

RETRO REPORT

As Afghanistan Collapses, a Lament for ‘Repeating the Same Mistakes’

Shifting objectives led to the expansion of a war that dragged on for almost two decades, and is ending in chaos.

By Clyde Haberman

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Few people in Congress have stood as alone as Representative Barbara Lee did on Sept. 14, 2001. Three days earlier, the United States had endured the most devastating attack ever on its soil. Now Congress was called on to authorize the unleashing of American military power against Al Qaeda and its Taliban enablers in Afghanistan who were held responsible for what has eternally come to be called 9/11.

In the House, 420 members voted to give the president that authority. The Senate agreed, 98-0. Only one lawmaker said no: Ms. Lee, a Democrat representing a district centered on Oakland and Berkeley, Calif. Her vote brought angry denunciations and even physical threats.

“People were calling me a traitor — ‘she’s got to go,’ ” she told Retro Report. “But I knew then that it was going to set the stage for perpetual war.”

That is exactly what it did.

But after 20 years, that perpetual war has finally ended. With the United States-supported Afghan government gone and the Taliban once again in control, Ms. Lee is no longer a lonely skeptical voice in Washington, doubting America’s capacity to reshape a distant and often hostile land. Lessons from the Afghanistan experience form the core of the accompanying video from Retro Report, whose mission is to examine the enduring impact of past events on present policies.

A stiff measure of humility is in order, suggested Richard A. Boucher, who was the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs during the administration of President George W. Bush.

“You can’t remake a country on the American image,” Mr. Boucher said to Retro Report. “You can’t win when you’re fighting people for their own villages and their own territory. Those were lessons we thought we learned in Vietnam. And yet, 30 or 40 years later, we end up in Afghanistan repeating the same mistakes.”

Humility was not a hallmark of United States policy in Afghanistan, even though Mr. Bush and his advisers understood that the country was called “the graveyard of empires” for good reason. Britain had a misadventure there in the 19th century. The Soviet Union had its own in the late 20th century. Somehow, Mr. Bush thought 21st-century America would be different.

Addressing cadets at the Virginia Military Institute in April 2002, a few months after United States-led troops had routed the Taliban, Mr. Bush offered a vision of an Afghanistan reconstituted with Washington’s guiding hand, much as devastated Europe had been after World War II through the Marshall Plan. “True peace,” he said, would not result from military force alone but rather from new networks of roads, hospitals and schools.

Mr. Bush said he understood the history of military conflict in Afghanistan. “It’s been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure,” he said. But he added, with a fleeting, confident smile, “We’re not going to repeat that mistake.”

Mistakes, obviously, were nonetheless made. Among them, in the judgment of many analysts, was the Bush administration’s expansion of its “war on terror” to Iraq. And as the years passed, it became evident that the Afghan leaders on whom Washington had placed big bets would not be the hoped-for instruments of effective, corruption-free governance.

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“I used to say to my guys on the Afghan desk, ‘If we’re winning, how come it don’t look like we’re winning?’ ” Mr. Boucher told Retro Report.

To complicate matters, the Taliban never disappeared. Slowly at first, and then with stunning speed, they regained control.

“The people were not rejecting the Taliban,” Mr. Boucher said. “That was, in the end, because the government couldn’t deliver much for the people.”

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Well before recent weeks, he said, “we should have at least asked ourselves whether it wasn’t really time for us to leave, to say to the Afghans, ‘It’s your place. You run it as best as you can.’”

Now the world is left to wonder whether the relatively moderate image that Taliban leaders have sought to project in recent days should be taken seriously. Or will they, instead, revert to the thuggery of the past, with dissidents killed, ancient monuments leveled, women denied jobs and compelled to wear burqas, and girls forced to leave school?

What lasting lessons the United States has learned remain similarly unclear. For one thing, the congressional vote in 2001 that gave the president open-ended license to use military force is still in force; it has been used as a basis for the deployment of American soldiers to Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen and many other countries.

Across the years, Representative Lee has introduced legislation to revoke this blanket authorization for the White House. She managed to succeed in the House in 2019, but the effort then failed in the Senate.

Her view 20 years ago, she told Retro Report, was that “we need to think through our military response, our national security response, and the possible impact on civilians.”

On that score, she seems unchanged from when she rose in Congress in 2001 to say: “However difficult this vote may be, some of us must urge the use of restraint. Our country is in a state of mourning. Some of us must say, ‘Let’s step back for a moment,

let's just pause, just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today, so that this does not spiral out of control.'"

At the time, "some of us" ended up being "one of us" — just her.

The video with this article is part of a documentary series presented by The New York Times. The video project was started with a grant from Christopher Buck. Retro Report, led by Kyra Darnton, is a nonprofit media organization examining the history and context behind today's news. To watch more, subscribe to the Retro Report newsletter, and follow Retro Report on YouTube and Twitter.

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