

The Afghanistan Papers:

~ AT WAR WITH THE TRUTH ~

A confidential trove of government documents reveals that senior U.S. officials **failed to tell the truth about the war** in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable. The 2000 pages of documents are the byproduct of the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction led by John Sopko's. Titled "*Lessons Learned*," the \$11 million project was meant to diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan so the United States would not repeat the mistakes the next time it invaded a country or tried to rebuild a shattered one.

The *Lessons Learned* staff interviewed more than 600 people with firsthand experience in the war. The documents contradict a long chorus of public statements from U.S. presidents, military commanders and diplomats who assured Americans year after year that they were making progress in Afghanistan and the war was worth fighting. Several of those interviewed described explicit and sustained efforts by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public. They said it was common at military headquarters in Kabul — and at the White House — to **distort statistics to make it appear the United States was winning the war when that was not the case.**

With their forthright descriptions of how the United States became stuck in a faraway war, as well as the government's determination to conceal them from the public, the *Lessons Learned* interviews broadly resemble the Pentagon Papers, the Defense Department's top-secret history of the Vietnam War. When they were leaked in 1971, the Pentagon Papers caused a sensation by revealing the government had long misled the public about how the United States came to be embroiled in Vietnam.

The United States has allocated more than **\$133 billion** to "**nation-build**" Afghanistan — more than it spent, adjusted for inflation, to revive the whole of Western Europe with the **Marshall Plan** after World War II. U.S. officials tried to create — from scratch — a democratic government in Kabul modeled after their own in Washington. It was a foreign concept to the Afghans, who were accustomed to tribalism, monarchism, communism and Islamic law.

Meanwhile, the United States flooded the fragile country with far more aid than it could possibly absorb. Aid workers told government interviewers it was a colossal misjudgment, akin to pumping kerosene on a dying campfire just to keep the flame alive. One unnamed executive with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) guessed that 90 percent of what they spent was overkill: **"We lost objectivity. We were given money, told to spend it and we did, without reason."**

The **gusher of aid** that Washington spent on Afghanistan gave rise to **historic levels of corruption**. In public, U.S. officials insisted they had no tolerance for graft. But in the *Lessons Learned* interviews, they admitted the U.S. government looked the other way while Afghan power brokers — allies of Washington — plundered with impunity.

Christopher Kolenda, an Army colonel who deployed to Afghanistan several times and advised three U.S. generals in charge of the war, said that the Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai had **"self-organized into a kleptocracy"** by 2006 — and that U.S. officials failed to recognize the lethal threat it posed to their strategy. **"I like to use a cancer analogy,"** Kolenda told government interviewers. **"Petty corruption is like skin cancer; there are ways to deal with it and you'll probably be just fine. Corruption within the ministries, higher level, is like colon cancer; it's worse, but if you catch it in time, you're probably ok. Kleptocracy, however, is like brain cancer; it's fatal."** By allowing corruption to fester, U.S. officials told interviewers, they helped destroy the popular legitimacy of the wobbly Afghan government they were fighting to prop up. With judges and police chiefs and bureaucrats extorting bribes, many Afghans soured on democracy and turned to the Taliban to enforce order.

Year after year, U.S. generals have said in public they are **making steady progress** on the central plank of their strategy: to train a robust Afghan army and national police force that can defend the country without foreign help. **"This army and this police force have been very, very effective in combat against the insurgents every single day. And I think that's an important story to be told across the board."** Stated then-Army Lt. Gen. Mark A. Milley, praising the Afghan security forces during a press briefing from Kabul. In the *Lessons Learned* interviews, however, U.S. military trainers described the Afghan security forces as incompetent, unmotivated and rife with deserters. They also accused Afghan commanders of pocketing salaries — paid by U.S. taxpayers — for tens of thousands of "ghost soldiers." A U.S. military officer estimated that one-third of police recruits were **"drug addicts or Taliban."** Yet another called them **"stealing fools"** who looted so much fuel from U.S. bases that they perpetually smelled of gasoline. None expressed confidence that the Afghan army and police could ever fend off, much less defeat, the Taliban on their own. More than 60,000 members of Afghan security forces have been killed, a casualty rate that U.S. commanders have called unsustainable. Milley is now a four-star general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Meanwhile, Afghanistan became the world's leading source of a **growing scourge: opium**. The United States has spent about \$9 billion to fight the problem over the past 18 years, but Afghan farmers are cultivating more opium poppies than ever. In 2018, Afghanistan was responsible for 82 percent of global opium production, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In the *Lessons Learned* interviews, former officials said almost everything they did to constrain opium farming backfired. **"We stated that our goal is to establish a**



"flourishing market economy," said Douglas Lute, the White House's **Afghan war czar** from 2007 to 2013. **"I thought we should have specified a flourishing drug trade — this is the only part of the market that's working."**

From the beginning, Washington never really figured out how to incorporate a war on drugs into its war against al-Qaeda. By 2006, U.S. officials feared that narco-traffickers had become stronger than the Afghan government and that money from the drug trade was powering the insurgency. No single agency or country was in charge of the Afghan drug strategy for the entirety of the war, so the State Department, the DEA, the U.S. military, NATO allies and the Afghan government butted heads constantly. The agencies and allies made things worse by embracing a dysfunctional muddle of programs, according to the interviews. At first, Afghan poppy farmers were paid by the British to destroy their crops — which only encouraged them to grow more the next season. Later, the U.S. government eradicated poppy fields without compensation — which only infuriated farmers and encouraged them to side with the Taliban.

In news conferences and other public appearances, those in charge of the war have followed the same talking points for 18 years. No matter how the war is going — and especially when it is going badly — they emphasize how they are **making progress**. For example, some snowflakes that Rumsfeld released with his memoir show he had received a string of unusually dire warnings from the war zone in 2006.

After returning from a fact-finding mission to Afghanistan, Barry McCaffrey, a retired Army general, reported the Taliban had made an impressive comeback and predicted that "we will encounter some very unpleasant surprises in the coming 24 months." Marin Strmecki, a civilian adviser to Rumsfeld, gave the Pentagon chief a classified, 40-page report that said "enormous popular discontent is building" against the Afghan government because of its corruption and incompetence. It also said that the Taliban was growing stronger, thanks to support from Pakistan, a U.S. ally.

Yet with Rumsfeld's personal blessing, the Pentagon buried the bleak warnings and told the public a very different story. His speechwriters delivered a paper titled "Afghanistan: Five Years Later," brimming with optimism. Since then, U.S. generals have almost always preached that the war is progressing well, no matter the reality on the battlefield. **"We're making some steady progress,"** Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Schloesser, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, told reporters in September 2008, even as he and other U.S. commanders in Kabul were urgently requesting reinforcements to cope with a rising tide of Taliban fighters. Two years later, as the casualty rate among U.S. and NATO troops climbed to another high, Army Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez held a news conference in Kabul. **"First, we are steadily making deliberate progress,"** he said.

Skeptical lawmakers pelted Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, with doubts that the U.S. strategy was working. **"The past eight months have seen important but hard-fought progress,"** echoed Petraeus. During a visit to Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stuck to the same script — even though he had just personally dodged a suicide attack. **"The campaign, as I've pointed out before, I think has made significant progress,"** Panetta told reporters. In July 2016, after a surge in Taliban attacks on major cities, Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan at the time, repeated the refrain. **"We are seeing some progress,"** he told reporters. Michael Flynn, a retired three-star Army general responded: **"Everybody did a great job. We're all doing a great job. Really? So if we're doing such a great job, why does it feel like we're losing**

"Going forward, we will not blindly stay the course. Instead, we will set clear metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable." — Obama, in remarks from the White House. A person identified as a senior National Security Council official said there was constant pressure from the Obama White House and Pentagon to produce figures to show the troop surge of 2009 to 2011 was working, despite hard evidence to the contrary. **"It was impossible to create good metrics. We tried using troop numbers trained, violence levels, control of territory and none of it painted an accurate picture,"** the senior NSC official told government interviewers in 2016. **"The metrics were always manipulated for the duration of the war."**

Even when casualty counts and other figures looked bad, the senior NSC official said, the White House and Pentagon would spin them to the point of absurdity. Suicide bombings in Kabul were portrayed as a sign of the Taliban's desperation that the

insurgents were too weak to engage in direct combat. Meanwhile, a rise in U.S. troop deaths was cited as proof that American forces were **taking the fight to the enemy.**

"It was their explanations," the senior NSC official said. **"For example, attacks are getting worse? That's because there are more targets for them to fire at, so more attacks are a false indicator of instability.' Then, three months later, attacks are still getting worse? It's because the Taliban are getting desperate, so it's actually an indicator that we're winning."** **"And this went on and on for two reasons,"** the senior NSC official said, **"to make everyone involved look good, and to make it look like the troops and resources were having the kind of effect where removing them would cause the country to deteriorate."**

"I do think the key benchmark is the one I've suggested, which is how many Afghans are getting killed," James Dobbins, the former U.S. diplomat, told a Senate panel. **"If the number's going up, you're losing. If the number's going down, you're winning. It's as simple as that."** Last year, 3,804 Afghan civilians were killed in the war, according to the United Nations. That is the most in one year since the United Nations began tracking casualties a decade ago.

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TRUTH Was TOLD

I was among the tiny minority of journalists and commentators who opposed the Afghanistan war from the very beginning. Nine days after 9/11, I published the first of my cartoons pointing out that Al Qaeda was in Pakistan, not Afghanistan, so there was no moral or legal justification for invading. As the war dragged on I pointed out that the men and women in charge of the war didn't have a clue about Afghanistan or the Afghan people. According to "*The Afghanistan Papers*," those men and women knew they were screwing up, wouldn't admit their ignorance and refused to bring in experts.

I went to Afghanistan to check things out for myself. It was obvious the U.S. didn't stand a chance there. **"The principal goal of this adventure in imperialistic vengeance, it seems obvious, should be to install a friendly government in Kabul. But we're winning neither hearts nor minds among either the commoners or the leadership of the current regime apparent,"** I wrote from Afghanistan on December 11, 2001. **"And so we've lost this war, not because they're good or we're not, but because of who we are. The American Empire can't spend the bodies or the time or the cash to fix this crazyass place, because in the final analysis, election-year W. was right—we're not nation builders...we ought to tally our dead, write up our losses, and count ourselves lucky to still be called a superpower."** My piece, for *The Village Voice*, was titled "**How We Lost Afghanistan.**" It was published eighteen years ago. But not in the *Washington Post*. They didn't want to hear what lefties like me had to say.

They still don't.

Afghanistan was not a passing fancy for me. I wrote hundreds of essays and drew hundreds of cartoons urging an end to the madness. It was lonely. Even Democrats liked the Afghan war; they called it the right war while Iraq was the dumb one.

I went back to the country, traveling independently as an **unembedded** reporter, several times. I wrote the first book about the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the only book about oil pipeline politics in that country, a book placing Afghanistan in the context of Central Asia, and yet another book comparing the state of Afghanistan when Obama said we were pulling out—**another lie**—with how it was at the start of the war.

What was my reward for being right while everyone else was wrong? Hundreds of death threats. Getting fired by my client newspapers and magazines. It's hard to believe now but back in 2004 George W. Bush was popular and being compared to Winston Churchill; that was the year that the "liberal" *New York Times* and *Washington Post* stopped running my work.

Major news outlets and book reviewers ignored my books. Editors refused to hire me. Producers wouldn't book me. Anyone opposed to the Afghanistan war was censored from U.S. corporate media.

Not that Afghanistan was ignored. It was the subject of countless analysis pieces and opinion articles in American newspapers—all of it pro-war propaganda. There were thousands of television and radio stories about the Afghan war on radio and television. Corporate media repeatedly trotted out the same retired generals, former CIA officers, and random right-wing warmongers for quotes and analysis. Never, ever did they invite critics or opponents of U.S. interventionism in Afghanistan to share their thoughts with readers, listeners and viewers.

Nothing has changed. Whenever there is a foreign policy "crisis," you will never read or hear or see someone completely opposed to U.S. involvement given a voice in the media. Certainly not in the *Post*.

So, 18 years and tens of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars too late, it's nice to see the media finally shame these scumbags and their government handlers. But they ought to save a big portion of the blame for themselves.

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