

A War's Epitaph: For Two Decades, Americans Told One Lie After Another About What They Were Doing in Afghanistan

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In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, U.S.-backed Afghan warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum's forces murdered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Taliban prisoners by jamming them into metal shipping containers and letting them suffocate. At the time, Dostum was on the CIA's payroll and had been working with U.S. special forces to oust the Taliban from power.

The Bush administration blocked subsequent efforts to investigate the mass murder, even after the FBI interviewed witnesses among the surviving Afghans who had been moved to the U.S. prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and after human rights officials publicly identified the mass grave site where Dostum's forces had disposed of bodies. Later, President Barack Obama promised to investigate, and then took no action.

Instead, Hollywood stepped in and turned Dostum into a hero. The 2018 movie, "[12 Strong](#)," a jingoistic account of the partnership between U.S. special forces and Dostum in the 2001 invasion, whitewashed Dostum — even as his crimes continued to pile up in the years after the prisoner massacre. At the time of the movie's January 2018 release, Dostum was in exile, hiding from criminal charges in Afghanistan for having ordered his bodyguards to rape a political opponent, including with an assault rifle. The movie (filmed in New Mexico, not Afghanistan) was based on a book that a New York Times reviewer called "a rousing, uplifting, Toby Keith-singing piece of work."

For two decades, Americans have told each other one lie after another about the war in Afghanistan. The lies have come from the White House, Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA, as well as from Hollywood, cable news pundits, journalists, and the broader culture.

Americans have hungered for a simple storyline, with heroes and villains, to make sense of the longest war in U.S. history. They have wanted stories like "12 Strong" to make them feel good. But at the very edge of the American empire, the war was nasty and brutish, and brought out in Americans the same imperial arrogance that [doomed](#) the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

[The 9/11 Wars](#)

This month, as the Taliban swiftly took control of Kabul and the American-backed government collapsed, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the government's

watchdog over the Afghan experience, issued his [final report](#). The assessment includes remarkably candid interviews with former American officials involved in shaping U.S. policy in Afghanistan that, collectively, offer perhaps the most biting critique of the 20-year American enterprise ever published in an official U.S. government report.

“The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose,” the report notes, “though the definition of that purpose evolved over time.”

Released in the days after Kabul fell, the report reads like an epitaph for America’s involvement in Afghanistan.

Afghan women and children gather in a corner as U.S. soldiers search their home for Taliban insurgents during a night raid in a village in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, on June 14, 2007.

Photo: Nicolas Asfour/AFP via Getty Images

One of the first things the U.S. did after gaining effective control over Afghanistan following the Taliban’s ouster in 2001 was to set up secret torture chambers. Beginning in 2002, the CIA tortured both Afghans and foreign prisoners flown to these torture rooms from all over Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The worst torture chamber was nicknamed “The Darkness” by the prisoners sent there, who suffered such complete sensory deprivation that they did not even know they were in Afghanistan. They were chained in solitary confinement with no light and music blaring constantly. They were hung by their arms for as long as two days, slammed against walls, forced to lie naked on tarps while gallons of ice water were poured over their bodies. At least one prisoner died in CIA custody after being left shackled in frigid temperatures.

No one was ever held to account for the American torture regime in Afghanistan.

American drone strikes also started early in Afghanistan. The CIA killed Al Qaeda operative Mohammed Atef and others with a drone there in November 2001, just two months after 9/11. Afghanistan soon became the beta test site for high-tech drone warfare, leading to countless civilian casualties and deep resentment among the Afghan people, who felt helpless against the unseen threat circling overhead.

America’s early adoption of drone warfare in Afghanistan helped make a fortune for Neal Blue, the chair of General Atomics; the Southern California energy and defense corporation manufactured the Predator, the first armed drone to fly over Afghanistan. (General Atomics subsequently produced the Predator’s follow-on model, the Reaper.) Blue and his brother, Linden Blue, vice chair of General Atomics, maintained low public profiles throughout the war, but as owners of privately held General Atomics, they were among the first — but hardly the last — American contractors to enrich themselves as blood spilled in Afghanistan.

Before long, the CIA’s drone campaign shifted from going after the few Al Qaeda operatives it could find in Afghanistan to targeting the Taliban — thus placing the drone campaign squarely in the midst of the Afghan domestic insurgency.

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The U.S. launched more than 13,000 drone strikes in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2020, killing up to 10,000 people, [according to statistics](#) kept by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The CIA, relying on cellphone numbers to find, fix, and finish its alleged enemies, often launched its Hellfire missiles at the wrong targets or at targets standing amid groups of civilians.

The practice devastated Afghan villages, yet the U.S. refused to keep track of civilian casualties from drone strikes. Instead, officials insisted that each strike had hit its intended target, while ignoring the claims of villagers that the missiles had killed a tribal chief or decimated a meeting of village elders.

Former Marine infantry officer Ian Cameron, who oversaw drone targeting in Afghanistan for nine months in 2018 and 2019, [wrote](#) in the Washington Post of the “sterility of this type of warfare, which allowed me to kill Taliban fighters in one moment and finish a half-eaten hamburger lunch the next.” It seemed to him a “Sisyphean exercise (since the Taliban never ran out of replacement fighters).”

Along with drone strikes came “night raids,” in which U.S. and Afghan forces would burst into a home in the middle of the night and kill or capture those inside, breeding further resentment. The raids were so deeply unpopular that they sometimes led an entire village to switch its allegiance to the Taliban. What was worse, the U.S. military and the CIA failed for years to fully grasp the degree to which their airstrikes and night raids were being manipulated by Afghans who fed them false information to convince the Americans to launch raids against their local rivals or have those rivals carted off to Guantánamo.

An illustration on a cardboard sign conveys to U.S. Marines that Taliban forces could be anywhere and everywhere, in southern Afghanistan on Dec. 1, 2001.

Photo: Jim Hollander/AFP via Getty Images

After the initial invasion that ousted the Taliban, the U.S. shifted most of its military and intelligence resources from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2002 and 2003. The Bush administration believed that Iraq was a more important theater of war than Afghanistan and falsely thought that the war in Afghanistan was over.

The shift of American resources by the Bush administration to Iraq in 2002 and 2003 was the greatest military miscalculation of the entire war in Afghanistan. While the U.S. was distracted by Iraq, the Taliban, which had been all but defeated and dispersed, recovered, and regained strength.

James Dobbins, a career diplomat who served as the Bush administration’s special envoy to Afghanistan, said in an [interview](#) with the special inspector general that officials soon realized they had to decide which war would receive the most government resources, and “they chose Iraq. ... You had several years of calculated neglect [in Afghanistan]. ... It was intentional.”

Yet even as the Bush administration drew down militarily in Afghanistan, it still insisted on creating a new, pro-Western government in Kabul and began a massive nation-building project in the country.

It did so without grasping the significance of several basic facts about the conditions it faced.

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The first was that the Afghan militias with whom the United States had joined forces to overthrow the Taliban in 2001 were largely composed of and loyal to the country's minority ethnic groups, while the Taliban were Pashtun, by far the largest ethnic group in the country, representing more than 40 percent of the population. The Tajiks, who dominated the Northern Alliance, were America's most dependable allies throughout the war, but they accounted for only a little more than a quarter of Afghanistan's population.

Even after the Taliban were ousted from power, they largely retained their support in rural southern Afghanistan, the country's Pashtun base. The U.S. and the government it installed in Kabul never figured out how to gain the loyalty of the rural Pashtun heartland.

A shopkeeper displays pictures of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, left, and newly elected President Hamid Karzai, right, in Afghanistan on June 7, 2004.

Photo: David Bathgate/Corbis via Getty Images

The U.S. failed to fully understand how deeply those ethnic divides would undercut nation-building in a country whose national identity had been weakened by decades of war. Even years after the U.S.-backed government was installed, it was still easy in Kabul to identify which government ministers were Tajik. They were the ones whose offices were dominated by large portraits of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the so-called Lion of the Panjshir, who led the Northern Alliance until he was assassinated by Al Qaeda two days before 9/11.

Another fundamental miscalculation involved Pakistan. In the 1980s, the CIA had worked with Pakistan's intelligence service to support the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviet forces occupying Afghanistan. But following the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Taliban leadership found sanctuary in Pakistan. The Taliban were able to reorganize and recruit new forces from among the more than one million, mainly Pashtun, Afghan refugees on Pakistan's side of the Durand Line, the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan established by the British at the end of the 19th century.

Pakistan's intelligence and military services played a double game with the U.S. throughout the American war in Afghanistan. For years, Pakistan provided America with logistical support, allowing supplies for U.S. forces in landlocked Afghanistan to be transported through its territory. It also sometimes provided critical intelligence on Al Qaeda and terrorism suspects believed to be traversing the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet many officers in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence were Islamists who were sympathetic to the Pashtuns and the Taliban, and had a long history of support for related Pashtun groups like the Haqqani network, whose founder, Jalaluddin Haqqani, had been on the CIA payroll during the 1980s campaign against the Soviet occupation.

What's more, Pakistani officials saw the war in Afghanistan through the lens of their ongoing cold war with India. They were deeply suspicious of the ties between India and the Northern Alliance-based government installed by the U.S. in Kabul.

The U.S.-Pakistan alliance, built on lies, proved unsustainable. The Taliban survived the initial American onslaught in 2001 in large part because it had Pakistan's backing. A decade into the war, Pakistan began to tighten its grip on American supply routes. Relations worsened after protests erupted in Pakistan against U.S. drone strikes there, and they nearly broke down following the U.S. raid on Abbottabad in May 2011, in which American special forces killed Osama bin Laden. A subsequent NATO airstrike that hit two military facilities in Pakistan and killed 28 Pakistani troops in November 2011 further strained ties. The U.S. was eventually forced to rely on far more costly supply routes through Russia and Central Asia.

Pakistani activists protesting lethal strikes conducted by drones burn the U.S. flag in Multan, Pakistan, on March 14, 2012.

Photo: Shahid Saeed/Mirza/AFP via Getty Images

Another miscalculation came when the United States turned its back on an early opportunity to work with Iran on Afghanistan. Iran has a long border with western Afghanistan, and the Persian influence in Herat and the surrounding region dates back to the days of the ancient Silk Road trade route. When the Taliban came to power in the 1990s, Iran saw the group as its enemy. Iran is predominantly Shia Muslim, while the Pashtun are Sunni, and the Taliban had a history in the 1990s of persecuting the Hazara minority group, which is predominantly Shia.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when the U.S. was preparing to invade Afghanistan, U.S. and Iranian officials secretly met in Geneva to discuss possible collaboration against the Taliban. Iranian officials even provided the Americans with targeting information for its anti-Taliban air campaign in late 2001, according to former U.S. officials.

But the brief possibility of an opening with Tehran ended as the Bush administration decided to widen its war on terror beyond Afghanistan. In his 2002 State of the Union, George W. Bush declared Iran a member of the "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea. Iran then reversed course and began to provide covert support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, while also supporting the insurgency against American forces in Iraq.

As the Taliban revived, the Bush administration had few troops left in Afghanistan to counter the threat. Within a few years of its initial victory in 2001, the U.S. was stuck in a quagmire of its own making in Afghanistan, just as it was in Iraq.

U.S. Marine Maj. David "Bull" Gurfein pulls down a poster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Safwan, Iraq, on March 21, 2003.

Photo: Chris Hondros/Getty Images

The Bush administration decided to stay in Afghanistan, but it no longer had any clear objectives. The original targets of the military mission — Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda leadership — had clearly escaped. So what was America's new mission?

Despite years of debate, the Bush White House couldn't decide. The Bush administration wanted to

leave Afghanistan and focus on Iraq — yet it didn't want to leave the military field open to the Taliban. Bush didn't want to engage in nation-building in Afghanistan, yet his government remained committed to creating a new, Western-style central government with modern roads, schools, hospitals, and a national army. (The CIA even quietly did nation-building of its own, creating the Afghan intelligence service, called the National Directorate of Security, and filling it with Tajiks on the CIA payroll.)

The result was that throughout his time in office, George W. Bush had one foot in and one foot out of Afghanistan. Stephen Hadley, Bush's national security adviser in his second term, weakly told the special inspector general that "there was just no process to do post-war mission planning."

The U.S. installed Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun who had been living in exile in Pakistan, as Afghanistan's first post-Taliban leader, and he went on to become Afghanistan's president. The Americans literally escorted Karzai into Afghanistan from Pakistan in 2001; when a U.S. aircraft accidentally bombed the group of Special Forces and CIA personnel bringing Karzai into the country, CIA officer Greg Vogle famously dove on top of Karzai, saving his life.

Karzai had been chosen largely because he was pro-Western and because, in the view of the ethnic groups and warlords in Afghanistan at the time, he was the least offensive candidate. The fact that he was an ethnic Pashtun was thought to be an important olive branch to Pashtuns resentful of the U.S.-backed victory of the Tajiks and the Northern Alliance. But he was from a small Pashtun tribe based in the village of Karz, outside Kandahar, and was not considered a prominent leader among the major Pashtun tribes.

It didn't take long for corruption to become rampant under Karzai. With the CIA's backing, the new president made his younger half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, the de-facto viceroy of Kandahar and southern Afghanistan — and the boss of the massive Afghan heroin trade.

Ahmed Wali Karzai's power over the heroin business meant that when tractor-trailers loaded with drugs were stopped by local security forces, he could [call their commanders to order the release of the trucks](#) and their contents.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration repeatedly uncovered evidence of Ahmed Wali Karzai's leading role in the Afghan drug trade; in one instance, American investigators discovered links between a truck found with 110 pounds of heroin and an intermediary for Ahmed Wali Karzai. The White House refused to allow the DEA to take any action against Ahmed Wali Karzai, [who was secretly on the CIA's payroll](#).

The willingness of the U.S. to turn a blind eye to Ahmed Wali Karzai's role as a drug lord was just one symptom of a much larger problem. The U.S. had invaded a country whose most lucrative businesses, besides war, were opium production and heroin smuggling, and yet American officials could never figure out what to do about it. In the end, they did nothing.

For 20 years, America essentially ran a narco-state in Afghanistan.

Afghan counternarcotics police officer Abdul Hanan shows confiscated heroin in Kabul on Feb. 11, 2006.

Photo: John Moore/Getty Images

During the initial invasion and bombing campaign in 2001, the Bush administration ignored the drug problem, believing that it was a distraction from America's main counterterrorism mission, and refused to bomb drug-related facilities.

Later, American officials assigned to deal with Afghanistan would occasionally push for greater counternarcotics measures; at one point they even brought in Colombian counternarcotics agents to try to train a new Afghan counternarcotics force. The Justice Department also built a special Afghan drug court, while the State Department launched a campaign to eradicate poppy crops.

But the efforts were just window dressing. The Karzai government refused to allow aerial chemical spraying of poppy fields, fearing a backlash among farmers. As a result, the State Department relied on manual eradication, which meant that hundreds of Afghans with tractors and sticks were sent out to manually rip up poppy fields — thus risking the wrath of the farmers. State Department officials soon realized that the fields identified for eradication by Afghan officials and local leaders were those of their rivals or of unimportant farmers. The crops of powerful Afghans were almost never touched.

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Each time American officials sought to make counternarcotics a priority, they ran into the reality that the drug lords of Afghanistan were also the warlords of Afghanistan who were on the CIA payroll and who the U.S. military relied upon to battle the Taliban.

The U.S. spent nearly \$9 billion on its token counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan, yet opium production and heroin smuggling in Afghanistan skyrocketed under the U.S.-backed government. Afghanistan now produces more than 80 percent of the world's heroin supply.

Afghanistan's opium production soared in 2002 — and just kept growing. By 2020, [224,000 hectares](#) of land were under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, compared with 123,000 hectares in 2010, according to the United Nations.

Afghans walk near a new hotel built amid the ruins of buildings destroyed in the country's civil war, in Kabul on Feb. 8, 2006.

Photo: John Moore/Getty Images

American aid and reconstruction money overwhelmed Afghanistan's economy. The U.S. provided \$145 billion over 20 years to rebuild a country that had a gross domestic product of just \$19 billion in 2019. As recently as 2018, nearly 80 percent of Afghan government spending came from Western donors.

The combined effects of the massive flows of Western aid dollars, funding for combat operations, and the river of narco-dollars created a surreal economic bubble in Afghanistan. A new, Western-style urban professional class sprang up in Kabul, many of whose members are now fleeing the Taliban. But the money also triggered an epidemic of corruption and insider dealing that thoroughly discredited both the Afghan central government and the United States.

Much of the American money enriched U.S. contractors without ever entering the Afghan economy.

Much of it also disappeared into secret bank accounts in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, held by Afghan government officials, warlords, and their families, a phenomenon described in a [2020 report](#) by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as “the cross-pollination of criminality between Afghanistan and Dubai.”

The frenetic example set by [Kabul Bank](#) provided the model for how the Afghan elite could efficiently and blatantly move American aid money out of Afghanistan and into their private offshore bank accounts. The bank, once the largest in Afghanistan, was founded by Sher Khan Farnood, a money-exchange dealer with operations in Kabul and Dubai who had fled Russia under suspicion that he was a money launderer. After he obtained the bank charter from the Karzai government, he used Kabul Bank to embezzle money from Afghan depositors to pay for his personal investments in Dubai real estate. Farnood also took out a \$100 million loan from Kabul Bank to buy Pamir Airways, which flew commercial routes from Kabul to Dubai.

Farnood’s couriers transporting cash from his money exchange in Kabul could “now more easily transport money embezzled from a Farnood-controlled bank (Kabul Bank) on a Farnood-owned airline (Pamir Airways) and deliver it to a Farnood-owned exchange house (Shaheen Money Exchange) in Dubai,” the Carnegie report concluded.

Before the bank finally and spectacularly collapsed in 2010, Farnood enjoyed plenty of political protection, because he was also using Kabul Bank to help Afghanistan’s most powerful politicians launder their ill-gotten cash in Dubai.

Meanwhile, petty corruption — bribes to local officials to obtain any service or job — was endemic, stoking more resentment against the government among average Afghans. The U.N. found that by 2012, Afghans were paying [\\$3.9 billion in bribes](#) per year; half of all Afghans paid a bribe for a public service.

As the U.S.-backed government continued, petty bribery and corruption grew worse, not better. Militias “were using their position and closeness with the government and U.S. military to control roads, secure lucrative contracts, establish themselves as regional powers, and sometimes serve both sides, cooperating with both international and Taliban forces to maximize profits,” concluded a [2018 report](#) from the Institute of World Politics.

The government-fueled bribery and corruption forced many Afghans into the arms of the Taliban, who gained a reputation for settling financial and other disputes using more straightforward — if far more brutal — methods. “Trying to compete with the Taliban’s successful dispute resolution would have meant allowing sharia, and that’s not something we could do politically,” Barnett Rubin, a longtime Afghanistan expert who advised the State Department, told the special inspector general.

Often, American reconstruction projects provided funding directly to the Taliban and related extremist groups. Afghan contractors frequently had to pay off the Taliban so they wouldn’t attack U.S.-backed projects, “making the insurgents in effect unofficial subcontractors to the U.S. government,” the special inspector general concluded. One example was a U.S.-funded project to [build a highway from Gardez to Khost](#) in southeastern Afghanistan. In order to avoid attacks in 2011, the road’s contractors paid \$1 million a year to a local figure known only as Arafat, who was believed to have ties to the Haqqani network.

U.S. Lt. Col. Christian Cabaniss speaks to Marines at Camp Dwyer in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, on July 1, 2009.

Photo: Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Perhaps the most cynical decision in the war in Afghanistan was taken by Obama in 2009. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama sought to distinguish himself from his main political rivals with his emphatic denunciations of the war in Iraq. Fearful of being attacked from the right for being too dovish, Obama balanced his attacks on the Iraq War by claiming that he would do more than the Bush administration had done to win “the good war” in Afghanistan.

In 2009, Obama announced that he was escalating U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan: his ill-considered Afghan “surge.” The surge came with no real long-term strategy, and it is hard not to see Obama’s decision as little more than a political calculation to live up to his earlier campaign promise, which had only been made to insulate him from attacks on his position on Iraq.

As American troops flowed steadily into Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010, combat operations were focused on the south, notably Helmand Province, a stronghold of both the Taliban and opium production. U.S. troop levels peaked at about 100,000 during the surge, the highest levels of the entire war in Afghanistan.

But the surge quickly descended into an inconclusive war of attrition. U.S. casualties reached their highest levels of the war during the surge, with fatalities rising to 496 in 2010. Obama drew down U.S. forces to around 8,400 by the time he left office.

Donald Trump came into the presidency in 2017, having campaigned on a vow to end America’s forever wars. He was determined to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan. But he was easily distracted by cronies eager to make money. [Erik Prince](#), the [infamous founder](#) of Blackwater, [nearly convinced](#) Trump to let him take over the entire combat mission in Afghanistan by using paid mercenaries instead of U.S. troops. Instead, Trump got so sidetracked that he let the Pentagon talk him into increasing troop levels to about 14,000 in 2017.

Trump finally got his way in February 2020, when the U.S. and the Taliban signed an agreement setting the conditions for a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. After the 2020 presidential election, Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller announced that U.S. troop levels had been reduced to 2,500.

Joe Biden came into office this year, making the case that, after 20 years, the war in Afghanistan had to end. Getting out of Afghanistan was perhaps the only issue on which he publicly agreed with Donald Trump.

On April 14, he announced that all U.S. troops would be withdrawn by September 11, 2021: the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Trump promptly criticized Biden for failing to meet the May 1 deadline he had negotiated with the Taliban, saying that “we can and should get out earlier,” and that “getting out of Afghanistan is a wonderful and positive thing to do. I planned to withdraw on May 1, and we should keep as close to that schedule as possible.”

The Taliban also issued a statement in April criticizing Biden for failing to meet the agreed-upon deadline. They warned ominously that the delay “opens the way for [the Taliban] to take every necessary countermeasure.”

The meaning and consequences of that Taliban statement in April are now playing out at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.

The U.S. certainly did some good in Afghanistan. Its nation-building created a new educated, urban

middle class, and the U.S.-backed government offered unprecedented rights to women. By 2018, life expectancy had increased by nine years, literacy rates rose, and child mortality fell.

But the special inspector general's final report, which documents those gains, concluded that they were not "commensurate with the U.S. investment." A former Pentagon official told the special inspector general that "when you look at how much we spent and what we got for it, it's mind boggling."

In an interview with the special inspector general, Douglas Lute, who coordinated strategy for Afghanistan at the National Security Council from 2007 to 2013, gave a brief and devastating critique of the American enterprise in Afghanistan.

"We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan," Lute said. "We didn't know what we were doing."

James Risen

P.S.

- The Intercept. August 26 2021, 6:35 p.m.:
<https://theintercept.com/2021/08/26/afghanistan-america-failures/>