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Biden's Vainglory Brings Abject Humiliation in Afghanistan

'America is back,' the president said in February, promising to 'live . . . by the power of our example.'



By

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks about the chaos in Afghanistan at a news conference in Washington, Aug. 25.

PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

If you wanted to capture the geopolitical history of the 21st century so far in a single paragraph, you couldn't do much better than this:

Twenty years ago, America fought a brief and successful military campaign to oust from power the people who had enabled a terrorist organization to kill as many American citizens as have ever died at the hands of a foreign power in a single day in the nation's history. A month shy of two decades later, the U.S. pleaded with that same power not to harm its soldiers, its citizens and their allies as it scrambled to complete a chaotic and humiliating retreat that left that former enemy—and American adversaries everywhere—immeasurably stronger.



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Any story of nemesis has its roots in hubris, and there's much hubris to go around in the 20 years of American engagement with Afghanistan.

But as a lesson in the tragic cost of vanity, not much can top the spectacle we have witnessed in the past few weeks: an administration so steeped in self-belief, so driven by self-confidence, so disastrously misled by the vain order it imagined it could impose on the world; a hubris now paid for not in a high-level resignation or even an expression of contrition, but in the lives of American troops, lions again sacrificed to save the faces of the donkeys who lead them.

Biden hubris is a perfect example of the genre: the team of strategic geniuses, lauded by their fellow so-called experts, by allies and above all by themselves, as the smartest guys in the room, the “grown-ups” back to clear up the mess left by those terrible naïfs who preceded them.

The seminal text on how deep this sense of their own ingrained superiority—and how tragically misaligned with geopolitical reality it made them—was the first foreign-policy address Joe Biden gave as president, two weeks after taking office, as he introduced Secretary of State Antony Blinken before an audience of his department's staff.

Read it and weep. Almost every word should be hung around the neck of the president in light of what we have witnessed these past few weeks, almost every rhetorical cliché a mocking epitaph to a foreign policy so disastrously exposed in less than seven months.

Introducing Mr. Biden and his vice president, masked and standing sentinel behind him, Mr. Blinken said: “In the history of the presidency, no one has brought as much foreign

policy experience to the job as Joe Biden. . . . And in Kamala Harris. . . we have a vice president with a long track record of standing up for the security of the American people.”

We never got to hear from the vice president, but the greatest foreign-policy expert in the history of the presidency—Mr. Biden couldn’t resist pointing out that he had been the “Benjamin Franklin Professor of Presidential Politics” at the University of Pennsylvania—shared some of his strategic genius.

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This will give you a sense of the priorities: The words “Afghanistan” and even “terrorism” don’t get a single mention, but “LGBTQ” gets three. The president solemnly enumerated the threats his administration would face down: climate change, pandemics and above all the menace to American democracy from political opponents at home, the scourge of white supremacy and systemic racism.

As we watch the spectacle unfold in Afghanistan—the alarming deterioration in American security it represents, the trashing of trust in America’s word, the potentially fatal undermining of allies and the appeasement of enemies, Mr. Biden’s words then produce only uncomprehending disdain now.

“America is back,” of course.

“The United States will live not by the example of our power but by the power of our example.”

“America’s alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and key partners once again.”

Has such extraordinarily misplaced self-assurance, such vainglorious delusion ever been so swiftly mocked by reality?

Just a month before Chinooks ferried the last U.S. diplomats from the Kabul embassy to the airport, Mr. Biden was telling us there would be no Saigon-like helicopter-on-the-roofs moment as America withdrew. Shortly before Kabul fell in a weekend, Mr. Blinken told lawmakers that any deterioration wouldn't happen from a "Friday to a Monday."

The story of Afghanistan is a longer tale of repeated misplaced confidence, a story of belief overwhelming judgment again and again. Yes, the Trump administration's deal with the Taliban was part of that; and no, Mr. Biden's catastrophic execution doesn't necessarily mean the decision to disengage was wrong.

But as the Biden geniuses pick through the wreckage of what they have achieved, they—and all of us—should remember with trepidation this lesson from history: It's not only the gods who punish arrogance and vanity.

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