

U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan doesn't mean peace

written by Scott Scheffer
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U.S. troops detain a civilian in Afghanistan. In 2019, Washington squashed an International Criminal Court investigation of U.S. war crimes.

In April, President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. war in Afghanistan would finally end after 20 years of horrible imperialist destruction. Initially the idea was that the troops would pack up shop by Sept. 11, 2021 – the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack. The pace of the withdrawal was faster than anticipated, and by July 2 U.S. military personnel had put the bases at Bagram, Kandahar, Helmand and others in the rearview mirror.

The war stands out as an example of the destruction and waste wrought during the imperialist stage of U.S. capitalism. The official number of deaths of U.S. soldiers is 2,300, and by some estimates about 6,000 private contractors (mercenaries) died. With the advances in field medicine, battlefield deaths are less frequent now. But the death toll is only part of the story.

What it doesn't reveal are the untold numbers of young people used as pawns in an imperialist war, who in previous times would have died, but now survive and return home as amputees, trauma survivors or otherwise injured for life.

Trillions of dollars were spent that should have been used to alleviate poverty, fight disease, build housing, bolster health care and provide education. U.S. defense contractors reaped the usual billions in profits.

The most terrible toll, however, was borne by the people of Afghanistan. Various sources project the number of deaths between 70,000 and 150,000.

During the occupation and war, poverty increased dramatically. The most recent [assessment by the Borgen Project](#) said that 90% of Afghans struggle to survive. There are very high rates of impaired childhood growth, anemia and wasting. More than 2 million Afghani children have to work to support their families, and 58% of families

are unable to afford adequate food.

Afghanistan was already one of the poorest nations before the Pentagon invasion, but these grim facts illuminate the rapid further deterioration caused directly by the U.S. occupation and war.

Destruction began long before invasion

Twenty years is how long there were U.S. troops in Afghanistan, but the destruction actually goes back more than 40 years.

For a short time, there was hope that there could be a better direction for Afghanistan. In April 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a socialist party, came to power. The PDPA reflected a growing fervor for socialism among young people in Kabul and other semi-urban areas.

The Saur Revolution began when the entire party leadership was jailed by the old government. Soldiers mutinied and broke the jailed leaders out, the old U.S.-leaning government was overthrown, and hopes for a new era emerged.

Afghanistan was largely feudal and run by powerful landlords. Among many progressive measures, the PDPA carried out a massive land reform program that wiped out debts of agricultural workers and began to redistribute land. The socialist government began literacy programs for everyone and made mandatory public education available for women.

[Anahita Ratebzad](#), a Marxist-Leninist leader and member of the PDPA government's Revolutionary Council, famously wrote an editorial in the Kabul Times just after the formation of the socialist government, saying: "Privileges which women, by right, must have, are equal education, job security, health services and free time ... Educating and enlightening women is now the subject of close government attention."

In response to the progressive changes underway in 1978, the CIA embarked on what would eventually become its largest operation to date. Dubbed “Operation Cyclone,” the U.S. agency gathered up, armed and funded an opposition movement.

The spy group recruited from among the Afghan landlords, and from countries near and far, to build a reactionary, anti-communist insurgency. President Jimmy Carter’s administration gave the green light and funding to the CIA for this destructive project in July 1978 — just 3 months after the formation of the PDPA’s socialist government.

Soon, young people, teachers and women who were taking part in the progressive transition were being gunned down in the streets. The socialist government was under siege.

Media spread lie of ‘Soviet invasion’

Although the Western media has manipulated the timeline to say that the U.S. intervened after a “Soviet invasion,” it was actually only after the mayhem of the CIA’s Operation Cyclone took root that the PDPA government asked the neighboring Soviet Union for military assistance.

The Soviet Union sent troops and equipment. In response, the Carter administration went full-court-press in terms of propaganda, boycotting the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, giving incensed speeches, and sending National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to the Khyber Pass for an infamous publicity stunt, pointing towards Afghanistan with a rifle in his hand.

It was Brzezinski who was the architect of the notion of using Afghanistan as a way of forcing the USSR into responding and becoming bogged down in a war. The continuous escalation by the U.S. over the years included providing shoulder-fired anti-aircraft Stinger missiles, enabling individuals to shoot down Soviet aircraft and helicopters on their own.

Unlike the imperialist military and defense contractors that push for war and thrive from the destruction and tragedy, the socialist USSR took measure of the awful consequences and withdrew.

Out of the reactionary army that the CIA cobbled together, distinct groups emerged, including the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The emergence of the Islamic States or ISIS can also be traced to that period in Afghanistan. ISIS is portrayed as an enemy of the U.S., but aided U.S. military aims in trying to destroy Syria. In a classic example of “blowback,” it was Al Qaeda that took responsibility for the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center.

The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was justified by blaming the Taliban, who had seized the government in Kabul by that time, for providing a staging ground for the attack by Al Qaeda, and for “protecting” Osama Bin Laden afterward. After driving the Taliban from power, the U.S. aided Hamid Karzai, a known CIA asset, in becoming the interim head of the government, and later, president.

Devastation drags on

U.S. troops were in Afghanistan in diminishing numbers after the capture and execution of Osama Bin Laden during the Obama administration. By the time of Biden’s announcement, they numbered only 2,500. But even with a smaller troop deployment, the occupation and destruction dragged on.

Exact numbers of private mercenaries are harder to come by. We now know that after Obama’s 2009 “surge” of an additional 33,000 troops, the number of U.S. soldiers started to go down, but they were often quietly replaced by mercenaries.

In early 2017, the new Trump administration dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb, called the “Mother Of All Bombs” (MOAB), in a mountainous area of eastern Afghanistan. The claim was that it was meant for an Islamic State target and that 36

ISIS fighters were killed. More likely, Trump was demonstrating his “warmaker chops” to the Pentagon after having campaigned as a politician who favored less use of the U.S. military.

We also know now that a false and overly-optimistic view of the ability of the U.S. to “win” in Afghanistan was peddled by administration and military figures for years, under both Republicans and Democrats, in a repeat of what was revealed by the Pentagon Papers about the Vietnam War. The lies justified prolonging the war and caused an unknown number of deaths, injuries and destruction.

Upon Biden’s announcement of a complete withdrawal, critics cried that without the continued presence of contractors, the Afghan military would lose its ability to maintain an air force. They objected that more than 18,000 Afghan interpreters who had worked for the U.S. would be in danger – presumably because the U.S. war and occupation and anyone who collaborated is hated by the people of Afghanistan. Pro-Pentagon think tanks warned that Kabul would fall to a resurgent Taliban.

The Biden administration has pledged to fund Afghanistan’s government so it can directly pay for more private mercenaries. The U.S. has also offered to pay contractors to maintain Afghan aircraft from Qatar, and has openly pledged that if Kabul is under threat of a Taliban takeover, the U.S. will once again use airstrikes and drones to prop up the shaky, reactionary government.

This U.S. withdrawal should not be mistaken for peace. Imperialist war is in the DNA of capitalism. The four decades of horror suffered by the people of Afghanistan should never be forgotten, even as our anti-imperialist efforts turn toward defending Cuba and Haiti from the dangers of U.S. intervention.

