



Biden still has a chance to save Afghanistan by learning the lesson of Operation Linebacker

August 13, 2021 **James S. Robbins** *USA Today*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Warfare; Afghanistan

President Biden says that there is no valid comparison between the current crisis in Afghanistan and the 1975 collapse of South Vietnam following the pullout of U.S. ground forces. “None whatsoever. Zero,” he told reporters. “It is not at all comparable.”

However, the situation on the ground looks uncomfortably more familiar by the day. Taliban forces are on the march, overrunning nine provincial capitals in the last week. Refugees are crowding the streets in the capital of Kabul, and the Biden administration has expanded the number eligible for permanent resettlement in the United States.

Learning military tactics from 1972

According to a new US military assessment of the Afghan situation, “everything is moving in the wrong direction.” Comparisons to the Vietnam War’s endgame are apt, but defeat is not inevitable if US policymakers learn the right lessons. They should focus less on 1975 and more on 1972.

In the spring of 1972, with the bulk of US ground forces out of South Vietnam and peace talks ongoing, North Vietnam launched a massive surprise attack to decide the outcome of the war in one stroke. The “Easter Offensive,” as it was dubbed, was a massive conventional invasion on a scale not seen since Tet in 1968.

South Vietnamese forces at first buckled under the ferocity of the assault, but President Nixon responded by launching Operation Linebacker, an intensive, coordinated air campaign that destroyed communist forces, disrupted their supply and communications lines, and gave South Vietnamese troops the opportunity to rally and push back the invaders.

This successful defense of South Vietnam demonstrated American resolve and was instrumental in securing the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. The dark days for South Vietnam came two years after the peace deal. Nixon had resigned, Democrats in Congress defunded the military support we had promised Saigon, and in April 1975 the North replayed its Easter Offensive script. This time it worked. Saigon fell, Americans bugged out, and the war was over.

It is important to note that it was not Viet Cong guerillas smashing through the US Embassy gates, but North Vietnamese army tanks. As Mao Zedong taught generations of guerilla warriors, victory in a protracted unconventional struggle comes through shifting to conventional war for the coup de grâce.

Catching the Taliban’s vulnerabilities

The Taliban are currently transitioning to this phase, massing troops, seizing ground, and preparing for the final assault. Ironically, this shift works to America’s advantage. As the Taliban sacrifice the stealth, agility, and mobility of guerilla war, they make themselves vulnerable to the type of warfare at which the United States excels. We saw it in the Easter Offensive in Vietnam. It was also the mistake ISIS made when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi attempted to consolidate his caliphate and fight a conventional war. More to the point, we saw this play out in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. The Taliban then controlled over ninety percent of the country.

In a matter of weeks, Afghan rebels, backed by US Special Operations Forces and CIA paramilitaries, and drawing on vast Coalition airpower resources, annihilated Taliban conventional ground forces, overthrew Mullah Omar’s government and reclaimed most of the country. So today while the sight of Taliban convoys boldly rolling down a highway might inspire fear among the Afghan people, to US defense planners this should present an array of targets begging to be destroyed.

To its credit the Biden administration has been ramping up airstrikes in Afghanistan, though this effort has not yet stalled the Taliban advance. President Biden still believes that the Taliban are “not remotely comparable in terms of capability” to the 1975-era North Vietnamese army, but they hardly need to be that powerful if the Afghan army is collapsing in front of them. Renewed commitment from the United States in words and deeds could stiffen the resolve of Afghan forces who must by now realize they are fighting for their survival. Afghan ground troops combined with Coalition special forces, strike capability and intelligence support would present a formidable challenge to the Taliban. The tactics used successfully in 2001 – as well as 1972 or against ISIS – could be repeated. The alternative would be once again to abandon an American ally, allow the Taliban to seize Kabul, and put America’s longest war firmly in the “lose” column.

James S. Robbins, a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors and author of "This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive," has taught at the National Defense University and the Marine Corps University and served as a special assistant in the office of the secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush administration. He is a senior fellow in National Security Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council. Follow him on Twitter: @James_Robbins