'No One Quite Knows What to Say': A War Easily Ignored Ends With Few Answers

At any Army base in Colorado, little acknowledgment as the war in Afghanistan comes to an abrupt and chaotic end.

By Dave Philipps

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FORT CARSON, Colo. — At the main gate of this busy Army post is a sandstone slab etched with the names of Fort Carson soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The slab ran out of room for names in 2005, so the Army added another. And another. And another. Nine slabs now stand by the gate with the names of 407 dead, including the final one, Sgt. Maj. James G. Sartor, who enlisted in the Army in 2001 and was killed by enemy fire in Afghanistan in 2019, on his seventh combat deployment.

Despite so many slabs put up over so many years, this week there was no ceremony at Fort Carson to recognize that the nation's longest war had come to an abrupt and chaotic end. There were no civilians waving homemade signs like there were at the war's start, no pause for a moment of silence.

Soldiers whisked through the gate on the way to training as if it were a normal day. One brigade was just weeks away from returning once more to Iraq.

The same absence of acknowledgment could be found on the civilian neighborhoods and rural crossroads across the country, where people who once flew American flags and stuck yellow ribbons on their cars, this week watched the fall of Kabul on TV and often struggled to weave coherent responses from conflicting threads of 20 years of emotion, memory and, at times, apathy.

Many young Americans grew up with the war in Afghanistan always in the air, ever-present but invisible enough to ignore.

Cody Vallecillo, 21, a cashier at a mall in San Antonio, said he had only passing knowledge "of a war going." But the images of turmoil in Kabul last week jarred him into remembering the conflict, and the conclusion made him feel uneasy. "We should just set them up for success," he said. "But it looks like it was a total failure."

Nearly two thirds of Americans say the war in Afghanistan, which cost an estimated $2 trillion and more than 2,440 lives of American service members, was not worth fighting, according to a poll released by The Associated Press this week. At the same time, the poll found, nearly all Americans remain concerned that foreign extremist groups remain a threat.

Those two sentiments show how the fall of Afghanistan has left the nation in a bind, both fearful of attacks and wary that the kind of military response seen in Iraq and Afghanistan may not offer any remedy.

Some Americans watching the Taliban ride through Kabul in celebration worry that the end of the war isn't an end at all.

"Is it ever going to end? I don't think it will," said Pat Terlingo, 76, a retired school superintendent in Shanksville, Pa. On Sept. 11, 2001, he was fielding calls from parents about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York when he saw a hijacked plane veer past his office window and crash into a nearby field.

After watching the Taliban surge into Kabul last week, he wondered if Afghanistan would end like Vietnam, where the gut-wrenching end to long war settled eventually into lasting peace. Or would instability breed something as dangerous as the wave of ISIS attacks that spread after the Iraq War?

Like nearly all Americans, Mr. Terlingo supported the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but he eventually lost faith as the mission drifted and faltered. This year, he supported the decision to withdraw. But he is worried that 20 years in Afghanistan may not have made his rural community much safer than it was in 2001.

Jason Dempsey, 49 deployed twice as an Army officer to Afghanistan, where he worked to train Afghan forces. Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

There will almost certainly be soul searching in military think tanks and war colleges, just as there was after the Vietnam War, said Jason Dempsey, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who deployed twice to Afghanistan, and wrote a book about military and civilians relations. But one unintended lasting lesson, he added, may be the military now knows how to conduct a war that can go on indefinitely, what he called "the upper limit of how much you can spend on a war indefinitely, both in cash and lives, without people paying too much attention."

One lasting impression the public may take away from Afghanistan, he said, is that the military is not so much a heroic problem solver as a vast federal bureaucracy that doesn't always do well when its generals are allowed to assess their own performance.

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.

"For years the military graded its own homework and said it was winning," said Mr. Dempsey "And civilians started wondering if we should be in Afghanistan, but did they call their congressmen? Did they protest in the street? No. Because there is no personal sacrifice. It's easy to ignore a catastrophe when it isn't yours."

Now that it has come crashing down, he said, "no one quite knows what to say."

When President Biden announced the remaining troops were leaving Afghanistan before the end of the summer, some members of the public felt like it was coming ten years or more too late.

"I always thought it would be difficult but not impossible to do what needed to be done in Afghanistan," said Bryan Smith, a university administrator at Florida A&M University. "I also think we have not always taken into consideration that everybody doesn't do democracy like we do."

It wasn't hard to find people who wanted to avoid the troubling questions of a long war by casting blame on one administration or another. It's not as easy to dismiss those questions for the 775,000 military men and women who deployed there. All week veterans have been reaching out to one another, many have posted the phone number for veterans crisis hotlines on their social media.

At the Army post's museum, Afghanistan is already an exhibit, complete with oil paintings of notable battles, showing uniforms already quaintly dated. The ground fought over in places like Kamdesh, recounted in that history, is already as unfamiliar to young soldiers as names like Somme or Khe Sanh.

On Friday, three privates who were in preschool in 2001 were taking a break at a local Starbucks near the post. Sipping fruit refreshers, they seemed to take the week's developments in stride. The past may have been dismal, the present lacking the solemn recognition it might deserve, the future uncertain, but all three said they were there to do what the nation asked of them, whatever it might be. The fall of Kabul hadn't changed that one bit.

One private, who declined to give his name because he wasn't authorized to speak, said it didn't bother him that the civilian world seemed to go on with little thought about the military efforts overseas.

"That's what I want, that's why I'm here," he said. "I don't want the country to have to worry."

Campbell Robertson contributed reporting from Shanksville, Pa., Audra D. S. Burch from Hollywood, Fla., and Edgar Sandoval from San Antonio.