

The Forbidden Question

From the Summer 2021 Issue of *Esquire*

IN APRIL, THE CIA'S TWITTER ACCOUNT REMINISCED ABOUT THE TIME THE United States supplied Afghan guerrillas with Stinger missiles. That was back in the go-go 1980s, when the U.S. national-security establishment was determined to ensure the Soviets, who had invaded Afghanistan, experienced "their own Vietnam." By 1989, the CIA website crows, "the Soviet Union had concluded that the fight was not worth the cost and withdrew from the country."

The Soviets were in Afghanistan for ten years. The United States has been there for 20. When the U.S. invaded following the attacks of September 11, the Taliban was in control. As President Joe Biden announces plans to withdraw by September 11, 2021 - an admission, witting or not, of the arbitrariness of it all - the Taliban rules large swaths of the country. It's hard to imagine it will control less when we leave. And we will have to leave. Like the Soviets, and like ourselves in our own Vietnam, we have lost - or at least realized we cannot win.

After two decades, what do we have to show for the bombs and the bullets, the blood and tears and treasure spilled in the sand and rock? By asking the question, you risk dishonoring the sacrifice of the people who died in the fight, and the others who returned home unable to sleep through the night or play with their kids in the backyard. But it is our duty to ask, if only to ensure no more are asked to do the same. So far, we've lost more than 7,000 soldiers in our post-9/11 wars. We may never know the extent of the injuries, though the official tally is more than 52,000. The Costs of War project from Brown University determined that at least 335,000 civilians have been killed. At least 21 million Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Syrian people are living as refugees. There are more terror groups active now than when we started, and all it's cost us is \$6.4 trillion.

We cannot keep this up out of some sunk cost accrued from mistakes already made. Because we are making the same mistakes all over the world. According to Costs of War, the United States is involved in some form of counterterrorism operations in 85 different countries. We've had troops on the ground training local forces or engaged in combat in Mali, Kenya, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, Niger, Kazakhstan. We have drones operating over large sections of the Middle East, and Special Forces operating all over Africa.

"We introduced a war-paradigm approach for dealing with the problem of terrorism, which is not necessarily effective," Stephanie Savell, codirector of the Costs of War project, told me. Historically, treating terrorism as a policing problem, or even negotiating with terror groups, has been more successful. "Nonetheless," she added, "the U.S. has this global war on terror."

Whether you find it absurd to wage war on a tactic, or you find all this to be another monstrous expression of the American imperial impulse, or you've just been conscious for the past 20 years, you are likely ready to admit that the United States dropping bombs and shooting bullets has not

solved a problem in a long time. When the smoke clears, there are always new enemies. For much of these past two decades, bullets and bombs were the default prescription. At the Bush-era peak, criticizing the Iraq War was transfigured into an attack on The Troops and America itself. In reality, demanding concrete justifications for waging war was always the patriotic position - and our duty to The Troops as well. Anti-war types were cast as hopelessly naive, unable to grasp the grim facts of life in the post-9/11 world. Now it's a position of cold rationality.

It's too late to undo all we've done, but it's just the right time for the Biden administration to commit itself to avoiding the use of force in all contexts except when it is unavoidable. Call it the Peace Doctrine, but stop with the bombs, please. That includes drones, and giving our friends bombs to drop, too. Congress should revoke the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force and reclaim its constitutional prerogative to declare war. If we can thank Donald Trump for one thing, it isn't actually dropping fewer bombs; it's that he made staying out of other countries' affairs a viable position on the Right, too. Oh, and those Afghan guerrillas to whom we gave those Stingers back in Reagan's day? The CIA tweet happily mentions they were known as the mujahideen, who counted Osama bin Laden as a top supporter. When the Soviets departed, he was left as a kind of war lord. All these years later, we're still handing out weapons to people in places we do not understand, with consequences we cannot possibly foresee.