

NEWS ANALYSIS

In Afghanistan, an Unceremonious End, and a Shrouded Beginning

The last American flight from Afghanistan left behind a host of unfulfilled promises and anxious questions about the country's fate.



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The end of the United States' longest war was unceremonious — trash blowing across the single airstrip of Kabul's international airport, Afghans lingering outside the gates, still hoping in vain for evacuation, Taliban firing victoriously into the night sky.

In its final days, it was two U.S. Marines shaking hands with Taliban fighters in the dim glow of the domestic terminal. It was lines of starved and dehydrated evacuees boarding gray planes that took them to uncertain futures. It was the Taliban's leadership dictating their terms, as a generation of Afghans pondered the end of 20 years of some kind of expanded hope.

It was highway overpasses and park benches stretched across the United States, named in honor of the war's dead.

The end, at least for the Americans and their Western allies, came on a Monday after the thousands of U.S. troops defending Hamid Karzai International Airport flew out in waves, one lumbering transport plane after another until none were left, in the final hours of the lost war.

Unlike the Soviets defeated before them, the Americans' legacy was not a landscape littered with the destroyed hulks of armored vehicles. Instead, they left all the arms and equipment needed to supply the Taliban, the victors, for years to come, the product of two decades and \$83 billion training and equipping an Afghan military and police forces that collapsed in the face of poor leadership and dwindling U.S. support.



Old Soviet tanks litter the grounds of Bala Hissar, outside Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



Khalil Haqqani, a Taliban leader, appeared at Friday prayers in Kabul this month with an American-made M-4 rifle. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Afghanistan has once more completed a cycle that has repeatedly defined the past 40 years of violence and upheaval: For the fifth time since the Soviet invasion in 1979, one order has collapsed and another has risen. What has followed each of those times has been a descent into vengeance, score-settling and, eventually, another cycle of disorder and war.

It is up to the Taliban, now, to decide whether they will perpetuate the cycle of vengeance, as they did upon seizing power from a group of feuding warlords in 1996, or will truly embrace the new path that their leaders have promised in recent days: one of acceptance and reconciliation.

Nearly 20 years have passed since Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda executed the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, and President George W. Bush announced that the United States would invade Afghanistan as the first act in a global war against terrorism. Now, the United States is contending with how to define its relationship with the same Islamist rulers it toppled in 2001 — again a question of vengeance or acceptance — and how to try to head off the resurgence of any international terrorist threat rising from Afghanistan.

Now, there are smaller prospects of airstrikes in the Afghan countryside that leave the unnamed and faceless dead as data points in a colored bar graph of a barely read United Nations report. No roadside bombs buried in haste, in the dead of night, that might strike a government vehicle or a minibus packed with families.

Instead, there is a widespread anxiety about what the true shape of Taliban rule will be with the Americans truly gone. And there is fear that the chaotic rush of the government's collapse during the Taliban advance could leave an unfixable economy, ruin and hunger.

The United States' conflict in Afghanistan was a long war with a quick end, or so it seemed. But the withdrawal's fate was set more than 18 months ago, when the Trump administration signed an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw from the country by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking Americans, end mass-casualty attacks on Afghans in cities, and prevent Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups from finding refuge in the country.

The Taliban's leverage, earned after years of fighting the world's most advanced military, multiplied as they captured more remote outposts and checkpoints, then rural villages and districts, then the roads in between them. By the beginning of this year, the Taliban had positioned themselves near several key cities, as the newly inaugurated Biden administration weighed whether to honor the agreement made under President Donald J. Trump to depart.

By the time President Biden and NATO announced in April the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces by Sept. 11, the Taliban were already taking district after district. The Afghan security forces were surrendering or being cut down in droves. Soon, provincial capitals too were under siege, despite American air power and an Afghan military that Mr. Biden and other senior officials said was nearly 300,000 strong. But in the final days, the Afghan security forces totaled around just one-sixth of that, according to U.S. officials.



Drawings sent to NATO soldiers hanging on a wall in a departure hall of Bagram Air Field in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



An Afghan soldier firing a machine gun at Taliban positions across the street in Lashkar Gah, in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Afghan troops fled more than fought, but those who were killed with their chests facing their enemy died for a cause that not even their leaders seemed to believe in.

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Even before Mr. Biden's announcement and Mr. Trump's deal with the Taliban, the United States had been in stages of withdrawal since December 2009, when President Barack Obama announced both a surge of tens of thousands of troops and their departure by 2014.

Since then, Afghans and America's allies have been in varying stages of alarm and second-guessing, clambering to secure their future and business interests. This uncertainty reinforced the endemic corruption that the West decried, but continued to feed it with billions of dollars in the hope it might somehow change.

Now, at the end, the Afghan politicians and entrepreneurs and elite who fed off the war's coffers have largely fled. The final U.S. military planes departed, leaving behind at least 100,000 Afghans eligible for resettlement in the United States for their work with the Americans.

The evacuation, which began in July as an orderly and modest relocation of a few thousand Afghans, devolved into an apocalyptic exodus as Kabul collapsed on Aug. 15. Hundreds, then thousands, amassed at the gates; people abandoned their cars; and U.S. forces watched on infrared cameras as people overran their defenses, not with tanks or explosives but with sheer mass.

The Americans and the Taliban then worked together to clear the airport and establish a perimeter after frantic Afghans fell from the underbelly of transport planes and the thud-thud-thud of helicopters evacuated the U.S. Embassy, one of the world's largest diplomatic missions. The evacuation became plagued by scenes that evoked those of another generational American war, when

Saigon fell and helicopters were pushed from ships to sea.



Afghans waving their documents at U.S. Marines standing guard atop the blast walls at the Kabul airport last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A C-17 military transport plane landing at the international airport in Kabul this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

“We have a mutually beneficial relationship with the Taliban,” one soldier said unironically this month, standing near the sea of people holding signs and documents and passports in the dead of night, illuminated by the flashlights attached to rifles held by American soldiers who yelled at them to stop pushing and get back. One person was caught in the string of barbed wire and ripped free by panicked family members as more steel barrier coils were laid in place.

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.

A year ago, or 10 years ago, or 15 years ago, the Taliban were shadows in an adjacent tree line, the unseen specters who turned the ground in front of U.S., NATO and Afghan troops into a mine-laden hell. Each step posed the question of what to do if a friend in front was suddenly blown in half — the tourniquet goes here, the blood type is O positive.

Yet in the final hours of America’s war, the Taliban fully materialized, just down the road or on the other side of the gate in the country’s capital. They were suddenly everywhere, their white-and-black flags orbiting the American positions, controlling the crowd, letting the Americans end the war — but not on American terms.



Buying Taliban flags outside the U.S. Embassy in Kabul this month. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Taliban fighters posing for a photograph in Kabul on Monday, as the Americans completed their withdrawal. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

For the American forces on the ground the final weeks of the war, the task at hand wasn't a presence patrol, or counterinsurgency operations or clear-hold-build or nation-building. There were no raids on Taliban weapons caches or bomb makers because the bomb makers and their commanders now controlled the city.

The young soldiers and Marines instead found ways to help those who were lucky enough to make it near the airport gates at all. They pulled people through the threshold to what Afghans believed would be a better life. Sometimes those Afghans didn't have the right documents, so they were turned away.

Beyond the trauma of having to give that rejection, and face that desperation, the Americans would once more face the loss of comrades in Afghanistan in those final hours — 13 U.S. service members, killed by an Islamic State terrorist attack on Thursday as they tried to sort a crowd of Afghans holding their documents out for consideration. Almost 200 Afghans were killed in the same attack, in a devastating coda of carnage.

In Qatar, Kuwait, Germany and the United States, tens of thousands of Afghans sit in processing centers, out of the shadow of the Taliban's new-old government, but uncertain of when or how they might make it to America.

In the United States, historians and analysts will look back on the failed solutions and the misguided strategies and general officers who assured victory even though in off-the-record briefings and closed-door sessions they acknowledged that the United States was losing. Perhaps the American people will demand accountability for the thousands of lives and trillions of dollars spent, only for the Taliban to end up back in control, more powerful than they were 20 years ago.

Or perhaps they won't care, and will move on in an America that will continue to be profoundly shaped — politically, economically and personally — by the war, noticed or not.

As for those left behind in Afghanistan, a country of 38 million minus the thousands who have fled or died in recent weeks, all they can do is look forward, asking themselves and anyone who will listen: What comes next?



An abandoned military outpost atop a hill overlooking Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times