

MIDDLE CLASS VALUES AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

By Ambassador Michael C. Polt

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We have all seen disturbing images from the Kabul airport. Most Americans support ending our military mission in Afghanistan, but hardly a departure in the manner displayed so far. Analysts argue that a Biden “foreign policy for the middle-class” that focuses on the trade interests of American farmers and job opportunities for our workers in the American car industry cannot also prioritize protecting the human rights of Afghans. If pictures of desperate people clinging to C-17s at Hamid Karzai Airport bother you, they say, the Biden team approach comes apart in its apparent contradictions.

To blame this tragic and disjointed end to our Afghanistan policy on the middle-class American public is insulting. Just because successive Administrations have listened to us and sought to get out of Afghanistan does not mean we instructed our leaders to analyze and plan poorly, act precipitously, or leave in harm's way our friends and allies. The American people are good and competent. Our foreign policy must reflect that goodness and that competence. We can protect American jobs and save Afghan lives at the same time. We were unable to reshape Afghanistan into a western democracy, but we can manage a dignified and safe exit from its internal conflict, including the extraction of Afghans who supported our mission.

Biden's foreign policy for the middle-class is neither his invention nor a more benign version of Trump populism. It is part of a policy seesaw dating back to our founding and the debate among us as enthusiastic, reluctant, or wholly unwilling stakeholders in our nation's foreign policy. Over 100 years ago, President Taft argued that *“The foreign relations of the United States actually and potentially affect the state of the union to a degree not widely realized and hardly surpassed by any other factor in the welfare of the whole nation. The position of the United States in the moral, intellectual and material relations of the family of nations should be a matter of vital interest to every patriotic citizen.”*

More recently, “regular” Americans were asked about their foreign policy interests and priorities by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, together with Ohio State University, the University of Colorado-Boulder, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Respondents in the three states expressed an overall lack of information about the U.S. role in the world, a lack of trust in our foreign policy professionals, but also pride in a record of helping refugees and support for a strong military. Other studies have also shown that most Americans support our global engagement consistent with our individual and national values, high among them compassion for the oppressed and support for human rights.

The Biden folks have it right. There is no option other than a foreign policy that considers the interests, anxieties, and values of the American people, including some of our contradictions. Of course, leaders are supposed to lead, not simply follow, no matter how emphatic public opinion. But by articulating a “foreign policy for the middle-class,” our leadership signals the willingness and ability to listen and is not claiming exclusive rights to setting policy.

The Biden folks also got it wrong. The prospect of leaving behind many in Afghanistan to face Taliban inhumanity deeply offends our values. The debacle at the Kabul airport did not have to be this way.