



A U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III safely transports over eight hundred Afghan citizens from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 15 August 2021. (Courtesy the U.S. Air Force)

# Principled Empathy: Perspectives of an Afghanistan Veteran

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A few days before the *New York Times* reported on the front page, “Taliban Capture Kabul,” a friend of mine shared a screen shot of an email he received from a former interpreter in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> It read only, “Sir please.”<sup>2</sup> Those who have witnessed evil can infer the fear in this ally’s request. A mutual friend replied to his post sharing, “I’ve been working with one for a few weeks now trying to help him ... It’s a f\*\*\*ing disaster.”<sup>3</sup> Much of the world wondered aloud on 16 August 2021 how the fall of Afghanistan happened so quickly. During the withdrawal of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in the days and weeks prior, large regions of Afghanistan and even provincial capitals that were

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once bastions of the Afghan government's presence and influence fell. Many did not see the speed of the collapse coming. Tragically, many of my brothers and sisters in the military saw the fall coming via social media like a cup that was dropped but can no longer be caught.

Political and military leaders often ask how they can help. Good people ask how they can help. Two of my classmates at the Command and General Staff Officer School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, recently jumped at the opportunity to ask a question after a briefing when most resolve to remain silent until the briefer acquiesces. One student asked for resources to help Afghan allies who were having trouble evacuating the country. An international student asked what was being done to support the members of the Afghan military and their families. It is hard to imagine the feeling of being stuck in another country while wearing the uniform of a country that overnight no longer exists. I am writing this article to reflect on my journey to this point, to consider how I arrived at this point, and to propose an application of principled empathy during this challenging time.

All those who are concerned about the situation in Afghanistan should take time to reflect. I challenge everyone to analyze and understand where they (and their organizations) have been, where they are now, and where they are going. A piece of my heart is in Afghanistan. Like many of my fellow Americans, I am both coping with and trying to determine where we are as a military and as a Nation. We have many responsibilities—some codified in law and international agreements, others are moral imperatives. Throughout this article, I reflect on my personal journey to this point and what I see as part of the way forward. I share some of the historical and legal underpinnings regarding displaced people, and encourage others to also reflect and consider how they can apply principled empathy as modeled by George Marshall to help guide the world to a better and safer future. Humanity depends on it.

## How Did I Get Here?

As a young lieutenant in the U.S. Army, I deployed in 2010 to Kandahar, Afghanistan, where I worked first as a battalion staff officer and later as a military police platoon leader. I led a group of about forty soldiers. We partnered with and trained the Afghan police. We ate

together, lived together, patrolled together, and fought together. We saw children going to school and playing soccer, we walked through lively markets and smelled roasting chicken kebabs, and we witnessed Afghans bravely and proudly vote in a presidential election.

This is not to suggest that everything was perfect. We also saw our share of small-arms fire attacks, occasional improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, and sometimes even more complex and serious attacks. One of my soldiers died in Afghanistan when he found an IED with a metal detector that just as easily could have killed me. Even more of my former soldiers lost their lives in the decade since we returned from Afghanistan due to suicide. A part of my heart remains in Afghanistan; it aches for an entire generation of Afghans who have had access to education, exercised their right to vote, and lived in relative freedom that allowed men and women to teach in schools, report in the news, and serve in elected office.

After commanding a military police company, I was selected to teach German at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In preparation, I went to the University of Wisconsin–Madison to work toward a Master of Arts in German. My favorite course there was a graduate seminar from Professor B. Venkat Mani titled “Asylum, Exile, Migration: Texts and Contexts.” During this course, we explored, analyzed, and discussed a variety of literary works on these themes. As I saw images of the Taliban parading around Kabul, I remembered the texts that I read including Nicol Ljubić's *Meeresstille* (The Stillness of the Sea).<sup>4</sup> I hope that the horrible images in my mind and the evil like that of the Yugoslav Wars do not befall the people of Afghanistan.

During my graduate studies, I researched and wrote extensively about Germany's “culture of welcoming,” particularly as it related to a wave of Afghan and Syrian refugees that arrived in Germany and Europe in 2015. Germany welcomed more than one million refugees. Though not always politically popular, Germany set a great example of leadership in Europe. In my second year at Madison, Mani invited me to guest lecture during his seminar. I was honored to discuss Germany's culture of welcoming, but I started by sharing my perspective of a soldier who still has a bit of his heart left in Afghanistan. At the time, I hoped that my lecture would always be a historical exercise. Unfortunately, the struggle of asylum, exile, and migration are all too

contemporary. I was reminded of this in a prescient opinion article in the *Hindustan Times* by my former professor, B. Venkat Mani, who wrote of “the necessity of humanistic inquiry in the current global political text.”<sup>5</sup> My graduate program prepared me well to teach

the Status of Refugees and later the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.<sup>7</sup> The combination of this declaration, convention, and protocol led to the establishment of the current definition of a refugee: “Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their



Cpl. Joshua A. Poindexter, a team leader with 2nd Squad, 1st Platoon, 630th Military Police Company, Task Force Spartan, shakes hands with young villagers 14 August 2010 after helping pass out donated school supplies in the Beshood District of Eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

German at West Point, but it also prepared me to understand the urgency facing millions of Afghans today.

## Historical Context

The plight of people fleeing their homes in search of safety has existed for millennia. Historically speaking, it is only recently that displaced people, those who are forced to migrate from their homes, have been internationally recognized and protected. After the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust, most of the world signed on to the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”<sup>6</sup> This declaration was reinforced in the 1951 Convention Relating to

country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>8</sup> There are likely hundreds of thousands of Afghans who will find themselves displaced from their homes and in a displaced status. These displaced people will find themselves in a world that is already struggling with more than eighty-two million displaced people, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ 2020 figures.<sup>9</sup> Although refugees and displaced people have existed for millennia, the scale today is unlike ever before. These eighty-two million people represent over 1 percent of the world’s population. How the United

States and the rest of the world respond in this critical time is of the utmost importance.

While the images of Afghans trying to flee from the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul were difficult to see, within a week, the United States and international community regained its operational footing. On 22 August 2021, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III ordered the commander of U.S. Transportation Command to activate Stage I of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet.<sup>10</sup> A press release informed of the activation of a total of eighteen civilian airplanes from American Airlines, Atlas Air, Delta Airlines, Omni Air, Hawaiian Airlines, and United Airlines. These airplanes were designated for the “onward movement of passengers from temporary safe havens and interim staging bases.”<sup>11</sup> This action was significant not only for its potential to assist with the immediate operational challenges but also as a means of providing additional resources that were desperately needed. The decision to activate the Civil Reserve Air Fleet was surely a challenging one, as it represented only the third time it was activated since its inception.<sup>12</sup> It is fitting that the significance of this action matched the importance of this moment in history. The United States concluded its formal air evacuation from the Kabul Airport minutes before the calendar turned to 31 August after evacuating more than 123,000 people.<sup>13</sup>

From mid to late August 2021, the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul was essentially a landlocked island in a sea of Taliban-controlled area. When I consider the airlift evacuation operation that the United States and allies undertook, I cannot help but see parallels to the Berlin Airlift from 1948 to 1949. During this time, West Berlin was functionally landlocked, surrounded by areas of Germany that were controlled by the Soviet Union. The U.S. Office of the Historian describes how after the “Soviet forces blockaded rail, road, and water access to Allied-controlled areas of Berlin ... the United States and United Kingdom responded by airlifting food and fuel to Berlin from Allied airbases in western Germany.”<sup>14</sup> The supply lines to Berlin closed overnight. The decision of the Soviets to establish the blockade was at least in part in response to the European Recovery, or Marshall, Plan, which was designed to “support economic recovery in Western Europe, [and] also to create a bulwark against Communism by drawing participating states

into the United States’ economic orbit.”<sup>15</sup> While the Berlin Airlift called for the United States and allies to ferry supplies into Berlin, the evacuation operation from Kabul required the United States and allies to ferry out people. I am drawn to this analogy not only because of the visual similarities of a massive airlift of strategic importance, but also because I find that many of the guiding moral imperatives of General and later Secretary of State George C. Marshall can be very well applied to the crisis in and around Afghanistan today.

## Principles from the Past

During trying times, many people feel an urge to help, but they are unsure what they can do. Literature offers wonderful resources to guide decision-making in these difficult times. Marshall’s role developing the European Recovery Plan before the Berlin Airlift draws an immediate association. Jack Uldrich captures nine useful principles in his book *Soldier, Statesman, Peacemaker: Leadership Lessons from George C. Marshall*.<sup>16</sup> Even though more than seventy years have passed since Marshall developed his European Recovery Plan, some of the lessons and moral imperatives presented in Uldrich’s book are particularly relevant given the current circumstances. Three of the principles that I find particularly relevant are doing the right thing, serving the greater good, and focusing on the big picture.<sup>17</sup> These three principles, as they might apply to the situation in Afghanistan now and in the coming months, are discussed for consideration at a national level, but their applicability and application can and should be similarly considered at individual and organizational levels as well.

**Do the right thing.** The first of Marshall’s principles that Uldrich highlights is “doing the right thing: the principle of integrity.”<sup>18</sup> At first glance, this may seem obvious, but it is worth highlighting. One example from Marshall began in the form of opposition from his assistant secretary of defense Anna Rosenberg who advocated for the full integration of blacks into fighting units in Korea. While Marshall initially objected, he was later convinced of the arguments and “had the courage and integrity to change his mind.”<sup>19</sup> There will be time in the future for congressional and military reviews and investigations into the planning and execution of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is worth acknowledging now that great efforts were

undertaken to evacuate U.S. citizens, allied Afghans, and their families who were in danger. This was an enormous challenge, but there is also more work to be done. If the images of crowds at the Kabul Airport risking their lives to escape their homes were not strong enough, then consider the image of a young Afghan attempting to escape on the outside of military cargo plane and falling to his death. These people are leaving their homes and nearly all their worldly goods behind with the hope of saving their lives. This is the reality in Kabul, and it does not even shed light on the challenges of others fleeing Kandahar, Kunduz, or Herat to try find safety. The time is now for doing the right

guiding principle while working to resettle those refugees who left Afghanistan.

**Focus on the big picture.** Lastly, I find that Uldrich’s eighth principle from Marshall is also keenly relevant to the Afghan evacuation discussion. The eighth principle calls for “focusing on the big picture: the principle of vision.”<sup>23</sup> As tragic as the current situation is for Afghan allies and the world, one must also realize that in coming months and years, the situation will eventually resolve. There will be other conflicts, other threats, and other people whom the United States will seek as allies. While the situation in Afghanistan represents an immediate challenge, there

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thing—for right action. Now is the time for political and military leaders to fully assess the scope of the problem, generate options in depth and breadth, and enact solutions that save lives.

**Serve the greater good.** The second principle that I find particularly relevant when analyzing the situation in Afghanistan is Uldrich’s third principle to “serve the greater good: the principle of selflessness.”<sup>20</sup> Marshall demonstrated this principle when he refused to ask for an assignment as the commander of the American and Allied forces in the invasion of Normandy during World War II.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he remained committed only to serving what was deemed as the greatest good for the country. Although the United States and its allies will be unable to save every Afghan who supported U.S. and allied forces over the last twenty years, there are a huge number of people who the United States and allies can and should help. I agree with James Stavridis who describes Marshall with respect to this principle as the leader who asks himself, “What is the morally correct course of action that does the greatest good for the greatest number?”<sup>22</sup> I contend that this principle is a moral imperative, and it should carry the maximum weight possible while refining the plans for evacuating Afghan allies and their families. It should also be a

will likely be even greater threats in the future. Our allies and the trust that we have in each other will be even more important than they are today. Focusing on the big picture informs that how the United States and its allies respond now matters, and that these decisions may have even greater implications in the future.

### For Humanity

Innumerate struggles currently face eighty-two million displaced people around the world. Instability in Afghanistan only exacerbates these struggles. Legal underpinnings to protect refugees and displaced people through the internationally recognized “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees” are already in place. As Afghans continue to evacuate Afghanistan, the number of displaced people and refugees will grow around the world. I am grateful that my personal journey has left a part of my heart in Afghanistan. It keeps me connected there and reminds me of the pressing urgency facing humanity there and around the world. Within the population of millions are a series of individual people, parents, brothers, daughters, and neighbors.

The analogy between the Berlin Airlift and the airlift evacuation operations Afghanistan in

August 2021 is meaningful in so far as it reminds and encourages people to consider the principled empathy that was modeled by leaders like George Marshall. Marshall applied his leadership principles with a constant mind toward the best interest of the United States and its allies. The principles of doing the right thing, serving the greater good, and focusing on the big picture should be similarly applied and oriented on the betterment of the world. The principles are just as relevant today, if not more relevant, than they were during the Berlin Airlift.

There is a plethora of literature that provides insights into both the struggles of displaced people and principled leadership for dealing with contemporary challenges. Although the evacuation flights have stopped, Afghans will continue to be displaced from

their homes, and the hardest work of resettling these people remains to be done. As Russell Berman contends in his TELOSscope article, “There is a crisis in the making, simultaneously humanitarian and political.”<sup>24</sup> Hopefully this framework of reflecting and applying principled empathy will be a guide for some, generate important conversations for others, and lead to action by many.

Political and military leaders have much work to do. Some may be fortunate enough to lead organizations through these challenging times. Everyone has an individual opportunity to reflect on their own journey and to contribute to important conversations about valuing humanity. Most importantly, everyone can apply principled empathy for those who lost their country and their homes overnight. ■

## Notes

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2. R. C., “Sir Please,” Facebook, 13 August 2021 [Redacted to protect Afghan].

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4. Nicol Ljubić, *Meeresstille* [The stillness of the sea] (Hamburg, Germany: Hoffmann und Campe, 2010).

5. B. Venkat Mani, “Empires Slay, Publics Pay: The Global Refugee Crisis Unfolding in Afghanistan,” *Hindustan Times* (website), 22 August 2021, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/empires-slay-publics-pay-the-global-refugee-crisis-unfolding-in-afghanistan-101629631940164.html>.

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8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. “Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2020,” UNHCR, 18 June 2021, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020>.

10. “Department of Defense Activates Civil Reserve Air Fleet to Assist with Afghanistan Efforts,” U.S. Department of Defense press release, 22 August 2021, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2741564/department-of-defense-activates-civil-reserve-air-fleet-to-assist-with-afghanis/>.

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11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Lloyd Austin III, “Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III on the End of the American War in Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of Defense press release, 30 August 2021, accessed 2 September 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2759181/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-austin-iii-on-the-end-of-the-american-w/>.

14. “The Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949,” Office of the Historian, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/berlin-airlift>.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Jack Uldrich, *Soldier, Statesman, Peacemaker: Leadership Lessons from George C. Marshall* (New York: AMACOM, 2005).

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 31–53.

19. *Ibid.*, 42.

20. *Ibid.*, 75–96.

21. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

22. James Stavridis and R. Manning Ancell, *The Leader’s Bookshelf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 127.

23. Uldrich, *Soldier, Statesman, Peacemaker*, 181–202.

24. Russell Berman, “The Consequences of Afghanistan: Comments on Girard,” *TELOSscope*, 12 August 2021, accessed 2 September 2021, <http://www.telospress.com/the-consequences-of-afghanistan-comments-on-girard/>.