

As someone who was in charge of an embassy during a major evacuation ...

Blog by Dennis Jett, 18 August 2021

First there were those who said that we could have won in Afghanistan--if only. If only we had stayed a little longer, spent a few billion dollars more, shed a little more blood, and done a better job propping up a house of cards that had no foundation. That chorus has now been supplanted by a new group of critics that are complaining about the evacuation. They are charging that people are being left behind that they insist can and should be gotten out.

As someone who was in charge of an embassy during a major evacuation, I have problems with the complaints that are being repeated so loudly and frequently on cable news. In a way, they reflect the hubris that helped create the situation in Afghanistan and its inglorious ending. They thought we could create a 21st century nation out of a country with its feet firmly planted in the 17th century merely by using American might, money, technology, and our example of democracy. And now, after it has all fallen apart, they think we are still in control to a far greater degree than the reality of the situation would suggest.

I was the acting ambassador in Liberia in mid-1990, as the rebels closed in on the capitol. Back then, we had several advantages that American officials in Afghanistan today do not. The corrupt, incompetent government at least held together enough to have some territory still under its power even though it was only a few square blocks of downtown Monrovia. The Liberian army, after years of American military training and hundreds of millions in military assistance, had been brutal in their treatment of civilians and performed miserably when confronting the insurgents. But when their backs were literally to the sea, they stood and fought. In a civil war that had turned very tribal, it was either that or die.

Being on the sea, we had an easy route out. And we had the benefit of a four-ship flotilla, that included the USS Saipan, a helicopter aircraft carrier, just over the horizon. It was there over two months steaming in circles as it took time for the situation to become desperate and we did want to put American troops in a situation where they might have to fight the rebels or the government soldiers.

Meanwhile, we helped people leave by commercial air and then by aircraft we chartered while there was still an airport open. Shortly before the city was completely cut off a new ambassador arrived. A few weeks later one of the leaders of the two rebel groups trying to seize power said he was going to start taking foreign hostages. At that point, we finally brought two hundred Marines ashore to protect the embassy compound, converted the basketball court into a helipad, and began to evacuate thousands of people out to the Saipan. Because neither the government troops nor the rebels were interested in attacking the embassy, the operation went very smoothly and those who able to make it to the compound got out safely.

That is not the case in Kabul, where the government totally collapsed in a matter of days, the Taliban are completely in control, and their intentions toward American personnel somewhere between ambiguous and antagonistic. But some of the dilemmas faced by the embassy there are the same ones we faced thirty years ago in Liberia.

For starters, whom do you evacuate? The number of people who can be gotten out will always be far fewer than the number who would like to leave. It is not just Americans and

local employees. Nationals of third countries will want to go as well. If, in a family of ten, one child is an American citizen does the entire family get to go? Does anyone who ever worked for any American organization in any capacity for any length of time qualify? Do officials of the government and the military get included, even though they are somewhat responsible for the situation?

Moreover, how can you get those eligible to the evacuation point? The short answer is you cannot. Those behind enemy lines cannot be magically scooped up a helicopter or whisked away by a convoy of soldiers. Many of them have probably ignored warnings to leave and have placed themselves in jeopardy. But that won't stop them from demanding to be rescued and from a journalist holding them up as an example of the failure of the operation. And the scenes of people frantically trying to board aircraft will get the airtime and not any shots of any orderly departures.

All this will provide the incentive for those in Congress and the media, who spend their days looking for things to criticize, to search for microphones instead of feasible solutions. They will never miss a chance to politicize a situation if it might win them a few votes or viewers. Some of them will say that everyone should just be brought to this country. But just wait until the first crime, or worst still, an act of terrorism is committed by an evacuee here. Then the chorus will begin anew without the slightest reference to what they have sung in the past.

In summary, there are no easy answers or simple solutions in a crisis. The situation is never uncomplicated and what you don't know is always much greater than what you are sure of. Those who have all the answers are never those who are on the scene. Of the many painful things associated with the debacle unfolding in Afghanistan, there is at least one that is controllable. We can stop listening to the armchair field marshals and retired military officers who are now telling us how we could have won.

STOP THE WHINING - AFGHANISTAN WAS ALWAYS UNWINNABLE

Blog by Dennis Jett, 15 August 2021

Afghanistan was never winnable for several reasons. First of all, it is not a country. Sure, there exists on the map an area with borders that bears that name, but that does not make it a nation. Being a real country requires most of the people in it to identify first and foremost as citizens of that country. Afghanistan is a collection of warring tribes, clans, and religious sects all of which are more important to their members than being Afghans.

Second, it is a narco-state that is the world's largest producer of heroin. When your economy is based on crime, there is little chance of having a government that can effectively govern. Third, look at the map. If you had to pick a collection of countries that would be the least helpful neighbors, you could not do better than the ones surrounding Afghanistan. Vietnam demonstrated the impact on the chances of prevailing in a conflict when external sanctuaries and supply routes are just across the border.

Pakistan has been a particularly unhelpful neighbor in part because of its competition with India and its inability or unwillingness to control its own territory. And it has provided a haven

to more than just Osama Bin Laden. Then there is Iran and China and several Stans, all of whom care more about their influence and access to resources than they do about peace.

Fourth, if it is one thing that Vietnam should have taught us is it is that when your local partner is corrupt, incompetent, and does not enjoy or care about having the support of its own people, then you have picked the losing side.

The only real winner in this sorry situation was our military-industrial complex. How many billions of dollars have been spent on trying to build a high-tech military capability in a country where only 38 percent of the people can read?

But none of this will stop the think tank generals with no military experience and the retired generals who think there is a kinetic solution for every problem from telling us they could have won if their strategy had been adopted. They had twenty years and hundreds of billions of dollars to come up with a way to win. It didn't happen because given the situation it could never happen. So now would they all just please shut up.

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