

American Disgrace

By Don Sutherland

This weekend saw the harvest of the bitter fruit of failure in Afghanistan. That harvest was made possible by the combination of an Afghan government that never gained broad legitimacy among Afghans, a hollow Afghan security force that was unmatched in incompetence, and a colossal American leadership failure brought about by lack of conviction and an overabundance of short-sightedness.

On July 8, 2021, President Biden proclaimed, “There’s going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of the embassy of the United States from Afghanistan... The Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.” Barely more than one month later on August 15, news agencies broadcast what will surely become an iconic Associated Press photograph of a helicopter hovering over the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Hours later, it was reported that Afghanistan’s hapless President Ashraf Ghani had secretly fled the country, leaving its people to fend for themselves at the mercy of the advancing Taliban.

Following a lightning days-long offensive and the complete disintegration of Afghanistan’s armed forces, the brutal Taliban regime has returned to power. Women and girls are in danger of losing their most basic rights and opportunities. People who valiantly served the United States in good faith are at risk of losing their lives and those of their families. Commenting on the scale of betrayal involved, one translator explained, “As an interpreter I saved many American lives. So, they’ve really left me behind. Now I’m about to be killed, as is my family.”

Stunned by the rapidity of events, the Biden Administration is desperately trying to spin the outcome to limit damage to the American world position, as well as its own suddenly diminished political standing. “This is manifestly not Saigon,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken protested on ABC’s “This Week.” Those efforts to invent an alternative narrative will be of no avail.

The stark reality is that the author of the disastrous abdication (Trump Administration) and the party that carried it out rather than overturned it (Biden Administration) share full responsibility for all of the consequences that will follow. In the public’s perception, the Administration in office during a policy catastrophe winds up shouldering the bulk of the blame. And that’s not entirely unfair. After all, the Administration in power possessed latitude of choice. It could have taken a different course. It should have reversed its predecessor’s bad decision. Instead, it acquiesced in it. There is no exoneration for the choice it made.

Going forward, this self-inflicted tragedy will have enormous and damaging consequences for American credibility. The world witnessed the naked betrayal of the Afghan people. The world saw that American commitments have a short shelf-life. The world experienced the reality that even great power is rendered impotent when leaders lack the requisite courage and foresight to translate that power into good outcomes.

This is 21st century America’s “Suez Canal” or “Saigon” moment. There will be geopolitical shockwaves that will reverberate across the globe for years or decades to come. Those shockwaves will accelerate the structural forces that are already reshaping the balance of power,

along with the world's political and economic arrangements. Those forces had already been tilting toward illiberal forms of governance. Illiberalism has gained a fresh boost of energy.

'America is back,' has been exposed to have been little more than empty rhetoric. The world cannot help but take notice of this disturbing reality. Action, not words, will increasingly be the currency on which U.S. policy will be judged. Loss of credibility exacts a high price. Loss of credibility cannot be swept away without a record of consistent performance being rebuilt.

In terms of American politics, the Afghanistan catastrophe opens up a viable path for what had become almost unthinkable following the failed Trumpist coup attempt of January 6. The Biden Administration's historic failure has given an unchastened Republican Party a path that could lead to its return to power in at least one of the two houses of Congress in 2022. That the Biden Administration has complained, but taken no substantive action to address voter suppression laws being adopted in such states as Florida and Texas, has further paved the way for that outcome. The lack of "fight" that has pervaded the current Administration's policy from Afghanistan to U.S. election laws has given determined actors, including the Republican Party, opportunity to exploit that weakness.

In the longer-run, the road ahead has numerous paths that could lead to increasingly illiberal rule in the United States and abroad. The number of paths that lead toward a revival of American democracy and the bolstering of democracy worldwide is shrinking. One needs courage, persistence, and foresight to advance democracy. Those are exactly the qualities that were lacking when it came to the American abdication that culminated in Afghanistan's tragic fall to the Taliban.