



Bush created a moral monstrosity in Afghanistan, and Biden is replicating it in Ukraine

Description

The empire-building debacle of the nearly 20-year U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is a lesson unlearned by the government.

This disaster began when then-President George W. Bush — stung deeply by the intelligence that he failed to heed, thus enabling the attacks of 9/11 to take place unimpeded — convinced the American people and Congress and most of our allies that the people who ran Afghanistan in the early part of this century needed to be taught a lesson, whether they personally enabled or facilitated the 9/11 attacks or not.

This moral monstrosity was executed in the name of retaliation, deterrence and liberation, but in reality, it was American hubris. And now, it is repeating itself in Ukraine.

Here is the backstory.

Mr. Bush — knowing days after the 9/11 attacks that they had been perpetrated and paid for by his friends, the Saudis — believed that by blaming the attacks on hapless Afghanistan, destroying much of that country and causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents, he would somehow teach the world that no one could “mess with us” without severe consequences.

His knee-jerk reaction and exploitation of raw American fear in the weeks following 9/11 set in motion a series of events that culminated in the triumph in Afghanistan of the very mindset Mr. Bush and his military, and his borrowed \$2 trillion, tried to destroy.

To amass the international consent needed to produce the invasion he wanted, Mr. Bush also vowed — channeling his inner Woodrow Wilson, who killed innocents in World War I in order to “make the world safe for democracy” — to defy history by installing a Western-style democracy in Afghanistan.

Did he not know that tens of thousands of British troops in the 19th century and more than 100,000 Soviet troops in the 20th century had failed to bend the culture and the will of this rugged and wretched country?

This gambit — born of Mr. Bush's incompetence and later nurtured by President Barack Obama's arrogance — was one of the worst foreign policy errors in modern American history.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump split with his own party to denounce the forever war in Afghanistan and vowed to bring the troops home. Mr. Trump's heart was in the right place — he was sick and tired of war — but his head was not.

In early 2020, thinking he'd be reelected president later that year, Mr. Trump dispatched his secretary of state to negotiate directly with the Taliban for a peaceful withdrawal of nearly all U.S. forces and a total end to the U.S. occupation. Mr. Trump's diplomats did not negotiate with the Bush-installed government of Afghanistan but with the government-in-waiting, the Taliban.

The deal they struck required the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters from its jails and the U.S. to complete its military departure by May 2021. By the time President Biden had taken office, he was faced with the May 2021 deadline and the realization that 5,000 Taliban ex-prisoners — more than the number of American troops there — had already been freed and were now armed.

We all know what happened when Mr. Biden pulled the plug, and the Taliban took control of the government in no time. Mr. Biden's head was in the right place, but his heart was not. He knew most Americans were, like Mr. Trump, sick and tired of that war, but he failed to fully comprehend the grave situation present in the Afghan streets and triggered by the sudden American departure.

Now, back to the moral monstrosity that Mr. Bush created.

When Mr. Bush determined to attack Afghanistan, he did not ask Congress for a declaration of war, as even he recognized that the then-existing Afghan government did not attack the U.S. He asked for and received instead a statute called the authorization for use of military force, or AUMF.

This creature is unknown to the Constitution, as it purported to authorize war without end.

Congressional declarations of war historically established that once the war had been fought and the target destroyed or surrendered, the declaration no longer authorized the war. Not so with the AUMF, as its wording was so expansive and ambiguous, it authorized any president to use military force at any time against any person or entity who perpetrated, facilitated or supported the 9/11 attacks.

Can presidents kill whomever they wish in the name of national security or empire-building? In a word, no.

But American presidents have had their hearts set on empire-building since Thomas Jefferson engineered the Louisiana Purchase. But unlike Wilson or Messrs. Bush or Biden, Jefferson did so without violence or bloodshed.

But the modern American empire builders surely think they can kill any foe — real or imagined. Mr. Bush claimed that he had powers from some source other than the Constitution. And he also claimed

he could strip Americans of their natural and constitutional rights — all for empire.

Mr. Biden is now fighting an undeclared war against Russia — not the Taliban, but a nuclear power — a war that Mr. Biden's own military believes is unwinnable. Without congressional authorization and without a national commitment, American boys in Ukraine are firing American ammunition at Russian boys. The U.S. was unable to defeat a ragtag gaggle of herdsmen in 20 years, and now it is challenging the mightiest army on Earth, 5,000 miles from Washington. For what? For empire.

For empire, it engineered a coup in Ukraine in 2014. For empire, it kills in Ukraine in 2023. Nondefensive killing defies natural law, which teaches that nondefensive violence is illicit because every person — American or not — enjoys the inviolable right to live.

The lesson of Afghanistan is a warning that Mr. Biden has ignored. Like Mr. Bush, he doesn't care about spilling blood and wasting assets. He wants to build empire to get reelected. So did Mr. Bush, and his reputation is in the dustbin of history. Mr. Biden is aiming to join him.

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