

Learning Nothing From the Ghost of Congress Past

There is a lesson to be learned from the *Washington Post's* publication of the "Afghanistan Papers," which chronicle the corruption, ineptitude, dishonesty, and strategic disarray that have marked the Afghanistan war since its earliest days. That lesson is this: when it comes to war, the American people and their elected representatives will do just about anything to avoid the truth.

Granted, Americans have become used to classifying the Afghanistan war as an afterthought. An undertaking begun in a faraway place for long since forgotten purposes, the conflict has over time drifted to the remotest fringes of the nation's collective consciousness. Here in Massachusetts, where I live, sagging casino revenues and the risks of vaping rate as matters of greater immediate concern than a war now in its 19th year.

So the predisposition to ignore the conflict in Afghanistan is well-established. Ironically, however, media outlets such as the *Post* itself have abetted this truth-dodging inclination. Having broken the Afghanistan Papers story, for example, the *Post* is now complicit in burying it, joining the media frenzy that's elevated President Trump's possible (and fervently wished for) removal from office to the status of story of the century. By comparison, revelations that the officials charged with running America's longest war have known virtually since the get-go that it was a total cockup – while telling the public otherwise – qualify as only of passing interest.

The uptick of interest in the Afghanistan war triggered by the *Post* is already subsiding. While perfunctory congressional hearings may yet occur, a meaningful response – one that would

demand accountability, for example – is about as likely as a bipartisan resolution to the impeachment crisis.

This implicit willingness to write off a costly, unwinnable, and arguably unnecessary war should itself prompt sober reflection. What we have here is a demonstration of how pervasive and deeply rooted American militarism has become.

Take seriously the speechifying heard on the floor of the House of Representatives in recent days and you'll be reassured that the United States remains a nation of laws, with Democrats and Republicans alike affirming their determination to defend our democracy and preserve the Constitution, even while disagreeing on what that might require at present.

Take seriously the contents of the Afghanistan Papers and you'll reach a different conclusion: we have become a nation given to misusing military power, abusing American soldiers, and averting our gaze from the results. U.S. military expenditures and the Pentagon's array of foreign bases far exceed those of any other nation on the planet. In our willingness to use force, we (along with Israel) lead the pack. Putative adversaries such as China and Russia are models of self-restraint by comparison. And when it comes to cumulative body count, the United States is in a league of its own.

Yet since the end of the Cold War and especially since 9/11, U.S. forces have rarely accomplished the purposes for which they are committed, the Pentagon concealing failure by downsizing its purposes. Afghanistan offers a good example. What began as Operation Enduring Freedom has become in all but name Operation Decent Interval, the aim being to disengage in a manner that will appear responsible, if only for a few years until the bottom falls out.

So the real significance of the Post's Afghanistan Papers is

this: they invite Americans to contemplate a particularly vivid example of what our misplaced infatuation with military power produces. Sadly, it appears evident that we will refuse the invitation. Don't blame Trump for this particular example of Washington's egregious irresponsibility.

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