



Atlas Society Member,

Twenty years ago, we drove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan for harboring and enabling al-Qaeda, in response to the terrorists' attack on New York and the Pentagon. Twenty years later, the Taliban is back in power.

Have we come full circle? Have all our efforts in Afghanistan come to naught? Does President Biden's disgraceful withdrawal leave us back where we were in 2001? Specialists in military affairs and foreign policy are discussing these questions, and doubtless will be for some time.

But The Atlas Society is a philosophic organization, and philosophically, sad to say, nothing has changed. The policies of the United States in Afghanistan (as in Iraq) were based on the same fallacies that undermined US foreign policy long before 9/11: the Pragmatism philosophy, the belief that democracy is an end in itself, and the failure to understand the philosophical premises of the Islamists.

Pragmatism: Pragmatism does not mean practicality. It is a philosophy that rejects principles and emphasizes short-range over long-range consequences. Pragmatism was at work when the US-supported mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, on the short-range assumption that the enemies of our enemies are our friends. Some were; most weren't, including Bin Laden. After invading Afghanistan in 2001, the US mission kept changing, with the result that it failed to create a viable government. Decades ago, Ayn Rand made the same point about the Vietnam war.

Democracy: The "nation-building" effort in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, was to establish democracy. This is another consequence of Pragmatism. Democracy is a superficial feature of free societies. It depends on a political culture in which people accept the outcome of elections, which depends on constitutional principles with which electoral parties must comply. This in turn depends on the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and principles of individual rights. Democracy doesn't work in a society based on tribal loyalties, strongmen, and corruption—which we never expunged.

Culture and philosophy: The Taliban and other Islamists are not would-be modernists. They are imbued with a philosophy that seeks Western technology but wants to restore fundamentalist Islam. They are philosophically opposed to modernist values of reason, individualism, and innovation.

The Atlas Society has published many articles over 20 years to explain these issues and provide a deeper level of understanding, including the following:

[The Assault On Civilization](#), Sept 13, 2001

This immediate response to 9/11 explained that the perpetrators represent the worst form of envy, the most vicious form of human evil. They hate us not for our sins but for our virtues, and they will not be appeased.

[9/11 and The War Against Modernity](#), May 2002

"The war on terrorism is the latest phase of a long and continuing struggle to achieve the promise of modern civilization. The threat posed by the Islamist terrorists derives not from their Islamic background but from the ideas, values, and motivations they share with anti-modernists everywhere—including in the West...."

[Does Islam Need a Reformation?](#) April 2011

No, Islam does *not* need a Reformation. The problem is that it's having one now. What it needs is an Enlightenment.

[Islamic Philosophy: The Good, the Bad, and the Dangerous](#)

This is a two-part lecture about the philosophical roots of Islamic terrorism, presented at The Atlas Society's Summer Seminar in 2004. It covers the early centuries of Islamic thought, when it was open to new ideas; its battle between reason and mysticism; its long stagnation under the rule of mysticism and authority. These lectures show how Islamist movements arose in the 20th-century to revive the previous glory by combining 7th-century Islam with the worst ideas from the West.

Today, we continue to explore these issues with in-depth conversations with scholars such as Mustafa Akyol, author of *Islam Without Extremes* and *Reopening American Minds*, in our weekly webinars, and more recently with Robert Tracinski, who shared his thoughts on Afghanistan on "The Atlas Society Asks." Every month, I join the webinar, along with my colleagues Stephen Hicks, Ph.D., Richard Salsman, Ph.D., and Jason Hill, Ph.D., to discuss current events, including developments in the Middle East, from an Objectivist perspective.

As we remember the fallen of 9/11, we're reminded of Ayn Rand's passionate defense of her beloved NYC: "that if a war came to threaten this, I would throw myself into space, over the city, and protect these buildings with my body." Today, let's protect her legacy and promote the ideals of reason, individualism, and liberty she so eloquently advanced. The horror of 9/11 was a graphic illustration of why those values are so precious, and why they must be defended against their enemies.

It is a matter of life and death.

In liberty,
David Kelley

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