

Watch the Forest as Well as the Trees

It's always important not to miss the forest for the trees. U.S. government announcements, such as its report of the turnover to the Afghan government of the seventh and last military base in Afghanistan, Bagram, should lead no one to think that U.S. foreign policy has changed worldwide or even in that particular region. Far from it. This is true even if virtually all U.S. troops, except for 600 military personnel, most of them left to guard the U.S. embassy, have left Afghanistan, as reported by *Politico*. (Who knows what the special operations forces will be up to?)

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki (at 1:03) said, "We have every intention of continuing an ongoing presence in Kabul, which is continuing even after we bring our military who are serving home by the end of August." But will those people come home or be redeployed? Can we expect cuts in the military budget? That may hold a clue.

A month earlier Psaki said, "The United States will remain deeply engaged with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure the country never again becomes a safe haven for terrorist groups who pose a threat to the U.S. homeland." In part I translate this to mean that the U.S. military contractors need not lose any sleep.

Note that Psaki invoked the old "safe haven" case for being ready to do something more in Afghanistan—or anywhere else, really. This is the argument that if we aren't careful, certain failing countries could become headquarters for terrorist groups bent on attacking America or Americans. Chief case in point, according to the convention wisdom, is Afghanistan after the Russians left and the U.S. government turned its attention elsewhere. Then came al Qaeda, supposedly given safe harbor by the Taliban.

But the "safe haven argument is a myth—a false but widely believed tale used to justify continuing a policy of perpetual failure," Scott Horton has repeatedly pointed out. (See also Horton's invaluable *Fool's Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan*.) As Horton summarized in *The American Conservative* in 2017, apart from the particular case of Afghanistan, from which the tiny remnant of al Qaeda has long departed, "terrorists don't need safe havens from which to strike. As we've seen in recent attacks in the United States and Europe, one or two men with rifles or a truck can do plenty of damage with no more preparation space than a rented apartment."

Moreover, he adds, "The few dozen core al Qaeda members who survived the initial Air Force bombing campaign in Afghanistan fled the country by the end of 2001 [largely to Pakistan]. They were a non-factor in the war against the Taliban regime, and at no point did they have major influence in the insurgency against the occupation that grew up in later years. If any did come back they would be irrelevant. Afghanistan is exile, as far as anyone

can get from anywhere. *It provides no special access to any Western target.*" (Emphasis added.)

Just to drive the point home, Horton goes on: "The September 11 hijackers, none of whom were Afghans, gained entry to the United States under regular tourist and student visas. The terrorists launched the attacks from Massachusetts, Virginia, and New Jersey. They had planned them in Malaysia, Germany, Spain, California, Florida, and Maryland." (See the article and the book for details on how distant the Taliban was from Osama bin Laden, despite U.S. government efforts to conflate the two.)

Needless to say, the safe-have myth has cost many lives, Afghan and American. And the myth seems not to have outlived its usefulness. The case for the United States as guardian of the globe echoes the myth, even when it is not invoked outright. Never forgetting 9/11 apparently means that the U.S. military and CIA need to be ready to pounce anywhere and everywhere. Nothing that goes on the world can be allowed to escape the attention of our best and brightest, lest we are caught asleep again.

But as Horton points out in the case of Afghanistan and the Middle East, the allegedly vigilant policies are actually counterproductive: rather than avert threats, they produce threats that then are used to justify U.S. intervention. It's been well-documented that 9/11 grew out of long years' of American intervention in the Middle East, especially the close ties with Israel and the Saudi monarchy and the 1990s child-killing sanctions against the Iraqis. (For details, in addition to *Fool's Errand*, also see Horton's encyclopedic *Enough Already: Time to End the War on Terrorism*.)

Provoking threats in order to respond to them is a very old game of state. Whenever U.S. troops suffer casualties in some remote place, I can almost hear a U.S. official saying, "That's why we need U.S. troops there. Without them, who would defend the U.S. troops there?"

In our efforts to keep track of the details of particular interventions, we must not lose sight of the big picture: the U.S. government's lethal and costly self-appointed mission to police the world and its rationalizations for that role. If liberty matters, it's a "little America" policy that we must promote.