

Global Conversation: The Afghanistan Crisis

Thinking Routine: See, Think, Wonder



Andy Spyra/laif/Contrasto

Look at the photograph of young women students in Afghanistan today.

- **See:** Say what you can see? (a group of female students in Afghanistan under the new Taliban regime. They are all completely covered by veils and are holding Taliban flags)
- **Think:** What does this make you think? (that the women have been forced to accept oppressive uniformity and the rules of a Taliban society)
- **Wonder:** What questions does this scene raise for you? (open: the lack of freedom and rights for girls and women; male domination of society; the importance of education for growth, freedom and democracy...)

Our article will focus on the recent events in Afghanistan and the twenty years of conflict that precede them, but it is interesting to take a quick glance at the more distant tormented past of the territory and Great Britain's attempt to bring Afghanistan into its empire and combat Russian influence.

The 19th century and early 20th century saw Britain engaged in three "**Afghan Wars**": 1839-1842; 1878-1880 and 1919.

The Second Afghan War (1878-1880), fought to counteract growing Russian influence, led to a short-lived victory. The war resonated with the British public and is referred to in a number of poems by the English journalist, novelist and poet **Rudyard Kipling** (1865-1936). One of the war's most terrible battles, the Battle of Maiwand (July 1880) in which British and Indian forces were wiped out by superior numbers of Afghan troops is recalled in Kipling's poem "**That Day**" (1895), whose refrain reads:

*Now there ain't no chorus 'ere to give,
Nor there ain't no band to play;
An' I wish I was dead 'fore I done what I did,
Or seen what I seed that day!*

[I would rather have died than have done what I did or seen what I saw on that day.]

The terrible battle is also commemorated in a war memorial in Reading, depicting the "Lion of Maiwand".

Curiously enough, this battle also provided Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with the model for his character Dr John Watson, who returns to London as an injured army doctor and meets Sherlock Holmes. Watson is inspired by a certain Surgeon Major Alexander Francis Preston, the regimental medical officer injured at Maiwand.

The modern-day TV series based on Conan Doyle's stories, "Sherlock", featuring Benedict Cumberbatch as the detective, brings us another Dr Watson who in 2002 returns from service in the Afghanistan occupation.

The context

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, **the Taliban, a religious, political and military organization**, governed Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law, banned music, television, sports, and dancing, and enforced harsh forms of justice. Amputation was an accepted form of punishment for stealing, and public executions could often be seen at the Kabul football stadium. Women's rights ceased to exist and women were generally banned from appearing in public or holding jobs outside the home.

An interesting reflection on the conditions of life in this period can be found in the novel by Afghan-American novelist **Khaled Hosseini**, "**The Kite Runner**", published in 2003

and adapted as a movie in 2007, but based on his own childhood experience of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

In 1996, **Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden moved to Afghanistan** where he was able to forge an alliance between the Taliban and his al-Qaeda organisation.

Afghanistan – 2001-2021

Four American Presidents

George W Bush 2001-2009

9/11

The first year of Bush's presidency was marked by the terrible "9/11" terrorist attack on the nation.

On 11th September 2001, 19 members of **Al-Qaeda**, a terrorist group based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, hi-jacked four commercial airliners in the United States. Two of the planes flew into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The towers collapsed.

A third plane flew into the Pentagon building, headquarters of the US Department of Defense in Virginia, while the fourth crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.

A total of 2,977 people were killed in the attacks, leaving the United States in a state of shock.

The War Against Terrorism

On 18th September the President George W Bush signed the **Authorisation of Use of Military Force** (AUMF). This authorisation, passed by the US Congress, gave the president the power to use military action against people or groups that "planned, authorised, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 or harbored such organizations or persons".

On 7th October 2001 President Bush launched "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. US and British forces swiftly overthrew the Taliban.

President Bush's first objective was to bring an end to terrorism:

"These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations."

The US also gave backing to the Afghan Northern Alliance which had been fighting against the Taliban.

On April 17th 2002 a transitional government led by Hamid Karzai was established in Kabul. The US Congress approved spending \$38 billion as part of Bush's plan to rebuild Afghanistan.

Nation Building

President Bush extended his ambition and sought to transform Afghanistan and neighbouring states into western-style democracies.

In his "State of the Union Address" to US Congress in January 2002, Bush included Iran, Iraq and North Korea as part of an "**axis of evil**".

"We are pursuing long-term victory in the war by promoting democracy in the Middle East, so that the nations of that region no longer breed hatred and terror."

"We have also got an ideology based upon liberty which stands in stark contrast to the ideology of the thugs and murderers called the Taliban."

In October 2002 the US Congress passed an Iraq AUMF after the Bush administration claimed that Iraq, under its bloody, tyrannical leader Saddam Hussein, was developing **Weapons of Mass Destruction**. In 2003 Bush launched an invasion of Iraq. The attention to Iraq distracted Bush from the Afghanistan mission and the Taliban and other forces regrouped in the south and east of Afghanistan. In 2008 the US military called for more troops to fight against the Taliban and by mid-2008 there were nearly 50,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan.

Barack Obama 2009-2017

Shifted expectations

Obama was elected on promises to end the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This led initially to a surge in the number of US soldiers; by December of 2009 there were approximately 100,000 American soldiers engaged.

Obama's declared objective was **to eliminate al-Qaeda, not to transform Afghan society**.

"Our goal is to destroy al-Qaeda, and we are on a path to do exactly that."

"Afghans are responsible for the security of their nation, and we build an equal partnership between two sovereign states; a future in which war ends and a new chapter begins."

On 2nd May 2011 **Obama bin Laden**, the man identified as the mastermind behind the 9/11 attack, was **killed in a US operation in Pakistan**.

In June of the same year negotiations began between the US, the Taliban and the Afghan government. Obama announced that the US would begin to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

In September 2014 Afghanistan signed a bilateral agreement with the US and another similar agreement with NATO: 12,500 foreign soldiers (of whom 9,800 American) would stay in Afghanistan in 2015. The American troops would have two missions: anti-terrorist operations against the Taliban and training Afghan forces.

However, the security situation deteriorated. In a tragic error in October 2015 a US air raid bombed a hospital run by Médecins sans Frontières in Kunduz province. The attack cost the lives of 24 patients and 14 members of the NGO.

In June 2016 Obama again slowed down the American withdrawal and said that 8,400 troops would remain in Afghanistan until 2017.

Donald Trump 2017-2021

Planning withdrawal

The new president, a man with no political experience, had no vision for Afghanistan. He simply wanted to get America out of a situation of stalemate. Losses of Afghan security troops rose and Trump agreed to increase the number of US soldiers in Afghanistan.

In January 2019 US negotiators held **discussions with Taliban representatives in Doha**, capital of Qatar. The Afghan government was not included in these talks.

In February 2020 the Taliban and the Trump administration reached an agreement: US troops would withdraw from Afghanistan by 1st May 2021 and in exchange the Taliban would stop attacking US forces and would cut ties with al-Qaeda.

“There hasn’t been a moment like this. We’ve had very successful negotiations. We think they’ll be successful in the end.”

The issue of human rights was completely ignored.

“We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.”

On January 15th 2021, in the last days of the Trump presidency, US forces in Afghanistan were reduced to 2,500.

Joe Biden 2021 –

Rapid conclusion

The new president was anxious to bring US involvement in Afghanistan to an end and announced that all US troops would be out of the nation by 11th September, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attack.

He realised that there could be no satisfactory end to the conflict:

“I cannot and will not ask our troops to fight on endlessly in another country’s civil war.”

“It’s time to end the forever war”

In July 2021 President Biden brought the deadline forward and promised that all American troops would leave Afghanistan by 31st August.

The Taliban launched a lightning-fast attack in August taking 17 provincial capitals and on 15th August they entered the capital Kabul where they met with no resistance as Afghan president Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

The speed of the collapse of the Afghan government surprised even the most pessimistic intelligence agencies. Western nations hurried to evacuate their citizens and vulnerable Afghans through Kabul airport which was under US military control.

On 26th August the “Islamic State in Khorasan Province” attacked Kabul airport, killing nearly 200 Afghans and 13 members of the US military.

Biden commented in an interview on ABC News: “The idea that somehow there’s a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don’t know how that happens.”

On 30th August, one day before the deadline, the Pentagon announced that all US troops had left Afghanistan. At least 100 US citizens were left in Afghanistan together with an unknown number of Afghans who had worked for the US (and UK) government and who were clearly targets for the Taliban.

And now?

A new, all-male Taliban government has been set up in Kabul. The new government has also replaced the **Women's Affairs Ministry** with the **Ministry of Vice and Virtue**, somehow sadly reminiscent of the oppressive “Ministry of Love” in the dystopian society described in Orwell’s “1984”.

This much-feared department was responsible for deploying religious police to the streets to enforce Sharia law during the Taliban's previous spell in power. It became known for beating women for infractions such as dressing immodestly and being outside without a male guardian.

The Taliban follow an extremely strict interpretation of Islamic law that segregates men and women, and have severely restricted women's access to work. Girls and young women have been forbidden to attend school or university.

Former female judges, who had given prison sentences to men convicted of murder and violence against women are now hiding. They fear for their lives as the Taliban have released prisoners who have sworn to take revenge on the judges.

The Taliban have been accused of human rights abuses in recent weeks, including publicly stringing up the bodies of four alleged kidnappers from cranes in Herat last week.

The display of the dead kidnapping suspects, who were killed in a shootout, was the most high-profile public punishment since the Taliban swept to power last month. It has been seen as a sign the Taliban will adopt fearsome measures similar to their previous rule from 1996 to 2001.

Now answer the following questions:

1. What tragic event marks the beginning of the 20-year Afghan crisis? (The 9/11 attack in 2001)
2. What two ambitions did President Bush express? (To bring an end to terrorism and to promote democracy in the Middle East)
3. How did President Obama describe Afghanistan? (as a sovereign state and an equal partner)
4. What negotiations did President Trump hold? (negotiations with Taliban representatives)
5. What issues did not matter for President Trump? (questions of human rights and of nation building)
6. Why did President Biden want to bring US troops back home from Afghanistan? (because there was no possibility of a satisfactory end to the war)
7. In the "chaos" that has followed, which members of Afghan society are paying the highest price? (women and girls, who have been deprived of their rights and freedoms to work and to attend school and university)