

Reflecting on these past 20 years

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Dear colleagues, this last Saturday was the 20th anniversary of terrorist attacks on the United States that united the world in horror and condemnation, and action. These attacks precipitated two wars and massive changes in how we live our lives today.

Twenty years is a long time.

For almost all our current undergraduate students, 20 years is beyond their capacity to remember the events clearly, or to understand their immediate impact. For many, 20 years is literally more than their lifetime.

These same students have never known a time when the U.S. and its allied armed forces were not deployed in at least one active war. For almost twenty years, we have had the privilege of serving military veterans of these wars as our students and now our alumni.

Many of us who are employed at the UA are old enough to have the clearest memories of September 11, 2001. We know exactly where we were and how we felt. The sharpness of these memories makes the anniversaries painful. We mourned again this September for those who died in the attacks, for those who lost loved ones, and for the survivors, first responders and others who are living with illnesses rooted in that day.

This year, this painful anniversary coincided with the withdrawal of U.S. and allied armed forces from Afghanistan, along with the rapid collapse of the Afghan government, reinstatement of Taliban control and resurgence of a terror group. Like many of you, I have been horrified for what is happening to the people of Afghanistan, especially its women and girls. The Afghani people want the same opportunities for their children as we do. They want their most basic needs to be met and to have human rights, especially freedom from fear. The experiences we have shared in the last 18 months have given me more empathy for those who do not have the things I am privileged to take for granted. I am an immigrant, but I can't imagine what it must feel like to arrive in the U.S. with guilt for those you had to leave behind to uncertain and likely awful fates.

Over the last 20 years I have been honored to have become close to military families, and I have witnessed the impact on the children, spouses, and parents when those serving were deployed, over and over again. I know families whose loved ones never returned. I have friends who will carry visible and invisible injury for life because of their military service. The events of the last weeks in Afghanistan have made some veterans and military families question whether their sacrifice was worth it.

I cannot even presume to have an answer for this question.

I do, however, firmly believe that their sacrifices will have a positive generational legacy in Afghanistan: 60% of Afghans were born since our veterans removed the Taliban from power--they have never known the Taliban's limitations, especially on women's and girls' rights, and especially denying education to females. These Afghans, and others who do remember Taliban rule, are taking to the streets. They may not know the data that shows that nations that fail women the most are the most failed nations or that female education has the single greatest impact on the wellbeing of a developing nation's people and economy.

I don't know what the future will bring for the people of Afghanistan, but I hope the impact of our veterans and their families will serve as an example to us all, especially as we stand in solidarity with the Afghani people's courageous protests against Taliban ammunition, batons and whips.

Thinking about the events of September 11 and what has transpired in the last 20 years here and abroad has been too complicated and emotional for me to cogently write about. I am very clear, however, about how I feel toward those living who were directly and indirectly impacted on the horrific day and since. I know that you are among us all even if I don't personally know of your losses and experiences. Please accept my sincere condolences. You inspire me. Thank you.

Best regards,
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We respectfully acknowledge the University of Arizona is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O'odham and the Yaqui. Committed to diversity and inclusion, the University strives to build sustainable relationships with sovereign Native Nations and Indigenous communities through education offerings, partnerships, and community service.