It is not a long-range success formula. First, in righteous rage, invade a fundamentalist Islamic basket and swiftly accomplish the mission of smashing the aggressor jihadist network’s command-and-control haven while deposing its host regime. Then, instead of returning home, clutch defeat from the jaws of victory by thanklessly sticking around to save the world, whether fundamentalist Islam wants our kind of saving or not. And now, twenty long years later, with over 2,300 young American warriors killed, tens of thousands more wounded, and a trillion futile dollars circling down the Kabul drain, make a meek, humiliating quietus—having made no impression. Having, indeed, forgotten why we came, if we ever did understand.

That is our Afghanistan misadventure. Alas, as the doleful twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 atrocities beckons, Afghanistan projects the whole of America’s encounter with sharia supremacism and the violent jihad it inevitably breeds. There are other battlefields across the globe. The global jihad, nevertheless, was born in Afghanistan, risen from the ashes of the Cold War, in the last theater of proxy combat between the two superpowers of the latter half twentieth century.

The jihadists are now convinced that they—that Allah—defeated both behemoths. It is hyperbole, to be expected from fanatics who derive from an ancient text a divine summons to modern terrorist conquest. But are they more right than wrong?

The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath were a consequence, not a cause—an accelerant, not the catalyst.
Anniversaries are occasions for marking history. But history is only clarifying if it is complete. Twenty years later, we tend to look at 9/11 as a liminal moment, a societal sea change like the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations. The irretrievable change came earlier, though. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath were a consequence, not a cause—an accelerant, not the catalyst. That we still don’t grasp this is not a problem. It is the problem.

To be sure, 9/11 was a singularly horrific event: the most destructive attack on the homeland ever carried out by a foreign enemy. The total death toll, 2,977 victims, was more devastating than the 2,403 killed at Pearl Harbor. More than six thousand were wounded.

The iconic World Trade Center complex was obliterated by two jumbo jets that the jihadists flew into the Twin Towers, killing 2,753. Among the dead were over four hundred firefighters, police, and emergency medical personnel, who rushed to the hellish scene from which thousands were fleeing, most perishing as the towers collapsed. A third airliner-turned-missile was drilled into the Pentagon, killing 184. Emblematic of the acts of heroism that followed is an iconic photograph of then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (who died earlier this summer) helping carry the wounded to safety as the complex smoldered.

Control of the fourth plane, United Flight 93, was wrested in midair by the heroic passengers—along with the remaining crew members who hadn’t been killed when the jihadists first breached the cockpit. It helped that the suicide-hijacking team was undermanned: it had just four terrorists, compared to the five-terrorist squads that succeeded in striking their intended targets, because the twentieth terrorist had been prevented from entering the country in early August by a duly suspicious immigration inspector in Florida—the one trifling achievement in an otherwise dismal performance by U.S. immigration and intelligence agencies. The jihadists were steering Flight 93 toward Washington, almost certainly to hit the Capitol or the White House in an attempt to decapitate our government. The plane crash-landed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. There were no survivors among the forty passengers and crew.

Obviously, the level of devastation demanded a response that altered our national life in many ways, not least in the conduct of America’s longest foreign military engagements—though to label Afghanistan and Iraq “wars” (or, worse, “forever wars”), as we’ve customarily come to do, is a distortion, in the same way as would be the confounding of World War II with the Marshall Plan and the continuing presence, seven decades later, of over 110,000 U.S. military personnel in Europe and Japan.

To understand the way many things have changed, and the way many others remain frustratingly the same, we need to go back to the beginning. The jihadist plotting that led to the 9/11 attacks began in Afghanistan, not in 2001 but in the 1970s.
The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan at the usual “invitation” of a Marxist regime that the Kremlin had installed and was bent on preserving. This was to be a fatal clash: “Russia’s Vietnam,” though worse in that the Soviet empire did not live to tell the tale. The Communists had in common with fundamentalist Islam, in addition to many other totalitarian conceits, the belief that every inch of territory ever joined to their realm was theirs in perpetuity, deeded to “the people”—or to Allah, as the case may be. As the British Empire could have warned its Russian rivals after three of its own quagmires in the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan in its geography, climate, culture, and, to be frank, its curse of simply not being worth the trouble, has an innate way of nullifying a superpower’s advantages. The Red Army spent ten long years in a stalemate it was always winning but could never win, finally withdrawing in 1989, on the fiction that the puppet government of indigenous leftists it was leaving behind would hold.

Of course, the USSR itself could not hold. It is impossible to overstate the significance of this development, not just for the world order but for fundamentalist Islam’s nettlesome role in that order.

The Evil Empire’s disintegration was not a case of Rome taking centuries to fall. It was so sudden and shocking, it seemed inconceivable even a few weeks before it became a formal reality. I spent many years investigating, prosecuting, and studying jihadists, beginning in 1993, when the Soviet unraveling was a fresh event. This included interviewing implacable jihadist leaders and operatives, as well as informants who infiltrated terror cells and accomplices who became cooperating government witnesses. Islamic fundamentalists believe in their bones that it is they who consigned the Soviets to the ash heap of history—they, as the hand of Allah, given victory over an infidel enemy of ostensibly far greater power, no different from the seminal seventh-century Battle of Badr, when Muhammad’s ragtag, outmanned forces overcame the army of the Quraysh in Medina. Moreover, as they looked out at the suddenly unipolar world from their Afghan sanctuaries, jihadists had convinced themselves that the more challenging of the two superpowers had now been defeated.
Delusional? Of course it is. That, however, is a huge part of our problem. For all their talk about American arrogance and appreciating diversity, the transnational progressives of the American political establishment, who dominate foreign policy regardless of which major party is running the government, lack “strategic empathy.” That is how the former Trump National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster (crediting the historian Zachary Shore) describes the discipline of assimilating, for intelligence purposes, how a counterpart sees the world. To the contrary, if a historical interpretation or a religio-cultural perspective seems wayward or outdated to the West’s bien-pensant officials, analysts, and intellectuals, it is not merely an error in judgment that needs mending; it is instead an impossibility that anyone could actually believe such a thing. Our officials refuse to take the jihadists at their word, which remains a fatal mistake.

Jihadists believe history is on their side, that they are winning, that their opponents are weak of will, and that they will ultimately prevail by patient, ruthless faith. There is deep self-deception in this perspective, as if Islamic history, despite the long-standing backwardness of fundamentalist Islamic societies, has been a series of uninterrupted conquests. In 1981, for example, jihadists murdered the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat—their nemesis after he made peace with Israel—by infiltrating a military parade celebrating Egypt’s victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur War . . . which it had lost.

Similarly, it is an article of faith that the Red Army was pummeled into submission by the “battalions of Islam,” such as they were lionized by Omar Abdel Rahman—the notorious “Blind Sheikh” who led the U.S.-based jihadist cell that bombed the World Trade Center in 1993. Abdel Rahman later issued a fatwa—an edict under Islamic law—that the al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden credited with green-lighting the 9/11 attacks. The fatwa was issued from a federal penitentiary, in which Abdel Rahman (who died in custody in 2017) was serving a life sentence based on his 1995 terrorism prosecution, which I led—in the pre-9/11 years, when the global jihad was addressed as a crime problem. The justice system convicted the Blind Sheikh but, alas, did not stop him from operating.

Abdel Rahman, naturally, had been in Afghanistan for the anti-Soviet jihad. By the mid-Eighties, the globally renowned sharia scholar—a firebrand in the Sunni fundamentalist tradition of Ibn Tamiyyah (1263–1328)—was already notorious for having issued the fatwa that called for Sadat’s murder, which was compliantly executed by jihadist cabals who lauded him as the “emir of jihad.” These Egyptian organizations grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood and became building blocks of what evolved, in Afghanistan, into the al Qaeda network. Abdel Rahman exploited his influence to recruit fighters and raise funds, aligning with a group of similarly influential jihadist leaders, including his fellow Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, a medical doctor who succeeded bin Laden as al Qaeda’s leader. The leader in the formative days, though, was bin Laden, the son of a Saudi construction magnate’s tenth wife.
Well-heeled and charismatic, bin Laden was a visionary organizer. Not a scholar, he was devoted student of Abdel Rahman and other exponents of sharia supremacism. This is the literalist interpretation of Islamic scripture, drawn from the Koran and hadiths. The efforts of Western progressives to airbrush and marginalize it notwithstanding, sharia supremacism is undergirded by fourteen centuries of scholarship.

In the global jihad, ideology is everything. Abdel Rahman, for example, was sightless from childhood, suffering from sundry other maladies, and thus incapable of materially abetting a terrorist organization in any way—couldn’t build a bomb, couldn’t storm a fortress, couldn’t conduct a political assassination. He was capable only of leading. He was revered as a leader, authorized to command mass murder, solely because of his mastery of the animating doctrine—his status as a doctor of sharia jurisprudence who had graduated from al-Azhar University in Cairo, the seat of Sunni learning since the tenth century, and his unabashed proselytism of jihad as Islam’s highest obligation.

The jihad against the Soviets was catalyzed by sharia supremacism. But contrary to jihadist lore, it was not won by this war doctrine—which obliges Muslims, when Islamic lands are invaded by infidels, to drive the occupiers out by any means necessary. It was won by game-changing international support, led by the United States—the Great Satan itself.

Under the direction of the cia, with Pakistan as its cutout, our government provided financial and materiel aid (most notably, stinger missiles that neutralized the Red Army’s arsenal) to the tune of about $3 billion. That sum, a staggering figure in the 1980s, was matched dollar for dollar by the Saudis and their Gulf allies. Most of this assistance went to native factions, led by warlords who, to this day, wield the real power in a no-man’s-land infinitely resistant to central governance. About a fifth of the haul, however, was steered to the so-called Arab-Afghans: Muslims recruited by bin Laden and his movement from across the world, but drawn mainly from Arab societies where sharia supremacism enjoys profound influence, who aligned themselves with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a jihadist warlord with close ties to Pakistani intelligence (and who, in this fundamentalist cauldron, was what passed for Afghanistan’s prime minister twice during the 1990s).
The American intelligence community prefers to remember its (barely) covert backing of the Afghan mujahideen as a geopolitical masterstroke and a significant component of President Reagan’s international pressure on, and arms race against, Moscow. This is understandable, for it was this strategy, not Allah, that exploited the monstrous Soviet system’s deep-seated weaknesses, leading to its stunning demise in the heady early years of George H. W. Bush’s presidency. There is a dark underbelly, nonetheless.

When the exhausted Russians trudged out of Afghanistan in 1989, Washington lost interest in the tinderbox they left behind. Our intelligence services, who had heavily relied on their insidious Pakistani counterparts to maintain a gloss of deniability, failed to penetrate the jihadist upstarts (or even account for the surplus stingers). With the USSR departed, the ascendant jihadists decided to capitalize on their stronghold (“al Qaeda” is Arabic for “the base”) to take the holy war global. That meant targeting the United States, their benefactor of fleeting, mutual convenience. In the terrorists’ eyes, the Americans were more loathsome than the Soviets. They were “the head of the snake,” in jihadist parlance, the patron of the hated Jewish state (Israel is “the little Satan” in this glossary) and of the heretical regimes that corruptly ruled Islamic lands in America’s interests, failing to impose sharia.

Sharia is not merely Allah’s law. It is Islam’s comprehensive societal framework. In the fundamentalist interpretation, which has been set in stone for over a millennium, sharia is discriminatory against women, non-Muslims, apostates, and violators of its suffocating sexual, financial, and behavioral mores. Its punishments are barbaric. Of course, many bygone societies, Christian ones in the New World very much included, resorted to savage punitive measures in furtherance of their beliefs. Sharia’s punishments, however, are more enduring for reasons that progressives, in their skepticism of religion, which often borders on outright hostility, mulishly ignore. This dismissal contributes materially to the West’s failure to comprehend sharia culture, and also to irrational exuberance regarding our capacity to transform it into modern democracy.

The Koran is understood to be the verbatim word of Allah. It is not taken to be mediated or read as “inspired” scripture. It is far more difficult, then, for sharia to be contextualized as a product of its ancient time, or refined to accord with modern sensibilities, since it is deemed to be immutable divine teaching. Furthermore, sharia (Arabic for “the path”) is understood by Muslims to be Allah’s revelation to mankind of the model of how life is to be lived, and it does not abide a “wall of separation” between the civic and spiritual realms.

In the sharia-supremacist worldview, the faithful are obliged to impose Allah’s sharia system, by force if necessary.
Ergo, when we speak of sharia “supremacism,” this is definitional, not derogatory. If Allah’s sharia has been revealed to people and they refuse to accept it, that is not seen as an exercise of free choice. It is an egregious offense. Even worse, on this calculation, is renunciation by the apostate. In the sharia-supremacist worldview, the faithful are obliged to impose Allah’s sharia system, by force if necessary. Ostensibly, the system does not tolerate conversion by force; rather, by discriminating against non-Muslims, sharia is designed to promote “voluntary” submission (which, tellingly, is what “Islam” means—submission).

To this day, even after exploiting sharia’s tenets in encouraging Afghans to repel the Soviets, Western leaders deny that there is a scripturally fueled coherence to Muslim terrorist attacks. Such strikes are marginalized as “violent extremism,” and it is verboten to ask, “Extremism about what?” If the word “jihad” (meaning “struggle”) is uttered at all, notwithstanding zealous efforts by government officials to purge it from our public lexicon, it is to convey a revisionist sense of internal self-improvement. Even this is a deception, since this supposedly benign connotation is not about struggling to become a better person, but to become a more sharia-compliant Muslim—which is a very different thing. But in any event, sharia is invoked numerous times in Islamic scripture in its classical sense: holy war to establish Allah’s law.

While Western governments, including their prosecutorial authorities, depict jihadist violence as wanton, there is always logic to it. In assessing mass-murder attacks, it is a mistake—one we’ve never stopped making—to confound inhumanity with irrationality. Jihadists strike in order to repel invaders on Muslim territory, or to expand Muslim territories by establishing sharia governance. That is why, when Muslim enclaves form in Western communities, the first thing they demand is the autonomy to conduct their affairs under Islamic law, and why the enclaves push aggressively for legal recognition of sharia domestic-relations and financial-transaction standards. Jihad is simply the forcible iteration of an overarching imperative to establish sharia in whatever manner best suits the circumstances: legislation, litigation, public relations, intimidation, or force. When Muslims are overmatched by the wealth and power of the perceived enemy, stealth attacks that violate Western standards of humane warfare (which cannot, in fundamentalist theory, supersede sharia) make brutal sense.

In their arrogance, Western governments and opinion elites consciously avoid confronting what ought to be the undeniable nexus between Islamic scripture and jihadist ideology—so that it is anathema even to utter such a phrase as “sharia supremacism,” let alone to concede its existence as a long-standing, coherent, catalyzing belief system. It is this willful blindness that made the United States such an alluring target for jihadists.

The onslaught that culminated twenty years ago in the 9/11 attacks began more than a decade earlier. By the time that jihadists in Afghanistan took the war global and directed it against America, Muslims living in the United States had already been the focus of recruitment initiatives on behalf of the mujahideen. A cell, dominated by Egyptian immigrants, formed up in the New York metropolitan area in the late Eighties. Their hubs were fundamentalist mosques. They
organized paramilitary training weekends in rural areas, and the FBI even surveilled them conducting firearms practice in remote Calverton, on Long Island. It was maddeningly typical of government schizophrenia: the CIA was arming and supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan in furtherance of American foreign policy goals; simultaneously, the Bureau was criminally investigating would-be mujahideen for potentially violating the Neutrality Act, which bars Americans from engaging in warfare against countries with which the United States is formally at peace, in this case the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. In fact, some of the New York–based Muslims did make the trek to Afghanistan to glory in the anti-Soviet jihad. They were revered on their return as heroes to be emulated, becoming influential in recruiting and fundraising efforts.

Those efforts were shaped by the influence of Sheikh Abdel Rahman. Members of the nascent American cell took him as their leader. He monitored their activities from overseas, and they recorded phone conversations with him, to be broadcast in the mosques and Islamic community centers for recruitment and fundraising purposes. When he relocated to the United States, he took up residence in Brooklyn and then Jersey City — thanks to the incompetence of immigration authorities, he’d already been awarded a green card (as a religious worker) by one office before another office realized he should have been barred from entering the country on suspicion of terrorist activities in Egypt.

Not long after Abdel Rahman moved to the New York area, a member of the cell, Sayyid Nosair, carried out its first violent operation: the November 1990 murder of Rabbi Meir Kahane, the radical right-wing Israeli politician who founded the Jewish Defense League, in a daring shooting at a Marriott hotel in midtown Manhattan. Nosair was captured trying to flee, after a shoot-out with a postal police officer. Investigators recovered from his home and work locker (he worked as an electrician for the New York court system) a trove of evidence tying him to the cell—including cassettes recording phone calls with Abdel Rahman, as well as notes vowing that the cell would break and destroy the morale of the enemies of Allah . . . by destroying [exploding] the structure of the pillars of their civilization, such as the touristic infrastructure which they are proud of and their high world buildings . . . and the buildings in which their leaders gather.

Establishing the pattern that still recurs thirty years later, the chief of detectives for the New York City Police Department rushed out to tell the media, before any real investigation could be done, that Kahane had been killed by “a lone, deranged gunman” who might have been suffering from depression. Islam — of course — had nothing to do with it. On-message, an FBI official told The New York Times that the Bureau was convinced Nosair had acted alone, and that the coincidence of the homicide with the Blind Sheikh’s recent arrival on the scene was “a tantalizing but probably meaningless footnote.”

On February 26, 1993, a few minutes after noon when tens of thousands of people were routinely concentrated in and around lower Manhattan, the jihadists effectively declared war on the United States by detonating a 1,400-pound chemical bomb in the basement garage of the World Trade Center. The terrorists’ objective had been to destroy the complex. Not content with that, they strapped hydrogen tanks to the bomb and laced it with cyanide, hoping to aerate
the deadly compound into toxic clouds that would kill even those remote from the explosion. While the attack was shocking and caused massive damage, the death toll of just six adults and an unborn child was miraculously low

This seamlessly led to the attack’s treatment as a law-enforcement matter rather than an act of war. Initially at least, that was not a conscious strategic decision. When the explosion first happened, it was not even clear that a bombing had caused it. Once that was established forensically, the fact that the jihadist cell had previously been under investigation led to rapid arrests of a half-dozen terrorists. The fact that there were no uniformed foreign “armed forces” operating in the United States prevented us from appreciating that we were under attack by a global enemy capable of projecting great force. Given that, and the low casualty count, the authorities assumed this was a heinous crime suitable for courtroom prosecution. Plus, once some of the bombers were in custody, the wheels of the justice system began to grind, leading inexorably to indictment and trial.

All this was understandable . . . at first. The problem is that what began as an accident of circumstances became a template, even after it was obvious that we were dealing with a profound national security threat, not a crime wave. In short order, it became clear that the enemy, while present in the United States, was orchestrating its jihad from overseas, where our law-enforcement agencies do not operate as they do here, where the writ of our courts does not run, and where host governments may be uncooperative, or just dysfunctional. This is not to say that the Justice Department was without a critical role to play, but it should have been a subordinate role, in support of military forces, intelligence agencies, and Treasury initiatives to interrupt jihadist funding channels. Prosecutors could not be the point of the spear, although that’s what they (what we) became.
The judicialization of national security went to absurd lengths. In the mid-Nineties, to take the most notorious example, the Clinton Justice Department implemented procedures, known as “the wall,” that prevented the FBI’s foreign counterintelligence agents from sharing information with the Bureau’s law-enforcement agents. In essence, the hypothetical possibility that national security surveillance powers could be abused to steer criminal investigations was prioritized over the imperative of connecting intelligence and law-enforcement dots to develop a full threat mosaic—one that might enable the Bureau to interrupt terrorist plots rather than content itself with indicting terrorists (if they were still alive, if they could be captured) after Americans had been mass-murdered. The wall had its catastrophic effect in August 2001, when the intelligence agents learned that al Qaeda–affiliated terrorists had probably entered the United States but FBI headquarters refused to permit those agents to work in tandem with criminal investigators to find them. A few weeks later, those terrorists were part of the suicide-hijacking team that crashed Flight 77 into the Pentagon.

The law-enforcement approach to counterterrorism, regnant for eight years from the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center to the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center, foreseeably emboldened the enemy. When the enemy is prosecuting a war and we are content to prosecute indictments—when the enemy deploys bombs, and we respond with subpoenas—we signal provocative weakness. The Blind Sheikh and Osama bin Laden crafted stump speeches invoking the U.S. government’s failure to respond to Hezbollah’s 1983 attack on the U.S. barracks in Beirut, which killed 220 Marines and twenty-one other military personnel: make it bloody enough, make it ugly enough, and the Americans will have no stomach for it. They will surrender, they will retreat.

And do not fear the label “terrorist.” Instead, Abdel Rahman brayed, embrace it and the enemy will fear you:

What kind of name is this? Why are we afraid of it? Why do we fear the word terrorist? If the terrorist is the person who defends his right, so we are terrorists. And if the terrorist is the one who struggles for the sake of God, then we are terrorists. We . . . have been ordered with terrorism because we must prepare what power we can to terrorize the enemy of Allah and your enemy. The Koran says “to strike terror.” Therefore, we don’t fear to be described with “terrorism.” . . . They may say, “He is a terrorist, he uses violence, he uses force.” Let them say that. We are ordered to prepare whatever we can of power to terrorize the enemies of Islam.
And so they terrorized. The February 1993 World Trade Center bombing was rapidly followed by a spring 1993 plot for simultaneous bombings of New York City landmarks—the United Nations complex and the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, with the fbi’s lower Manhattan headquarters, a military facility, and the George Washington Bridge also scouted as potential targets. These plots failed because the fbi managed to infiltrate the cell with an informant (who had been tragically sidelined from the investigation of the cell prior to the Trade Center bombing). The next scheme, in 1994, adumbrated 9/11: Project Bojinka, in which the terrorists hoped to blow up U.S. airliners mid-flight. That ambition, too, was frustrated, though not before the terrorists killed a passenger and nearly took down a plane in a preparatory strike.

In June 1996, the jihadists, in collusion with the Iranian regime (since internecine Sunni–Shiite warring is tabled for the higher priority of jihad against the West), bombed the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, killing nineteen American Air Force members. In August 1998, al Qaeda carried out contemporaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing over two hundred people—most of them non-Americans, including Muslims working in and around the facilities, who were deemed expendable for the greater good of the jihad. And in October 2000, an al Qaeda cell bombed and nearly sank an American destroyer, uss Cole, in the Gulf of Aden, killing seventeen Navy personnel. The Cole bombing, less than a year before 9/11, took place about nine months after the jihadists tried to sink uss The Sullivans, a different American destroyer, but failed because their dinghy, overladen with explosives, sank.

To summarize, by the time the 9/11 attacks occurred, we had spent years projecting that we did not accept the premise that a determined foreign enemy was waging war against us, and we refused to accept that its ideological motivation for attacking the United States was a scripturally based, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that was backed by fourteen centuries of scholarship and remained powerfully influential in Muslim societies, especially in the Middle East. The 9/11 attacks were not the start of a new era. They were the foreseeable culmination of a yearslong campaign, during which we convinced the jihadists—who already believed they had defeated one superpower—that the remaining superpower could be similarly humiliated.

The staggering carnage of the 9/11 attacks forced a change in security strategy, but not in our mindset regarding the enemy—or our reluctance to believe it was conceivable, in the twenty-first century, that we could have an incorrigible enemy motivated by a religion to which millions of people in the West adhere.
Of course, the vast majority of those Muslims are not fundamentalists. Most of them have come to the West to get away from sharia societies. They oppose violent jihad. They oppose sharia supremacy. And importantly, they fully grasp the danger that it portends. Nevertheless, Western government officials and opinion elites did not gravitate to those Muslims. They took their cues from what they regarded as Muslim community leaders—organizations tied to the sharia-supremacist Muslim Brotherhood. They were convinced that Muslim resentment owed to political conflicts (especially American support of Israel) as well as Western arrogance and colonialism—the familiar list of progressive grievances against the United States, advanced under the guise of combating religious bigotry (“Islamophobia”), just as today they are advanced under the banner of “anti-racism.”

Twenty years ago, the United States responded to the 9/11 atrocities with military invasions, endorsed by Congress and guided by the Bush Doctrine, which cautioned that we were reserving the right to attack terrorists in any sanctuary. Host governments were given a stark choice: they could be with us, or with the terrorists—and, if they made the latter choice, they would be treated in kind.

Democracy, as we understand it, was never going to take root in sharia societies. It was a hallucination. It is not that fundamentalist Islamic cultures fail to apprehend the virtues of liberty. It is that they reject them, believing their conception of the good is superior. All these years later, we still have not learned the most basic truth: in sharia cultures, there are no representatives, elected by citizen constituents, to whom they are accountable for pursuing those citizens’ interests; instead, leaders have subjects, to whom their sole responsibility is to apply sharia faithfully; provided they do that, the subjects’ duty is to obey.

Democracy, as we understand it, was never going to take root in sharia societies. Yet, in Afghanistan and Iraq, instead of completing the security mission and extricating ourselves—i.e., instead of clearing out the terrorist safe havens and taming or toppling the regimes that cosseted the terrorists—we poured lives and fortunes into the impossible and thankless task of creating sharia democracies.
Now we are leaving, with the Taliban not just poised to retake power but so confident of America’s haste to depart that they are projecting the appearance of chasing us out of the country—just as the mujahideen chased the Soviets out of Afghanistan over thirty years ago. The Taliban, the sharia supremacists, are the dominant Afghan warlords. The Taliban’s alliance with al Qaeda—the jihadists who attacked America on 9/11—has never been broken.

It has been twenty years since September 11, 2001. Our enemies are now as formidable as they were on September 10, 2001. Our government understands them no better now than it did then.

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