

The Desertion of Afghanistan



From the series Into the Valley, Jules George

by Samuel Hux

The Afghan fiasco is not a partisan matter, and any politician who tries to make it so—as some of course are doing—should have his mouth sewn up. I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican, although I have been both, am now a party-less conservative (*neoconservative*, to be exact). Donald Trump planned to depart Afghanistan in May 2021; Joe Biden began our departure in July 2021: big difference! So both parties own it. Let no one object on partisan grounds to what I have to say—although it is legitimate to wonder who I am to say anything on the matter. I have no accredited expertise in international affairs, have only a vast store of mostly useless knowledge, philosophical flexibility (not the same thing as relativism), common sense, and an absence of

historical naiveté. On the other hand, so many people with accredited expertise in the field of foreign affairs speak such utter nonsense that I feel emboldened to have my say. On a mythical third hand, since the American departure was a military operation, I feel justified in confessing that I have thought long and hard for many years on matters military, and invite the reader to visit, should he or she wish, my essay "Where Have You Gone, Vinegar Joe?—Thoughts on the Profession of Arms," which is not irrelevant to my perspective on Afghanistan.

Although it is not the "fiasco" I wish ultimately to get to, the execution—no matter how many people ultimately escape Taliban-land—was a predictable mess, if not quite a thorough disaster, from the get-go. Although I think Joe Biden has for the most part told the truth—as he sees it—I do not believe him at all when he says that he ordered Bagram Air Base closed and emptied on the best military advice: I cannot imagine a bunch of generals and admirals advising such a foolhardy venture, leaving one's rear exposed during a tactical retreat! Equally foolish was the assurance that the Taliban would need months to overrun a tribally balkanized non-nation. Even more foolish was the certainty that the Afghan military—because trained by the U.S. military—would be the equal of the Taliban cutthroats. Some thoughts about this specific matter, more than a mere digression:

Despite the illusions of pacifists, you can't have a truly professional military unless you have a civilized nation. By "truly professional" I mean more than heavy weapons and technological sophistication. I mean a certain mentality and character, that of the *professional of arms*. Armies may be partially composed of conscripts and temporary soldiers in for whatever practical reason; but it's a professional army only when mostly and permanently composed of and led by those who have chosen to join the *Warrior Class*! I volunteered as a young man to do my service, for reasons far short of

patriotism, I assure you, compelled by a vague feeling it was the right thing to do. My enlistment almost over I was briefly tempted to re-up with the possibility of helicopter training; but I knew deep down I was but a temporary warrior at best, not in the league of Captain John Womack or Sergeant Bob Jacobs (whose names need mean nothing to you) with their Combat Infantryman's Badges. Ironically, it was the army itself that taught me who I was. Attached to a special unit at The Infantry School I spent late evenings in bull sessions like nothing I was to experience in college where they are traditionally supposed to happen, and knew that a bookish life was what I was meant or doomed to live, Professor rather than Warrant Officer. But I never lost my respect (and partial longing) for the warrior class.

And by "civilized nation" I mean for all practical purposes the opposite of historical Afghanistan, a collection of tribal regions, governed, to use a verb loosely, by ignorant and uncultivated warlords, not to be confused with warrior-lords, except for a 20-year interregnum bracketed by Sharia rule of fundamentalist fanatics called "medieval" only by insulting the Middle Ages, time and culture, after all, of Augustine, Aquinas, Chaucer, Dante, and medieval Islamic Spain of Averroes by the way. An Afghan military, no matter its training and financing, could never be "professional" because not a warrior class but only several hundred thousand poor souls in a poverty-stricken non-nation in need of jobs and nothing more. Biden's confidence in them was absurd. And not because the Taliban were so overpowering, but because the Afghan military was so under-powering.

Nor are the *Taliban*—nor their associates like *Al Qaida* or rivals like *ISIS*—a warrior class; a professional military is driven by pride in its mission and pride in its skill, not by religious fanaticism, ethnic hatred, and rejection of modernity.

When I think of a professional military today what comes

immediately to mind of course is the American military as well as the British as well as the Israel Defense Force. When I broaden my thoughts historically the French Foreign Legion comes to mind ... along with the British soldiery that built and secured the British Empire ... along with, God help us, the *Wehrmacht* (which, by the way, the *Waffen SS* was not a constituent part of). Do not assume this reveals a Western or European bias on my part. A significant part of that Imperial British military were Sikh regiments (read Winston Churchill's memoirs), and I doubt that any racial or ethnic soldiery outstripped the *Gurkhas* from Nepal as a warrior class. But my views are not free of bias, I will admit. When I try to imagine a truly professional military as I have described it, no Islamic army comes to mind, only terrorist gangs as noted. It is hard to judge the quality of Arabic militaries (Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian, Saudi, etc.) which in concert have never been able to stand up to a nation the size of New Jersey: Israel. I hope I will be forgiven (actually I don't much care) if I seem overly disrespectful of Islam (I am not *overly* so). But to have assumed that an Afghan military would be superior to or even comparable to that of its Arab cousins was illusion.

The moment President Biden announced the removal of American troops the hope of the interregnum Afghanistan was doomed. And it takes an amazing act of self-generating ignorance not to know that.

And now I turn to the real Afghan fiasco—which was not the execution of the operation, but the decision to make it. The following reflections put me in a distinct minority of my fellow citizens. So be it. Of course there are reasons for closing down the American military presence in Afghanistan, and they've been repeated ad nauseam. How about some recognition of the reasons there were for staying?

We might clear the air by recognizing how rhetoric has clouded the air. "*America Ends its Longest War*" makes for a dramatic

headline. It also propagates a violation of truth. Only about half of those years might be considered *war* in the common sense of that word; the rest an on-again-off-again "Police Action." I am about to say something those who have never been soldiers may find insensitive. In *20 years* America lost roughly 1900 killed in action—which is not nothing of course. But in "my war," the Korean conflict, when I was a teenage recruit who luckily missed combat by a matter of weeks, scared half to death in the meantime, roughly 40,000 G.I.s were killed in action in *three (3) years*. Furthermore, considering the fact that in the first months of the Afghan campaign U.S.-led troops, mostly Special Forces, drove the Taliban into abject defeat, it was Washington D.C. lassitude that extended "the war" as long as it did. It is hard for me to believe that a full-out military operation could not have murdered or rendered inoperative an already crippled Taliban, which deserved no less for sheltering Al Qaida. But the cry "Bring the Boys Home" was already ringing through the air. So "the Boys" remained abroad with arms tied behind their backs.

The right-thinking majority of American citizens will be delighted that the American military installations abroad, from giant bases like Ramstein Air Base in Germany to a radar station in Pogo-Pogo (which I just invented) have been reduced from *roughly 800 to now roughly 799, in roughly 69 foreign states or territories instead of roughly 70*.

This raises a lot of questions.

One of them is specifically why depart Afghanistan instead of Ramstein or any other? We know what the official answer is; what's the real one? There are good reasons why our troops remain in Germany. But here is the immediate reason in context: our troops there are not in danger, as they were in Afghanistan. That's it. No one, including Biden, emoting "bring the guys and gals back home" is thinking of American troops in Germany, England, or wherever, but only where they are in harm's way.

In Harm's Way is the special place a professional military belongs: potential harm is its reason for being. It's not an organization of guys and gals, the boys, kids. It is the professional home of the Warrior Class. For sentimentalists, especially of the liberal variety, the military is a training and employment endeavor for those not fortunate enough to make it in the private industries and institutions. . . so bring them home out of harm's way—"home" not necessarily *Home*, but at least where there's little danger. This amounts of course to a vulgarization and disrespect of the *Profession of Arms!*

I have not the least doubt about the previous paragraph. Listen. This very afternoon as I wrote, President Biden hosted in photo op the president of Ukraine. The receptive mood was proper, as it should be. But concerning Ukraine's principal ambition—membership in NATO—Biden remains unconvinced that Ukraine is quite ready for that. Again, listen. Of all the nations in Europe there is none that needs NATO protection from Russia more than Ukraine. So why is Ukraine not "ready"? I have not the least doubt about the following:

The principal and strongest component of NATO is of course the American military. Nations in Western Europe, and so on, are in no danger now of military aggression from Russia. But if Ukraine were a NATO member we would be committed to render her protection ... and that could put American "boys" in harm's way.

It's been decades now since I wore the uniform. But I remain offended at the vulgar disrespect—parading as solicitation—of the one sure honorable profession in the United States of America.

Neither the administration nor those who approve the departure will admit to the motives I have ascribed to them of course. But they will admit, proudly, to the asinine motive "Time to cease *nation-building*: it doesn't work." Asinine? Consider a bit of history:

The most extensive U.S. military presence abroad is of course in Germany and Japan—both beginning as occupation operations, before they slowly evolved into more complicated endeavors. Does anyone think that our two powerful totalitarian enemies would have evolved into these two democracies without American efforts at “nation building”? The comfortable right thinkers should drop the rhetoric, for it wasn’t nation *building* in the first place, neither in Germany, Japan, *nor in Afghanistan*: it was “*nation reformation*”! American success in Germany and Japan are two of the most glorious chapters in the history of American foreign policy. No need to expect such a chapter to be written about Afghanistan since it is judged a failure. But we’re too quick to judge.

The institution of Democracy did not fail in Afghanistan, since its tenure was during a *tribal congeries* trying on *nationhood*: ignorant and selfish politicians failed. But the *reformation* of a society-in-evolution was stupendous. What reformation was that? In what had been essentially a Sharia-ist Taliban sexual slavocracy one half of the population had gained the right to independence, education, and freedom. Nations traditionally have a gender (as Israel for instance, given the nature of Hebrew grammar, is masculine); given the principal reformation I think of Afghanistan as *She*. The United States and its allies should be proud ... or should *have been* proud. It was not Afghans—no matter the hollowness of their military or representation—who failed. Failure was assured the moment Biden pulled the plug.

And what do the U.S. and the West gain? A loss. A friendly Muslim country, even an ally, replaced by one more radical Islamist country hosting terrorist gangs of murderous thugs at war with civilization. Al Qaida, and even ISIS, no longer dislocated, will have a location and base of operations. Of course foreign relations cannot always be altruistic but they should never be suicidal and must serve national interests and national security. But can someone explain how this policy

serves our interests and improves our security?

So how long should we have remained? As long as was-is necessary. Necessity obeys no clock or calendar. Ask our European hosts, or our Asian. Another asinine cliché: “We cannot be the world’s policemen.” Perhaps we *cannot* be ... but we *are*. The U.S.A. has both *been elected* and *has volunteered*. History is not reversible; there is simply no way around that fact—although elected persons or institutions can fail. As Marshal Matt Dillon would have failed had he announced to the citizens of Dodge City that he and his deputies intended to select the neighborhoods they would police, avoiding the dangerous ones.

Another thing we lose: trust, which no police department can do without. Not necessarily the trust of some European “deputies” feeling over-burdened by support of American operations in faraway places. But the trust of people in those very places faraway. We are all saddened of course by the plight of the now-famous “SIVs,” people supposedly blessed with Special Immigrant Visas for support of American operations in Afghanistan, such as the thousands of interpreters. But this SIV phenomenon turns out to have been untrustworthy all along, and not only because all could not be evacuated. Consider: No Japanese interpreting for U.S. soldiers and airmen would be “protected” by possession of a special visa, and it’s perfectly clear why not. But when our Afghan allies were promised the SIV and famously told they would “have a home in the U.S.,” that should be also just as clear. The last three administrations at least knew that we would leave Afghanistan (which is not Ramstein Air Base), and knowing that the policy of allowing the Taliban to revive rather than crushing it, knew that when we left the Taliban would have a free run once again. This is too obvious to miss. And it will take one hell of a long time for foreign allies to forget it. Perhaps most Americans can bear that ... but not all. I cannot get used to the nation in which I was born and have

lived in (and even served) being thought dishonorable ... because its leaders are dishonorable. Forget the SIVs for a moment. The administrations knew that the lame promise of a home in the U.S. excluded one half of the Afghan population, the most vulnerable. Too bad Ladies and your daughters. What could be more disgraceful?

Furthermore, because of the reckless assumptions about the possible slowness of the Taliban advance, the over-estimation of a hardly professional army, the hasty-in-the-extreme closing of Bagram, and other foolishness, the U.S. had to hope for and even rely on some degree of Taliban co-operation. How embarrassing! And to get out whoever else we can get out we will have to parlay with (not necessarily to beg, we will be assured from Washington) with the Taliban at the further expense of dwindling honor. Who knows what is next? A pragmatic recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan is not out of the question. Which, cut it how you will, would amount coldly diplomatically to "forgiveness" (let bygones be bygones) for past sins: among those sins the support and shelter of Al Qaida, which Taliban spokesmen still will not admit was responsible for 9/11, or at least Osama bin Laden was not (ask MSNBC foreign correspondent Richard Engel, who interviewed them) ... which would mean an indirect forgiveness of Al Qaida for its past sins, 9/11 being so very long ago. This cannot be! Well, I suppose it can or could; but it just *cannot*, if you'll take my meaning.

There's yet more to say, even if it makes me sound like John Wayne—and I assure the reader I am not embarrassed to sound that way. There is a universal ethic (or it should be universal even while it isn't): *There are some things a real man will not do. And one of them is he will no more intentionally leave a woman in danger than he would a child.* I cannot help adding a meta-comment. I am sure Joe Biden would never intentionally make propositions or physical gestures that would make women feel "uncomfortable." I would guess that

Andrew Cuomo, who did both, evidently, would not leave one of those women in danger.

And there's yet more: something relevant comes to mind which I have written about before: the intimate or distant relations to the military of presidents in my lifetime.

Franklin Roosevelt long before he was Commander in Chief was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, but of course never in uniform. Surveying those from my adulthood:

Harry Truman had been an artillery officer in World War I. Dwight Eisenhower was of course "Ike," Chief in the European Zone and Five-Star General of the Army. Both Jack Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were Naval officers, Kennedy seeing combat in the Pacific. Both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford were Naval officers, Nixon serving in the Pacific. Jimmy Carter was an Annapolis graduate. George Bush the elder was in combat in the Pacific as a Naval flyer. Bill Clinton successfully dodged the draft, several times. George Bush the younger served in the Air National Guard. Barack Obama was neither a subject to the draft (nor a volunteer). Donald Trump and Joe Biden both received medical deferments during the Vietnam War.

The only one above who unquestionably benefitted politically from military service was Ike; indeed that surely was why he was elected. I doubt that many knew then as few know now of Truman's service. Nixon's service was hardly an issue in either of his campaigns, and in the first would not have competed with JFK's dramatic PT-Boat story, which itself was probably not dispositive. Bush I's survival in combat probably helped him less than the fact that his Democratic opponent was so unimpressive I can't even recall his name. How little military service has come to mean for politicians is suggested by the fates of Bob Dole and John McCain. Dole—despite his heroism and permanently disabling wounds from Italy in WW II—was stomped on by Clinton the Draft Dodger. Professional warrior McCain's heroism in flight over Vietnam and in Hanoi

Hilton could not stand up against the historic coloration of the so-so pol and pisher Obama.

Something has been lost in American political culture. That something is an essential respect for the profession of arms, a sense that military service matters as a background experience and significant qualification for candidates for public service ... service in an increasingly very dangerous world. Consequently, we have public servants with no bloody idea what a warrior class is for. Consequently we have a world subject to permanent war. If I were I king I would compromise democracy in one little bit: no one would sit in the White House who had not done military service.

Some readers may know that I am obsessed with Winston Churchill; and if not I announce it now. Long before he became Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill, a graduate of Sandhurst, was a cavalry and infantry officer in *five wars*: unofficial duty in Cuba, official duty in India, in the Sudan, in the Boer War, and in World War I when he could have remained in parliament instead. In each instance he was a *combatant*, never pulling rearguard duty for more than a few days. Given the constant danger he was exposed to, he should have been dead several times over. In a memoir, he commented on bullets whizzing by his head his last day of combat in South Africa that he "had thrown double sixes again." He indeed was outrageously lucky ... and unbelievably brave. Luck is beyond comprehension. Whence the bravery? Is it a matter of genes? Tradition? Both?

When Churchill was in South Africa serving as both soldier and war correspondent (which defied both journalistic practice and military rules, but he got away with it), his widowed mother, the transcendently beautiful Lady Churchill, was back in London attracting the adoration of swooning suitors. She convinced a wealthy American, named Scott I recall, to buy her a yacht and set it up as a water-born hospital. Then Lady Churchill sailed it herself, with crew of course, to South

Africa to take on British wounded. One of the first taken aboard, to her surprise, was her son and Churchill's younger brother Jack.

My wife has asked me many more times than once, "Why can't we have a Churchill in Washington." To which I answer with the child's non-answer, "Because ..."