

Bill Kaplan: Biden ends U.S. intervention in Afghan civil war

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In the aftermath of al-Qaeda's 9-11 terrorist attacks Congress supported military action that was limited and not open-ended. Force was authorized against al-Qaeda and a complicit Taliban-led Afghanistan. In 2011, U.S. troops killed al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden. However, the U.S. remained mired in an Afghan civil war 20 years after 9-11.

The cost has been high: 2,430 U.S. dead, including 35 Wisconsinites; more than 20,000 U.S. wounded; and 157,000 Afghan dead, including 43,000 civilians. The U.S. financial cost is more than \$2 trillion. Our war veterans' healthcare will add costs for another half-century. However, unlike all other U.S. wars, no wartime tax was passed to pay for the war; instead taxes were cut while U.S. troops were fighting.

Afghanistan remains an ethnically divided nation, with murderous hostilities between groups. Pashtuns (control the Taliban), the largest minority, are divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan by an old British colonial boundary . Subsequently, U.S. military intervention in the Afghan civil war has helped destabilize a nuclear-armed Pakistan. No Afghan government has had legitimacy given ethnic conflicts, massive electoral fraud, endemic corruption and widespread poverty. Afghanistan is an endless quagmire.

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Optimism has been unwarranted throughout. But in 2015, General Douglas Lute, Ret., top U.S. strategist, said: "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of

Afghanistan – we didn't know what we were doing. ... We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking." Despite President Obama temporarily tripling U.S. troops to 100,000 the war still went badly. Badly-led Afghan troops had little incentive to fight and desertions were never-ending. Massive U.S. firepower did not compensate. Much of Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban.

President Biden, drawing on his long experience, has come to the right conclusion. He said: "I'm now the fourth United States president to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth. I've concluded that it's time to end America's longest war. It's time for American troops to come home." He honored the sacrifice of U.S. troops by going to Arlington National Cemetery's Section 60, where U.S. dead from the Afghan civil war are buried.

Retired Wisconsin Democratic Representative Dave Obey reached the same conclusion earlier. In 2009, he warned President Obama about repeating the mistakes of the Vietnam War by sending more troops to Afghanistan. He reminded Obama about a taped conversation between LBJ and Georgia Democratic Senator Richard Russell: "Well, we know this is damn near a fool's errand, but we don't have any choice." Obey also proposed a "war surtax" to pay for the war. Obey was willing to speak truth to power.

Finally, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin said: "I honor the service and sacrifice of the troops who served in Afghanistan, and I support President Biden's plan to bring our service members home ... in a safe and responsible manner. I also believe we need to recommit ourselves to doing more for our post 9-11 war veterans and their families."

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