Opinion

News



U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, steps on board a C-17 transport plane as the last U.S. service member to leave Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 30, in a photograph taken using night vision optics. (CNS/XVIII Airborne Corps/handout via Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 1, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

"The last C-17 lifted off from Hamid Karzai International Airport on Aug. 30 this afternoon at 3:29 p.m. East Coast time, and the last manned aircraft is now clearing the airspace above Afghanistan," announced Gen. Kenneth McKenzie at a news conference Monday afternoon. The longest war in American history was over.

At least for us Americans. The absence of war is not to be confused with the presence of peace. For many of the people of Afghanistan, even those who do not plan to take up arms against their new rulers, rule by the Taliban is not exactly the same thing as peace.

What the Taliban will require by way of religious observance remains to be seen. They have indicated they plan to be more moderate this time around, which is a pretty low bar. Lest we forget, women were largely barred from leaving their homes, and never without a male companion, the last time the group ruled the country. And they conducted one the grossest acts of cultural destruction in modern history when they dynamited the Buddhas of Bamiyan, which dated back to the sixth century and were harming no one.

What had become obvious for some time is that there was no way the U.S. military presence was going to be able to help Afghan society march boldly into the 18th century. The government we helped set up was corrupt to its core. The images of the presidential palace, with gold and marble everywhere, in a country where 47.3% of the population lives below the poverty line, according to the Asian Development Bank, were enough to explain why the government fell so quickly. Would you fight so that your president can live in luxury while you and your neighbors live in squalor?

Those who care about human rights, and especially the rights of women and girls, should be looking for any and all points of leverage that can be employed with the Taliban, to encourage them toward moderation and away from extremism. A military presence was counterproductive, to be sure, but it is not clear that non-military means will prove more successful. It is time they are tried.

> A military presence was counterproductive, to be sure, but it is not clear that non-military means will prove more successful. It is time they are tried.
>
> Tweet this

President Biden spoke at the White House Monday, after the end of operations in Kabul. He thanked the military and diplomatic personnel who helped conduct the airlift, which rescued over 120,000 people. He thanked those aid workers and former military who helped identify Afghans who needed to be rescued in the past few weeks. And, importantly, he thanked "everyone who is now — and who will — welcome our Afghan allies to their new homes around the world, and in the United States."

The U.S. Catholic bishops, and our various aid agencies, have indicated they are willing to help resettle the refugees but need the U.S. government to clear away some of the bureaucratic hurdles to process these desperate men and women, many of whom risked their lives for our troops, more quickly.

As NCR's editors urged last week, after the smoke clears, the Biden administration should begin looking for ways to wage peace instead of war. How can we promote the rights of women and girls in countries that remain repressive, without sending in the Marines? And without exercising cultural imperialism? How do we promote democracy? How do we support liberal ideals about civil society and a free press in countries with vastly different cultural legacies? One thing is clear: Enough with the sticks; let's focus on the carrots.

Retrenchment into a 21st-century isolationism is not an option. America is still an indispensable nation for a variety of reasons, not least our power. Since the advent of the atomic age, the constitutional provisions for keeping our sword sheathed have been set aside. The threat, and specifically the immediacy of the threat, of nuclear war during the Cold War demanded vesting the president with powers the founding fathers did not imagine. Congress was given the power to declare war. It is time to recalibrate our constitutional provisions such that a president can respond with quickness, but also such that any "Wag the Dog" temptation — or worse, the real thing! — is kept out of reach.

Advertisement

If not retrenchment, then what? It is time to look back at some of the "lessons" of the 20th century that we thought were clear as a bell. One of those lessons was that we should promote democracy abroad because democracies do not start wars. That may be true, but it is also true that democracies behave just as badly as non-democracies once the war has started.

For example, many view the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945 as singularly shocking, but what is actually harder to grasp is why the democracies undertook strategic bombing in the first place? At the time, allied leaders promised our bombers would break the will of the German and Japanese people, but German bombing had not broken the will of Londoners during the Blitz. There was no "strategic" objective in firebombing Dresden and Tokyo, which killed more people than the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was payback, revenge. Democratic norms may channel some, but not all, human emotions in fruitful and peaceful ways. War is an equalizer when it comes to dispensing evil.

This, finally, is the hardest question: How should our moral convictions influence our conduct of foreign relations in a world that does not share our moral compass? The just war tradition needs to be reevaluated to take account of modern conditions, in both its major categories: *Jus ad bellum*, what justice requires before going to war, and *jus in bello*, what limits justice places on the conduct of war, need to be reexamined to account for the ways they have been abused. And, they need to be stretched to account for new problems of both a theoretical and practical nature. Is it just to go to war to stop a genocide? How do drones affect our *in bello* considerations?

"The Sermon on the Mount is the last word in Christian ethics. Everyone respects the Quakers," wrote Winston Churchill in *The Gathering Storm*. "Still, it is not on these terms that Ministers assume their responsibilities of guiding states."

A Catholic cannot accept such a rigid divorce of practical duties from theological reflection. The tragedy of the Afghan war, and the tragedy that may accompany the Afghan peace, both point to the need for renewed theological reflection on our just war tradition.