



# Remember Afghanistan?

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September 11th, 2021 was the twentieth anniversary of 9/11.

Beyond the real-world commemorations there were also numerous televisual tributes looking back on the day and its aftermath, from *9/11—Inside the President's War Room* to Netflix's 5-part series, *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror*, CNN's updated 2002 documentary *9/11* and *Front Row to History: The 9/11 Classroom*, National Geographic's six-part series, *9/11: One Day in America*, PBS' *Frontline America After 9/11*, MSNBC's *Memory Box: Echoes of 9/11*, and the History Channel's *Rise and Fall: The World Trade Centre*. Over and over, the shows returned us again to that day and its iconic images—images of the smoking tower and the ashen columns against the heat-haze of the early morning azure; of the second plane's movement into sight and explosion; of the circling copter-shots; of the towers' implosion, and of the ground-level white-out and the stunned figures stumbling out of the debris, grey and bloodied.

But watching the footage now, what stood out was how *old* the images looked, appearing like hyperreal polaroids from the past, whose grain and colours fascinate as iconic semiotic markers of that lost time. The images felt *historical*, though less in their political significance, than in carrying us back to something long past. They took us back to an era that we'd forgotten: a time before smartphones, Facebook, YouTube, or even MySpace; a time of large, beige, home-office computers, noisy dial-up internet and pages that loaded with a line-by-line striptease; to a time where the place where events happened was still television. 9/11, therefore, was a different era. It was the defining terrorist spectacle of the broadcast-era and the culmination less of an era of terrorist violence than of its mode of mass mediation in the west.

The anniversary of 9/11, therefore, was more underwhelming than we might have expected, appearing as an event of a different era, even for those who remembered it.

But it wasn't just the age of the event that reduced its significance. The commemorations were definitively eclipsed in the news-cycle and public mind by an event 9/11 had birthed: by the final act in the first act of the global war on terror—the end of the Afghan War. After three presidents—Bush, Obama and Trump—had failed to end the war, in April 2021 Joe Biden took the decision that all US troops would withdraw by the symbolic date of September 11th, the twentieth anniversary of 9/11. Had that gone well, the commemorations might have had more power. A completed war, with the Afghan government still in place would have allowed the respectful memorialisation of that original day. Instead, the chaotic withdrawal, the collapse of the Afghan government, the victory of the Taliban and the humiliating, panic-stricken endgame meant that what we remembered on that symbolic date wasn't 9/11, but the Afghan War: a war that had started very differently

## The military-social media complex

Despite the knee-jerk Neo-Con desire to link 9/11 to Saddam Hussein and plan the invasion of Iraq (Merrin 2018, pp. 88–90), the US quickly understood who was behind the attack, their connections to Al Qaeda and the necessity of pursuing Bin Laden in Afghanistan. With the Taliban's refusal to hand him over to western, secular justice, the invasion of Afghanistan was inevitable. The US launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' on October 7th, based upon an existing CIA plan to capture Bin Laden, using CIA commanders (and, later, Pentagon-controlled special forces), supporting anti-Taliban Northern Alliance ground troops, and US air strikes on Taliban positions. The tactics were remarkably successful, with major Afghan cities falling like dominoes through November and the heart of the Taliban, Kandahar, falling on December 7th.

The media coverage of the war was deliberately limited. The US model of media management created in the 1991 Gulf War and redeployed in Kosovo in 1999 was tightened more than ever. With few journalists on the ground

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or allowed access, all that remained was the official briefings and footage. Public access wasn't needed, because, unlike those previous wars, the public didn't need to be brought on side: 9/11 itself provided all the legitimation required here. This was a war, therefore, conducted in secrecy; in a media blackout that meant we didn't see the conflict, we missed the civilian casualties and knew little about what was happening. As Philip Knightley pointed out, 'the truth was that nobody outside government knew anything', with war correspondents having 'no real access to the war' (Keeble and Mair 2010, pp. 108–109) One US editor complained that 'this administration has clamped the most severe information freeze I've seen in 35 years of reporting' (Ricchiardi 2001). The military control of battlefield information extended to a deliberate airstrike on the Kabul offices of Al Jazeera on November 13th as an implicit punishment for their journalism, in broadcasting Bin Laden's messages and showing the Afghan casualties of US bombing.

Interest in the country waned anyway after the invasion, with the belief that the Taliban had been defeated and with the subsequent distraction of the war in Iraq. Despite more casualties, year after year, and continual claims of 'progress', belied by the insurgency, the western public and media paid only intermittent attention to Afghanistan over the following years. Everything changed, however, in the final months in Summer 2021.

If the 2001 invasion had proceeded with a close-control of the conflict imagery, messaging and narrative, the US withdrawal saw the complete reversal of this model. Twenty years later, this control had exploded: this was a withdrawal caught in the full glare of the world's media. In an ironic reprise of the 2001 invasion, the Afghan cities fell like dominoes, but this time it was back into Taliban hands. Within days, governmental authority had collapsed. We watched as the US retreated to the airport, as the ANA collapsed, as the Taliban rode into Kabul, as desperate Afghans besieged the airport, as they passed their children over the wire, as they ran alongside the departing planes, as they fell from the skies from the planes they clung to, and as US helicopters fled the capital.

It was a retreat captured by every journalist, every individual's phone-camera, and shared across and commented upon on every platform, with the full-snark of every quote-tweet and every one's best meme-game. The secrecy of 'full-spectrum dominance' had given way to the hyper-transparency of full-spectrum access. Even the Taliban joined in, with one account posting memes trolling the US and the West. Repurposing the alt-right icon, one meme showed a Turbaned, smirking Pepe the Frog giving a hand-signal against a backdrop of McDonalds, burning LGBT flags, fleeing planes with falling people and the US embassy helicopter desperately taking off (OpIndia 2021).

This was a significant reversal from the secretive, parochial, aniconic, medieval cult that had ruled from 1996, which had destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas as idolatry, had banned music, photography, television, VCRs, satellite-dishes and the internet and symbolically 'hung' televisions in the street. They hadn't changed their theocratic ideology, but they had changed their view of technology: the 'Taliban 2.0' had made their peace with images and with digitality. If, in 1961, President Eisenhower could warn of a linked 'military industrial complex' threatening US democracy, today we can see the emergence of a 'military-social media complex' that poses a similar threat. This differs, however, in being a set of predominantly US-owned technologies, platforms and apps that can be globally-accessed, used and weaponised by states and non-state actors. With them, actors can communicate, coordinate, recruit, and wage effective informational war from anywhere in the world. Hence, just as Al Qaeda hijacked US planes and TV airwaves on 9/11, the Taliban had hijacked US technology for their own campaign and messaging.

The military-social media complex goes far beyond only the vested interests of social media companies, the military and state. Rather, it is the very success of the global penetration of social media, increasingly beyond the control of its makers, that has been exploited for a spectrum of terrorist and even genocidal ends. For example, from the mid 2010s, Facebook was used to extend the hate campaign by the Myanmar security forces against the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority (UNHRC 2018). The Myanmar government and military quickly weaponised Facebook, stirring up hatred (in effect Facebook was the Internet in the country). The company itself were unable or unwilling to slow or stop the use of its platform in this way. In effect, the most spectacularly successful Western-created and owned communication tool of this century had been dropped blindly into a country with little concern for how it could be used to make viral ethnic, religious and political tensions (Ford and Hoskins 2022). The military-social media complex then is also the reversal in the astonishing power of the mostly US-owned and developed technologies, platforms and apps, being weaponised against them and their allies. And it is the recent history of war in Afghanistan where we see this complex writ large.

For Brooking, the Taliban have waged 'a singular, focussed, twenty-year information war' (Brooking 2021). He traces its development in three periods, 2002–2009, 2009–2017 and 2017 to the present. From 2002 the Taliban began a long-term informational strategy to match the insurgency. They set up a new media arm and reversed their ban on 'living images' so they could produce propaganda. In 2005 their website Al Emarah came online, published in five languages for international impact and by 2008 their communications were centralised under the control of key



figures such as ‘Zabihullah Mujahid’. From 2009 the Taliban discovered social media, joining YouTube that year and adding a Facebook ‘share’ button to their website in 2011. They also learned from other jihadi movements about security, communicating through encrypted apps such as Whatsapp and Telegram, and used social media for fundraising and recruitment.

Ironically, the US had helped this situation, due to their investment in cell-phone towers. Cell-phone use rose in Afghanistan from 1 m phones in 2005 to 22 m in 2019 (Mozur and ur-Rahman 2021), with estimates of access to phones by 2021 ranging from 70% (Mozur and ur-Rahman 2021) to 90% (Brooking, 2021). Though there was an urban bias in use, it is clear that Afghanistan was a more highly-connected society and that all helped the Taliban spread their message.

From 2014, as part of the assault on Islamic State, Taliban accounts began to be blocked on YouTube and Facebook, though they learned how to get new ones up quickly and they remained highly-active on Twitter. In the final phase, from 2017, the Taliban information war was beating that of the Afghan government, which became more secretive. As Brooking says, ‘by 2019 the Taliban’s digital propaganda had fully matured. It issued rapid-fire English-language news alerts about ongoing battles, often accompanied by ready-to-share infographics and short video clips’ with Mujahid’s Twitter account being amplified by a network of accounts (Brooking 2021). Taliban messaging succeeded because it was faster and often more accurate than official government messaging (Mozur and ur-Rehman 2021), because it appealed to Afghan identity vs the occupier’s status, and because it was clearly-aimed and targeted. Online magazines were produced in English, Pashto, Dari and Arabic, for example, with content tailored to different audiences (Mehran 2021).

The Taliban succeeded, therefore, in controlling their narrative. Internationally, they presented themselves as a national group seeking self-determination and fighting imperialism and nationally they promoted peace and unity, framing the US as the cause of instability and appealing to all Afghans to trust them. There were exceptions, such as their use of trending hashtags to intimidate voters in 2019 (Mozur and ur-Rahman 2021), but threats weren’t usually necessary as most Afghans already understood the Taliban’s severity. Mostly, therefore, their messaging was positive, upbeat and designed to reassure. As Mehran notes, their direct appeal to local community and religious leaders and scholars proved crucial, due to their influence in persuading ANA soldiers to abandon resistance (Mehran 2021).

The February 2020 agreement for US withdrawal had given the Taliban increased legitimacy, as a government-in-waiting and they increased their communications as their on-the-ground influence spread. With US and Afghan

legitimacy falling, Brooking says, ‘by the time the Taliban began its blitzkrieg attacks in August 2021, many defenders had run out of reasons to fight’ (Brooking 2021). Their offensives were marked by coordinated social media campaigns, with smartphone and microphone equipped Taliban fighters also posting images and selfies from the battlefield. Their images of success, appeal to Afghans to unite, intimidation of the ANA and offers of amnesties acted as a force-multiplier, significantly contributing to the eventual lack of resistance to their advances and the collapse of the army and government.

By the end, thousands of Twitter accounts echoed the message that the Taliban victory was inevitable. Meanwhile, pro-Taliban influencers called for reconciliation, with Qari Saeed Khosty, posting on Twitter, ‘I cried hard to see your situation. You, the friends of the occupation, we have similarly cried for you for 20 years. We told you that Tommy Ghani will never be loyal to you ... We have forgiven you, I swear to Allah. We are not for this situation. Please come back to your homes’ (Mozur and ur-Rahman 2021). During the first days of their capture of Kabul, Taliban journalists and pro-Taliban YouTubers toured the city, recording interviews and material to show the peaceful transition of power.

Hence a war begun in secrecy against a remorselessly secretive, aniconic and anti-technological movement, ended with a deluge of Taliban videos, messages and memes celebrating victory against the technological power that had provided their cell-phone systems, digital tools and media strategies. For those final weeks in August and into September, everything else was pushed aside. The spectacle of the 2001 invasion had been so poor that even the US military had complained the campaign primarily involved ‘turning big bits of rubble into small bits of rubble’ (Merrin 2005, p. 107). Bombed, ramshackle training camps, towns already destroyed by decades of civil-war, and a ground campaign fought by Afghans visually indistinguishable from the Taliban came a poor second to the real-time epoch-defining images of the imploding Twin Towers. Indeed, the spectacle was so poor that the invasion of Iraq was perhaps intended as a replay of one of their great media successes of the 1990s to provide that global demonstration of power that Afghanistan couldn’t. By 2021, the situation was reversed. Even the replayed images of 9/11 couldn’t match the wild spectacle of Afghanistan’s fall and America’s humiliation.

## Erasing Afghanistan

The spectacle of the Afghanistan endgame, however, was immediately accompanied by its opposite: by a reversal of this transparency and the erasure of the present. This was first seen in the desperate desire to erase digital identities. With the spread of smartphones, social media and messaging



apps had become a common part of everyday life for many Afghans. The profiles, posts, photos and videos, however, could now implicate them in any number of crimes, whether lifestyle-related or from their work or politics. Any association with western nations, international rights groups, the Afghan government or military etc. could be used against them. There were already reports of Taliban asking for phones, to check their contents. As Glaser and Smith (2021) note, a generation born after the Taliban's first rule had a life-time of digital activity to erase.

Everyday communication through messaging apps, texts, tweets and emails, have become part of a new global battleground of privacy: of ownership and control over one's digital trails, but with Afghanistan, we witnessed the next stage in the weaponisation of social media and personal data. The 'post-scarcity' past weighs heavily on present and future; digital memory has become an awesome new risk in its entanglement in the unimaginable scale and complexity of hybrid personal/public networks and archives and therein digital traces' immeasurable capacity to haunt (Hoskins 2015, 2017). But with Afghanistan, we can speak of a 'post-human archive' in which such data acquires new force—becomes operational—as part of a new kind of hauntology of war (Hoskins forthcoming).

The post-human archive persists through the actions of users, social media companies and an array of actors intent on exploiting the tsunami of publicly available personal data as well as that collected, stored, shared and sold invisibly. Platforms don't make bulk deletion easy and many depending on their profiles for family communications didn't want to just delete them. Facebook did add a new button to lock accounts, preventing others from seeing their 'friends' list, but most of their help pages weren't available in local languages. Human rights groups such as the Digital Rights Foundation and AccessNow extended their helplines to Afghanistan to help users cover their traces or install a VPN and worked to translate help pages and security guides into Pashto and Dari etc. (Glaser and Smith 2021).

Of course, these attempts at erasure went hand-in-hand with another erasure: that of the 2004–2021 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan itself. So many commentators and politicians seemed surprised at the regime's immediate collapse, which happened so fast that the US were still in the process of leaving, turning their orderly, quiet withdrawal into a globally mediated defeat. This followed the heavily memorialised script of the military withdrawal from Saigon on 30 April 1975, a vision that continues to haunt the US, offering a perpetual template for a drive for both more and less war over decades (Hoskins 2004), including inevitably, images of the helicopter fleeing the embassy.

The real surprise, however, is why anyone thought the Afghan government would survive the US's departure. By 2021 there was a thriving literature on the Afghan War and

the multiple, interlinked reasons for its failure. The most recent of these books was Whitlock's well-timed overview, *The Afghanistan Papers*, using the evidence of the federal agency, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) who had interviewed US combatants about their experiences (Whitlock 2021).

Whitlock's book captures all the well-known problems of the conflict, from the lack of objectives and mission-creep to 'nation-building'; the too small a force for security; the question of who the US was fighting; the political failure to include the Taliban in talks; the military failure to capture Bin Laden or defeat the Taliban; the lack of investment by the US; the distraction of the Iraq War and movement of resources to another conflict; the lack of history of centralised power; the installation of a corrupt government that included the warlords; the lack of western knowledge of Afghani culture; the failure of the police force and the Afghan army; Pakistan's support for the Taliban; the failure to recognise the new insurgent threat; the lack of a plan over the conflict and deployment; divisions with NATO forces and confused command; ongoing Afghan and government anger at US bombing raids, drone strikes and night-raids and the mounting civilian casualties; continuing government corruption, the problem of the drug trade; Afghan anger at occupation forces; the failure of Obama's surges; the problems around Aid projects and private contractors and their corruption; ANA attacks on US soldiers and the lack of trust in each other; the military lies about 'progress' every year; the ongoing success of the Taliban; the gradual reduction in troops and the movement towards a US withdrawal that only spurred on the Taliban. All of this, and more, had been known for years (Whitlock 2021).

The late August spectacle of a failing state, therefore, was misleading. This wasn't a failing state because it had never really been a state. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was a simulated state—a *phantasmatic state*; the spectral image of a functioning, rooted state. Perhaps all Afghan states have been simulacral: has any Afghan government unified the nation under its authority, when, for most of the country, the state has never been a presence or force, with only local authority, leaders and justice? The US, therefore, followed this tradition of simulation, pouring money and effort into the creation of yet another simulacral state; one, this time, with all the trappings of democracy—voting, representatives, executive government and infrastructure projects to improve the regions and tie them better to the centre. In reality, however, few across Afghanistan knew anything of the government, had even heard of Karzai, or had any identification with the outsider forces representing central authority, whether the hyper-equipped and alien-looking US forces, or the Afghan army or police.

This was a government with limited popular legitimacy, that didn't represent all of the Afghans, with endemic fraud



and corruption at all levels, and whose structures only survived because of the external support and money continually poured into it. Its democracy never stood on its own and never really seeped into the bones of the Afghans, being eclipsed in the fight for the country's future by the rooted Afghani culture and deep beliefs, religious certainties and commitment of the Taliban. Because this wasn't just the simulacral image of a state: it was one made *in the image of the west*. The US provided not just the organisation and finances, it provided what it thought of as the ideal model to be replicated, with little understanding of the centuries democracy had taken to develop, the complexities of modern mass-democracies, their cultural specificities and their own limitations. However, just as the west regularly received the bounty of a globalised, outsourced capitalism which arrived in containers on its shores, so it thought its own political system could operate as a reverse-gift, that it could be containerised and transported back to the developing world, to be unpacked at its overseas destination.

Just as the US had thought that Iraq could be instantly transformed into a Neo-Liberal, free-market economy, with a stock-exchange filled with computers, overseen by a modern, democratic state (see Chandrasekaran 2006), so, Whitlock confirms, the Afghan government was also created as a simulation of the US. He quotes Richard Boucher, former State Department chief spokesman, who admits, 'I think this idea that we went in with, that this was going to become a state government like a US state or something like that, was just wrong, and is what condemned us to 15 years of war instead of two or three' (2021, p. 38). Instead of following traditional structures of tribal interrelationship and organisation, the US model would be flown in. This extended to the army as well which was designed 'as a facsimile of the US military, forcing it to adopt similar rules, customs and structures in spite of vast differences in culture and knowledge' ... 'they were all trying to train a Western army instead of figuring out the strengths of the Afghans as a fighting people and then building on that' (2021, pp. 57; 58).

Building projects, including bases and barracks, also followed western ideas of provision, ignoring cultural differences—urinals were used as drinking fountains and toilets were broken as Afghans squatted on them, towel racks were broken off the walls and even kitchens and chow-halls suffered from different cooking traditions (Whitlock 2021, p. 63). Similarly, attempts to impose a western-style system of justice failed within a culture where 'tribal or religious codes of conduct' and the authority of elders to resolve disputes had been in place 'for generations' (2021, p. 66). Even the imposition of a fixed time on Afghan soldiers proved too much when many couldn't tell the time and temporality itself was experienced differently (2021, p. 72).

With the sudden withdrawal of its ideal model and of the system that had maintained it, the simulacral copy

collapsed. Indeed, the US simply *ghosted* the Afghans—they fled Bagram airbase at night, without even telling the new Afghan commander, who discovered they'd gone hours later, after looters had got in (Gannon 2021)—and so the Afghans, in turn, continued to copy their model, ghosting their own government and the US in turn.

We might, from this perspective, see the Afghani simulation as a *remarkable success* in copying not just western democracy, but also in—*ironically, parodically*—copying its failure. The new beacons of democracy, Afghanistan and Iraq, were set up during the War on Terror, by a US that was throwing out the Geneva conventions and civil rights and rendering, interrogating, waterboarding and torturing its own democratic values—as Jean Baudrillard commented, in the images of the wired-up, hooded man from Abu Ghraib, 'America ... had electrocuted itself' (Baudrillard 2005). Thus, the Afghan government was put to work to implement democracy at a time when US drone strikes, air strikes, special forces operations and 'night-raids' were killing targets without due judicial process, killing civilians and entering their homes by force, tying up families whilst they were searched. Meanwhile, in Iraq, civilians were also rounded up to be interrogated in Abu Ghraib about Al Qaeda's role in the insurgency, before being abused and tortured and released without charge.

What exactly, therefore, was this democratic model Afghanistan and Iraq were supposed to follow? Perhaps the failure of Afghan's democracy can be seen as a parodic simulation of the western model's destruction of its own values during the War on Terror. From this view, even the much commented upon corrupt, oligarchical nature of Afghani 'democracy' can be seen as a commentary on western democracies, where, too, lobbying power and influence comes from money, special interest groups trump the needs of the people and, as they showed in Afghanistan, private companies systematically fleece the public purse. And, perhaps, this corruption, instead of being a failure, had a positive outcome for the US after all. Just as Baudrillard famously argued that 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of the US] is real' (Baudrillard 1981, p. 12), so the 'corruption' of the Afghan and Iraqi governments at least helped further the myth that the US model remained a 'real' democracy at a time when it had globally-jettisoned those values.

Over time, as the 'forever wars' wore on, the west began to lose even its own public commitment to democracy, with the rise of East European anti-liberal, right-wing populists (in Poland and Hungary), the success of the far-right (in Germany and France), the rise of nativist, populist politics intent on denying rights to others (the UK) and, finally, in the rise of Donald Trump, on the back of nativist and white-supremacist support. In the year that the Afghan government collapsed, Trump had managed to reject the verified result of



a democratic election, galvanise his supporters to ‘stop the steal’ and rile them into an insurrection intended to overturn the entire democratic electoral process in the US. In collapsing so simply and so completely, Afghan ‘democracy’ showed not its failure to imitate US democracy but actually *how well it had copied the failing US model*.

However simulacral the state, of course, the gains it brought for many were real and these will all be reversed. The erasure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan wasn’t just an act of suicidal auto-destruction, it is an ongoing process that the Taliban will carry out, in their desire to return to Sharia law and values and to wipe-out the existence of the last twenty years, restoring their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This will be an erasure of human rights, women’s rights, freedoms, culture, media and sport etc. Already, as Kabul was entered by the Taliban, hairdressers closed and western-style shop-front adverts were being painted away.

Of course, the Taliban are now subject to the same Web 2.0 transparency as any other regime, with a smartphone equipped population able to film and share their actions. The 11th September video that spread showing Taliban soldiers beheading an Afghan soldier and celebrating whilst holding his head, for example, undermined their claims of peaceful transition and amnesty (Catling 2021). Meanwhile, Afghani women are already using the power of social media to protest the Taliban, as seen in the September 2021 #Donottouchmyclothes hashtag and the October 2021 viral video of two women singing with their burqas on, defying and challenging Taliban rule (Glinski 2021; Nasimi 2021). How long internet and social media access will be allowed remains to be seen. The erasure of communication is another likely result here.

But the Taliban’s erasure is also directly murderous. There are many reports of Taliban revenge against those seen as too-connected to the former regime or with the advances it produced. On the 20<sup>th</sup> October, reports emerged of the Taliban beheading Mahjabeen Hakimi, a member of the Afghan junior women’s national volleyball team and member of the Taliban-persecuted Shiite, Hazara ethnic group (Bhalla 2021). The Taliban also have a new tool to help in this persecution and murder. As Jacobsen explains in her book *First Platoon*, faced with the ongoing problem of even knowing who the enemy was, the US implemented a huge, digital biometrics programme capturing detailed biometric data ‘on 80% of Afghanistan’s 22 m population’ (Jacobsen 2021, p. 242). The war in Afghanistan, therefore, became ‘the quest for identity’, with the discovery of the insurgent’s ‘true’ identity being seen as holding the key to the war (Jacobsen 2021, p., 141).

The failure of the US’s ability to even know who they should fight was summed up by their final act of violence, their drone-strike against claimed IS suicide-bombers on 29th August that, they later admitted, killed 10 innocent

civilians (Smith 2021). The Taliban, in contrast, have a clearer vision of their enemies and in August it was reported that their victory now gave them access to the biometric data held on the US programme’s devices, as well as on the Afghan government databases (Guo and Noori 2021). The erasure of the Afghan Republic will likely continue with the ongoing erasure of those who served that government and related agencies.

## The Event as Erasure

A war that, for most in the west, had already faded from memory, has even less chance of surviving now. The end was a hyper-visible, spectacular, hyper-mediated event, but it wasn’t an event inscribing itself on history: *it was instead an event that overwrote and erased history*. It took us backwards, obliterating the past, rather than forward, as real, historical events do. The images of the crowds and helicopters of the hasty exit, was a template of the US withdrawal from Vietnam. This seemed to even erase the memory of the intervening wars—notably of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003—Iraq War—whose legitimacy and legacy were drowned in the sticky US conscious of Vietnam. In effect, a ‘new memory’ (Hoskins 2004, 2014, 2017) of war, in that remembering/forgetting is a continually emergent state of how we make sense of the past through the metaphors, media and technologies of the day, is being replaced by a new force of erasure. This ‘breaking’ of the past (Hoskins forthcoming) is a rapidly developing cultural and political desire for forgetting and erasure. This is fostered by a widespread cavalier or at least resigned attitude to the potential risks in the capturing, storing and sharing of personal data and other information including through ‘participative war’ (Merrin 2018), coupled with a new belief in erasure in that information, events and people can be readily erased in digital life (for instance, as a form of ‘cancel culture’).

The desire for erasure is illustrated through the US military representing their withdrawal from Afghanistan as already from a bygone era. The US Army released a monochromatic green night-scope image of Army Maj. Gen. Christopher T. Donahue, the last service member on the ground in Afghanistan about to depart Kabul airport on 30 August 2021. As Kennicott (2021) argues, the round ‘iris’ shot of the soldier suggests an age of silent movies to end a scene, or a whole film. ‘The basic trope—the last man on the ground—recalls an emotionally resonant idea of responsibility and even chivalry. The captain is the last one off a sinking ship. The general is the last one out the door as the United States turns off the lights in Afghanistan’ (Kennicott 2021). This is erasure through closure.

This war will erase itself in the western military mind, in western culture, in western histories and in western



education, just as Queen Victoria's nineteenth century multiple incursions were completely unknown to the British squaddies who, with access to years of education and Wikipedia, knew less than the Afghan people. So, the longest war in American history will survive only in its short-term memory. In 1991 Jean Baudrillard, faced with the most globally mediated event in human history, had the temerity to claim, 'The Gulf War did not take place' (Baudrillard 1995). Then, the radical act was to question the existence and status of the 'war', to argue it was a simulation of war; that was not a real war. In the future, we will have to assert instead that *the Afghan War did take place*: that it was a twenty-year simulation of peace that was a real war and that it did, indeed, happen, contrary to our lack of memory.

The US state will be complicit in this erasure, happy to leave its defeat behind. Crippled for years by 'the Vietnam syndrome', it took until 1991 for the US to reassert its military-supremacy and esteem. The lesson this time will be different: it will defeat 'the Afghanistan syndrome' by helping with its erasure. One path of historical erasure is to move forward. Thus, unlike in Vietnam, which prompted an introspective withdrawal, the US will withdraw only from on-the-ground nation-building. As Tooze (2021) explains, it will go forward into the world secure in its new mission of fighting perceived global, nation-state threats (China and Russia) on the basis of economic and technological power—through the development of new systems, including increasingly autonomous A.I., drone swarms, robotics, cyber-weapons, connected cloud systems, human augmentation technologies, hypersonic missiles, the militarisation of space and new naval and underwater systems. And despite the tsunami of images and information of participative war that clogs the 'war feed', many of these weapons actually are more difficult to represent than those of earlier wars, disrupting also the memory of war. For instance, as Simon Norfolk considers, 'How do you photograph satellite warfare or submarine systems, or cyberwarfare? That's how the war of the future is being fought, that is where the money is being spent... I don't know how to photograph any of that stuff' (Norfolk 2012; Hoskins 2014). The US will erase the failure of Afghanistan with its renewed commitment to the clean wars of globalised, technological supremacy, in a new regime of the in/visibility of war.

In 1988 Ballard published the short-story, 'The Secret History of World War 3'. Ballard's narrator explains firstly that the nuclear conflict, WWII, has already happened and took only four minutes and that, secondly, 'I am virtually the only person to know that it ever occurred' (Ballard 2002, p. 1116). He continues, that he has yet to meet any member of the public who remembers the war: 'Whenever I refer to the war, people stare at me with incredulity' (2002, p. 1116). Distracted by 'a continuous stream of information' on TV with updates of President Reagan's health, there was

no room for reporting on the war he'd unleashed or its conclusion. Even the president, Ballard slyly comments, had forgotten the war he'd launched. The story ends with the suggestion that the president may not even have been alive, and that some 'animated spectre' of himself reconstituted from the broadcast medical print-outs might even go on to further terms, unleashing world wars four and five 'whose secret histories will expire within the interstices of our television schedules' (2002, p. 1123). Give it a few years and try this for yourselves: ask people, do you remember the Afghan War?

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