a hash out of it all. No one had the courage to draw the curtain, so we bled more than necessary. Then someone decided to draw the curtain. But without committing the resources, the planning, the organization, and the leadership to do it right.

So we ended the mission on an unthinkable low note. People who volunteered to be part of something great found themselves bending every reed of their capability just to narrowly avoid cataclysm.

It was a sorry spectacle obscuring Herculean effort by legions of well-meaning warriors.

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The way Afghanistan ended is a dishonor. A disgrace. Nigh on unforgivable.

Bodies, hearts, minds, families, lives, hopes for happiness ... broken en masse. Broken as punishment for unwarranted faith. We left our ability to trust behind, sunken in bitter soil.

Among airmen, especially those in the airlift community, the aftermath only served to punctuate a generation-long descent into institutional stupidity. It took the Air Force months to decide a C-17 crew wasn't at fault for a desperate Afghan climbing into its wheel well before takeoff.

That should have taken zero seconds to conclude. These people were heroes. Letting them sit under a cloud for months is inexcusable.

It took more than two years for the airmen involved in the evacuation to be properly recognized and decorated. Unacceptable. And it only happened at all because Gen. Mike Minihan used his influence and authority to overwhelm Mickey Mouse legion.

And the risk was that we'd actually obscure the only bright light in this God awful mess. The commitment of our fighting men and women.

To the end, they did their duty, at great risk, to get our people out of a rapidly imploding morass. They did it with steadfastness and composure even as they bore first-hand witness to the massive human tragedy unfolding on the ground.

The crews who saw first-hand the tragic desperation and carnage of those moments will never get it out of their minds. And they will likely never forgive the misguided shitlords who put them in a position where the reward for 20 years of hardship was to sit astride a shameful capitulation. To be the star players for the losing team, with all the unwelcome notoriety it brings.

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The reward for breaking themselves was to be instruments in re-offending the national conscience. Although I catch myself thinking that sounds ridiculous in its overstatement of ordinary American regard for a debacle long-forgotten, if ever it pierced general awareness at all.

The war in Afghanistan is something like a Rosetta Stone by which most American pathologies can be deciphered.

Our fractured psyche. Our fractured politics. Our fractured finances.

Our broken Air Force. Generals obsessing over beards and boonie hats while we sit unready for the next war and lethargic to address it. Meanwhile, pilots are getting six months less training. Planes are crashing in training and investigations are getting compromised by scapegoating and politics.

Our Air Force has never been in deeper shit. But you wouldn't know it by listening to the chattering class, who say if we can just get people to look better in uniform, everything will be hunky dory.

Which brings me to my final thought. Afghanistan also exposes our tortured relationship with truth.

Here's what Air Mobility Command had to say on the anniversary of our ignominious withdrawal from a two-decade stalemate that bled us white.



Air Mobility Command ✓

14h ·

This week marks the third anniversary of Operation Allies Refuge. This historic airlift out of Kabul forever changed AMC. The heroes involved helped AMC rediscover maneuver and lethality; the connective tissues between Air Mobility, the Joint Force, and **Victory**.



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I don't know how drunk you have to be to use the word "Victory" in a post on this subject.

We didn't win. We lost. We failed to achieve our objectives. We bankrupted ourselves. We broke our military. Declaring victory is a galactically stupid way to bypass hard truths and critical lessons. We need to wallow in our failure long enough to let it seep into every molecule of who and what we are. Because otherwise, we will do this all again.

We will anyway. Because learning comes from knowledge, which comes from truth. And politics, which is the hand in the glove of war, is allergic to truth.

We lie, we accept lies, and we even celebrate lies. So we won't learn. And we will suffer.

None of that can nullify the effort, earnestly undertaken, by those who do our fighting for us. They are the standout heroes in an otherwise pitiful story. I wish more than anything I could say their effort hadn't been wasted.

They give this ruinous twenty-year FUBAR fiasco the ever-so-thin veneer of redemption. Through which we can't avoid glimpsing the bloody, rotting mass of reality beneath.

If you agree, contact your members in Congress [HERE](#) and [HERE](#) to make this argument.

If you feel that you have been a victim of these types of concerns, feel free to reach out privately at francescagraham@walkthetalkfoundation.org, or share your story in the comments.

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2. [SIGN THIS PETITION](#) demanding that our leaders in Congress change the DoD's unjust administrative investigatory system.
3. [SIGN THIS PETITION](#) demanding real anti-harassment reform in the Military and Coast Guard now.

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