

Happy Birthday, Afghanistan

October 08, 2019

The war in Afghanistan is now old enough to go to war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday the war in Afghanistan, first to fall under the catchall designation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), turned 18 years old, meaning that individuals who were not yet born when it started are now old enough to deploy in it.

Growing up, 18 is one of those birthdays you look forward to so much. It means freedom, emancipation from parental oversight. It means cigarettes and lottery tickets. It means taking part in the democratic process. It means tattoos.

The war is not much different.

Freedom is certainly at the forefront of its goals. 18 years ago it began its existence as Operation Enduring Freedom and it continues (since 2015) as Operation Freedom's Sentinel. At this point there have probably been more cigarettes smoked by US troops than rounds fired. Notably absent from this new longest war is the draft lottery, a staple of the previous longest conflict, The Vietnam War.

As for the democratic process, Afghanistan has gotten it, or a version of it, since the US removal of the Taliban in 2001, having held three parliamentary elections and just completed their fourth presidential election (though the results are still unknown, partly due to ongoing violence, low turn-out, and the usual allegations of corruption).

And tattoos? Well, tattoos are just ink filled scars, and 18 years of war have left plenty of those.

I don't much remember my 18th birthday. I'm sure it was rather

unremarkable, taking place during midterms of my senior year in high school, the year we got new US history textbooks that included the September 11th attacks.

It wasn't until two months later that I got my first tattoo, and I didn't move out of my parents' house until five months later. I wouldn't enlist until two months after my 19th birthday, and with full-scale ground wars now in two countries, it was clear that I'd be deploying, especially having joined the infantry.



I received my orders to deploy to Afghanistan on October 2, 2005, just before the war turned four. By this age, much of the country's attention was turned to its younger sibling, the War in Iraq. I went to war just after my 20th birthday.

When I got home in 2006, people constantly asked me what it was like in Iraq. They still do. This was the beginning of the realization that my war would be forgotten, but I never imagined it would reach this scale.

Over the past 18 years, less than half of one percent of this country's population has served in the military. An even smaller percentage has deployed, and of that group even fewer saw combat. The nature of the war in Afghanistan, like the official operational name, has changed. But war is war and US troops are still dying.

According to [DOD's most recent report](#) (October 7, 2019), there have been 1,893 US troops killed in action in Afghanistan since the start of the conflict. 60 of those have come under the banner of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which allegedly marked the end of combat operations in the country. There have been another 405 "non-hostile" deaths, and another 20,582 wounded in action. This is to say nothing of the US

contractors or Afghan and allied forces KIA and WIA, or the veterans who have died since returning from the war, be it from complications to war injuries or from suicide.

Or the Afghan civilians whose freedom we are supposed to be sentinels of.

Questions I'm consistently faced with as a veteran of Afghanistan include: Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Should we leave? Did we win? How do we win?

The question of worth is a difficult one for me. Can we say anything is worth the number of lives that have been lost? More to the point, can we really make that judgment while we're still in the thick of it?

Personally, yes, I would again answer my nation's call and attempt to protect those whose position demands protection. Was it worth the injuries, physical and moral? Again, it's hard to say in the thick of it, but when I hear that a combat outpost my team opened was closed just a few years later, or that a city we helped clear of the Taliban has fallen back under their control, it's harder to say.

Should we leave? Absolutely. The challenge is *how* we leave. And I don't have the answer. When the Soviets left in 1989 (after just 9 years of war), they did so under a cloud of atrocities committed. In some cases they just up and left, leaving behind equipment, mortars and tanks that I would patrol past 17 years later. They left a physical and political mess behind them. We can't do the same. For the sake of the people of Afghanistan and the US troops who served there, we mustn't. The feeling of futility, that our actions and sacrifices were entirely inconsequential, is one of the contributing factors to the rise of suicide among veterans.

The last question is the crux of it all. What can we call winning? Does the fact that the OEF designation ended mean that we secured enduring freedom? Is it only enduring because

we are still there as its sentinel? One of the reasons this question is so hard to answer is a lack of missional clarity from 18 years ago.

The Taliban was removed from power. That was not the end of the war. Osama bin Laden was killed. The war went on. The Afghan people democratically elected a second president. Still we were there. We declared an end to combat operations. US troops are still dying in combat.

But if my 18th birthday was unremarkable, the Afghan war's is even more so. Especially when considered in the context of national discourse. There was no Facebook reminder that October 7th was OEF's birthday. There was no corresponding fundraiser.

Rather, the occasion was largely marked by attention being paid to yet another younger sibling: Syria. Headlines, television news, and online platforms were dominated by the administration's latest GWOT decision to remove troops from a younger war. And it is unsurprising.

While withdrawing troops from Afghanistan has been given lip service in debates over the past few election cycles, nothing of substance has been done. During the confirmation for Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, not a single question was asked about Afghanistan. It took two hours for the incoming Secretary of the Army to be asked a question about Afghanistan during his confirmation.

President Trump didn't even mention Afghanistan on its war's birthday. The closest he came was tweeting, "I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars..." But this was clearly in response to criticism of the Syria decision.

No mention of the war that was voted most likely to be endless.