

Nation-Building Abroad Eroded Pennsylvanians' Trust in Institutions

COMMENTARY

By **Hunter DeRensis**
September 01, 2021



During the founding of the United States, Pennsylvania earned the nickname “keystone” for its essential role—geographic, economic, and political—in winning American independence. Two and a half centuries later, Pennsylvania maintained its Keystone State status in the now concluded war in Afghanistan.

In 2013, after the peak of the insurgency, state Adjutant Gen. Wesley Craig said that Pennsylvania endured “by far” the most National Guard deaths of any state. In the past two decades, according to tracker icasualties.org, the state has seen 93 U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan in addition to Guardsmen, along with more than 400 wounded.

What do these sacrifices mean, many Pennsylvani-

ans wonder, if the soldiers fighting our wars have no faith in their commanding officers—and moreover, if there are no consequences for predictable failure?

Last Friday, U.S. Marine Lt. Col. Stuart Scheller filmed a viral Facebook video in reaction to the suicide bombing at Kabul airport that killed 13 U.S. service members.

“People are upset because their senior leaders let them down and none of them are raising their hands and accepting accountability saying, ‘We messed this up,’” Scheller said, accusing the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other top brass of “not hold-

continued on reverse...

ing up their end of the bargain.” Scheller was relieved of command that same day and has since announced his intention to resign from the Marine Corps.

His disillusionment is not isolated. Last weekend, I spoke with a born-and-bred Pennsylvanian and active-duty U.S. Army soldier who expressed similar disappointment in our military leadership. He prefers to stay anonymous to protect himself against the type of retribution faced by Scheller.

“I’m not mad about us pulling out of Afghanistan,” he said, having served in-country as a rifle squad team leader. “The frustrating thing for me is the fact that these senior leaders, I would say brigade level and up, are so disconnected from their formations that they thought that this [nation-building] was gonna work.” He added: “They thought that the Afghans would actually adopt a democracy. Their military would be able to fight off the Taliban, and everything would be great.”

The average enlistee, interacting on the ground with Afghan army recruits and fearing the infamous green-on-blue attacks—when those recruits turn their rifles on their trainers—were under no such fantasy. “You ask any grunt that has been on the ground in Afghanistan, ‘Do you feel the Afghan army was at any point or would be capable of effectively protecting their country?’ They’re going to tell you no.”

The soldier, who had previously served a tour in Iraq as well, placed blame on both the system and the men operating it. First is the insular nature of a command post. “These higher-up leaders, these generals, they only get their information through third parties,” he said. “You wouldn’t really see too many generals actually walking around, actually seeing what is going on.”

To adopt a phrase used by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, maybe it’s the strategists who are seeing the conduct of the

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war “through a soda straw.”

But even when policymakers and advisers get accurate information about the war’s progress (or lack thereof), their incentive is to sugarcoat it.

“The way the army does its wording, the way they do everything, they don’t like to sound negative if there’s some kind of reprisal that’s going to come from it,” the soldier explained. “So, they word things so that it sounds better. It briefs well.”

In 2019, the *Washington Post* published the Afghanistan Papers, made up of leaked internal interviews featuring high-ranking military and government officials. The documents exposed an explicit and sustained effort to manipulate numbers, fabricate an optimistic narrative, and deceive Americans about the war effort.

“We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking,” Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute said about Afghanistan in one *Post* interview, contradicting the positive assessment he regularly doled out to the public. Lute, senior adviser on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, was will-

ing to be candid behind closed doors, but not to voters—and certainly not to the men and women under his command.

Should anyone be surprised when this multi-decade deception erodes trust in our institutions?

This discontent is evident in Pennsylvania, a major political bellwether, and it’s not new. Unhappiness with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led to widespread Republican losses in 2006, including the defeat of U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum. This same disillusionment helped fuel Donald Trump’s victory in 2016, especially in formerly Democratic regions that now trend Republican. This legacy has remained a major issue in the Keystone State.

This crisis of confidence, especially among soldiers, shouldn’t be ignored. The men and women tasked to defend our nation must reckon with defeat in a war about which they were never given an honest assessment. How many, like Scheller, are willing to walk away from their careers and pensions over it? How many, like the soldier I spoke to, are willing to continue their service but with pessimism toward their mission and a sardonic attitude toward the people deploying them?

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Like Americans elsewhere, Pennsylvanians are lamenting the course of these past 20 years.

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