**Is it Amnesia or Ignorance that Reigns in America?**

[Harlan Ullman](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/harlan-ullman/)

August 22, 2022

This week marked the first anniversary of America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is hard to overstate the calamity that ensued in a country in which nearly 3,000 Americans died and possibly nearly a trillion dollars were spent in trying to impose democracy where it never could work.

In the prior week, FBI agents conducted a search of former President Donald Trump’s Mar a Lago home in Palm Beach and seized box loads of material in part based on the Espionage Act passed in 1917. And to make these events into a hat trick, two separate Congressional delegations visited Taiwan enraging China and creating a mini-crisis as the Chinese military conducted “exercises” in a quasi-blockade of that island.

Clearly, these three incidents seem entirely unrelated with one exception. Each was largely caused by a bad case of historical amnesia or more likely ignorance that has been a congenital danger to American policy. Consider the arguments that make this case.

From the Bonn Summit on Afghanistan in early 2002 after the extraordinary military operation that collapsed the Taliban leadership until the bungled withdrawal two decades later, no one seemed to be aware of the history of Afghanistan and how unkind that country had been to invaders. Alexander the Great understood that. So did the British. And the Russian too learned that lesson.

Imposing a Jeffersonian-like democracy with a western constitutional form of government in Afghanistan was several bridges too far.

But Americans were too arrogant or too ignorant of history for any of that to matter. The failed Vietnam War should have offered some restraint. And perhaps ironically, the same Secretary of Defense who presided over the end of that war, Donald Rumsfeld, was back in office leading the Pentagon into Afghanistan and what would be another debacle. What was well known was that Afghanistan was tribal; de-centralized in structure with local chieftains and warlords in charge; and with a weak government in Kabul. Imposing a Jeffersonian-like democracy with a western constitutional form of government was several bridges too far. And a system dependent on “bak-shish” for centuries, or as regarded in the West as corruption and bribery, would not change quickly if at all.

Still, the US and its allies persisted. While in the final year of occupation, no American combat deaths were reported, the Taliban had regrouped. The Afghan security forces had been trained to Western standards of war, not those that had persisted also for centuries, that could not operate without large amounts of outside support. Hence, the edifice came crumbling down.

About Mr Trump’s travail, the Espionage Act was passed after America entered World War I. It and the Sedition Act a year later in 1918 were used to quell any domestic activities deemed counter to the war effort including criticism of Army uniforms. Civilian vigilante committees were organized to spy on and identify anyone suspected of opposing the war.

After the war ended in 1918 and amidst the Spanish Flu pandemic that claimed nearly 700,000 lives (equivalent to about two million today as the country’s population then was about 120 million), twenty-four letter bombs exploded throughout America terrifying the nation possibly more so than after September 11th. Two people were killed and the perpetrators were never found. But the infamous Palmer raids, named for then-Attorney J. Mitchell Palmer detained many tens of thousands of Americans without due process and deported many also in violation of the Fourth Amendment.

That statute remains a relic. The parallel between convicting the notorious gangster Al Capone of income tax evasion and the seizure of Trump material may prove ironic. Keeping highly classified documents that, if released, would do “exceptionally grave damage” to US national security is far more serious although taxes may still haunt Trump.

Similarly, the Congressional visits to Taiwan, while some argue certainly were important to show solidarity, were guaranteed to provoke China. Relations with China have already collapsed. Why worsen them?

And again history was dismissed. In November 1950 after the brilliant landing at Pusan during the Korean War, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur had so defeated the North Korean Army that his forces were racing towards the Yalu River and the border with Red China. Despite repeated intelligence warnings that China would intervene and three probes by their Army, MacArthur ignored the advice. Disaster followed. China will not invade Taiwan. But China will act against our interests. But why recall history? Ignorance often produces bliss before a catastrophe.

*The writer is a senior advisor at Washington, DC’s Atlantic Council and a published author*