

Yonatan Freedman-Naditch
Division 4 Humanities

Most people agree that American troops should get out of Afghanistan. The questions which create debate are not ‘what,’ but rather ‘how’ and ‘when.’ Both of these questions require balance. My opinion is that America should reduce the number of military personnel very gradually, while retaining contact with the Afghan government. We would provide economic advisors that they could call upon as they deemed necessary, but would not offer unsolicited advice. Evacuate our troops too early, without enough precaution, and the Taliban will once again be in control, putting Afghanistan in a position that isn’t any better than when the US arrived. Exercise too much precaution, keep too firm of a grip, and the Taliban will use it as an example in order to gain more recruits and become stronger, leaving the Afghan government with a more difficult problem. This foreign policy problem has many intelligent people baffled.

Some argue that we should be focusing on leaving Afghanistan regardless of the situation there, so that we can protect the American troops. Those people may point out that this is the longest ongoing war in American history. Despite this true fact, the war has cost America very little compared to what it has cost those in Afghanistan itself. Between two and three thousand Americans have died in Afghanistan over the last two decades. Afghanistan’s death toll is more than fifty times that number - on the scale of American deaths in World War I. Nobody has benefitted, and the American deaths matter, but in the end, this is Afghanistan’s war. And as such, we should be leaving Afghanistan in the position that is best *for Afghanistan*. Many argue this position as well, but debate remains on how to achieve it.

As someone who has spent only a few months learning about the situation in Afghanistan, I would take my own advice with a grain of salt. But to me, it seems evident that withdrawing too quickly or too slowly is a recipe for disaster. The goal is that a public “solicited advice only” instruction, provided to American advisors, would slowly dispel any rumors concerning the current Afghan government being a puppet of America. In addition, we would be seen visibly starting to move out, while still maintaining some degree of military aid until the Afghan government can become self-sufficient. The war would not end immediately, but to walk a mile you must first take a step.

Was the war worth it to begin with? Have the gains been greater than the losses? The answer to these questions are no clearer to me than the questions about how to leave. We don’t know what would have happened had America not gone to war. We never will know, because that isn’t the timeline we live in. It could be that if we had never waged war, the Taliban would have destabilized internally, leaving an opening to eliminate Al Qaeda quickly. Or, it could be that both the Taliban and Al Qaeda would have gotten stronger, and we would have been forced to war, but with far greater losses. The second option seems more likely to me, but the first isn’t out of the realm of possibility.

I would certainly like to believe that waging a war is never worth it. The reality is, though, that sometimes you must destroy some lives to save more of them, and that it isn't possible to know, with certainty, which situations those are beforehand, or even after. But we can take our best guesses towards whether, when and how to wage a war, and whether, when, and how to pull out of it. In Afghanistan, the whether seems obvious - we should pull out. The when seems like it should start now. But as for the how, the most anyone can provide is their best educated guess.