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Having lost its way, the West lost the war

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Next month, as Americans commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the fall of Kabul will resonate every bit as loudly among the Islamists and their supporters as the collapse of the twin towers.

In effect, what greater proof could there be that Osama bin Laden was right? Hadn't he said that the West, with its love of life and fear of death, would never be able to withstand the mujaheddin who craved martyrdom's eternal glory? Now America itself has fled in disarray from warriors whose resources are laughable when set against the world's most costly armoury. After that, who can question bin Laden's assurance that the ultimate defeat of the "crusaders" is merely a matter of time?

Ceaselessly repeated throughout the Islamic world, that message will give the jihadis renewed vigour, with consequences made all the more deadly by their access to bases in Afghanistan. And as the shredding of America's credibility heartens its foes and dispirits its friends, two decades of bloodshed will have led us not towards the paradise of collective security but deeper into the hell of global chaos.

Whether the tragedy could have been averted will be debated for years to come. What is certain is that Afghanistan proved to be a trap: and if history's long record of military entrapments has a lesson, it is that the only good way to get out of a trap is not to get into it in

the first place. Yet this much is certain too: that trap would have been less fateful had the war's aims not been expanded far beyond the realms of possibility.

Originally, those aims were clear, limited and attainable. The initial US demand, made immediately after 9/11, was for the Taliban to turn over al-Qa'ida's leadership. "Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution," said president George W. Bush on September 20, 2001. "Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done." With the Taliban refusing to comply, an intervention whose goals were to uproot the Taliban and destroy al-Qa'ida began on October 7 and was largely completed, as far as Afghan territory was concerned, on December 17.

Even then, however, the intervention's nature had begun to change, and the change accelerated as the scale of the intervention increased. Punishing the Taliban and the jihadis it had harboured was no longer the goal; instead, it became the reconstruction – or, more properly, better construction – of Afghanistan. "Free nations," Bush said in 2005, "do not support terrorists"; the key to making "the world more peaceful" was to "advance the cause of liberty" by transforming Afghanistan into an example that could help "spread the hope of freedom across the broader Middle East".

Nor did Barack Obama resile from that goal. On the contrary, as the Democrats obtained control, greater emphasis was placed on the social objectives reconstruction would achieve, notably in empowering women and girls. America's full might, it seemed, would be deployed to push Afghanistan to the frontiers of human rights.

But as the level of ambition rose, the prospects of success plummeted. "In this war," Bush had told the US Naval Academy's midshipmen, "there is only one option: victory." By December 2009, when Obama spoke at West Point, the word "victory" did not appear a single time – a remarkable performance for the commander-in-chief of a country at war addressing young men and women who were headed to the field of battle.

From then on, the dominant aim, throughout the war's fluctuating fortunes, became the avoidance of outright defeat. And as public support in the US dwindled, that goal too moved increasingly out of reach.

In that sense, Joe Biden was right to claim the war was unsustainable. However, the need to bring the war to an end cannot justify the current calamity.

After all, even where military victory is not achievable, many different outcomes may still be possible, from a partial success through to a searing debacle. There are, for sure, few things harder to manage than a “just defeat”, as the best peace that can be secured may offer little more than an ugly stability. But that only makes the situation a truer test of leadership.

Harry Truman understood that when the Korean War became unwinnable late in 1950 following China’s massive intervention. Instead of escalating the war into China (as General Douglas MacArthur urged), Truman drastically reduced the war aims, abandoning the goal of changing the regime in North Korea and negotiating an armistice that, for all its flaws, avoided the risk of a global conflagration and gave South Korea a chance to prosper.

The performance of Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, in Vietnam certainly fell short of Truman’s standard. They knew the “peace with honour” Nixon had promised American voters was an illusion: if Saigon could not succeed bolstered by 500,000 foreign troops, how could it survive once those soldiers had left?

Nor did they have any intention of enforcing the peace agreement that was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973, and that supposedly guaranteed the South’s territorial integrity.

But while their conduct betrayed the people who had relied on them, at least Nixon and Kissinger tried to minimise the international ramifications of North Vietnam’s victory by locking in the opening to China and renewing detente with the Soviet Union – achievements they considered of much greater significance to restoring world order than the future of Indo-China and which they believed could not be secured for so long as American forces remained in Vietnam.

There was, however, none of that in the Biden administration’s decision to cut and run.

Effectively scrapping the (scarcely perfect) February 2020 agreement the UN Security Council had unanimously endorsed, the administration announced it would pull out unconditionally,

abandoning the Afghans to their fate while inciting the Taliban offensive; the threat that retaliation would be wreaked on the Taliban if it violated basic rights sounded, and was soon shown to be, entirely hollow; and nothing whatsoever was done to contain the global fallout.

Far from ending the “forever wars”, those crippling errors, and the weakness they betrayed, seemed designed to make them eternal.

“If we drove out a medieval tyranny only to make room for savage anarchy we had better not have begun the task at all,” Theodore Roosevelt warned Americans in 1899 when they cheered their territorial conquests in the Spanish-American War. Next month, it is those words, not Biden’s, that deserve to echo as the bells toll for the dead of 9/11 and of the miserable, heart-wrenching conflicts it unleashed.