

Lessons of Freedom From 20 Years of War Against Jihadism

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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In mid-August, owing to shoddy planning and execution, the Biden administration's frenetic troop withdrawal paved the way to the Taliban's lightning takeover of Afghanistan. The United States left stranded behind enemy lines "[at least hundreds of U.S. citizens](#)" and [tens of thousands](#) of Afghans who supported American efforts. Billions and perhaps tens of billions of dollars of weapons — from pistols, assault rifles, and machine guns, to Humvees, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft — [fell into](#) Taliban hands. In self-defense, Biden and his team launched volleys of obfuscation, culminating with the president's Aug. 31 White House [speech](#) in which he portrayed flagrant ineptitude as the "extraordinary success" of tough-minded statecraft dealing with the inevitable disarray and violence following a hard-but-correct decision to end America's two-decades-long military presence in Afghanistan.

With the crisis unfolding on the ground halfway around the world, White House gaslighting heightened confusion about the purpose of American foreign policy. Even as the [Chinese Communist Party's quest for global hegemony](#) has supplanted Islamic extremism as America's leading geopolitical challenge, the Biden administration's Afghanistan debacle shows that the United States has yet to come to grips with the lessons for freedom from America's 20 years of war against jihadism.

Neither military necessity nor sober diplomatic calculation determined President Biden's decision to remove all American troops from Afghanistan by Aug. 31 in the middle of the Taliban's warm-weather fighting season, much less his team's conduct of the tragically ill-conceived pullout. Contrary to his insistence — in an Aug. 16 White House [address](#) to the nation, which he repeated in White House [remarks](#) on Aug. 20, at an Aug. 26 White House [press conference](#), and again on Aug. 31 — Biden was not hamstrung by the Trump administration's February 2020 [agreement](#) with the Taliban. Since taking office in January, the 46th president has aggressively exercised his executive prerogative to rescind Trump administration executive orders, repudiate Trump administration priorities, and reverse Trump administration policies. Had the Biden administration genuinely considered itself bound by the Doha agreement, it would have taken seriously the provision that conditioned the withdrawal of American troops on “[g]uarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.” The Taliban's manifest failure to live up to their end of the bargain nullified the United States' obligation to complete the withdrawal. Nothing in the Doha agreement, moreover, compelled the Biden administration to [vacate](#) Bagram Airfield in early July in the middle of the night, well in advance of the final troop pullout and without informing the base's Afghan commander. Nor did the agreement require the Biden administration to complete the withdrawal before evacuating all American nationals and Afghans who had worked with the United States.

Biden also repeatedly misled the nation by suggesting that he faced a stark choice: continue America's failed efforts at nation building or remove all American troops. Biden falsely implied that the only conceivable purpose of retaining a modest military presence in Afghanistan was to promote democracy and freedom. There was also, for example, our [counterterrorism mission](#) to consider. The president could have ordered a small security contingent to remain in Afghanistan to preserve the stalemate. By continuing to provide aircover and intelligence, several thousand U.S. troops could very well have sustained the Afghan National Army. This would prevent the country from falling into the Taliban's hands and reverting to a launching pad for jihadism against American targets around the world.

Meanwhile, though the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan might trigger "a surge of regional instability," Zhou Bo, a senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army from 2003 to 2020, boasted in the New York Times that China "is ready to step into the void left by the hasty U.S. retreat to seize a golden opportunity," including Chinese Belt and Road Initiative construction projects in Afghanistan and mining of the abundant rare-earth mineral deposits there. Chinese state-run media warned Taiwan that American fecklessness in Afghanistan shows that the United States cannot be trusted.

Aesthetics and domestic political considerations seem to have impelled Biden to set a firm date of Aug. 31 to make a clean break with his predecessors' policies. Proud of its commitment to making American foreign policy work better for the middle class and working class, the Biden administration pandered to its own dubious perceptions of those classes' preferences. Apparently, the president and his advisers anticipated a public relations bonanza from celebrating the conclusion of America's involvement in Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks.

The costs of this subordination of national security to partisan politics are staggering. The U.S. actions that plunged Afghanistan into chaos are reverberating around the world. The demonstration for all to see of weakness, amateurishness, and perfidy disheartens America's friends and emboldens America's enemies. And it compounds confusion and controversy at home — two decades in the making and growing — about America's purposes abroad.

In 2000, George W. Bush campaigned against nation building in foreign policy and in favor of humility on the world stage. In September 2001, eight months after he entered the White House, he confronted the smoldering ruins of the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center, the charred and gaping gash in the Pentagon, and the burned-out remnants of United Flight 93 in a western Pennsylvania field, along with the almost 3,000 Americans killed and tens of billions of dollars of near-term damage to the country. Al-Qaeda's attacks that day, undertaken in service of the

religious war that Osama bin Laden [declared](#) in 1996 against the United States and the freedom and democracy to which it is dedicated, changed President Bush's calculations. In the face of the threat posed by rogue states as well as stateless terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction — biological, chemical, and nuclear — Bush resolved that the United States must go on the offensive.

In October 2001, he dispatched troops to Afghanistan to eliminate the haven that the ruling Taliban provided to bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. Within two months, Operation Enduring Freedom destroyed al-Qaeda's camps and routed the Taliban. Determined to prevent Afghanistan from serving again as a base for jihadism, the administration eventually adopted the promotion of democracy and freedom in Afghanistan as one of its objectives.

In mid-March 2003, Bush launched Operation Iraqi Freedom to oust Saddam Hussein who, in defiance of numerous U.N. Security Council Resolutions, had long pursued WMD. By the end of April, coalition forces drove Saddam from Baghdad and gained control over the country. Following the conclusion of major military operations, U.S. and international investigators, despite uncovering numerous plans and programs, found little evidence that the dictator had made significant progress in acquiring WMD. Convinced, nevertheless, that dictatorship was a principal source of poverty, religious extremism, and political instability in the Middle East, the Bush administration expanded the U.S. mission in Iraq to include the promotion of democracy and freedom.

Gross miscalculations, grave setbacks, and recurring deceptions and self-deceptions in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last two decades have brought nation building — another way of saying the promotion of democracy and freedom, since rights-respecting democracy is the only sort of regime that the United States seeks to build — into disrepute. [More than 7,000](#) American soldiers lost their lives in Afghanistan and Iraq and tens of thousands were wounded. Direct Afghanistan and Iraq war [costs](#) to the U.S. taxpayer exceed \$2 trillion. Notwithstanding genuine accomplishments in the two countries, Iraq's Shiite-led government leans toward Iran, the world's leading state-sponsor of

terror and the United States' primary adversary in the region, while a better trained and equipped Taliban now control more of Afghanistan than on 9/11. For many on the left and the right, the Biden administration's calamitous pullout cements the conclusion they reached by the end of the Bush administration: promoting democracy and freedom are beyond America's capabilities, impose destabilizing practices and institutions on local populations, and have no place in a responsible U.S. foreign policy.

The better conclusion, however, is that to serve the nation's surpassing interest in securing the conditions conducive to freedom at home, U.S. foreign policy must responsibly identify opportunities to advance it abroad. In support of that conclusion, the two decades since the Sept. 11 attacks furnish several lessons of freedom, paid for with blood and treasure.

First, the conventional categories of foreign policy analysis — realists vs. idealists, isolationists vs. interventionists, and nationalists vs. globalists — should be set aside because they reflect hidebound dichotomies that derail clear thinking about America's role in the world. The challenge is not to choose one of the poles but to secure American freedom by striking a reasonable balance among competing imperatives. U.S. foreign policy should begin with a clear-eyed assessment of the motives, aims, and geopolitical logic that drive nation-states while never losing sight, on the one hand, of how customs and ideas shape regime conduct and, on the other hand, of the rights inherent in all human beings. U.S. foreign policy should be grounded in America's needs and priorities, which include the preservation of a free and open international order, while fashioning plans to act abroad — from speeches, educational initiatives, and foreign aid to (always as a last resort) military operations — to defend U.S. interests. And U.S. foreign policy should insist that sovereign nation-states are the fundamental political unit of international affairs even as securing freedom at home compels America to cultivate a diversity of friends, partners, and allies and to maintain — and reform — international institutions to promote comity and commerce among nations.

Second, the United States must distinguish between promoting democracy and promoting freedom. Both conservatives and progressives have a bad habit of treating these undertakings as synonymous. They are not. Although liberal democracies such as the United States weave together freedom and democracy to the benefit of both, they are separable and distinct achievements. Democracy refers to the people's rule through fair elections. Hence, promoting democracy usually implies regime change. In contrast, freedom — which in the first place means the ability to choose how to live one's life instead of being commanded by another — can be a matter of degree and enjoyed to a greater or lesser extent under a variety of regimes. Accordingly, freedom can be advanced — more religious liberty, more economic freedom, more free speech, more independence in the judiciary — incrementally and without replacing an authoritarian regime with a democratic one. Because freer nations are not only more respectful of human rights but also tend to be more productive, more reliable, and more aligned with the United States' interest in a free and open international order, hardheaded political calculation requires the prudent allocation of scarce resources to advance freedom abroad.

Third, America's ability to advance freedom abroad is, in most circumstances, severely limited. In 2012, after devoting the better part of a decade to establishing the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, John Agresto [reconsidered](#) America's post-9/11 foreign policy aims. It is one thing, Agresto argued, to say that all people *deserve* freedom. That proposition [reflects the principles](#) of the American Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Agresto added, it "is flat-out wrong" to say that all people *desire* freedom. That proposition is contradicted by history and the diversity of nations and peoples today. "Indeed, some people would rather be holy than free, or safe than free, or be instructed in how they should lead their lives rather than be free," Agresto observed. "Many prefer the comfort of strong answers already given rather than the openness and hazards of freedom. There are those who would never dream of substituting their will for the imam's or pushing their desires over the customs and traditions of their families. Some men kiss their chains."

Fourth, because the desire for freedom and — equally important to the establishment and preservation of free institutions — the appreciation for the right of others to a like freedom depend on a people's traditions, the U.S. foreign policy establishment must improve its understanding of other nations' cultures. Such cultural understanding is a prerequisite not only to understanding strategic competitors and adversaries but also to determining where advancing freedom is most feasible and to ascertaining the best available means. A crucial step in the acquisition of such cultural understanding is a concerted national effort to encourage the serious study of critical foreign languages.

Fifth, the United States must rededicate itself to educating Americans for liberty. Citizens indoctrinated from grade school on up with the notions that oppression is pervasive in the United States, that government and society must allocate rewards and burdens based on race, and that America is a uniquely iniquitous nation will be in no position to safeguard freedom at home, let alone understand the limited means by which America can advance it abroad. Instead, from K-12 through college the core curriculum must explore the principles of freedom on which the United States is based and the constitutional traditions through which those principles have been institutionalized — an exploration that includes the nation's tragic betrayals of those principles and the heroic struggles to set things right. Individual freedom, human equality, the consent of the governed, limited government, and a foreign policy dedicated to securing American freedom should be seen for what they are — not a set of partisan commitments but the nation's precious heritage and the basis on which right and left in America can constructively debate, and cooperate in determining, what's best for the nation.

The debacle in Afghanistan coupled with the magnitude of the China challenge make the learning of these lessons of freedom from America's 20 years of war against jihadism a vital national interest.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. In 2019 and 2020, he served as Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.

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