The Lessons of the Afghan War that No One Will Want to Learn

By Anthony H. Cordesman

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Please provide comments to acordesman@gmail.com

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At the best of times, the U.S. tends to rush out heavily politicized studies of the lessons of war that are more political ammunition than serious analyses, and while these are followed by long formal studies that are often quite good, they then are often ignored as the flow of events moves on. These are scarcely the best of times. The collapse of the Afghan government and forces has occurred during one of the most partisan periods in American politics, followed by a totally different kind of conflict in Ukraine, all while the U.S. focus on terrorism and regional conflicts that began with 9/11 has been replaced by a focus on competition with nuclear superpowers like Russia and China.

The very fact that the war stretched out over two decades has meant that much of the focus on lessons has ignored the first half or more of the war, and the almost inevitable chaos following the U.S. decision to withdraw has led to the focus on the collapse of the Afghan forces and the central government rather than on the actual conduct of the war – and few within the U.S. government now want to rake over the list of past mistakes that turned an initial tactical victory into a massive grand strategic defeat.

Some Honest Reports and Elements of Truth

Fortunately for the U.S., there are two key official sources that already provide a wide range of useful data and analysis – although both focus largely on the U.S. and not the overall role of the Afghan central government and allied powers and international organizations. These sources are the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), whose reports can be found on their official website, and the reports of the Lead Inspector General (LIG) for Operation Enduring Sentinel (OES) and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS).¹ These LIG reports are not readily available at any one website, but they can be found by searching all of the entries on the web.

Unfortunately, these reports do not cover the entire war, and they focus heavily on the financial and programmatic concerns of the inspector generals rather than on the overall conduct of the war. The SIGAR reports only go back to 2008, and they took several years to develop the access, content, and methods to probe into the favorable fog of war being created at the Command, DoD, State, and White House levels. The LIG reports were also more cautious and initially tended to mirror image the public affairs and official line of each agency, but they did become more probing after 2017.

SIGAR has also started to produce a series of lessons studies, which probe deeply into the mistakes that the U.S. and Afghan governments made, and it counters the increasingly dishonest reporting coming out of official spokespersons and senior officials from 2011 onwards – sources whose reporting steadily provided more favorable pictures of both the fighting and the failed peace efforts that led to the collapse instead of the actual data and events involved. The two SIGAR reports published to date include SIGAR 22-22-1P, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise and SIGAR 22-22-LL, Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.²
There also is a mass of individual reporting from various think tanks and from official sources that focused on narrow aspects of the war and efforts to create an effective Afghan government, including a mass of maps, graphs, and other data that challenge the steady shift to favorable official “spin” that took place as the war went on, the Taliban made gains, and the Afghan government and forces became increasingly corrupt and ineffective. Think tanks include RAND, the Institute of the Study of War, Brookings, CSIS, and Long War Journal. A partial collection of such material, entitled, *The Afghan Archives: Key Metrics from 2002-2019*, is available on the CSIS website.3

**Looking at the Full Range of Key Issues**

Nevertheless, it is far from clear that the U.S. will fully examine some of the most critical issues and lessons of the war, go beyond the kind of hopelessly hollow and inaccurate summary efforts on the lessons – like the *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress* study that was rushed out after the end of the First Gulf War – or address many of the key issues and failures to honestly analyze the course of events that colored the overall resolution of the conflict.4

Virtually everyone who has studied the war has their own list of such issues, but it seems useful to highlight at least some of the cases where the U.S. failed to learn from events as they transpired or effectively developed the same kind of favorable and increasingly dishonest metrics, including those that colored much of the reporting during and immediately after the Vietnam War and during the fighting against extremist movements in Iraq and Syria in spite of some excellent reporting by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) assessing Syrian reconstruction through early 2013.5

**Strategic Triage: Where, When, and How Long to Intervene**

One key issue was why the U.S. intervened so heavily, for so long, and at such high cost in a nation which had served as the springboard for one set of attacks on the United States by what was a Saudi extremist group that had been driven out of Saudi Arabia and whose attacks were not connected in any way to direct support from the Taliban’s government of Afghanistan.

The emotional nature of the U.S. reaction does largely explain what happened, just as much as the U.S. commitment to Vietnam expanded far beyond the strategic value of that conflict to the United States, and just as the invasion of Iraq had led the U.S. to intervene in Iraq and eastern Syria ever since 2003.

Afghanistan was (and is) somewhat unique, however, in that it is one of the least strategically important countries in the world to the United States, presents a strategic burden to states that are scarcely U.S. allies (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and the “-Stans”), and has never been more of a potential terrorist threat to the U.S. than a host of other troubled and “fragile” states – many of which do have locations or characteristics of considerably higher strategic importance to the United States.

Nevertheless, the United States spent two decades and massive human and financial resources in transformational exercises in nation-building, which never had great prospects for success at any point, and where the resources could have been used in other areas of far higher strategic or domestic priority.

As the spending graphs in **Figure One** and **Figure Two** show, the U.S. let sheer strategic momentum drive a major rise in its efforts for a decade, and it then phased down its efforts without any clear plan and in ways the supposedly aimed at a peace settlement that the U.S. never seriously
attempted to model or define and effectively disguised the fact that its political, military, and economic efforts had failed and the cost-benefits of continuing them had become largely negative.

The U.S. needs to learn from this lesson – as it should have learned from Vietnam and is learning from Iraq. Strategy should not pave the road to hell out of good intentions. Strategy is also not a morality play, and it should not be a matter of sheer momentum. The U.S. should not assume other nations and cultures can be transformed in the face of evidence to the contrary, or it should not indulge in ridiculous exercises in optimism like the “new silk road” or the peace negotiations that disguised U.S. disengagement in ways that did far more to trigger a catastrophic collapse of the Afghan central government than any failure in securing the Kabul airport and planning an orderly evacuation.

**Effective Governance Is the Primary Key to Success – Not Democracy, Winning Battles, Winning Hearts and Minds, or a Focus on Human Rights**

A second key lesson the U.S. needs to examine is the impact of the U.S. effort to intervene in Afghanistan by transforming a nation with radically different levels of development and a radically different mix of cultural, sectarian, and ethnic values into an underdeveloped copy of the United States. If one looks at the war from its start in 2001, the most striking failure was the lack of realism in creating an Afghan government that could actually produce an effective degree of unity among the main Afghan factions and power brokers, function effectively in providing a reasonably effective level of both civil governance and security throughout the country, and use military and civil aid effectively with a reasonable degree of honesty and equity – all while doing so on Afghan terms that suited Afghan politics, culture, and the needs and values of the majority of the Afghan people.

The structure of the new Afghan government that replaced the Taliban ignored the real-world divisions and power structure of the country. It lacked the basic structure of government after growing out of the Russian invasion and the rise of the Taliban. As was the case in Vietnam and later in Iraq, the Afghan government attempted to leap forward into a level of democracy in a country with no political experience, no history of compromise, and no experienced political figures who had actually governed. Worse, the United States created a structure where the legislature had little real power and control over money, ignored the need for an effective police and justice system, and ignored the fact that the Taliban had strong popular roots.

At the same time, the U.S. was largely responsible for creating a failed international effort to coordinate the nation building effort in the form of a UN agency – United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) – that never succeeded in creating an effective ability to coordinate aid and outside support efforts and that maintained a de facto structure of dependence on the United States and outside aid that was often focused on U.S. military objective and on U.S. civil objective like counternarcotics. This structure did make real progress in areas like education, the rights of women, health, and the formal structure of the rule of law in supporting human rights, but it often did make these gains in the form of “islands” of progress that were largely urban or highly local.

Worse, as is documented in depth by the reports of SIGAR, the basic structure of governance was undermined by a massive flow of aid that lacked realistic planning and management and encouraged a pervasive level of corruption that crippled both the civil and military efforts on a
national level – making the struggle over the control of resources and the ability to profit from aid key functions of virtually every aspect of government activity. As SIGAR points out in depth, the lack of conditionality in providing aid and in ensuring that it was used honestly and effectively was coupled to a failure in providing the kind of policing and justice efforts that provided basic security.

At the same time, the U.S., UNAMA, and other states providing civil and military aid allowed this situation to continue while effectively denying the seriousness of the problem and failing to enforce any overall degree of conditionality and penalties for corruption, waste, and misuse of funds. Even educated Afghan elites were faced with a system that forced them to compromise or be corrupt to get jobs and earn a living standard that matched their education, and most Afghans – especially rural Afghans and low-income urban Afghans – lacked any clear basis of security.

This in no way argues that a focus on democracy and improving human rights is unimportant, but the core starting point is effective governance that meets the basic needs of the people. The U.S. failed to focus on this key point at the start of its role in Afghanistan, and in many ways tried to create a mirror image which helped enable the return of the Taliban over time, wasted an immense amount of civil and military aid funding, and effectively deprived a steadily rising number of Afghans of effective economic and personal security.

**Wasting a Flood of Aid and Defense Spending**

One of the great strengths of the SIGAR reporting is the extent to which it shows how much of the aid effort was erratic, wasted, and stolen. What it does not address is the lack of coordination and effective planning of the U.S. and other international aid efforts, the lack of coordination of the U.S. military and civil aid efforts, failure on the part of the U.S. to create of an effective integrated planning and management system, and the failure of both UNAMA and various donor conferences to link aid allocation to effective and coordinated efforts. As SIGAR notes, this is to some extent a function of its legal mandate.6

**Failing to Manage and Honestly Report on 20 Years of Warfare**

SIGAR’s April 2022 Quarterly Report to Congress does, however, provide a devasting picture of the overall flow of aid during the course of the war. **Figure One** shows official total cost of the U.S. military and the civil aid efforts from FY2002 to FY2021 as well as the troop levels reported in the country – excluding external land, air, and naval forces. One does not have to be a political or military expert to see that these funding and manpower curves reflect a massive investment in a strategic failure, providing a crucial overall lesson of war as compared to any aspect of the actual warfighting and nation-building effort.

In effect, the U.S. was extremely slow to react during the period when the Taliban had been virtually shattered by its initial defeats in 2021. It then built a massive spending effort as it poured U.S. combat troops into Afghanistan. This effort failed to achieve any of its strategic goals, and the U.S. then steadily cut back on spending. The resulting cuts helped the Taliban take over the countryside while also enabling the military and civil collapse of the central Afghan government.

**Figure One** also shows that the official cost of the war poured vastly more money into the military effort to pay for a massive build-up of U.S. land and air forces than it spent on aid to Afghan military and civil efforts – a build-up that raised the cost of U.S. military forces for the war by nearly ten times between FY2004 and FY2012, although the end result was considerably less...
effective than a shift to heavy reliance on U.S. airpower and limited amounts of ground forces that cut total U.S. spending on U.S. forces to roughly one-third of the FY2012 level by the time the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan.

These points are especially critical from a lessons viewpoint because they strongly indicate that if the U.S. had focused on a major build-up of Afghan forces that tailored the build-up to Afghan—rather than U.S.—standards early in the war, it might well have won the war for a fraction of the cost of losing. They also warn against focusing on the total cost of the war, rather than on the pattern and allocation of expenditures over time.

This is particularly true because some estimates of total cost are far higher than the figures in Figure One. As SIGAR notes,

A nongovernmental estimate of U.S. costs for the 20-year war in Afghanistan stands at more than double DOD’s calculation. The Costs of War Project sponsored by the Watson Institute at Brown University recently issued U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021, putting total costs at $2.26 trillion.13 The Watson Institute’s independently produced report builds on DOD’s $933 billion Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budgets and State’s $59 billion OCO budgets for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unlike the DOD Cost of War Report, the Watson report adds what it considers to be Afghanistan-related costs of $433 billion above DOD baseline costs, $296 billion in medical and disability costs for veterans, and $530 billion in interest costs on related Treasury borrowing...SIGAR takes no position on the reasonableness on the Watson report’s assumptions or the accuracy of its calculations.

Here, it should be noted that the data in Figure One are themselves a lesson of war. The overall allocation of resources to the war, the need to manage investment in the war relative to other national security needs, and the proof that spending on the war was well managed were some of the most obvious and important lessons to the United States. Yet, the U.S. government never developed transparent and consistent reporting on the cost of the war in 20 years of fighting.

Various elements of the Executive Branch constantly changed their methods of accounting. They often failed to openly report for a given year, and the numbers in Figure One still remain questionable at best. Here, administration after administration failed to report properly, and the Senate and House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees failed to perform a key part of their duties over 20 years. The net effect was that the two main branches of government effectively lied by omission to the American people for decades.

One lesson of the war – and one that should apply to any future conflict or any serious overseas contingency operation – is the need for annual reporting on its true cost that is either prepared by, or audited by, the General Accountability Office (GAO). The U.S. should never again see such reporting by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) mysteriously vanish, see constant shifts in reporting methods, or see erratic efforts like the Cost of War reports.

Like virtually every other aspect of official reporting on the war, the tendency to disguise problems and lie, at least by omission, demonstrates the need for public and unclassified reporting in depth and for public debate on the major aspects of the cost and conduct of war and military/security operations. Excessive classification does not hide reality from enemies, who soon learn the weaknesses in U.S. efforts in the field. It hides reality from the American people and meaningful review by the Congress, media, and outside expert review.
Compartmentalized Aid Efforts without Coherent and Integrated Planning, Management, Accounting, and Measures of Effectiveness

Equally important, a review of the ways each department of the U.S. government planned and managed this spending shows that the proforma U.S. efforts to create an integrated plan for the military efforts of the Department of Defense – which dominated total spending – and the civil efforts of the Department of State and USAID were never more than a hollow shell.

Such a review will show that no element of the U.S. government created a coherent planning structure for its efforts that extended over a meaningful period of years, that there were no effective financial controls or efforts to cut off aid on a conditional basis when given efforts failed or were subject to a continuing process of massive corruption, and that far too many claims of effectiveness were never based on actual data or efforts to measure how effective aid really was.

Mindlessly Erratic Spending Patterns

The need to learn these lessons is further reinforced by the data in Figure Two, which shows the almost incredible swings in military spending by major category of U.S. aid. No one needs to be a CEO or even have managed a household budget to realize how ridiculously stupid the swings in spending shown in these four graphs are. They could not possibly fund stable efforts, and they clearly do not correlate to the patterns in the fighting.

Some, like the counternarcotics effort were not only a total waste, but actively aided the Taliban and corruption by creating incentives for those in the Afghan government to turn to the Taliban for support in growing narcotics and to sell exemptions from the efforts to destroy poppy crops and limit exports. Program turbulence is inevitable in wartime, but this level of turbulence almost ensure that many forms of aid would fail – and fail after massive investment. Like conditionality, the need for effective planning and long-term management of funds is another critical lesson of the war.
**Figure One: The “Alpine Swings” in the U.S. Effort in Afghanistan**

**Part One: Total Reported U.S. Spending on the Afghan War: FY2002-FY2021**

**Fourth Quarter**

Note: Numbers have been rounded. Cumulative obligations reported by DOD for the Cost of War through September 30, 2021, differ markedly from cumulative appropriations through March 31, 2022, as presented elsewhere in the Status of Funds section, because the former figures do not include unobligated appropriations and DOD Cost of War reporting currently lags by two quarters.

Source: DOD, Cost of War Monthly Report, Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred, data as of September 30, 2021. Obligation data shown against year funds obligated. SIGAR analysis of annual obligation of reconstruction accounts as presented in SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 10/30/2021. Obligation data shown against year funds appropriated.

Figure One: The “Alpine Swings” in the U.S. Effort in Afghanistan
Part Two: Estimates of Total U.S. Troop Levels: 2002-2021

Source: Department of Defense “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress, media reports.

Notes: Reported DOD figures through October 2017 include all active and reserve component personnel physically located in Afghanistan as of the first calendar day of each month.

*Projected for 2018 based on public statements of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. According to USFORA, the publicly releasable U.S. troop level, as of March 1, 2018, remains 14,000.

*On January 15, 2021, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was 2,500; 850 is projected for the end of the drawdown.
Figure Two: *Boom and Bust: Dysfunctional Swings in Aid Spending Over a Twenty-Year Period (In U.S. Billions)*

Corruption and Failed Governance

As the reporting of SIGAR makes consistently clear, far too many U.S. aid and military support efforts resulted in little more than waste, fraud, and abuse. As the World Bank data in Figure Three show, the Afghan central government that the U.S. did so much to create remained one of the worst governments in the world in spite of U.S. and other outside efforts.  

Corruption was the rule, not the exception. Islands of real success were not transformed into success at the national level, and many of the claims made by U.S. officials and public affairs officers were little more than exaggerations that bordered on becoming a liars’ contest.

An intensive review of both public opinion polls and U.S. official reporting (which should include a review of all relevant classified data now that there is no reason to classify it) will also show that while many Afghans did benefit and did appreciate the aid, they also saw it as enabling massive levels of corruption and power brokering at their expense. It will also show that the struggle for “hearts and minds” was undermined as much by the massive levels of corruption and profiteering as any other single cause that anti-corruption efforts failed to go beyond token levels and that pledges that the flow of aid would be conditional on honest performance were never kept.

SIGAR and LIG reports document case after case, and it seems all too likely that a great deal of classified Command, State, and USAID traffic do the same. It is also all too possible that major amounts of outside humanitarian aid were diverted or wasted.

Accordingly, one of the key lessons of the war is that both civil and military aid efforts need to be integrated, that effective requirements need to be developed and enforced to control the flow of funds and measure the effectiveness with which they are used, and that there needs to be some effective way to find and punish a host country’s corrupt political figures, officials, officers, and contractors – as well as corrupt U.S. and allied officials, officers, and contractors.

Given the long history of failed anti-corruption efforts in host countries – ones that never go beyond a few symbolic efforts or beyond punishing a few scape goats – the answer may well be one that SIGAR has addressed in much of its reporting. Conditionality must be ruthlessly enforced whenever corruption, waste, fraud, and abuse reach gross levels. It is not reasonable to punish every petty action, but aid efforts cannot be allowed to become symbols of waste and abuse. Money and support must by publicly ended, and the corrupt must be identified by name. Corrupt individuals, elements of government or the security services, and contractors must be publicly and permanently banned from any further role in using or allocating aid money.

Moreover, the U.S. should probably take a lesson from its sanctioning of Russian oligarchs and similar cases. It should deny corrupt officials, officers, and contractors the right to enter the U.S., along with their adult children – repeatedly naming them in official public reports – and working with other aid donors to do the same. Relying on national anti-corruption efforts may work in a few developed cases like Singapore, but it is a triumph of hope over experience in dealing with almost all of the developing world.

Finally, one of the key lessons of the Afghan War – and major U.S. security assistance and civil aid projects supported by the Department of Defense, State Department, USAID, and other federal agencies – may be for the Congress to legislate a requirement for annual reporting on spending and effectiveness by major activity that explicitly requires reporting on the level of financial control and supervision; suspected and proven levels of corruption, waste, fraud, and abuse; and the level of progress and its impact with suitable metrics to explicitly indicate the real-world status
of the effort. The kind of empty praise and “spin” in most current reporting encourages exaggerated claims, a lack of proper fiscal controls, and the tolerance of waste and corruption.

**Figure Three: Failed and Corrupt Afghan National Governance 2001-2020**

Reacting Far Too Slowly to the Return of the Taliban When it Mattered Most

One real danger is the tendency to focus on the final phases of the war and the final collapse of the Afghan national government, rather than the entire history of the war. As Figure Four shows, the U.S. reacted far too slowly to the return of the Taliban after 2005. If anything, Figure Four sharply understates this failure because the U.S. and its allies took years to actually staff their efforts to create effective Afghan national military forces even after they finally set meaningful force goals in 2010. Even in 2011, a large number of the required trainers were not present.

As Figure Five shows, the U.S. and NATO then actually made things worse by counting pledged trainers as present when they were not, and it took until 2012-2013 to create a critical mass of trainers for the Afghan National Army (ANA). No similar effort ever took place to create a fully effective mix of a paramilitary forces for the Afghan National Police (ANP).

The full range of problems that followed after 2011 is too complex to easily summarize, but it is address in detail in Anthony H. Cordesman’s Learning to Right Lessons from the Afghan War, CSIS, September 7, 2021, and in SIGAR’s Collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that Led to Its Demise, May 2022. The Learning the Right Lessons paper provides an additional warning that the U.S. seems to have steadily restructured its reporting on the Afghan civil and military efforts – and on the Taliban’s progress – to make development seem positive when they were becoming increasingly negative. Put bluntly, the U.S. public affairs effort became something approaching a deliberate set of lies after 2014, although much of this was in the form of shifts away from meaningful metrics which had increasingly negative results to metrics that were valid as far as they went but increasingly irrelevant and sometimes – particularly in the civil sector – not a metric at all. SIGAR also highlighted these developments at the time, although it described them as having classified the meaningful data, and SIGAR did not address the possible motives involved.

The more recent SIGAR analysis of the Collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces does a particularly good job of analyzing of the causes of the ANA’s collapse and the lessons the U.S. should learn from its failures in trying to create effective Afghan military forces. It concludes that, SIGAR found that the single most important factor in the ANDSF’s collapse in August 2021 was the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan through signing the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump administration, followed by President Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April 2021.

Due to the ANDSF’s dependency on U.S. military forces, these events destroyed ANDSF morale. The ANDSF had long relied on the U.S. military’s presence to protect against large-scale ANDSF losses, and Afghan troops saw the United States as a means of holding their government accountable for paying their salaries. The U.S.-Taliban agreement made it clear that this was no longer the case, resulting in a sense of abandonment within the ANDSF and the Afghan population. The agreement set in motion a series of events crucial to understanding the ANDSF’s collapse.

First, the United States dramatically reduced a critical force multiplier: U.S. airstrikes. In 2017, the Trump administration’s South Asia strategy granted the Department of Defense (DOD) additional authorizations to combat the Taliban, mostly in the form of airstrikes. In 2019 alone, the United States conducted 7,423 airstrikes, the most since at least 2009. As a result, senior Afghan officials told SIGAR that the ANDSF was making progress and recapturing territory. Limiting airstrikes after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement the following year left the ANDSF without a key advantage in keeping the Taliban at bay.
Next, the ANDSF remained reliant on the U.S. military in part because the United States designed the ANDSF as a mirror image of U.S. forces. This created long-term ANDSF dependencies. The United States created a combined arms military structure that required a high degree of professional military sophistication and leadership. The United States also created a non-commissioned officer corps which had no foundation in Afghanistan military history.

A critical component of the combined arms military force structure was the Afghan Air Force (AAF), which was the greatest ANDSF advantage over the Taliban. However, the AAF was not projected to be self-sufficient until at least 2030. The U.S. decision to withdraw on-site contract maintenance from Afghanistan in May 2021 reduced the availability of operational aircraft and removed maintenance instruction at key regional airfields. Further, the ANDSF had stockpiles of U.S.-provided weapons and supplies, but did not have the logistics capabilities to move these items quickly enough to meet operational demands and had to rely on a thinly-stretched Afghan Air Force to do so. As a result, ANDSF units complained that they did not have enough ammunition, food, water, or other military equipment to sustain military engagements against the Taliban.

Additionally, the Afghan government failed to develop a national security strategy and plan for nationwide security following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Instead, former President Ashraf Ghani frequently changed ANDSF leaders and appointed loyalists, while marginalizing well-trained ANDSF officers aligned with the United States. The constant turnover weakened military chains of command, trust, and morale in the ANDSF. Young, well-trained, educated, and professional ANDSF officers who grew up under U.S. tutelage were marginalized and their ties to the U.S. became a liability.

It is striking that SIGAR highlights the limited ability of the ANA and ANDSF to support its own logistics and maintenance effort after some 20 years of outside training, and it is equally striking that the ANDSF were still dependent on 22,000+ Department of Defense contractors in the second quarter of 2020.13
Figure Four: Giving the Taliban a Decade to Return without Making a Proper Effort to Create Effective Afghan National Forces

Figure Five: Illustrative Shortfalls in Trainers and ANA Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Equipment in January 2011

Trainer Shortfalls in January 2011, even if Trainers pledged but absent are counted

NCO Shortfalls in January 2011, even if AWOLs and Missing are counted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANA unit</th>
<th>Number of NCO positions</th>
<th>Number of NCO positions unfilled</th>
<th>Percentage of NCO positions unfilled</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>111th Capital Division</td>
<td>2,016</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201st Corps</td>
<td>6,664</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>203rd Corps</td>
<td>5,440</td>
<td>1,666</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>205th Corps</td>
<td>6,219</td>
<td>1,806</td>
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<tr>
<td>207th Corps</td>
<td>2,486</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>209th Corps</td>
<td>3,134</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>216th Corps</td>
<td>4,346</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forces Division</td>
<td>2,570</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31,875</td>
<td>8,413</td>
<td>26%</td>
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</table>

Massive Equipment Shortfalls

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<thead>
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<th>Item</th>
<th>Number authorized</th>
<th>Number on hand</th>
<th>Percentage of authorized on hand</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
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<tr>
<td>D-30 howitzer</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>99</td>
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<td>RPG-7 recoilless gun</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vehicles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable reach rough terrain forklift</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>117</td>
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<tr>
<td>M116 tractor</td>
<td>124</td>
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<tr>
<td>M870 trailer</td>
<td>131</td>
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<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>M1151 Humvee</td>
<td>2,108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motorcycle</td>
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<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire truck</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Losing by Winning: “Win, Leave, and Lose”

In broad terms, the U.S. then proceeded to repeat one key aspect of the war in Vietnam from at least 2003 through the collapse of the Afghan government forces in 2021.

The U.S. could use airpower and elite U.S. and Afghan forces to win virtually every battle to the extent it could limit or avoid any major lasting Taliban defeat of U.S., allied, or Afghan national forces. The end result, however, increasingly became a situation where — in case after case — every such tactical victory was followed by the elite forces that defeated the Taliban leaving and the Afghan military forces, police, and government that remained coming under growing Taliban influence or control. The end result was that a short-term initial victory against the Taliban turned into a defeat.

In Harry Summers book, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, he noted in an exchange he had with a Vietnamese officer: Summer stated to the officer, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,” and the North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant.” As Lt. General James Dubik who served in a senior command in Afghanistan pointed out in an article for the Institute for War as early as 2014, this had all too many parallels in Afghanistan.

Even early in the war — when U.S. and allied forces did virtually all of the fighting — the U.S. ability to “win” battles at the tactical level was enabled through the use of airpower and sometimes with elite troops. The Afghan forces rarely demonstrated the ability to hold the territory involved, and both the Afghan government and supporting aid efforts only showed a tenuous ability to win by establishing a lasting and effective civil presence.

As time went on, even a massive surge in U.S. ground troops could only win at the tactical level. The combination of U.S., allied, and Afghan military, police, and local forces failed to “hold” and secure the area over time — often seeing the Taliban exploit the aftermath of its tactical defeats to increase its presence and ability to influence and pressure Afghan forces and governance.

As time went on and U.S. and allied ground forces were cut to only play a steadily less important direct role in the fighting, Afghan forces grew in size but only a limited number of such forces were highly effective in combat, and they required massive U.S. air support and often support from U.S. elite forces and/or forward “advisory” elements that played a key role in directing combat.

Efforts like restructuring the Afghan government presence in areas where the Taliban had tactical reversals at the peak of the fighting — like the “government in a box” effort — usually failed, and Afghan local forces, police, and regular army forces were vulnerable to Taliban threats and pressure. More and more rural Districts became unsafe for aid workers, saw Taliban elements grow in size and influence, watched the government presence become limited to token action or to a presence in the District capital, and effectively disappear, while major roads and lines of communication came under de facto Taliban control — sometimes with parallel lines of Taliban and Afghan government check points.

While U.S. commanders referred to a strategy of “win, hold, and build” through at least 2014, this was almost never the case. The real-world course of action, was “win, leave, and lose.” Even during the surge of U.S. troops at the peak of U.S. deployments, the United States could not provide enough U.S. ground troops to secure major urban and rural areas for any length of time. Even after some 15 years of serious efforts to build up effective ANA forces, it was still dependent on a small, elite portion of the force to win actual battles — and “win” meant dependence on U.S. air power.
From some point around 2012, the war established a pattern where the Taliban could not take a major urban area or openly control a rural district capitol, but it could steadily exploit its ability to control the countryside around a population center and increasingly exploit the instability that followed a U.S./ANA tactical victory by establishing control or a high degree of influence over the weakened and corrupt local government, equally weak and often corrupt Afghan police forces, and the army forces that were too weak to go on the offensive or actively hold a given area. It took years of slow incremental effort, but the Taliban steadily increased its influence and control without necessarily winning tactical victories and thus establishing a steadily wide pattern of success.

These patterns were reinforced by the fact that the only forces which could potentially perform the “hold” function in most areas were the local defense forces – which remained low priority, corrupt, and self-seeking in spite of multiple reorganizations – and the police forces which were also a low priority for training, sometimes fell to corruption and were vulnerable to Taliban pressure, despite being pushed more and more into trying to perform paramilitary functions at the cost of providing an effective justice effort.

As SIGAR points out in its report on lessons from the Afghan police effort,\(^\text{15}\)

> Our findings highlight the difficulty of fighting a heavily armed insurgency while trying to develop indigenous law enforcement and civilian policing capabilities. As the Taliban-led insurgency gained inroads into southern and eastern Afghanistan in 2004 and violence escalated, the United States and the international community decided to transfer from a civilian-led to a military-led police assistance mission. The result of this policy shift was that the Afghan police force became increasingly militarized, and its focus became fighting insurgents rather than arresting the common criminals and gangsters—many of whom were members of or closely affiliated with the Afghan government—who threatened the everyday lives of Afghan citizens. This militarization, along with the U.S. focus on counterinsurgency operations, ended up empowering and supporting warlords-turned-police chiefs who were tactically proficient in fighting, but who were also known to be human rights abusers and criminals. Police advisors often faced a moral dilemma: whether to partner with corrupt and abusive yet militarily effective police officials who had the support of key portions of the local population, or refuse and risk rising instability, the loss of support for the U.S. intervention, and the reduction of the United States’ ability to target and disrupt terrorist cells.

…For nearly 20 years, the United States and the international community provided assistance to the Afghan National Police (ANP) with the goal of creating a legitimate, accountable, and effective civilian police force that could protect the population from criminals and uphold the country’s rule of law…Yet—with the exception of some specialized police forces—community policing and law enforcement capabilities in Afghanistan were weak or nonexistent, despite more than $21 billion in U.S. and international financial support…Overall, the ANP proved incapable of enforcing the law, protecting Afghan citizens from attacks from the Taliban and the Islamic State, or ensuring that Afghanistan does not become another safe haven for international terrorists. In August 2021, four months after the U.S. president announced a full withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)—including the ANP—collapsed, paving the way for a Taliban takeover.

…Another contributing factor in the collapse of the ANP was the failure of the international community to learn from experience. In December 2001, as the international community was mediating a signed compact among the various anti-Taliban Afghan factions, the United States and the United Nations largely ignored the well-documented need to rapidly deploy police and rule of law advisors to stabilize what was, at least at that moment, a post-conflict country. Instead, starting in 2001, the United States chose a “light footprint” strategy of maintaining a small troop presence, and the international community followed suit. As the United States focused on pursuing al-Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors, senior Afghan government officials seized the opportunity to reestablish a police force beholden only to them, at the expense of the Afghan people.

For over a decade, that post-2001 Afghan police force operated with near-total impunity. The Afghan government and international community did not hold Afghan police officers, especially those with political connections, accountable for numerous acts of corruption and human rights abuses: extortion, arbitrary
detention, torture, and even extrajudicial killings. This rapidly diminished the population’s hope that the new Afghan government would serve their interests. Over time, the Taliban exploited that lack of trust to reestablish inroads in Afghanistan.

By mid-2002, the international community recognized the depleted state of the Afghan police and the need to increase international support. Based on its longstanding ties with the Afghan police dating back to the 1930s, Germany took the lead for this task. Germany’s approach focused on a multi-year, university-like training for Afghan police officers, in addition to reconstructing police infrastructure. While Germany largely met its stated goals for training and restructuring the force, the overall plan was inadequate—too small in scope, and too slow in implementation—to meet the law enforcement needs of the volatile Afghan environment.

Frustrated with the German approach, but unwilling to directly criticize it, the U.S. Department of State created its own program of police reform in 2003. Although by law State is the lead U.S. agency for police assistance, it does not have a dedicated team of deployable police development experts. Instead, it contracted out its entire police development mission with little to no oversight.

From the start, the State-led police assistance program struggled. Like Germany’s, the U.S. police training program was based on the assumption that Afghanistan was a post-conflict state, and that the international community had years to implement a professional police training program. By then, however, Afghanistan was not a post-conflict country; it was a “conflict-paused” country. As the Taliban regained strength, security deteriorated—as did State’s freedom of movement, limiting U.S. personnel to bases and the U.S. embassy in Kabul. State also failed to implement a universal best practice of embedding experienced police advisors with newly trained police officers to provide follow-up training in the field. In short, despite having the legal authority and the budget, State proved ill-prepared to operate in a high-threat environment like Afghanistan.

Starting around 2004, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld began to advocate for the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to take over the police assistance mission from both State and the Germans. Rumsfeld directed military commanders in Afghanistan to conduct fact-finding missions to support his arguments. The findings were alarming: despite existing training programs, the ANP were short over 3 million basic items, including cold weather uniforms and sleeping bags, and had only 15 percent of the weapons and communications equipment that they needed…After a year of increasingly urgent memos from Rumsfeld to the White House and to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, Rumsfeld succeeded in persuading then-President George W. Bush in 2005 to authorize the transfer of all police assistance and training programs from State to DOD because DOD seemed better resourced for the mission.

… By 2006, the U.S. military created separate police training teams called police mentoring teams, with the intent to deploy soldiers specifically focused on the police assistance mission. Despite the change in approach implied by the new name, the police mentoring teams continued to be staffed mostly by soldiers who lacked a basic understanding of policing, including law enforcement, community policing, or criminal investigations, but rather had expertise in infantry, combat aviation, and other military related capabilities.

This was largely the result of a lack of human resource management systems within DOD that could properly identify and deploy U.S. military officers who had experience and expertise in law enforcement tasks. The teams were also short-staffed, and team members were frequently reassigned to other units. The relatively small number of police mentoring teams meant that many ANP units lacked regular trainers and mentors. The teams themselves were often confined to the base because they did not have the required force strength to both guard the base and advise the Afghan police. Frequent reassignments of team members also resulted in misleading reports from the field.

… Starting in 2009, the U.S. military, NATO, and the Afghan Ministry of Interior adopted a “clear, hold, and build” counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan, in which the various Afghan police units—the Afghan Uniform Police, Afghan Border Police, and the Afghan Civil Order Police—each had, in theory, specified roles. The Afghan Uniform Police was responsible for providing law enforcement and community policing in secure districts, the Afghan Border Police was assigned to protect the border from insurgent movement, and the Afghan National Civil Order Police was supposed to be a bridge between military-led operations and police led security.

In reality, these roles were confused. Afghan Uniform Police and Afghan Border Police were involved in initial counterinsurgency operations to clear districts, and the Afghan National Civil Order Police—the
smallest of the forces—was unable to provide policing in all high-threat areas. Ill-equipped to fight and hold territory against heavily armed insurgents, the Afghan Uniform Police suffered high casualties and even lost newly gained territory back to the insurgency. By focusing on the counterinsurgency fight and the growing violence throughout the country, the Afghan police failed to develop the basic law enforcement and community policing capabilities required to prevent and respond to criminal activities that plagued the daily lives of many Afghan citizens, even in areas of Afghanistan that were secure enough for a civilian police presence. 

Afghan police officers struggled to deliver law and order to local communities, and in many cases actually contributed to crime by engaging in extortion, assault, and human rights abuses, which eroded the legitimacy of the police and the entire Afghan governance system in the eyes of the local population. Because of underdeveloped investigative techniques, the police relied almost exclusively on written confessions for court convictions. This practice led to the widespread use of illegal detention and torture of suspected insurgents. In response to such police brutality, some communities, especially in the Pashtun heartlands of southern Afghanistan, welcomed the Taliban back as liberators—just as they did in the 1990s.

The U.S. military’s approach to police training preserved Afghanistan’s pervasive culture of police impunity by funding and providing technical assistance to Afghan police units that faced credible reports of committing gross human rights abuses. Afghanistan thus illustrated a key dilemma for U.S. advisors in stabilization and reconstruction missions: Is U.S. cooperation with brutal but militarily capable security forces worthwhile if it restores security to contested or enemy-controlled territory—or does such cooperation create more conflict in the long run by undermining good governance and rule of law?

… Despite … limited success stories, Afghan police capabilities were significantly underdeveloped at the time the United States decided to withdraw military forces. In the face of an aggressive Taliban offensive and lacking either logistical support or the benefit of U.S. air strikes, many units of the Afghan National Police simply quit, often without a fight.

Worse, the deep divisions in the Afghan government under President Ghani, the endemic corruption in government operations and the government justice system, the fact numerous local power brokers lost influence over the Taliban, and the U.S./Afghan command focusing on securing Kabul and provincial capitals with limited focus on the countryside, all contributed to the “win, leave, and lose” aspects of warfare. In contrast, the Taliban established effective cells and local power structures, was not corrupt, provided a more functional local justice system, and was a part of the local culture – initially in Pashtun areas and gradually in other areas that initially were hostile. It also exploited drug, mining, and other economic activities in ways that gained popular support or did far less to alienate itself from the people.

Furthermore, the U.S. disguised this situation by failing to report on the steady progress the Taliban had made in taking control – or expanding its influence – in rural and urban areas since 2014. It effectively shifted from a focus on national defense to one on defending Kabul and provincial capitals in the process, but it only reported on what it defined as “enemy initiated attacks” rather than the fact that the Afghan government was steadily losing the country at a political level over a period of nearly a decade.

Over time, the U.S. stopped unclassified reporting on progress in aid and development by District as the Taliban gained influence. The UN was also pressured to stop reporting on the districts where aid workers could successfully operate. The U.S. and NATO stopped reporting in detail on overall levels of violence and substituted meaningless metrics like Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs). The U.S and NATO then – as SIGAR warned clearly at the time – classified virtually all such reporting. No serious reporting was sustained on the impact of the civil governance and development efforts. Official reporting lied more by omission than commission, but the longer the war lasted, the more of a liars’ contest it became.
As time went on, elite Afghan ground forces – with heavy support from U.S. airpower and direct forward support from elite ground elements and advisors – continued to win major battles, but such battles gradually became more and more limited to urban areas and finally to provincial capitals. Afghan elite forces were too small to perform the hold function, and Afghan governance was too divided, weak, and corrupt. “Winning” battles became more and more synonymous with losing the war. By some point between 2017 and 2019, the war became largely a conflict between urban “islands” under increasingly uncertain government control and large rural areas under Taliban control, with steadily growing Taliban influence even in the areas under government control.

As is discussed in a following section of this analysis, this situation became far worse after the U.S. began to negotiate “peace talks” between the Taliban and Afghan government and announced deadlines for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The U.S. reduced its intense air attacks and limited the role of elite U.S. troops.

Here, SIGAR reporting already provides a clear statement of what is likely to be one of the most unpopular lessons of the war, as the following excerpt from the summary of its report on the Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise shows:

SIGAR found that the single most important factor in the ANDSF’s collapse in August 2021 was the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan through signing the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump administration, followed by President Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April 2021. Due to the ANDSF’s dependency on U.S. military forces, these events destroyed ANDSF morale. The ANDSF had long relied on the U.S. military’s presence to protect against large-scale ANDSF losses, and Afghan troops saw the United States as a means of holding their government accountable for paying their salaries. The U.S.-Taliban agreement made it clear that this was no longer the case, resulting in a sense of abandonment within the ANDSF and the Afghan population. The agreement set in motion a series of events crucial to understanding the ANDSF’s collapse.

First, the United States dramatically reduced a critical force multiplier: U.S. airstrikes. In 2017, the Trump administration’s South Asia strategy granted the Department of Defense (DOD) additional authorizations to combat the Taliban, mostly in the form of airstrikes. In 2019 alone, the United States conducted 7,423 airstrikes, the most since at least 2009. As a result, senior Afghan officials told SIGAR that the ANDSF was making progress and recapturing territory. Limiting airstrikes after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement the following year left the ANDSF without a key advantage in keeping the Taliban at bay. Next, the ANDSF remained reliant on the U.S. military in part because the United States designed the ANDSF as a mirror image of U.S. forces.

This created long-term ANDSF dependencies. The United States created a combined arms military structure that required a high degree of professional military sophistication and leadership. The United States also created a non-commissioned officer corps which had no foundation in Afghanistan military history. A critical component of the combined arms military force structure was the Afghan Air Force (AAF), which was the greatest ANDSF advantage over the Taliban. However, the AAF was not projected to be self-sufficient until at least 2030. The U.S. decision to withdraw on-site contract maintenance from Afghanistan in May 2021 reduced the availability of operational aircraft and removed maintenance instruction at key regional airfields.

Further, the ANDSF had stockpiles of U.S.-provided weapons and supplies, but did not have the logistics capabilities to move these items quickly enough to meet operational demands and had to rely on a thinly-stretched Afghan Air Force to do so. As a result, ANDSF units complained that they did not have enough ammunition, food, water, or other military equipment to sustain military engagements against the Taliban.

Additionally, the Afghan government failed to develop a national security strategy and plan for nationwide security following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Instead, former President Ashraf Ghani frequently changed ANDSF leaders and appointed loyalists, while marginalizing well-trained ANDSF officers aligned with the
United States. The constant turnover weakened military chains of command, trust, and morale in the ANDSF. Young, well-trained, educated, and professional ANDSF officers who grew up under U.S. tutelage were marginalized and their ties to the U.S. became a liability.

Meanwhile, the Taliban’s military campaign exploited the ANDSF’s logistical, tactical, and leadership weaknesses. Direct attacks and negotiated surrenders set up a domino effect of one district after another falling to the Taliban. The Taliban’s media campaign, magnified by real-time reporting, further undermined the Afghan forces’ determination to fight. Other factors also played a role in the ANDSF’s collapse.

First, SIGAR found that no one country or agency had ownership of the ANDSF development mission. Instead, ownership existed within a NATO-led coalition and with temporary organizations, such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Resolute Support, and the Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan. All of these entities were staffed with a constantly changing rotation of military and civilian advisors. The constant personnel turnover impeded continuity and institutional memory. The result was an uncoordinated approach that plagued the entire mission. Second, the length of the U.S. commitment was disconnected from a realistic understanding of the time required to build a self-sustaining security sector—a process that took decades to achieve in South Korea.

Third, the United States created more long-term dependencies by providing the ANDSF with advanced military equipment that they could not sustain and that required a U.S. military or contractor presence. Additionally, starting in 2005, DOD received congressional authorization to implement a pseudo Foreign Military Sales process that removed the Afghan government from any formal role in the equipping process. From 2005 on, the United States had sole responsibility for requirements for ANDSF equipment, the fulfillment of those requirements, and the payment for items procured.

Fourth, the United States lacked any real yardstick for measuring the ANDSF’s development. The metrics DOD used were inconsistent and unable to measure the development of ANDSF capabilities and capacities over time. Since 2005, the U.S. metrics used by the military focused primarily on inputs and outputs, masking performance-degrading factors such as poor leadership and corruption. During the U.S. military surge, measurement methods changed five times, making long-term tracking of ANDSF progress impossible. Despite the goal of developing a self-sustaining ANDSF, the highest recorded measurement of progress during the U.S. military’s transition of security to the ANDSF was “independent with advisors,” a complete disconnect from DOD’s stated objective.

Fifth, SIGAR found that over the 20-year mission, the Afghan government lacked ownership and access to important Afghan systems responsible for tracking ANDSF personnel and equipment. Senior Afghan government officials told SIGAR that despite having staff responsible for human resource management and procurement, these staff members did not have the ability to independently access and modify accountability systems. To access and manipulate ANDSF data, senior Afghan officials had to request readouts from U.S. contractors embedded in the Ministries of Defense and Interior. This lack of trust also manifested in the field, where U.S. forces internally planning operations would give ANDSF-partnered units only limited notice of operations, due to fears that the ANDSF would leak plans to the Taliban. At times, according to retired General David Barno, ANDSF field units were simply “window dressing” to U.S.-led operations.
Focusing on Creating Truly Self-Sufficient Forces and Civil Governance

Seen from these perspectives, the data in Figure Two to Figure Five also indicate that the United States should be far more careful about substituting U.S. and allied forces for the development of effective national forces, funding exercises in transformational nation-building rather than requiring a host country to provide effective and honest enough governance to succeed, and making massive commitments of U.S. resources in the process.

In broad terms, the almost Alpine peaks in the rise and fall of U.S. and allied troops, military spending, and civil spending between 2002 and 2021 did far more to encourage ultimate defeat than success. So did suppressing reporting on progress by district and ending polls of popular support for the government by district after 2010 – when such support began to seriously decline. As has been suggested earlier, only the most critical strategic interests could ever have justified the level of commitment shown in these figures, and no credible process of strategic triage could have resulted in funding profiles that reflect so much obvious waste.

At the same time, these same data strongly indicate that if the U.S. had focused from the start on building effective Afghan forces – trained and equipped to meet Afghan standards and political and economic realities – it might well have prevented the reemergence of the Taliban at anything like the level that occurred before 2011. Similarly letting (or forcing) the Afghans to create an effective government by their standards – with aid contingent on actual performance – might have done far more to bring political and economic stability.

It is clear from the spending profiles involved (and also from the data on U.S. casualties in the war) that the U.S. might well have made massive cuts in its spending and military efforts after FY2006 and been able to shift to supporting Afghan forces with airpower and the kind of training and expert combat support exemplified by the Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) much sooner. In practice, waiting until 2018 to create effective tools like the SFABs to support Afghan forces wasted some eighteen years. Moreover – as was also the case with Vietnam and Iraq – one critical lesson of such wars is that the United States cannot cost-effectively help a nation that cannot help itself.

Peace Negotiations that End All Peace

Finally, any honest analysis of the lessons of the war should fully examine the strange mix of peace negotiation efforts under the Trump and Biden administrations that forced a resisting Ghani government into peace negotiations with the Taliban without any public indication of what kind of peace the U.S. was seeking or that could lead to a stable and peaceful relationship between the two sides.

There is a strange and nearly total silence about the existence of any concrete U.S. goals as to how both sides could agree on a peace settlement and a new form of government from the first announcement that the U.S. had reached an agreement on peace negotiations with the Taliban in February 2020, to the Biden announcement on April 13, 2021 that all U.S. troops would leave between May and September 11, 2021, to the fall of Kabul and former President Ghani fleeing the country on August 15, 2021.

If the U.S. had any contingency plans for a credible peace settlement between the Afghan central Government and the Taliban, they were one of the few secrets of this kind that any U.S.
government has ever kept. If anything, they seem to be something close to a parody of the famous misquote of Senator George Aiken regarding the Vietnam war, “Let’s declare victory and get out.”

In fairness to Aiken, Mark Bushnell – a Vermont historian – reports that Aiken’s actual quote came much closer to the situation in Afghanistan as the Trump administration approached its decision to call for peace negotiations and the announcement of an American withdrawal from Afghanistan on February 29, 2020 that continued in virtually the same form under the Biden administration. According to Bushnell, what Allen actually said was: “Let’s declare that we have achieved victory in our struggle to meet attainable military goals and then redeploy our troops in cities that the enemy could have no hope of capturing, thus forcing them either to escalate the war, and thereby face the condemnation of the world, or agree to negotiate.” He also quotes Aiken as saying that, “Such a declaration should be accompanied, not by announcement of a phased withdrawal, but by the gradual redeployment of U.S. military forces around strategic centers and the substitution of intensive reconnaissance for bombing.”

If the real goal of the Trump and Biden administrations was simply to create a unilateral political cover for leaving Afghanistan, any honest effort at strategic triage would have provided a good rationale for using such an approach as a political “cover” for withdrawal and could have been one that at least had a tenuous hope of success. However, the use of such tactics to put a favorable spin on U.S. withdrawal should at least be acknowledged and examined.

If there were any actual Trump and Biden plans that focused on what either administration felt offered real-world prospects for peace and that led the U.S. to virtually forcing negotiations on the Ghani government and the U.S. moving ahead in the face of Ghani’s resistance, this should be made clear as well. At present, there is something approaching a deafening silence in all of the public statements about the entire U.S. approach from February 2020 to the collapse in mid-August 2021. The fog of war is bad enough. Deliberately creating a fog of peace is going a bit too far.

Accordingly, an honest examination of the lessons of war must include the full examination of the following ten questions, and one that publicly discloses every classified answers in detail that does not disclose sensitive sources and methods:

1. To what extent did the U.S. actually understand that it had lost much of the countryside to the Taliban, that its efforts to create an effective Afghan government and economy had failed, that SIGAR is correct in stating that the U.S. was years away from creating effective Afghan forces (if ever), and that the entire structure of the Afghan government civil and military effort had become a façade indefinitely dependent on outside foreign aid – aid that financed most of the modern urban development and economic activity in the country?

2. To what extent did the State Department and USAID realize how corrupt, divided, and ineffective the civil government had become and the degree to which the limited “islands” of success in governance and development had little or no prospect of becoming self-financed?

3. Why did the Executive Branch and the Congress fail to create effective financial controls; measures of effectiveness; and limits to waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption over a 20-year period?

4. To what extent had the U.S. government engaged in peace negotiations with the Taliban because it saw no credible prospect that the Ghani or some alternative Afghan central
government could survive in a country where it increasing only governed and secured “Kabulstan” and a few other urban islands rather than the nation?

5. To what extent did the U.S. military and NATO recognize the crippling issues and shortfalls in the military and police training and the development issues raised by SIGAR in its lessons reporting?

6. To what extent did the U.S. recognize that by forcing the Ghani government to negotiate with the Taliban with a deadline for U.S. withdrawal, it essentially created a situation where there was virtually no practical chance of either a functional peace settlement or the survival of the Afghan government?

7. To what extent did either administration consult on a realistic and honest basis with the Congress and America’s allies in the war?

8. To what extent did the U.S. policy apparatus, command structure, and the administrations of the time fail to understand the growing problems in the Afghan effort from 2010 onwards, and to what extent did they deliberately conceal and understate the problems involved? To what extent did a reliance on “spin” and favorable public affairs reporting contribute to the failure of the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan by understating real-world needs and allocating resources to wrong objectives?

9. At what point, if any, did the U.S. recognize at the classified level that the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and military was all too real a prospect?

10. To what extent did publicly denying the real-world progress of the Taliban, the growing reliance on protecting urban areas rather than creating an effective national government, and announcing and enforcing a deadline for withdrawal regardless of the lack of progress in the peace process ensure that when the collapse came, the impact would be an unmanageable mess?

One key aspect of all of these questions is that none have a partisan answer. Another is that all illustrate the need for transparency and honesty in communicating the realities of war on a public and unclassified level. From a practical viewpoint, the last question is also critical because of the risk that the lessons effort will focus on the near chaos of some aspects of the evacuation during the final collapse of Kabul and the Afghan government.

One does not have to be an expert in complexity or chaos theory to realize that no amount of planning and preparation could have avoided most of the problems that occurred during the evacuation or could have prevented the far worse problems the Afghan people are now facing, including dealing with a regressive Taliban, the collapse of much of the nation’s more developed economic and governance, the cut off of major amounts of foreign aid and limits to development aid, and the problems faced by refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The airport might have been better managed, but any effort to manage a massive evacuation effort over time would almost certainly have simply resulted in an earlier collapse and chaos. One way or another, any effort to manage the evacuation to give proper priority to those who had earned through their support of U.S. forces would also have collapsed on the weight of mass pressure
from other Afghans seeking to leave the county, the difficulties in validating who had earned the right to evacuation, and a natural human desire by many to stay in the country as long as possible. In the real-world, chaos ends with a bang and not a whimper.
1 The reports by SIGAR can be accessed at https://www.sigar.mil/allreports/.

2 Both reports are available at https://www.sigar.mil/allreports/.


5 There does not seem to be an official website collecting all of the reporting by the first Special Inspector General for Syrian Reconstruction. His final report, Learning From Iraq: A Final Report From the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, dated March 2013, is available at https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA587236, and other reports are scattered through the net and are available at the Library of Congress.


8 These issues are covered in detail in SIGAR’s Quarterly Reports to Congress. For additional analysis of the problems with contractors, see Abdul Waheed Ahmad and Dr. Gabriella Lloyd, Lessons for Afghanistan for Western State Building in a Multipolar World, Atlantic Council, May 2022.

9 See GAO, Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined, GAO 11-66, January 2011, pp. 4, 6. There is no clear source for the work done by Lt. General William B. Caldwell and his successors to correct this situation from 2009 onwards, but any lessons effort should examine their unclassified briefings in detail.

10 For a detailed analysis of these problems, see Police in Conflict, Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, SIGAR, June 2022.


15 Police in Conflict, Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, SIGAR, June 2022, pp. 2-3, XVII-XIX.


The full history of the DoD 1225 reports on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan does not seem to be available on the web, but it is comparable to the depth of reporting in the November 2013 report, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf, which was issued after some key metrics and content relating to Afghan popular support of the government had already been dropped, and to the lack of depth and coverage in the April 2021 report, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF.