The Twenty-Year War

Lessons Learned from U.S. Failures in Afghanistan, 2001–2021
U.S. Decision-Making on the War in Afghanistan (GLBL 638)

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Introduction

On September 11, 2001, nineteen citizens of Arab countries attacked the United States, the most serious aggression against U.S. territory since Pearl Harbor. The attackers targeted two symbols of American power, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, at a historic high point of U.S. economic and military might. A fourth attack was reportedly aimed at the White House, but the plane hijacked for that purpose was retaken by passengers, who stormed the cockpit in a certain suicide mission and crashed it into a Pennsylvania field. Overall, almost three thousand people died on that day.

It did not take long to identify Saudi citizen Osama bin Laden, a sometime target of American intelligence and military power, as the mastermind of the attacks. Bin Laden had founded an organization called al-Qaeda (the Base) in the 1980s as part of an Islamic holy war being waged against the Soviets, who were then occupying Afghanistan. After the Soviets were defeated, he mobilized his followers against any Arab or Western country that did not conform to his distorted views of Islamic rule.[1]

On September 11, Osama bin Laden was living in Afghanistan, under the ostensible protection of the Taliban, which then controlled the country. He had been expelled from Saudi Arabia for his opposition to American troops on Saudi soil during the first Gulf War and for his threats against the House of Saud. After a few years in Sudan, he arrived in 1996 in Afghanistan, where the Taliban had just taken power following a brutal ten-year civil war. Reportedly, the relationship between bin Laden and the Taliban was not a collegial one. Although the Taliban did not restrain bin Laden's terrorist activities against other countries, neither did they condone them. The Taliban leadership had no advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks.

Despite extended U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in funding the insurgency against the Soviets, the United States had paid little attention to Afghanistan during the ensuing civil war, a policy that continued during the years of Taliban rule. U.S. policy toward Afghanistan was considered a success because it had helped hasten the collapse of the Soviet Union and bring down the Iron Curtain, but although ominous reports had come in concerning the brutality of the Taliban regime, America did not consider Afghanistan crucial to its security. After the attacks, U.S. intelligence officials sought to negotiate with the Taliban to surrender bin Laden to the United States, but the Taliban refused, offering instead, through Pakistan, to give him up to a third country. The United States rejected this offer.[2]

On September 14, the U.S. Congress passed the "Authorization for Use of Military Force" against "nations, organizations or persons" who the president determined had "planned,

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[1] The history of the founding of al-Qaeda can be found in several excellent accounts focusing on bin Laden's early life in Saudi Arabia as a member of a huge construction dynasty; his fight against the Soviets and later against Saudi Arabia itself; and his second-in-command, the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, the organizational force behind al-Qaeda. See, e.g., Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Vintage, 2006); Steven Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). On July 31, 2022, al-Zawahiri was killed by an American drone strike.

[2] See Carter Malkasian, *America's War in Afghanistan*: *A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 56; conversation with the authors by senior Taliban leader, December 18, 2021.

authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks." Two days previously, the United Nations Security Council had passed an unusually strong resolution to "combat by all means threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts."[3] Supported by airstrikes, CIA paramilitaries entered Afghanistan on October 7, setting off the chain of events that would lead to the defeat of the Taliban. Many of the Taliban leaders, as well as Osama bin Laden and his followers, fled to Pakistan, while the United States joined the international community to determine which leader or party would rule Afghanistan. And so began the longest war in U.S. history, as competing factions, including the Taliban, struggled for control and the United States sought to maintain order. Following an extensive, ten-year manhunt, U.S. Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan on May 2, 2011. But still the United States remained in Afghanistan, and still the fighting continued.

In August 2022, the United States finally lost its longest war. Over the course of twenty years, 6,200 American soldiers or contractors died and the United States spent some $2.3 trillion. The violence of the war in Afghanistan claimed more than 243,000 lives directly, of which barely a third were opposition fighters.[4] It involved immense, career-defining sacrifice from generations of military men and women in the United States and almost sixty allied nations. And although it led to some notable development gains for Afghanistan and the Afghan people, it ended in failure: the swift and utter dissolution of the Afghan Republic that the coalition had spent decades trying to install. The United States began the war as an unrivaled hegemon with powerful and sympathetic allies. How could it have spent so much, for so long, and have so little to show for it?

Less than a week after the final American soldier left Afghanistan in August 2021, the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University convened a yearlong seminar to investigate what had happened. The class included seven active or former members of allied militaries in addition to individuals with experience in development, with the Peace Corps, and on the Hill. Students came from a number of departments, at both the graduate and undergraduate level, and from several regions of the United States and the international community. Under the instruction of Anne Patterson, a former U.S. ambassador, the group read thousands of pages of research and interviewed dozens of high-ranking diplomats, generals, intelligence leaders, and aid officials who shaped and witnessed U.S. policy decisions throughout the war. This report is the product of that eight-month project.

The report has two primary goals. First, it aims to summarize and describe the key issues that led to the failure of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. We divide these issues into four conceptual problems and four problems of execution. Second, it aims to make recommendations on how to avoid similar problems moving forward in the conduct of counterterror, counterinsurgency, or

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[3] "Authorization for Use of Military Force," Pub. L. No. 107-40, 115 Stat. 224 (September 18, 2001), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-107sjres23enr/pdf/BILLS-107sjres23enr.pdf; United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1368 (2001), Adopted by the Security Council at Its 4370th Meeting, on 12 September 2001, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/448051?ln=en.

[4] See Costs of War Project, "Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan in $Billions, FY2001–FY2022," Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022.

nation-building efforts abroad. To permit maximum candor, the report uses “Chatham House rules” throughout: the officials and other participants we interviewed are paraphrased but not named.

Many books have been written on these issues, and more will follow, offering broader and more comprehensive analyses than are possible here. Our aim in writing this report was to distill, without oversimplifying, our research and interview material into a succinct summary of overarching themes that might help inform future choices. The lessons of Afghanistan may be painful, but they can also be valuable. In an effort to prevent future failures, we must accept our national responsibility to learn from our mistakes.

Executive Summary

The U.S. effort in Afghanistan did achieve some major victories. Notably conditions for Afghan women and girls improved, and the allied nations made significant advances in building internal infrastructure in areas such as health care and education. But these victories were achieved at an extraordinary human cost and obscured a hard truth: at no point in our longest war did U.S. policymakers articulate a clear, credible, and coherent strategy for Afghanistan. Rather, coalition forces pursued vague and shifting goals that often evolved from under-considered decisions made early in the war or were pursued on unrealistically abbreviated timelines. And even tactically effective funding and military policies frequently undermined America's strategic efforts in the long term, fueling corruption and eroding hard-won local trust.

Strategic mistakes were compounded by problems in execution. Different arms of the U.S. effort often failed to coordinate—duplicating or even undermining one another's efforts. U.S. forces suffered from an inability to recruit, retain, and staff top talent, especially personnel with expertise in Afghan culture. And Congress evaded its constitutional duties, failing to conduct rigorous oversight and furthering a decades-long pattern of ceding war powers to the Executive. The lack of congressional oversight meant that U.S. policy toward Afghanistan tended either to continue unsupervised or to be redefined by successive administrations and in different government departments.

Below we present our eight main findings on the U.S. failure in Afghanistan, divided into two categories. The first concerns broad strategic issues of the war and how it was conceived at the highest levels. We label our four main conceptual problems C1, C2, C3, and C4. The second involves failures in executing the various policy goals. We label these execution failures E1, E2, E3, and E4.

The conceptual issues were these:

C1. The U.S. mission was never clearly defined, and its shifting goals remained vague and ambiguous. From the start of the war to its end, policymakers struggled to define the mission's goals. The initial intention of bringing the 9/11 perpetrators to justice quickly expanded into rebuilding Afghan society, as a consensus emerged that a stable Afghanistan was important for U.S. national security. But no consensus was ever reached on what that stability required. At various times U.S. objectives ranged from installing democracy and inculcating liberal values to strengthening Afghan security forces, and from reorganizing legal institutions around Western models to improving health and education for all, especially women and girls. These policy shifts created confusion within both the military and the development communities, allowing operations to drift with political tides instead of uniformly striving toward a common purpose.

C2. Crucial decisions made hastily or informally in the first year of war locked the United States into a course of action that affected the entire war. Before and immediately following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the United States government made a series of choices that hampered its ability to succeed later in the war. After the September 11 attacks, the United States chose not to engage at a senior level with the Taliban to find a diplomatic solution.[5] Then, when the Taliban were defeated, they were excluded from the Bonn Conference

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[5] See Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

convened to determine the future governance of Afghanistan, setting the stage for their resurgence. Further, the United States left the long-term security needs of Pakistan out of its decision making, instead securing Pakistan's assistance through a combination of threats and bargains. This initial neglect of Pakistan's interests precluded the creation of a mutually beneficial security partnership that might have undergirded a successful effort against the Taliban. And by failing to invest from the outset in civilian security, police, and military forces, the United States created conditions that were ripe for a Taliban resurgence.

C3. U.S. officials embraced grand ambitions that were incompatible with their desire to get out quickly, producing constant tension between big goals and short timelines. A mismatch between lofty (if inconsistent) goals and the projected timelines for achieving them plagued U.S. strategy and implementation at every juncture of the war. This mismatch could be seen from the start, with the Bush administration's lack of an exit plan, absence of clear timelines, unwillingness to engage in nation-building, and underestimation of the challenges facing it. By the time the Taliban returned to Afghanistan, U.S. goals had expanded beyond the government's ability to calculate what their implementation would require and evidenced little appreciation of the American public's limited willingness for prolonged sacrifice in Afghanistan. The result was a seemingly unending cycle of overinvestment followed by failure and fruitless strategy changes, which created the impression that the United States was fighting not one twenty-year war but twenty one-year wars.

C4. Massive outside spending flooded Afghanistan with more money than it could sustainably incorporate. Trillions of dollars in spending proved to be more than one of the poorest nations on earth could productively handle—and more than the richest nation could effectively oversee—leading to a host of unintended effects. Outsized spending fueled corruption, stifled the local economy, and created a rentier state, more responsive to foreign patrons than it was to its own citizens. It also fostered a dependency on outside actors that weakened the Afghans' incentives to complete allied military or developmental programs, disempowered and disillusioned local leaders, and undercut the effectiveness, sustainability, and legitimacy of the Afghan Armed Forces. And although some development programs, especially those connected to health care and education, scored remarkable successes, these achievements came at a high cost and were largely unsustainable after the Americans withdrew. Finally, disproportionate spending on defense meant that the U.S. military led development initiatives that should have been civilian- and Afghan-led. Little of this spending was subject to explicit cost-benefit analysis, which enabled budgets to grow indefinitely.

The execution problems were these:

E1. The U.S. actors involved in the mission and their allied partners failed to adequately coordinate their activities. The mission's unclear objectives and vague policy guidance provoked personality and departmental conflicts in Washington and elsewhere, preventing clear lines of responsibility from being established. Military leaders resisted civilian oversight and fought for control in both Washington and Afghanistan. Allied militaries were isolated, relying on vertical chains of command; in addition, they distrusted one another's capabilities, leading to a lack of overall coordination. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions overlapped as different units conducted operations in the same areas, at times resulting in serious blunders. Aid officials resented oversight by the U.S. government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, arguing that more resources were assigned to investigating them than to helping them avoid repeated errors.

E2. Personnel on the ground in Afghanistan were not properly prepared for the mission. U.S. forces, diplomats, advisors, and aid workers were ill-equipped for their jobs in Afghanistan because the people who sent them there had not done the kind of planning and training needed to prepare them properly. Military and civilian personnel knew little or nothing about Afghanistan's culture or languages, and their ignorance contributed to misunderstandings and misjudgments when they got there, undermining U.S. efforts. Exacerbating the problem for the people on the ground were short tours of duty and security restrictions that kept them largely confined to gated security compounds. The U.S. government did not recognize the need for training in Afghan culture and/or languages until it was too late, and then it invested too little in implementing it. Advisors to Afghan security forces lacked personnel and specialized training. And important resources, including trained personnel, funding, and materiel, were diverted to Iraq during the war's crucial early years. The loss of material resources exacerbated a decline in morale, as personnel perceived these appropriations as indicating a lack of government focus on the mission in Afghanistan.

E3. Lack of understanding of Afghan culture, religion, and identity harmed and alienated Afghan communities and impeded reconstruction efforts. The mission in Afghanistan relied on the misguided assumption that American strategies, understandings of key issues, and cultural ideals could be applied wholesale to Afghanistan. The United States failed to properly engage with local religious leaders and promoted Western distinctions between religious and secular society that locals did not recognize or accept. Afghan peacebuilding interests were conflated with military strategic objectives in transparent ways that made locals feel as if they were being ignored or silenced. Deeply ingrained conservative norms around women's rights were underestimated, and popular community-based methods of dispute resolution were marginalized in favor of a corrupt state court system. This failure to prioritize local needs and preferences caused significant harm and led to nation-building policies that bore little relation to how Afghans understood their own identity and culture.

E4. Congress avoided making hard decisions or exercising active oversight, even in areas where it has clear constitutional authority. Over the course of the war, Congress escalated a decades-long trend of ceding more and more of its war powers to the Executive. The exact division of these powers is a contentious legal debate, but the one area in which Congress has unquestioned authority—managing the budget—illuminates the broader problem of a disengaged Legislative branch. With a passive Congress that was disinclined to assume political risk or responsibility, it was easier for the Department of Defense to influence budget decision making to its advantage, avoiding active oversight or accountability. Congressional passivity weakened the war effort through budget indiscipline and over-deference to military proposals.

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Part I
Conceptual Problems

C1. The U.S. Mission Was Never Clearly Defined, and Its Shifting Goals Remained Vague and Ambiguous

From the start of the war to its end, policymakers struggled to define the mission's goals. The initial intention of bringing the 9/11 perpetrators to justice quickly expanded into rebuilding Afghan society, as a consensus emerged that a stable Afghanistan was important for U.S. national security. But no consensus was ever reached on what that stability required. At various times U.S. objectives ranged from installing democracy and inculcating liberal values to strengthening Afghan security forces, and from reorganizing legal institutions around Western models to improving health and education for all, especially women and girls. These policy shifts created confusion within both the military and the development communities, allowing operations to drift with political tides instead of uniformly striving toward a common purpose.

The U.S. mission quickly shifted from punishing al-Qaeda and preventing terrorism to rebuilding Afghanistan, but policymakers never spelled out what rebuilding would require

The September 11 attacks caught the Bush administration off-guard. Many Americans expected additional attacks in the near future, and the emergency called for an immediate, forceful response, not long-term planning. Yet once the administration decided to invade Afghanistan in order to bring the perpetrators to justice, as well as deter further acts of terrorism against the United States, President Bush and his advisors quickly determined that deterrence required removing al-Qaeda's Taliban protectors from power.[1] Within days of the attacks, personnel from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense (DOD) began planning a combined operation with Afghan warlords to depose the Taliban, a goal they achieved within three months.

The next step was more complicated. The Bush administration was loath to embark on nation-building: indeed, the president had campaigned on the issue, criticizing the Clinton administration for its own nation-building efforts. Bush's military operations had been designed to avoid a large ground war, relying instead on Afghans and recruits from allied warlords fighting alongside American Special Forces, intelligence, and air power. The initial military outlay was a mere five thousand troops, which climbed to eight thousand, still a small force, in 2002. The goal of this "light footprint," as summarized by Carter Malkasian, senior advisor to General Joseph Dunford, was mostly military in nature: defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban, prevent them from reorganizing, and leave: "The idea was to withdraw eventually, but there was no clear plan for how to make that happen, other than killing or capturing al Qaeda and Taliban leaders."[2]

Yet even before the invasion the administration had anticipated the additional responsibilities that deposing the Taliban would entail. On October 16, the National Security

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[1] See Carter Malkasian, *America's War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 54.

[2] Carter Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad: America's Slow-Motion Failure in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2020), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/how-good-war-went-bad.

Council approved an updated strategy paper that concluded that the United States should "take steps to contribute to a more stable post-Taliban Afghanistan."[3] And in an address delivered to the Citadel on December 11, 2001, President Bush "set forth the commitments essential to victory in our war against terror," and went on to discuss the changing face of conflict. Notably, he specifically mentioned the Marshall Plan, the massive U.S.-led effort to rebuild parts of Europe after World War II.[4] This was his delicate segue into what the administration was unwilling to call nation-building.

The following month, President Bush went farther during his State of the Union address: "America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We'll be partners in rebuilding that country."[5] Thus the term *rebuilding* was used to describe at least an aspect of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from relatively early in the conflict.

The strategic planning and senior White House guidance informing this commitment, however, had been vague and rushed. On October 31, 2001, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld directed Douglas Feith, a senior DOD civilian official, along with General Peter Pace, assistant chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to write a "new plan" for Afghan strategy in just four hours.[6] Several leaders we spoke to who served in Afghanistan remarked on the lack of specifics in their guidance. One ambassador noted that they were instructed by senior leaders simply to "stabilize Afghanistan." To him, this meant "increase access to health care and education." This kind of vague direction from the senior leadership left subordinates unclear about America's goals and ill-equipped to implement them.

The ease with which the Taliban was defeated prompted Americans to underestimate the difficulty and urgency of installing a legitimate regime and to expand their development goals

In the early years of the war, the United States had a chance to reset and reevaluate its goals. Broad agreement had been reached that a stable Afghan government was important to U.S. national security; without it, Afghanistan might again become a provider or protector of anti-American extremist groups. What stability required, however, was an open question. In answering it, overconfidence born of their recent success in overthrowing the Taliban encouraged Americans to plan on a much larger scale. Many, especially those serving on the ground, felt that such plans were made without adequate thought to the resources needed to implement them.[7]

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[3] Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 8.

[4] "President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets," December 11, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/text/20011211-6.html.

[5] "President Delivers State of the Union Address," January 29, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.

[6] Whitlock, *Afghanistan Papers,* 9.

[7] See James Dobbins, "Afghanistan Was Lost Long Ago: Defeat Wasn't Inevitable but Early Mistakes Made Success Unlikely," *Foreign Affairs* (August 30, 2020), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-30/afghanistan-was-lost-long-ago.

In *The Envoy,* Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior staff member of the National Security Council and later ambassador to Afghanistan, described the expansion of the mission at a Loya Jirga (national council) called in July 2002 to discuss the next steps:

> During the Emergency Loya Jirga, significant tension between American and Afghan perspectives arose. . . . Bush administration officials took it as a given that liberal democracy was the best form of government for Afghanistan and that elections were the most legitimate way to work out differences among Afghans. The president and his principals seemed to believe that these goals were achievable, at least in broad outlines, without a significant U.S. investment in state and nation-building.[8]

By July 2002, then, the missions of hunting down al-Qaeda, overthrowing the Taliban, and rebuilding Afghanistan (in only vaguely defined ways) were joined by a new mission: establish a liberal democracy in a culture to which such a concept was foreign. The mission in Afghanistan had just become much more complicated.

One factor enabling the growth in new goals was inertia. According to a State Department official we interviewed, the speed and ease with which the Taliban were overthrown encouraged the administration to think that every operation in Afghanistan could be equally easy and inexpensive. The counterterrorism expert Seth Jones recalled, "The sheer alacrity with which United States and Northern Alliance forces overthrew the Taliban regime was awe-inspiring. It took less than three months and cost America only twelve lives."[9] Early political progress also inspired optimism. Before long, Afghans had voted for the first time, and a Loya Jirga had approved a new constitution. Rory Stewart, a British public servant who helped found a development NGO (nongovernmental organization) in Afghanistan, noted that by 2004, "Afghanistan had a stable currency, millions more children in school, a better health system, an elected Parliament, no Al Qaeda and almost no Taliban. All this was achieved with only 20,000 troops and a relatively small international aid budget."[10] Nation-building seemed relatively easy, and it aligned with Americans' pro-democracy worldview.

Galvanized by these successes, American policymakers looked beyond mere stability, and even beyond democracy. They decided that since they were building a new government, it should be not only democratic but also meritocratic, gender-sensitive, relatively liberal, and capable of providing broad access to health care and education. Each of these goals was said to be conducive to Afghanistan's stability—or even required for it. The argument was politically convenient, for by combining all the goals under the rubric of "stability," leaders avoided the necessity of making tough choices among humanitarian, development, and security interests. And because the Executive had been authorized after September 11 to address "counterterrorism," anything that could be plausibly tied to denying al-Qaeda safe haven could be—and was—included in that category. The lack of an explicit cost-benefit analysis, coupled

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[8] Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy* (New York: St. Martin's 2016), 149.

[9] Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Norton, 2010), 108.

[10] Rory Stewart, "The 'Good War' Isn't Worth Fighting," *New York Times,* November 22, 2008, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/opinion/23stewart.html.

with the apparent triumph of democracy in Afghanistan, allowed policymakers to turn developmental wish lists into official wartime objectives.

The development sector pursued ambiguous goals divorced from realities on the ground

One result of this expansion was that the people overseeing development in Afghanistan lost touch with realities on the ground. Rory Stewart elaborated in his 2011 book written with Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?:*

> What exactly was the end goal in Afghanistan? There were a hundred. In 2002, at a UN meeting in Kabul, I was told that the goal emerged from an Afghan consensus to create a gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic centralized state, based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. . . . Five years later, . . . the central headings of the strategy appeared as follows: "5.2 Security; 5.3 Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights; 5.4 Economic and Social Development; 5.5 Achieving Our Vision Through a 'Social Compact'; 5.6 Linking Strategy to Sectors; 6.1 Cross Cutting Themes; 6.2 Gender Equity . . ."[11]

That development officials were claiming that such goals "emerged from an Afghan consensus" showed their lack of understanding of rural Afghanistan. These were Western goals, taken from boilerplate development models, written in technocratic jargon that even most native English speakers would find baffling, and then pursued through a maze of overlapping bureaucracies. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, a government oversight authority) agreed with Stewart's assessment, writing, "Not only did U.S. officials misjudge in good faith the time and resources required to rebuild Afghanistan, they also prioritized their own political preferences for what Afghanistan's reconstruction should look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve."[12] The lack of coherent development goals tied to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan persisted throughout the war, undermining the efforts of development and aid workers.[13]

The military's own conception of the mission vacillated over time, as indicated by the change of a single word

The military role in Afghanistan also seemed to be influenced by the changing politics surrounding America's mission. The annual reports published by the Department of Defense illustrate the confused and changing nature of the mission. The executive summary contained in the DOD "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan 2008" reads:

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[11] Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* (New York: Norton, 2011), 34.

[12] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* (August 2021), 23-24, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf.

[13] We expand on this problem in section E3.

> The U.S. continues to work with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) and our international partners towards building an Afghanistan that is 1) never again a safe haven for terrorists and is a reliable, stable ally in the War on Terror; 2) moderate and democratic, with a thriving private sector economy; 3) capable of governing its territory and borders; and 4) respectful of the rights of all its citizens.[14]

The report for 2009, however, lists the following objectives under the heading "Comprehensive Strategy for Afghanistan":

> The core goal for the United States in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat al-Qaida and its extremist allies, their support structures, and their safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to either country. Extremists must be denied sanctuary from which to launch terrorist attacks in the region and worldwide.[15]

The 2010 "Strategy," probably informed by President Obama's new counterinsurgency mission, included a bulleted list of objectives: "Deny al Qaeda a safe haven," "Reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the Afghan Government," and "Strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and the Afghan Government so they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future."[16] But by 2012, the "goal" was again "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda, and to prevent its return to Afghanistan or Pakistan."[17]

Similar efforts to adapt to changing circumstances in Afghanistan appear throughout each annual report in the following years. But some of these adaptations clearly changed foundational aspects of the mission—for example, the change from disrupting, dismantling and defeating al-Qaeda to "deny al Qaeda a safe haven" back to "disrupt, dismantle and . . . defeat al-Qaeda." The change from *deny* to *defeat* created a challenge for intelligence agencies and the military community: Were they to destroy al-Qaeda members wherever they could be found, or simply make them afraid to return to Afghanistan? Such reports led to confusion among diplomats, aid personnel, and military forces on the ground, generating even more confusion as they tried to implement the policies.

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[14] Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (August 29, 2008), 15, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/Joint_Staff/10-F-0018_Report_on_Progress_Toward_Security_and_Stability_in_Aghanistan.pdf.

[15] Department of Defense, "Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (June 2009), 11. https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1230_June-2009Final.pdf.

[16] Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (April 2010), 11. http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/pentagon-report-afghanistan.pdf. (The spelling of al-Qaeda was changed between the 2009 and the 2010 reports.)

[17] Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (December 2012), 11, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2012/afghanistan-security-stability_201212.pdf.

Policy Recommendations

Before a mission is undertaken, policymakers must be explicit about its objectives—and particularly about how those objectives will be achieved. One issue that surfaced repeatedly in our interviews was the gap between policy and implementation. If the United States wishes to foster sustained strategic change, it must engage in sustained planning. If it chooses to expand a military mission into a broader nation-building or development project, all actors—in the military, diplomacy, development, or intelligence—must have a shared understanding of precisely what the new mission is. Imprecise terms such as "stability" that can mask the complexities of the tasks ahead should be avoided. Rather, the Executive must state the parameters and central goals of the administration. Critically, those goals can be developed only with a robust understanding of the capabilities and resources of the U.S. actors in the region.

In addition, success in one area cannot be considered a predictor of success in another. Defeating a regime is not the same as building a legitimate government or achieving development goals. Policymakers must set goals based on a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground.

Policymakers also need to agree on what constitutes a successful mission. In both development and military efforts in Afghanistan, the definition of success was unclear. In the case of development, even clearly stated goals—creating a gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic, centralized, democratic state based on respect for human rights and the rule of law—had little to do with the practicalities of day-to-day life in Afghanistan. It was thus close to impossible to determine whether something that could be considered a success had been achieved. For the military, the lack of clarity on whether the United States aimed to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven or defeat the Taliban meant that success was by definition unachievable. Leaders need to be willing to change a mission's objectives to reflect changes on the ground, but changes must be related to a commonly understood purpose so that they can then gauge when that purpose has been achieved.

Finally, future conflicts will require clearer communication channels between actors on the ground and those in Washington. Time and time again, our speakers emphasized that personnel in Afghanistan understood the conflict differently from the ones making decisions about strategy. Had all the actors prioritized communication, policymakers would have recognized when implementation was difficult or impossible, and those tasked with implementing the policy would have received the resources to do so.

C2. Crucial Decisions Made Hastily or Informally in the First Year of War Locked the United States into a Course of Action That Affected the Entire War

Before and immediately following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the United States government made a series of choices that hampered its ability to succeed later in the war. After the September 11 attacks, the United States chose not to engage at a senior level with the Taliban to find a diplomatic solution.[18] Then, when the Taliban were defeated, they were excluded from the Bonn Conference convened to determine the future governance of Afghanistan, setting the stage for their resurgence. Further, the United States left the long-term security needs of Pakistan out of its decision making, instead securing Pakistan's assistance through a combination of threats and bargains. This initial neglect of Pakistan's interests precluded the creation of a mutually beneficial security partnership that might have undergirded a successful effort against the Taliban. And by failing to invest from the outset in civilian security, police, and military forces, the United States created conditions that were ripe for a Taliban resurgence.

Diplomatic alternatives to war were too hastily abandoned

After the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration quickly decided on a military response. This intention was already clear in President Bush's address to the nation that night when he said that the United States would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."[19] On September 14, a near-unanimous Congress approved the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). The haste with which this bill was passed, and the vast powers it awarded to the president, showed that the United States was not only prepared but determined to use military force in response to the attacks.

With this authorization in hand, the Bush administration gave the Taliban an ultimatum: either give up Osama bin Laden or "face their fate."[20] But this ultimatum was not presented as a way of avoiding war: in her memoir, then–National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice noted that the ultimatum was intended to give advance notice of an invasion.[21] And what would have been the crucial negotiations with the Taliban to turn over Osama bin Laden were led by the CIA station chief in Islamabad, who was reporting little progress in his off-again, on-again discussions with mid-level Taliban officials.[22] The Bush administration decided to halt efforts to resolve the conflict diplomatically. Public support for military action was overwhelming in light of three thousand civilians killed in New York City, Washington, and Pennsylvania.

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[18] See Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

[19] "Statement by President Bush in His Address to the Nation," September 11, 2001, https://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html.

[20] "Transcript of President Bush's Address, September 21, 2001, CNN.com, https://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/.

[21] Condoleeza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 90–92. See also Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar*.

[22] See Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 56.

Following the fall of Kabul, the Taliban were excluded from the Bonn Peace Conference

After Kabul fell in November 2001, the warlords of the Northern Alliance that had been opposing Taliban rule, along with other prominent Afghans, gathered at Bonn with the United State and its Western allies to create a new government.[23] The Taliban were not among the participants. A senior U.S. official at the conference reasoned that since the Taliban were the losers of the war, they should not be invited. We interviewed a number of American diplomats involved in the process who supported this decision, giving as their view that inviting the Taliban would have put the entire negotiation at risk of falling apart. They believed that members of the Northern Alliance and other Afghans would not have participated had the Taliban been present. Additionally, since the United States had effectively just punished the Taliban for the actions of al-Qaeda, the American public was finding it difficult to differentiate the two entities, a confusion that persisted throughout the war and could have made it politically problematic to try to negotiate with the Taliban.[24]

Whatever the obstacles, excluding the Taliban from the talks ensured that they remained an adversary of the new government, and this animosity played a part in their later resurgence. The Taliban were the strongest organized entity in Afghanistan, having ended the civil war that ravaged the country after the Soviets' defeat in the Afghan-Soviet War. Their participation in the conference might have lent legitimacy to the new government, and their involvement might have kept them from developing the grievances that fueled their later insurgency. By excluding the Taliban from the negotiations, the United States lost whatever leverage it might later have had to integrate them into a government friendly to U.S. interests.

Following Bonn, the United States passed over another opportunity to settle with the Taliban. In January 2002, the newly elected Afghan president Hamid Karzai reportedly approached Americans with an offer from Mullah Omar to surrender the Taliban to the United States and call for his followers to lay down their arms in exchange for his personal protection. But Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in line with his frequently stated views on negotiation with the Taliban, ruled this possibility out.[25] The United States would never get such an offer again.

Pakistan was pressured to cooperate with the invasion, while its underlying security interests were dismissed

One crucial issue that affected the U.S. mission year after year was America's relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan bordered Afghanistan, and it harbored many al-Qaeda and Taliban adherents. Pakistan's cooperation was essential to America's ability to wage war because

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[23] See Zachary Laub and Lindsay Maizland, "The U.S. War in Afghanistan" September 27, 2021, Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

[24] Information in these paragraphs is from Jackson Institute class interviews with senior officials involved in the Bonn Conference and its immediate aftermath.

[25] On Rumsfeld's views, see, for instance, C-Span, Department of Defense briefing, with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace, December 6, 2001; transcript of his press conference of December 19, 2001, in the *Washington Post*.

it was the conduit through which supplies, particularly fuel, would flow. Since Afghanistan is landlocked, the United States needed to either fly supplies into the country(a massively expensive undertaking) or use a land route through Pakistan. In 2010 Bruce Riedel, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institute, noted that "over 80 percent of the supplies coalition forces depend on to survive arrive via Pakistan."[26] Although America's dependence waned slightly as the war progressed, the Bush administration knew from the outset how important Pakistan was to the mission. But in the first year of the war, U.S. officials failed to address in their negotiations either the fraught history of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations or Pakistan's conflicting interests in the region.

The administration's approach to Pakistan in the first year aligned with President Bush's statement to the world: "You're either with us or against us."[27] In his 2006 autobiography, General Pervez Musharraf, the leader of Pakistan at the time, claimed that then–Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had threatened to bomb Pakistan "back into the Stone Age" if he did not cooperate.[28] Armitage denies the allegation, but senior officials from the time noted that the remark sounded like something he would say. What is known is that Pakistan chose to be "with us." American diplomatic officials recalled being impressed by the initial cooperation from the Pakistanis, who quickly granted the U.S. government almost all its requests. They provided crucial access to supplies and land routes into Afghanistan while cooperating in the search for al-Qaeda agents.

The U.S.-Pakistan relationship post–September 11 represented a significant change from previous interactions, but earlier difficulties colored it throughout the war. A decade previously, in 1990, the United States had abruptly cut off support to Pakistan by invoking the Pressler Amendment, which banned most military and economic assistance to Pakistan if an annual presidential determination that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device was not given; in 1990 President George H. W. Bush refused that certification.[29] U.S. sanctions continued throughout the 1990s. Senior officials we interviewed agreed that the Pakistanis never overcame their suspicion that the United States might once again abruptly pivot away from the region, leaving them alone with an unstable (or, worse, Indian-influenced) neighbor.

As a result, Pakistan paired immediate cooperation with the continued pursuit of its own independent interests, some of which were in conflict with American priorities. Even at the outset of the invasion, Pakistan's policy toward the Taliban was internally conflicted. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, Pakistan's military intelligence branch, had cultivated deep ties with the Taliban, with whom they had worked during the Soviet-Afghan War, and through the end of 2001, the ISI often supported the Taliban at the same time they were pursuing specific agents on behalf of the United States.[30] Over time, ISI support for the Taliban stabilized,

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[26] Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Role in the Afghanistan War's Outcome," May 20, 2010, Brookings Institute, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistans-role-in-the-afghanistan-wars-outcome/.

[27] "You Are Either with Us or Against Us," November 6, 2001, CNN, https://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/.

[28] Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 201.

[29] "U.S. Legislation on Pakistan (1990–2004)," *Frontline*, October 3, 2006, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/pakistan/uspolicychart.html.

[30] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan,* 55.

and by mid-2003 American leaders knew that some Pakistani intelligence and military officials were assisting the Taliban.[31]

Yet American officials in 2003 were "desperate for whatever immediate cooperation they [could] squeeze, cajole or buy from Pakistan."[32] Much of the time, this meant pouring billions of dollars into Pakistan's coffers with little or no oversight of how it was spent. In 2002, Pakistan received $2.5 billion from the United States, and it received no less than a billion dollars every year for the next decade.[33] Most of the aid came as "coalition support funds" (a U.S. budget category designed to encourage support for counterterrorism efforts), and these were provided to reimburse Pakistan for its military expenditures. But once the funds were disbursed, little effort was made to monitor them, and many in the United States suspected that the invoices submitted to them were padded. Some estimates from U.S. Embassy officials suggest that Pakistan misused up to 70 percent of these funds.[34] To reframe our earlier definition of the war, America did not have a twenty-year relationship with Pakistan: it had twenty one-year relationships. Pakistan continued to fear an American withdrawal, and U.S. officials continued to make one-year commitments. Pakistani leaders had little incentive to negotiate a longer-term relationship with a country they doubted was interested in a long-term commitment, so the annual U.S. dollars purchased only short-term deliverables, such as the transit of U.S. supplies through Pakistan, periodic cooperation against terrorists, and the detention of a number of terrorist leaders—but not long-term loyalty to or alignment with U.S. interests. Even as Pakistan supported various American counterterrorism objectives, it was clear that the country's intelligence agencies remained in close contact with many of their previous allies from the Soviet-Afghan War. Americans knew that these intelligence agencies would sometimes give those contacts advance warning of operations planned against them. Pakistan also allowed many of these extremists to enter the country from Afghanistan and conceal themselves in towns along the border.

The United States prioritized counterterrorism over development or security assistance

The United States squandered promising development opportunities in the first year of the war. At the Bonn Conference in December 2001, the Americans still saw their mission as defeating al-Qaeda, whereas Afghan participants had the broader objective of forming a new government. One American expert summed up the divide by noting that Bonn started on a misunderstanding; everyone else wanted peace, but the United States wanted war. Americans saw their mission in the first year as a brief foray in which the United States would capture or kill 9/11-linked terrorists and their hosts, and forever prevent their return to Afghanistan. Afghans, however, hoped that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan could end the more than twenty years of periodic war they had already suffered. They needed support rebuilding their country,

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[31] Jim Hoagland. "Bush Needs a Prudent Pakistan Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2003, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB105692187170290100.

[32] Ibid.

[33] "Aid to Pakistan by the Numbers," Center for Global Development (September 2013), https://www.cgdev.org/page/aid-pakistan-numbers.

[34] "A Timeline of U.S. Aid to Pakistan," *Newsweek*, October 20, 2009, https://www.newsweek.com/timeline-us-aid-pakistan-81153.

and after the Bonn Agreement they hoped to secure it.[35] But nation-building was not part of America's vision that year, and the country's failure to act would undercut later U.S. development efforts.

The Bush administration realized that Americans had to help build functioning police and military in Afghanistan before they could leave, yet the United States initially refused to provide funding and coordination for the project. More than a year passed before America agreed to fund and help develop a new Afghan army, and then the project was mismanaged. President Karzai was left out of much of the planning. The police, the army, and the National Directorate of Security (the intelligence service) made little attempt to coordinate with one another or with other departments of the Afghan government, and the army and police did not establish strong working relationships with the president. But once these inadequate systems became entrenched, they were exceedingly difficult to change.

Though the security situation in Afghanistan was initially promising, stability eroded quickly, partially as a result of American decisions. When President Karzai asked the United States to help him disarm the warlords across the country in the hope of reducing threats to his government, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld refused.[36] Although disarming the warlords would not have been easy, the United States paid for leaving them in power. The constant fighting among the warlords and the government destabilized the country, leading to twenty years of institutional corruption and alienating Afghans living under the U.S.-backed regime.[37] In that first year of the war, the United States lost its best opportunity to unseat them.

But though the thirteen thousand troops the United States and its allies kept in Afghanistan were inadequate to establish security throughout the country, they staged constant raids into Afghan homes looking for Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. Some of these raids resulted in the capture or death of important enemies, but they also racked up civilian casualties, undermining the U.S. relationship with Karzai and the Afghan people.[38] As several military officials explained to our class, the speed and precision of the initial invasion had given the Afghans the impression that Americans hit their target every time. From this they drew the conclusion that Americans must have *meant* to kill civilians when they did so.

On the civic, economic, and development fronts, America gave the least money and effort when it could have been the most effective. Over the next twenty years, the United States spent some $145 billion on reconstruction and aid in Afghanistan, but only $2 billion in international (including American) aid arrived between 2002 and 2003, when the country was most peaceful and most capable of development.[39] Political development also proceeded haphazardly. Senior Americans at Bonn reported having no direction from Washington on what to seek from the

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[35] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 80.

[36] Ibid., 90.

[37] See Nick Grono, "Dealing with Brutal Afghan Warlords Is a Mistake," January 17, 2010, The Crisis Group, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/dealing-brutal-afghan-warlords-mistake; Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 130–31.

[38] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 82.

[39] Farah Stockman. "The War on Terror Was Corrupt From the Start," *New York Times*, September 13, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/13/opinion/afghanistan-war-economy.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article.

meeting; in the first year the policy was guided by whichever American official happened to be in charge at a given time.

The mistakes made in the first year set the country on a dangerous course. Although in the wake of the initial U.S. victory, the Bush administration talked of a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan that would rebuild security forces, protect human rights, establish democratic governance, and kill terrorists,[40] officials followed through on these promises reluctantly, slowly, and sometimes not at all, allowing opportunities for peace and stability to slip away.

Policy Recommendations

In adversarial situations, diplomacy should remain on the table, even when military action is unavoidable. Diplomatic solutions are worth pursuing—and, as important, continuing—even after hostilities begin. In Afghanistan, diplomatic opportunities were often fleeting, but they might have averted decades of suffering and conflict.

In addition, it is crucial that planning in the initial stages be focused and well considered. It needs to encompass agencies, forces, and allied partners and take account of the long term as well as the short term. Too often in the first year of the war, policymakers considered only what the United States needed to do immediately, without looking at what that action could mean for long-term U.S. involvement in the region. For example, U.S. actors quickly decided to conflate two separate groups, al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which they designated enemies, and to treat them as the same. Thus, they refused to negotiate not only with al-Qaeda (which was probably uninterested in negotiation) but also with the Taliban, which might have been open to a pragmatic conflict resolution. The rhetoric that emerges early in a war or dispute can create political realities that are difficult to change later, even if an opportunity for peace emerges.

Policymakers also need to make efforts to accommodate the long-term interests of allies from whom they require strategic assistance. The United States could not afford to alienate Pakistan while Pakistan controlled American shipping lanes into Afghanistan and Taliban safe havens, and in negotiating for Pakistan's assistance, the administration needed to help the country secure its national security goals. When an ally's help is essential, it is prudent to win its full, long-term alignment, rather than limited, short-term, transactional assistance. Given the history of U.S.-Pakistan relations, such an alignment would not have been easily achieved, but a less adversarial approach, with a better grasp of regional sensitivities and a longer commitment to the region, might have ensured a stronger relationship.

Finally, resources need to be commensurate with policy decisions so decisions can be implemented in a timely fashion. Opportunities were lost in the early days of the war to assist in development and building up of the Afghan army and police. Even after decisions were made to increase and professionalize the size of the Afghan Army, resources lagged. A similar dynamic played out with development assistance.

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[40] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 83.

C3. U.S. Officials Embraced Grand Ambitions That Were Incompatible with Their Desire to Get Out Quickly, Producing Constant Tension Between Big Goals and Short Timelines

A mismatch between lofty (if inconsistent) goals and the projected timelines for achieving them plagued U.S. strategy and implementation at every juncture of the war. This mismatch could be seen from the start, with the Bush administration's lack of an exit plan, absence of clear timelines, unwillingness to engage in nation-building, and underestimation of the challenges facing it. By the time the Taliban returned to Afghanistan, U.S. goals had expanded beyond the government's ability to calculate what their implementation would require and evidenced little appreciation of the American public's limited willingness for prolonged sacrifice in Afghanistan. The result was a seemingly unending cycle of overinvestment followed by failure and fruitless strategy changes, which created the impression that the United States was fighting not one twenty-year war but twenty one-year wars.

Policymakers consistently underestimated both the time and the resources needed to pursue specific goals

Whichever of the many goals Americans pursued in Afghanistan, they faced a consistent mismatch between the scale of their ambition and the duration of their intended commitment. Time and again, Americans underestimated how long progress would take and set out to achieve it faster than was realistic. SIGAR summarizes:

> The U.S. government is poor at predicting the resources and length of time necessary to rebuild complex political institutions in other countries. Being poor predictors makes it tempting for policymakers to assume they can effect change via sheer willpower, and to impose timelines or political pressures to rapidly complete a mission that is exceptionally difficult on any timeline.[41]

This problem was more easily identified than solved. Some defined it as overambition and proposed setting smaller and more realistic goals. Others characterized it as impatience and proposed giving longer and more realistic timelines. A few identified it as both and proposed setting smaller goals *and* longer timelines, which offered a more realistic formula for success. But such an approach would have required leaders not only to admit the limits of their powers but to call for prolonged sacrifice to achieve it, neither of which was politically popular. Presidents and their advisors found it easier to devote ever greater amounts of money and other resources to mission goals in the hope that renewed investment would make short timelines feasible. This policy (or lack of one) did not work, and it resulted in a cycle of hasty failures followed by strategy changes and more failures.

The initial invasion had limited objectives and scale, but no exit plan or timeline

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[41] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, 36–37

Reluctant to nation-build and distracted by Iraq, Bush-era officials set short deadlines for the war in order to maintain political support. Since infrastructure projects, local military training, and the development of democratic institutions were time-consuming, these were handed off to coalition allies, limiting U.S. involvement. SIGAR reported that "early in the war, U.S. officials denied the mission [the] resources necessary to have an impact"; "implicit deadlines," it noted, "made the task even harder."[42]

Citing the example of a road built shoddily because officials were anxious to finish it in time for the 2004 U.S. and Afghan elections, SIGAR alleged that the United States generally "prioritized tangible projects on which money could be spent and success claimed more quickly, over less tangible types of programming with the potential to be more enduring, such as capacity building."[43] Funding, donations, and votes depended on regular and fast-paced proof of success, irrespective of the needs of a particular project.

The Bush administration faced significant domestic pressure to act swiftly, while also fearing that both domestic and international support would wane over time.[44] Polls from 2001 found that only 22 percent of Americans thought the war would last more than two years.[45] This expectation aligned with President Bush's October 2001 warning that "it may take a year or two" (as opposed to a few weeks or months) to bring al-Qaeda to justice.[46] Some members of Congress were quoted as bracing for a longer struggle, but the emergency spending bill they passed on the same day as the AUMF only allocated $20 billion to "strengthen security and fight terrorism."[47] The idea was seemingly to strike while the iron was hot and then get out.

In hindsight it seems clear that through this ambiguous messaging—neither clarifying what success required nor preparing Americans for long-term commitment—U.S. officials squandered their best chance for buy-in from the American people. One official assured us that in the early years of the war, Bush still had the public support he needed to invest as many resources as he wanted. Had his administration called for prolonged sacrifice in the name of rebuilding Afghanistan, Americans might have gone along.

Alternatively, had he declared the mission accomplished and withdrawn the U.S. personnel there (perhaps with a warning that if al-Qaeda returned, the United States would too), most Americans would not have concerned themselves with Afghanistan's uncertain political

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[42] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn,* 23.

[43] Ibid., 26.

[44] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan,* 58.

[45] David W. Moore, "Public Overwhelmingly Backs Bush in Attacks on Afghanistan," October 8, 2001, Gallup, https://news.gallup.com/poll/4966/public-overwhelmingly-backs-bush-attacks-afghanistan.aspx.

[46] Patrick E. Tyler and Elisabeth Bumiller, "A Nation Challenged: The White House; Bush Offers Taliban '2nd Chance' to Yield; Says He'd Welcome U.N. in Nation-Building; F.B.I Issues Alert on Signs of New Terror," *New York Times,* October 12, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/12/world/nation-challenged-white-house-bush-offers-taliban-2nd-chance-yield-says-he-d.html.

[47] John Lancaster and Helen Dewar, "Congress Clears Use of Force, $40 Billion in Emergency Aid," *Washington Post,* September 15, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/09/15/congress-clears-use-of-force-40-billion-in-emergency-aid/d12b4d91-cb58-4562-8bed-0236ca7d4f0b/.

future. Instead, Bush vacillated between the two. The result was that the United States pursued small goals with a small footprint at a time when the American public might have supported larger ones, and then shifted to big goals and an increasingly large outlay when the American public was ready to quit.

As the administration broadened the mission, it failed to extend the timeline commensurately. When the mission grew to include installing democracy in Afghanistan, it should have been clear that doing so would require a radically changed timeline for the war. But the administration either did not recognize or chose to ignore this implication. One former ambassador told us that policymakers assumed that time was on their side in 2002. The Taliban were thought to be vanquished, and few foresaw their return. If the Taliban did return, many took it for granted that they could be dealt with as easily as they had been in 2001.

The return of the Taliban insurgency made nation-building more difficult while also increasing political pressure to wrap things up quickly, triggering a cycle of escalating investment and shifting strategies

Contrary to a pervasive belief at the time, the Taliban were not vanquished in 2001. In 2003, Mullah Omar sent a voice recording to key Taliban leaders calling on his followers to reconstitute themselves in Pakistan and prepare for a major offensive against the United States and the government in Afghanistan. After sporadic sorties against Afghan targets, the Taliban launched a massive attack in 2006, overrunning entire districts and building what amounted to a rival regime. Over the next three years, the Taliban captured most of south and much of east Afghanistan, drawing U.S. forces and their NATO allies into intense combat. By the end of President Bush's tenure, thirty thousand troops had been deployed, but the U.S. forces were unable to beat back the Taliban.[48]

Growing violence drew public attention in America to the war, which was suddenly going poorly. This setback coincided with similar difficulties in the *other* war, in Iraq, and political leaders recognized that something needed to be done. Suddenly, time was of the essence. But it now seemed too late to walk back the more ambitious and popular nation-building goals that had been added to the mission while the Taliban lay dormant, especially since the administration had so explicitly tied these goals to U.S. security. SIGAR elaborates:

> As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban. . . . In what would become a pattern, a perpetual sense of imminent departure reduced the ability of U.S. officials to plan for the long term.[49]

In Afghanistan, U.S. leaders on the ground complained that their mission was impossible—at least, on the administration's timeline—without more resources. Yet few seemed to question whether the mission would be feasible were they given additional resources; nor did the administration go into the question of which resources ought to be committed. The answer

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[48] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 115–16.

[49] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, 23–24.

to either question would have required leadership to lay out the precise goals of the mission and agree upon a more transparent and measurable standard for its achievement. Faced with the choice of shrinking the mission, pushing the timeline, or requesting additional resources, administration officials repeatedly chose to request more funding, and Congress repeatedly granted their requests. Rory Stewart, who would later become the U.K. minister of state for development, described this process in *Can Intervention Work?* co-written with Gerald Knaus:

> Lofty abstractions such as "ungoverned space," "the rule of law," and "the legitimate monopoly on the use of violence" are so difficult to apply to an Afghan village that it was almost impossible to know when they were failing. And since it had perhaps not yet succeeded (what after all would success look like?) the international community sent in more money and more troops and more plans.
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> Nowhere was this tendency clearer than with the military. Each new general in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2011 suggested that the situation he had inherited was dismal; implied that this was because his predecessor had had the wrong resources or strategy; and asserted that he now had the resources, strategy, and leadership to deliver a decisive year.[50]

In addition to ever-increasing investment, this tendency produced ever-evolving strategies, enacted by a succession of leaders. None of these plans, either military or developmental, was implemented for long enough to determine whether it might eventually succeed. And since no strategy could succeed on the timeline provided, each was discarded as a failure, then replaced by a new (equally doomed) strategy. Stewart continues:

> When the predecessor emphasized central government, the successor emphasized decentralization. Predecessors and successors oscillated between emphasis on local militia and emphasis on the national army; action on counter-narcotics and inaction on the same; spread-out isolated positions to concentrated bases; keeping distance from the population to being among them. The commanders went from "ink spots" and "Afghan Development Zones" (a concentrated approach) to remote, thinly spread forward operating bases. [The town of] Musa Qala is taken and lost and taken again. . . . The people are disarmed, and then rearmed. . . .
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> All of which heralds a decisive year. And during this time, great progress is announced. . . . Meanwhile, the commander presses relentlessly for more resources, and more resources are granted. . . . Each time a commander hands over control of an area in a ceremony, he is praised by his successor for the transformation. And then almost immediately we hear the new commander privately confess that he has inherited a dismal situation but has a new strategy, requiring new resources, which will usher in a decisive year.[51]

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[50] Stewart and Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?*, 49–53.

[51] Ibid., 54–55.

A half dozen people we interviewed—ranging from aid officials to generals to junior military leaders—independently cited the same memorable sentence we have quoted earlier to describe this problem: "America did not fight a twenty-year war in Afghanistan, but twenty one-year wars." An ambassador told us that he counted ten distinct U.S. policies in twenty years. Another speaker explained that it was not that we "couldn't do it, but that we couldn't pick an 'it' to do."

The authors of this report have reached no consensus on whether success—however it should be defined—was possible on any timeline. But we are of the uniform mind that it was not possible on the actual timelines that policymakers laid out. SIGAR summarizes our takeaway well: "The painstaking work of rebuilding institutions was simply never compatible with the urgency with which the U.S. government perpetually operated in Afghanistan.[52]

The can-do attitude of the U.S. military colored Americans' perceptions of what was achievable

The U.S. foreign policy community is understandably invested in an optimistic vision of the capabilities and impact of their programs. This was especially true of the post–Cold War generation that fashioned America's response to 9/11. Officials envisioned the United States as a "global force for good,"[53] seeing the triumph of democracy as inevitable. History called on America to lead, not back down from a challenge. If the United States could defeat the Nazis and the Soviet Union, what could it not do?

This can-do mindset was especially pronounced in the U.S. military, in part because of the way it trains and promotes its leaders. From basic training on, soldiers are sternly taught to take accountability for mission results and never to make excuses. Officers are responsible for everything their soldiers do or fail to do. Almost all failures are thought to be leadership failures; "circumstances beyond my control" is not a phrase the military recognizes. The right leader—with the right strategy, training, and resources—so the thinking goes, can accomplish anything.

Officers are also promoted through a massive and highly competitive bureaucratic hierarchy. Those who make it to the top are ultraconfident ambitious hard-chargers who are more accustomed to success than failure. Such leaders are exactly what the military wants. Their attitude pushes units to accomplish difficult missions; their training methods produce truly impressive leaders.

During the Afghanistan war, however, this institutional bias may have inhibited critical thinking about which missions were realistically possible or worth attempting. Some of the most surprising comments in all of our interviews came from senior military leaders involved with President Obama's decision to commit additional forces to Afghanistan in December 2009. The additional forces marked an escalation of the conflict; the ordered troop "surge" would implement a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.

The decision to launch the surge involved one of the most internally divisive series of policy discussions during the war. In our conversation, several military leaders told us that they thought the surge had only a 50–50 chance of success. One of them presented this as an argument in *favor* of attempting the mission. Even the architects of the surge, those who

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[52] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, 36–37.

[53] "America's Navy: A Global Force for Good," ad, posted to YouTube May 3, 2010, America's Navy- A Global force for good.—YouTube.

believed in it most and pushed for it against a resistant administration, thought it was a coin flip—but they pressed on with the strategy anyway.

The same bias toward action resurfaced within the intelligence community. A former CIA official grading U.S. covert actions gave the agency a D, arguing that presidents are too quick to ask for CIA operations, and CIA directors are too quick to say yes. He described this as a "say yes culture," one that our research suggests is shared by other federal agencies.

In congressional testimony during the debate over the surge decision, Rory Stewart gave a British perspective on why Americans were so tempted by ambitious military solutions. "Americans are particularly unwilling to believe that problems are insoluble," he observed. "Obama's motto is not 'no we can't'; soldiers are not trained to admit defeat or to say a mission is impossible."[54] The Soldiers Creed of the U.S. Army puts this explicitly: "I will never accept defeat. I will never quit." Such an attitude makes sense for soldiers. But if leaders and policy decision makers take it as their starting point, they will never recognize when victory is either unlikely or will cost too much. U.S. leaders applied this attitude to tasks that might not have been achievable (especially by 2009), but they spent twenty years and $2 trillion trying.

Policymakers disagreed about whether the U.S. mission was to defeat the Taliban and remake Afghanistan as a democratic state or to manage the Taliban presence in Afghanistan and improve the country's existing conditions

Those most subsumed by the can-do spirit tended to approach the war in terms of victory and defeat. These included President Bush, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus. The perceived success of the Iraq surge of 2006-7 inspired optimism that a similar surge could defeat the Taliban decisively.

Carter Malkasian notes: "U.S. troop levels had risen to over 30,000 without stemming the tide [of the Taliban offensive]. Yet the overall strategy did not change. Bush remained determined to defeat the Taliban and win what he deemed 'a victory for the forces of liberty.'"[55] Such rhetoric was popular politically, in part because victory implied an end to the conflict. Politicians "dream of solving the fundamental problems and getting out."[56] And here again, the military culture was apparent. The army's mission statement was, and remains, "to fight and *win* the nation's wars." We might call those with this mindset "Team Victory."

As time went on, however, skeptics began to challenge this view. Some, including senior civilian officials, argued that a decisive victory was unlikely in the short term. Let's call them "Team Mitigate." They counseled reframing the mission as managing or mitigating the problems over the long term. In his 2008 *New York Times* piece "The 'Good War' Isn't Worth Fighting," Stewart declared, "We will not be able to eliminate the Taliban from the rural areas of Afghanistan`s south, so we will have to work with Afghans to contain the insurgency instead."[57] Team Mitigate generally called on presidents to "go low to go long," giving a more modest but

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[54] Rory Stewart testimony, Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, September 16, 2009, Senate Hearing 111-321, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg55538/html/CHRG-111shrg55538.htm.

[55] Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad."

[56] Stewart, "The 'Good War' Isn't Worth Fighting."

[57] Ibid.

prolonged investment of troops and resources that would be more sustainable over the long term.

In our interviews, officials in the State Department seemed more inclined to the latter approach (albeit with the benefit of hindsight). One former State official joked that the United States "had the misfortune of winning the Second World War," which sometimes led policymakers to think that winning was possible in situations where managing was more realistic; "we want to fix things instead of just improving them." In a public seminar last September, Stewart commented that the United States seemed unable to imagine a military mission with modest goals, preferring instead to be "either all in or all out."

But rather than choosing between these two approaches, President Obama's surge ultimately fused them. On one hand, he aimed for something more limited than all-out military victory, explicitly eschewing transformational change in Afghanistan's social and political organizations. He sought only to create conditions that would permit the United States to hand over responsibility for the fight to the Afghans, even though he knew that at least limited Taliban resistance would outlast the Americans' departure. "Gone was Bush's intent to defeat the Taliban no matter what," Malkasian noted. "Instead, the United States would deny al Qaeda a safe haven, reverse the Taliban's momentum, and strengthen the Afghan government and its security forces."[58] This prescription was closer to the modest goals put forth by Team Mitigate.

Some critics of Obama's withdrawal timeline misinterpreted its purpose. A common objection from Team Victory was that telegraphing America's intention to leave Afghanistan encouraged the Taliban to hang on, disincentivizing surrender or political compromise. But an outright Taliban surrender was never the objective; the surge aimed only to push the Taliban back temporarily so as to provide Afghan forces with the time and incentive to take over the fight. In announcing the surge, Obama explained:

> [Some] oppose identifying a timeframe for our transition to Afghan responsibility. Indeed, some call for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort—one that would commit us to a nation-building project of up to a decade. I reject this course because it sets goals that are beyond what we can achieve at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests.[59]

On the other hand, this withdrawal timeline *did* contravene the counsel of Team Mitigate, which called for precisely such a decades-long commitment. Instead of "go low to go long," Obama went high so he could get out. A former ambassador at the heart of the dispute confirmed that this time-bound surge was a compromise between the ambition of the military's COIN (counterinsurgency) enthusiasts and the deadlines of skeptical and politically constrained civilians. The administration's internal fight over troop levels became a proxy for the overall scale and duration of the U.S. commitment. Like Bush before him, Obama opted for a grander scale but a shorter duration. Obama believed that if success was not achieved in his announced time frame, it would probably not be achieved at all.

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[58] Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad."

[59] "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

Both Team Victory and Team Mitigate were unrealistic in their forecasts. Team Victory, imbued with the can-do bias, dismissed serious budgetary and political constraints. Its proponents failed to see that a heavy-handed approach could be self-defeating, and they underestimated the timeline on which any victory could have been possible. Team Mitigate dismissed its own political constraints by punting the question of how long the United States would be willing to wage war. They saw Afghanistan as a development project—but the Pentagon is not a development agency. Culturally, politically, and morally, Americans saw war as a different and graver thing than the management of long-term trends to incrementally improve outcomes. Afghanistan was not a peacetime garrison like Korea or Germany; it was the epicenter of a costly and ferocious war, and that distinction mattered deeply to the U.S. mission there.[60]

The tug-of-war between U.S. ambitions and the deadlines for achieving them continued during and after the surge

The first surge of troops arrived in 2009, but the generals in charge suggested to us that a fully resourced counterinsurgency did not begin until mid-2010. By mid-2011, the marines had taken control of Helmand Province, and the situation in Kandahar had also improved. But President Obama's initial drawdown date was fast approaching. And crucially, a U.S. raid had just killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, completing an important goal of the initial invasion.

General Petraeus wanted to delay the drawdown until at least late 2012 and turn his focus to the east. But Obama thought differently. To him the situation in Afghanistan showed no dramatic improvement: the Taliban seemed undeterred; the Afghan people were not rising up against the Taliban as the Sunnis had risen up against extremist groups in Iraq; the number of casualties stayed the same or even increased; and corruption remained prevalent within the Afghan government. In addition, the president's priorities had shifted to domestic issues. Every dollar spent in Afghanistan could instead have been devoted to American economic recovery following the 2008 financial crisis.

Senior military leaders who planned and adopted the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan either underestimated how long the progress would take or bet that they could win deadline extensions by demonstrating initial progress. Although Obama did several times extend his withdrawal deadline, eventually he enforced it, holding a formal handover ceremony before the end of his tenure. Petraeus left Afghanistan in July 2011, less than a month after Obama's drawdown decision, to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency. After he left, the counterinsurgency lost its initiative. General Dempsey, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conveyed his opposition to COIN to subordinate commanders.[61] U.S. policymakers also preferred less expensive counterterrorism approaches.

In June 2012, Obama decided to withdraw all thirty-three thousand surge troops by September of that year. He set a timeline for the drawdown to continue over the following years, ending in 2014, when security responsibility would be handed over to the Afghans. Malkasian

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[60] See Andrew Doris, "Afghanistan Was Not Korea: Withdrawal Critics Understate the Costs of War," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (January 13, 2022), https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/nno4r8v67o753ucd6t6nb3glrdipn1.

[61] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 305.

argues that the surge was a tactical success but a strategic failure. It secured Helmand and Kandahar, but it brought the United States nearer to exhaustion and withdrawal.[62]

The reduction of resources devoted to Afghanistan was not accompanied by a reduced vision of acceptable outcomes. In 2014, the political scientist and career army officer Rick Brennan wrote for *Foreign Affairs:*

> There is a growing mismatch between the United States' objectives in Afghanistan and the resources and time that Washington has given its military forces and diplomats to achieve them. The stated goal of the NATO mission is "to create the conditions whereby the Government of Afghanistan is able to exercise its authority throughout the country, including the development of professional and capable Afghan National Security Forces." But little evidence exists to suggest that NATO will be able to achieve that goal by the end of 2016, when all . . . NATO forces are scheduled to depart. . . . Most credible estimates suggest that those [capability] gaps cannot be filled until at least 2018.[63]

In the war's later years, presidents searched for the fastest politically palatable escape, while still maintaining that the United States would not leave until an Afghan government capable of standing on its own was in place. As Brennan's assessment shows, even pessimistic estimates of how quickly this would be possible proved to be wishful thinking. Leaders were arguing over 2016 versus 2018. Yet by 2022, the goal had still not been achieved.

America had no popular mandate for prolonged sacrifice in Afghanistan, which led leaders to conceal how the war was progressing

Three days after 9/11, Congress authorized the president to use military force "against those nations, organizations, or persons" he determined "planned, authorized, committed, or aided" the attacks, with only one nay vote in the House of Representatives and none in the Senate.[64] The vote reflected the nation's strong support for a military response targeting those directly responsible for the attacks.

The vote did not, however, reflect broad public acceptance of the necessity of gradually rebuilding Afghanistan's internal infrastructure over several decades. We earlier noted that most Americans expected the war to be over within two years, and as American casualties mounted, polling increasingly indicated that the public lacked enthusiasm for an extended commitment.[65]

The counterinsurgency doctrine was developed from 2005 to 2006, when Americans still generally saw Afghanistan as "the good war." By the time COIN was implemented, however, its

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[62] Ibid., 304–5.

[63] Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs* (November–December 2014), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/withdrawal-symptoms.

[64] Public Law 107-40, 107th Congress, September 18, 2001, https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf.

[65] Amber Phillips, "When and How Americans Started Souring on the War in Afghanistan," *Washington Post,* August 19, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/18/when-how-americans-started-souring-war-afghanistan/.

requirements seemed out of touch with public sentiment. The 2008 recession had further reduced Americans' appetite for overseas investment. A September 2009 poll showed that 41 percent of the American public wanted to reduce troop levels, up from 26 percent at the year's outset.[66] A December poll found similar results, alongside growing "isolationist" sentiment.[67] And support for the war continued to decline. The killing of Osama bin Laden led many Americans to question whether the United States still needed to be in the country at all since the person responsible for the 9/11 attacks was dead.

Political leaders were sensitive to this polling, particularly after the election of President Obama. It inclined them to push for accelerated timelines for withdrawal. But practitioners who were isolated from electoral pressure were less sensitive to the need to get out quickly and more inclined to pursue their larger ambitions. Those on the ground in Afghanistan tended to inflate the mission's overall importance to U.S. security, relative to those on the ground in Arkansas or California. People who believed the mission was overwhelmingly urgent—that "failure was not an option" for America's safety and that its credibility hung in the balance—concluded that no price was too high, and no timeline too long, for success. But people who felt Afghanistan was just one issue among many—believing that there were many nations in need of aid, and many places where terrorists might operate—were more skeptical of the larger plans.

The disconnect between public opinion and the aims of those implementing the policy was the driving factor behind the leaders' temptation to mislead the public about how the war was going. The desire to pacify an increasingly frustrated nation led leaders to offer overly rosy progress assessments of the mission's progress, and an overall lack of clarity, candor, and transparency colored communications about how long it was likely to take.

Leaders who were privately calling for a decades-long commitment to some project in Afghanistan rarely said so publicly. They were likelier to describe exciting progress, minimize bad news, and hope that the issue would stay out of the public eye. Malkasian notes that a "single-minded focus on preferred outcomes had the unhealthy side effect of sidelining inconvenient evidence."[68] In most cases, he concluded that U.S. leaders covered up such evidence inadvertently or because they truly believed the situation was well in hand.

As the surge went on, the Obama administration increasingly limited the access of journalists by claiming operational security, reversing a long policy of embedding media personnel with military units. In *The Hardest Place,* Wesley Morgan describes steps the Obama administration took to make media access more difficult—for example, by becoming increasingly wary of freelance journalists embedding with military units. A State Department official we interviewed raised this issue as well. Such attempts at concealment strike us as symptomatic of the larger problem: the United States was fighting a long war without a clear

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[66] "International Public Opinion on the War in Afghanistan," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_public_opinion_on_the_war_in_Afghanistan#:~:text=The%20plurality%20of%20Americans%2C%2032,%22strongly%20favor%22%20doing%20so (accessed May 6, 2022).

[67] Pew Research Center, "Record Number Favors Removing U.S. Troops from Afghanistan," June 21, 2011, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2011/06/21/record-number-favors-removing-u-s-troops-from-afghanistan/.

[68] Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad."

end goal and hence without broad public buy-in. It is not surprising that leaders felt pressured to conceal from media scrutiny what was actually taking place.[69]

Several decades-long trends combined to shift how the public perceived the war, from a collective national effort reported on the evening news to special reports by foreign correspondents that most Americans did not notice. Among these trends were the nature of the U.S. military force (an all-volunteer force can insulate military activities from civilians); the gradual seizure of congressional war powers by the Executive, protecting congressional decision makers from the need to placate voters; a shift away from boots-on-the-ground fighting to CIA drone strikes, which reduced American casualties (but also obscured whom the United States was fighting and why); and public promises to draw down U.S. troops, with little actual withdrawal. Restricting media access fit this broader trend.

Ultimately, public opinion could not be evaded forever. Every president after George W. Bush made campaign promises to end the war in Afghanistan. By the time President Joe Biden finally did so, some 70 percent of Americans supported his decision.[70] Where American public opinion was concerned, the U.S. foreign policy community wrote a series of checks that the people they served were unwilling to endorse. The sense of betrayal felt in August 2021 resulted in part because the American public and the Afghan public were given conflicting promises about America's commitment—and in the end, neither promise was kept.

Policy recommendations

In simple terms, there are but two ways to correct a mismatch between ambition and timeline: reduce the ambition or increase the timeline. We will not suggest which path the United States should take moving forward, since we have no way of knowing the context of future policy decisions. But future administrations should make such decisions publicly and transparently, openly laying out for themselves and for the people they serve the cost, duration, and prospects of success of each option.

For policymakers to more accurately assess the timeline needed for a mission, they will have to assume that implementation will not go smoothly. One ambassador told us that little attention was given to the actual implementation of the strategy by policymakers in Washington. But within America's flawed political institutions, strategists cannot assume that large government programs will be implemented smoothly. This is particularly the case when programs are to be executed in underdeveloped nations, within an unfamiliar cultural context. Planners will have better success if they set low expectations and assume that implementation will encounter delays. In their planning they should consistently "round up" projected costs and timelines, while rounding down projected outcomes.

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[69] See Wesley Morgan, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* (New York: Random House, 2021). Jessica Donati, "Access Denied: The Costs of Keeping the Afghan War out of the Media Spotlight," Modern War Institute (July 6, 2021), https://mwi.usma.edu/access-denied-the-costs-of-keeping-the-afghan-war-out-of-the-media-spotlight/.

[70] Dina Smeltz and Emily Sullivan, "U.S. Public Supports Withdrawal from Afghanistan," August 9, 2021, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/us-public-supports-withdrawal-afghanistan.

Policymakers should also ask, “What is our margin for error?” and plan on ways to circumvent the errors that will occur. Leaders cannot strategize as if political institutions were more efficient, Congress more unified, or voters more charitable than they are likely to be. They are constrained by the tools at their disposal.

Likewise, when waging war, policymakers cannot strategize as if the public’s will to fight were inexhaustible. If a military objective cannot be achieved on a timeline and at a cost acceptable to the American people, it will fail. Willingness for war is a scarce resource that cannot be taken for granted.

In today’s polarized society, political leaders—especially military leaders—might need to refrain from endeavors they would otherwise support. Such restraint is prudence, not weakness. Civilians must exercise control over the military and evaluate military advice and input on the basis of realistic policy objectives. The military’s can-do culture is more easily accepted than changed—and changing it might not be wise; often, it helps achieve victory. The tradeoff is that while generals should have broad discretion on how to execute administration and congressional decisions, those decisions should be made independently, with a better sense of realistic goals.

Finally, public support for one mission should not be imagined or assumed on the basis of public support for another one, and different missions should not be joined without clear directives. Future congressional authorizations for the use of force should be specific enough to clarify which missions have a popular mandate and which do not. If leaders feel pressure to conceal the war from media scrutiny, this is an indication that its continuation may not be democratically legitimate.

C4. Massive Outside Spending Flooded Afghanistan with More Money Than It Could Sustainably Incorporate

Trillions of dollars in spending proved to be more than one of the poorest nations on earth could productively handle—and more than the richest nation could effectively oversee—leading to a host of unintended effects. Outsized spending fueled corruption, stifled the local economy, and created a rentier state, more responsive to foreign patrons than it was to its own citizens. It also fostered a dependency on outside actors that weakened the Afghans' incentives to complete allied military or developmental programs, disempowered and disillusioned local leaders, and undercut the effectiveness, sustainability, and legitimacy of the Afghan Armed Forces. And although some development programs, especially those connected to health care and education, scored remarkable successes, these achievements came at a high cost and were largely unsustainable after the Americans withdrew. Finally, disproportionate spending on defense meant that the U.S. military led development initiatives that should have been civilian- and Afghan-led. Little of this spending was subject to explicit cost-benefit analysis, which enabled budgets to grow indefinitely.

Policymakers saw increasing spending as the solution to every problem, and as a result the spending spiraled completely out of control

Estimating the exact amount the United States spent in Afghanistan depends on what is included in the total. SIGAR puts the figure at $982 billion, but Brown University's much broader Costs of War Project estimates expenses at over $2 trillion.[71] Whichever is correct, the price is staggering. By SIGAR's lower estimates, the war cost $135 million a day, or more than $90,000 a minute, for nearly twenty years, from October 7, 2001, to August 30, 2021.

Such massive spending far exceeded what U.S. officials could effectively administer. In its 2021 report *What We Need to Learn,* SIGAR noted that while "internal USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] protocols recommended that each manager oversee roughly $10 million in grants," during some periods of high expenditures, "that number reached upwards of $100 million."[72] Overworked grant managers had not the time, the resources, or the incentive to investigate expenditures in detail. As the former Afghanistan development worker Sarah Chayes noted, U.S. officials never examined whether project expenditures aligned with their initial budgets.[73]

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[71] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start; Netta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz; "Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," August 25, 2021, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Human%20and%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Afghan%20War%2C%202001-2022.pdf.

[72] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn,* 31.

[73] Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America," *Foreign Affairs* (September 3, 2021), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-03/afghanistans-corruption-was-made-in-america.

As noted in section C3, when projects stalled, administrators tended to request more funding rather than acknowledge that the project was too large or needed more time. Despite the unmanageable oversight burden, the pressure to spend money as a proxy for making progress kept the funds flowing. SIGAR documents how the "political desire to show progress manifested in bureaucratic pressure that outweighed countervailing directives to ensure that progress would last." Congressional and bureaucratic mandates for long-term sustainability also failed to control spending.[74]

Massive outside spending fueled corruption, supplanted the local economy, and created a rentier state

Hampering the U.S. mission—both the war effort and the development aims—was the corruption military and aid workers encountered within the Afghan government and among the institutions they were seeking to assist. And whether the corruption flowed solely from the American money pouring into the country or was simply exacerbated by it, American dollars were finding their way into the pockets of corrupt officials and organizations. Yet too many American officials refused to acknowledge any responsibility for Afghanistan's corruption, portraying it as a facet of Afghan culture. Indeed, one general we interviewed repeated this argument as late as fall 2021. Such a view is directly contradicted by Afghans themselves, who are rightly offended by the implication. Sarah Chayes elaborates in *Foreign Affairs:*

> In more than a decade of working to expose and fight corruption in Afghanistan, I was never told by a single Afghan, "We don't really mind corruption; it's part of our culture." Such comments about Afghanistan invariably came only from Westerners. Other U.S. officials contended that petty corruption was so common that Afghans simply took it for granted and that high-level corruption was too politically charged to confront. To Afghans, the explanation was simpler. "America must want the corruption," I remember my cooperative's chief financial officer remarking.[75]

In truth, corruption festered in Afghanistan because the United States rewarded it. Sometimes officials did so knowingly, by empowering and allying with strongmen known to be corrupt and turning a blind eye to their actions for perceived military, intelligence, or political gain. But more often, they did so inadvertently, by spending vastly more than they could effectively monitor. In fact, unmonitored spending constituted a fundamental part of U.S. strategy.[76] In 2017 an employee at the Afghan Ministry of Finance estimated that 30 percent of Ministry funds were spent on projects they were intended for, another 30 percent were appropriated "with political bias," and the other 40 percent simply went "astray."[77] In 2010,

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[74] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn*, 40.

[75] Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America."

[76] Ibid.

[77] Kate Clark, "The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering Inequality, Poverty and Lack of Democracy through the 'Rentier State' Lens" (Afghan Analysts Network Special Report, May 2020), https://www.afghanistan-

surveys in Afghanistan concluded that between $2 billion and $5 billion, at least 13 percent of the country's GDP at the time, went unaccounted for.[78]

Even if the United States had properly administered every dollar that entered Afghanistan, the more fundamental problem was that too much money was being spent. As Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network argues, "What is significant is not whether there has been greater or less 'aid effectiveness.' Rather, it is the magnitude of the aid, along with the spending by foreign armies, and how this distorts the state/citizen relationship and the economy, that has proved so deeply problematic for Afghanistan." Clark describes this central challenge as creating a "rentier state."[79] While rentier-state theory did not develop in Afghanistan, the country is a textbook case of the insidious consequences of absorbing too much cash from foreign sources.

To begin with, the massive foreign aid impeded the development of the Afghan economy. The influx of funds drove up the value of the Afghan currency, cheapening imports and raising the price of exports, which undercut local economic development. By 2020, Afghanistan was importing around $7 billion in goods and services (mostly food).[80] By contrast its exports were a mere sixth of the value of its imports. The influx of money and goods also inhibited local investment in resources by reliance on external sources.[81]

At the time the United States invaded Afghanistan, the best estimates of the country's GDP put it around $4 billion. During the occupation, the economy ballooned to as high as $20 billion—but nearly half of that figure came from foreign funding.[82] Over 75 percent of the Afghan government's budget also came from foreign assistance.[83] As Farah Stockman of the *New York Times* describes it, the war "became" the Afghan economy and "dwarfed every other economic activity, apart from the opium trade."[84]

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analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/20200528-Rentier-2.pdf, 26.

[78] Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America."

[79] Clark, "The Cost of Support to Afghanistan."

[80] Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Warns of 'Colossal' Collapse of Afghan Banking System," November 22, 2021, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/exclusive-un-warns-colossal-collapse-afghan-banking-system-2021-11-22/.

[81] Kate Clark. "Killing the Goose That Laid the Golden Egg: Afghanistan's Economic Distress Post-15 August," November 11, 2021, Afghanistan Analysts Network, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/killing-the-goose-that-laid-the-golden-egg-afghanistans-economic-distress-post-15-august/.

[82] Benjamin Parkin and Fazelminallah Qazizai. "Afghanistan's Looming Famine: Will the US Help the Taliban?" *Financial Times*, December 22, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/bdbb57ab-84a8-48b2-ae6f-6177f7830064.

[83] Editorial Board, "Let Innocent Afghans Have Their Money," *New York Times*, January, 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/opinion/afghanistan-bank-money.html?referringSource=articleShare.

[84] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start."

The opium and heroin trade was in fact an important element of economic distortion. It accounted for between 9 and 14 percent of GDP.[85] Typical of economies with significant levels of narcotics production and trafficking, opium production crowded out legitimate exports, particularly in agriculture, and distorted labor markets. Afghan citizens paid a high price for the trade; among other problems, it led to high rates of addiction, which largely went untreated. Addiction affected about 8 percent of the population, twice the international level. Not only did the high rate of addiction strain health care systems, it reduced labor productivity.[86] The international community, despite many different strategies to address the drug problem, was unable to stem the increase in opium cultivation, an increase that promoted lawlessness and corruption, further undermining the legitimate economy. Reports by SIGAR outline the constant shifts in strategy, the protracted interagency disputes, and the enormous, $8.6 billion cost of counternarcotics efforts.[87]

Aid also disrupted the relationship between the Afghan people and the Afghan state. By providing three-quarters of the government's budget, international donors relieved the state of the need to tax its citizens or to foster the economic development that would enable it to gain sufficient tax revenues. While tax relief lowers an administration's burdens, it also weakens the citizens' demands for democratic accountability, in addition to undermining the rule of law and property rights.[88] Instead of accountability to citizens through representation, the state was beholden to its financiers. It prioritized the ideals of American voters—building girls' schools, engaging in counterterrorism, halting (briefly) the drug trade—over those of Afghan voters.

Democratic development was further hampered by the lack of an effective political opposition. Politicians did not compete for votes; they competed for power, relationships, and patronage networks.[89] These already dangerous incentives, combined with ineffective aid monitoring, produced a government rife with personal conflicts and corruption—and one that had no compelling motivation to gain the support of the public.[90]

The dependency fostered by massive outside spending gave Afghans little incentive to help America achieve its goals and thus stop the flow of aid

One might imagine an upside to the rentier-state problem from the American perspective: if Afghan officials were more responsive to foreign patrons than to local needs, they

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[85] UNODC, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2021: Cultivation and Production," March 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_Opium_Survey_2021.pdf.

[86] United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, press release, "UNODC Reports Major, and Growing, Drug Abuse in Afghanistan," June 21, 2010, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2010/June/unodc-reports-major-and-growing-drug-abuse-in-afghanistan.html.

[87] Special Inspector General For Afghanistan [SIGAR], *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan* (June 2018), https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/counternarcotics/index.html.

[88] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start."

[89] Ibid.

[90] See Anthony H. Cordesman. "Reshaping U.S. Aid to Afghanistan: The Challenge of Lasting Progress," February 23, 2022, Center for Strategic & International Studies, https://www.csis.org/analysis/reshaping-us-aid-afghanistan-challenge-lasting-progress.

would be motivated to help further American goals. But paradoxically, this same dependency on outside revenue also created a strong incentive among Afghan officials *not* to deliver on these projects for fear the foreigners would declare the mission accomplished, leave Afghanistan, and take their money with them. Western funders enabled this disincentive by failing to attach conditions or accountability to the money they pumped into the country.

This problem was identified relatively early in the conflict. The 2008 *New York Times* op-ed by Rory Stewart cited earlier asked the right rhetorical questions:

> What incentive do Afghan leaders have to reform if their country is allowed to produce 92 percent of the world's heroin and still receive $20 billion of international aid? Are they wrong to think that if they became more stable and law-abiding and wiped out the Taliban we would give them less support? That this is a protection racket where the amount of money one receives is directly proportional to one's ability to threaten trouble? This is certainly the experience of the more stable provinces in central Afghanistan, where leaders talk about the need to set off bombs to receive the assistance given to their wealthier but more dangerous neighbors.[91]

Thirteen years later, the *Times* was still publishing op-eds asking similar questions: "Why build a factory or plant crops when you can get fabulously wealthy selling whatever the Americans want to buy? Why fight the Taliban when you could just pay them not to attack?"[92]

As we discuss in section E2, many international funders were ignorant of the situation in Afghanistan, and thus dependent on locals for logistical and intelligence support. Oblivious foreigners were more easily duped and manipulated into paying for nonsolutions (or worse).[93] But more important, Western funders never made aid contingent on systemic reforms, accountability for wrongdoing, or even results in the promised area. Clark writes:

> Fundamental to the inability of donors to hold Afghan institutions to account is that they have kept funding Afghanistan and supporting it militarily no matter how badly they thought money was spent. . . . Afghans have never been persuaded that foreign money would dry up because they have looked to donors' behaviour, rather than their rhetoric, to understand their intentions. Rarely has the threat to withdraw support been acted upon. . . . As Karzai repeatedly did, [Afghan president] Ghani has successfully faced down American threats to cut funding if behaviour did not change.[94]

Two case studies highlight the emptiness of American threats to withhold support, even threats from those powerful enough to do so. The first was President Obama's increasingly

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[91] Stewart, "The 'Good War' Isn't Worth Fighting."

[92] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start."

[93] See Carl Forsberg, *Politics and Power in Kandahar,* Afghanistan Report 5," Institute for the Study of War (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2010), 22, https://www.understandingwar.org/report/politics-and-power-kandahar.

[94] Clark, "The Cost of Support to Afghanistan."

flexible withdrawal timeline. Initially, reducing Afghan dependency was a primary justification for this timeline. In his West Point speech announcing the surge, Obama suggested that "the absence of a timeframe for transition would deny us any sense of urgency in working with the Afghan government. It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan."[95] But when 2011 came, and Afghan forces remained incapable of mounting their own defense, the president repeatedly postponed the planned withdrawal to accommodate them. The full withdrawal did not take place until thirteen years after his surge and seven years after his presidency ended.

Second, in 2020 Mike Pompeo announced the United States would cut $1 billion in aid to Afghanistan as a consequence of the squabbling between two claimed victors of the previous year's presidential election.[96] But he walked back these comments the very next day, and the Defense Department never cut aid by a single dollar.

In sum, part of the reason the United States found it so difficult to leave Afghanistan is that its Afghan allies did not want it to leave, called America's bluff when it threatened to leave, and at times actively thwarted the conditions that might have enabled it to leave. These actions did not stem from anything innate in the Afghan national character. They were rather an understandable and predictable response to the perverse incentives created by wealthy nations offering impoverished nations a de facto blank check.

Spending on American priorities disillusioned Afghan leaders and disincentivized locals

One U.S. diplomat suggested that because the surge was not supported by President Karzai, Karzai was not invested in its success. By ignoring his preferences and suggestions the United States not only angered a supposed ally; it placed the responsibility for the mission's outcome on Americans.

Another U.S. official told us that shortly after the invasion, he found his team in charge of designing the Afghan flag. At other points, he recalled disagreements among Americans about what to include in Afghan school curricula or textbooks. Such actions were emblematic of an attitude endemic to the U.S. mission: the United States would lead, and the Afghans would follow. Afghans and their local interests were bypassed, which gave them little motivation to invest in programs sponsored by the Americans. Had the United States involved local leaders and given them the freedom to deliver their own results, they could have created more organically Afghan institutions.

Even so, some remarkable development successes were achieved during the U.S. intervention, particularly in the areas of maternal and child health and the education of women and girls. Significant advances were also made in building infrastructure.

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[95] "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

[96] Humeyra Pamuk, Hamid Shalizi, and Charlotte Greenfield, "U.S. to Reduce Afghan Aid by $1 Billion After Pompeo Fails to Break Impasse," March 23, 2020, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-taliban/u-s-to-reduce-afghan-aid-by-1-billion-after-pompeo-fails-to-break-impasse-idUSKBN21A0N5.

The most empirically impressive gains were in maternal and child mortality. This was a priority for the United States and for many in Congress. The U.S. Agency for International Development invested over $1 billion in health care for women and girls, mostly focusing on the education of midwives and the provision of trained health care workers. Even in the less than enthusiastic reports of the Inspector General, who questions some of the baseline data, more Afghan children and mothers are alive today, and with a healthier start in life, because of access to internationally funded health care. Not surprisingly, advances were more rapid in urban areas, and a huge divergence in health improvements can be found among Afghan provinces and between rural and urban areas of the country. According to UNICEF, the under-five mortality rate fell from 130 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 58 in 2020. The neonatal mortality rate declined just as impressively, from 63 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 35 in 2020.[97] Gains in maternal mortality were also good: 1,600 mothers per 100,000 live births died in 2002 while 538 died in 2017. Only 16 percent of pregnant women in Afghanistan had access to skilled prenatal care in 2002, but 61 percent had been seen by a skilled health care worker by 2015. In 2002, Afghanistan had 467 trained midwives; by 2018, there were 4,000.[98]

When most observers talk about success in Afghanistan, they first mention the number of girls in school. The education of women has a well-known multiplier effect in development: educated women are far more likely to delay pregnancy, have fewer children overall, enter the labor force, and insist on the education of their daughters. By 2020, there were 3.5 million girls in school in Afghanistan out of 9 million students, a huge increase from the 5,000 Afghan girls who attended school in 2001. Literacy rates among women had doubled, from 20 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2017.[99] These are significant advances by any international standard. But as with other development programs, the organizations implementing them were based on U.S. models, with little input from Afghans. Not only did these programs come at a very high cost, inadequate provision was made for their maintenance and sustainability, and after the United States withdrew in 2021, the Taliban began dismantling them.

As time went on, U.S. agencies began recognizing the need to bring Afghans more fully into the process, and they set various goals for transferring spending to the Afghan government. In 2009, for example, USAID wanted to set a goal of spending 40 percent of assistance through the Afghan government by 2011.[100] Yet by the end of the conflict, only 12 percent of development funds were handled by the government.[101]

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[97] In comparison, the infant mortality rate in the United States is 5.6 deaths per 1,000 births: the United States ranks thirty-third in infant deaths out of thirty-six industrialized countries.

[98] See Alison Farnham and Olena Kuzyakiv, "Skills Gap Training for Midwives in Rural Afghanistan" Harvard Center for Excellence in Maternal Health, August 19, 2019; and World Bank, "How Has Afghanistan Achieved Better Health for Its Citizens," April 5, 2018. Both sources referenced in a report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan [SIGAR], *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons Learned from the US Experience in Afghanistan* (February 2021), https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/gender-equality/index.html.

[99] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality,* 64.

[100] Curt Tarnoff, *Afghanistan: U.S. Foreign Assistance,* Congressional Research Service (August 21, 2012), 2, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R40699/18.

[101] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn,* 29.

The Afghan Armed Forces were built and motivated by outside spending, which undercut their effectiveness, sustainability, and legitimacy

Like the Afghan Republic they served, the Afghan Armed Forces (AAF) were created by foreigners, who tried to build a military establishment appropriate for a more developed country. As one ambassador argued, the United States' overbearing role in training, building, and directing the AAF robbed President Karzai of control over his own military, which undercut his ability to navigate complicated Afghan political dynamics. The appropriate use of the Afghan military and police was a subject of constant tension between President Karzai and the United States.

For example, the size of these forces was always a function of how many service members the United States decided the AAF should have to serve American interests, based on American assessments of the security situation. It was never a function of Afghan leaders' interests or assessments. One former ambassador told us that from 2002 to 2003, the United States thought the Taliban had gone forever, and so built an Afghan military intended to contain local warlords. It was about 70,000 strong. When it became clear that the Taliban were preparing to return as an invading force, the United States pushed for the AAF to grow to 110,000 troops, supplied with better technology and equipment. By the end of 2008, the force numbered 148,000, and soon afterward General McChrystal demanded that it increase to 352,000 to bolster the surge that President Karzai had no interest in mounting.[102] At each step, the Americans decided whether the Afghans needed more troops, and the Americans committed the resources to outfit and train them. It was thus not surprising that the military was seen as more loyal to the United States than to Afghanistan. Nor was it surprising that so many "ghost soldiers" and their leaders collected paychecks when they only served on paper.

It can seem callous to criticize a defeated ally's military performance, as controversy surrounding President Biden's comments on the Afghans' "will to fight" made clear in August 2021.[103] We spoke to many who were outraged by those comments, and we do not wish to impugn the bravery or character of the thousands of Afghan soldiers who fought side by side with Americans for twenty years. In fact, from 2014 on, Afghan soldiers were more than "side by side" with Americans: they were the tip of the spear, aided only by U.S. air power while they bore the brunt of the casualties themselves. Tens of thousands of Afghans willingly gave their lives in the struggle, and many more fought with valor both before and after the U.S. withdrawal. Had the United States continued to provide air support, or even contractor maintenance, after the withdrawal, many of these soldiers would have fought longer still. Their courage and sacrifice under trying conditions was nothing short of heroic.

But for many other Afghan soldiers, the main, or only, incentive to join the army or the police force was the pay—and for some, fighting was optional. Multiple surveys confirmed this throughout the war. A 2010 survey commissioned by the U.S. military in Kandahar found that 49 percent of respondents thought their fellow Afghans joined the army for a job or pay, while

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[102] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 229.

[103] "Read the Full Transcript of President Biden's Remarks on Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/us/politics/biden-taliban-afghanistan-speech.html.

53 percent thought the same of police recruits. Only 10 percent said Afghans had joined either organization to defend their country.[104] Sometimes the fighters themselves acknowledged this. A 2015 survey of 1,657 police officers in eleven provinces found that only 11 percent had joined the force specifically to fight the Taliban, compared to 19 percent saying they had joined for a salary. Many agreed with the claim that police "rank and file are not convinced that they are fighting for a just cause." Seventy percent felt the government was "overly influenced by the west." And nearly a third of respondents—who, again, were all employed as Afghan police officers—considered the Taliban authority a legitimate one.[105]

The United States proved willing to pour money into its effort to increase Afghan military capacity. So long as it demonstrated this willingness, hundreds of thousands of impoverished locals were happy to sign up to fight. But the speed and relative bloodlessness with which that military fell apart in August 2021 made it clear that such a force could not have survived without ongoing American support.

These troops were undersupplied and under-supported after the U.S. withdrawal. But lack of resources alone does not explain the AAF's poor showing. The surrender of Afghan forces was not a new phenomenon; occurrences could be cited even while the United States was still supporting it. Carter Malkasian recalls that in 2015, while 9,800 U.S. troops remained in the country, the Taliban launched a series of decisive offensives:

> [In] Kunduz, 500 Taliban fighters routed some 3,000 Afghan soldiers and police and captured a provincial capital for the first time. In Helmand Province, around 1,800 Taliban fighters defeated some 4,500 Afghan soldiers and police and recaptured almost all the ground the group had lost in the surge. "They ran!" cried an angry Omar Jan, the most talented Afghan frontline commander in Helmand, when I spoke to him in early 2016. "Two thousand men. They had everything they needed—numbers, arms, ammunition—and they gave up!" Only last-minute reinforcements from U.S. and Afghan special operations forces saved the provinces.
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> In battle after battle, numerically superior and well-supplied soldiers and police in intact defensive positions made a collective decision to throw in the towel rather than go another round against the Taliban. . . . Afghan security forces retreated without putting up much of a fight despite their numerical superiority and their having at least an equal amount of ammunition and supplies.[106]

Malkasian explains these poor showings simply enough: the Taliban had a motivational edge, due to deeply ingrained Afghan resistance to outside domination, intensified by the rampant corruption enabled by U.S. spending. His thesis also explains the spate of killing of their

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[104] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, 336.

[105] See Nathan Hodge, "Army Researchers: Why the Kandahar Offensive Could Backfire," Wired, April 18, 2010; Glevum Associates, *Kandahar Province Survey Report*, Human Terrain System (March 2010), 35; Robert Zaman, and Adbul Hadi Khalid, *Trends of Radicalization Among the Ranks of the Afghan National Police*, Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (December 2, 2015), 10, 19.

[106] Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad."

American counterparts and advisors by Afghan police and military, killings that inflicted up to 20 percent of U.S. casualties in 2012.[107] U.S. special operators developed a high degree of distrust for their Afghan counterparts, assigning a member of the U.S. team to monitor Afghan soldiers during helicopter commutes to and from a mission. Many of the soldiers Americans trained were insecure about allying with non-Islamic "infidels" for a paycheck, especially in the wake of highly publicized scandals such as when U.S. soldiers burned a Qur'an. Malkasian summarizes:

> The Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something tied to what it meant to be Afghan. They cast themselves as representatives of Islam and called for resistance to foreign occupation. Together, these two ideas formed a potent mix for ordinary Afghans, who tend to be devout Muslims but not extremists. Aligned with foreign occupiers, the government mustered no similar inspiration.[108]

In a religious society like Afghanistan's, the artificiality of the Afghan Armed Forces contributed to the impression of corruption that clung to the entire government.

All these issues underscore the deeper conceptual flaw of the United States spending as much as it in Afghanistan. For sensitive cultural, religious, and historical reasons, many Afghans could never embrace what foreigners had built or paid for, and yet nearly the entire government and military was built and paid for by foreigners. As Farah Stockman noted after the war, "You cannot buy an army. You can only rent one for a while. Once the money spigot turned off, how many stuck around to fight for our vision of Afghanistan?"[109]

Massive military spending gave the military de facto leadership over civilian state-building functions

As a state cannot buy an army, neither can an army buy a state. But at times, the U.S. military attempted to do just that, through a counterinsurgency doctrine that positioned soldiers as state-builders. In the foreword to the 2006 COIN Field Manual on which the 2009 surge strategy was based, Generals David Petraeus and James Amos wrote, "Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help reestablish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services. They must be able to facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law."[110] In theory, a "civilian surge" was to match and complement the military surge through an integrated whole-of-government approach. But in practice, the military's manpower, funding, and flexibility

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[107] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan,* 338.

[108] Carter Malkasian, "What America Didn't Understand About Its Longest War," *Politico,* July 6, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/06/afghanistan-war-malkasian-book-excerpt-497843.

[109] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start."

[110] Quoted in Jaqueline L. Hazelton, "The Hearts-and-Minds Myth: How America Gets Counterinsurgency Wrong," *Foreign Affairs* (July 15, 2021), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-15/hearts-and-minds-myth .

always dwarfed that of counterparts in the State Department or USAID, and this numerical superiority gave the Defense Department disproportionate influence over the effort.

Malkasian notes that the State Department's "civilian surge" amounted to a grand total of 900 additional workers sent to provincial reconstruction teams (to complement an additional 30,000 American troops).[111] Meanwhile, the Afghan Armed Forces increased from 148,000 to 352,000, while U.S. drone strikes and Special Forces night raids increased fivefold.

Military and nonmilitary components of the effort were even less balanced economically. Brown University's Costs of War project counts a cumulative $1.055 *trillion* in Defense Department overseas contingency operations (OCO) related to the war in Afghanistan, compared to just $60 *billion* in the State Department's OCO spending. And of the United States' $15.3 billion in aid to Afghanistan at the peak of the surge in 2011, $11.8 billion was military aid.[112]

Because the military had more discretion to shift spending in response to unexpected contingencies, it was often easier to fund civilian projects through military channels. One USAID official recalled needing a billion dollars early in the war. When he petitioned Congress, he was stonewalled; when he called the secretary of defense, he had it by the next morning. But in the long term, this military bias had other costs. In her 2011 book *When More Is Less,* the political scientist Astri Suhkre documented the "fundamental contradictions inherent in the competing objectives of waging war and building peace" in Afghanistan, "in particular because the short-term tactical needs of the former consistently trump and undermine the longer-term processes needed to achieve the latter."[113] Stockman argues that "instead of a nation, what we really built were more than 500 military bases—and the personal fortunes of the people who supplied them."[114]

There is also evidence that military and intelligence agencies cared less about corruption than did civilian agencies, so the military's increased role in nation-building helped trivialize a crucial issue. Sarah Chayes—at that time the head of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)'s anticorruption task force—noted about one project:

> I responded to request after request from Petraeus until I realized that he had no intention of acting on my recommendations; it was just make-work. . . . Task Force Shafafiyat [the anti-corruption Combined Joint Interagency Task Force–Shafafiyat] continued operating, but it served essentially as window-dressing to be displayed when members of Congress visited as proof that the United States was really trying to do something about Afghan corruption.[115]

Anti-corruption groups were at times unable to hold individuals to account (most famously, Karzai aide Muhammad Zia Salehi, who was caught soliciting bribes to obstruct an

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[111] Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan,* 227.

[112] "How Much Did the US Spend in Aid to Afghanistan?" September 3, 2021, USAFacts, https://usafacts.org/articles/how-much-did-the-us-spend-in-aid-to-afghanistan/.

[113] Andrew Wilder, review of *When More Is Less* by Astri Suhkre, 2011, CMI: Chr. Michelsen Institute, https://www.cmi.no/publications/4094-when-more-is-less.

[114] Stockman, "The War on Terror Was Corrupt from the Start."

[115] Chayes, "Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America."

investigation) because they were protected CIA assets. The political scientist Barnett Rubin described the Salehi dilemma: "One part of U.S. policy corrupted Afghan officials while other parts tried to investigate and root out corruption. Given the interest that defined the mission, concerns about corruption did not trump those of covert action."[116]

An official with firsthand knowledge of the era's budget debates indicated that congressional priorities motivated this imbalance. Congress did not care about inefficiency—the public would not punish members for it—but it did care about troop safety and combat effectiveness. In times of war, elected officials were less likely to get bad press by giving the military too much money than they were by giving it too little. But pressure to keep pace with this spending in turn motivated civilian officials to request more funding than they needed or could responsibly oversee. One ambassador we spoke to recalled fearing that if he requested $1 billion instead of $4 billion, the military would complain to Congress that "the ambassador isn't taking the surge seriously."

This notably contradicts a competing explanation for Afghanistan's corruption. Some commentators cite an alleged dearth of civilian spending as a cause of insufficiently developed—and thus, corrupt—Afghan institutions. Our testimony hints it might have been the opposite. The *relative* paucity of civilian resources compared to outsized military spending motivated civilian officials to pump out more money, in absolute terms, than they could responsibly oversee. Thus, corruption was more accurately fueled by too much nonmilitary spending, not too little.

Policymakers rarely had to show a cost-benefit analysis for their spending

The immediate purposes for the $2.3 trillion spent in Afghanistan varied wildly, from the war on drugs to education to maternity health. But the original and overarching goal of these parallel efforts was ostensibly to reduce the risk of additional terror attacks on Americans—as Ryan Crocker put it to Congress in fall 2021: "to insure that Afghan soil would never again be used to launch an attack on the American homeland."[117] If this was the case, the spending was severely cost-ineffective under any realistic estimate of how much terrorism it prevented.

Using standard statistical values for human life and a series of conservative assumptions, we calculated that the war in Afghanistan would have to have saved a minimum of 154,200 lives—or prevented at least ten attacks of equivalent economic damage to those of 9/11—in order to be economically cost-effective.[118] A review of terrorism's historical frequency and lethality marks such figures as deeply implausible. According to the Global Terrorism Database, all forms of terrorism combined (including the September 11 attacks) have killed about 109 Americans per

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[116] Barnett Rubin, "What I Saw in Afghanistan," *New Yorker,* July 1, 2015, reprinted at https://cic.nyu.edu/news_commentary/what-i-saw-afghanistan.

[117] Ryan Crocker, "Afghanistan 2001–2021: U.S. Policy Lessons Learned," November 17, 2021, testimony, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/17/afghanistan-2001-2021-u.s.-policy-lessons-learned-pub-85814.

[118] Sarah Gonzalez, "How Government Agencies Determine the Dollar-Value of Human Life, "April 23, 2020, NPR, https://www.npr.org/2020/04/23/843310123/how-government-agencies-determine-the-dollar-value-of-human-life.

year since 1970.[119] Islamic jihadism, in particular, has killed 107 Americans in total (6 per year) since 2002.[120] And despite all the fear-mongering that followed 9/11, there is no evidence that terrorists have come close to obtaining weapons of mass destruction, or even that they have seriously tried to do so.[121]

Of course statistical analysis of terrorist attacks and spending is not the full story. We can never know definitively how many lives were saved by the American efforts in Afghanistan or anywhere else. Nor can statistical analysis account with any precision for the enormous political and psychological effects of attempted terrorist attacks in the United States (though the analysis we conducted is conservative in this regard). Sporadic terror incidents such as the failed bombing of Times Square in 2010, which resulted in no casualties but revealed a web of terrorists inside Pakistan previously unknown to Americans stirred up public unease and caused policymakers in Washington to worry about potential future attacks.

This helps explain the problem of overspending generally: congressional leaders and policymakers had no sense of perspective. American leaders declined to quantify the value of what they hoped to achieve in Afghanistan, and this prevented them from identifying or enforcing a proportional budgetary ceiling. They preferred to portray counterterrorism—alongside democratic or humanitarian concerns like women's rights and education—as an almost infinite value, and insist that failure to achieve this lofty goal was "not an option." When manifold obstacles prevented them from achieving any of these goals quickly, they felt duty-bound to spend more. The impulse to spend more resulted from impatience with the pace of progress; the act of spending more made progress even slower.

Policy recommendations

Most policymakers already acknowledge—at least in the abstract—that neither state-building nor counterinsurgency can succeed by simply spending large amounts of money. There needs to be a strategy for how that money will be used. The core lesson of the failures outlined in this section, however, goes beyond that: we argue that *even with the proper strategy,* overspending can be problematic. This is especially important when policymakers are trying to nurture institutions whose local legitimacy is threatened by the perception of foreign influence. In such cases, habitually increasing investment in the face of stubborn obstacles is not merely unhelpful; it is actively counterproductive.

Rentier-state problems could not have been solved by improving spending efficacy in Afghanistan. They required *reducing* spending overall; this, in turn, might have improved oversight capacity. Likewise, the imbalance between civilian and military resources devoted to a

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[119] "Incidence, Fatality and Injury from Terrorist Attacks, United States, 1970 to 2017, " 2018, Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/incidence-of-terrorism?country=~USA.

[120] "What Is the Threat to the United States Today"? New America, n.d., https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/what-is-the-threat-to-the-united-states-today (accessed May 6, 2022).

[121] "Browsing the 'Atomic Bazaar,'" interview of William Langewiesche by Steve Inskeep, May 15, 2007, NPR, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/10175622; John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "How Safe Are We"? Asking the Right Questions About Terrorism," August 15, 2016, Cato Institute, https://www.cato.org/commentary/how-safe-are-we-asking-right-questions-about-terrorism.

project could have been corrected only by reducing the military resources, not by increasing the civilian funding to match it. Such a strategy would have implied more modest goals, in both the short and the long term. The overspending was fundamentally a problem of how the mission was conceived in Washington, rather than a problem of poor execution on the ground. By making the mission one of unrealistic ambitions and funding it accordingly, the United States impeded the achievement of more modest but feasible goals.

Funding requires supervision to be productive; when managers are overburdened to the point of incapacity, adjustments need to be made. The failure of the Afghan government to build a revenue base and sustainably staff and organize basic social institutions such as hospitals and schools, for example, indicated that too much foreign funding was coming into the country. Furthermore, when left to their own volition, organizations will face enormous pressure to spend all the donor money they receive for immediate rather than long-term gains to ensure that it continues. One suggestion from SIGAR on how to combat this problem is to create a "long-term private sector development fund" with moderated and steady spending levels to control and monitor projects.[122]

Any rapid upsurge in funding requires a preceding and proportional upsurge in the capacity to audit and account for where that money goes. But the presence of greater monitoring capacity alone should not incentivize greater spending. It is possible to monitor money effectively and still spend too much.

Finally, one prerequisite to cost-consciousness is a clear-eyed view of what the funds are buying and how much that purchase is worth. Federal agencies should conduct and publicize in advance explicit cost-benefit analyses of long-term investments that the public can debate and compare to competing budgetary priorities. Ideally, this will help avoid wasteful investments before they occur. Short of this, it will at least raise red flags earlier in the process, before costs run too far above their expected benefits.

In the context of counterterrorism, America's experience in Afghanistan may guide policymakers to nonmilitary responses in the future. For example, Americans' annual risk of dying in a terrorist attack from 1975 to 2017 was far lower than their annual risk of being struck by lightning.[123] By these metrics, the United States received disproportionately small protection from terrorism from its massive outlay in Afghanistan.

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[122] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn,* 37.

[123] John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Terrorism and Bathtubs: Comparing and Assessing the Risks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 1 (2021), https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/bathtubsfin.pdf.

Part II

Problems of Execution

E1. The U.S. Actors Involved in the Mission and Their Allied Partners Failed to Adequately Coordinate Their Activities

The mission's unclear objectives and vague policy guidance provoked personality and departmental conflicts in Washington and elsewhere, preventing clear lines of responsibility from being established. Military leaders resisted civilian oversight and fought for control in both Washington and Afghanistan. Allied militaries were isolated, relying on vertical chains of command; in addition, they distrusted one another's capabilities, leading to a lack of overall coordination. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions overlapped as different units conducted operations in the same areas, at times resulting in serious blunders. Aid officials resented oversight by the U.S. government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, arguing that more resources were assigned to investigating them than to helping them avoid repeated errors.

The U.S. military resisted civilian oversight, and fought for supremacy in both Washington and Afghanistan

From the onset of the mission in Afghanistan, the Department of Defense and civilian agencies clashed. In her memoir, Condoleezza Rice, at that time President Bush's national security advisor, described a discussion with the president during the initial planning stages of the military operation. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld had just briefed President Bush on the invasion plan, which Rice considered solid but lacking in details. She insisted on a review of the plan by the full Principals Committee, noting, "They will ask more detailed and candid questions than you can. People don't like to admit that they don't understand something—or to critique their colleagues—with you in the room." But both Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary Rumsfeld were "very protective of the Pentagon's prerogatives" and resisted civilian efforts to question them.[129] This attitude deprived key members of Bush's National Security Council of an opportunity to contribute to plans that would have implications for their own departments and agencies.

The Department of Defense not only failed to collaborate with outside agencies; it also sought to manage information circulating among its internal components. Operation Anaconda, which was designed to capture bin Laden in Tora Bora, Afghanistan, offers a case study in the problems with these tactics. Records indicate that intelligence staffers at the Combined Air Operations Center did not find out about the operation until six days before it began.[130] Without advanced planning, the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) collection troops could not be prepositioned in order to support the operation. The navy, which had also been left out of the planning, had only one carrier available for support, and it was hosting a picnic the day Anaconda kicked off. Despite the inauspicious start, U.S. forces closed in on bin Laden's

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[129] Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 138. The Principals Committee consisted of the heads of Cabinet departments and the national security advisor.

[130] *Operation Anaconda: An Air Power Perspective,* Headquarters United States Air Force AF/XOL (February 7, 2005), https://media.defense.gov/2014/Sep/17/2001329845/-1/-1/0/anaconda%20ADA495248.pdf.

White Mountains redoubt. But General Tommy Franks, who was in overall command of the mission, rejected the request of CIA officer Henry Crumpton to increase U.S. forces, and the United States lost an opportunity to capture al-Qaeda's leaders.[131]

The lack of coordination continued during the Obama administration, when the surge became a point of contention. In Washington, the DOD made itself responsible for the plan, even though the military's role was only one aspect of the mission; the surge was also intended to win Afghan hearts and minds by removing the Taliban and clearing the way for rebuilding. Afghan civilians needed to be involved in that state-building, and this was ordinarily the purview of the State Department and USAID. Yet General Petraeus, in describing the operation, referred to Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke as his "wingman," revealing the subordinate role he envisioned for civilians.

In Afghanistan, competing mission priorities created even more tension. During the daytime, for example, conventional forces carried out the COIN strategy, even as Special Forces continued to launch counterterror missions, usually at night, in the same theater. These two tactical approaches sometimes conflicted, as Wesley Morgan documented extensively in *The Hardest Place*. Special Forces conducted counterterrorism operations during the "night war" as conventional units (and some Special Forces teams) conducted counterinsurgency missions during the "day war." Civilian casualties from these raids brought Afghans out in protest, subverting the counterinsurgency's goal of winning them over.[132]

Indeed, the hearts-and-minds approach seemed incongruent with many other forms of military engagement. David Galula, author of a pioneering manual of counterinsurgency, apportioned 80 percent of COIN operations to political affairs and the remaining 20 percent to military activity.[133] Yet in Afghanistan the military involved itself in everything from agrarian reform to city cleanup. With an overseas contingency operations budget that was a little over 5 percent of that of the DOD, the Department of State simply could not afford to get into nation-building at the level of the Department of Defense.[134] This generated ill-will between the departments.

Personal feuds between the leaders worsened the problem. Discord between General McChrystal and Karl Eikenberry, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, became public in 2009 when Eikenberry's objections to the surge leaked, and again the following year when General

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[131] Henry A. Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 258–59.

[132] Morgan, *The Hardest Place*, 413–49. Wes Morgan also spoke with the class about this issue. See also Rod Nordland, "Afghans Protest Deadly U.S. Raid," New York Times, May 14, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/15/world/asia/15afghan.html.

[133] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Praeger Security International, 2006), 63.

[134] Costs of War Project, "Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan in $ Billions, FY2001–FY2022," August 2021, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022.

McChrystal's staff voiced political grievances to a journalist from *Rolling Stone* magazine.[135] These incidents reflected the internal dissension between the civilian and military operations.

The role of Richard Holbrooke at State seemed particularly disruptive to interagency cooperation, as several of our speakers reported. Agencies resisted his coordination, which was seen as impulsive and lacking in analysis. And while some of his initiatives were sound, the secrecy with which he operated tended to undermine support for them. Further hampering his effectiveness, Holbrooke lost the support of President Obama and the president's senior staff.[136]

There was little coordination among either allied militaries or U.S. aid agencies, and officials tended to resent SIGAR oversight

United States and NATO forces fought, trained, and advised side by side during the war in Afghanistan under a U.S.-NATO commander. But whereas this commander (usually an American) oversaw reconstruction efforts within the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of the Interior, no similar commander had oversight for the entire coalition effort. Rather, responsibility in Afghanistan was spread across a number of competing international and U.S. organizations, while the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) had oversight of the U.S. military and aid programs, but no authority to make changes in them. The U.S.-NATO commander had no direct authority over civilians or international organizations, and, in fact, no absolute authority over other NATO country forces. The commander thus could not standardize methods and activities used by other NATO countries to train and advise the ANSF.[137] This division of leadership resulted in a lack of unity of effort and inconsistent results in the development of the ANSF.

Similarly, no single U.S. Executive branch department or military service branch oversaw the U.S. mission. Multiple U.S. departments and organizations implemented policy, instituted programs, assessed progress according to individual standards, and managed personnel independently.[138] The personnel on the ground who carried out the missions received their guidelines piecemeal, without the high-level oversight and continuous reassessment necessary for strategic coordination among military and civilian institutions.

Thus, in the absence of institutional coordination, each agency competed for influence and oversight of U.S. programs. Many agencies overestimated their ability to build or reform Afghan institutions (or faced pressure from political leaders who had overestimated it) and then hesitated to reveal the problems to SIGAR inspectors. One senior civilian aid worker noted the

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[135] [Ambassador Karl Eikenberry], U.S. Embassy (Kabul), Cable 3594, "Subject: Looking Beyond Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," November 9, 2009, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24562-u-s-embassy-kabul-cable-3594-subject-looking-beyond-counterinsurgency-afghanistan; Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General: The Profile That Brought Down McChrystal," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/.

[136] See George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2019), chaps. 3 and 4.

[137] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan* (July 2019), https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/divided-responsibility/index.html.

[138] Ibid.

general contempt for overseers from SIGAR, whose well-researched reports were highly critical of U.S. civilian and military operations in Afghanistan. Workers on the ground complained about the large amount of resources the Inspector General could bring to bear to find fault and his apparent eagerness to look for problems while giving only grudging credit for successes. Many people on the ground saw the Inspector General as an adversary, not as a source of constructive advice . "You can always find fault somewhere," said a government official, "and sometimes there were more inspectors than there were aid workers on the teams being inspected." Compounding the problem, in 2015 Pentagon officials requested that SIGAR classify its findings regarding casualty rates, training shortfalls, and other deficiencies of the ANSF on the grounds that were this information made public the Taliban could use it to target certain units or enhance its own morale. This was a valid concern, but the information would also have been useful to the allied partners, helping them develop more accurate reviews of the progress of the ANSF. Restricting U.S. government inspectors made it even harder for the various organizations to coordinate and improve their programs.

Policy Recommendations

In future conflicts, the United States must focus on improved coordination among policymakers in Washington and between the policymakers and workers on the ground. One strategy that has had both successes and failures in the past is for the president to appoint a Washington-based civilian leader to serve as the strategic "czar" of the conflict. Appointing a czar (or special envoy) who deals with the various agency heads and reports directly to the president is key, since only the president can exercise authority over different government agencies and their disparate budgets. The czar would be responsible for clarifying the strategic goals of the mission and assessing progress toward achieving them, working with a dedicated staff drawn from relevant departments and agencies.

It is critically important to select as czar a person who has the necessary experience and, most important, the respect of his or her colleagues and of the president. At several junctures during the Afghanistan War, an ineffective or unpopular coordinator aggravated problems of coordination and implementation. James Dobbins, President Bush's first special envoy for Afghanistan, now with the RAND Corporation, commented in one of his many analyses of nation-building for RAND:

> Experience in the past twenty years suggests that the main problem is not inadequate civilian capacity in the field, but rather the failure at the Washington headquarters level to retain required expertise, formulate realistically resourced plans, and successfully integrate the various elements of American power and international influence. If this is an accurate diagnosis, prescriptions for change should be directed primarily to fixing the problem in Washington, and only secondarily in the field.[139]

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[139] James Dobbins, "Organizing for Victory," *Prism: the Journal of Complex Operations* 1, no. 1 (June 2011): 57. The RAND Corporation has made a number of post-conflict studies of the way the conflict was conceived and carried out. These reports highlighted many of the same issues we have mentioned in the conduct of the war in Afghanistan: the importance of continuity of

The czar or special envoy would chair high-level meetings, including those held at the level of deputies of Cabinet offices and those at the Cabinet leadership or Principals Committee level. This would facilitate a unified approach to the mission and its implementation by allowing experts from the various departments to discuss the issues that particularly affect them. It should also reduce the workload of the other senior leaders, enabling them to focus on other national security challenges.

The Washington special envoy or czar should, with the concurrence of the ambassador to the affected region (who is in charge of civilian personnel in that country), appoint senior staff to the embassy with the sole job of monitoring implementation of civilian projects. This staff member would serve a multi-year tour to ensure continuity of oversight.

In future conflicts, the staff of the Inspector General, who can bring to bear specialized skills like analysis, auditing, and familiarity with similar programs that have been put into place in other countries, should work more closely with the personnel carrying out the programs to improve their implementation. SIGAR's role should go beyond well written reports, which may have little impact on day-to-day operations on the ground. While we understand that the SIGAR has a separate legislative mandate to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse in government programs, the Inspector General should seek to be regarded as a source of constructive advice, not just of criticism. Given the experience of the Inspector General and SIGAR staff, SIGAR is also in a position informally to improve coordination among agencies and program personnel.

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expertise, the need to address problems early on, confusion between policymaking and program implementation, and disagreements over budget apportionment. *Prism*, the journal of the National Defense University, has published a number of articles on nation-building and post-conflict scenarios, in addition to the article cited above. See also James Dobbins, [first name] Watts, et al., *Seizing the Golden Hour: Tasks, Organizations, and Capabilities Required at the Earliest Phase of Stability Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2020). The U.S. Institute of Peace has also conducted a number of post-conflict studies; one such is Keith w. Mines, *Why Nation Building Matters: Political Consolidation, Building Security Forces, and Economic Development in Failed and Fragile States* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

E2. Personnel on the Ground in Afghanistan Were Not Properly Prepared for the Mission

U.S. forces, diplomats, advisors, and aid workers were ill-equipped for their jobs in Afghanistan because the people who sent them there had not done the kind of planning and training needed to prepare them properly. Military and civilian personnel knew little or nothing about Afghanistan's culture or languages, and their ignorance contributed to misunderstandings and misjudgments when they got there, undermining U.S. efforts. Exacerbating the problem for the people on the ground were short tours of duty and security restrictions that kept them largely confined to gated security compounds. The U.S. government did not recognize the need for training in Afghan culture and/or languages until it was too late, and then it invested too little in implementing it. Advisors to Afghan security forces lacked personnel and specialized training. And important resources, including trained personnel, funding, and materiel, were diverted to Iraq during the war's crucial early years. The loss of material resources exacerbated a decline in morale, as personnel perceived these appropriations as indicating a lack of government focus on the mission in Afghanistan.

U.S. personnel lacked cultural knowledge and language skills

Before 9/11, many Americans knew little or nothing about Afghanistan. The media had paid limited attention to the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, and less to the ensuing Afghan civil war. After the U.S. invasion, as American involvement in the war escalated, hundreds of thousands of young servicemembers and contingents of development workers and diplomats headed out into a world that was completely foreign to them, a world of remote Afghan villages, treacherous mountainsides, and crowded Afghan cities. U.S. troops and civilian personnel dealt with the local population in countless ways—at various times they might negotiate with elders, traverse tribal regions, advise and assist their Afghan counterparts, or make life-or-death decisions. Yet for most of the war they performed these duties without a clear understanding of Afghanistan's culture, history, governance, or languages.

Neither the Department of State nor USAID implemented long-term language training and cultural awareness in any programmatic way. At times, there were only two or three Americans in the entire country who spoke Pashto, the language of southern Afghanistan, well enough to communicate official business. Personnel were recruited because of willingness to serve, not for their expertise in the region or in Afghanistan itself. Not until the 2009 surge was under consideration did the U.S. government begin training overseas personnel in the culture and languages of the country they were assisting, and that training offered too little and came too late.

In 2009, the Department of Defense launched its Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands program (AFPAK Hands). Under AFPAK Hands, senior uniformed military personnel and civilian DOD employees received extensive language training in one of several languages in Afghanistan (Dari, Pashto, and Urdu); lessons in Afghan and Pakistani culture, politics, history, and governance; and training in COIN fundamentals such as stabilization operations, ethics, human rights, and security force assistance through training, development, and advisement.[140] Over a four- to five-

[140] SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 48-49.

year commitment, this cadre of experts was expected to deploy multiple times to the same billet in order to cultivate close, long-term working relationships with their Afghan counterparts in support of Afghan capacity-building.[141]

The program was sorely needed, but imperfectly implemented. Largely viewed by the services as yet another ad hoc requirement competing for scarce resources, AFPAK Hands suffered from lack of investment in recruiting processes and incentives stateside, and a lack of program awareness or risk aversion, and improper employment, overseas, undermining its effectiveness.[142]

Security requirements isolated Western officials from local culture and sentiment

"Lead from the front" and "trust but verify" are among the most foundational leadership principles. Leaders personally inspect combat and other mission zones to get a more accurate picture of a situation; local presence helps them clarify aims and procedures, and resolve problems at their source. It also demonstrates a commitment to and investment in the mission and the personnel charged with carrying it out that sets a positive example for the organization and encourages accountability for outcomes. In Afghanistan, however, restrictions put in place to protect U.S. officials sometimes forced or tempted them to "lead from the rear," either by physically isolating them in gated compounds or psychologically distancing them from the Afghan population.

Western officials found it difficult to leave government compounds, making it harder for them to ground themselves in Afghan culture, government projects, or other social realities. Traveling outside the embassy often required bodyguards or security escorts, arranged in advance at considerable hassle. VIPs could coordinate with the military, which usually resulted in an inauthentic "dog and pony show"; but lower-level officials sometimes had their requests to visit development sites denied by a military that understandably prioritized its own missions. As Rory Stewart recalled, "Individual staff would have been willing to travel more (and often tried to do so behind the backs of their employers)."[143] Ambassadors and managers were exceedingly risk averse, and some cited a new insurance and legal notion of 'duty of care' to ensure that their civilian staff took no risks. In any case, every leader was painfully aware of the career-ending consequences of loss of life or injury in his chain of command."

Even when escorts were arranged, traveling with armed, uniformed men in armored vehicles hardly offered officials an authentic cultural immersion. Soldiers garbed in combat uniforms laden with high-tech equipment could be frightening to poor rural Afghan farmers, especially when they rolled up in MRAPs (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected) or other imposing

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[141] Hans Winkler and Robert Kerr, "AFPAK Hands: A Call for Change," *Small Wars Journal* (June 8, 2018), https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/afpak-hands-call-change.

[142] Tyrell Mayfield, "Handcuffed: The Burden of Institutional Management and Leadership Problems on the AFPAK Hands Program," *Small Wars Journal* (October 18, 2013), https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/handcuffed-the-burden-of-institutional-management-and-leadership-problems-on-the-afpak-hand. Materia in this section also comes from research on AFPAK conducted by one of the students in the class.

[143] Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* (New York: Norton, 2011), 14.

vehicles. The officials they accompanied had no chance to blend in or witness Afghan daily life from within. Locals were on guard and less than forthcoming.

Being stuck inside compounds was especially problematic for development workers, whose jobs depended on working with Afghans. So severe were restrictions on nonmilitary travel that USAID workers were sometimes unable to visit the projects they were funding. This was true of Stewart's own NGO in Kabul, which received $10 million from USAID and was located just three hundred yards from the Afghan Ministry of Finance. He recalls one official visit:

> When one senior visitor made it to the site, he was given twelve foreign bodyguards and fifty members of the Afghan police and security department as protection, and was allowed to remain exactly six minutes in the area before being "extracted." If they could not visit a safe neighborhood in central Kabul, it was out of the question for most foreign civilians to spend a night in a Pushtun village house.[144]

Such isolation surely intensified the problem of corrupt and inefficient spending. The United States paid for schools that were not built and soldiers who existed on paper only, in part because U.S. personnel could not physically inspect where their money was going, much less do so unannounced.

Short tours of duty contributed to cultural ignorance, led to constant changeover, and prevented personnel from adopting long-term goals

A number of the ambassadors we interviewed commented on the brevity of the average American posting to the country. State Department tours were usually no longer than two years. U.S. military tours might be fifteen months but were more commonly six to nine months. Allied military personnel had even shorter tours. From 2001 to 2011, "the Italian military served four months; the British soldiers, six; and the British diplomats in Kabul were on a one-year term, extendable to two."[145] This practice made demanding overseas service more bearable for military personnel, but it was detrimental to the mission.

When personnel are replaced after a few months, the lessons and expertise they have gained, particularly with regard to local culture, are frequently lost; newcomers end up having to learn the same lessons—before they leave in their turn. It is also more difficult to win or retain the trust of the locals if the people they are dealing with never remain the same for more than a few months. And as in any other industry, workers who will be on the job for a only short time tend to set short-term goals. The rotating personnel were yet another factor in the sense many had that the United States was fighting twenty one-year wars.

Those of us who served overseas ourselves remember these problems well. The typical twelve-month tour of a U.S. soldier in South Korea, for example, usually included no more than nine productive months. The first two months were spent in processing, while about a month before their departure most soldiers had mentally checked out. It is difficult to invest in long-term projects, or care as much about long-term outcomes, if you will neither be present to see them bear fruit nor be held accountable for their success or failure.

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[144] Ibid., 15.

[145] Ibid., 13.

U.S. advisors to Afghan security forces lacked adequate manpower, organization, and specialization

Insufficient selection processes and training programs for U.S. advisors, coupled with a lack of understanding of the operational environment, hampered their ability to work with the Afghan National Security Forces. Without specialized teams of advisors focused on the specific geography and cultural nuances of the region, the DOD cobbled together temporary units that it staffed in an ad hoc manner. This complicated security sector assistance (SSA) mission fell under the auspices of the DOD, defined as the "set of DOD activities that support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces and their supporting institutions."[146] In addition to the military, the ANSF consisted of police, paramilitary, border control, and other agencies within the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior.[147]

Personnel quotas placed on an already taxed system often resulted in filling billets with bodies regardless of aptitude, attitude, or experience, all necessities for Americans trying to build relationships, impart knowledge and skills, and assess the effectiveness of their Afghan counterparts. The U.S. military's staff supply dwarfed that of other U.S. organizations, but these personnel were constantly being deployed to new tasks, depleting even the most populous units. Projects lost staff, which adversely affected the military's ability to achieve mission objectives.[148] Pilots, chemical-warfare response units, and countless other U.S. military specialists with no previous policing, infrastructure-building, or other necessary experience received mere weekslong training. As a result, Afghan training largely consisted of generic tasks that could be applied to any combat situation, rather than specialized instruction geared to the different components of the ANSF or the situation on the ground.[149]

Security sector assistance field-advising team models evolved over the course of the war as part of an effort to address command, staffing, training, and retention issues. Four different iterations of these team models experimented with command structures, personnel sourcing, and capability requirements.[150] Yet at the war's end chronic training shortcomings and problems with setting mission priorities and allocating resources persisted. Individual branches did institute improvements to training over time, but the temporary nature of the advisory units worked against long-term strategic investment.[151] Even when it could muster the appropriate

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[146] Dan Grazier, *Preventing Train and Defeat in Future Conflicts: Institutionalizing the Lessons Learned During Afghanistan to Prevent Another Two-Decade Exercise in Futility,* Project on Government Oversight (April 8, 2020), 3, https://www.pogo.org/report/2020/04/preventing-train-and-defeat-in-future-conflicts/.

[147] NATO, "Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)," October 26, 2010, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_11/20110310_101122-media-backgrounder-ANSF.pdf.

[148] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* (August 2021), 23-24, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf.

[149] Ibid.

[150] SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility.*

[151] Grazier, "Preventing Train and Defeat in Future Conflicts."

inputs of personnel, training, and configuration, SSA modeled these on complex U.S. military structures and systems the Afghans could neither afford nor maintain. Advisory role training did not focus on ANSF-specific systems, processes, equipment, or doctrine.[152]

Resources and personnel were diverted to Iraq

Beginning in 2002, Pentagon policy planners shifted their focus to Iraq. This diverted not only human and financial resources away from Afghanistan, but attention in Washington as well, hampering U.S. efforts at the strategic and operational levels.

The Bush administration had become distracted by Iraq by early 2002, when administrators identified Saddam Hussein as a major security threat in the region. That October, Bush obtained congressional approval to invade Iraq. Now the United States was fighting two wars, and the result was poor resource management, lack of strategic thinking in both operating theaters, and a misalignment of policy objectives. While policymakers denied that the Iraq War distracted combat efforts in Afghanistan, a close examination of how policy unfolded within the administration reveals the extent to which fighting two wars hampered decision-making processes and execution at both strategic and operational levels.

As James Dobbins, the special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2013–14, verified in an interview with SIGAR, the Bush administration prioritized combat efforts in Iraq over maintaining security and stability in Afghanistan.[153] The administration diverted critical reconstruction and intelligence resources to Iraq, sending elite Special Forces units and CIA teams to search for Taliban and terrorist leaders there. Predator drones were dispatched to Iraq rather than Afghanistan as soon as they rolled off the assembly lines.[154] Until roughly 2009, Iraq took attention away from Afghanistan; after 2005, Iraq began to take resources as well.[155]

One longtime Special Forces operative coauthoring this report offers compelling anecdotal testimony to substantiate these claims from an on-the-ground point of view. He served on deployments in Afghanistan in 2005, Iraq in 2005, 2006, 2007, and Afghanistan again in 2008 and 2009, and his time in both countries made clear to him that the two theaters received significantly unequal personnel, both soldiers and leaders. In Iraq, the Special Operations system of finding, fixing, and finishing objectives, then using the intelligence gained on those missions to continue the cycle, operated briskly and efficiently. By contrast, in Afghanistan the duties of the senior leadership in processing intelligence and opportunities for engagement with the enemy developed much more slowly, and communications processes were markedly less efficient and effective.

When asked about this perceived difference in professionalism and effectiveness, a former commander of forces in both theaters agreed with the anecdotal assessment. To

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[152] SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 12–13

[153] United States of America, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], "Interview of Ambassador James Dobbins," January 11, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/?document=dobbins_james_ll_02212018.

[154] David Rohde and David E. Sanger. "How a 'Good War' in Afghanistan Went Bad," *New York Times*, August 12, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/world/asia/12afghan.html.

[155] SIGAR, "Interview of Ambassador James Dobbins."

paraphrase his view, many of the more aggressive and motivated fighters went to Iraq because it offered far more combat opportunities. In his opinion, the U.S. forces who served in the upper levels of leadership in Afghanistan had different motivations. This echoed the assessment of David Richards, a British general who led NATO in 2006–7: "The US was sending the best minds and resources to Iraq, so it became clear that NATO would take over [Afghanistan] because the US had too much on their plates."[156]

Policy Recommendations

The U.S. military, State Department, and development agencies need to invest in cultural competency and language programs and career paths. Cultural knowledge and understanding can inform U.S. efforts overseas, allowing personnel on the ground to accurately assess what is possible, sustainable, and best suited to a nation's unique needs and capabilities. Additionally, culture and language training provides invaluable insight for U.S. personnel interacting with local populations. The United States can strategically plan for most-probable scenarios of conventional conflicts, but violent extremism, security crises, and other unforeseen events may again require engagement in far-flung, poorly understood regions of the world. Advance investment in cultural training will prepare military and development personnel to meet these challenges, as well as to deal with challenges and complexities that do not allow a simple solution.

The United States also needs to permit civil servants to accept greater personal risk in the conduct of their jobs, with full knowledge on both sides that this will result in more American casualties. Afghanistan was a dangerous place, but not so dangerous that it justified the inflexible, self-defeating security restrictions that were imposed. If the U.S. government is willing to ask military service members to risk their lives in the line of duty, it should be equally willing to ask—or at least permit—its civilian public servants to do the same. To do otherwise is to imply that the civilian mission is less important than the combat mission, an attitude that the U.S. experience in Afghanistan disproves.

Additionally, individual tours of duty should be preemptively extended in times of prolonged crisis. Overseas service is emotionally difficult for public servants and their families—especially in war zones, and especially for those actively fighting that war. We do not propose returning to antiquated models in which diplomats served lifetime tours in a single country and soldiers signed up for the duration of the war; any effort to do so would hamper recruitment. Nevertheless, the focus today may be too much in favor of generalists at the expense of personnel with local expertise. A volunteer service compensated with deployment bonuses would be likelier to prevail in prolonged counterinsurgency if its members did not serve with one eye on the calendar and its local allies did not have to reset their working relationships so frequently.

The U.S. military should also invest in permanent combat advisor–security sector assistance training programs and career paths. While we are not advocating that the United States increase nation-building efforts, the U.S. military may one day find itself responsible for

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[156] United States of America, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], "Interview of David Richards" October 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/?document=richards_david_ll_07_67_09262017.

advising security sector allies crucial to a host nation's security and stability. These are necessary conditions for other agencies and organizations to further state- or capacity-building efforts.

E3. Lack of Understanding of Afghan Culture, Religion, and Identity Harmed and Alienated Afghan Communities and Impeded Reconstruction Efforts

The mission in Afghanistan relied on the misguided assumption that American strategies, understandings of key issues, and cultural ideals could be applied wholesale to Afghanistan. The United States failed to properly engage with local religious leaders and promoted Western distinctions between religious and secular society that locals did not recognize or accept. Afghan peacebuilding interests were conflated with military strategic objectives in transparent ways that made locals feel as if they were being ignored or silenced. Deeply ingrained conservative norms around women's rights were underestimated, and popular community-based methods of dispute resolution were marginalized in favor of a corrupt state court system. This failure to prioritize local needs and preferences caused significant harm and led to nation-building policies that bore little relation to how Afghans understood their own identity and culture.

Personnel dealing with Afghan religious leaders tried to impose distinctions between religious and secular society that were alien to the Afghans, while military outreach to religious leaders conflated peacebuilding with military strategic objectives

In a country whose government and social structure are largely tied to Islam, religious actors and leaders hold important positions in communities, making them key to any inclusive peacebuilding process. Afghans trust religious leaders more than they do any governance institution or actor, and more than any media outlet.[157] But U.S. personnel in Afghanistan made little strategic outreach to religious leaders. U.S. officials systematically overlooked religious leaders and institutions, rarely involving them in projects or planning, to the detriment of the mission.

From the beginning, American officials treated local religious leaders and organizations as distinct and separate from the "true," secular Afghan civil society. In June 2002, for instance, when the United States spearheaded an emergency Loya Jirga to establish the transitional government, it also held a last-minute "civil society conference" paralleling the Bonn Conference, intended as a forum for key actors to define their vision of Afghanistan. But of the seventy-six Afghan civil society members invited, none represented a religious group. The body was primarily made up of "elite" actors working in "the NGO sector in Pakistan and Iran."[158]

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[157] "Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People," November 14, 2017, Asia Foundation, ReliefWeb https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-2017-survey-afghan-people.

[158] Kaja Borchgrevink, *Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan*, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) (November 2017, 43, https://www.prio.org/download/publicationfile/425/Borchgrevink%20(2007)%20Religious%20Actors%20and%20Civil%20Society%20in%20Post-2001%20Afghanistan%20(PRIO%20PAPER).pdf

In 2006 the same exclusions prevailed. The international community convened in London to issue the "Afghanistan Compact" and renew a commitment to "strengthening state institutions and civil society"—but only "modern" civil society actors were consulted, with no representatives from religious and traditional groups. Similarly, donor programming, especially in the early years of the war, focused primarily on NGOs, which "subscribe to key elements of donor ideology and strategy" in a way more Westerners find reassuring than they do the operations of religious groups.[159] Religious leaders were seen as "conservative traditionalists" opposed to guardians of the "fundamental values associated with establishing a liberal democracy." The National Solidarity Program, the largest development program in Afghanistan, which was partially funded by USAID, categorically rejected "any support to religious institutions, as part of its bylaws."[160]

Azza Karam, secretary-general of the global NGO Religions for Peace, notes:

> If you look at the way support for civil society went from the US government to Afghanistan, it didn't go towards a broad civil society approach, a whole-of-civil-society approach that included religious leaders. In fact, it very rarely went to religious leaders and actors. It was about the secular civil society—the women's rights, the human rights [advocates] who were all speaking and thinking the secular language.[161]

U.S. officials, having brought their view of church-state separation with them, attempted to impose it upon a society that had a wholly different conception of the role of religion in public and political life.

Military leaders, meanwhile, valued peacebuilding efforts and outreach to religious leaders only when these activities fit into their own counterinsurgency objectives. As Navy Command Chaplain James Fisher put it in 2007, "If we do not win the mullahs, we will not win this war."[162] This instrumentalization of religious leaders further marginalized them by creating a relationship in which their concerns were accepted as valid only if they aligned with military objectives.

In the early years of the war, military leaders made only sporadic approaches to Afghan religious leaders. Not until the 2009 surge did the military prioritize strategic, centralized engagement with religious leaders. At this time, military chaplains were made officially responsible for "mapping the religious terrain" in Afghanistan: U.S. officials had realized that

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[159] Borchgrevink, *Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan,* 52.

[160] Mirwais Wardak, Idrees Zaman, and Kanishka Nawabi, *The Role and Functions of Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan: Case Studies from Sayedabad and Kunduz,* Cooperation for Peace and Unity (July 2007), 34, https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkley-center/070701CPAURoleFunctionReligiousCivilSocietyAfghanistan.pdf.

[161] Michael Igoe, "Q&A: Can Faith Engagement Help Prevent Afghanistan's Collapse?" October 5, 2021, Devex, https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/q-a-can-faith-engagement-help-prevent-afghanistan-s-collapse-101711.

[162] Julie Weckerlein, "Air Force Chaplain Shares Faith in Afghanistan," August 15, 2007, Air Force, https://www.af.mil/News/Features/Display/Article/143419/air-force-chaplain-shares-faith-in-afghanistan/.

religious outreach and information gathering had been neglected in earlier years, and that "no one had established the leaders or groups who would provide the greatest influence within the country." Similarly, no one knew which religious leaders in Pakistan held influence within Afghanistan, and no coordination of informal outreach had been attempted.[163]

Even organized military engagement with Afghan religious leaders presented many challenges. In most cases, the role of U.S. chaplains was ambiguous or poorly defined. "Chaplains lacked a formal doctrine" and there was "no agreement across branches as to how far and in what manner" their authority in religious advising and outreach extended.[164] Further, it is not clear whether military chaplains had the necessary expertise to conduct this kind of outreach to Afghan religious leaders. As Commander George Adams, a navy chaplain, notes, chaplains were individually responsible for gaining knowledge about the cultures and religious environment into which they would be deployed in Afghanistan, but their preparation was often "done by browsing the internet or reading a few books." Most chaplains did not receive "adequate training in world religions, conflict resolution, cross-cultural interfaith dialogue skills," or other key competencies.[165] Absent proper training, chaplains relied on "word-of-mouth shared from unit to unit over time" to develop best practices.[166]

Further, chaplains' subordinate status to military commanders gave them little or no autonomy outside of military interests. As Adams noted, if chaplains engaged religious leaders, some commanders might "inadvertently use their relationship with those leaders to gather human intelligence."[167] Where does the boundary lie between relationship-building and using a religious leader as a tool to win a war? No official code of ethics for military chaplains addressed this question, yet their accountability to military leaders should have raised the issue.

The United States underestimated deeply ingrained cultural norms in Afghan society involving women's rights, and created unsustainable programs that prioritized American values over those of Afghans

The underlying problem in the U.S. approach to women's rights in Afghanistan was the failure on the part of the Americans to understand the diversity of Afghan ethnic groups and the conservatism that was deeply rooted in Afghan society, particularly rural societies. To many Afghans, it has long been clear that the main barrier to promoting women's rights is "social and cultural norms."[168] Americans tended to speak of protecting women from the Taliban and its

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[163] Eric Patterson, ed., *Military Chaplains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Beyond: Advisement and Leader Engagement in Highly Religious Environments* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 121, 120.

[164] Ibid., 180.

[165] George Adams, *Chaplains as Liaisons with Religious Leaders: Lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan,* United States Institute of Peace (March 1, 2006), 42–43, https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/03/chaplains-liaisons-religious-leaders-lessons-iraq-and-afghanistan.

[166] Patterson, *Military Chaplains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Beyond,* 66.

[167] Adams, *Chaplains as Liaisons with Religious Leaders,* 41.

[168] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (February 17, 2021), 7, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf.

Islamic ideology, but traditional gender norms among different ethnic groups long predate the Taliban.

The U.S. promotion of women's rights affected many areas, but it mostly changed things for a relatively small demographic: urban populations.[169] This focus excluded the three-quarters of Afghan women who live in rural areas, and posed a significant problem for development.[170] Rural populations tend to hold more conservative values and have limited access to health care, education, and other social services.

The United States especially focused on girls' education. According to SIGAR reports, the United States invested about $1 billion in education, of which $205 million specifically went to programs for girls' education.[171] By 2021, there were 3.5 million girls in school, about 40 percent of the student population of 9.2 million students.[172] Still, a huge rural-urban divide persisted in female education. The SIGAR report states,

> As with so many things in Afghanistan, there is also a significant rural-urban divide. Most of the gains in girls' education have been in the cities. According to a 2018 UNICEF report, girls living in rural areas make up the biggest group of out-of-school children: across Afghanistan, some 1.45 million girls at the primary and lower secondary levels are out of school. (These numbers, however, do not count girls who are enrolled in community- based education programs.)[173]

Initiatives by both Americans and Afghans to put women into government and politics likewise fell short of their ambitions. To ensure women's participation in politics, a certain number of parliamentary seats were reserved for female candidates. Specifically, a minimum of 68 out of 250 parliamentary seats (27 percent) were reserved for women.[174] But simply gaining a political seat does not equate to gaining a political voice or political influence.[175] The Afghan Analysts Network reported that "female parliamentarians [were] disunited; many [were] elected with the support of warlords and [were] answerable to them."[176] As a result, women's participation in Afghanistan's government did little for women's rights development. Very often, female parliamentarians were not in a position to advocate for legislation that would gain more rights for women.

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[169] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality*, 6–7, 54, 67, 77, 85–86, 114, 149.

[170] *Afghanistan—Education Equity Profile for Adolescent Girls*, UNICEF South Asia, UNICEF (December 1, 2019), 3, https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/afghanistan-education-equity-profile-adolescent-girls.

[171] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality*, 72.

[172] Ibid, 63.

[173] Ibid., 67.

[174] Jelena Bjelica and Rohullah Sorush, "Afghanistan Elections Conundrum (20): Women Candidates Going Against the Grain," October 19, 2018, updated March 9, 2020, Afghanistan Analysts Network, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/afghanistan-elections-conundrum-19-women-candidates-going-against-the-grain/.

[175] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality*, 80.

[176] Bjelica and Sorush, "Afghanistan Elections Conundrum."

Little was done to bridge the divide between urban and rural Afghan women. The SIGAR report on gender inequality highlighted the vast differences in U.S. impact on urban and rural populations, citing "lack of funding, inaccessibility, poor infrastructure, and insecurity" as the "the main factors that limit their expansion to rural areas."[177] And even beyond access to resources, rural and urban women had different goals and were living under vastly different conditions. Despite the U.S. presence, "for many rural women, particularly in Pashtun areas but also among other rural minority ethnic groups, actual life has not changed much from the Taliban era. . . . [I]nstead of economic, social, and political empowerment, Afghan women in rural areas experience the devastation of bloody and intensifying fighting between the Taliban and government forces and local militias."[178]

The United States built Western, state-based rule-of-law programs at the expense of community-based systems preferred by Afghans

Fostering the rule of law was at the cornerstone of establishing a legitimate Afghan state. Former officials explained to us that rule-of-law and judicial-reconstruction efforts connected every developmental and military objective in the country. All in all, the United States spent over $1 billion across sixty-six rule-of-law programs led by USAID, the State Department, the Justice Department, and the Department of Defense.[179] These programs included legislative reform, legal education, public outreach, anti-corruption initiatives, and community-based dispute resolution.

The majority of this spending was directed at the formal legal system.[180] In its efforts, the United States sought to develop rule-of-law institutions, which had been successful in other development projects but proved unsuccessful in Afghanistan because Afghan justice systems are centered on tribal consensus and mediation. As in other reconstruction efforts, the initiatives that succeeded generally involved long-term commitment to projects that most closely aligned with Afghan culture and thus were likely to be sustained by the Afghan people.

But despite decades of involvement, and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on the formal court system, the judiciary consistently ranked as the most corrupt branch of the Afghan government. Low salaries, weak institutional control, and a lack of external oversight, together with the influence of warlords and political elites, fueled endemic corruption; Asia Foundation surveys found that Afghans were more likely to bribe a judge than to bribe police, military, or customs officials.[181] In urban areas, for example, it was nearly impossible to buy land without

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[177] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality,* 86.

[178] John R. Allen, and Vanda Felbab-Brown. "The Fate of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," March 4, 2021, Brookings Institute, https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/.

[179] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], *Rule of Law in Afghanistan: U.S. Agencies Lack a Strategy and Cannot Fully Determine the Effectiveness of Programs Costing More Than $1 Billion*, (SIGAR 15-68 Audit Report, July 2015), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-15-68-AR.pdf.

[180] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality,* 21.

[181] John Braithwaite and Ali Wardak, "Crime and War in Afghanistan: Part I: The Hobbesian Solution," *British Journal of Criminology* 53, no. 2 (March 2013): 178, 185, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azs065;

bribing a judge. "Without high-level state efforts to reduce corruption, improve judicial performance, and engage constructively with nonstate tribal and religious actors," explained Geoffrey Swenson, a fellow in international development at the London School of Economics, "judicial state-building assistance would always achieve little regardless of expenditures or program design."[182]

Given the corruption of the state legal system and the primacy of local communities as the preferred form of social organization, between 80 and 90 percent of disputes in Afghanistan were resolved outside the state system.[183] Rather than taking their disputes to state judges, Afghan communities turned to jirgas (for Pashtuns) and shuras (for non-Pashtuns).

Although practices differ from community to community, jirgas and shuras usually consist of a committee of elders whose collective decisions bind parties involved in a dispute.[184] Human rights and women's rights organizations often objected to working with jirgas, however, because jirgas were usually composed entirely of male members, and they might make their decisions for the benefit of the entire community rather than the individuals involved—especially when those individuals were female.[185] In the most extreme cases, a jirga would recommend the marriage of a woman from the offender's tribe to a close relative of the victim in order to settle a debt.[186] While rare and a violation of Afghan state laws, such a practice was anathema to many American and international organizations, particularly given their focus on women's rights throughout the war.

The serious human rights concerns notwithstanding, by refusing to engage with local partners trusted by Afghan communities, American development workers undermined their own efforts, as they created institutions that Afghans considered illegitimate. Eventually, USAID experimented with a program that aimed to support traditional paths to justice by working with tribal and religious leaders while attempting to protect the rights of women. The program was also intended to better link the formal state-based justice system with community-based resolution practices. SIGAR gave the program mixed reviews, noting that judges would refer cases to community-based methods, but community members rarely if ever referred cases to the state system. Notably, of the approximately $1 billion invested in rule-of-law programs, only

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Ali Wardak, "A Decade and a Half of Rebuilding Afghanistan's Justice System," *Van Vollenhoven Institute*, 2016, https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/en/publications/a-decade-and-a-half-of-rebuilding-afghanistans-justice-system-an-, 8.

[182] Geoffrey Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts to Promote the Rule of Law in Afghanistan Failed," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 19, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00285.

[183] Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts to Promote the Rule of Law in Afghanistan Failed," 6.

[184] Ali Wardak, "Building a Post-War Justice System in Afghanistan," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 41, no. 4 (May 2004): 319–41, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:CRIS.0000025765.73021.fa.

[185] Ali Wardak and John Braithwaite, "Crime and War in Afghanistan: Part II: A Jeffersonian Alternative?" *British Journal of Criminology* 53, no. 2 (March 2013): 197–214, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azs066.

[186] Wardak, "Building a Post-War Justice System in Afghanistan," 327.

$39.7 million went to the USAID program explicitly devoted to community-based dispute resolution.[187]

The shift from investing solely in state organizations to working with jirgas and shuras reflected the evolving conditions on the ground. As the state system grew increasingly corrupt, the Taliban formed a parallel court system that had become the centerpiece of its insurgency by 2006.[188] Afghans viewed Taliban courts as more effective and fair than state courts.[189] To the counterinsurgency mission, then, the Americans' own rule-of-law efforts became a tactical liability. By the time the Americans pivoted to working with nonstate partners, they had lost their opportunity to gain the people's trust, and the steps they took were inadequate. The Taliban remained popular for their ability to offer fast rulings without demanding bribes.

The blurring of lines between pro-Afghan government development and anti-Taliban military objectives speaks to the larger U.S. crisis of purpose in Afghanistan. In some ways, the overlap between building state capacity and undercutting the Taliban should have uniquely positioned U.S. rule-of-law efforts to succeed, with money and commitment going toward development, diplomacy, and defense. Instead, after twenty years, the Afghan judiciary remained irreparably flawed.

The U.S. agencies' attempts to impose generic development models that had little connection to Afghan organizations and social structure were not limited to rule-of-law efforts. Describing a formal 2004 statement of the Afghan government drafted in Berlin that was supported by every major development institution, Rory Stewart summed up the problem:

> Among the sixty-nine separate tables and charts in this 137-page plan, including ones on "predicted teledensity" and "status and accomplishment, national police and law enforcement," the following words did not appear: *Pushtun, Hazara, Tajik, Islam, Sharia, jihad, communism, Northern Alliance, warlord, democracy, equality, insurgency, resistance,* and *consent*. Were you to delete the word *Afghanistan* from the document, and replace it with the word *Botswana,* it would be very difficult to know of which country you were speaking.[190]

In this section we have focused on U.S. approaches to religious engagement, promoting gender equity, and judicial reform, although we recognize that the problem recurred in numerous areas, from elections to training the Afghan Armed Forces, and that it came to further undermine the legitimacy of all U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Ultimately, attempting to impose flawed American cultural and identity-based institutions harmed the communities they were meant to serve, directly undermining the stability and development of Afghan society.

Policy recommendations

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[187] SIGAR, *Rule of Law in Afghanistan*, 17.

[188] Swenson, "Why U.S. Efforts to Promote the Rule of Law in Afghanistan Failed," 121.

[189] Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "Taliban Courts Filling Justice Vacuum in Afghanistan," December 16, 2008, NPR, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98261034.

[190] Stewart and Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* 36–37.

Whether with regard to military conflicts, development projects, or state-building, the United States must recognize that Western institutions cannot be transferred wholesale throughout the world. Americans entered Afghanistan confident in their ability to apply past models and ultimately failed to implement them because such models had no place in the Afghanistan social and political culture.

Understanding is more important than innovation. The most effective solutions will enlist direct, sustained community engagement and support in establishing systems that can be maintained without perpetual U.S. involvement. Rural communities in particular, should be targeted for assistance but approached with caution because they are usually more conservative and have fewer resources than urban communities.

When the United States is engaging with leaders in fragile situations, its efforts must be led by impartial civilian actors who have the necessary expertise in the region. This is especially the case when dealing with religious leaders. The United States and other international donors should prioritize a two-way relationship with religious leaders and actors, considering their needs and goals and viewing them as key partners instead of mere instruments through which to achieve military objectives. Americans should also adopt a culturally and historically sensitive approach to civil society promotion that acknowledges the key role of religious actors and institutions.

In all cases, community outreach is essential. Working with on-the-ground partners and investing in a relationship between country-based U.S. actors and local communities is the only path to sustained change. In the area of women's rights, for example, longer-term engagement in rural areas would have allowed more directed planning and efforts tailored to community needs.

Finally, as seen in judicial reconstruction efforts, the United States must understand that American conceptions of legitimacy are not universal. A country with a long history of decentralized government, foreign intervention, and local community organization will have its own view on what constitutes good government. Rather than attempting to impose a preordained model, the United States should work with partner communities and nations to find the best solution for each.

E4. Congress Avoided Making Hard Decisions or Exercising Active Oversight, Even in Areas Where It Has Clear Constitutional Authority

Over the course of the war, Congress escalated a decades-long trend of ceding more and more of its war powers to the Executive. The exact division of these powers is a contentious legal debate, but the one area in which Congress has unquestioned authority—managing the budget—illuminates the broader problem of a disengaged Legislative branch. With a passive Congress that was disinclined to assume political risk or responsibility, it was easier for the Department of Defense to influence budget decision making to its advantage, avoiding active oversight or accountability. Congressional passivity weakened the war effort through budget indiscipline and over-deference to military proposals.

Congress pursued an overly compliant course throughout the war, to the detriment of both the war and the country

As the war in Afghanistan dragged on, the U.S. Congress failed to act as an effective check on ever-increasing Executive overreach. It did not attempt to clarify the mission; to narrow, replace, or repeal the 2001 AUMF; to impose withdrawal timelines; to check contractors' influence over resourcing decisions; to prevent, punish, or investigate CIA torture programs and indefinite detention at Guantánamo Bay; or to demand accountability for civilian casualties, especially with regard to drone strikes.

A full examination of each area in which Congress might have been more assertive is not within the scope of this report. Moreover, many of these issues touch on contentious debates of constitutional law; for example, President Bush's Office of Legal Counsel argued that the president did not require the 2001 AUMF in order to go to war. But there is one responsibility that effectively everyone—even those most supportive of plenary Executive power over foreign policy—agrees belongs to Congress alone: managing the federal budget.

Through interviews with people involved in the defense budget process over the past twenty years, we found that although Congress was often frustrated by Executive (and especially DOD) overreach, it ultimately proved unwilling to rein it in. Through its inaction, Congress weakened the war effort, overspent on military (relative to diplomatic or development) solutions, and abdicated its clearest constitutional responsibilities.

For ten years, Congress funded the war through emergency supplemental appropriations, which were subject to less oversight and effectively bypassed the authorizing committees intended to oversee war spending

War moves quickly and Congress moves slowly. The regular budget process takes about eighteen months from start to finish—so if it were strictly followed, Congress would have had to start planning to fund the war in Afghanistan long before 9/11.[191] Even once a war begins, it is

[191] See Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy* (New York: St. Martin's, 2016), 180.

impossible for the government to know how much it will end up costing, for that depends in part on how many bullets will be fired, how many helicopters will need to be deployed, and so on.

In the case of Afghanistan, these incidental costs were extensive. For example, the military rapidly depleted its stocks of munitions kits and Tomahawk missiles. As more National Guard and Reserve troops were added to the fight, the military had to pay them active-duty salaries.[192] The development and production of new technology and equipment demanded by the war effort was also expensive.

For these reasons, in the twentieth century, Congress regularly used "supplemental" budgets to respond to unforeseen military crises. After the first large supplemental, Congress would then adjust (more or less) the following years' regular appropriations bills to account for the continued cost of a war.

But in the years after the post-9/11 supplemental, this folding-in process did not occur. Instead, the administration continued to request more and more supplementals.[193] When DOD comptroller Dov Zakheim introduced the regular 2004 defense budget request, he "made it clear in [his] press briefing that this was a 'peacetime budget' and that a separate supplemental would be submitted to fund wartime operations."[194] This announcement reflected the policy that would dominate the first half of the war. Unlike the funding of the Korean and Vietnam wars, the cost of the war in Afghanistan would not be incorporated into the base budget but would instead be treated as a series of "emergency" supplementals.

Keeping the Afghanistan (and later Iraq) budget separate from the DOD base budget might have had the benefit of helping Congress track the war's cost apart from regular defense costs. But by the end of the decade, the practice was derided across Washington. These bills were subject to far less oversight and practically bypassed the authorizing committees. The first one or two supplemental bills could reasonably be justified as a response to the unexpected emergency of war. But even after the war became an entirely predictable expense, for funding purposes it was still treated with the reduced oversight afforded to emergencies.

According to a number of congressional staffers, DOD's requests were vague, and the process to pass them was purposely rushed. Supplemental requests contained a minuscule fraction of the detail included in regular budget requests, and it was often unclear how accurate and exact those requested budgets were. Often the military would simply decide how much it wanted overall and work backward to justify the cost by filling in numbers on the balance sheet. The resulting requests contained figures and language that were, in reality, made up. Staff referred to these items as "SWAG": "Silly Wild-Ass Guess."[195]

One particularly jarring example of this process occurred in relation to the 2003 base budget. In February 2002, along with the 2002 supplemental request, DOD also sent Congress its request for the regular 2003 defense budget. In that request, the Office of Management and

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[192] Dov S. Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

[193] Congressional Research Service, *Overseas Contingency Operations Funding: Background and Status* (September 6, 2019), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44519.pdf.

[194] Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale*, 190.

[195] This section draws extensively on interviews with current and former congressional staffers.

Budget (OMB) had inserted language asking Congress to create a $10 billion contingency war fund. Congress was not pleased. Not only do lawmakers tend to hate contingency funds (because they have so little power to oversee how the money is spent), the request did not even specify what type of contingency the fund was intended to address. At the time, the United States was at war only in Afghanistan. However, "it seemed evident" to Zakheim, and to many in and out of government, "that OMB had Iraq in mind." Congress could also tell that the money was really for Iraq. The contingency war fund was eventually dropped from the bill.[196]

But congressional resources were typically spread so thin that that members of Congress and their staff did not have the time to take a close enough look at the requests to divine which figures were legitimate and which were not. Supplemental requests provided Congress with insufficient information and were overseen by a smaller number of staffers than the base budget. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees have a combined staff of forty to forty-five people, while Defense Appropriations has closer to ten. Fewer people working on a bill means fewer reading the request, fewer asking questions, fewer taking meetings, and less congressional understanding of what is inside the bill. Supplementals more or less bypassed the two Armed Services committees. They were appropriated, but in a real sense they were not formally authorized.

Even if Congress had wanted to exercise greater oversight, the final obstacle was politics. For a politician of any party to oppose defense spending, especially during wartime, is a significant political risk. Less money for defense means fewer resources for soldiers serving overseas. For this reason, voting for a defense bill is among the easiest votes most members of Congress make in a year. This political reality shaped the treatment of supplementals: Congress never really pushed back against them.

Supplementals contributed to a lack of budget discipline and interagency inequity

According to a number of congressional staffers, the ease with which supplementals moved through Congress contributed to a lack of discipline in responding to urgent issues. Problems would arise, and Congress would often throw money at the most expensive solution without investigating whether it was the best solution.

In the early years of the war, military personnel were very concerned about the issue of IEDs (improvised explosive devices), which were blowing up convoys of American soldiers. In response, Congress allocated huge sums of money for the development of MRAPs, up-armored trucks that could better withstand IED strikes. But MRAPs proved to be impractical on the ground due to logistical and other difficulties, and many of them now lie unused, in disrepair. The better solutions the military eventually hit upon, such as finding ways to jam the IEDs themselves, were initially missed because money for more conventional solutions was readily available and easy to appropriate. Had the money not been so easily obtainable, these solutions might have been put into place sooner.[197] That being said, others in the defense world disagree with this evaluation of MRAPs.

Furthermore, there was a clear asymmetry in the ways the State Department and Defense Department were funded. Before the war, the State Department had been heavily

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[196] Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale*, 156–58.

[197] This section draws extensively from interviews with current and former congressional staffers.

criticized for using supplementals.[198] Now, the military was using supplementals as a matter of course, while, as Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad remembers, "civilian agencies, by contrast, were largely expected to live within the straightjackets of their regular budgets." If the State Department wanted to fund something new, it had to find other things to cut and go through the rigors of reprogramming.[199]

From 2011 on, Congress funded the war through a separate account for overseas contingency operations, further reducing oversight and budget discipline

Just when legislators and policymakers were indicating a substantial political will to end the use of supplementals, the Budget Control Act of 2011 extinguished any hope of incorporating war funding into the base budget. Instead, Congress drew on an overseas contingency operations (OCO) account to fund the war. This meant the funding would be an addendum to the regular budget but would not count against the budget caps enforced on other agencies. Overseas contingency operations accounts, in turn, also came to be abused to cover many planned and routine costs. While many members of Congress were outwardly opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by mid-2010, Congress's continuing approval of DOD budget requests tells a story of tacit support.[200]

The term "overseas contingency operations" first appeared in a 140-page policy statement and budget blueprint called *A New Era of Responsibility: Renewing America's Promise,* published just a month into President Obama's first term. For a decade, the law had categorized the money flowing into Afghanistan and Iraq as "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) funding. Now, ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan would instead be called OCO.[201]

In fiscal year 2011, the Budget Control Act (BCA) was passed as a compromise between the Obama administration and the new Republican Congress. The BCA was an attempt to reduce budget deficits by at least $2.1 trillion over the next decade by putting limits on discretionary spending. About half the cuts were to come from defense spending, and the limits applied to defense and nondefense spending in different ways. If the limits were breached, sequestration would be triggered, and the president would be required to order across-the-board cuts.[202]

However, the BCA exempted overseas contingency operations funding from the caps on discretionary spending. Over time, not only has Congress amended the BCA to raise the overall caps numerous times, it has used the OCO exemption to continue to raise defense spending despite the caps that remained in place.[203]

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[198] Ronald E. Neumann, *Three Embassies Four Wars*, Adapted from the Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (Xlibris, 2017), 261–62.

[199] Khalilzad, *The Envoy*, 180–81.

[200] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 302.

[201] Ibid.

[202] James V. Saturno, *Defense Primer: Defense Appropriations Process*, Congressional Research Service (December 7, 2021). Can you give a URL?

[203] Paul D. Shinkman, "Inside the Pentagon's 'Slush Fund,'" *US News and World Report*, February 12, 2016.

A number of arguments do support the use of OCO. First, OCO was a reform to the use of supplementals in that it was technically a part of the regular budget bill, though it was a separate section. This means that OCO has not been rushed through Congress the way supplementals often were; it is subject to a yearly process. In addition, it can be useful in a time of crisis. According to the Congressional Research Service, "Some defense officials and policymakers say OCO funding enables a flexible and timely response to an emergency or contingency and provides a political and fiscal safety valve to the BCA caps and threat of sequestration."[204] And some argue that the real problem with the defense budget lies in Operations and Management (O&M). While O&M constitutes about one-third of the base budget, it makes up about two-thirds of OCO. Most OCO/GWOT funding is O&M funding. O&M covers needs such as "fuel, maintenance to repair facilities and equipment, and the mobilization of forces," along with "war-related operational costs," which the DOD defines as "operations, training, overseas facilities and base support, equipment maintenance, communications, and replacement of combat losses and enhancements."[205] In this way, problems with defense budget discipline originate not with OCO but with a general congressional culture of lax oversight. Fundamentally, the logic behind a contingency fund for the military is the same as the logic behind using supplementals: during a war, no one can predict exactly what resources will be required each year. Compared to supplementals, OCO was subject to marginally better oversight.

But OCO funding quickly expanded beyond its intended purpose to fund fully anticipated costs and enabled irresponsible military spending strategies. Critics have called the OCO account a "slush fund" for spending unrelated to any contingency. Former OMB director Mick Mulvaney derided these "budget gimmicks," and the Congressional Research Service explains why:

> Critics argue what was once generally restricted to a fund for replacing combat losses of equipment, resupplying expended munitions, transporting troops to and through war zones, and distributing foreign aid to frontline states has "ballooned into an ambiguous part of the budget to which government financiers increasingly turn to pay for other, at times unrelated, costs."[206]

By 2011, the war was no longer a yearly surprise, but it was being funded as if it were. The military still did not have to justify its costs five years in advance, as did every other federal agency. This year-by-year funding strategy allowed successive administrations to avoid making long-term decisions about the war.

Overseas Contingency Operations funding also contributed to a lack of budget discipline. By the end of the war, it was stated policy that OCO contained three types of funding: OCO for direct war costs, OCO for enduring requirements (enduring OCO), and OCO for base requirements. In the Trump administration's fiscal year 2020 OCO budget request, the

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[204] Ibid., citing Congressional Research Service, *Overseas Contingency Operations Funding,* 9.

[205] Congressional Research Service, *Overseas Contingency Operations Funding,* 12.

[206] Ibid., 9, citing Shinkman, "Inside the Pentagon's 'Slush Fund.'"

formulaic definition for OCO for direct war costs was "Direct War costs are those combat or direct combat support costs that will not continue to be expended once combat operations end at major contingency locations." The definition of enduring OCO was "costs that will likely remain after combat operations cease, and have previously been funded in OCO." And the definition of OCO for base requirements was "funding for base budget requirements in support of the National Defense Strategy." The request went on: "The Budget requests these funds in OCO to comply with the base budget defense caps included in the Budget Control Act of 2011." In other words, the military used OCO to fund nonemergency needs that the DOD did not think would otherwise be approved or funded. The funding requested for OCO for base requirements alone was almost double the funding requested for OCO for direct war costs.[207] Contingency funds are for unforeseen combat needs. To use contingency dollars to fund requirements that will continue after combat concludes as well as requirements which the government openly admits should be in the base budget is to use congressionally appropriated money for a purpose other than what it was intended for. This is the definition of a slush fund.

Critics of OCO also suspect that its use hinders defense planning by creating uncertainty. In January 2017, the Government Accountability Office concluded that "without a complete and reliable estimate of DOD's enduring OCO costs, neither DOD nor congressional decision makers will have a complete picture of the department's future funding needs."[208]

Since September 11, 2001, the total amount of discretionary budget authority Congress has appropriated for emergencies, OCO, or GWOT operations is around $2 trillion, $1.8 trillion of which went to the Department of Defense. In total, non-base funding has accounted for 17 percent of all DOD funding since fiscal year 2001. In comparison, comparable funding accounted for just 6 percent of DOD spending in Vietnam.[209]

Policy Recommendations

Congress as an institution cannot allow the Department of Defense to steamroll irresponsible budgets through staff-limited subcommittees. Much of Congress's de facto power comes from controlling the budget process. Congress must ensure that war funding is subject to at least the same level of oversight as other government funding. It is important that in a country without a military draft, the American people are not allowed to ignore the financial and human costs of war waged in their name.[210]

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[207] Department of the Army, *Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 Budget Estimates, March 2019,* vol. 3: *Operation and Maintenance, Army, Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO)Request,* https://www.asafm.army.mil/Portals/72/Documents/BudgetMaterial/2020/OCO/Operation%20and%20Maintenance/01%20Army%20(OMA)%20-%20Vol%203.pdf. **Page numbers needed for quotes.**

[208] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *OMB and DOD Should Revise the Criteria for Determining Eligible Costs and Identify the Costs Likely to Endure Long Term* (January 18, 2017), 15, https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-68.

[209] Congressional Research Service, *Overseas Contingency Operations Funding,* 3.

[210] Ben Hodges, "How We as a Nation—and I as a Military Officer—Failed in Afghanistan," *New York Post* (blog), August 24, 2021,

On April 9, 2021, the Biden Administration submitted a fact sheet to congressional appropriators that announced its intention of bringing an end to OCO. The move was covered favorably within the policy community, both by *Roll Call* and *The Hill*.[211] On May 28, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin released a statement on President Biden's defense budget request for fiscal year 2022. In that statement, Secretary Austin wrote, "For the first time since September 11, 2001, DOD direct war and enduring operation costs are included within the base budget request, rather than as a separate Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) request." In the final Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022, which became law on April 15, 2022, there was no mention of "Overseas Contingency Operations."[212]

Roughly a year later, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration requested $33 billion in funding for Ukraine. It did so through a supplemental.[213] While there are vast differences between funding the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and supporting Ukrainian defense forces, these moves do indicate that the Biden administration has moved away from OCO and back toward the use of supplementals. If the war in Ukraine continues into the following fiscal year, the Biden administration should incorporate funding for Ukraine into the base budget, returning to the precedent of Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War, as well as to sound budgetary practice. It is admirable that the Biden administration voluntarily chose to return OCO funding to the base budget, but this practice should be mandated by law.

However, in the event that the U.S. is drawn into a direct war of any kind in the future, there are more fundamental lessons to be gleaned. First, Congress must crack down significantly on the cavalier use of phrases like "emergency" and "contingency operations."

Second, war funding (whether as a supplemental or as some OCO-equivalent contingency fund) should also require genuine authorization by the Armed Services Committees in both chambers of Congress, rather than simply appropriation. Congress should also subject the Department of Defense to regular and detailed audits to evaluate whether significant anticipated costs are misidentified. By setting up a joint commission with the military, Congress could develop metrics for military budgeting that allow more insight into actual costs.

If a contingency fund is ever re-created for the Department of Defense, there should be strict guardrails placed on the fund. Equivalents of "Enduring OCO" and "OCO for Base" should not be permitted. When the United States is at war (a designation that should be further clarified by the judiciary), contingency dollars should be placed in an account specific to that

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https://nypost.com/2021/08/24/how-we-as-a-nation-and-i-as-a-military-officer-failed-in-afghanistan/.

[211] John M. Donnelly, "Analysis: Biden Ends Abuse-Prone Overseas Military Budgets," Roll Call (April 9, 2021), https://rollcall.com/2021/04/09/analysis-biden-ends-abuse-prone-overseas-military-budgets/; Laice Heeley,"The Biden Administration Is Poised to Absorb the Pentagon's 'Slush Fund'" (May 21, 2021), https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/553920-the-biden-administration-is-poised-to-absorb-the-pentagons-slush/.

[212] H.R.2471: Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, 117th Congress, https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/ 2471/text.

[213] Christina Wilkie and Thomas Franck, "Biden Asks Congress for $33 Billion to Support Ukraine Through September, April 28, 2022, CNBC, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/04/28/biden-to-ask-congress-for-33-billion-to-support-ukraine-through-september-.html .

operation and be used only for direct war-related costs. When the conflict ends, the account should be emptied and dissolved.

Congress should also revisit the use of taxation to fund war, as has been done throughout American history. Americans should share directly in the costs of war and not be allowed to ignore those costs.

Finally, Congress should not limit its reassertion of oversight power to budgetary matters. For instance, Congress should reassert its power to declare war and ratify the treaties which end war. The only way to test the true limits of congressional war powers is to execute them vigorously and take any resultant disputes before a judge. Courts can only adjudicate cases brought before them, and issues of standing are likely to impede them. However, in this context, legislative action may spur judicial action as well. At minimum, Congress should clarify its intended boundaries for the 2001 AUMF, especially now that the U.S. war in Afghanistan is over.

Conclusion

During this course, we spoke to many senior American leaders, all of whom were personally impressive and clearly dedicated to America's mission in Afghanistan. But in Afghanistan, America failed. Why did it turn out so badly, in lives lost and money wasted?

First, an almost permanent confusion existed regarding America's strategic goals. The original goal of defeating terrorists never receded, but it waxed and waned in importance over the years. No successful attacks were launched on American soil in these twenty years, but it is not clear how, or to what extent, U.S. efforts in Afghanistan contributed to that peacefulness, or at what cost. America's emphasis on other goals in Afghanistan, such as ending the drug trade, establishing the rule of law, and promoting democracy also varied. Gains were made in these areas but they turned out to be ephemeral. Significant achievements could be found in female education and maternal and child health, for which the United States should be justly proud. But even these accomplishments are likely to be undone now that the Taliban is back in control.

In addition, a high and surprising degree of animosity among leaders and between civilians and the military went unaddressed, undercutting efforts at coordination of mission goals. At critical points, it seemed as if the chain of command, both in Washington and in Kabul, was broken.

Compounding the problem of internal communications, no one among the U.S. policymakers, military, or aid personnel understood Afghanistan's culture, history, or traditions, despite the long period of U.S. involvement and a staggering amount of literature about the country. Few Americans spoke any of the local languages; tours were too short to enable personal interaction; and programs that were designed to fix these shortcomings for both civilians and the military were discontinued after a few years. Because they had little understanding of the country, Americans made mistakes of analysis, such as underestimating the Taliban, and of implementation, such as designing projects that were unsuited for a country like Afghanistan.

Particularly crucial during the early years was that Iraq took priority for many in the upper echelons of the U.S. government and military. The invasion of Iraq diverted resources and personnel from Afghanistan during what some experts have called the "golden hour," a period early in an intervention in which expenditure of resources and decisions made can decide its course. America's leaders understood that Iraq was not Afghanistan, but military operations that had succeeded in Iraq such as the surge, which led to the Sunni awakening, were nonetheless tried out in Afghanistan, where they had little or no success. A constant competition went on between those invested in the Iraq War and those dealing with Afghanistan for personnel, resources, and—perhaps most important—the attention of American leadership and public.

Finally, Congress gave the military and other policymakers too much money, and that money poured into Afghanistan too quickly. The sheer volume of funding fed a notoriously high level of corruption in Afghanistan, undermining public trust and fostering an attitude among Afghans to follow whatever course would keep the funds flowing. Administrations requested money in hastily designed supplementals and budget categories with limited oversight. Congress readily went along. Projects were set up without proper analysis or evaluation. Implementers on

the ground were pressured to spend the money quickly to ensure that it continued to be made available.

America's experience in Afghanistan ended in August 2021 with a chaotic withdrawal that reflected these problems, many of which had been in plain sight for twenty years. As the United States signaled its withdrawal, these early failings led to a catastrophic breakdown. Americans misjudged how quickly the Taliban could retake the country and overestimated the strength of the Afghan military, which had been built in the U.S. image. The Afghan government, doubting that the United States would abandon the country so quickly, refused to prepare for its withdrawal. When U.S. funding, which represented an astonishing 75 percent of government revenue, ceased, the economy collapsed, and Afghans fled the country.

The war in Afghanistan began in confusion and ended in chaos. Over the course of twenty years, policies were adopted and abandoned; military objectives were redefined; and costs were hidden from and by the people who were paying them. Americans—and the Afghan people—deserved better for their twenty-year sacrifice. Our goal in writing this report has been to analyze for the benefit of future policymakers, legislators, and military personnel what went wrong and how such terrible and costly mistakes can be avoided in the future. If we do not learn from what happened in Afghanistan, we stand the risk of creating a new Afghanistan somewhere else.

This report was written under the leadership of Jackson Senior Fellow Ambassador Anne Patterson and student James Hatch. Editing by Susan Laity.