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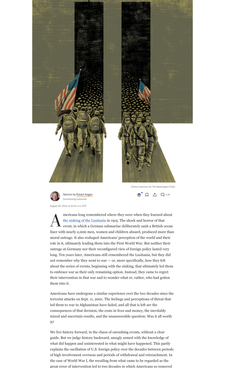
It wasn't hubris that drove America into Afghanistan. It was fear.



Artist rendition for The Washington Post

Opinions by Robert Kagan
Contributing columnist

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Americans long remembered where they were when they learned about the ending of the Lusitania in 1915. The shock and horror of that sinking, which had taken the lives of 1,200 people, including 128 Americans from coastal towns, women and children aboard, produced more than moral outrage. It also undermined Americans' perception of the world and their role in it, ultimately leading them into the First World War. But neither their outrage or Germany nor their reconfigured view of foreign policy lasted very long. Ten years later, Americans still remembered the Lusitania, but they did not remember why they went to war — or, more specifically, how they felt about the war they had entered into. Memory had faded, and with it the sense of urgency to carry out a daily remaining options, instead they came to see, with their intervention in that war and to wonder what or, rather, who had gotten them into it.

Americans have undergone a similar experience over the two decades since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. The feelings and perceptions of threat that led them to war in Afghanistan have faded, and all that is left are the consequences of that decision, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the inevitably mixed and uncertain results, and the unanswerable question: Was it all worth it?

We feel history forward, in the chains of unfolding events, without a clear sense of what we are doing or why we are doing it, and only afterward do we see what did happen and understand in what might have happened. This partly explains the oscillation of U.S. foreign policy over the decades between periods of high involvement overseas and periods of withdrawal and retrenchment. In the case of World War I, the resulting from what came to be regarded as the great error of intervention led to long decades in which Americans so resented themselves from involvement in Europe and East Asia that they unwittingly paved the way for another, even more terrible war that they had to fight and fighting. One wonders whether this pattern will eventually repeat itself in Afghanistan.

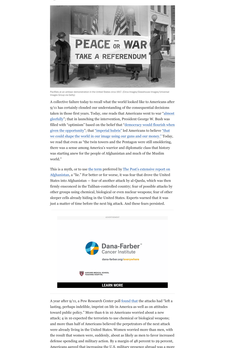
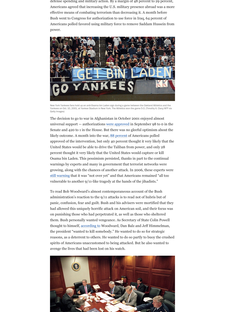


Illustration by Alexander Hunter/The Washington Post; photo of Lusitania passengers courtesy of Underwood & Underwood/Library of Congress/Getty Images

A collective failure today to recall what the world looked like to Americans after 9/11 has certainly clouded our understanding of the consequential decisions made in the years that followed. The United States was attacked, "out of the blue, gleefully", that is launching the intervention, President George W. Bush was filled with "optimism" based on the belief that "democracy would flourish when given the opportunity", that "imperial hubris" led Americans to believe "that we could shape the world in our image using our guns and our money." Today, Americans, and Biden, are blaming "hubris" for the decision to go to Afghanistan, there was a mass among American intellectuals and diplomatic class that history was starting anew for the people of Afghanistan and much of the Middle world.

This is worth, or to use the term preferred by The Post's eminent expert on Afghanistan, a "lie," the better to see how it was that drove the United States into Afghanistan — fear of another attack by al-Qaeda, which was then firmly entrenched in the Taliban-controlled country. Fear of possible attacks by other groups using chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons, fear of other attacks on American cities, fear of being blamed for not doing enough and fear of just a matter of time before the next big attack. And there fear prevailed.



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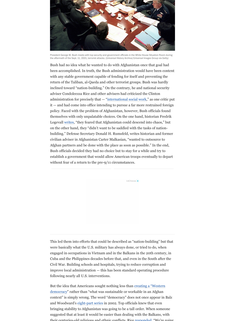
A year after 9/11, a Pew Research Center poll found that the attacks had "left a lasting, perhaps indelible, imprint on life in America as well as on attitudes toward public policy." More than 6 in 10 Americans worried about a new attack; a 6 in 10 expected the terrorists to use chemical or biological weapons; 4 in 10 worried about a nuclear weapon being exploded in a city. Fears were already lining in the United States. Women worried more than men, with the result that women were, unlike about as much as men in favor increased defense spending and military action. By a margin of 40 percent to 30 percent, Americans agreed that increasing the U.S. military presence abroad was a more effective way to combat terrorism than "improving the image of the United States" Bush went to Congress for authorization to use force in Iraq. Americans in Pew's survey also favored using military force to remove Saddam Hussein from power.



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The decision to go to war in Afghanistan in October 2001 enjoyed almost unanimous support in Congress, including from Democrats who would, in the next Senate and gave to it the House. But there was no plenty of optimism about the likely outcome. A month into the war, 68 percent of Americans polled approved of the intervention but only 40 percent thought it very likely that the United States would be able to drive the Taliban from power, and only 48 percent thought it was "worth the cost in lives and money" to try to do so, according to the Gallup Poll. The prominent pointed, thanks in part to the constant warnings by experts and many in government that terrorist networks were growing, along with the chances of another attack. In sum, these experts were still warning that it was "not over yet" and that Americans remained "all too vulnerable to another 9/11 in the heights of the Jindalee."

Bush had Bob Woodward's almost contemporaneous account of the Bush administration's reaction to the 9/11 attacks is to read not of Solon-level prudence, confusion, fear and guilt. Bush and his advisers were mortified that they had let the terrorists succeed in their attacks and were fearful that there would be many more attacks if they failed to prevent them. Bush was so plagued with guilt that he was ready to do anything to keep the terrorists from coming back. On the one hand, historian Fredrik Logevall writes, "they feared that Afghanistan could descend into chaos," but on the other hand, they "didn't want to be saddled with the tasks of nation-building." Bush was reluctant to "commit the United States to the kind of nation-building civilian advisers in Afghanistan Carlos Pascharella, "wanted to outsource to Afghan partners and be done with the place as soon as possible." In the end, Bush officials decided they had no choice but to stay for a while and try to establish a government that would allow American troops eventually to depart without fear of a return to the prior situation.

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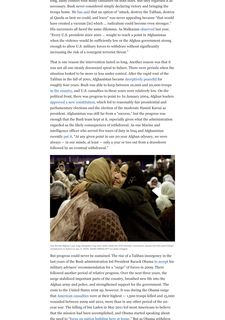
Bush had no cities what he wanted to do with Afghanistan once that goal had been accomplished. In truth, the Bush administration would have been content to let the Afghanistan government, which was the Taliban government in return of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Bush was barely inclined toward "nation-building." On the contrary, he and national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and other advisers had criticized the Clinton administration for precisely that — "international social work," as one critic put it, and had run for office promising to "end the kind of nation-building missions that Clinton was pursuing in the Balkans and Somalia, however. Bush officials found themselves with only unpalatable choices. On the one hand, historian Fredrik Logevall writes, "they feared that Afghanistan could descend into chaos," but on the other hand, they "didn't want to be saddled with the tasks of nation-building." Bush was reluctant to "commit the United States to the kind of nation-building civilian advisers in Afghanistan Carlos Pascharella, "wanted to outsource to Afghan partners and be done with the place as soon as possible." In the end, Bush officials decided they had no choice but to stay for a while and try to establish a government that would allow American troops eventually to depart without fear of a return to the prior situation.



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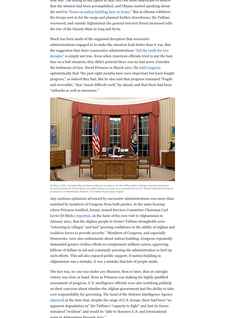
This led them into efforts that could be described as "nation-building," but that was exactly what the U.S. military has always done, or tried to do, when engaged in occupations in Vietnam and in the Balkans in the 20th century, in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 21st century. It was what the United States did in Civil War, Reshaping schools and hospitals, trying to reduce corruption and improve local administration — this has been standard operating procedure following nearly all U.S. interventions.

But the idea that Americans would begin to take from creating a "Western democracy" rather than "what one scholarly textbook calls an Afghan custom" is simply wrong. The word "democracy" does not even appear in Bush and Woodward's eight-part series in 2004. Very officials knew that even bringing stability to Afghanistan was going to be a tall order. When someone asked Bush in early 2002 how he was dealing with the Taliban, he said, "I'm then continue civil religious and ethnic conflicts, then temporarily," "We're going to wish this was the Balkans."



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The United States turned toward nation-building in Afghanistan not because it was a democratic imperialist power with a mission to bring the rule of law and the available options. Not even three efforts digged just an American public kept in the dark. One year into the war, 56 percent of Americans favored "sticking to the end of Afghanistan to help it recover from the war," and fully two-thirds agreed that the United States would have to "stay there for a long time to make sure that the country does not become a haven. And still Americans remained doubtful and apprehensive. A year into the war, only 35 percent regarded it as successful, 10 percent called it a failure, and 70 percent thought it was too early to tell. Only a third of the public believed that terrorists were able to launch a new attack then they had been a year earlier.

The United States U.S. was engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the U.S. military was stretched thin. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images; Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images; Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images; Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images; Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images; Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images

But progress could never be sustained. The rise of a Taliban insurgency in the last years of the Bush administration left President Barack Obama to accept his military advisers' recommendation for a "surge" of forces in 2009. There followed another period of relative progress. Over the next three years, the Taliban insurgency was weakened, the Afghan Army was built up, the Afghan army and police, and strengthened support for the government. The costs to the United States went up, however. It was during the Obama surge that American casualties were at their highest — 1,500 troops killed and 13,000 wounded between 2009 and 2014, more than in any other period of the war. Yet, in the end, it was Obama who, in 2014, ordered the U.S. troops to begin the process of the United States withdrawal, and Donald Trump who, in 2020, signed the deal to "focus on nation-building here at home." But as Obama withdrew the troops sent in for the surge and planned further drawdowns, the Taliban recovered, and outside Afghanistan the general terrorist threat increased with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Much has been made of the supposed deception that successive administrations engaged in to hide the situation in Iraq and better than it was. But the suggestion that these successive administrations "hid the truth for two decades" is misleading. Yes, there were many optimistic statements, but there was a bad situation, they didn't pretend there was not bad, and Gen. Clander testimony of Gen. David Petraeus in March 2010 was hardly Congress optimistically that "the past eight months have seen important but hard-fought progress," or indeed they had. But he also said that progress remained "fragile and reversible," that "much difficult work" lay ahead, and that there had been "setbacks as well as successes."

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Gen. Lanton optimism administration by successive administrations was more than matched by members of Congress from both parties. At the same hearing where Petraeus testified, Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) reported, on the basis of his own visit to Afghanistan in January 2011, that the Afghan people in former Taliban strongholds were "returning to villages" and that "growing confidence in the ability of Afghan and coalition forces to provide security." Members of Congress, and especially Democrats, were also enthusiastic about nation-building. Congress repeatedly demanded greater civilian efforts to complement military action, approving increasing funds for nation-building, including reconstruction of schools and such efforts. This did also expend public support. If nation-building in Afghanistan was a mistake, it was a mistake that lots of people made.

The hard war, as we now realize, was between, then or later, that no certain victory was close at hand. Even as Petraeus was making his highly qualified assessment of progress, U.S. intelligence officials were also notifying politicians on their concerns about whether the Afghan government had the ability to take over responsibility for governing. The head of the Defense Intelligence Agency observed at the time that, despite the surge of U.S. troops, "we don't have the Taliban on the run." Gen. Michael Flynn said that "we don't have the Taliban on the run." Flynn also expressed public support. If nation-building in Afghanistan was a mistake, it was a mistake that lots of people made.

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Yet deep this, a majority of Americans consistently supported continued involvement, and in zero a substantial majority supported Obama's drawdown plans, and yet, even as the war was being fought, Americans were also paying attention to the health of the economy and health care. Like the administration, the public and Congress knew the war wasn't going particularly well but opposed immediate withdrawal. Gallup's project 2.0 commission, 70 and large, Americans were all in it together, even if most have a hard time remembering that now.

From the beginning, the effort in Afghanistan faced severe constraints, many self-imposed. Afghanistan was a distant case, repeated many times throughout American history, of a United States with one foot out the door from the beginning, a United States that was, in the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell, a reluctant theme of Afghanistan and Iraq was the belief by Rumsfeld and his subordinates that both interventions could be sustained without a large contingent of U.S. forces. Perhaps this belief was delusional, or at least, but it was really just an effort to keep the American footprint to a minimum. Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, was

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mainly cared about keeping a lid on the number of deployed U.S. troops. Rumsfeld in particular would become exercised at any mention of additional forces. Some argued for more troops, but as Richard Haass, who was one of them, later recounted, "There was a profound sense of a lack of possibility in Afghanistan." Instead, as in Iraq, the Pentagon worked to build an Afghan army capable of taking over. U.S. officials tended both to inflate the numbers and exaggerate the capabilities of the Afghan army. Why? To demonstrate that there was no need for more American troops or a more extended commitment. When the British commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan told Rumsfeld in 2006 that "we don't have enough troops and resources," Rumsfeld responded, "General, I don't agree. Move on."

A military transport plane takes off while Afghans who cannot get into the airport to evacuate watch and wonder while stranded outside, in Kabul on Aug. 23. (Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Whatever chance of success the United States might have had was not improved by this half-in/half-out approach. The Taliban could see how eager the Americans were to get out and so bided its time. But as significant was the effect on America's partners in Afghanistan. The very uncertainty of the American commitment worked at cross-purposes with the effort to build a government and an army that could stand on their own. As one American who served in Afghanistan has pointed out, one of the consequences was to increase corruption. "Our consistent messaging that we were on our way out of Afghanistan encouraged Afghans in positions of power to embrace corruption — specifically, the siphoning of resources for personal gain — as the one clear and sure means of survival. Corruption became a financial contingency plan, the choice any reasonable Afghan would make to ensure a safe future for their children." Afghan fighters also had to make choices. They had barely held on in the fight against the Taliban with American help, including air support; why imagine that they could hold on without it? No one in the U.S. government ever believed the Afghan army was ready to stand on its own. Officials misjudged only the rapidity of its collapse, which proved embarrassing but should not have been surprising. In any case, it seems a bit unfair to say that America's Afghan partners were simply "rotten." Their lives depended on making the right judgment about American staying power, and that was always in doubt.

And it was not just the Afghans who had to make such calculations. Among the biggest obstacles to U.S. policy was Pakistan's continuing support for the Taliban. Top Pakistani officials made no secret of the fact that they were hedging their bets. As the head of the Pakistani intelligence service told then-Ambassador Ryan Crocker, one day "you'll be done with us, but we're still going to be here … and the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so, yes, we're hedging our bets." As Crocker said in 2016, the only way to have compelled a different set of calculations would have been to make clear that there was no calendar for withdrawal, that the United States was prepared to keep its forces in Afghanistan for as long as necessary. As Crocker put it, "Americans are short-term. Our adversaries count on that, and our allies fear it." One can only wonder how the various actors might have responded had the Bush administration and its successors said the United States was prepared to stay in Afghanistan for 20 years, instead of spending 20 years with one foot always out the door.

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The further irony is that Americans have maintained troops in other countries for decades. They have kept troops in Korea for 70 years, guarding against the resumption of a war that has never formally ended and that could erupt again at any moment. They have kept American troops on the front lines of the Cold War in Europe and elsewhere in Asia for even longer. There were American forces in the Balkans for more than a decade. The fact is, Americans will keep troops in distant theaters for decades, so long as casualties are minimal.

Could things have gone differently in Afghanistan? Possibly, although that seems unlikely given the proclivities of all the parties involved. Successive U.S. administrations believed the likely price of lasting success in Afghanistan was higher than the American people wanted to pay, especially as the fear and anger after 9/11 faded. But the price of withdrawal was also too high. Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that successive presidents chose the route they did. And though there can be much second-guessing about both strategy and tactics, this was not one of those cases where the answer was obvious and only ideologues could not see it. So why the brutal recriminations? Why does every American setback have to be a morality tale, a search for scapegoats and an indictment of American foreign policy in general? The United States intervened in Afghanistan for perfectly good and understandable reasons after 9/11 and then did not know how to extricate itself with an acceptable outcome. Why has this been treated by so many as a tale of sin and hubris? Why has the "war on terror" come to be viewed as a symptom and for some the source of much of America's troubles today?

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In fact, the "war on terror" has been successful — astoundingly so. If you had told anyone after 9/11 that there would not be another major attack on the U.S. homeland for 20 years, few would have believed it possible. The prevailing wisdom at the time was that not only would there be other attacks, but they would be more severe. In 2004, Harvard's premier foreign policy expert, Graham Allison, predicted that it was "more likely than not" that terrorists would explode a nuclear weapon in the United States in the coming decade. What former Obama and current Biden officials Rob Malley and Jon Finer observed three years ago remains true today: "No group or individual has been able to repeat anything close to the devastating scale of the 9/11 attacks in the United States or against U.S. citizens abroad, owing to the remarkable efforts of U.S. authorities, who have disrupted myriad active plots and demolished many terrorist cells and organizations."

That this fact is rarely noted as Americans argue about Afghanistan is remarkable. Does anyone think these efforts would have been as successful if after 9/11 the United States had left the Taliban and al-Qaeda in place for all these years? And it is interesting that so many Americans now believe the price has been too high. As often happens, the fact that the United States hasn't been hit again tends to reinforce the idea that there never was a serious threat to begin with, certainly not serious enough to warrant paying such a price. But this is again the difference between living history forward and judging history backward. If someone had told Americans after 9/11 that they could go two decades without another successful attack but that it would cost 4,000 American lives and $1 trillion, as well as tens of thousands of Afghan lives, would *they* have rejected it as too high? Likely not.

When Americans went to war in 2001, most believed that the dangers of inaction had become too great, that threats of both international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction were growing, and that serious efforts had to be made to address them. Today, many Americans increasingly believe that those earlier perceptions were mistaken or perhaps even manufactured. With America's departure from Afghanistan, we may begin to learn who was more right.

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