

# Afghanistan

by Bill Herbst

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Needless to say, the U.S. military's official withdrawal from Afghanistan has dominated the news over the past weeks. I include the adjective "official" because military operations in Afghanistan won't cease. Drone strikes and secret ops (whether launched from the Pentagon, the CIA, or some other agency within the Deep State) will continue, no doubt. What Biden is doing is pulling out the obvious and visible troops on the ground — somewhat less than 5,000 soldiers — along with a fairly small percentage of their equipment. The bulk of the military materiel America invested into Afghanistan, which I'd guess was at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars -- will remain there, either to rot or be taken over by whichever Afghans are in power, at this point presumably the Taliban.

Back in 2001 during the weeks after 9-11, when Dick Cheney's hand puppet, President George W. Bush, announced the decision to invade Afghanistan with the absurdly misnamed "Operation Enduring Freedom," roughly 5% of the American public was against it. The vast majority of Americans were in the grip of jingoistic bloodlust aimed at Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, or more generally any and all Muslims. They didn't really care who we attacked in the Mideast, as long as we kicked ass. America wasn't going to invade Pakistan, which was where most of the Al Qaeda camps existed, or Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that the guys who hijacked the airliners and crashed them into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were all Saudis. Afghanistan was the "easy" target, giving the U.S. a golden opportunity to take out the Taliban.

Most Americans didn't know much about those considerations and didn't care. True, red-blooded American patriots were bent on vengeance. The cautionary lessons of Vietnam in the 1960s and the Soviet military debacle in Afghanistan during the 1980s were completely lost on Americans, from the Pentagon to the public. The vast majority of Americans had no idea that the "War on Terror" would inevitably produce disaster.

Well, not exactly. The 5% of the American public that opposed the invasion included millions of us — I was one — who saw very clearly what would happen. And, of course, we were right.

But this commentary is not about how the American Empire ignores its dissenters. That goes with the territory, has always been that way, and is unlikely to change. No, this post is about who actually won the 20-year war in Afghanistan.

It was, to use the term first coined by Dwight D. Eisenhower in his televised farewell address as President in January 1961, the “military-industrial complex” in America. The victors in Afghanistan were the five largest “defense” contractors (i.e. weapons makers, who were long ago called “merchants of death”). Those are: Lockheed-Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Boeing, and Northrup-Grummond. They make most of the armaments used by the American military. These five won the war, along with thousands of smaller defense subcontractors. How did they win? Their owners and stockholders got rich — filthy, stinking rich.

Want to know what’s important in America? I mean, really, truly important? *Money*. Want to understand what America does and why? *Follow the money*.

Here are the increases in stock prices since 2001 of the weapons manufacturers I listed above, expressed as percentages. The source for these numbers is the non-profit progressive consumer rights advocacy group, *Public Citizen*:

1,236% return..... Lockheed-Martin  
1,196% return..... Northrup-Grummond  
975% return..... Boeing  
625% return..... General Dynamics  
331% return..... Raytheon

If you had invested \$10,000 in 2001 by buying equal shares of public stock in these five corporations, your portfolio would now be worth more than \$100,000. That’s an increase of 1,000% in two decades. Pretty good.

The war in Afghanistan was not (and was never intended to be) about freedom or democracy or even protecting America from terrorism. It wasn’t about human rights or nation-building, although all the neocon hawks said it was. No, it was about the Great American Religion — making money and getting rich.

See, we’re not good at those other things. We’re lousy at democracy and freedom and human rights, and we’re sure as hell not competent to build any nations in our own image. What we’re good at is increasing the wealth of the richest people in America. We do that brilliantly and on steroids, but that’s about all we’re good at, really. Everything else we do these days is shoddy, half-assed, and comes with terrible problems, but that’s OK as long as it makes the rich even wealthier.

On the face of it, this reads like I’m being both cynical and sarcastic. And I am, of course. But that doesn’t mean it’s not true. War profiteering is as American as apple pie. The great fortunes made during the Civil War set up America for the Gilded Age of Robber Barons that would follow in the 1870s and 1880s. And the two World Wars of the 20th century were immensely profitable for the people who made all the stuff those wars required. But all of that paled compared to what we’ve done over the past 70 years. In my lifetime, the business of killing has grown into a leviathan of art, myth, and science.

The vested interests of the defense contractors are clear and at least fairly straightforward. But what of the politicians, policy wonks, and other government officials who masterminded America's foreign policy over the past half century? What about Zbigniew Brzezinski — President Jimmy Carter's stand-in for Henry Kissinger — who oversaw the strategy of supporting the Mujahedin to pressure the Soviets? Those particular Afghans, otherwise known as the Northern Alliance, were the forerunners of the Taliban — warlords and heroin merchants who were also Islamic fundamentalist reactionaries. Those were "our" friends. What about Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, who rose to power with Reagan and ran the whole show with Bush the Younger? Did men such as these and the many other theorists behind and cheerleaders for the War on Terror ever have second thoughts about their geopolitical game-playing? Did anything that's happened cause them to doubt their allegiance to the American Empire?

I suppose it's possible, and perhaps even likely, that some among the elite class of policy-makers have privately harbored doubts or entertained reservations about what was done, but I'm unaware of any compelling public evidence to support that. The Neocons were certain of themselves from the beginning and have remained so throughout the entire tragic fiasco that ensued.

My guess is that some percentage of the military who served in the various campaigns conducted over the past 20 years in the Mideast and Africa — foot soldiers, airmen, and even perhaps generals — feel remorse about what they did or saw. This happens for some veterans of every war. Such soldiers come away from their experience in combat feeling traumatized forever by the horrors of death and destruction. They start out as patriots, but end up as peaceniks.

For the architects, engineers, and manufacturers, however, the likelihood of repentance is very small. After all, they didn't kill anyone. They didn't have to overcome immobilizing fear or smell the stench of death. They don't think of themselves as killers, just business people.

There is, however, a fundamental divide: Are you for war or against it? Some Americans try get around that by the argument that some wars are justified, and thus good. This is the American myth behind World War II — the "Good War." To engage in that argument, however, you have to believe that America alone defeated Nazi Germany, and that's not true. The Soviets did that, with the help of American manufacturing and 30 million of their own dead. You must also ignore the fire bombing of cities in Germany and Japan that contributed little to a military victory but killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. And then there's the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were actually the opening salvos of the Cold War.

If you believe that World War II was "the Good War," then in my book you're for war. Period. Now, I'm against war, but I'm not a pacifist. I don't believe that it's always correct — morally, ethically, practically, or spiritually — to "turn the other cheek." Sometimes, but not always. Aggression may require a response,

but war is not the optimal first response to choose. War ought to be the last resort, employed only when all other measures of diplomacy have failed.

What we did in Afghanistan was not the last resort. It was not just foolish, but downright stupid, and guaranteed to fail. The fact that it did fail so spectacularly should come as no surprise to anyone. Presidents Bush and Obama are more than just complicit in this. They are guilty of war crimes, although with that and five bucks you can get a cappuccino. Neither man will be held to account.

War has been a lynchpin of civilization since it began. Randolph Bourne's now-famous dictum, "*War is the health of the state*," has proven all too true. The deadly serious game of geopolitics is deeply entrenched in the ways that nations approach their relationships with each other. The game is played by the most powerful nations on the world stage (such as America and China), as well as by those that aspire to be powerful (such as North Korea). Over the history of the last, say, millennium, was there ever an extended period where wars weren't being fought somewhere? Not long enough to catch a breath.

Is another, more peaceful world possible? Sure. We created civilization, and we can change it. Is such a transformation likely? Sadly, no. Throughout the past century, numerous efforts to outlaw war were all undone by human depravity, greed, and the most tragic expressions of Us-versus-Them. For every person committed to peace and harmony, another person is willing (and maybe eager) to use force, coercion, or violence to get what he wants. That second type is much more drawn to the corridors of power and control over others.

"War is a Racket" is a short but pungent treatise by Major General Smedley Butler. Butler was a senior officer in the U.S. Marine Corps who commanded American troops during the Mexican Revolution, Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection, and World War I. At the time of his death in 1940, General Butler was the most decorated Marine in U.S. history, one of only 19 men to be awarded the coveted Medal of Honor *twice*. If anyone were in a position to truly understand the relationship between war and empire, it was Butler, the quintessential soldier's soldier.

Although not well known to the public, Butler's essay (written first as a speech after his retirement from the military, and then published as a short book in 1935), has become a landmark testament among advocates for peace.

Here's a link to "War is a Racket" online:

<https://www.ratical.org/ratville/CAH/warisaracket.html>

On that web page, click the link in the upper left corner to view or download the free PDF version of Butler's essay. It's a quick read — only 19 pages — but it's bluntly illuminating about the state of American belligerence, offered from the informed perspective of a soldier who served the Empire faithfully and witnessed firsthand the entire spectrum of war's motivations and repercussions. If you haven't read the essay, it's well worth checking out.