

Statement of LTG H.R. McMaster (U.S. Army, retired)
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The catastrophe that is only beginning in Afghanistan, is the result of incompetence. Incompetence based in strategic narcissism, or the tendency for American leaders to define the world only in relation to the United States, and to assume that what they decide to do is decisive in securing a positive outcome. The problem with that tendency is that it does not acknowledge the authorship over the future that others enjoy, from allies to adversaries to enemies. In Afghanistan, a lack of what the historian Zachary Shore calls ‘strategic empathy’ resulted in policies and strategies across two decades that were based on what we preferred rather than what the situation demanded. Strategic narcissism led to self-delusion, and self-delusion provided a rationale for self-defeat.

The work of this committee is necessary because we must learn from the lost war in Afghanistan to rebuild strategic competence. A fundamental lesson is that wars are interactive and that progress in war and diplomacy is never linear. That is why the war in Afghanistan and the long war against jihadist terrorist organizations is not over; it is entering a new, more dangerous era. Containing and then recovering from the catastrophe in Afghanistan and learning from it will require U.S. leaders to confront the truth of our experience in Afghanistan and stop pretending.

We must stop pretending that our surrender to the Taliban in February 2020 and subsequent concessions to that terrorist organization – which strengthened our enemies and weakened our Afghan allies – were not the principal reasons for a lost war and its consequences. The psychological blows we delivered to our Afghan allies included negotiating with the Taliban without the Afghan government, not insisting on a cease fire, forcing the Afghan government to release 5,000 terrorists and criminals, curtailing intelligence support, ending active pursuit of the Taliban, withdrawing all U.S. aircraft from the country, and terminating contractor support for Afghan security forces.

We must stop pretending that we can end so-called endless wars by withdrawal. Wars do not end when one party disengages and our enemies are waging an endless jihad. We failed to learn from our complete withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011 and the subsequent reemergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq which morphed into ISIS. By the summer of 2014, ISIS gained control of territory the size of Britain and became the most destructive terrorist organization in history. As the English philosopher and theologian G.K. Chesterton observed, war may not be the best way of settling differences, but it may be the only way to ensure that

they are not settled for you.

We must stop pretending that all our efforts in Afghanistan were wasted. We are watching the Taliban reverse the gains Afghans made and eliminate the freedoms Afghans won with international assistance since 2001. Progress is impossible to disavow as we watch the Taliban reverse gains and reinstate the horrors endured during the organization's rule from 1996 to 2001. Afghanistan was not transformed into Denmark. But Afghanistan only needed to be Afghanistan with a government hostile to jihadist terrorists, and security forces strong enough to withstand the regenerative capacity of the Taliban.

We must stop pretending that the outcome would have been better if we had simply left Afghanistan after the successful military campaign in 2001. The consolidation of gains has never been an optional phase in war. This is made clear in Dr. Nadia Schadlow's description of American denial syndrome in her book 'War and the Art of Governance' or Colonel Conrad Crane's essay, "Avoiding Vietnam" in which he observes in connection with the consolidation of military gains to get to a sustainable political outcome that "we have never been able to never do it again."

We must stop pretending that America cannot generate the will for sustained military efforts abroad. Those who cite public opinion polls in favor of withdrawal should attribute lack of support to leaders' failure to explain what was at stake in the war and the strategy for achieving an outcome worthy of the costs, risks, and sacrifices. By 2018 a low level of military commitment and an affordable level of multi-national financial support was enabling the Afghans to bear the brunt of the fight. Sustained efforts in Korea, the Sinai, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Colombia are just a few examples of successful and sustained long term efforts.

We must stop pretending that there are short term solutions to long term problems. Afghanistan was not a twenty-year war; it was a one-year war fought twenty times over. Our short-term approach increased the cost and duration of the war. Persistent declarations of withdrawal across three administrations emboldened our enemies, sowed doubts among our allies, encouraged hedging behavior, perpetuated corruption, and weakened state institutions.

We must stop pretending that we can fight enemies we wish we had rather than our actual enemies. The Taliban has not changed, is intertwined with other jihadist terrorist organizations, and is determined to reinstate brutal Sharia. The reestablishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is as much a victory for Al Qaeda and other jihadists as it is for the Taliban. The

notion of partnering with the Taliban to fight terrorism is like partnering with Whitey Bulger or Tony Soprano to fight organized crime.

We must stop pretending that vilification from the ‘international community’ will influence the Taliban. The notion that enemies of humanity who are determined to force Afghanistan back into the 7th century or an organization led by someone who encouraged his seventeen-year-old son to become a suicide bomber are concerned about chiding tweets or disapproving speeches in Washington, New York, Brussels, or the Hague is ludicrous.

We must stop pretending that the military instrument can be separated from diplomacy. As Secretary George Schultz observed, “negotiation is a euphemism for capitulation unless the shadow of power is cast across the bargaining table.” For much of the war, what we did militarily (e.g. no longer targeting the Taliban or announcing the timeline for our withdrawal) actually cut against our political and diplomatic efforts. We kept hearing that there was no military solution to the war in Afghanistan. But the Taliban, their Pakistani sponsors, and their Al Qaeda allies clearly had one in mind. More diplomacy with a terrorist organization like the Taliban without the prospect of force will achieve nothing but further embarrassment.

We must stop pretending that enemies and adversaries will conform to our policy preferences. Until the base motivation of its Army changes, Pakistan will never be a reliable partner against jihadist terrorist organizations. The ISI directed, rebuilt and sustained the Taliban with the assistance of Al Qaeda after 2001. Moreover, South Asia is an arena of competition with China and Russia. Surrender and withdrawal in Afghanistan detracted from rather than reinforced our ability to deter great power conflict and compete with China and Russia. Deterrence is based on capability and will; our adversaries may have concluded from that we lack the latter.

Finally, we must stop pretending that it is acceptable to fight wars without a commitment to win. Winning in Afghanistan meant achieving the just intention of ensuring that Afghanistan never again became a haven for jihadist terrorists. Because in war each side tries to outdo the other, lack of commitment to win is counterproductive. According to Thomas Aquinas’ *jus ad bellum* theory, it is also unethical to fight without determination to succeed. Our leaders invented a new lexicon including terms like ‘responsible end’ as cover for their ambivalence as they sent soldiers into battle. In Afghanistan, delusional strategies oriented on amorphous objectives provided an unethical rationale for self-defeat.

The humanitarian, political, and security consequences of our self-defeat in Afghanistan will reverberate far beyond South Asia. Our allies' confidence is shaken. Our enemies are emboldened. Jihadist terrorists are claiming victory over the world superpower. Iran is accelerating its nuclear program. North Korea's nuclear reactor is active again as it tests more missiles. Vladimir Putin's Russia is conducting a massive military exercise to demonstrate power from the Baltics to the Black Sea and Ukraine. China is increasing its threats to Taiwan. It is imperative that we stop pretending as the first step in regaining our strategic competence and rebuilding ours and our allies' confidence.

Many servicemen and women and their families are asking if the war in Afghanistan was worth the sacrifices made. I believe that the answer to that question is yes. America's war in Afghanistan was a just and noble endeavor. Our military forces decimated Al Qaeda and unseated the government that harbored terrorists who had committed the mass murder of nearly 3,000 innocent victims. In doing so, our coalition delivered the Afghan people from the hell of Taliban rule and allowed them to transform Afghan society. Our sustained efforts alongside courageous Afghans and other coalition members on a modern-day frontier between barbarism and civilization prevented countless attacks. American servicemen and women should be proud of what they accomplished and know that we need them to remain ready to fight because, as mentioned previously, wars do not end when one party disengages. The war against jihadist terrorists is not over; it is entering a new, more dangerous phase.