



AFGHANISTAN

and the Reluctant Superpower

As I've been thinking about what's happening in Afghanistan I cannot help but feel sad or angry or maybe a little bit of both. 2,500 lost American lives, another 20,000 wounded and injured and a \$1T bill doesn't even begin to tell the whole story. Whatever was going-on there, our troops have been coming home with serious problems. A horrible suicide epidemic has claimed the lives of over 30,000 veterans. In my mind, this puts Afghanistan on the same level as Vietnam. And this is just our side of the ledger. For the Afghans the toll is orders of magnitude higher.

Just what exactly were we there to do? Was it to find Osama Bin Laden and root out Al Qaeda? Kind of. Although we did end up finding Bin Laden and many other Al Qaeda leaders over in Pakistan.... That's another story altogether. But wasn't Afghanistan also about the Taliban though? Weren't we there to protect human rights? And if so, why are we now letting the Taliban so casually resume control of the country? Twice now since WWII, first in Vietnam and now in Afghanistan, what's followed in the wake of our "strategic withdrawal" (i.e. abandonment / evacuation) is chaos. What can we learn from this?

Called the "graveyard of empires" by many, Afghanistan has always presented a formidable geopolitical challenge. Some historians even argue that it is one of those places that might be unconquerable. Even Alexander the Great struggled there. After smashing the well-organized, well-financed professional armies of the Persian empire in under a year, he got stuck in Afghanistan for almost 3 years fighting what we moderns would call irregular warfare. It was only after he decided to marry Roxanne, the daughter of one of the region's most powerful warlords, that he was able to establish a stable enough situation there to move on into India. This move, though highly controversial, especially among his Macedonian and Greek troops who expected him to marry one of their own, actually worked. In the end, Alexander didn't so much as "conquer" Afghanistan as he achieved a kind of diplomatic victory there via this marriage.

One day the City of Priam will fall, and Priam and all his people shall be slain.

Presumably, the architects of our own invasion of Afghanistan knew this and many other similarly ominous stories from the history of this region. The more I study the past, the more I realize how much of an anomaly America has been on the world stage. There's never really been a superpower like America, a country so unbelievably powerful yet so reluctant to assert itself. Winston Churchill famously quipped: "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing after they have tried everything else." Well, this is kind of true and has gotten us into a lot of trouble over the years, especially so in the post-WWII era. Think about Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan. Think about what these stories all have in common.

I think the theme here and the problem is that America has been unwilling to fully accept the responsibility of its superpower status. Because of our reluctance, we have this tendency to get ourselves routinely entangled in very complicated geopolitical situations. They usually start with some noble narrative, like "we have to stop the spread of communism" or "we have to stop the spread of terrorism," but then things get complicated or the urgency of the narrative changes and we lose the political will to see things through to a stable end. This is one of the existential threats of the era of modern democracy.

Now, I don't think we are or should be responsible for everything. President Biden was right when he talked about how we cannot supply a people with the will to fight. But in this case we do owe the people of Afghanistan our support. We've intervened in the governance structure of their country for far too long to just walk away. What this means is that we should welcome, with open arms, as many refugees as we can and as quickly as possible. And if things get really ugly in Taliban controlled Afghanistan we should seriously consider a resumption of military activity.

As we come to terms with what's happening in Afghanistan, we have to remember that this whole thing started because of 9/11. The Taliban had been firmly in control of Afghanistan for years and the only reason we attacked there first is that they were openly harboring Al Qaeda. Our campaign in Afghanistan was our opening move in what would become a global war on terror, not necessarily a bid to remove the Taliban. And for a while the Global War on Terror was all we could talk about. It wasn't that long ago when you

couldn't turn on a TV or open a newspaper without hearing all about the threat of terrorism. It was the issue of the day.

Things sure have changed. Now we are collectively obsessed with the politics of pandemic and fighting about things like vaccines, masks, lockdowns and whether certain animal medicines are appropriate to treat COVID. The last time we heard anything about terrorism it seems was when President Trump was giving what has to be the most incredible press conference in American history. Remember that one? It was after the daring raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019? Trump was standing there so self-assured, so almost amused and bragging about how Baghdadi was "whimpering, screaming and crying all the way" and "died like a dog" and a "coward."



Prior to our withdrawal from Afghanistan, there was a decent consensus that this was the right thing to do. Trump wanted to do it and, obviously, so did Biden. The same is true of many members of Congress on both sides of the aisle. Where did this consensus come from? I'm convinced it's all a function of our perception that terrorism isn't as big of a threat anymore. I don't believe for a second that this is true. We might be winning the war on terror but we haven't won. The Middle East is still a geopolitical mess and in many places things are worse than ever. Trust me we haven't heard the last about terrorism.

Anyway, as I was watching the images come in of the Taliban's dramatic recapturing of Kabul, I was reminded of this story from Ancient Rome for some reason. The story goes that as Scipio Africanus the Younger—not the conqueror of Hannibal but his grandson and a great general himself—stood before the burning city of Carthage he turned to his companions and quoted, in Ancient Greek of course, this famous line from "The Iliad":

*One day the City of Priam will fall,
and Priam and all his people shall be slain.*

According to Polybius, who was there at this moment, in the conversation that ensued we learn that Scipio was trying to make a very subtle point here. You see, he wasn't thinking about Carthage at all; he was thinking about Rome. Scipio understood something important about nations and the course of history: longevity is rare and peaceful longevity

downright non-existent. He, in this dramatic moment of triumph, was insightful enough to know that while Rome might be on top of the world today, it would one day probably face the same fate as Carthage, a city in flames.

Scipio came of age in an era when people took seriously the idea of hubris. They had this belief that certain actions, if they were wrong or evil or somehow excessive, would be punished by the Gods. This applied to both individuals and Nations. To the Ancients, there was almost nothing worse than to act with hubris. For them, the downfall of every nation stemmed from some hubristic action, something so wrong, so outrageously arrogant that it offended the Gods.

Well, what does Rome's destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. have to do with America and Afghanistan? More than you think. If Rome was guilty, as Scipio thought, of hubristic overreach in destroying Carthage, might we be guilty of the opposite for abandoning Afghanistan? Is it possible that it is equally hubristic to underreach as it is to overreach? What are the consequences of having the power to do good but refusing to do it? Is there a price to pay for our reluctance to lead and to accept the responsibilities of power? I wonder what Scipio would think about what we've done and not done in Afghanistan. □



Photo: Mohammad Rahmani