

Bill Kaplan: Biden right about Afghanistan, despite partisan cheap shots

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President Biden ended “20 years of war in Afghanistan – the longest war in American history.” Although Americans overwhelmingly supported invading Afghanistan, few of them served in the military or fought there. Nor did Americans pay a war tax. Instead, like the Iraq War, our taxes were cut; a first in U.S. history. However, the cost of war was huge: about 2,500 U.S. dead, including 35 Wisconsinites, more than 20,000 U.S. wounded, well over 164,000 Afghans dead and a U.S. fiscal bill of \$2.3 trillion.

The U.S. withdrawal took place in the fog of war, under hostile fire. 13 U.S. troops were killed and 20 more were wounded, including 1 Wisconsinite. Counterinsurgency wars inevitably end in chaos and death. And, the U.S., despite being a super power, has never prevailed in these conflicts. The U.S. must reject intervening in a civil war or foolishly attempting nation-building. The U.S. lost the Afghanistan War many years ago.

However, from the beginning there was unwarranted optimism. In 2011, U.S. Army Lt. General William Caldwell, who led the U.S. training command in Afghanistan, said: “We’ve made tremendous strides, incredible progress. They’re probably the best-trained, the best-equipped and best-led of any forces we’ve developed yet inside of Afghanistan. They only continue to get better with time.” Many U.S. commanders shared this delusional view, despite later reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

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But U.S. Navy Admiral Ret. Mike Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently said: “I thought we could turn it around, obviously, I was wrong.” Biden made the right strategic decision, despite tactical missteps. Other U.S. presidents, fearful of conservative backlash and humiliation, dug the hole deeper. It did not take long before the partisan cheap shots commenced.

The headlines said it all: “On Afghanistan, GOP Assails the Pullout It Had Supported Under Trump” (NYT), “Republicans hit Biden over Afghanistan, with eye on midterms” (Hill) and “GOP douses Afghanistan withdrawal with misinformation” (Washington Post). The Post reported: “They’ve (GOP) trafficked repeatedly in recent days in false, misleading or unproved allegations involving the Taliban hanging someone from an American helicopter, President Biden skipping a ceremony for 13 Americans killed last week, military dogs being left behind, and \$80 billion in military equipment being left for use by the Taliban. With the assistance of some high-profile conservatives and even congressional Republicans, these reports have proliferated on social media.”

Wisconsin GOP Representative Glenn Grothman “was a cheerleader for Mr. Trump’s withdrawal plans” (NYT). Now he denounces Biden and says U.S. troops should have remained in Afghanistan. And, Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher issues strident news releases disparaging the withdrawal and making “demands” on Biden. They have no strategic alternative, only partisan cheap shots.

Moreover, Congress keeps funding unneeded tanks and vulnerable aircraft carriers and the U.S. nuclear stockpile is many times larger than needed for deterrence. It’s time to end nation-building and have a long overdue congressional debate on the future of the U.S. military – its size, strategy and direction.

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