

Is this the Right Way to End a War? By [Rod Nordland -Mr. Nordland is The Times's Kabul bureau chief. From the New York Times February 2, 2019](#)

Afghanistan long ago took from Vietnam the title of [America's longest war](#), when it passed the 13-year mark in 2014.

Five years later, with the recent possibility of a peace deal that would bring another American withdrawal from an unpopular war, comparisons of the two conflicts are once again rife — even among many of the leaders America has sent to Afghanistan in recent years.

Ryan Crocker, who was twice America's top diplomat in Kabul, led the chorus of people sensing déjà vu. "It just reminds me of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam," Mr. Crocker, now diplomat-in-residence at Princeton, said. "By going to the table, we basically were telling the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, 'We surrender, we're here just to work out the terms.'"

He was comparing the Paris negotiations that led to America's withdrawal from Vietnam with six days of talks between the American envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. The talks ended Jan. 26 in a [preliminary agreement](#) that American troops would be withdrawn in exchange for Taliban guarantees not to allow terrorists to attack America again. "I just cannot see this getting to any better place," Mr. Crocker said. "We don't have a whole lot of leverage here. I can't see this as anything more than putting lipstick on what will be a U.S. withdrawal."

A comparison of the two wars has not been fashionable for many years now, with scholars pointing out that superficial similarities were greatly outweighed by the differences. Vietnam took place at the height of the Cold War, with the superpowers on opposite sides. Vietnam and Afghanistan are dramatically different in culture, geography and history. Even the scale of the two wars was vastly different: Half a million American troops went to Vietnam at its height, compared with a maximum of 100,000 to Afghanistan, now whittled down to 14,000; more than 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, fewer than 3,000 in Afghanistan.

Yet a significant number of the American ambassadors and military leaders who served in Afghanistan are worried about the similarities. Karl Eikenberry, the American military commander in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, and then the American ambassador from 2009 to 2011, said that in both countries it was a challenge to develop a national force committed to protecting the weak and corrupt central government. And in both places, the host country's forces, many of them trained by the United States, "were further undermined because they constantly doubted the long-term support of the U.S.," said Mr. Eikenberry, who is now a professor at Stanford.

Mr. Crocker is among those who worry that the Trump administration just wants out of Afghanistan and is willing to sacrifice gains that have been made, particularly on [behalf of women](#). A rushed deal could put the Taliban in a position to eventually take over, as happened in Vietnam when the United States withdrew its troops even though the North Vietnamese did not keep their promise to do the same.

"I imagine we and the Afghans have killed most of the slow and stupid" Taliban fighters, Mr. Crocker said. "The ones who are still in the Taliban after 18 years are now tough, committed, and I can't imagine them signing on to any meaningful compromise. They'll just talk compromise."

Not all recent ambassadors are prone to drawing parallels to Vietnam. James Cunningham, who was ambassador from 2012 through 2014 and is now a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, said fear that the United States will cut and run is "definitely a concern for a lot of people back here, and for the Afghans I know. And there may be some people who want that to happen." But he said the analogy wasn't accurate. In America, he said, "there's a lot of sympathy for the Afghans and what they're trying to do. This doesn't have to be a recipe for rushing to the exits and I hope it won't be."

Mr. Cunningham is not convinced that the Trump administration will pull out, even though many of the president's supporters in Washington want it to. "It's no secret the president would like to leave, as did his predecessor and presumably his predecessor, but reality and conditions have a way of intruding," he said.

Many experts also see lessons from Vietnam for the American experience in Afghanistan, often in terms of "you've learned so well from your mistakes that you can repeat them exactly," as a diplomat in Afghanistan put it.

Anthony Cordesman, an official in the Defense Department during the final years of the Vietnam War, recently wrote [a paper](#) detailing the parallels between the two wars. In an interview, Mr. Cordesman, now a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, recalled how late in the Vietnam War "we concealed the casualty rates, the absentee rates, the ghost soldier rates," just as the American military and the government of President Ashraf Ghani [are doing now](#).

"Just as in Vietnam, under the shell of top leadership there were many deep divisions," Mr. Cordesman said. In Afghanistan, "you have a country of power brokers. A lot of the underlying economy is extremely weak, buoyed up by war and aid. And as that's reduced, you find less and less reason for the economy and political structure to hold together."

In some ways, Afghanistan is actually in worse shape than South Vietnam was when the American military left in 1973; the country fell to the Communists in 1975. In Afghanistan, "the only major hard currency earner is the narcotics sector, other than war and aid," Mr. Cordesman said. Vietnam, in contrast, had a more diverse economy. Even the Afghan military units are weaker. "There were some very good units in Vietnam," he said.

The British historian Max Hastings, author of the recent book "Vietnam, an Epic Tragedy 1945-1975," said he sees many similarities between Vietnam and Afghanistan. "Western governments and commanders still don't seem to have got the message that winning firefights is meaningless unless we can also achieve a real cultural, social and political engagement with local societies," he said.

"For most people in Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, daily life represents an endless series of accommodations, compromises and judgments about who is likely to win," Mr. Hastings said. "Most of them today put their money on the Taliban not necessarily because they like them, but because they seem likely to be around longer than us."

Mr. Eikenberry said that an even better comparison than Vietnam might be to the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. Like the United States, the Soviets no longer wanted to shoulder the responsibility and expense of Afghanistan at a time of declining power and prestige. "Both Vietnam and Afghanistan were, ultimately, wars of choice," Mr. Eikenberry said. "And because of the incredible wealth and power of the U.S., we were able to make the choices — which both proved bad ones."

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