

Have Americans Forgotten Afghanistan

James Wright

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On January 20, men of the First Battalion 38th Infantry Regiment gathered at a frigid base camp in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. At Combat Outpost Sperwan Ghar in southern Kandahar, they held a memorial service for Army Sergeant David J. Chambers. A native of Hampton, Va., Chambers had been killed on January 16 by an improvised explosive device while on patrol. His commander said of him, "His subordinates trusted him, his peers learned from the example he set, and his superiors counted on him to get the job done." He had been wounded on a previous deployment to Afghanistan but he hadn't talked about this much because, as his mother said, "he never tried to worry us."

The day that the soldiers saluted their fallen comrade at Combat Outpost Sperwan Ghar, Sergeant Mark Schoonhoven died at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, from wounds suffered in Afghanistan. Schoonhoven was from Plainwell, Michigan. His mother and oldest daughter had sat by his hospital bed for nearly six weeks hoping he would recover from the coma. His wife had returned to Michigan to look after the five children at home. He never recovered from the injuries suffered when insurgents detonated explosives as his vehicle passed. At his funeral his wife and his mother received folded flags and each of his children put a rose on his coffin.

Other than local coverage, there was little attention paid to these deaths. Certainly there was little notice in Washington. In August 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta expressed his frustration over the absence of any discussion of the war in Afghanistan during the political campaigns. He explained at a Pentagon press briefing, "I thought it was important to remind the American people that there is a war going on."

This reminder takes on a great importance as Americans reflect on the 10-year anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq. As pundits and politicians debate the origins of that war, they will not dwell too long on the Afghanistan war that started a year and a half earlier -- and still continues.

Afghanistan did not become an issue during the fall presidential election campaigns, and the war seldom was a substantive issue in congressional races. Candidates scarcely discussed the war other than in passing references. In fact, they focused more on the putative next war in Iran. Ignoring the current war may have been politically or even morally derelict, but it was not of electoral consequence. Voters did not seem to consider war strategy as relevant to their election choices. Afghanistan did not figure in public opinion polls as a major issue and had not for some time.

Nonetheless, we could hope that after the election political leaders would finally focus on the war in Afghanistan. If it did not seem relevant to swing-state campaign strategy, it surely was an important issue in developing national military strategy. After all, there was a need to consider the objectives for the troops who remained there as well as the terms of the drawdown of these troops scheduled for the end of 2014.

Of course, fiscal cliffs, sequestered funds, the ongoing effects of the recession, the shocked reaction to the tragedy at Sandy Hook School, as well as the new political urgency to address immigration policy all took over the post-election debate and positioning. All of these were clearly important matters and there was

genuine urgency associated with them. But Afghanistan also cried out for attention -- attention with the sense of priority that war has traditionally received in American politics.

Early in 2013 President Obama nominated Senator Chuck Hagel to replace the retiring Panetta as Secretary of Defense. This cabinet post was critical in the management of the war effort. The Senate confirmation hearings might have finally provided an opportunity for the sort of debate that Washington has had far too infrequently during America's wars in recent years.

Unfortunately, in the Senate Armed Services Committee hearings on January 31, Afghanistan was hardly mentioned. Gayle Tzemach Lemmon of the Council on Foreign Relations observed that those who watched the hearings on television "could be forgiven for forgetting that America is at war." She noted that "Apparently, so did their senators."

Most senators, especially the Hagel critics, as it turned out were focused beyond Afghanistan -- not beyond in terms of addressing the critical strategic questions regarding the mission of the post-Afghanistan military. In this case "beyond Afghanistan" meant the senators paid far more attention to a potential engagement with Iran than they did to the current war with the Taliban. And in the minds of many senators, equally troubling was the corollary question of how U.S. Iranian policy would support that of Israel. This in fact became the primary focus of the opposition to Senator Hagel. When Afghanistan did come up, it largely involved critical statements by Republicans, or slow-pitch questions by Democrats, and Senator Hagel's responses.

Perhaps the most pointed exchange in the hearing occurred not over future plans or concern about what we are asking our servicemen and women to do, but over views of recent history. Senator John McCain, who had been an aggressive advocate of the 2007 "surge" in Iraq, asked Hagel to answer "yes" or "no" to whether the surge had been successful. Hagel, who had been wounded and cited for bravery while serving as an enlisted man in Vietnam, would not.

When given the opportunity by Senator Bill Nelson to explain his position on the surge, it may not have received as much press coverage as the testy exchange with Senator McCain, but his reflections on this were revealing - and finally got to the basic question that should be asked whenever American troops are sent off to war.

"I had one fundamental question that I asked myself on every vote I took, every decision I made. Was the policy worthy of the men and women that we were sending into battle and surely to their deaths?...

I saw it from the bottom. I saw what happens. I saw the consequences and the suffering when we are at war."

The Senate hearing was not encouraging to those who hoped to have a real debate on future plans for the war in Afghanistan. Secretary Panetta's August inquiry seemed to still hang over the ongoing theatre. It is hard to produce evidence that most Americans or their representatives do indeed know there is a war going on. Obviously they do in a general, even an abstracted, way. And certainly they "care." But the war seldom intrudes into their world.

Wars do have costs. Human costs. It has become far too easy to ignore those when neither the wars nor those flesh-and-blood citizens who serve and sacrifice are acknowledged. Numbers on casualty reports do not bear human faces for most Americans.

The surge began in Iraq early in 2007. Between 2007 and 2011, 1,482 Americans died in Iraq, all but a few following the announcement of the new enhanced operation. Senator Hagel was correct. History will judge the final results of the surge. Andrew Bacevich recently observed of the surge, "avoiding defeat should not be confused with winning."

There still remain the unanswered questions of what the United States will do next in Afghanistan. Or in Iran. History will judge our record here as well. Our task, our political leadership's task, is not to preview that judgment but to frame the policies and goals that will be part of this record. What will be the rate of withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan? What will be the objectives of troops in Afghanistan during this period? How many troops will remain, if any, after 2014? What goal do we have for the next 20 months--and for the period following that? What are the likely casualties in this period? Is this an acceptable cost?

Senator Hagel sought to remind his colleagues of the personal consequences of military policy. He had tried to do that in January 2007 as well, when he spoke in opposition to the Iraq surge: "This is a ping-pong game with American lives. These young men and women that we put in Anbar province, in Iraq, in Baghdad are not beans; they're real lives. And we better be damn sure we know what we're doing, all of us, before we put 22,000 more Americans into that grinder."

Surely six years later Americans are even more tired of hearing about the wars than they were during the Iraq surge debate. But as a military spouse once said, "I understand that the American public is war weary. I only wish they understood what war weary really meant." Well under 1 percent of Americans serve in the military today -- a smaller fraction has actually served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most American families have not been absorbed with worry and have not had to deal with grieving for the loss or serious injury of a loved one. They have not had to wait for the ring of the doorbell at night.

War and death do go together -- and we have managed to put the current wars out of our lives sufficiently that grief from their sacrifices has seldom touched most of us. But it is there. Over 6,660 U.S. servicemen and women have died in these wars -- 145 have been women. Over 1,000 of these men and women were under 20 years of age; more than 3800 were 25 or younger (fatalities in Iraq were on average younger than those in Afghanistan.) The survivor's organization TAPS has estimated that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left 3,659 widows and widowers with 4,790 surviving children, 13,306 grieving parents and 19,559 grandparents. Since 2001, 18,311 Americans have been wounded in Afghanistan. And 32,223 were wounded in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. These only count the visible wounds.

Of course, these wars have impacted people beyond our borders, as well. There have been 619 casualties from the United Kingdom and 780 from other coalition countries -- most of these have died in Afghanistan. And the United Nations has reported that in the last six years 14,728 Afghan civilians have lost their lives as a result of the war (in the last year it is estimated that over 80 percent of these were due to anti-government forces.) A Reuters estimate places the Iraqi civilian deaths at between 103,000 and 113,000.

But numbers can tally only; they cannot introduce us to the experience of war.

Wars with undefined purposes are dangerous things. Wars fought by men and women who are unknown to most citizens are more than dangerous -- they strip war of the very human cost that is a necessary part of war. Americans need to assert ownership over the purposes of this war -- and affirm responsibility for their costs and for those who pay these costs. Last August, just three days after Secretary Panetta reminded the American people, in frustration, "there is a war going on," the 2,000th American victim of the Afghanistan war died in the Landstuhl U.S. Army/Department of Defense hospital in Germany. He

had been in Afghanistan for a month when he was shot in the head while posted in Wardak Province. The 21-year old soldier from Grover, North Carolina had played drums and guitar in his church and had always wanted to be a soldier. He left a wife and three stepchildren.

A few days later the *New York Times* published a lengthy story by James Dao and Andrew Lehen analyzing the casualties in Afghanistan. The first thousand were killed over nine years, from 2001 to 2010. The second thousand died in just 27 months. The *Times* supplemented the Dao/Lehen story with four full pages of photos of the thousand deaths since early in 2010, a period overlapping with the "surge" in Afghanistan announced by President Obama in December 2009. These small snapshots record the faces of dreams that ended--and scanning through them gives a sense of human tragedy that numbers can never convey. Other news sources, such as *Military Times*, the *Washington Post*, *PBS NewsHour*, periodically present the photographs of the dead as well. CNN provides a comprehensive and interactive site. These are reminiscent of the striking *Life Magazine* June 27, 1969 issue that had ten pages of photos of the 242 Americans killed in one week in Vietnam. Today's presentations do not seem to have the political impact of the 1969 story.

In the months following the Panetta plea to remember the war, the human toll has continued. In this period Americans have conducted a national election and have confirmed a new secretary of defense without much mention of this loss of life. Accounts or photographs in hometown or base newspapers present the deceased with their families prior to deployment. Or they convey the grief of loved ones -- clutching folded flags, weeping over coffins, hugging together. The wife of a dead soldier from Montana urged all at his funeral to hug friends and families tightly. His daughters sang at the service. These news sources have local readership or viewers, and most Americans miss the moving and very human accounts of grief and loss.

A soldier from Coral Springs, Florida, killed on his fifth deployment, left behind a wife and three children. Before his final deployment he had arranged a 60th anniversary dinner for his grandparents. A family member said, "He really believed in celebrating marriage." A Marine sent off a Facebook greeting to his mother before he went out on patrol. He promised to call her in the morning -- and his morning never came.

A Windsor, Colorado soldier was on his third deployment when he and another soldier were killed by an Afghan ally. His mother said of her son, "There was just something about him that made him able to bring a smile to anyone's face." A Kentwood, Michigan Navy Seal was killed when his Blackhawk helicopter crashed during a mission. Ten others died as well in the crash. His grandfather told a reporter that the young man and his girlfriend were going to get married before Christmas. "They were as happy as two kids in a candy store," he reported.

Most of us don't have to stay on alert. "The Marines are at war and America's at the mall," said the mother of Clay Hunt, a Marine who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan and had watched his friends die. He was wounded, and after three years of agonizing over his experiences, he committed suicide.

CNN correspondent Jake Tapper's book *The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor* puts a searing human face on the war in Afghanistan. It tells the story of American soldiers in an unknown place fighting a battle with little tactical meaning. Tapper introduces readers to the soldiers there, young men worrying about their situations, thinking about their families, planning for their futures. In October 2009 they repulsed a heavy attack by Taliban forces. Of the 53 outnumbered soldiers, 8 were killed and 22 wounded. One of this band, Staff Sergeant Clinton Romesha, received the Medal of Honor from President Obama on February 11. Following brief applause, the nation went on about its business.

On February 13, President Obama announced in greater detail the plans for the drawing down of American troops in Afghanistan. With the Senate confirmation vote delayed, he did not have the opportunity to involve Senator Hagel in the discussion leading to the decision. United States senators on the Armed Services Committee did not avail themselves of the opportunity to discuss these options when they had it. None of his critics directly asked Hagel about his view on this.

On February 27 Chuck Hagel was sworn in as Secretary of Defense. He immediately faced the problem of sequestration of funds that would impact the Department in two days. But first he met with some of his new colleagues, both civilian and military. He visited the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial where he "reflected a bit on what had happened that day." The new Secretary asked Army Sgt. 1st Class John Wirth, of Gordon, Nebraska, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghan wars, to introduce him to the Pentagon gathering. Wirth said that Secretary Hagel "knows the very real cost of war."

That same day in Window Rock, Arizona, the flag of the Navajo Nation was at half staff. Marine Staff Sergeant Jonathan Davis had been killed in Helmand Province, the only American death in Afghanistan in February. A Marine since 1997, Davis had two previous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and had already been awarded a Purple Heart. He was married with a son and hundreds turned out in Flagstaff and along the highway home to honor him when his body was returned to the Navajo Nation. The Tribal Chairman announced that he was the 14th Navajo to die in Iraq or Afghanistan. On March 2 he was buried at Kayenta. That same day Marines and Coalition troops who served with him held a memorial at Forward Operating Base Shir Ghazay in Afghanistan.

A week after assuming his new responsibilities, Secretary Hagel traveled to Afghanistan. He visited with the troops there and responded to President Karzai's allegation that the United States was working with the Taliban. During the Hagel visit, the Taliban detonated an explosive at the defense ministry in Kabul. On March 11 two American soldiers were killed by an individual wearing an Afghan army uniform, and five others died in a helicopter crash.

There is still a war going on.