

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.](#)

Biden's Rhetorical Absurdities on Afghanistan



Last week, while defending his decision to remove all American troops from Afghanistan, President Biden said of the Taliban threat, "I trust the capacity of the Afghan military, who is better trained, better equipped, and ... more competent in terms of conducting war."

My mouth dropped open at those words, and it wasn't just because I hadn't previously heard anyone – including top military leaders and members of the Biden administration – attempt to make such a case. What also got me was that the

statement flew directly in the face of what was currently going on in Afghanistan... including in real-time reporting from the region.

Civil war was already underway, led by a Taliban offensive in the northern part of the country (a traditional area of government strength). Not waiting for the completion of our withdrawal, the Taliban (in concert with al-Qaeda) had been making huge territorial gains across the nation through various combat operations. According to the *Long War Journal*, they'd already taken over 20 percent of country, half of that (38 of Afghanistan's 407 districts) in a mere six days. Without U.S. support for the first time in many years (not even airstrikes), lots of Afghan troops had already laid down their arms, abandoned their posts, and sought refuge in surrounding countries.

Biden's 'Baghdad Bob' moment wasn't all that different than the president's claims a few months ago that the border situation between Mexico and the U.S. was under control.

Things have since worsened in Afghanistan. Just about every day there are new reports of Taliban gains. The group now holds at least 139 districts, nearly tripling its territorial rule in the span of just two months. Several provincial capitals are now in their cross-hairs.

This incursion was not only predictable, but actually predicted... by just about every military and intelligence expert on the region (everything but the speed at which it has occurred).

The Taliban's ultimate goal is to restore the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Islamic State that was overthrown by the Northern Alliance almost 20 years ago, shortly after 9/11. But for that to occur, the U.S. needs to be gone – something that Biden now says will happen by the end of August.

American withdrawal is shaping up to be a huge mistake by both

President Biden and President Trump – one that would have failed any reasonable cost-benefit analysis in regard to U.S. interests and national security. The faulty “endless war” narrative (which is remarkably never applied to a number of countries where we’ve had U.S. soldiers stationed for much longer), and leaders looking to carve out a significant foreign policy spot for themselves in the history books, have trumped the reality, resources, and hard-earned stability on the ground.

Prior to our withdrawal efforts, U.S. combat operations and casualties in Afghanistan had been very rare. No U.S. soldier has been killed on an operation in well over a year. Our role there had been a supporting, stabilizing one. We’d been helping to train and provide resources for the Afghan National Army, as well as lend support to NATO troops. We had a light and relatively inexpensive military footprint, the presence of which served as an effective deterrent against the Taliban (and their human rights atrocities), an important hub for anti-terror intelligence gathering, and a strategic regional advantage against neighboring threats.

Yet, Biden said in that same press conference last week, “I will not send another generation of Americans to war in Afghanistan with no reasonable expectation to achieve a different outcome. The United States cannot afford to remain tethered to policies created in response to a world as it was 20 years ago.”

The statement undoubtedly sounded good to many Americans... but it was also nonsensical.

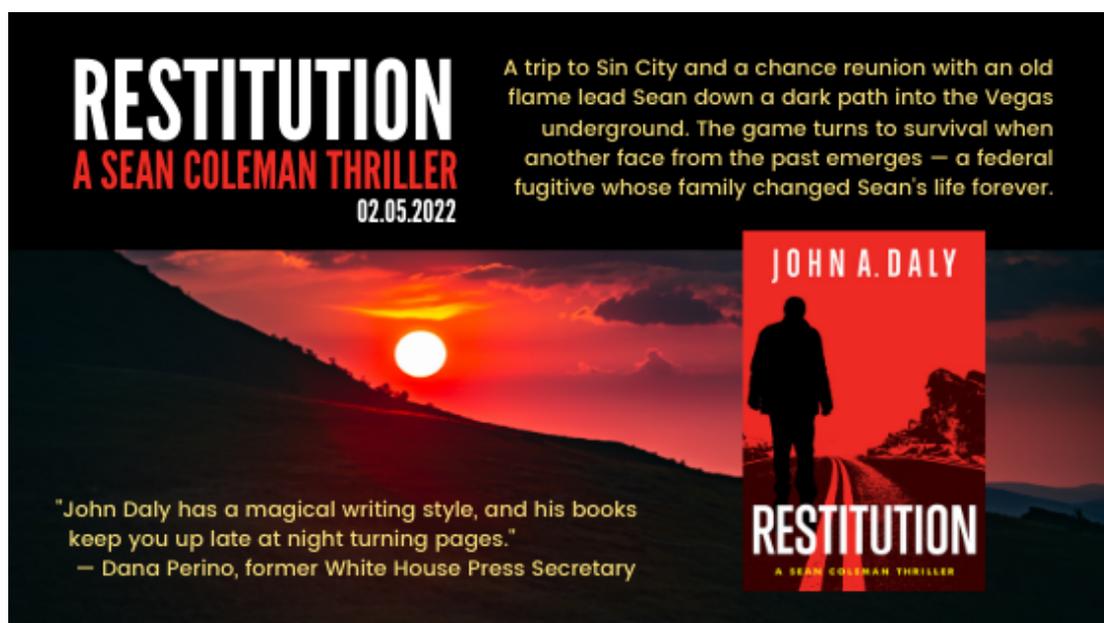
What we’d seen in Afghanistan in recent years (not 20 years ago) resembled more of a “cold war” situation than anything else. American withdrawal, however, is already producing something much closer to the type of war that Biden described. The worsening conditions are far more likely to, at some point, bring back U.S. military operations inside the country.

Biden clearly didn't learn this lesson during the last administration he was in, when the U.S. had to send troops back to Iraq to deal with the horrific ISIS insurgency brought on by our premature withdrawal from the country.

I understand the frustration many Americans have had with the Afghan government's inability to – on their own – prevent a radical extremist takeover of their country. It's a sad reality (despite Biden pretending otherwise), and I've shared that frustration for a long time.

But an open-ended hand-holding operation, that had become a small but lucrative investment for the United States and our allies, was absolutely worth keeping. I'm afraid that will become more and more apparent in the coming weeks and months.

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John Daly's novel "Restitution" is now available for pre-order (click to reserve your copy)!

Trail Balloons

Politicians are always floating trial balloons to test the winds for their various programs. I have my own balloons, and I often wish I could use them to float off to another planet

For instance, I received an email from a fellow who had spent 40 years working in procurement for the U.S. military. He was calling my attention to how quickly the federal government got those signs announcing the shutdown printed and posted all across the country, at every national park and monument. As he says, it's not as if they just happened to have those thousands of 3x4-foot signs lying around since the last shutdown 17 years ago.

He estimates that they had to have started getting them ready at least six months ago, and the only person who could have authorized the massive project is the schmuck in the Oval Office.

On the other hand, he had over a year and \$500 million to spend getting ready for ObamaCare, and that was a total disaster, with apparently only a dozen Americans signed in and signed up after the first two weeks of the grand opening.

My assumption is that merely proves Obama can only juggle one catastrophe at a time, confirming him to be the sort who can walk and chew gum, but not simultaneously.

Some people are convinced that Obama was born in Kenya. I confess that I simply don't know. I confess, though, that it wouldn't shock me to learn that he had been born in the Aloha State. After all, Hawaii is even more liberal than California. In fact, it's so far to the left, they couldn't even find a place for it on the mainland; they had to stick it way out in

the middle of the ocean. Unfortunately, they let it remain above sea level.

By this time, you have probably heard about the school that banned football, baseball and soccer from recess, lest a kid be hurt with a hard ball. Instead, they have them using Nerfballs. I suppose the next step is to eliminate language, history and math, from the curriculum because they're hard subjects.

Along the same lines, the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, has put the kibosh on three postage stamps in a series dedicated to healthy activities. The problem is that they showed a kid on a skateboard without knee pads, a kid cannonballing into a pool and a kid doing a handstand without a helmet.

I'm almost too shocked to ask the question, but what kid has ever performed a handstand while wearing a helmet? And what sort of loon do you have to be to be appointed to this council, and just what activities have they been performing without a helmet that's left them in this tragic brain-damaged condition?

I've noticed that whenever anything unfortunate occurs, we can trust some pompous ass in Washington to declare "We must never allow this to happen ever again," even though it's something they are powerless to prevent. My theory is that by making that pointless statement, it makes them feel as if they've actually done something.

But when I say we must never allow this to happen again, I am referring to the election of Barack Obama, and I mean it. I understand that he, personally, can never run again, but that's not good enough. The thing that must never happen again is electing someone simply because he or she is black, Jewish, Hispanic, gay, female or suffer from a physical disability.

For one thing, it's a really dumb thing to do. I mean, it's

even dumber than most of the reasons we vote for some shmoe. For another, once one of these people is elected president and you happen to disagree with their policy, you will be labeled a bigot, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a homophobe or just plain heartless.

Moreover, if you vote for anyone whose resume mentions time spent as a community organizer, which is just another name for a left-wing troublemaker, you shouldn't be labeled anything. Instead, you should be belted with a baseball bat.

The Nobel Peace Prize, which has replaced the Stalin Peace Prize for all intents and purposes, has gone this year to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a Hague-based group dedicated to eliminating poison gas. But inasmuch as it has no authority to do anything, it's really just another of those organizations with a high-sounding name that's created so that it's overpaid members can live high, wide and handsomely, off their expense accounts.

The million dollar prize could have gone to Malala Yousafzai, the 16-year-old Pakistani who has been an advocate for Middle East girls being given an education. After all, for her efforts to bring civilization belatedly to the Muslim world, she took a bullet in the face when the Taliban attempted to assassinate her last year. There is still a fatwa on her and her father. The only risk to those clowns who received the Peace Prize is a severe case of the gout.

Generally when it comes to our nation's enemies, we speak longingly of bombing them back to the Dark Ages. However, when referring to the Taliban and their vile comrades in Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, who already dwell in the Dark Ages, their appropriate fate would be to wake up with missing limbs in the Ice Age.

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