

Ten Years of War in Afghanistan

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The war in Afghanistan, which is now in its tenth year, has occupied a strange place in the American political psyche. Although the war has now lasted longer than U.S. involvement in World War I and World War II combined, it has frequently been overshadowed by the U.S. war in Iraq. The war in Afghanistan has been quieter with a lower profile, but over time may prove to be more significant than the war in Iraq. Afghanistan has, in some respects, played Michael Corleone to Iraq's Sonny or Dwight Evans to Iraq's Jim Rice.

Ten years is a long time for a country to be involved in a war, particularly for a democracy like the U.S. where leaders are somewhat accountable to the people and unpopular wars are difficult to sustain. However, wars that last this long, particularly when the military, but not the society at large, are mobilized for war, can begin to fade into the background and seem almost inevitable. Media interest comes and goes; explanations for the war change and evolve; timelines for winding down the war are proposed and rationalized away; reasons for hope come and go; and lights at the end of the tunnels give way to oncoming trains. None of this, however, is enough to mobilize enough opposition to the war, while proponents of the war are able to explain the need for the war and how victory is just around the corner effectively enough to continue support for the war.

In the ten years since the war started, a lot has happened to the U.S. The threat of terrorism which was on everybody's minds when the war started, while still real, is no longer something which ordinary Americans think about every day. However, the added security we confront in our daily lives has become a permanent part of life in the U.S. The U.S. is moving towards surrendering its role as the global hegemon as the world seems more strongly than ever to be moving towards multi-polarity. The U.S. has also experienced the most severe economic downturn since the great depression with widespread unemployment threatening to change life in America for years to come. Not surprisingly, the political polarization and vitriol, which was already a source of great consternation in 2001, has gotten worse in the last decade.

Although all of these things occurred in the last decade, the extent to which any of this can be attributed to the war in Afghanistan is less apparent. The war probably helped combat terrorism, but is only one of many factors which contributed to the ten years since September 11th passing without further acts of Jihadist terror in the U.S. Similarly, the decline in American power, ongoing recession and increased political polarity in the U.S. all have many causes, but the war in Afghanistan has been a drain on American resources and diverted the U.S. from other priorities which has contributed to economic problems and political instability at home.

The war in Afghanistan has contributed to, or perhaps accelerated, some of the profound problems facing the U.S. today, but more troubling is that there is still no clear resolution for that war. Just as it has been almost background music to American political life in the last decade,

the war in Afghanistan could play a similar role as the background to further American decline in the next decade.

Despite, the impact of the Afghanistan war, it is important to recognize that the war in Afghanistan was, to a far greater extent than the war in Iraq, a war of necessity not of choice. The need to respond after September 11th, weaken or destroy Al Qaeda and capture or kill Osama Bin Laden was much more compelling than the ever changing rationales used to justify the war in Iraq. The problem with the war in Afghanistan was not the decision to initiate the conflict because that may have been unavoidable, but that just as there was a necessity to make that decision, there is a similar necessity to end the war, a necessity which has never been recognized by America's leaders. Instead, we have ten years of a war that has taken on increasingly ambitious and unrealistic goals and no believable plan for genuinely ending the conflict.