

Why Afghanistan matters

Andrew Hamilton 24 August 2021

Most early commentary on the swift coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan has focused on how it happened and who was to blame for it. Much of the blame has been focused on United States President Biden and former President Trump. Increasingly attention has turned to the plight of people in Afghanistan, particularly women and those who helped the occupation forces and women. The quest for guilty parties obscures deeper questions about the reasons for Western involvement in Afghanistan and for its abandonment, and about their effect on the human beings affected by it.



The most important people involved are the Afghan people themselves. They have lived under the occupation and must now live under the Taliban. It is difficult, however, for an outsider to generalise about them. We do know the responses of the mainly urban Afghans who have benefited from it and will fear the leaving. These include women, particularly in cities, won greater freedom and access to education and public life, interpreters and others who have

worked with the occupation forces, and minority ethnic groups who had found some respite from persecution. Others benefited through their businesses from the influx of money, or in less tangible ways through interaction with individual soldiers and the charitable activities they sponsored.

These, however, form only a small proportion of the Afghan people, most of whom are rural and have lived off the land before and during this latest invasion of their land. They will have to deal pragmatically with the Taliban and local war lords, as they did with the Taliban and the Government Forces, hedging their bets in order to survive.

The crucial Afghan group affected by the invasion and its ending is the Taliban. Their dispositions and actions will affect all the people whom they rule. We have no reason for believing that their regime will be less severe its adherence to a religious ideology focused on punitive law, and social practices marked by the control of women by men. Since first coming to power, they have been invaded, driven from power, regrouped, been attacked and finally returned to power. Such experiences do not make men gentle.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the Taliban as homogenous. Some Taliban leaders clearly see the need for international recognition and access to Afghan funds in overseas banks. They have promised moderation. The warriors who are given local responsibility, however, will have not been trained for leadership and compromise in a time of peace. As the airport bombing shows, they will also have to decide how in government they will relate to groups with a similar ideology. It would not be surprising if there are mixed signals.

When reflecting on the occupation of Afghanistan and its ending, we must also consider the motivation of the human beings who planned it, overthrew the Taliban government, decided to rebuild a nation in their own image, and finally decided to cut their losses and leave. Initially directed ineffectively against Osama Bin Laden after the Twin Towers destruction, the plan developed into the military occupation of Afghanistan and then into regime change and the military management of a client government.

Ultimately the leaders of the United States committed themselves to these courses of actions, and Australian leaders decided to join them, because they saw them to be in their own interest, and because they had the power to do so. In a broader context such actions were another phase of 'the great game' in which for over a century Western powers tried to serve their own strategic interests by using military force to control the rulers and routes of Afghanistan. Such decisions have consistently been fed by a fear of a contagious Muslim conspiracy that would spread beyond Afghanistan into the Soviet Union, the Middle East and beyond.

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The Russians and Americans who planned the occupation of Afghanistan looked only at their own self-interest, paying no attention to the wishes or the welfare of the persons on whom the invasion would impact. The argument for the latest occupation was essentially utilitarian, based on the argument that the desired end of punishing and wiping out a small, lethal terrorist group justified the means of invading a nation with all the consequences for its people's lives.

The self-interest of this project, however, was masked by representing the conflict as one between good and evil. This move was fateful. In Afghanistan it also had long precedents. The Spanish and Portuguese saw their conquests in the Americas as the triumph of Christianity over paganism. The British, like the Romans, saw their actions as the triumph of civilisation over barbarism. In occupying Afghanistan the United States and Australian politicians portrayed the Taliban as violent, enslaving and authoritarian, in contrast to the civilisation building, freedom loving and democratic spirit of the invaders. In such a conflict, who could not salute the flag of freedom and democracy, even if it was flown on the frigate of self-interest?

When you act out of self-interest, you face three dangers in promoting such a self-congratulatory account. The first is that you will believe it yourself, and so carry your actions far beyond what self-interest dictates. That occurred in Afghanistan where it led intelligent men to describe the occupation as a nation-building exercise. It committed the United States to enormous expenditure on a doomed project, and ensured that when — like the Romans, the British and the Russians before them — they eventually withdrew, it would be seen as a failure and even a betrayal.

The second danger is that to clothe yourself in virtue will cloud your understanding of how you will be seen by others, including those whom your self-interest leads you to harm. You will assume that they will be persuaded by your self-proclaimed virtue and will subscribe to your ideals. They, of course, will recognise the dominant self-interest in your actions. The virtue of democracy to which politicians in the United States and Australia laid claim is based on respect for the will of the people who are affected by the actions of governments. Yet in occupying Iraq and Afghanistan they took no account of what the people of those nations wanted. Their claim could only be seen as hypocrisy.

The third danger is that you will corrupt your own public discourse to the extent that any appeal to such values as truth, respect, democracy, humanity and virtue are dismissed as the camouflage of self-interest. That is the harvest that Western societies now risk reaping.

For the people of Afghanistan, the great immediate danger they now face will come less from the Taliban than from the perceived self-interest of the vanquished. The people will be at risk of starvation. If Western nations, which are already walling themselves from refugees do not consider the humanity of the Afghan people they may again see it to be in their geopolitical interest to withhold funds and to support armed resistance to the Taliban. In that case they will sink further into the moral morass by inflicting this further cruelty of famine on an already much abused people.



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Main image: Kabul city view, Afghanistan (Christophe Cerisier / Getty images)