

Bill Kaplan: Afghanistan is not Kansas City or Iowa

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Washington Post media critic Margaret Sullivan wrote: “Headlines fail to capture complexities of Afghanistan morass ... Biden has been in office for just over seven months; the always untenable Afghan War – and its sure-to-be-terrible ending – has been a disaster for decades. It cuts across political parties: begun by a Republican, George W. Bush, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and presided over by two Obama terms and four years of Trump.”

Arrogance and fear led U.S. policy makers, with overwhelming public support, to exceed the justifiable objective of getting Osama bin Laden. Instead, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter having no connection to 9/11 (or weapons of mass destruction). Then the U.S. began nation-building, with huge human and fiscal costs. It turned out to be easy to initiate-replicate strategic blunders, but harder to end. President Biden deserves immense credit for making the right choice strategically to end the Afghan War, despite tactical missteps.

Over a decade ago, then Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russ Feingold courageously said: “A large, open-ended (U.S.) presence in Afghanistan is counterproductive to our global fight against al Qaeda. Rather than pour resources into a nation-building strategy ... we should develop a timetable to end our massive presence in Afghanistan, so we are better able to go after al Qaeda’s global network.” Feingold also called for a tax to pay for the war; positions generally shared by former Wisconsin Democratic Representative Dave Obey and current Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin.

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However, the U.S. continued the delusional route of nation-building. It's a colonial strategy and not new. In 1940, Nebraska GOP Senator Kenneth Wherry said: "With God's help, we will lift Shanghai up and up, ever up, until it is just like Kansas City." As the Taliban took over, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction issued its final report. Its leader, John Sopko, said: "It was a little bit of hubris here that we thought it was easy to turn Afghanistan into, you know, Iowa. ... We didn't understand Afghanistan, we didn't appreciate their culture. We didn't appreciate the nuances of working there and also the history of working there, their views toward foreigners and foreign invasions over centuries."

The report further emphasized why U.S. intervention ended in chaos: "The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapons systems they could not understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls."

Biden - unlike LBJ, Nixon, Bush, Obama or Trump - faced reality. It took guts, knowing that partisan blowback would be savage from the likes of Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson and Representatives Mike Gallagher and Tom Tiffany. The tactical missteps are being corrected, as Americans and Afghans are safely evacuated by U.S. troops in the inescapable fog of war.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.