

AMERICA'S WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

The use of military force in Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks was justifiable. Nearly two decades later, and with the counterterrorism mission complete, it is time to end America's military mission in Afghanistan. A negotiated end to the war and the removal of all U.S. forces from the country in a deliberate but expeditious fashion is in America's national interest.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish a cease-fire.** The resulting partition between Taliban-held areas and Kabul-held areas would temper the violence and provide the space necessary for negotiations.
- **Negotiate an end to the war.** Prioritize the withdrawal of U.S. forces and a formal pledge by the Taliban that its territory will not be used by international terror groups.
- **Push to maintain humanitarian gains, but not at the expense of a negotiated peace.** Provide incentives to continue the advancement of human rights—particularly as they relate to women, minorities, and education—and offer assistance in the form of mental health expertise to help the Afghan population deal with the trauma produced by 40 years of war.

BACKGROUND

America's objectives in its war in Afghanistan should have been limited to destroying the terrorist training camps in the country, removing the terrorist-harboring Taliban government, and sending a clear message to others that such behavior would not be tolerated.

Instead, America pursued the extremely costly strategy of nation-building, which has proven to be beyond the capacity of the United States. Conservative estimates find that America has spent almost \$1 trillion in Afghanistan since 2001, \$126 billion of which has gone toward reconstruction—more in inflation-adjusted dollars than the United States spent to help rebuild Europe after World War II.

In addition to the material cost of the war, over 2,300 American soldiers have lost their lives in the conflict and over 20,000 have been wounded. Yet, despite the great efforts and sacrifices of the American troops as well as the diplomatic corps, the Taliban controls more territory than at any time since the war began. Reversing these trends would require a level of effort that Americans would not abide. In fact, polls suggest that a majority of Americans would support a decision to remove all U.S. troops from Afghanistan within a year.

The case for ending America's war in Afghanistan is straightforward. The U.S. military has achieved its core counterterrorism objectives. Bin Laden is dead. The terrorist training camps have been virtually eliminated. And al Qaeda is crippled. The Department of Defense reported in December 2018: "The al-Qa'ida threat to the United States and its allies and partners has decreased, and the few remaining al-Qa'ida core members are focused on their own survival."

Today, the meager benefits that might accrue to U.S. national security on account of an American military presence in Afghanistan are not offset by the costs—in blood and treasure. Leaving U.S. troops there without a clear and achievable mission and with no vital national security issue at stake is nothing short of political cowardice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

["Overcoming Inertia: Why It's Time to End the War in Afghanistan"](#) by John Glaser and John Mueller, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 878, August 13, 2019.

["War State, Trauma State: Why Afghanistan Remains Stuck in Conflict"](#) by Erik Goepner, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 844, June 19, 2018.

["Step Back: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror"](#) by A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 814, June 26, 2017.