

Long overdue:

Biden right to pull U.S. troops out of Afghanistan

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Former U.S. President Donald Trump and current Commander-in-Chief Joseph Biden were right to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan because it was the right thing to do for America.

From Washington to Brussels, governments struggled to make sense of the chaotic events that unfolded in Afghanistan. President Biden had insisted¹ the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was not inevitable; the assumption then was that the Afghan government and its military leadership had both the capacity and will to hold off advancing Taliban forces².

As became subsequently clear, U.S. policy underestimated³ the impact of corruption in the

country and overestimated⁴ the Afghan military's ability to defend the country. Leadership misjudged⁵ the Taliban's ability to win⁶ back the hearts and minds of its countryside people and to successfully recruit enough young men to sustain the fight against U.S. forces. Now everyone is asking⁷ what went wrong? Was America's longest war justified? Was the withdrawal warranted, despite the manner in which it was executed? Did America achieve any of its objectives in Afghanistan? Under Taliban rule, will Afghanistan allow Al Qaeda and other extremist groups to use the country – a crossroads of Central and South Asia – as a base for international terrorist attacks?

For some, it will be impossible for President Biden to wash away the deadly stain⁸ of a tumultuous exit from Afghanistan. These folks will insist⁹ the U.S. should still keep¹⁰ an active fighting presence in Afghanistan. Others will argue that Islamic extremists¹¹ and jihadis¹² – particularly ISIS-K and al Qaeda – will return to Afghanistan with the removal of U.S. troops. A number of analysts will position the withdrawal as a

¹ “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan.” The White House. *The United States Government*, July 8, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

² *ibid*

³ Donati, Jessica, Rasmussen Sune Engel, and Philips Michael, M. “Chaotic Afghanistan Pullout Caps Two Decades of Missteps.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2021.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/chaotic-afghanistan-pullout-caps-two-decades-of-missteps-11629067315?mod=djemwhatsnews>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Mashal, Mujib. “How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-war.html>.

⁷ “What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?” *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, August 21, 2021.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-went-wrong-in-afghanistan-11629472600>.

⁸ Koreck, Natasha, Christopher Cadelago, and Ally Mutnik. “Biden Was Barreling toward Perilous Political Waters. Then Afghanistan Happened.” *POLITICO*, August 16, 2021.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/16/afghanistan-politics-biden-fallout-505339>.

⁹ Ward, Alex. “The Best Case against Withdrawing All US Troops from Afghanistan.” *Vox*. *Vox*, March 17, 2021.

<https://www.vox.com/22327124/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-lisa-curtis-stay>.

¹⁰ Stavrida, James. “Keeping Troops in Afghanistan Makes America Safer.” *Bloomberg*, 2021.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-02-12/keeping-troops-in-afghanistan-makes-america-safer>.

¹¹ Gutman, Roy. “The Taliban Is Back, and the World's Jihadis Are Coming.” *The Washington Institute*, August 18, 2021.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/taliban-back-and-worlds-jihadis-are-coming?fbclid=IwAR16WZRNb4ZPkZWbMbC13UT329eHOH5dwUsRXmM84-of3QDm0QWD3VGwu10>.

¹² *ibid*

failed¹³ U.S. “civilizing” mission. And there are certainly those who will point to all of the above as factors working against Biden’s public opinion poll ratings, which dipped to the lowest point of his young presidency. By comparison, Trump’s record-low presidential ratings had less to do with his commitment to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

The graveyard of empires

In the 19th century – seemingly a world away from the conflict of today – the Afghans inflicted heavy losses on British forces in the British-Afghan wars¹⁴ (1838-42, 1878-80, 1919-21). Decades later in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded¹⁵ and occupied the country until the Geneva Accords were signed in 1988. This led to Soviet withdrawal the following year – without victory. Next, in 2001, the United States and its Western allies invaded¹⁶ Afghanistan and now, after nearly two decades, the U.S. is leaving the country without a formal military victory. Like the British and the Soviets before them, the U.S. made colossal errors¹⁷ in the country.

What emerged in Afghanistan went far beyond the original mission; it became – as perceived by those who would ultimately storm Kabul – a war of occupation¹⁸. What has been shown in Afghanistan

was a collapse – a two-decade catastrophe – in U.S. policymaking. According to a study by the Center for Complex Operations at the U.S. military’s National Defense University, the U.S. nation-building experiment¹⁹ in Afghanistan was “doomed to fail.”

I’ll say it again: Both Trump and Biden were right to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, because it was the right thing to do for this country. Trump made it a policy issue²⁰, Biden executed what previous U.S. presidents failed to do. But, whatever the circumstances, whatever the political motivations, the withdrawal of American troops *should* provide our current administration the opportunity to focus more intently and effectively on matters of internal crises: a budget approval process that threatens our government’s ability to conduct business, the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic and its aftermath, an economy staggered by the pandemic, and overdue infrastructure improvements in many areas, including transportation, utilities, and the environment.

For Trump, Afghanistan represented the “forever wars²¹.” So eager was the president to end U.S. involvement that he bypassed the Afghan government, went directly to the Taliban, and struck a deal²² in February 2020 to withdraw all U.S. troops by May 2021. Four months following his January 2021

¹³ Fernandez, Belen. “Women’s Rights and the US’s ‘Civilising’ Mission in Afghanistan.” Women’s Rights | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 21, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/21/white-women-washing-the-uss-civilising-mission-in-afghanistan>.

¹⁴ News Desk. “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, May 4, 2011.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Malkasian, Carter. “The American War in Afghanistan: A History.” Amazon. Oxford University Press, 2021.

https://www.amazon.com/American-War-Afghanistan-History/dp/0197550770/ref=sr_1_3?dchild=1&keywords=American%2BWar%2Bin%2BAfghanistan&qid=1629607515&sr=8-3.

¹⁸ Loyn, David. “In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation.” Amazon. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. <https://www.amazon.com/Afghanistan-Hundred-British-American-Occupation/dp/0230614035>.

¹⁹ Whitlock, Craig, and The Washington Post. “The Afghanistan Papers.” Book by Craig Whitlock, The Washington Post | Official Publisher Page | Simon & Schuster, 2021.

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Afghanistan-Papers/Craig-Whitlock/9781982159009>.

²⁰ Risen, James. “For Two Decades, Americans Told One Lie after Another about What They Were Doing in Afghanistan.” The Intercept. The Intercept, August 26, 2021.

https://theintercept.com/2021/08/26/afghanistan-america-failures/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=The+Intercept+Newsletter.

²¹ Dozier, Kimberly, and W. J. Hennigan. “For Two Decades, Americans Told One Lie after Another about What They Were Doing in Afghanistan.” Time, November 17, 2020.

<https://politomix.com/the-intercept/1871477/two-decades-americans-told-one-lie-after-another-doing/>.

²² Welna, David, and Colin Dwyer. “U.S. Signs Peace Deal with Taliban after Nearly 2 Decades of War in Afghanistan.” NPR. NPR, February 29, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810537586/u-s-signs-peace-deal-with-taliban-after-nearly-2-decades-of-war-in-afghanistan>.

inauguration, Biden pushed back the removal²³ deadline to August 31 to allow more time for U.S. troops and administrators, as well as those who helped the U.S. in the war-torn country.

However, the writing was always on the wall. *The Washington Post's* "Afghanistan Papers"²⁴ documented what was known privately by presidents, senior U.S. officials, and military leaders: the war had become unwinnable²⁵. Contrary to boots-on-the-ground reality, claims of progress in villages, settlements, and on the battlefields ignored the facts²⁶. Progress was nearly²⁷ nonexistent and unsteady at best; the conflict would never be resolved in the U.S.'s favor. In fact, the Taliban made inroads in many areas and did not show any signs of defeat or backing down.

Moving forward, Taliban-branded business as usual – especially harboring extremist factions and terrorist groups that could attack the U.S. – may take a directional detour as the Islamist organization seeks to bring some semblance of governance and security to the country, not least as there appear to be increasingly violent conflicts between the Taliban and ISIS-K elements. And there's this: The U.S. has changed how it wages war on terrorism. It no longer relies purely on

troop numbers and the attending land, air, and sea weaponry. Today, surgically-targeted air strikes are used to take out key individuals, to obliterate convoys, to vaporize opposition strongholds. Such tactics and weaponry – vastly changed from the earlier days of the conflict – will be considered as the Taliban calculates the cost of warfare moving forward. Drones can be quickly deployed²⁸ remotely over long periods of time and distance and provide the calculus of lethal results at a lower financial cost and risk to U.S. troops.

Western Nation-building

This nation's original mission – the defeat of al Qaeda and elimination or capture of senior al Qaeda leaders – has largely been accomplished²⁹. Al Qaeda's ability to plan, finance and execute terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its allies has been greatly degraded and severely diminished.

There was no ideal context in which the U.S. could pull troops out without consequences. But the rapid-speed and total collapse of the Afghan National Army³⁰ (300,000) in the face of a relatively modest number³¹ of Taliban forces (75,000) was not anticipated. Despite U.S. spending of more than \$88 billion to train and equip Afghan security forces³²,

²³ Ryan, Missy, and Karen DeYoung. "Biden Will Withdraw All U.S. Forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, August 17, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8_story.html.

²⁴ Whitlock, Craig. "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ "Getting Counterinsurgency Wrong." *Boston Review*, December 19, 2019. <https://bostonreview.net/articles/ethan-bueno-de-mesquita-afghanistan/>.

²⁷ Whitlock, Craig. "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

²⁸ Byman, Daniel. "Why There Hasn't Been Another 9/11." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, September 11, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-there-hasnt-been-another-9-11-11631332860?mod=djemwhatsnews>.

²⁹ Blogs, Menu SLS |SLS, Allen S. Weiner, and Q&A with Sharon Driscoll. "Stanford's Allen Weiner on the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Fall of Kabul." *Stanford Law School*. Accessed April 12, 2022.

<https://law.stanford.edu/2021/08/16/stanfords-allen-weiner-on-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-and-the-fall-of-kabul/>.

³⁰ "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan." *The White House*. The United States Government, July 8, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

³¹ Sanger, David E., and Helene Cooper. "Taliban Sweep in Afghanistan Follows Years of U.S. Miscalculations." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, August 14, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/14/us/politics/afghanistan-biden.html#:~:text=But%20administration%20officials%2C%20responding%20to,some%20300%2C000%20troops%20to%2075%2C000.&text=They%20have%20an%20air%20force,press%20secretary%2C%20said%20on%20Friday>.

³² "January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to Congress - Sigar." Accessed April 11, 2022.

<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr-section2-funding.pdf>.

including the Afghan National Army and police force, little, if any, consequential resistance met the Taliban as they took control of the country.

More importantly, there is massive support for ending U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. While there was widespread disapproval³³ of Biden's handling of the seemingly disorganized and frantic withdrawal, the majority³⁴ of Americans approve³⁵ of pulling U.S. troops from the country.

The [cost](#) of the war has been extraordinary. Over \$2 trillion was spent and more than 775,000 U.S. troops fought in Afghanistan. Nearly 2,500 American lives have been lost in the fight and over 20,000 troops wounded in action. According to the *Afghanistan Papers*³⁶, an estimated 157,000 people have been killed in the war in Afghanistan since 2001 in the efforts to build a pro-Western democracy. The human and economic cost of the war to the U.S. will not end with its full withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to the Costs of War Project, the full [cost](#) of the war – such as the financial costs of U.S. veterans' care³⁷ – will continue for decades.

The defeat of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan is a reminder that there is no substitute for deep understanding of local context. Despite spending nearly two decades fighting in Afghanistan, the U.S.'s contextual and cultural knowledge was no match for

the local Afghans. They were able to bide their time, recruit supporters, and build a coalition that ultimately pushed the U.S. out of the country.

The Taliban have had decades to absorb the lessons from insurgents in formerly colonized³⁸ regions. Indonesia's escape from colonial domination by the Dutch is an example. North Vietnam's victory over French and ultimately American forces is another. Kenya's freedom from the British conquest and Algeria's defeat of the French in a war so tumultuous it brought down the French republic offer two more lessons to be learned, with two different outcomes to their insurgencies and ways of achieving independence; hard schooling has been at the forefront for the losers.

War is fought as much in the minds of men and women as it is physically contested on the battlefield; Napoleon once said³⁹, "In war, three-quarters turns on personal character and relations; the balance of manpower and materials counts only for the remaining quarter." If one cannot directly defeat the mighty, then one must resort to guerrilla warfare, a war of attrition, tiring the opponents and wearing down the will to fight. Once morale is low, it does not require might to turn the tables on the battlefield.

³³ Geoffreyvs. "Afghanistan Has Fallen to the Taliban. How Will Americans Judge Biden's Decision to Withdraw?" *FiveThirtyEight*. *FiveThirtyEight*, August 16, 2021.

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/afghanistan-has-fallen-to-the-taliban-how-will-americans-judge-bidens-decision-to-withdraw/>.

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Green, Ted Van, and Carroll Doherty. "Majority of U.S. Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized for His Handling of Situation." *Pew Research Center*. *Pew Research Center*, August 31, 2021.

https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/?utm_source=Pew%2BResearch%2BCenter&utm_campaign=9c808b0fb6-Weekly_2021_10_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-9c808b0fb6-399667505.

³⁶ "Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan." *The Washington Post*.

WP Company, December 9, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

³⁷ "Costs of War Bilmes Long-Term Costs of Care for Vets Aug 2021." Accessed April 11, 2022.

https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Bilmes_Long-Term%20Costs%20of%20Care%20for%20Vets_Aug%202021.pdf.

³⁸ Robert Freeman. "Opinion: The Lessons the U.S. Will Probably Not Learn from Afghanistan." *Common Dreams*, August 21, 2021.

<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/08/21/lessons-us-will-probably-not-learn-afghanistan>.

³⁹ "Napoleon I." *Oxford Reference*. Accessed April 12, 2022.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00007762>.

To put it bluntly, the U.S. does not have a positive⁴⁰ recent track record in engineering nation and state building overseas⁴¹, and even less in the Middle East and Asia. If the hard experience⁴² gained from the Vietnam War was that the U.S. should never intervene in a foreign country's conflict without a clear plan, exit strategy and popular support, then that lesson was forgotten or was not applied in Afghanistan. The U.S. overstayed and couldn't gather popular local support. In the end, the U.S. was perceived as an occupying force, like in Iraq. The Taliban – armed with local knowledge, vast networks and popular support, as well as a long background of fighting in the country – managed to come to power by drawing on a deep well of popular support and deep-rooted resistance⁴³ to foreign occupation – not their ability to go toe-to-toe with our military might.

The original mission of disrupting al Qaeda, eliminating terrorist leaders and preventing another terror attack against the United States has seen some success; probably more than we know. The ill-fated Afghanistan conflict should serve as a reminder to U.S. foreign interventions and experiments in nation and state building that there is a fine line between invading a country to disrupt terror networks and overstaying the assignment.

⁴⁰ “May 2003 Summary the American Record on Nation Building.” Accessed April 11, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Policybrief24.pdf>.

⁴¹ “America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy with Stephen Walt.” Harvard Kennedy School. Accessed April 12, 2022. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/wiener-conference-calls/stephen-walt>.

⁴² Traub, James. “The United States Keeps Doing What It Can't.” Foreign Policy, August 20, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/20/the-united-states-keeps-doing-what-it-cant/>.

⁴³ Malkasian, Carter. “How the Good War Went Bad.” Foreign Affairs, August 24, 2021. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/how-good-war-went-bad?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=special_send&utm_campaign=americas_longest_war_prospects&utm_content=20210820&utm_term=promo-email-prospects.

⁴⁴ “President Biden Remarks on Afghanistan and ... - c-Span.org.” Accessed April 12, 2022. https://www.c-span.org/video/?514201-1/president-biden-american-home-afghanistan-home&_escaped_fragment_=#!

Conclusion

The cold, realpolitik fact that underscored Trump's and Biden's decision⁴⁴ is simply that Afghanistan is no longer a matter of national interest⁴⁵. The U.S. exit undoubtedly could have been better planned and executed, but extending the U.S. stay in Afghanistan would not have served U.S. interest⁴⁶ any more now than it has in the past two decades.

Despite military leaders⁴⁷ making the case to keep a limited number of US troops in Afghanistan, foreign policy experts, were divided over the decision⁴⁸ whether to stay or leave. Other commentor would have preferred the US stays to deny⁴⁹ al-Qaeda a safe haven in the country and help overseas a peace deal with the Taliban. Those that made the case of continual US involvement overlooked the massive cost of such an operation, the continual radicalization that US presence fueled, and the fact the US was not going to win the war in Afghanistan. Keeping American troops in Afghanistan would have only deferred the inevitable. Biden ultimately stood by his decision⁵⁰ to pull all combat troops out before the end of August 2021.

⁴⁵ Jr., E.J. Dionne. “Opinion | the Afghanistan Outcome Is Ugly. Biden Was Still Right to Say: Enough.” The Washington Post. WP Company, August 23, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/22/afghanist-an-outcome-is-bad-biden-was-still-right-say-enough/>.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ “Milley, Military Leaders Contradict Biden on Support for Complete Afghanistan Withdrawal.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, September 28, 2021.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/milley-military-leaders-contradict-biden-on-support-for-complete-afghanistan-withdrawal>.

⁴⁸ Ghani, Ashraf, Seth G. Jones, Claire Felter, Edward Alden, Joshua Kurlantzick, Alyssa Ayres, Zachary Laub, and James M. Lindsay. “Is Washington Right to Leave Afghanistan?” Foreign Affairs, July 21, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2021-06-22/washington-right-leave-afghanistan>.

⁴⁹ Ward, Alex. “The Best Case against Withdrawing All US Troops from Afghanistan.” Vox. Vox, March 17, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/22327124/afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-lisa-curtis-stay>.

⁵⁰ “Biden Defends Afghanistan Withdrawal: 'Not Extending a Forever Exit'.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, August 31, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white->

The trillions of dollars that the United States has spent⁵¹ in failed⁵² nation-building projects⁵³ in Afghanistan and elsewhere could have, should have been invested at home; hopefully it will be in the future with at least one international distraction removed. Certainly, the internal needs of this country are there: the strengthening of the U.S. economy, the critical battle against coronavirus and the focus of infrastructure challenges, including the much larger catastrophe⁵⁴ that is climate change.

America has far greater priorities⁵⁵ here and around the world that should be addressed through efforts and policies that demonstrate a bipartisan focus on what makes this country great, safe from outside intrusion and a positive force in international goodwill. Despite its military might, the U.S. must accept that rarely can it bend existing circumstances; it cannot succeed when it is forced to change such circumstances.

house/biden-address-end-afghan-war-amid-criticism-over-chaotic-u-n1278142.

⁵¹ “Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022: Figures: Costs of War.” The Costs of War. Accessed April 12, 2022.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

⁵² Parkin, Benjamin. “Afghanistan: A History of Failed Foreign Occupations.” Subscribe to read | Financial Times. Financial Times, August 19, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/aa351a06-29b4-435d-a3fb-df87425cee38>.

⁵³ Whitlock, Craig, and The Washington Post. “The Afghanistan Papers.” Book by Craig Whitlock, The Washington Post | Official Publisher Page | Simon & Schuster, 2021.

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Afghanistan-Papers/Craig-Whitlock/9781982159009>

⁵⁴ “Ar6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis.” Sixth Assessment Report. Accessed April 12, 2022. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>.

⁵⁵ Hudson, John, and Missy Ryan. “Withdrawal from Afghanistan Forces Allies and Adversaries to Reconsider America's Global Role.” The Washington Post. WP Company, August 18, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-forces-allies-and-adversaries-to-reconsider-americas-global-role/2021/08/17/2808ddbc-ff84-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64_story.html.

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