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Lessons From Vietnam on Leaving Afghanistan

There's No Good Way to End a Bad War, but Some Options Are Worse Than Others

By George C. Herring

The prospect of an end to the conflict in Afghanistan has led many U.S. foreign policy experts to ponder the ignoble conclusion of another war, now a half century past. Vietnam reportedly offers a cautionary tale for some Pentagon officials who worry about reliving the ignominious events of 1975, when the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (NLF) marched triumphantly into Saigon and the last Americans, along with some South Vietnamese allies, struggled frantically to escape by helicopter. Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker and others who worry about the humanitarian and geopolitical consequences of withdrawing from Afghanistan warn of a “Vietnam redux” and hear “echoes of America’s retreat from Vietnam.” They seem to fear an Afghanistan syndrome, like the so-called Vietnam syndrome before it, that could cripple the United States’ ability to intervene militarily.

Just how similar was the war in Vietnam to the war in Afghanistan, and how similar are their endings likely to be? What will be the consequences of U.S. withdrawal for Afghans and Americans—and what lessons might the United States take from Vietnam to mitigate them?

GRAVEYARDS OF EMPIRES

Vietnam and Afghanistan are both reputed “graveyards of empires,” countries fiercely resistant to the will of even the most powerful outsider. The American wars in both countries were offshoots of larger global conflicts: Vietnam was a Cold War front and Afghanistan a front in former U.S. President George W. Bush’s “war on terror.” In both cases, local insurgent forces who fought the United States took the long view, determined to wait out their superpower foe. “You have the watches,” an Afghan insurgent told an American reporter, “we have the time.”

The United States and North Vietnam negotiated the 1973 peace settlement directly with each other, ignoring their respective allies, the government of South Vietnam and the NLF. In Afghanistan, the United States is now negotiating directly with the Taliban, sidestepping its ally, the government of President Ashraf Ghani. The U.S. ally in Kabul, like its ally in South Vietnam, controls only a fragment of its territory, exercises weak leadership, and is afflicted with political and governmental dysfunction as well as rampant corruption. The Afghan military, like its South Vietnamese counterpart, depends on U.S. financial aid and support. And just as in Vietnam, the timing of a U.S. troop withdrawal is an essential element of any agreement. Now, as then, U.S. officials seek a “decent interval,” in the phrase coined by Henry Kissinger, national security adviser to U.S. President Richard Nixon, between the departure of the United States and the fall of its allied government.

For all that, the two wars are also strikingly dissimilar—beginning with their entirely incomparable scale. U.S. troops in Vietnam peaked at slightly more than half a million, of which more than 58,000 were killed. The United States has committed barely a fifth the forces to Afghanistan and has lost fewer than 3,000. Of course, the enemy is incomparable, too. North

Vietnam was a formidable foe with one of the world's largest armies and substantial outside support from the Soviet bloc and China. The U.S. enemy in Afghanistan is mainly the Taliban insurgents, a far smaller military force backed mostly by Pakistan. No great power rivalry adds complexity or cost to the Afghan war.

The war in Vietnam provoked an outcry at home that would define a legacy shared by no U.S. war before or since. By the time the Paris peace negotiations began in earnest in 1972, that war was deeply and irredeemably unpopular in the United States. Domestic pressure left Nixon and Kissinger, his chief negotiator, little choice but to settle quickly for the best terms possible. In part because of the rift Vietnam opened in the American social fabric, the United States has fought in Afghanistan with a volunteer army, employed far fewer troops, and sought to keep casualties low. There have been no war taxes to rile the public, no street demonstrations to rattle decision-makers. Media coverage has been limited and boosterish. Polls show that a solid majority of Americans think the war was a mistake, doubt that progress is being made, and want to get out. But unlike Vietnam, the present war has not aroused opposition potent enough to force discussion of a withdrawal.

GETTING OUT

Oddly, the major impetus for extrication from Afghanistan has come not from strategic thinkers or antiwar protesters but from a chief executive who is a foreign policy neophyte and who often behaves quite erratically. As a candidate for the U.S. presidency, Donald Trump expressed concern about costly, never-ending wars, such as the one in Afghanistan, and vowed to terminate them. When he took office, his advisers persuaded him to authorize a small increase in U.S. troops instead. Now, with the departure of establishment figures such as former U.S. National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster and former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Trump has again set out, in his words, to extricate the nation from these “endless wars” and “bring our folks home.” The foreign policy establishment and some more hawkish senators, such as Lindsey Graham, the Republican from South Carolina, have sought to obstruct or at least delay the president's plans and sustain the commitment in Afghanistan.

The ignominious end to the war in Vietnam haunts this discussion. Many Americans retain indelible images of North Vietnam's devastating final offensive against the South, the complete collapse of the Saigon government and its army, and the desperate, belated efforts of Americans and South Vietnamese to escape the onslaught. For a nation accustomed to victory in war, such memories are searing. Would a withdrawal from Afghanistan look like Vietnam and have similar consequences for Afghans—and Americans?

At this point, the details of the agreement under negotiation are unsettled. The Taliban seeks an early withdrawal of U.S. troops; the United States favors a process that could take up to three years. U.S. negotiators seek guarantees from the Taliban that terrorists will not again use Afghan territory as a base from which to strike the United States. There is no way to ensure that the Taliban would keep such a pledge, but the group apparently has its own concerns about al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), both of which have nests scattered across Afghanistan, and might seek to curtail their activities for its own reasons. The agreement includes a provision for a cease-fire, which would likely hold only as long as the various parties in Afghanistan want it to—perhaps not long. In Vietnam, the Saigon government broke the cease-fire before the ink on the 1973 agreement was dry; North Vietnam was not far behind.

We can't know what will happen in Afghanistan when the United States withdraws. One possibility is that the country will revert to a Taliban-dominated nation-state and a patchwork of ethnic groups and warlords, just as before 2001. As North Vietnam did in the South after 1975, a Taliban government might try to impose its ideology on the part of Afghanistan it controls, in this case re-creating an Islamic state similar to the one it ran before it was deposed, with all the obvious implications for human rights and the treatment of women.

HISTORY LESSONS

Using historical analogy to inform policy decisions is tricky at best and perilous at worst. Nonetheless, Vietnam may offer some useful lessons for postwar Afghanistan. For instance, Nixon deluded himself into thinking that the promise of economic aid and the threat of renewed bombing would give him leverage over North Vietnam after U.S. troops withdrew. In reality, the Watergate scandal and fierce opposition in Congress and the country to any form of reintervention tied his hands. Even without Watergate, Nixon would likely not have been able to forestall North Vietnam's victory. In Afghanistan, similarly, the United States will have little influence on events on the ground after it has left. The reintroduction of troops seems highly improbable; the most the United States might do would be to attack terrorist bases with bombs and missiles, as it has done in Syria and elsewhere.

Vietnam should also remind us of the costs of wishful thinking in the final stages of war. In the spring of 1975, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin stubbornly refused even to plan for withdrawal, for fear of encouraging the enemy and discouraging the South Vietnamese—a stance that made the U.S. departure more chaotic than it might have been. A quiet, well-planned, orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan would look much different from a Vietnam-like exit under extreme duress. And it would militate against the “Afghanistan syndrome” that many foreign policy analysts fear.

Another lesson from Vietnam is the critical importance of consulting with U.S. allies well in advance of departure. Nixon's announcement of U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam just hours after informing allies of the decision deeply antagonized several of those governments. Australia, the most zealous U.S. ally at the start of the war, responded by disengaging from Vietnam even more rapidly than the United States. The Trump administration should avoid repeating this mistake; unfortunately, its track record in dealing with allies does not bode well in this area. American officials would also do well to follow the courageous example of U.S. President Gerald Ford in welcoming South Vietnamese refugees by providing for the emigration of those Afghans who have been most closely tied to the United States—again, no simple task, especially given the current administration's hostility toward immigration.

Because the war in Afghanistan has largely been invisible to most Americans, the domestic political effect of the withdrawal will likely be less dramatic than with Vietnam. A flap in Congress over who lost Afghanistan seems improbable. The most the withdrawal might do in terms of domestic politics is widen the intraparty rift between Trumpian nationalists and mainstream Republicans and sharpen the already discernible public weariness with costly and interminable conflicts abroad. A survey commissioned by the Eurasia Group Foundation in 2018 shows that a majority of Americans favor a more nationalist approach that prioritizes urgent needs at home over costly campaigns to remake the world in America's image. This represents a shift in attitudes away from public acceptance of a more interventionist policy in the aftermath of

9/11 and exposes a widening gap between the views of the public and those of foreign policy elites—a gap that leaders will have to address when framing future policies.

The options before the United States today are familiar ones. Washington could escalate in hopes of winning the war; it could persist just as it has so far, inviting a prolonged stalemate; or it could put an end to a failed venture that has lasted 18 years and whose long-term costs may run to trillions of dollars. The choice seems obvious. The United States must abandon its fixation with abstractions, such as credibility or the fear of appearing weak, and act instead on the basis of common sense. The most enduring lesson of Vietnam—and Afghanistan—may be that there is no good way out of a bad war except to end it.

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