

**Afghanistan, Murdering Your Spouse, Finding Your Biological Parents**  
**What Happens Next – 8.22.2021**  
**Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie QA**

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Andrew. Let's talk about Biden's recent statements during his press conference. When pushed, he said that this result is what he expected, he was not particularly surprised by it. How do you feel about the decisions that went on at the national security level to decide that this was the right decision?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Well, I've had the opportunity to interact with Senator Biden, who was extraordinarily knowledgeable about Afghanistan. This is when I was the Army commander for Canada. And every time I'd go to Washington, which was a lot, there'd be interactions with senior members of the Senate and Congress. So he knows that of which he's talking about. No doubt about it. I think he was driven by the political agenda vis-a-vis the United States where I believe understandably, the typical American citizen is getting sort of more than tired of the forever wars, and Afghanistan it's been going on for a very long time. Especially in such a dynamic and vibrant society is that which we find in the United States where perhaps attention spans aren't as long as in other places, oh for example, Afghanistan, where they can be decades in duration. So I think he made up his mind that it was time to leave. I think he laid a date down, which later became cast in concrete. And despite a variety of other of his senior members of the National Security Council, who themselves have firsthand knowledge of Afghanistan having fought there, he was determined to set the example and not bend. Was he as surprised as most others by the absolute chaos that ensues? Probably not, but a lot of people were, though a bunch of us predicted that this is exactly what would have happened. What else would you expect to happen, when essentially the guarantor of security, sustenance and firepower to the fighting forces of the Afghan army says, "Right, we're done on a certain date."

Larry Bernstein:

What is the relationship between the American military and Biden specifically? Years ago, I had for book club with General Stan McChrystal, who was relieved of duty during the Obama administration when members of his staff undercut Biden's position and his qualifications, when the Rolling Stone reporter visited him in Afghanistan. Are you aware of that situation and has Biden been able to improve his relationship with the military?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Well, I'm very aware of it. I've spent 35 years as a Canadian soldier. And in that period of time, spent a considerable amount of time fighting or serving as peacekeepers alongside American troops, point number one. Point number two, the President of the United States is the

commander in chief of the United States Armed Forces. So he has a legal and moral position which is unique at the top of the pyramid.

As a matter of fact, the combatant commanders, so in this case says, Stan McChrystal, whom I know is a hell of a soldier, by the way, he was a direct report to the President of the United States when he was wearing the hat of his combatant commander. Well, of course the president has the authority to remove generals for a whole host of reasons, or actually just if they lose confidence in that General's ability to successfully execute the resident of the United States' intent. Vis-a-vis President Biden's relationship with the generals as you call them, well, President Trump certainly wasn't great. So I think anything's an improvement in that regard. And don't forget President Biden's been around Washington for a couple of decades, he's well-known to the more senior generals who each have a certain amount of Washington time.

Larry Bernstein:

We got a question from Ruth Mandel, she's a professor in the department of anthropology at UCL in London. She asks a question about nation building in a country like Afghanistan, is that folly to begin with because it really isn't a nation, it's really just a collection of ethnic groups? Your thoughts on nation building in Afghanistan as a project?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Well, 1500 years ago, and you can see them when you're flying in a helicopter or low over some of the deserts. 1500 years ago, there were a complicated system of irrigation canals, which would take the spring runoff from the mountains, the Hindu Kush and push the water out onto the plains to allow crops to grow. So in one sense, though nation building and Afghanistan you're quite right, has not been a coherent nation except for one or two brief periods of its history, perhaps the most recent, less than 100 years ago.

If a significant proportion of the population want to better themselves, want to make sure that there's a difference in how their sons and daughters can have expectations for more peaceful or prosperous life and to do that, they're willing to invest in the concept of nation. Then I think it's in all our interests to give them a hand. Now how much, and under what circumstances? That's a tough question to decide, but that's why we've got international bodies to help us make those sorts of decisions. It was the right thing to do considering the size and the numbers of folks who were clamoring for change.

Larry Bernstein:

We have a question from Alan Herskowitz. Here's what he asks. He wonders whether or not making a democracy out of Afghanistan was a worthy project. We tried in Iraq, we tried experiments in Libya and Afghanistan. It doesn't appear to be working too well in the Islamic world. Is there something that's specific about Islamic nations that makes this more challenging? Is it cultural? What's going on there?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

I'm not sure it's specific to Islamic nations. I do know that there is a very strongly held belief amongst progressives, those who have a sort of an air of sophistication and almost a relentless desire to try and better themselves and others, that democracy is the most efficient and effective and egalitarian form of rule, and I happen to agree with them. There's also a flip side, a darker side of the argument, which if you speak it aloud these days, you tend to get yelled at by just about everybody that certain nations may not be ready for democracy. In other words, they don't have the same judicial standards, they don't have the same cultures in terms of discourse and debate.

And in nations that are recently fractured or there's significant hostilities between tribal groupings or ethnic subdivisions, it can be tough. As a matter of fact, I know several democracies that are incredibly sophisticated and successful, where there's still significant tensions between linguistic groups or religious groups. Nation building as an idea is a good one. The devil is in the details and how much do you apply? And the whole idea that democratic values, how much do you discern in terms of the populations willing to adapt them and adopt them? That's a tough one.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned specifically protecting Afghan women and girls and their rights, their ability to play football and be educated. You mentioned in your prepared remarks. But when we sent the military to Afghanistan, we went there to kill Osama Bin Laden to make sure that that country was unable to project force against the United States and its allies. To what extent should the demands change or morph into a pro women or pro-democracy or pro human rights and away from a more simplistic, understandable military objective?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

What this recent debacle in Afghanistan and debacle in the sense of how it ended, is going to be studied in staff colleges and universities for the next 100 years, amongst others that have happened and will happen in the future.

It started with counter-terrorism like you've identified: hunt and kill. And actually the United States in the main assisted by some others did a hell of a good job at targeting those specific individuals that had either contributed to 9/11 or were engaged in supporting those activities in which the protagonists of 9/11 were allowed to flourish and thrive. Then we moved into counterinsurgency, dealing with those who were trying to overthrow the government, the remnants of the Soviet withdrawals and then what happened after the Taliban were there last time and demonstrated such savagery towards women and girls. And then we started getting into nation building because a whole bunch of folk quite rightly looked around and said, "Well, we could do more. We could do more to help this group. We could do more over here. Why aren't girls going to school? Why don't we have female infantry officers in the Afghan army? Why is it that there's no women in the shuras, let alone the nascent parliament?"

And at some point, you had counter-terrorism activities alongside counterinsurgency efforts with nation building all wrapped up into a complex ball. And it's easy in retrospect to say, "Well, we should have done one or the other. A light touch with just the hunting and killing, a medium touch with counterinsurgency and not so much nation building." Difficult though, when you're dealing with hundreds of thousands of people who want just a little bit more to get a crop in that isn't opium that could actually contribute to foodstuffs or more legitimacy. So that's going to be something that they're going to talk about in the staff colleges for a long time.

Larry Bernstein:

You talked about staff colleges and learning from our mistakes. But what this experience most reminds me of is Vietnam. We came with certain objectives, it morphed, we lost our willingness to fight and then we had this incredibly embarrassing withdrawal. And a power vacuum that resulted in a loss of rights and loss of life to our allies who had supported us. But another way it was similar was that there were allies of North Vietnam in the area which prevented us from taking the war to them and they had constant ability to resupply. And in this example, I'm thinking of Pakistan and their willingness to provide certain elements of support to the Taliban. To what extent is Pakistan responsible for this victory of the Taliban?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

I think they, and a bunch of other neighbors have been enablers for a very long time, and just as is true of what's happened in Vietnam. Let's not forget one of the trigger points for the American forces going in was the disasters that befell the French army.

Pakistan has had a role to play. They have issues with their neighbors, which are complex and dangerous. And at best, I think they've tried to see and neutralize Afghanistan to operate against elements inside Pakistan. And their Northwest frontier region is extraordinarily problematic and it is home to a variety of massive displaced person refugee camps, which have turned into training centers for young Afghan, mainly men who cross the Pakistan-Afghan border who have killed our soldiers in large numbers and Afghan civilians.

Larry Bernstein:

And we have a question about multilateral support for these sorts of objectives. Canada was a leading force in Afghanistan. The United States has limited means, we can't fight multiple wars at the same time. How does Canada view itself and its role to support these sort of activities? And why did Canada cut and run a decade before us? What motivated their decision to no longer want to fight the fight as you called it, the good fight? Was it too expensive in loss of life and in treasure? And Canada wasn't alone.

There were other allies of the West who sort of slipped away. When the US went to fight in Iraq, we said to our allies, "You take care of Afghanistan. We're going to go fight a different war. It's up to you." But then they sort of disappeared. How do we think about maintaining multinational support for these sorts of peace keeping operations and why it just the United States that was left to take the last chopper out?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Let me answer that last question first. The United States is not perfect, no nation is, but as a soldier, as a pragmatist, as someone who's studied my profession in a variety of universities and staff colleges around the world, I'm kind of glad the United States is the world's superpower. And I'm kind of glad that it's been, though sanguinary at times, it's been much more benevolent than if you look through centuries gone by when there was one or two nations that were vastly more powerful than others, it was pretty unpleasant for everybody else around them. The United States has tried to help, they haven't been shy of committing blood and treasure, to use your language, to solving really complicated and wicked problems. The strength of their economy, of their democracy, their enthusiasm, their energy has been infectious, as has their culture for pretty close to a century. There are near peer competitors that are getting stronger, especially China. The Russian bear is diminished but it still got claws.

And the United States is and has been the world's policeman for at least 80 years of the last century. Everyone loves to criticize, but I think a whole bunch of people secretly are kind of grateful. And that's why whenever there's a multinational problem that's wickedly complicated and lives are being lost in large numbers, people will say, "Well, where's the United States?"

The Americans have tried to build consensus and multinational for, be it the United Nations or NATO or a variety of other regional organizations. And at times they've had to go it alone, usually quietly, but someone eventually has got to do it. The flip side of that argument is no. No, no one has to do it. And just rely on the innate common sense and the ability of folk to get along and it'll eventually settle out. Well, tragically it doesn't. Someone has to do that job.

Larry Bernstein:

One of the reasons that Biden gave for leaving Afghanistan was to reallocate resources, to pivot to use the Obama word to Asia with our finite resources. The United States with its coalition partners, which they refer to as the Quad: India, the United States, Australia, and Japan plan to contain Chinese power in the South China Sea with the objective of maintaining the independence of Taiwan. But stories like Afghanistan illustrate the flaws of multilateral organizations or combinations of states working together on a mission that will take time and energy. How do you think about the Quad's ability to contain Chinese power, and does giving up on Afghanistan undermine future missions?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Well, let me just build on your question and point out to use a naval analogy and full disclosure, I'm an army guy. But if the intent is to try and contain China using the Quad with the strategic objective of the preservation of Taiwan, and of course other like-minded nations, by the abrupt and hurried withdrawal which has led to questioning of America's will to contribute to international stability missions, and as well has sort of sent a shudder through a bunch of allies that have come to rely on the steady presence of the United States, I noticed that there's a picture of the head of the Taliban and the Ambassador of China to Afghanistan in a variety of newspapers. And let's not forget that China has a border with Afghanistan just in the Badakhshan Province to the north.

China has the ability to assist with mischief that may arise out of Afghanistan. China has the potential to do that. Will they? We don't know. But if we don't have folks there, we certainly won't be able to influence what happens, at least not directly. And the impact of what has just happened in Afghanistan, the ripples of that will be felt for at least a generation or two in the region, if not further afield.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, you got a question from a mutual friend of ours, Alex Graham. He asks, did the diversion of US forces to the invasion of Iraq doom the Afghan mission at its birth?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

No, I don't think so. And a lot of my professional colleagues will disagree, but Afghanistan started out as being a light touch, the counter-terrorism moving into counterinsurgency. It wasn't until nation building really took off that you had the demand for more troops to essentially help with the stability operations inside the various provinces and districts.

Generals always want more troops, been one, ask for more all the time. It's up to the political masters to decide what is reasonable and what impact, not exceeding to the generals demand, will have on the probable outcome of the war. And there's a variety of political factors. But no, I don't think it had a terribly negative effect.

The big issue is that the good fight was fought for 20 years. Women and children in Afghanistan for those 20 years, in many cases were allowed to spread their wings and fly, much more so than in the past. I think all that's going to come to a shuttering halt. But the real impact of Afghanistan will be felt amongst those who are watching the issue with cold, hardened, ruthless eyes, people who are not necessarily our friends.

Larry Bernstein:

Why did Canada leave the coalition?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

Lost the will to fight. That simple. Just like what happened now with the United States, just happened to us sooner. And by the way, when I say lost the will to fight, perhaps I should rephrase that. The political elite in Canada lost the will to fight. Soldiers didn't. And I suspect the average Canadian in the street was quite proud of what their troops were doing, not only in fighting and protecting those who were seeking a better life, but also some of the nation building activities like building schools for girls and helping plant crops and veterinary training to people taking care of animals, and the list goes on. And that's what does happen in democracy. See, the political elite lose the will to fight.

Larry Bernstein:

There are a lot of NGOs that ended up in Afghanistan. My friend, Roy Stewart started a NGO in Kabul. And as I understand that there are 10,000 to 15,000 American citizens who remain in Afghanistan, I assume predominantly worked at NGOs, trying to improve the quality of life for

Afghans and build institutions. Why do you think that we hadn't really considered how to get our citizens out earlier? Why did we wait to get these people out? How did we not plan the end game very well?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

I've met Roy. I had the privilege. He's a remarkable fellow, a true, a true gentleman, a true adventurer, who actually walked across Afghanistan shortly before I arrived there ... If I tried to do the same, I'd make damn sure I was surrounded by several hundred of the best soldiers in the world with air cover. So quite a guy.

The 15,000 remaining Americans, it's tragic what's happening in and around them. I believe the State Department for the last month or so has been fairly vocal in trying to warn people that this was possible. But to get to the root of the question, why wasn't it better organized for the end game? I think people had a sense that shortly after the Americans withdrew their air power and the technicians to support and fix the machines that provided that air power, all of whom were American contractors, that the end would not be far away. I just don't think they thought it would end that soon.

And this is often the case. People think more of the journey and not the end. And there's a certain amount of denial, and people sometimes under those stressful circumstances and especially in Kabul, they hear sometimes what they want to hear, not what they should be listening to.

Larry Bernstein:

One of your responsibilities was being a senior commander with NATO. And that's just at another multilateral organization whose purpose is to defend Western Europe, Canada, the United States. How does that organization able to adapt and morph to deal with issues like Afghanistan or provide support for the Quad in case of an invasion of Taiwan, how does that organization work and can it be effective outside its original goals and objectives?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

NATO was set up as a defense coalition, essentially focused on preventing the re-occurrence of war, specifically nuclear war, and the designated enemy, and the most likely at the time being Russia and the Warsaw Pact. Under a specific article in the constitution of NATO, if an attack is made on one of the member states, then the other member states of NATO have an obligation to assist in their defense. In this case, it was determined correctly that the attack originated from elements trained and organized within Afghanistan. And so when the United States went in, they invoked that and asked allies to help, and most did, including Canada. And by the way, I still, I haven't gone around to answer your question about the details of the Canada-US relationship. I'll do that at the end.

NATO, and I was part of that first force commanded by a NATO three-star. I was his deputy to a German three-star, as a Canadian two-star, and was able to help in a variety of areas, ops and stuff that happens at night and all that kind of good stuff. It was a transition. It was complicated. It was cumbersome as coalition warfare often is. But I think any general with

operational experience in a contemporary theater will tell you it's better to fight with allies than with none, because at the general officer level, you have to be aware of what you're trying to achieve politically, you have to understand that the application of force is there to achieve certain specific political objectives. And the more voices you can have around the tables of the world, the better when it comes time to come with solutions and as well burden sharing.

Larry Bernstein:

Andrew, I like to end on a note of optimism. This is a challenging one. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the US mission in Afghanistan?

Ret. Lt. General Hon. Andrew Leslie:

For 20 years, people were given the opportunity to better themselves, and two generations, maybe even three of women and girls became police officers, helicopter pilots, doctors, members of parliament, artists, robotic engineers, soccer players, and the list goes on and on and on. That spark has been reignited because it was there 50 or 60 years ago as well. And no matter what happens, and this is going to be tragic and awful and bloody, and is just going to make, it's going to be repulsive what is going to happen there in the short term, but that flame is there.

And it's my hope that the cycle will turn and there'll be progress probably 10 or 15 years out, if not sooner, because like happened last time, the Taliban are not one single group. They're united in ideology, actually a unique interpretation of a specific religion, and they are essentially adopting the same moral attitudes and ideas that existed 600 or 700 years ago. They are fiercely independent. They are professional warriors, not trained soldiers. They're not unified by a code of service discipline. They don't really respect authority that well at all, if it's outside the religious sort of stream. And they are all tribal members. And those tribal tensions, trump all, they will eventually collapse under the weight of their tribal conflicts. And that's when the slain can perhaps come to life again.