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Defeat in Afghanistan: An Autopsy

Joseph J. Collins
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ABSTRACT: Policy initiatives in the Trump administration and the Biden-Harris administration significantly accelerated the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. This article supports the conclusion that the major factors in this defeat were the historical difficulty in governing Afghanistan, the Afghan republic's two inefficient and corrupt governments, an ineffective US strategy, operational shortcomings by US forces, an ineffective Afghan military, Pakistan's duplicitous policy, and the strength and determination of the Taliban. This article rejects the claim that the United States' nation-building effort was a major factor in its defeat and concludes with a discussion of lessons encountered.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, al-Qaeda, intervention, US strategy, irregular conflict

After two decades of costly struggle, Afghanistan and its partners suffered a military defeat, a catastrophic regime collapse, and a chaotic evacuation in August 2021. The United States failed to accomplish its objectives, whether judged in terms of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, or nation building. This outcome represents a significant unforced error in American national security policy.

With \$88 billion in US security assistance, Afghanistan led the fight for the last seven years, losing 66,000 uniformed personnel, more than the United States lost in Vietnam. Experts believe nearly 50,000 Afghan civilians perished in that time, the majority at the hands of the Taliban. The American toll was considerable; of the 800,000 Americans who served in Afghanistan, 2,461 servicemembers died, over 20,695 were wounded, and, in the words of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, “countless others suffer the invisible wounds of war.” In total, the United States spent about \$2 trillion on its Afghanistan effort.¹

1. For casualty statistics, see “Costs of War,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University (website), n.d., <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>. For a precis, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_casualties_in_the_war_in_Afghanistan_\(2001%E2%80%932021\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_casualties_in_the_war_in_Afghanistan_(2001%E2%80%932021)). For US statistics, see *Senate Armed Services Committee: Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Department of Defense Afghanistan Hearing, September 28, 2021* (2021) (statement of Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf>. For additional information on reconstruction, see Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, August 2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

In the end, Afghan security forces and the Kabul government collapsed under Taliban pressure and the specter of US abandonment. While the army and the government of Afghanistan failed dramatically in the last few months of their existence, it took 20 years of fighting, political half steps, missed opportunities, and mistakes to create the tragedy that unfolded in the summer of 2021. The first two parts of this essay will review key events from 2001 to 2021.² The third part will mine the narrative for the most critical factors that brought about the coalition's defeat and the collapse of the Kabul government. The essay will conclude with a section on lessons grounded in theory and best practices.

The Bush and Obama Years

After al-Qaeda's attack on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush sent CIA paramilitary elements and air, ground, and special operations forces to Afghanistan "to destroy al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and remove the Taliban from power."³ The capture of Osama bin Laden was not a stated military objective but was a clear aspiration, especially for the Central Intelligence Agency. Bush had no long-range plan for post-conflict Afghanistan, and few in 2001 expected a long-term troop presence there.

By fall's end, the United States and anti-Taliban forces had achieved a quick but indecisive victory, scattering al-Qaeda forces and ousting their Taliban protectors. In Afghanistan, the Bush administration initially focused on counterterrorism and al-Qaeda but quickly realized establishing a secure and functioning Afghan state was key to that mission. Bush later explained his thoughts:

[A]fter 9/11, I changed my mind. Afghanistan was the ultimate nation building mission. We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better. We also had a strategic interest in helping the Afghan people build a free society. The terrorists took refuge in places of chaos, despair, and repression. A democratic Afghanistan would be a hopeful alternative to the vision of the extremists.⁴

2. For a much shorter version of my thoughts on this subject, see Joseph J. Collins, "What Went Wrong in Afghanistan," *Defense One* (website), September 2, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/09/what-went-wrong-afghanistan/185061/>.

3. Tommy R. Franks and Malcolm McConnell, *American Soldier* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 277.

4. George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 205.

Bush added nation building to the counterterrorism mission. Yet, many at the Pentagon wanted to keep a small footprint in Afghanistan, especially as the higher priority effort in Iraq began in 2003 and persisted over eight years. The Pentagon initially resisted classifying operations in Afghanistan as a counterinsurgency, which would have required more resources, even in the face of growing guerrilla warfare there.

Bush cannot be faulted for changing his mind. When I visited Afghanistan as a deputy assistant secretary of defense in February 2002, it was on the edge of a humanitarian disaster. The country had been at war since 1978, and, by 1996, the United Nations scored Afghanistan in the bottom five countries in the world on its Human Development Index. Five years of drought and Taliban mismanagement followed. Less than 30 percent of adults were literate, and 80 percent of schools were destroyed in two decades of fighting. By 2001, the under-five child mortality rate in Afghanistan was one in four, and only 9 percent of the population had reasonable access to health care. Even in the best areas of Kabul, underfed people and starving work animals were evident.⁵

Much of the early nation-building effort was humanitarian assistance. Larger projects followed, notably, the reconstruction of the ring road connecting many of the major cities. Critics later noted that many projects were inefficient and stimulated corruption. Money for reconstruction found its way to warlords, criminals, and even the Taliban, which was mainly funded by the growth of the Afghan narcotics industry and donations from abroad.⁶ Still, much good work helping Afghanistan began under Bush and continued with the help of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), thousands of Afghans, nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations. By the end of the Bush administration, USAID reported that 2,700 kilometers of road had been repaired or built, 670 health clinics opened, 10,500 health workers trained, 680 schools built or refurbished, and 60 million textbooks distributed. The Obama administration stepped up many of these costly efforts.⁷ In my opinion, these efforts did in fact help

5. I originally recorded these observations in Joseph J. Collins, *Understanding War in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), 63. See “Human Development Index – HDI: Human Development Ranking 1996,” [countryeconomy.com](https://countryeconomy.com/hdi?year=1996) (website), n.d., <https://countryeconomy.com/hdi?year=1996>.

6. For additional information on corruption in and around reconstruction, see SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, vii–xiii.

7. For additional information on US economic and humanitarian assistance efforts, see the USAID website, <https://www.usaid.gov/>. For USAID accomplishments during the Bush years (2002–08), see USAID, “USAID Assistance to Afghanistan 2002–2008” (press release), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (website), March 27, 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/usaid-assistance-afghanistan-2002-2008>.

the people, facilitate security operations, and further the strategic interests of the United States, if only to a modest degree.

The first three years of US presence were relatively quiet. The Afghan government was legitimized by a *loya jirga*, a national assembly of tribal and provincial leaders. A new, more inclusive and democratic version of the 1964 version of the Afghan constitution was ratified, with the president assuming many of the duties of the former king. With help from NATO Allies, the Bush administration began to build the Afghan National Army with the modest target of 70,000 soldiers. Other nations initially led the rebuilding of the police and the judiciary with mixed results. There was a significant expansion of human rights for Afghans, especially women and girls, during this period. Elections followed, as did a new parliament. While the Afghans embraced the concept of democracy, they could not translate their enthusiasm into practice, much less an effective modern state.

Ultimately, the Bush administration failed to match the growth of Taliban power or to follow through on its initial pressure on Pakistan. The Taliban rearmed and reorganized. Afghan suicide bombing, inspired by al-Qaeda, rose in 2004. With Pakistan's help, the Taliban began in 2005 to fight more aggressively. In May 2006, retired General Barry McCaffrey, a distinguished combat commander and strategist, toured Afghanistan at the behest of the Pentagon. He concluded that the well-armed Taliban was on the march and the military situation was "deteriorating." The Taliban was "very aggressive and smart in their tactics" and would "soon adopt a strategy of waiting us out."⁸ Concurrently, NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) broadened its control over most military functions to help the United States as it struggled in Iraq and to facilitate coalition management. In short order, the commander of US forces also became the ISAF commander.

According to our senior commanders, security incidents—clashes between the Taliban and coalition forces or other attacks in Afghanistan—went from a weekly high of 100 in 2004 to a weekly high of 350 across the nation in 2008. In 2009, the weekly high would top 900 incidents. Counting only enemy-initiated attacks, the Defense

8. As quoted in Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 97–98; and Donald Rumsfeld to General Pete Pace, memorandum, June 15, 2006, <http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/2215/2006-06-14%20to%20Gen%20Pete%20Pace%20re%20General%20McCaffreys%20Report%20on%20Afghanistan-%20Memo%20Attachment.pdf>.

Intelligence Agency calculated that Taliban attacks more than doubled between 2005 and 2006 and again between 2006 and 2008.⁹

In the eyes of many Afghans, the Taliban's attacks established the members as valiant fighters against a foreign occupier and its puppet, the Kabul government. Carter Malkasian, a historian who also served as a US official in Afghanistan, wrote that admiration for the Taliban and growing resentment at coalition air strikes doomed the allied effort. He observed, "A series of US surveys showed favorable views among all Afghans toward the United States fell steadily from 88 percent in 2006 to 52 percent in 2010. After that it never recovered."¹⁰ On October 2, 2008, former UK ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles was quoted in the *London Times* as having said, "the security situation is getting worse; so is corruption and the Government has lost all trust. . . . The foreign forces are ensuring the survival of a regime which would collapse without them."¹¹

By 2008, with considerable progress in the Iraq surge and ominous reports about Afghanistan, Bush readdressed Afghanistan. He sent Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, his National Security Council coordinator for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for a firsthand look. Lute found a strategic muddle and deteriorating battlefield conditions. The Afghan Army and National Police were often ineffective and being built too slowly, and the Afghan Air Force was still an infant industry. Possible remedies included more reinforcements for the 30,000 US troops already there and a more focused counterinsurgency effort—however, the Bush administration was out of time. It modestly increased forces in Afghanistan and passed its study to the Obama administration, which had campaigned hard on Afghanistan as the "good war."¹²

President Barack Obama increased the US forces in Afghanistan in two increments to 100,000. He also increased direct US expenditures in and for Afghanistan to over \$100 billion per year. The five-month decision process for Obama's second reinforcement in Afghanistan, commonly referred to simply as "the surge," was fraught with tension between Obama and his advisers. The president felt boxed in and ill-served by his military advisers, who were often backed by the secretaries of state and defense. That uncomfortable situation was compounded first by the leak

9. International Security Assistance Force, "Security Incidents in Afghanistan" (unpublished graphic), 2004–09; and SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, 13.

10. Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), 156.

11. As quoted in Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 217.

12. As quoted in Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 2, 218.

of General Stanley McChrystal's classified assessment, then by McChrystal's relief for a breach of military decorum just as the surge began.¹³

Obama described a comprehensive formulation of objectives in Afghanistan in his December 1, 2009, speech to West Point:

. . . [T]o disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future [w]e must deny al-Qaeda a safe haven . . . reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.

Despite this clarity, the president demonstrated ambivalence toward the new US strategy with the startling revelation that the surge would only continue for 18 months, a fact not lost on Pakistani and Taliban leaders.¹⁴

The Afghanistan surge was not as operationally successful as the Iraq surge had been. The Taliban held its own in the east after being pummeled in the south. The Afghan Army and National Police expanded rapidly in both numbers and equipment. After a little more than a year, General David Petraeus, the outgoing commander, tried to get an extension of the surge. The president stuck to his original decision and refused to grant one. Malkasian explained the outcome of the surge:

[The surge] was a tactical success but a strategic failure. Brilliant minds and great generals, brave soldiers, marines, Green Berets, and SEALs could only get so far. The resolve of the Taliban fighter was difficult to overcome. The costs had been too great. They signaled to Obama not only the unsustainability of the surge but the unsustainability of the whole Afghan endeavor. The strategic discourse reoriented to withdrawal. That shift in direction is the true strategic significance of the surge.¹⁵

13. For the best account of the surge decision making, see Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 175–390. On the civil-military aspects, see Joseph J. Collins, "Preparing Senior Officers and Their Counterparts for Interagency National Security Decisionmaking," *Joint Force Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (2020): 51.

14. Barack Obama, "Briefing Room – Speeches & Remarks: Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," White House (website), December 1, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

15. Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 304–5.

Pakistan was a key factor in the Taliban's vigorous resistance. Admiral Michael G. Mullen, the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tried harder than anyone in government to bring Pakistan around. In 2011, after a series of attacks, Mullen angrily testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that "the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network operate from Pakistan with impunity" and called the Haqqani Network a "strategic arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency," adding that it was "responsible for the September 13th attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Kabul."¹⁶

In 2014, Afghan security forces took the lead in the fight against the Taliban. The rapid growth of the Afghan Army and National Police to over 300,000 personnel was among the most important accomplishments of the surge years. Around the same time, an attempt to negotiate with Taliban leaders bore little fruit. The Taliban was able, however, to establish a quasi-diplomatic office in Doha, Qatar, which enabled it to increase its international status and contacts. At the same time, relations between Kabul and Washington soured after undiplomatic behavior by both allies. Hamid Karzai, the then Afghan president, had become permanently irascible, and Ashraf Ghani, his successor, was tied down by infighting. In the end, Obama's intention to leave Afghanistan altogether was thwarted by Taliban progress on the battlefield. Despite Taliban gains, Obama continued to reduce US forces over the next five years from nearly 100,000 to 8,400 troops.

The Trump and Biden Years

For the first 16 years of the American presence in Afghanistan, despite tremendous spending and effort, the United States and its coalition partners were muddling through, presiding over a deteriorating battlefield situation. In contrast, Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden favored full military withdrawal and slowly severed the link between battlefield conditions and the strength of coalition efforts on the ground. In their singular pursuit of complete withdrawal, they broke faith with our Afghan allies, demoralized Afghan forces in the field, and opened the door for the final Taliban offensive.

For his part, Trump was skeptical of the cost and future of the Afghanistan commitment, but Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster,

16. *Senate Armed Services Committee: Statement of Admiral Michael Mullen, US Navy, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, before the Armed Services Committee on Afghanistan and Iraq, September 22, 2011* (2011) (statement of Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mullen%2009-22-11.pdf>.

his national security adviser, and General John W. “Mick” Nicholson, theater commander, urged the president to step up US efforts. Trump briefly increased US troop strength, but in his first major speech on Afghanistan policy, he warned that “the American people are weary of war without victory” and that he had been skeptical about the war before he became president. He stated clearly that the consequences of a rapid exit would be unacceptable. He said that his strategy would be “conditions based.” Trump promised a new, robust approach: “We will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition: attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”¹⁷

A year later, Trump pushed aside our allies to negotiate directly with Taliban leaders, who refused to hold discussions or negotiate with the Kabul government. The United States agreed in February 2020—without a cease-fire or significant Taliban concessions—to withdraw all US forces by May 2021. For a date certain of US withdrawal, the Taliban made a few promises and pledged not to target US personnel during the withdrawal. The Trump administration also pushed then President Ghani to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, many of whom participated in the final offensive against the Kabul government. From February 29, 2020, the date of the Doha Agreement, to the start of the Biden-Harris administration in January 2021, the United States drew down its forces to 3,500 personnel. Contractors supporting the war effort declined from 9,700 to 6,300 during the same period. Despite the Doha Agreement, Trump tried to withdraw all US forces before the Biden inauguration. According to Milley, after subsequent discussions about risks, the “order was rescinded.”¹⁸

In mid-April 2021, the Biden-Harris administration began to plan a complete US withdrawal, sliding the final date to August. For its part, the Taliban hastened its battlefield progress, and by February 2021, it controlled 78 of Afghanistan’s 419 military districts. By mid-June, it controlled 100 districts, and, by July 2021, over 200 districts, roughly half the total.¹⁹ Many of the Taliban victories happened with little or no fighting. The Afghan Army was coming apart as the United States

17. For a transcript of Trump’s August 8, 2017, speech at Fort Myer, see “READ: Trump’s Speech on Afghanistan,” *CNN* (website), August 22, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/21/politics/read-trump-speech>.

18. *Statement of General Mark A. Milley*. The mention of the January withdrawal appears on page 4 of the original typescript of the chairman’s testimony, available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf>.

19. *Statement of General Mark A. Milley*. Note: The chairman’s estimates match those of Bill Roggio’s *Long War Journal* cited in SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, July 2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-07-30qr.pdf>.

was assembling forces to conduct a large-scale but single point evacuation of a country the size of Texas.

Afghan national security officials advised Ghani that further resistance was futile. To avoid more bloodshed, he left the country on August 15, and the Taliban fighters walked into Kabul with little opposition. Malignant fortune and inadequate planning found US and coalition forces conducting the evacuation from the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, whose adjacent streets the Taliban controlled.²⁰

The final collapse of Afghanistan did not take 11 days; it began with the Doha Agreement and accelerated during the early months of the Biden-Harris administration. Washington's declarations of unending support to Kabul rang false as General Austin "Scott" Miller, the US commander, departed and our massive embassy lowered its flag. In early July, US forces stealthily abandoned the enormous Bagram Air Base, once synonymous with US strength and its lasting commitment to democracy and the Afghan people. The United States seemed blind to the degree to which its withdrawal scheme affected the Afghans. Afghan General Sami Sadat indicated in the *New York Times*: "It's true that the Afghan Army lost its will to fight. But that's because of the growing sense of abandonment by our American partners and the disrespect and disloyalty reflected in Mr. Biden's tone and words over the past few months."²¹

Directly negotiating with the Taliban and making the top US priority a complete withdrawal eroded the will of our Afghan allies. During the evacuation, valiant action by US diplomats and US men and women in uniform allowed for the evacuation of 6,000 Americans, 3,000 foreign nationals, and 111,000 Afghan partners by August 31. In the process, 13 servicemembers and over 170 Afghans were killed by an Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) suicide bomber. To prevent further losses, the United States conducted

20. For an analysis of planning problems based on an Army investigation, see Dan Lamothe and Alex Horton, "Documents Reveal U.S. Military's Frustration with White House, Diplomats over Afghanistan Evacuation," *Washington Post* (website), February 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/08/afghanistan-evacuation-investigation/>.

21. Sami Sadat, "I Commanded Afghan Troops This Year. We Were Betrayed," *New York Times* (website), August 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/25/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-army.html>.

a drone strike in residential Kabul, which killed an aid worker and his family.²²

According to George Packer’s reporting in the *Atlantic*, 90 percent of the Afghan special immigrant visa holders or applicants closely associated with American forces were left behind. Reaching all or most of the thousands of special immigrant visa holders and applicants spread across the country was impossible. United States Marine Corps General Kenneth F. “Frank” McKenzie, the Central Command commander, told National Public Radio a year later that leaving so many behind “haunts him to this day.” According to the *Washington Post*, over 70,000 of our Afghan allies and visa program participants remained in Afghanistan, subject to Taliban reprisals.²³

Factors in the Defeat

From 2001 to 2021, the United States and its partners pursued a number of objectives in Afghanistan. United States and allied operations prevented attacks on our respective homelands and eliminated al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden, and later, Ayman al-Zawahiri—however, al-Qaeda and now ISIS-K remain robust forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our counterinsurgency effort blocked a Taliban takeover, but Afghan forces could not sustain it. Those efforts evaporated in the final weeks with the virtual disintegration of Afghan forces. Similarly, our nation-building efforts were productive but inefficient. In the end, we conducted a chaotic evacuation in Kabul at the forbearance of Taliban forces that had taken the capital without resistance. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs assessed the withdrawal as “a logistical success but a strategic failure.” Later he noted, “Strategically, the war was lost.”²⁴

22. For evacuation statistics, see *Statement of General Mark A. Milley* and Mary Louise Kelly, interview with General Frank McKenzie, “Kabul’s Fall to the Taliban, 1 Year Later,” NPR (website), August 5, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/05/1116036132/kabuls-fall-to-the-taliban-1-year-later>. On the drone strike, see Azmat Khan, “Military Investigation Reveals How the U.S. Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul,” *New York Times* (website), January 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html>.

23. For the 90 percent figure, see George Packer, “The Betrayal,” *Atlantic*, January 31, 2022. (Note: Packer sources the estimate to an NGO, Human Rights First.) The 70,000 figure is from Editorial Board, “Opinion: A Year After Kabul’s Fall, Duty Still Calls the U.S. in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post* (website), August 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/08/20/us-strategy-afghanistan-one-year-anniversary/>; and Kelly, “Kabul’s Fall.”

24. Gordon Lubold and Nancy Youssef, “Gen. Milley Calls Afghan Withdrawal ‘Strategic Failure’ in Heated Senate Hearing,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), September 28, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/military-leaders-to-face-questions-over-afghan-withdrawal-evacuation-11632827812>.

The major factors that brought about the victory of the Taliban over Afghanistan and its partners are complex but few. First, Afghanistan has always been difficult, but not impossible, to govern. Compounding its poverty, ethnic divisions, and underdevelopment, its fractious politics produced an environment where most of its twentieth-century rulers were killed in office or forced into exile. Only the period from the early 1930s until 1978—during the reign of Mohammed Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, and then the brief tenure of Mohammed Daoud Khan, his cousin and deposer—was stable and relatively peaceful. More than 40 years of conflict followed. The royals, and Presidents Karzai and Ghani, all favored centralized rule. There were 34 provinces subordinate to Kabul and its rulers. Local interests had no elected governors to handle daily governance. Furthermore, the Afghan parliament was riven by factional fighting and not up to the tasks of a modern legislature.

Presidents Karzai and Ghani pursued centralization because of power, patronage, and the evils of warlordism. At the same time, they had to contend with “fragmentary tendencies in Afghanistan’s ethnolinguistic, geographical, and ethnic makeup.”²⁵ In the twentieth century, the modernizers also had to contend with unsavory actors on Afghanistan’s borders. Foreign financial support and interference across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were constants in the modern history of Afghanistan. Religious zealotry increased from the late 1960s onward, further complicating ethnic and tribal rivalries.

Afghanistan in 2021 was not a lost cause. Better outcomes were possible, even if the US government wanted a full withdrawal.²⁶ Nothing in the Afghan experience suggests that a chaotic withdrawal was a necessary ending to the US and coalition experience. The historical difficulty of governing Afghanistan only provided part of the context for the Afghan government and its partners, who also had to deal with foreign interference, an emerging insurgency, and the reconstruction of a poor nation devastated by decades of war.

Second, the Afghan government under Presidents Karzai and Ghani seldom rose above ineffectiveness and corruption. The more the United States and its coalition partners pumped resources into the country,

25. David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co. [Publishers] Ltd., 2021), 67.

26. For a critique of what happened and alternatives, see David Petraeus, “Afghanistan Did Not Have to End this Way,” *Atlantic* (website), August 8, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/author/david-petraeus/#:~:text=David%20Petraeus%20David%20H.%20Petraeus%20served%20from%20early,Did%20Not%20Have%20to%20Turn%20Out%20This%20Way>.

the more money flowed to corrupt entities. Karzai's family was implicated in the looting of the Kabul Bank in 2010. Losses in the bank scandal numbered in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The coalition's inability to control narcotics production yielded at least half a billion dollars to the Taliban annually. Similar amounts of ill-gotten gains went to Kabul officials or, reportedly, to Wali Karzai, President Karzai's brother in Kandahar. Even the Army was steeped in corruption and cronyism. Local commanders routinely pocketed money from fuel, supplies, and pay for "ghost soldiers" on their rosters.

Karzai and Ghani also had their personal shortcomings. Karzai was inexperienced and not an institutionalist, but he was adept at dealing with regional and ethnic politics. He was also temperamental and increasingly criticized the United States. He stepped down in 2014 but remained a discordant voice in the capital. Ghani was a technocrat, an academic expert in state building, and an impressive minister of finance, but not a natural politician. His elections were widely considered fraudulent. After the first controversial election, the United States forced a political marriage between Karzai and former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, his electoral rival, to prevent a total split among friendly factions. It may have been necessary, but it slowed executive and personnel decisions. Neither Afghan president was able to create the institutions needed for a functioning country at war.

Third, though plans and programs abounded, the United States failed to develop and execute an effective strategy to unite all coalition efforts and chart a course to success. Operations in Iraq were considered higher priority and took critical manpower and equipment that could have been used in the Afghan fight. More importantly, Iraq dominated the minds and decision time of US leaders from 2003 to 2008. During most of that period, problems in Iraq dwarfed those in Afghanistan, but it was also the time when conditions in Afghanistan went from satisfactory to turbulent.

On key strategic matters, there was never consistent follow-through. Pakistan supported the Taliban and played the United States like a fiddle. Only in the Obama administration did the United States and its allies put enough troops in country for effective counterinsurgency, but that \$100 billion-per-year effort lasted less than 18 months. In the end, the United States did not exercise the power and persistence needed

to prevail in Afghanistan. Pakistan and the Taliban had far fewer distractions and greater long-term stakes in the Hindu Kush.

Trump and Biden broke faith with our hard-pressed Afghan allies and negotiated directly with the enemy. They downplayed battlefield conditions and focused on withdrawal. During negotiations, the Trump administration failed to use its leverage to force the Taliban to conduct a nationwide cease-fire and negotiate in good faith with the Kabul government. Both presidents failed to see that our immediate withdrawal policy had devalued the US pledge to continue long-term support for the Kabul government and the Afghan people. Ultimately, the US government created a sense of abandonment that contributed mightily to the disintegration of Afghan forces and government. While Bush and Obama did not succeed in Afghanistan, Trump and Biden undercut long-term US strategy and bear special responsibility for the final defeat in Afghanistan.

Fourth, the US Armed Forces owns a significant share of the blame for how the war was fought. It was slow to adapt and lost situational awareness with one-year or six-month tours for units in the field. As was often said, our rotation policy created the impression that we were not in Afghanistan for 20 years but for one year, 20 times. We could have lessened this problem by repetitive unit deployments to the same geographic areas but rarely did so.

Command tenure was a related problem. In Afghanistan, up to 2015, even our senior-most commanders averaged 13 months on station. Our last few commanders there, Generals John F. Campbell, Nicholson, and Miller—all multi-tour veterans of Afghan combat—put an end to the norm of short-tenure, new-to-theater commanders.

American forces showed brilliance in logistics and tactics but less skill in operational and strategic planning. US military advice in Washington was often inadequate and unimaginative, and civilian national security leaders were habitually more interested in not losing than in succeeding in Afghanistan. Counterterrorist and counterinsurgency operations in the field were run separately. Lack of coordination and information sharing was a particular sore point, a bitter memory for many conventional force officers

who found their relations with the local people disrupted by counterterrorism raids they could not explain.

Our management of the military chain of command in Afghanistan was problematic even a decade after we entered Afghanistan.²⁷ How the principle of unity of command applied to the fiercely independent special operations forces and Marines was never clear. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations were compatible but required careful coordination and information sharing, which were not always present. Compounding the problem with special operations forces, NATO officers at ISAF headquarters marveled at Marine independence in Helmand in the surge years. They jokingly referred to the Marine area of operations in Helmand Province as “Marineistan.” They were part of the allied effort, but their operational commander was their stateside Central Command component commander. Although the Marines fought well and earned their unit citations, higher commanders might have used all or some of them to greater effect in Kandahar or the eastern provinces.²⁸

Fifth, the United States and its coalition partners developed an Afghan army and police force in the American mold. They were ill-suited to their missions and required significant logistical support.²⁹ The United States slow rolled the development of the Afghan Air Force, and Afghan ground forces relied heavily on US air strikes, which were great force multipliers but risked mass casualties. They alienated Afghans, including Karzai. Our attempt to develop the Afghan Air Force never rose above inadequacy. Despite many valiant Afghan airmen, when the United States pulled out its maintenance contractors in the final months, the utility of the Afghan Air Force’s 200 aircraft became limited. While a few pilots fought to the end, many flew their aircraft to neighboring countries. The remaining aircraft are now the Taliban Air Force.

On the ground, Afghan battlefield performance was spotty, except for the Afghan commando units, trained and advised by coalition special operators. After our chaotic evacuation, Secretary of Defense

27. See Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, “Reflections by General David Petraeus, USA (ret.) on the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *PRISM* 7, no. 1 (September 2017): 151–67, https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_7-1/12-Petraeus.pdf?ver=2017-09-14-133601-667.

28. For a strategic critique of the US experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, see Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015). On the Marines in Helmand, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

29. For more on the faulty US system of building foreign armies, see T. X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan,” in Hooker and Collins, *Lessons Encountered*, 277–334, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/lessons-encountered/lessons-encountered_Ch4.pdf?ver=2015-09-29-125202-147.

Lloyd J. Austin III added an update to complaints about the high command of the Afghan Army:

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths: that we did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor leadership in their [Afghan] senior ranks, that we did not grasp the damaging effect of frequent and unexplained rotations by President Ghani of his commanders, that we did not anticipate the snowball effects caused by the deals that Taliban commanders struck with local leaders in the wake of the Doha agreement, that the Doha agreement itself had a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers, and that we failed to grasp that there was only so much for which—and for whom—many of the Afghan forces would fight.³⁰

Sixth, Pakistani policy was a major element in the coalition's defeat. To protect its western frontier from Indian influence and to exert control over its neighbor, Pakistan created the Taliban in the early 1990s, advised it, nurtured it, brought it back to life after its 2001 defeat, and provided a secure sanctuary for Taliban leaders and their families. Pakistani support for the Taliban made effective counterinsurgency extremely difficult.³¹

Exploiting its status as a nuclear power essential to our supply lines to Afghanistan, the Pakistani generals successfully played a double game. Pakistan supported the Taliban while posing as our ally in the war on terrorism, listing its considerable losses to homegrown jihadists as Pakistan's sacrifice in the global war on terrorism. It was telling that Osama bin Laden lived for years within the shadow of Pakistan's version of West Point until his death in May 2011 in a US special operations forces raid. The Taliban's victory was a triumph of Pakistani duplicity.

As a postscript to the Taliban-Pakistani triumph, in August 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani, a senior Taliban leader, head of the Haqqani Network,

30. "Speech, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks before the Senate Armed Services Committee (As Prepared)," US Department of Defense (website), September 28, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2791954/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-before-the-senate-armed-service/>.

31. For a precis of the complex relationship between Pakistan and the United States over Afghanistan, see Thomas F. Lynch III, "The Decades-long 'Double-double Game': Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban," *Military Review* (July–August 2018): 64–77. On the origins of the Taliban-Pakistan relationship, see Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008), 2–23; and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

and a US- and UN-designated terrorist, was appointed as Afghanistan's interior minister. In the end, the Taliban's main link to Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence took charge of the police and intelligence in Afghanistan.

Finally, the Kabul government faced strong opposition from the Taliban. Animated by Islamist fervor and Afghan xenophobia, the various Taliban groups fought well and were less corrupt than the local government. They were quintessentially Afghan in the tradition of valiant, anti-foreign Afghan warriors of old.³² As in many other insurgencies, government forces rarely matched the morale and esprit de corps of the Taliban insurgents, who were well supported by the narcotics trade, other criminal activities, donations from the Islamic world, and many forms of assistance from Pakistan. The Taliban's message, closely tied to local conditions and backed by swift justice, won the day. In the end, the old saying proved true: we had all the watches, but the Taliban had all the time—and more motivation as well. Those attributes and Pakistani support put them over the goal line.

Lessons Encountered

We should identify lessons encountered so future national security leaders can use them judiciously in future operations. Here, in my view, are a few lessons to begin the discussion.

Where possible, the United States must avoid being a third party in a major insurgency where the insurgents have safe havens nearby and high levels of support from foreign powers. Vietnam had support from China and the USSR, but in Afghanistan the makeweight was Pakistan. If operations in such locations cannot be avoided, the disruption of safe havens must a top priority. The elimination of safe havens, however, carries the risk of escalation, which may adversely affect future plans.

The US military operations in Afghanistan (and Iraq) did not begin as a counterinsurgency operation but evolved relatively quickly from conventional operations to nationwide insurgencies. This observation may not be a lesson, but it is a warning to all those now focused on conventional conflict against great powers. The character of a war can change quickly, and forces on the ground must be prepared to adapt.

In estimating costs, even relatively small wars fought by volunteer forces will be incredibly expensive over the long term. Iraq and

32. Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 332, 454–55.

Afghanistan each demanded direct expenditures of over \$1 trillion dollars. The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University estimates real costs in Afghanistan—including indirect costs to the Pentagon, current veterans' expenditures, and other indirect costs—at over \$2 trillion.³³

Prudence and strategic priorities favor short-term troop presence, but the character of many conflicts requires years of costly presence and concerted diplomatic efforts. In the Republic of Korea, a long-term US presence paid off magnificently, albeit in a markedly different situation. A lengthy presence worked less well in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Iraq's future is still in question, but, even with its considerable problems, Iraq is doing better than Afghanistan.

In the future, US leaders should realize the critical decision is whether to enter a conflict on the ground. Air and sea operations have great utility but significant limitations. Raiding or punitive in-and-out operations seldom produce lasting results. Boots on the ground may well be necessary to achieve long-lasting effects, but the prolonged presence of ground troops significantly ups the ante. Withdrawal is difficult and costs grow daily. Planning exit strategies helps, but, in the end, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, US exit strategies quickly become more about exit timetables than about the greater strategy.

All opportunities to use force abroad require prudence and careful decision making. Sadly, US national security leaders often do not have the historical knowledge base to offer a comparative perspective on military interventions. Senior military officers and defense policy officials must bring that background knowledge into interagency deliberations.

In great-power interventions, the hallmark of wisdom is knowing when and how to commit the nation. In many instances, the use of advisory efforts with troubled allies (also known as the by, with, and through experience) can be a useful halfway option relative to the use of full-scale expeditionary forces. In any case, one must be skeptical of quick fixes to complex problems.³⁴

33. "Figures: Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University (website), n.d., <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

34. Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2018): 40-47, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_40-47_Votel-Keravuori.pdf?ver=2018-04-11-125441-307. On the folly of raiding and short war thinking, see H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 160-84, 433-41.

Policy inertia and sunk cost issues tend to keep us deployed longer than anticipated. In Afghanistan, the events marking the ideal time to leave vary from observer to observer. For example, some scholars speculate that we could have brought the Taliban into the 2001 Bonn Conference.³⁵ From my perch in the third row of Pentagon leadership, this idea was, and still is, problematic; US officials were dizzy with success over their good fortune in defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Giving the Taliban who protected al-Qaeda a seat at the table was not a priority for US leaders still affected by the deaths of nearly 3,000 people at the Pentagon, in New York City, and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Other analysts see missed opportunities to make peace during the Obama administration or note that leaving in 2011 after taking out Osama bin Laden would have been timely and closely related to the reason for which we intervened in the first place.

All speculation aside, one should be skeptical of any scenario that assumes the Taliban would adopt democratic practices, become a loyal opposition in a coalition government, or abandon their pursuit of an emirate. The Taliban is filled with authoritarian theocrats. They could have been defeated, but they would not long stand for being partnered with officials of a typical civil government. They were also clever negotiators and readily abandoned agreements, including, as Milley notes, six out of their seven pledges in the Doha accords.³⁶

Finally, one should avoid blaming the demise of the Afghan republic and the defeat of the United States and its coalition partners on nation building. On the economic, health, and education fronts, the coalition could not have ignored the perilous state of Afghanistan. There is little evidence that US or Afghan forces were frequently diverted from combat to perform humanitarian assistance or economic reconstruction tasks or to provide support for Afghan civil governance, the key elements of nation building. The vast security assistance program in Afghanistan could be characterized as nation building, but it was also a fundamental part of US strategy to enable the eventual safe withdrawal of coalition forces.

The notion that we could have saved money and troop strength by ignoring nation building and counterinsurgency and by simply using Afghanistan as a counterterrorism (CT) platform is attractive. It would have made little sense, however, for hard-pressed Afghan leaders, who needed to help their suffering nation and work to create a society

35. For example, see Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 99–101.

36. *Statement of General Mark A. Milley*, 3.

where radicalism was less likely to flourish. Moreover, a CT-only posture would have ignored the close relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. You could not have fought al-Qaeda and ignored the Taliban, or vice versa. Without a troop presence on the ground, it would also have been difficult to gain local intelligence on the terrorists. A CT-only military strategy remains an idea in search of successful historical cases. While Western forces at the headquarters level worked closely with USAID and its partners, it is difficult to see where these actions inhibited military operations.

We can be sure from the many excellent reports of the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction that many of our nation-building efforts were ineffective or inefficient. They fed corruption, wasted millions of taxpayer dollars, and left much to be desired. None of the corruption or waste, however, made the perils and problems of nation building a principal cause of our defeat in Afghanistan. While shortcomings emphasize the difficulty of conducting humanitarian assistance or economic development projects during an armed conflict, the sad condition of Afghanistan dictated that we try to help.

Conclusion

In the end, the United States sought to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a terrorist safe haven that could threaten our homeland. That goal required robust counterterrorist operations, a long-term counterinsurgency effort, some degree of nation building, security assistance, and an attempt at forming a stable government in Kabul. We had many successes, but the overall enterprise failed. After two decades of significant effort, the United States and its partners left behind a country that has an ISIS-K problem and as many as 500 al-Qaeda members closely allied with the Taliban.³⁷ The country is tense, economically depressed, full of modern military equipment, and a human rights nightmare.

Today, the tentacles of the Haqqani Network and the Taliban's ignorance are much in evidence. The Taliban has few well-developed government policies. The Taliban has again blocked university and high school

37. *Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2557 (2020) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan [S/2021/486]* (New York: UN Security Council, June 2021), 13, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2053487.html>.

attendance for Afghan women and girls.³⁸ Vile, physical punishments are back in vogue, and those who aided the coalition are being hunted down. Coalition-sponsored advances in education, health care, and human rights are in extreme jeopardy. The economy, never in good shape, is now cut off from many sources of outside aid. Foreign donors are looking for ways to help the people while avoiding cooperation with the Taliban regime.

At the same time, the Taliban will learn that the nation they conquered in 2021 is not the same one they fled in 2001. Half the population is under 25 years of age. By 2020, due to effective Afghan government efforts under President Karzai and Finance Minister Ghani, 18 million Afghans—half the population—gained access to cell phones. The urban youth have been weaned on television, Western and Indian music, and the Internet. They do not remember the first Taliban regime, and they may well become a resistant element to rule by the Taliban's harsh version of sharia law. The remnants of the Northern Alliance have been put down, but they are not out. In the north, we have not seen the last of former (or new) Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara warlords.³⁹ ISIS-K is still a vibrant threat to Afghanistan and Pakistan. One must be skeptical about whether so much strife can be confined within the borders of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan will likely be another case that proves Carl von Clausewitz's sad observation: the results of war are never final.⁴⁰ Without a doubt, Afghanistan and its people will pay a high price for this tragic defeat and the collapse of the republic that existed from 2002 to 2021. Sadly, Afghanistan's future is as clouded today as it was before the US intervention in October 2001.

38. Lynne O'Donnell, "Analysis: Taliban Reversal on Girls' Education Ignites World's Anger," *Foreign Policy* (website), March 29, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/29/taliban-girls-education-ban-reversal-afghanistan-schools/>; Kathy Gannon, "Taliban Break a Promise on Higher Education for Afghan Girls," Associated Press (website), March 23, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-education-kabul-taliban-dcdc0ba67is68213009f69cc6e284d7f52>; and Christina Goldbaum and Najim Rahim, "Taliban Bar Women from College in a Stark Reversal of Rights," *New York Times* (website), December 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/20/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-women-education.html>.

39. On recent fighting, mainly in five northern provinces, see Bill Roggio, "One Year after U.S. Withdrawal, Resistance to Taliban Rule Grows," *Long War Journal* (website), August 29, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/08/one-year-after-u-s-withdrawal-resistance-to-taliban-rule-grows.php>.

40. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), bk. 1, chap. 1, 80.

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