

When America gives up on Afghanistan, its women will pay

by Phyllis Chesler



President Trump's [call for a withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) raises a troubling question: Is the West morally obliged to persist in a struggle that can't be won? How much blood and treasure must we spend to save the victims of barbarism?

No one, after all, has ever been able to conquer or transform Afghanistan. It's a losing game. But once the United States leaves, young girls and women will be at the mercy of ruthless religious fanatics.

I should know: I was once a bride, trapped in Kabul in the early 1960s. I saw great natural beauty there and experienced

uncommon graciousness. But I also saw gender and religious apartheid up close.

Although I lived in fairly posh purdah (seclusion) in a home with servants, I'd entered a medieval world of women in burqas, polygamy, child marriage, honor-based violence, honor killing, epidemic but denied pederasty, heartbreaking poverty, infidel-hatred and religious fanaticism. Back then, despite some extraordinary books about Afghanistan, Westerners knew virtually nothing about the country's warrior culture, continuous feuds, vigilantism and woman-hatred.

With the rise of the Taliban, particularly after 9/11, Americans learned that Afghan women were publicly beaten if their burqas slipped and an ankle or a strand of hair showed and stoned to death for alleged adultery when raped.

Husbands and mothers-in-law humiliated and enslaved wives and sometimes tortured them to death. We saw that violent domestic abuse was considered normal and women routinely committed suicide as their only way out.

American women felt compelled to speak out. Former first lady Laura Bush cited "the brutal treatment of Afghan women shuttered in their homes, forbidden to go outside." Women, she noted, "were punished for laughing. Girls were forbidden to attend school."

Feminists took to the airwaves and organized rallies denouncing the Taliban. Western social workers, physicians, aid workers, activists and authors flocked to Afghanistan. Some were assassinated.

Yet Afghan lives were also saved – and improved. According to Mrs. Bush, enrollment of girls in primary school had jumped from 5,000 under the Taliban to nearly 2.5 million by 2016. More than 120,000 have graduated from secondary school. There are now over 3,000 women-owned businesses. Women hold important positions in local and national government.

Women for Afghan Women, too, reports that since 2001 it has educated and protected more than 1 million Afghan women.

Of course, America and our allies did not invade Afghanistan for the sake of women's rights. It did so in our pursuit of Osama bin Laden, who had been given shelter by the Taliban. Now bin Laden is dead, yet we are still in Afghanistan.

Too many American soldiers have been killed (2,400) and wounded (20,320) – not to mention the more than 100,000 Afghan civilians dead and wounded. Trillions have been spent on this new kind of religious war, which has us fighting soldiers without uniforms who hide behind civilians and propping up corrupt and incompetent leaders who cannot unite their own warlords.

It can't go on. Trump now seems determined to withdraw, though the country remains divided, chaotic, corrupt, volatile and a haven for terrorists. Linger to forge and implement a peace treaty with the Taliban is probably a lost cause, no different than brokering a treaty with ISIS, Boko Haram, Hezbollah or the Palestinian Authority.

I'm no military strategist. But I do fear for the Afghan people, particularly women and young girls, if and when America leaves – especially those who have shown so much courage in standing up for themselves against incredible odds.

We simply aren't going to be able to airlift every last girl, woman and dissident to freedom. (Would they all even want to leave?) Nor is there any nearby safe enclave to which they could flee.

No, America's departure will be a monumental tragedy for Afghan girls and women. The moment the last boot-on-the-ground departs, the Taliban and assorted paramilitary groups will torch every existing shelter for battered women and school for girls. Unrelenting fear will become the order of the day.

Still, there may yet be some way to find at least a measure of safety and dignity for those left behind. Pray we do: It might be our greatest triumph there of all.

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