

# The Afghanistan War and America's National Identity

Tim Bynion\*

**Abstract:** *The Afghanistan War was started in 2001 as a result of the September 11 attacks. The United States invaded Afghanistan with a mission to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban while implementing a democratic government in Afghanistan to increase regional stability. Seventeen years later, this mission has yet to be achieved, the Taliban still controls large swaths of Afghan territory, and the war shows no signs of ending. As the war progressed, American public support steadily declined from its initial near-unanimous support in 2001 to a majority of Americans disapproving of the war today. At the same time, public discourse of the Afghanistan War has disappeared, with very few discussions on the war in both media and political debates. Conventional wisdom would suggest that unpopular wars would be met with public outrage, but this has not been the case with the Afghanistan War, which leads to the question of what has caused this disparity between public opinion and public discourse. This paper argues this disparity can best be explained through American nationalism, also known as American "national identity." This concept has existed and evolved since the beginning of American history, and it has greatly influenced Americans' ideas of how their country should behave on the world stage. However, the events of the Afghanistan War contradict several of the key ideas of American nationalism, which may help to explain why many Americans have chosen to avoid discussions on the topic altogether.*

## I. Introduction

On August 3, 2017, Spc. Christopher Harris and Sgt. Jonathon Hunter of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division were killed in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan. The two American troops were killed in a suicide bombing that also left four of their fellow troops with non-life-threatening injuries. Hunter was only 32 days into his first deployment, and Harris was survived by his newly pregnant wife.<sup>1</sup> Less than a month later, another American soldier was killed in eastern Afghanistan after sustaining injuries from an operation against an Islamic State affiliate. That particular incident marked the 11<sup>th</sup> time that an American soldier was killed in Afghanistan in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Even more recently, U.S. Army Cpl. Joseph Maciel was killed in an insider attack in the Uruzgan province on July 7, 2018, which marked the third combat fatality in Afghanistan in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

\*Tim Bynion graduated with honors from Towson University in 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science, focusing on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. He is currently working full-time and hopes to continue studying political science at the graduate level next year.

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<sup>1</sup> Dianna Cahn, "Military Identifies Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan Suicide Bomb Attack," accessed on March 30, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/08/04/military-identifies-soldiers-killed-afghanistan-suicide-bomb.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "American Service Member Killed and Others Wounded in Afghanistan Raid," last modified August 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/world/asia/military-death-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Browne, "Pentagon identifies soldier killed in apparent insider attack in Afghanistan," last modified July 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/08/politics/soldier-killed-afghanistan-corporal-joseph-maciel/index.html>.

Of course, American troops have been dying in Afghanistan since long before 2017. Since the initial U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, more than 2,400 American troops have been killed in Afghanistan, not to mention the tens of thousands of native Afghans that have also lost their lives as a result of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> When taking into account other groups of people who were killed, including Taliban militants, Afghan military and police, humanitarian workers, journalists, U.S. allies, and more, the total death count of the Afghanistan War rises to more than 111,400 casualties.<sup>5</sup> This number provides the perspective needed to understand the immense costs of what has now become America's longest war.

As is the case with most wars that last for extended periods of time, public support for the Afghanistan War has steadily declined over the past 17 years. After the 9/11 attacks, in a moment when Americans were still recovering from witnessing nearly 3,000 of their fellow citizens murdered on their own soil, President George W. Bush initiated the invasion of Afghanistan with the mission of defeating al-Qaeda and the Taliban through both American military might and the successful implementation of a stable democracy in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan War was initiated with virtually unanimous support from the American people, as on Gallup poll indicated that 89% of Americans supported the initial invasion.<sup>6</sup>

However, this national unity would not last indefinitely, as public support for the Afghanistan War began to steadily decline until the war became unpopular around 2006.<sup>7</sup> By 2014, only 49% of Americans still supported America's involvement in the war, which is a statistic that represents the overall downward trend of public approval for the war over time.<sup>8</sup> A number of factors help to explain this shift in public opinion, including the rising number of American troop deaths, the ever-increasing costs of the war to the American taxpayer, and the apparent inability of the U.S. military to achieve its intended mission in Afghanistan. When taking all of these factors into consideration, many Americans now wonder why the Afghanistan War is a seemingly endless endeavor, leading many to believe that soldiers like Harris, Hunter, and the rest of the American troops lost in Afghanistan may have died for an impossible mission.

It is clear that the Afghanistan War has declined in popularity because the costs of the war have outweighed the perceived benefits, but what is unclear is why at the same time, the Afghanistan War has disappeared from America's national public discourse. Discussions about the fact that the United States is actually fighting in a war are notably absent from outlets like the mainstream media and presidential debates, both of which can be seen as tools by which to gauge which issues are salient to most Americans. To provide an example of this idea, in the 2016 presidential election, the Afghanistan War was mentioned a total of one time during all three nationally-televised debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.<sup>9</sup> The presidential debates are meant to highlight the candidates' views on the most salient issues

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Rafferty, "The War in Afghanistan: By The Numbers," last modified August 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/war-afghanistan-numbers-n794626>.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Westcott, "Afghanistan: 16 years, thousands dead and no clear end in sight," last modified October 31, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/21/asia/afghanistan-war-explainer/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Newport, "More Americans Now View Afghanistan War as a Mistake," last modified February 19, 2014, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/167471/americans-view-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Good, "When and Why Did Americans Turn Against the War in Afghanistan?" last modified June 22, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/06/when-and-why-did-americans-turn-against-the-war-in-afghanistan/240880/>.

<sup>8</sup> Newport, "More Americans," 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Afghanistan is the dirty little secret of the US presidential campaign," last modified October 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/27/afghanistan-is-the-dirty-little-secret-of-the-us-presidential-campaign>.

facing the American public, and the fact that the widely unpopular Afghanistan War was not even given time for a serious discussion in the presidential election indicates the miniscule level of attention it now receives. This disparity between public opinion and public discourse leads to the question: why has a war as unpopular as the Afghanistan War led to such little public outcry or even discussion on the war and its merits?

While there are many ways that one could go about explaining this issue, this paper will argue that the most appropriate way to understand this phenomenon is by examining it through the lens of American nationalism. Nationalism is a far-reaching topic that carries with it implications for virtually every aspect of American society, so naturally, it can also serve to explain why Americans would be reluctant and even unwilling to discuss the events of the Afghanistan War. Although there are several definitions of nationalism, this paper adopts Trautsch's definition and will use the term to refer to "the ideology which creates, legitimizes, mobilizes, and integrates the nation, promotes the unity of the national people, and demands a sovereign state for this nation."<sup>10</sup> As the definition implies, nationalism or "national identity" is the driving force that gives a nation purpose and a reason for its existence. For the United States in particular, nationalism is an especially relevant factor to consider when exploring how Americans react to their country's foreign policy and military actions, as American nationalism, like America itself, is unique in many ways that distinguish it from the nationalisms of other states, particularly in the ways in which it has affected U.S. foreign policy. In this particular instance, Americans are reluctant or even unwilling to discuss the events of the Afghanistan War because they go against what they believe to be their country's national identity.

In order to demonstrate the impact of American nationalism on Americans' silence on the Afghanistan War, it will first be necessary to analyze the Afghanistan War, the historical factors that led to its initiation, and the rhetoric and public opinion surrounding it in an effort to demonstrate both why the war has persisted for so long and why most Americans have abandoned their support for it. Doing so will provide the necessary context for understanding both the reasons for the American failure in Afghanistan and how the American people have responded to it. Second, this paper will explore the history and evolution of American nationalism and demonstrate its continued relevance in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, focusing primarily on the nationalistic ideals of American exceptionalism and liberal internationalism but also the concepts of triumphalism and militarism. All of these aspects of American nationalism carry with them implications for Americans' views of their country and its role in the world at large, which makes them relevant for understanding their views of the Afghanistan War. With a thorough understanding of both the Afghanistan War and American nationalism in mind, this paper will then connect these topics together by showcasing how the events of the Afghanistan War contradict many of the nationalistic tenets that most Americans still hold to be true. Doing so will provide a comprehensive study as to how American nationalism can help explain the puzzling gap in public opinion and public discourse surrounding the Afghanistan War.

## **II. The Afghanistan War and American Public Opinion/Discourse**

In order to understand the impact of American nationalism on Americans' views of the Afghanistan War, it is first necessary to understand the Afghanistan War itself. While it is understood

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<sup>10</sup> Jasper M. Trautsch. "The origins and nature of American nationalism." *National Identities* 18, no. 3 (September 2016): 289-312. <http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=116265009&site=ehost-live>, 291.

that the war was primarily a result of the 9/11 attacks, understanding the various reasons why the war has proven to be a failure is required in order to evaluate the American reaction to the Afghanistan War and its connection to American nationalism. This section will explore these factors as well as the factors that have led to the war's ever-increasing unpopularity among the American people.

*Pre-Afghanistan War History: Culture and U.S. Relations*

When one examines the specifics of Afghan history and culture, there are a number of factors that emerge that can explain America's inability to both claim military victory and establish a stable democracy in Afghanistan. One of the most important of these factors is Afghanistan's storied history of tribalism and internal conflict. From its earliest roots, Afghanistan has always been home to a number of groups, each one competing for power. Around the year 1250, the area now encompassing the country of Afghanistan was invaded by the Mongols, but the Mongol empire would eventually expand to the point where its military could not effectively defend all of its borders. Around 1510, northern Afghanistan would be controlled by the Uzbeks, and the Turkomans of Turkmenistan would occupy the southwest.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the variety of tribal identities that have come to define Afghanistan takes its historical roots in all of Central Asia in a trend that was established by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; Afghanistan alone contained about twenty spoken languages, including Persian, Turkish, and Pushto.<sup>12</sup> As will be demonstrated later, this prevalence of various tribal identities that was present in the early days of Afghan history would persist in the years to come and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Additionally, the prevalence of tribalism in Afghanistan was well-established throughout Afghan history and constituted a major difference from the governance structure of the United States. While Americans have long viewed the national government as a legitimate and necessary institution validated by the will of the people, the people of Afghanistan and Central Asia as a whole have a long history of resisting national authority and keeping power at the hands of local tribal leaders.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, "the tribe [tried] to maintain its autonomy from the state while the state [tried] to establish itself as the sole power holder by employing modern means of unification,"<sup>14</sup> including a centralized army and the promotion of a national ideology. Interestingly, a form of Afghan nationalism emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of various foreign involvements in Afghanistan, specifically from the British Empire and eventually the Soviet Union. This nationalism did not form any kind of "national consciousness," but it did reinforce "the traditional Afghan spirit of independence."<sup>15</sup> In other words, many of the events of Afghan history led to an underlying hostility among the Afghan people toward the idea of a centralized, powerful government. Years later, this mindset would ultimately prove to be very detrimental to the U.S. effort to implement a centralized democracy in Afghanistan.

Of course, understanding the U.S. war in Afghanistan also requires an understanding of the larger history of the United States' relationship with Afghanistan. Formal relations between the two countries

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<sup>11</sup> David Seddon, "Imperial Designs: A Deep History of Afghanistan," *Critical Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2003): 175-194, <http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=10184014&site=ehost-live>, 177.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>13</sup> Aaron O'Connell, *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> Zeynep Tuba Sungur, "Early Modern State Formation in Afghanistan in Relation to Pashtun Tribalism," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16, no. 3 (December 2016):437-455. doi: 10.1111/sena.12211, 439.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

were officially established in 1934 under the reign of King Zahir Shah, who ruled for forty years by bringing some level of political stability to Afghanistan after years of British occupation.<sup>16</sup> In the decades that followed, the U.S. relationship with Afghanistan faced significant strains, particularly during the Cold War. The United States faced a military and ideological adversary in the Soviet Union (USSR), and Afghanistan would not escape the far-reaching implications of this rivalry of superpowers.

In 1953, Mohammed Daoud Khan, a pro-Soviet General, became prime minister of Afghanistan and began to seek economic and military aid from the USSR. In 1956, then-Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agreed to ally with Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Under this alliance, Afghanistan “was completely dependent on the Soviet Union for arms and 90 percent dependent for petroleum products.”<sup>18</sup> During this alliance, the Afghan Communist Party was formed in 1965, and because of its desire to appease the Soviet Union, the Afghan government allowed the Party to form unimpeded. This group was able to implement a communist regime bolstered by a Soviet invasion in 1979.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan proved to be a key moment in the formation of Afghanistan's future, and it also carried with it serious implications for U.S. relations with both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. When examining this event within the context of the then-ongoing Cold War, it is important to note that the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan “[marked] the only time the Soviet Union invaded a country outside the Eastern Bloc—a strategic decision met by nearly worldwide condemnation.”<sup>20</sup>

Acting in line with its policy of containment, the United States, along with its European allies, condemned this act of Soviet aggression and attempted to find ways to get Moscow to withdraw from Kabul. However, the 1979 assassination of the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Adolph Dubs by four left-wing Afghans prompted President Jimmy Carter to send secret aid to the opposition forces to the communist regime.<sup>21</sup> This tragic event, along with further internal strife within Afghanistan and the fact that the Afghan government was bolstered by America's major ideological opponent, only served to further deteriorate Afghanistan's relationship with the United States. In fact, the United States would not even send an ambassador to Afghanistan until the U.S. invasion in 2001.<sup>22</sup> The unwillingness of the United States to even maintain diplomatic relations with Afghanistan during the 1980s and beyond demonstrates the fact that the difficulties of U.S.-Afghan relations began long before the start of the Afghanistan War in 2001.

### *The Afghanistan War: Mission and Results*

These difficulties would prove to be a significant factor during the course of the Afghanistan War itself, which began on October 7, 2001. The overall mission of the Afghanistan War had one simple goal: defeat al-Qaeda and end its ability to operate in Afghanistan by removing the Taliban from power and

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<sup>16</sup> Larisa Epatko, “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan.” Last modified December 31, 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.

<sup>17</sup> Epatko, “A Historical Timeline,” 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Seddon, “Imperial Designs,” 189.

<sup>19</sup> Nazif M. Shahrani, “War, Factionalism, and the State in Afghanistan,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 715-722, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567249>.

<sup>20</sup> “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978-1980,” U.S. Department of State, accessed March 22, 2018. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.

<sup>21</sup> Seddon, “Imperial Designs,” 190.

<sup>22</sup> Will Grunewald, “The Mysterious Kidnapping of an American Ambassador Still Haunts the State Department.” Last modified June 4, 2017. <https://www.washingtonian.com/2017/06/04/mysterious-kidnapping-american-ambassador-still-haunts-state-department/>.

killing bin Laden. However, a major aspect of that mission was for the United States to successfully implement a democratic government in Afghanistan. Democracy promotion was one of the major tenets of President Bush's overall foreign policy doctrine, otherwise known as the Bush Doctrine. In 2004, Bush himself stated that "democracy and reform will make [Middle Eastern states] stronger and more stable, and make the world more secure by undermining terrorism at its source."<sup>23</sup> President Bush linked the scourges of terrorism and tyranny together on many occasions, including in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), which stated that "The US national strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better."<sup>24</sup> In other words, promoting democracy in threatening countries would kill two birds with one stone: making America safer and simultaneously improving the lives of people in countries like Afghanistan.

Seventeen years later, this mission has still not been realized. The U.S. has proven utterly incapable at establishing a stable democracy in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda still commits acts of terror, and the Taliban still controls large swaths of the country. As Afghanistan veteran Aaron O'Connell puts it, "Despite three-quarters of a trillion dollars and 13 years of trying, America and its allies could not convince Afghan rulers to adopt Western norms of governance or rural Afghans to break fully with the Taliban insurgency."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising that a majority of Americans now disapprove of the Afghanistan War. What is surprising is the fact that this particular war is virtually nonexistent in American public discourse. As discussed previously, the Afghanistan War was lucky to even be mentioned in the 2016 campaign, and studies have found that coverage of the war has significantly declined in both television<sup>26</sup> and print news sources.<sup>27</sup> Conventional wisdom would dictate that if a nation is engaged in a lengthy, costly, and unpopular military endeavor, the people of that nation would be vocal in their opposition, but such is not the case with the Afghanistan War today. Thus, it is important to examine what factors could lead to this notable disparity between public opinion and discourse, as the answer will carry with it implications for understanding how Americans understand the proper role of the United States in the world at large.

### III. American Nationalism

One way to interpret this issue is through the lens of American nationalism. Sociologists Bart Bonikowski and Paul DiMaggio define American nationalism as "the complex of ideas, sentiments, and representations by which Americans understand the United States and their relationship to it."<sup>28</sup> When

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (2005): 112-156, doi: 10.1162/0162288054299383, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Maria Helena de Castro Santos & Ulysses Tavares Teixeira, "The essential role of democracy in the Bush Doctrine: the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 56, no. 2 (2013): 131-156, <http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=93516377&site=ehost-live>, 143.

<sup>25</sup> O'Connell, *Our Latest Longest War*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Stelter, "Afghan War Just a Slice of U.S. Coverage," Last modified December 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/20/business/media/20coverage.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Dominic Tierney, "Forgetting Afghanistan," Last modified June 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/afghanistan-war-memory/396701/>.

<sup>28</sup> Bart Bonikowski & Paul DiMaggio, "Varieties of American Popular Nationalism," *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (September 2016): 949-980. <https://doi-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177/0003122416663683>, 949.

considered with Trautsch's definition of nationalism, nationalism is the set of ideas and values that bind the people of a state together into what Benedict Anderson coined as an "imagined community."<sup>29</sup> Nationalism, or a state's "national identity," is in essence what sets it apart from the rest of the states in the world.

In the case of American nationalism, there are several aspects of this concept that can be directly related to the events of the Afghanistan War. While America's national identity is inherently subjective and has evolved over the hundreds of years since America's founding, scholars have identified several key aspects of American nationalism that are long-lasting and pervasive in American culture. Some of these concepts, such as American exceptionalism and liberal internationalism, were essential in the founding of the United States, while others, such as the interconnected ideas of militarism and triumphalism, arose later in American history. This section will explore all of these concepts and their origins and then discuss how they can explain Americans' apparent ambivalence to the Afghanistan War.

### *American Exceptionalism*

Arguably, the most important aspect of American nationalism is American exceptionalism, and its importance lies in the fact that all of the other aspects of American nationalism stem from the idea of American exceptionalism. Its origins can be traced back to the formative years of the United States, and its influence in U.S. foreign policy can be seen throughout the course of American history into the present day. Like American nationalism itself, American exceptionalism does not lend itself to one simple definition, as its complexities have led scholars to devise numerous definitions that all touch on different aspects of this concept. At the most basic level, exceptionalism implies that, as Alexis de Tocqueville first posited, America is "qualitatively different from all other countries."<sup>30</sup> In other words, there are a number of observable characteristics of America that set it apart from every other state. These characteristics can be traced back to the American founding. Unlike many other countries whose nationalism was derived from history or territory, America and its people were bound together by a set of ideals, which Seymour Martin Lipset identifies as liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.<sup>31</sup> It is both these ideals and the fact that America was founded on a set of ideals that set it apart from other nations and make it exceptional. It is also important to note that with this notion of American exceptionalism came an "us vs. them" mentality. Americans believed that it was their mission to promote the ideals of liberty to the "other," but there was also a domestic security factor that came into play in this mindset. In general, states that view themselves as exceptional also "see themselves as living in a hostile world. Threats are universalized."<sup>32</sup> Such a mindset can be seen throughout the history of U.S. foreign policy, most notably during the Cold War with the ideological threat of communism presented by the Soviet Union. However, this mindset existed in the early years of the United States' existence as well. When crafting the Constitution, the framers worked to secure two major goals for the new republic: "to form a 'more perfect union' and to provide for a central authority—be it Congress or an

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<sup>29</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> K.J. Holsti, "Exceptionalism in American foreign policy: Is it exceptional?" *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 3 (November 2010): 381-404. <https://doi-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177%2F1354066110377674>, 384.

Executive—able to defend the states from foreigners *without endangering their liberties at home.*<sup>33</sup> As stated previously, exceptionalist states observe the rest of the world and perceive hostility, and given that the United States was not yet the superpower it would one day become at the time of the founding, external threats were of the utmost concern. Therefore, a national belief in American exceptionalism brings with it the aforementioned “us vs. them” mentality, a mindset that is still prevalent in American society.

In the case of the Afghanistan War, the connection between the two can be traced back to the very start of the conflict in 2001. On September 20, 2001, a mere nine days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush spoke before Congress to announce the start of the so-called “war on terror.” In this speech, Bush invoked several key themes of American exceptionalism to justify this act of retaliation: “Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what they see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”<sup>34</sup> In this statement alone, Bush spoke of the United States in exceptionalist terms in two distinct ways. First, he notes the supremacy of the American values of freedom and democracy, which are the founding values of America that make it exceptional. Second, he promotes the us vs. them mentality that is characteristic of exceptionalist states. Under this worldview, America is seen as the victim of a hostile world environment, which was certainly the case in the 9/11 attacks. Since America lost nearly 3,000 of its own citizens in an attack on its own soil, the us vs. them mentality was particularly salient at the time, which also helps to explain why approval ratings for the invasion of Afghanistan initially approached 90%. Simply put, the Afghanistan War was initiated and justified by harkening to the various notions of American exceptionalism.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that 9/11 brought with it a surge in the belief in American exceptionalism among the American people. A 2002 study by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that Americans “were nearly unanimous (more than eight of ten) in their preference for the United States exerting ‘strong leadership’ in world affairs.”<sup>35</sup> Additionally, a 2001 poll found that 83% of Americans believed that war was sometimes morally justified, a statistic which correlated with an 85% approval rating in support of military action against acts of terror.<sup>36</sup> Even more intriguing is the fact that among the group of individuals who asserted that war is never morally justified, 55% supported the war on terrorism at the time.<sup>37</sup> These data suggest that Americans at the time were clearly accepting of many of the main tenets of American exceptionalism, mainly the idea that the United States exists in a hostile world and is therefore justified in pursuing military action to protect itself and that its superior set of values also justified its strong leadership in the international community.

It is clear that the Afghanistan War was initiated with the language of American exceptionalism and was supported by the vast majority of Americans at the time. However, 17 years have passed since the invasion of Afghanistan, and while its approval from the American people has plummeted over that time period, the belief in American exceptionalism has not declined to the same degree. Polling data

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<sup>33</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 26.

<sup>34</sup> George W. Bush, “Text of George Bush’s speech.” Last modified September 21, 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13>.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Rojecki, *America and the Politics of Insecurity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 84.

<sup>36</sup> “Post September 11 Attitudes,” *Pewresearch.org*, last modified December 6, 2001, <http://www.people-press.org/2001/12/06/post-september-11-attitudes/>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

indicate that the vast majority of Americans still hold their country in high regard, and although this factor is certainly not the only measure of belief in American exceptionalism, it is relevant because a belief in American exceptionalism will by nature translate to a favorable view of the United States. According to the Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey from the Pew Research Center, as of 2017, 85% of Americans held a favorable view of the United States, which is a number that is actually higher than the same statistic from the previous six years.<sup>38</sup> According to a 2014 survey from the Pew Research Center, 86% of Americans still believe that the United States either “stands above all other countries in the world” or is “one of the greatest countries in the world, along with some others.”<sup>39</sup> This statistic clearly demonstrates a widespread belief in American exceptionalism, as such a belief naturally carries with it the belief that the United States is simply better than the other countries of the world. All of the aforementioned data points indicate that American exceptionalism has endured into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a key aspect of American nationalism, so therefore, it can be used as a tool to understand how Americans respond to the Afghanistan War.

Therefore, the question of how American exceptionalism (or a lack thereof) can be seen in the Afghanistan War must be asked. As previously discussed, the initial discourse on the war itself was framed in the language of American exceptionalism, but it is also important to examine how the actual events of the war over the past 17 years are also related to this pillar of American nationalism. In the most basic sense, the events of the Afghanistan War go against the narrative of American exceptionalism because they do not lend credence to the notion that America is exceptional. Not only did the United States fail to implement its liberal values in Afghanistan, it has been unable to use its unsurpassed military might to defeat a terrorist group that is based in one of the most unstable regions of the world. The fact that the world's foremost superpower was unable to accomplish its goals in a country as unstable and relatively weak as Afghanistan does not support the narrative of American exceptionalism, and since most Americans still subscribe to that narrative, it is unsurprising that they would be uncomfortable with discussions of the Afghanistan War.

### *Liberal Internationalism*

Another nationalistic concept that is closely related to American exceptionalism is the idea of liberal internationalism. At its most basic sense, the goal of liberal internationalism is the promotion of individual freedom for all people.<sup>40</sup> Liberal internationalists aim to extend the various principles of liberalism, including equality, free markets, and democracy, to all people around the world in an effort to create a liberal world order. Liberalism, derived from the word “liberty,” was always a key aspect in the formation of the American national identity. The Founding Fathers created the federal government with the desire to preserve several liberal principles, including a wariness of a centralized government, a strong emphasis on individual liberty, and a desire to institutionalize equality.<sup>41</sup> It was a dedication to sustaining

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<sup>38</sup> “Global Indicators Database,” *Pewglobal.org*, last modified August 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/survey/all/>.

<sup>39</sup> Alec Tyson, “Most Americans think the U.S. is great, but fewer say it's the greatest,” Last modified July 2, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/02/most-americans-think-the-u-s-is-great-but-fewer-say-its-the-greatest/>.

<sup>40</sup> Antonio Franceschet, “The ethical foundations of liberal internationalism.” *International Journal* 54, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 463-481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070209905400308>, 465.

<sup>41</sup> John McGowan, *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 13.

these virtues that shaped the nature of both the federal system of government and, more importantly, an American national identity that was centered on the prospect of protecting liberty.

However, American national identity involved more than protecting liberty within America's borders. The ideals of liberal internationalism, rooted in the ever-prevalent notion of American exceptionalism, demanded that ideals of liberalism be promoted to the rest of the world. As mentioned in the previous section, part of the logic of American exceptionalism was to protect American interests from foreign interference. In that sense, "the distinctive revolutionary American Self was instituted in the form of the Federal Union, and this experience formed the origin of American-style liberal internationalism."<sup>42</sup> The United States was not always the global superpower it is today, and in the decades after it became an independent nation, it "made repeated efforts to build liberal international order—that is, order that is relatively open, rule-based, and progressive."<sup>43</sup> Having created a new state with a distinct sense of its own unique identity, leaders like Madison and Jefferson wanted to protect this identity by promoting America's conception of liberal ideals to the rest of the world. In fact, it was Jefferson who "had been the first to insist that a peaceful world order in which America could fully participate needed to be one constituted by democratic states."<sup>44</sup> The motivations behind this line of thinking were certainly self-interested on the part of the United States, but the principles themselves constituted liberal internationalism.

This idea would be reinforced in the decades following the American founding through several historical events, most notably during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. Before the United States entered World War I in 1917, President Wilson cautioned against the European model of "entangling alliances" and advocated for "a new association or league of nations."<sup>45</sup> The purpose of creating this league was to create, as Wilson himself said, "not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace."<sup>46</sup> Wilson envisioned a global community of states, led by the United States, that would achieve lasting peace by working toward common interests and goals. Wilson believed that creating such a community, exemplified in the now-defunct League of Nations, could actually end the threat of war while maintaining an international system composed of sovereign states.<sup>47</sup>

The ultimate purpose of creating this liberal world order was to establish a worldwide peace free from war, but in another sense, it was also meant to establish American hegemony, or exceptionalism. This mission was, at its core, one that confirmed the idea of American exceptionalism, as Wilsonians "believe that the security and success of the Revolution at home demands its universal extension

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<sup>42</sup> Taesuh Cha. "The formation of American exceptional identities: A three-tier model of the 'standard of civilization' in US foreign policy." *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 4 (January 2015): 743-767. <https://doi-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177%2F1354066114562475>, 757.

<sup>43</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>44</sup> Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>45</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson, Alliances, and the League of Nations," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (April 2006): 139-165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25144432>, 140.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> David Fromkin, "What Is Wilsonianism?" *World Policy Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 100-111. <http://proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login?ins=tu&url=http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9406233061&site=ehost-live>, 110.

throughout the world.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, since the experiment of democracy had worked with great results in America, it must be extended to the rest of the world because of its inherent goodness. Therefore, this liberal world order would simultaneously fulfill the American exceptionalist view that the United States offered the world's best system of government, one based on the liberal principles of equality, limited government, and liberty. These ideas are still prominent in modern-day America, making them relevant to understanding Americans' views of the Afghanistan War. As discussed previously, one of the central missions of the Afghanistan War was to implement a stable democracy in Afghanistan in effort to bolster security in the region and keep America safe from future attacks. This mindset is one of the core aspects of liberal internationalism, which makes the mission of the Afghanistan War one that is completely in line with the ideals of American nationalism. This mission was premised on the liberal-democratic notion “that some version of the modern Western state is natural rather than artificial and voluntary rather than coercive.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, a liberal democracy is the most natural form of government, and with some help from a champion of democracy, Afghanistan could also become a stable democratic state.

Of course, the outcome of the Afghanistan War thus far has not supported this theory, as 17 years into the war, the United States has proven incapable of overcoming the systemic issues discussed previously and implementing a stable democracy in Afghanistan. It is this inability of states to successfully promote these liberal principles abroad that partly explains why Americans would want to ignore the Afghanistan War. As discussed in the previous section, America's national identity is premised on a set of ideals based primarily on the liberal values of freedom, democracy, equality, free markets, etc. In this sense, the mission of the Afghanistan War was at its core a liberal internationalist one. However, the mission was, and is by all accounts, a failure. After 17 years of military intervention, Afghanistan has not yet embraced a liberal democracy, and the Taliban still controls a great deal of Afghan territory and certainly does not uphold liberal principles. Therefore, the results of the Afghanistan War do not fall in line with the liberal internationalist view of the United States, and since most Americans still see this mission as part of their national identity, it is understandable that Americans would avoid discussions on the Afghanistan War.

### *Triumphalism*

In any state, nationalism is an evolving concept, and American nationalism is no exception. While the two aforementioned concepts originated with the creation of the United States, other nationalistic sentiments arose later in U.S. history as a result of various events. One of these concepts is an idea often known as triumphalism. The concept of triumphalism within American nationalism is essentially the idea that as an exceptional nation with a “divine mission,” the United States is destined to emerge victorious in any military conflict it becomes involved with. This strain of thought rose to prominence following the events of World War II, as this conflict resulted in an important American victory on two fronts. First of all, World War II constituted a monumental military victory for the United States, which reaffirmed notions of American exceptionalism. Since the United States exited the war with both a victory and far fewer casualties than most of the other countries involved, the idea emerged that “America had been spared the scale of suffering so common elsewhere, fueling the conviction that

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2001), 181.

<sup>49</sup> O'Connell, *Our Latest Longest War*, 220.

God or destiny had reserved a special role for the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, American exceptionalism and global leadership was once again proven to be the correct perception of the United States.

However, the American victory in World War II went beyond a mere assertion of military might. It also constituted an ideological victory, as “It was not simply that the United States and Great Britain triumphed over Germany and Japan; it was that one form of government and one proposed structure of world order won out over another.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, the ideologies of liberalism and democracy triumphed over totalitarianism and fascism, which demonstrated the superiority of these American ideals. In fact, it would be difficult to argue that the fascist powers of Germany and Japan would have ever turned to democracy without American power and leadership leading the fight against their ideologies.<sup>52</sup> This mindset was further solidified by the American victory over communism in the Cold War. The conflict with the Soviet Union pitted two superpowers against each other, but in a more fundamental sense, it was a struggle between two competing ideologies: capitalism vs. communism. To Americans, communism represented a fundamental threat to everything that made America what it was, including “a belief in individual freedom, unfettered capitalism, the sanctity of the home, and a suspicion of outsiders.”<sup>53</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union once again demonstrated the superiority of these American principles and the inability of opposing principles to endure in the long run. It also spoke to the power of liberal internationalism, as scholars like Francis Fukuyama have argued that “With the demise of communism, ... liberalism—democracy and market capitalism—had triumphed over all other governmental and economic systems or sets of ordering principles.”<sup>54</sup> The end of the Cold War signaled not only the triumph of American values against Soviet ones, but it also signaled the triumph of American values against *all* other forms of governing values. Therefore, triumphalism can be seen as encompassing a belief in both unparalleled American military might and a set of national ideologies that is morally superior to all others.

Regardless of the mission, the Afghanistan War is still a military conflict, so the idea of triumphalism is also relevant here. Under this belief, America is destined to win any military conflict it is engaged in, and although this belief became prominent decades ago, it still alive and well in modern-day America. According to a 2017 study by Gallup, an astounding 72% of Americans hold either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the U.S. military.<sup>55</sup> This statistic falls in line with a 2016 study conducted by Pew which found that 79% of Americans had either a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in the military.<sup>56</sup> The fact that such a strong majority of Americans continue to hold such confidence in the military is a testament to the endurance of this nationalistic sentiment. In fact, this sentiment has endured despite more than a decade of seemingly unwinnable wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq. One study found

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<sup>50</sup> Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 7.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *America's Mission*, 142.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Elaine Tyler May, “Security against Democracy: The Legacy of the Cold War at Home,” *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 939-957. doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaq026, 945.

<sup>54</sup> John Mueller, “Did History End? Assessing the Fukuyama Thesis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 35-54. doi: 10.1002/polq.12147, 35.

<sup>55</sup> “Confidence in Institutions,” *Gallup*, accessed April 26, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

<sup>56</sup> Brian Kennedy, “Most Americans trust the military and scientists to act in the public’s interest,” last modified October 18, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/18/most-americans-trust-the-military-and-scientists-to-act-in-the-publics-interest/>.

that even though half of its respondents said that neither of these wars were worth the costs, “91% of the public surveyed expressed pride in U.S. soldiers, and 76% said they had personally thanked someone in the military.”<sup>57</sup> All of the above data indicate that Americans still maintain a belief in triumphalism, as widespread confidence in the military is synonymous with a belief that it can act as a winning force in any conflict it enters.

This belief is bolstered by the undeniable reality of American military supremacy in the world. The fact of the matter is that the United States currently maintains the world's most powerful military force by a sizable margin. The United States currently spends \$596 billion a year on military spending, while the next seven countries combined spend a total of \$567 billion and the rest of the world only \$514 billion.<sup>58</sup> In terms of specific military capabilities, the United States is far more advanced than the rest of the world in a number of key areas. The U.S. military has more than 1,400 Air Force fighter aircrafts. The only other country that comes close to rivaling this number is Russia with approximately 1,100 aircrafts, but “there is a broad consensus that American aircraft are more advanced than those of other nations.”<sup>59</sup> Simply put, the high level of confidence that Americans hold toward the U.S. military is not misguided, as American military power is unmatched throughout the world.

However, the supremacy of the U.S. military has not been evidence in the case of the Afghanistan War, as it would be impossible to argue that the U.S. military has been “victorious” in Afghanistan. The failure of the United States to defeat the Taliban and implement democracy in Afghanistan is ultimately a failure of the U.S. military, as it is the institution that is on the ground in Afghanistan and is tasked with making these goals a reality. As Nathan Jennings argues,

The American theory of victory designed to remedy these issues centers on providing military assistance to allow the time and space necessary for Afghans to enact lasting political, security, economic, and social reforms. However, as demonstrated in Vietnam, Iraq, as well as in previous Russian experiences in Afghanistan, translating external security assistance into lasting societal transformation is problematic—and sometimes impossible. Given the United States' dismal record in applying this transference in Southeast and Southwest Asia, the Afghan campaign should be assessed according to strategies informed by historical trends and realistic viability, as opposed to attractive but improbable outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, the United States may have entered Afghanistan with lofty ambitions of using its military to create democracy and increase security in Afghanistan, but its mission ignored the historical factors that have led to both the reliance of local leaders and the ascension of the Taliban. America's unmatched military might has not yet won the Afghanistan War because military power cannot overcome hundreds of years of Afghan history that are antithetical to America's mission. However, this reality does not

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<sup>57</sup> Meredith Kleykamp, Crosby Hipes, & Alair MacLean, “Who Supports U.S. Veterans and Who Exaggerates Their Support?” *Armed Forces & Society* 44, no. 1 (January 2017): 92-115. <https://doi-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177%2F0095327X16682786>, 93.

<sup>58</sup> K.K. Rebecca Lai, Troy Griggs, Max Fisher, & Audrey Carlsen, “Is America's Military Big Enough?” last modified March 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/22/us/is-americas-military-big-enough.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Nathan Jennings, “Is America Winning to Lose in Afghanistan?” last modified March 27, 2018, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/03/27/is\\_america\\_winning\\_to\\_lose\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_113247.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/03/27/is_america_winning_to_lose_in_afghanistan_113247.html).

correlate well with the American nationalistic belief in triumphalism. America is viewed by its citizens as a global superpower in no small part due to the unquestioned superiority of its military above all other countries. Given that the events of the Afghanistan War contradict these deeply-held nationalistic sentiments, it is simply easier for Americans to not discuss the Afghanistan War rather than attempt to justify it within the narrative of triumphalism. In this way, this aspect of nationalism further helps to explain why Americans would choose to ignore their country's longest war.

### *Militarism*

Connected to the idea of triumphalism is another nationalistic concept known as militarism. Like triumphalism, this idea emerged later in American history, but its impact and relevance can still be observed today. For the purposes of this analysis, militarism refers to, as Zimbardo, Breckenridge, and Moghaddam note, "an expression of the public's' widespread and deeply positive regard and respect for the sacrifice and courage of soldiers and their families."<sup>61</sup> There were several key moments in American history that led to this affection, the most notable of which being the treatment of veterans after the Vietnam War. After the war ended with much opposition from the American people, many Vietnam veterans were welcomed home with less than warm receptions, as many Americans believe that the veterans had participated in an unjust and unnecessary war. Even the media pushed the "crazy vet" stereotype and usually portrayed Vietnam veterans as criminals.<sup>62</sup> American anger with the Vietnam War itself was projected onto the veterans because they were widely seen as the agents of an immoral and unnecessary mission.

However, this attitude would shift throughout the 1970s as the years after the Vietnam War continued to multiply. A belief emerged that "Vietnam veterans were unjustly spurned by their fellow citizens and now deserved unconditional respect and honor. Whatever anyone might think of the brutal and unpopular war these soldiers were sent to fight, all Americans should applaud their willingness to serve."<sup>63</sup> In other words, Americans began to feel the need to separate the warrior from the war. Veterans were seen as heroes to be praised instead of government tools to be spurned. This narrative continued to be reinforced in the decades that followed Vietnam and, notably, as a result of the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>64</sup>

The idea of American soldiers as heroes became a prominent aspect of American nationalism in the decades following the Vietnam War, but its roots can be traced back even further in American history. Because soldiers are now perceived as defenders of American liberty and freedom, the country's founding and most sacred principles, these soldiers are almost deified because of their willingness to protect these principles at the potential cost of their own lives. As Christine Sylvester notes, "Whether a soldier lives or dies in today's war on terror can seem less important than the fact that he or she has 'served.'"<sup>65</sup> In the United States, it is the mere act of serving in the military that earns one a high level of respect and admiration as a hero, regardless of what that person actually did while he or she served. In the United

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<sup>61</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, James N. Breckenridge, & Fathali M. Moghaddam, "Culture, militarism, and America's heroic future," *Culture & Psychology* 21, no. 4 (December 2015): 505-514. doi: 10.1177/1354067X15615811, 507-508.

<sup>62</sup> Appy, *American Reckoning*, 238-239.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>64</sup> Zimbardo, Breckendridge, & Mogahaddan, "Culture, militarism, and America's heroic future," 508.

<sup>65</sup> Christine Sylvester, "Curating and re-curating the American war in Vietnam," *Security Dialogue* 00, vol. 0 (2017): 1-14, <https://doi-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177/0967010617733851>, 2.

States, it is the mere act of serving in the military that earns one a high level of respect and admiration as a hero, regardless of what that person actually did while he or she served. As discussed previously, the various ideals of liberalism are central to American nationalism, and since the military is seen as the ultimate protector of these ideals, it is no wonder that it is held with such high esteem among the American public. In that sense, militarism, while most easily traced back to the aftermath of the Vietnam War, has its roots in the longer nationalistic traditions of both American exceptionalism and liberal internationalism.

Despite years of seemingly unwinnable conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans as a whole still hold a great deal of respect for their military, which would indicate that militarism is still a relevant factor when analyzing American nationalism. According to a 2013 study from Pew, 78% of Americans said that “members of the armed services contribute ‘a lot’ to society’s well-being.”<sup>66</sup> In addition, this consensus regarding the military remains consistent when comparing all demographic groups, including gender, age, ethnicity, education level, and political affiliation.<sup>67</sup> In other words, the level of respect one holds for the military is generally not affected by the demographic variables that often predict so many other aspects of public opinion. A 2017 study by Gallup found that sizable majorities of Americans hold either very favorable or somewhat favorable views of all five branches of the U.S. military (Army: 77%, Navy: 78%, Air Force: 81%, Marines: 78%, Coast Guard, 76%).<sup>68</sup> In fact, the military has ranked number one in Gallup’s annual Confidence in Institutions poll every year since 1998, “with at least 72% expressing ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the military in the past eight years.”<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, the Afghanistan War has not seemed to have any effect on these statistics. According to another study from Pew, a total of “nine-in-ten Americans say they have felt proud of the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq since those two wars began.”<sup>70</sup> In addition, 76% of respondents said they had personally thanked a person in the military for his or her service, and a full 92% of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans said they had been thanked by someone for their service since they came home.<sup>71</sup> Americans also understand that since 9/11, “members of the military and their families have carried greater burdens than the American people. More than eight-in-ten (83%) say that members of the military and their families have had to make a lot of sacrifices, while only 43% say so about the American public.”<sup>72</sup> It is clear that Americans’ admiration for members of the military remains at an astoundingly high level today.

This fact also helps to explain why Americans would be willing to ignore the realities of the Afghanistan War. As discussed at the outset of this paper, public support for the Afghanistan War has steadily declined over the past 17 years, but as just discussed here, public confidence in and respect for the military has remained at a high level throughout the same time period. As explained here, American respect for the military is woven into the fabric of American nationalism because of the military’s role in

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<sup>66</sup> “Public Esteem for Military Still High,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified July 11, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/11/public-esteem-for-military-still-high/>.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Jim Norman, “Americans Give Military Branches Similar High Marks,” last modified May 26, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/211112/americans-give-military-branches-similar-high-marks.aspx>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> “Chapter 5: The Public and the Military,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified October 5, 2011, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/chapter-5-the-public-and-the-military/>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

maintaining both American exceptionalism and liberal internationalism, so it should not be surprising that public support for the military has remained constant over the past two decades. Members of the military are viewed as the individuals who carry out America's liberal internationalist mission, which is also one of the main ways that America is exceptional. In addition, militarism is also closely related to triumphalism, as respect for the military is also rooted in confidence in the military. Therefore, the fact that the U.S. military has been unable to achieve its goals and fulfill America's "mission" in Afghanistan undermines the very reasons that Americans hold the military in such high esteem. Thus, militarism cannot be reconciled with the events of the Afghanistan War, which partly explains why Americans can simultaneously disapprove of the war but also want to avoid discussions about it. Since respect for the military is rooted in the various notions of American nationalism, it is understandable that Americans, who place a high value on their "national identity," would avoid topics that contradict this nationalistic sentiment.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As discussed throughout this paper, American nationalism is rooted in the very founding of the United States and remains a powerful force in American culture centuries later. Because it provides Americans with a sense of their country's exceptional role in the world, it is essential to understand the ways in which Americans view and react to various U.S. foreign policy decisions. The Afghanistan War offers a particularly interesting case study, as it is widely unpopular but completely absent from public political discourse. By all accounts, this war has proven to be an abject failure for the United States, but failure is not synonymous with the way that most Americans view their country. This perception is due in large part to the persistence of American nationalism, and therefore, Americans are unable to reconcile the actual result of the Afghanistan War with their understanding of what the result should have been: a resounding victory for the United States. This is not to say that Americans are justified in ignoring the harsh realities of the Afghanistan War, nor is it to say that the ideas of American nationalism are proven completely false by this event. Rather, this paper attempts to demonstrate the prominent and long-lasting influence of American nationalism on the American psyche. Regardless of one's opinions on both the Afghanistan War and American nationalism, it is necessary to examine these topics and the connections between them in order to gain a thorough understanding of the ways in which Americans understand and react to contemporary U.S. foreign policy.

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