

It's Okay To Admit Both Sides Had the Afghanistan Withdrawal Wrong



A couple weeks ago, under a piece I wrote about the fall of Afghanistan back into the hands of the Taliban, a regular commenter, who had previously supported a full U.S. withdrawal from the country, did something rather remarkable in today's political environment. He admitted that he had been wrong.

He confessed that he hadn't sufficiently researched what the conditions in Afghanistan had been in recent years. With little national reporting coming out of the country, public opinion long favoring leaving, and U.S. political leaders from both parties continuing to insist that we were fighting a costly, deadly, pointless, and "endless" war, he was inclined to agree that it was indeed time to go.

"I believed Afghanistan to be a worthless piece of rock where the Afghans refused to fight their own battles at enormous cost to US money and lives," he wrote. "Over 70 percent of

Americans wanted out of Afghanistan. And I believe 100 percent of them had the same opinion I had due to the lack of facts.”

He added, “I have been missing-in-action pertaining to the fact that this war 20 years old, saw young people, including girls, that grew up in an environment free of totalitarianism that permitted them to be educated. I can’t imagine being brought up in a society knowing that a murderous monster in the Taliban was patiently awaiting at the border. The fate of a 17 year old kid plunging to his death in his attempt to flee brought this reality home. I did not realize that over 50,000 Afghans died over the past 7 years fighting the Taliban and in many cases without pay or ammunition. It no longer appears to me that they were the cowards who refused to fight portrayed by the last two administrations.”

I took a couple things away from the commenter’s words.

For starters, he made a really good point about the false perception he and most Americans had of Afghanistan. Once widely seen as the “good war,” our continued deployment there eventually took on the same stigma as the “bad war,” Iraq.

The narrative went something like this: If we were still there years later, having to hold a Middle Eastern government’s hand while terrorist groups targeted our soldiers, it was time to call it quits. This reasoning was perpetuated not just by anti-war activists, non-interventionists, and media liberals, but also by a bipartisan consensus among the last three U.S. presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden).

Few people of public influence were making a case for staying, even with that case being very strong. This included some traditionally hawkish Republican leaders, many of whom were worried about crossing Trump.

Coupled with dwindling media interest in the country (including the “conservative” media), few Americans understood that the U.S. had officially ended combat operations in

Afghanistan back in 2014, and had since been serving in a supporting, stabilizing role, helping to train and provide resources for the Afghan National army, as well as lend a hand to NATO troops. Few understood that no U.S. soldiers had been killed there in combat for over a year. And last week, when 13 U.S. service members were killed in the Kabul attack, I'm guessing that most Americans were shocked to learn that our military hadn't had a day that deadly in Afghanistan in a decade, and that we hadn't lost that many U.S. service members there in any of the last several *years*.

Of course, in a sense, this is all a moot point now that we've completed our withdrawal, as mindbogglingly incompetent and stunningly callous as it was. So, let me get my second take-away from the commenter's words. It has to do with character and credibility.

To be clear, I already respected this individual prior to his remarks. But one's willingness to admit a political error, rather than spin it into an alternative narrative to save face or run interference for their side of the aisle, is so unheard of these days that it's worth drawing attention to and commending.

After all, it's a hard thing to do. No one likes to admit that they got something wrong, especially when it comes to politics. Back in 2016, in my political writing, I treated a Trump loss to Hillary Clinton as an inevitability. I was sure he would lose. And then he won... and I ate some crow. I didn't enjoy eating it, but it was the table I set for myself, and I learned something from it.

Something I think is truly poisonous to our politics is the inability of people to admit that they were wrong, or even to acknowledge that they held a previous position once that position becomes politically inconvenient. Such examples aren't hard to find (especially in recent years and with today's politicians), but the topic of Afghanistan is

particularly striking in this regard, because both sides really mucked things up and are now doing a lot of deflecting to pretend otherwise.

Let's be real here. Any honest, serious discussion of Biden's Afghanistan policy really should begin with one concession made by each side.

Trump supporters should concede that Biden's policy was effectively the same as Trump's. Neither was conditions-based, both meant a full and telegraphed withdrawal (against the recommendations of top military officials), and both foolishly recognized the Taliban as a counter-terrorism partner to the United States. (Heck, Trump even freed 5,000 jihadi prisoners at the Taliban's demand). The only real distinction was that Trump wanted out even faster than Biden (May 1st to be exact).

One can argue that, had Trump won re-election, his military advisors would have managed to talk him out of the foolhardy withdrawal he'd begun and was clearly passionate about completing. Or... one can speculate, using whatever rationale they choose, that the withdrawal itself would have been less chaotic under Trump, with fewer lives lost and more equipment salvaged (or destroyed). I personally have no confidence that would have been the case, for reasons described in my last column and also the Taliban's movements over several weeks. (Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it's hard to get it back in). But it's certainly possible that at least some of the chaos would have been mitigated.

However, the real problem, as Chris Stirewalt effectively argues, wasn't just a few weeks of incompetency and dishonest messaging from the administration. It was the policy itself.

Afghanistan falling back under Taliban rule, along with all of the human-rights atrocities, murder, lawlessness, lost intel and strategic positioning, and terrorist invigoration that came with it, was both administrations' recognized outcome.

Regardless of what they said publicly, they knew it would happen (though assuredly believing it would take longer than it did), and they decided it was an acceptable consequence of U.S. withdrawal.

What Biden's supporters should concede is that, counter to what the president has been saying, Biden was under absolutely no obligation to advance the policy of his predecessor. He consciously chose to, he'd wanted to leave Afghanistan for a long time (regardless of the conditions on the ground), he pulled the trigger on this mess, and now he – not Trump – owns the results and should be held accountable for them.

But is either side making those concessions?

To be fair, some on the left (outside of the administration) have been more willing than I was expecting to rightfully lay the blame on Biden. This has included, as Bernie Goldberg wrote in a recent column, a number of liberal journalists.

And on the right, some prominent Trump supporters in the media have been calling things straight as well:

This is totally Biden's shit show – he owns it. But how can anyone defend Trump's releasing 5,000 prisoners at Taliban's demand? And to put it another way, if Biden had released 5,000 prisoners at Taliban's demand before bug out, what would MAGA-world be saying?

– Andy McCarthy (@AndrewCMcCarthy) August 31, 2021

But people like Andrew McCarthy seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Many others are now acting as if they hadn't supported the policy that led to the chaos they're currently decrying in front of the cameras.

I'm talking about people like House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who advocated for withdrawing from Afghanistan when

Trump was president (even praising Trump's "deal" with the Taliban), but claimed last week that he was *against* a full withdrawal, and touted how well our prior presence in Afghanistan had been working to keep the peace.

I'm talking about people like Senator Josh Hawley, who also outspokenly supported withdrawing from Afghanistan under Trump. Hawley even praised Biden back in April for following through with the policy (while chiding him for not moving fast enough). Now Hawley's calling on the president to resign.

I'm talking about people like Newt Gingrich, who's been assailing Biden day after day on social media and Fox News, slamming the president for placing trust in the Taliban. It's a valid criticism, but last year Gingrich praised Trump for doing the same thing.

And of course, I'm talking about regular folks on social media and in political comment sections who were all on board with getting out of Afghanistan ASAP... until a different guy actually did it.

Again, no concessions that they or the guy they were supporting were wrong on any of it, or even reckless or naïve in their actions and aspirations. Just a seamless partisan transition to the other side of the argument.

Of course, a number of people in the pro-Biden camp haven't been any less embarrassing. Check out this alternate-reality take from Matthew Dowd:

The fact is the most honest and competent moments of presidential leadership on Afghanistan over the last 19 years was the last two weeks or so. Don't we want leaders to tell us the truth and serve the public? That is exactly what president Biden did.

– Matthew Dowd (@matthewjdowd) August 31, 2021

Honest? Competent? I had to check multiple times to make sure that wasn't a parody account.

Others haven't been quite as prepared to lavish praise on Biden, but have found other creative ways to run interference for the man, including some really bizarre whataboutism:

It's worth noting that many of the same people attacking the Biden Administration for leaving women's rights behind in Afghanistan are eager to control women's bodies and choices in the United States.

– Dan Rather (@DanRather) September 1, 2021

Yes Dan, pro-life Americans are just like the Taliban. Nailed it. Ugh.

No one likes to be on the wrong side of an argument, but it really shouldn't be this hard to just admit when your own side screws up. It shouldn't be this hard to recognize that a screw-up is still a screw-up, no matter who commits it.

The willingness to do so is not only good for your character and credibility (including when you're critiquing your political opponents), but it also helps your side recognize their mistakes, and hopefully do better going forward.

If you're nothing but a "yes" person for your team, and a "no" person for the other, you can certainly make it far in the world of partisan political commentary, but you're also helping to assure that our leaders, policies, and culture have little incentive to improve.

And when it comes to issues like terrorism and national security, we should all have a vested interest in improvement.

Sean Coleman is back in John A. Daly's upcoming thriller novel, "Restitution." [Click here to pre-order.](#)