

Another date which will live in infamy – the day Kabul fell to the Taliban, Sunday 15 August 2021

Reflections by a former military surgeon and Afghanistan veteran

What is it about a date? What is it that makes particular dates and anniversaries resonate so deeply within us all? Is it fundamentally their association with our shared mortality, with life and death, whether through our birthday or the day we die? If so, this explains why dates are when we especially empathise with others too, that we remember what happened to them, or what they did – and the forceful emotions engendered by such memories will often galvanise us into action, for good or evil, sometimes with unintended consequences. That's what's so powerful about a date.

It was US President Franklin D Roosevelt who inspired the title of this piece, a phrase coined by him for the memorable opening sentence of his famous speech to Congress calling for a declaration of war: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941 — a date which will live in infamy — the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." 2,403 Americans lost their lives that day, precipitating America's entry into the Second World War.

That War came to a successful end for the Allies on another date four years later, 15 August 1945, commemorated ever since as VJ-Day (Victory over Japan). That date was closely preceded by two dates newly tainted by infamy for the manner and number of indiscriminate deaths associated with them, 6 August and 9 August, when the first atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively, with the loss of some 110,000 lives. Evil is not constrained to one side or other in war.

66 years later, another date which will live in infamy again overshadowed the world – that of a second sudden attack on the USA, this time by Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida Islamist terrorists against the Twin Towers in New York, with the loss of nearly 3,000 lives, on 11 September 2001. This date is more familiarly remembered as 9/11, twenty years ago this coming month. The righteous international indignation aroused on that date led to the overthrow by NATO forces of the Taliban in Afghanistan for harbouring Al-Qaida, bringing a glimmer of hope to Afghanistan's oppressed population, especially its women and children.

On a personal note, in September 2001, as a military surgeon then attached to 22 Field Hospital, I was in Oman on Exercise SAIF SARREA II, alongside some 20,000 British troops simulating potential conflict in the Middle East. The TV images of airliners crashing into the Twin Towers on 9/11 held us spellbound in horror. One thought pre-dominated – who knows where we will be by Christmas? Sure enough, on 23 December I was flying on a RAF Hercules C-130 aircraft into Bagram airfield, northern Afghanistan, now attached to 34 Field Hospital Troop. We set up a small field hospital on this war-scarred airfield the next day, surrounded by taped off minefields and destroyed Russian MIG aircraft from a previous superpower incursion, and were ready to receive casualties by Christmas Day. That was the start of the first of my six deployments to Afghanistan. Our first major incident arose when a US Army CH47 Chinook of the 101st (Airborne) Division crashed during a night landing on 28 January 2002. 16 casualties were brought in to us, fortunately all survived.¹ It would not be our last incident. It also presaged a revolution in military and trauma medicine, a beneficial legacy of this war.

¹ Vassallo DJ, Gerlinger T, Maholtz P, Burlingame B, Shepherd A. Combined UK/US Field Hospital management of a major incident arising from a Chinook helicopter crash in Afghanistan, 28 Jan 2002. *J Roy Army Med Corps* 2003;**149**:47-52 <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/jramc/149/1/47.full.pdf>

Sadly, the attention of the USA and UK was soon diverted to start a war in Iraq in 2003, on the false premise of Iraq harbouring weapons of mass destruction. That Iraq war, widely condemned as illegal, lost the Allies all semblance of legitimacy in both Iraq and Afghanistan. US President Bush's decision to attack Iraq has been described as a strategic error ranking in enormity alongside Napoleon and Hitler's decisions to invade Russia, decisions which cost Napoleon his Empire and Hitler his Third Reich.² The fatal loss of focus on Afghanistan ultimately led to progressive withdrawal of US and NATO troops from both countries, culminating after two decades of strife in the debacle of the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 – a date of infamy for the US, which will live in memory for its self-inflicted shame at the abandonment of an ally, at the betrayal of hope and trust.

This debacle was precipitated by the hold of another date over the American psyche, the imminent 20th anniversary of 9/11. The new US President, Joe Biden, seeking to hijack the power of this date to bookend American military involvement in a now unpopular war, announced in April that US troops would withdraw completely from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11, leaving the weakened Afghan Armed Forces to try and buttress their Government against a resurgent Taliban.

President Biden could have chosen any other date, or maintained some support to Afghanistan, as his withdrawal decision was unforced, but 9/11 it had to be. This decision unintentionally tarnished the memory of 9/11, and of the world's unified positive response to such outrage, with the negative and demoralising vibes of defeat, of ignominious withdrawal in the face of an unvanquished foe.

In retrospect, this was also wishful thinking and a strategic miscalculation of the first order, because it simultaneously emboldened the Taliban (who had their own narrative to promote) and critically demoralised the Afghan Army and Government. The Taliban had long taunted the Allies with the catchphrase "you have the watches, we have the time". Now their time had come to prove that they indeed had the greater staying power.

Summer is the normal fighting season in Afghanistan. The first two weeks of August saw lightning advances by the Taliban, and the rapid fall of provincial capitals one by one, as ill-led and demoralised Afghan security forces and officials capitulated in haste. The fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 will be for ever remembered for the images of US and UK helicopters hastily evacuating their nationals from their embassies, and for the chaotic scenes the next day of desperate refugees clinging to departing American aircraft, reminiscent of the last days of Saigon in 1975.

15 August 2021, a date which will live in infamy, for the fall of Kabul, and of Afghanistan.

A different way of remembering VJ-Day.

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² Ben Barry. *Blood, Metal and Dust – How Victory turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2020)