

Biden's Embarrassingly Low Bar for a Successful Withdrawal

My friend Charles Lipson succinctly summarized President Biden's speech the other day claiming credit for evacuating all US troops from Afghanistan. "Every one of (his) claims is false. Calling the evacuation mission an 'extraordinary success' is worse than false. It is shameful. Biden is taking credit for a humiliating defeat that leaves thousands of innocents behind."

In addition to those innocents, other things left behind include roughly \$85 billion in top-line US military equipment. According to Jim Hoft, our Taliban adversaries now possess over 600,000 infantry weapons, 75,000 tactical vehicles and at least 200 aircraft, including 45 Blackhawk helicopters. In addition to the millions of rounds of ammunition, rockets and explosives now under Taliban control, certain luxuries once reserved for US elites were also discarded: encrypted cell-phones and laptops, stockpiles of advanced body armor and, for good measure, hi-tech biometric detection devices – useful for rooting out regime opponents, Christians, uppity women and other undesirables.

But the question White House spokesperson Jen Psaki is least likely to face from the adoring oopa-loopas in her press room is this: "Jen, if the Kabul operation was a military success, then how would President Biden define a failure?" Instead, the media machine instinctively reacts to any hint of Democratic failure by re-defining success in absurd ways: Not an unseemly strategic retreat under fire but an aerial Dunkirk that should be celebrated! You can almost envision Ms. Psaki tossing her hair as she effortlessly dissembles, "Sure, things got a little crazy there for awhile and yeah, we left some

stuff behind but, c'mon now who cares? And no Americans are really stranded, and certainly not hostages; although we freely concede that some hard cases might be somewhat delayed-in-transit, OK?"

It is precisely the same intellectual defect that the eminent historian Roberta Wohlstetter famously described as "the slow pleasures of self-deception." In his epic foreword to Wohlstetter's classic work on Pearl Harbor, Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling wrote in 1962: "Surprise, when it happens to a government, is likely to be a complicated, diffuse, bureaucratic thing...The results at Pearl Harbor were sudden, concentrated and dramatic...(but the) failure...was cumulative, widespread and rather drearily familiar." I was fortunate enough to have Schelling as one of my grad-school professors. His teachings were often applied during my military career: but they came in especially handy afterwards when I became an on-air military analyst for NBC News. (Thomas C. Schelling, Foreword to Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Sanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962).

In early 2001, the brass at MSNBC asked me to act as technical advisor for a documentary they were planning to release later that year. Predicated on the far-out possibility of a terrorist attack on the American homeland, the creative team asked if its working title – "Attack on Manhattan" – made sense. I replied carefully. "Yes, Islamic terrorists attacked the towers in 1993 so it's reasonable to assume they might do so again. Especially if they can apply some lessons-learned the first time." We met periodically, eventually settling on a coordinated scenario where the main event was a small nuclear weapon smuggled into the basement of World Trade. We reasoned that a tightly confined but powerful explosion might even cause one tower to collapse against the other.

I forgot about the project over a summer where Florida shark attacks and the search for a missing congressional intern dominated network coverage. Connecting with the show's

producer just before Labor Day, I learned that “Attack on Manhattan” was tentatively scheduled to air during the third week of September: September, 2001.

So in one sense, I predicted the events that came horribly true on 9-11 – a day I spent entirely in front of TV cameras acting like someone who knew what was going on. But in another, I was just as shocked as everyone else, despite having an exquisite sense of the possibilities. MSNBC eventually broadcast “Attack on Manhattan” over a year later, a retrospective showing only the might-have-beens and what-if conjectures.

Twenty years down the road, my sense of irony is only deepened by recent events because our nation seemingly remains impervious to history. My book on mission-creep in Somalia concluded with the stark warning, “The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has limits.” But after 9-11, we boldly invaded Afghanistan, that Graveyard of Empires. We never applied those hard lessons from Somalia, much less asking an even more basic question, one that a British professor put to me many years ago when I was studying abroad: What will we do if we win?