

THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS A secret history of the war

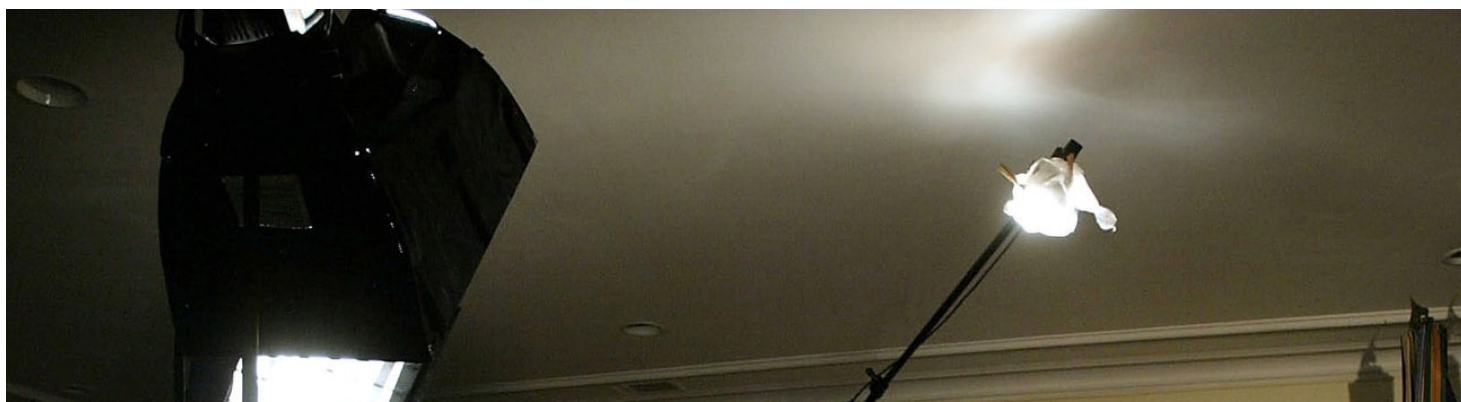
AT WAR WITH THE TRUTH

U.S. officials constantly said they were making progress. They were not, and they knew it, an exclusive Post investigation found.

By **Craig Whitlock** Dec. 9, 2019



THE PENTAGON, 2003 (David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images)





A confidential trove of government documents obtained by The Washington Post 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 documents were generated by a federal project examining the root failures of the longest armed conflict in U.S. history. They include more than 2,000 pages of previously unpublished notes of interviews with people

who played a direct role in the war, from generals and diplomats to aid workers and Afghan officials.

The U.S. government tried to shield the identities of the vast majority of those interviewed for the project and conceal nearly all of their remarks. The Post won release of the documents under the Freedom of Information Act after a three-year legal battle.

In the interviews, more than 400 insiders offered unrestrained criticism of what went wrong in Afghanistan and how the United States became mired in nearly two decades of warfare.

With a bluntness rarely expressed in public, the interviews lay bare pent-up complaints, frustrations and confessions, along with second-guessing and backbiting.

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“We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan — we didn’t know what we were doing,”  Douglas Lute, a three-star Army general who served as the White House’s Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama administrations, told government interviewers in 2015. He added: “What are we trying to do here? We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking.” 

“If the American people knew the magnitude of this dysfunction . . . 2,400 lives lost,”  Lute added, blaming the deaths of U.S. military personnel on bureaucratic breakdowns among Congress, the Pentagon and the State Department. “Who will say this was in vain?” 

Since 2001, more than 775,000 U.S. troops have deployed to Afghanistan, many repeatedly. Of those, 2,300 died there and 20,589 were wounded in action, according to Defense Department figures.



This series is the basis for a book, **“The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War,”** by Washington Post reporter Craig Whitlock. [The book can be ordered here.](#)

The interviews, through an extensive array of voices, bring into sharp relief the core failings of the war that persist to this day. They underscore how three presidents — George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump — and their military commanders have been unable to deliver on their promises to prevail in Afghanistan.

THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS

See the documents More than 2,000 pages of interviews and memos reveal a secret history of the war.

Part 2: Stranded without a strategy Conflicting objectives dogged the war from the start.

Responses to The Post from people named in The Afghanistan Papers

With most speaking on the assumption that their remarks would not become public, U.S. officials acknowledged that their warfighting strategies were fatally flawed and that Washington wasted enormous sums of money trying to remake Afghanistan into a modern nation.

The interviews also highlight the U.S. government's botched attempts to curtail runaway corruption, build a competent Afghan army and police force, and put a dent in Afghanistan's thriving opium trade.

The U.S. government has not carried out a comprehensive accounting of how much it has spent on the war in Afghanistan, but the costs are staggering.

Since 2001, the Defense Department, State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development have spent or appropriated between \$934 billion and \$978 billion, according to an inflation-adjusted estimate calculated by Neta Crawford, a political science professor and co-director of the Costs of War Project at Brown University.

Those figures do not include money spent by other agencies such as the CIA and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is responsible for medical care for wounded veterans.

“What did we get for this \$1 trillion effort? Was it worth \$1 trillion?”  Jeffrey Eggers, a retired Navy SEAL and White House staffer for Bush and Obama, told government interviewers. He added, “After the killing of Osama bin Laden, I said that Osama was probably laughing in his watery grave considering how much we have spent on Afghanistan.” 

The documents also 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.

(Video by Joyce Lee/The Washington Post)

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.



“Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible,”  Bob Crowley, an Army colonel who served as a senior counterinsurgency adviser to U.S. military commanders in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers. “Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable but reinforced that  everything we were doing was right and we became a

self-licking ice cream cone.” 

John Sopko, the head of the federal agency that conducted the interviews, acknowledged to The Post that the documents show “the American people have constantly been lied to.”

The interviews are the byproduct of a project led by Sopko’s agency, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Known as SIGAR, the agency was created by Congress in 2008 to investigate waste and fraud in the war zone.

In 2014, at Sopko’s direction, SIGAR departed from its usual mission of performing audits and launched a side venture. 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. Most were Americans, but SIGAR analysts also traveled to London, Brussels and Berlin to interview NATO allies. In addition, they interviewed about 20 Afghan officials, discussing reconstruction and development programs.

Drawing partly on the interviews, as well as other government records and statistics, SIGAR has published seven [Lessons Learned reports](#) since 2016 that highlight problems in Afghanistan and recommend changes to stabilize the country.

But the reports, written in dense bureaucratic prose and focused on an alphabet soup of government initiatives, left out the harshest and most frank criticisms from the interviews.

“We found the stabilization strategy and the programs used to achieve it were not properly tailored to the Afghan context, and successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians,” read the introduction to one report released in May 2018.

The reports also omitted the names of more than 90 percent of the people who were interviewed for the project. While a few officials agreed to speak on the record to SIGAR, the agency said it promised anonymity to everyone else it interviewed to avoid controversy over politically sensitive matters.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, The Post began seeking Lessons Learned interview records in August 2016. SIGAR refused, arguing that the documents were privileged and that the public had no right to see them.

The Post had to sue SIGAR in federal court — twice — to compel it to release the documents.

“We don’t invade poor countries to make them rich. We don’t invade authoritarian countries to make them democratic. We invade violent countries to make them peaceful and we clearly failed in Afghanistan.”

— James Dobbins, former U.S. diplomat

 [Listen](#)

The agency eventually disclosed more than 2,000 pages of unpublished notes and transcripts from 428 of the interviews, as well as several audio recordings.

The documents identify 62 of the people who were interviewed, but SIGAR blacked out the names of 366 others. In legal briefs, the agency contended that those individuals should be seen as whistleblowers and informants who might face humiliation, harassment, retaliation or physical harm if their names became public.

By cross-referencing dates and other details from the documents, The Post independently identified 33 other people who were interviewed, including several former ambassadors, generals and White House officials.

The Post has asked a federal judge to force SIGAR to disclose the names of everyone else interviewed, arguing that the public has a right to know which officials criticized the war and asserted that the government had misled the American people. The Post also argued the officials were not whistleblowers or informants, because they were not interviewed as part of an investigation.

A decision by Judge Amy Berman Jackson of the U.S. District Court in Washington has been pending since late September.

The Post is publishing the documents now, instead of waiting for a final ruling, to inform the public while the Trump administration is negotiating with the Taliban and considering whether to withdraw the 13,000 U.S. troops who remain in Afghanistan.

The Post attempted to contact for comment everyone whom it was able to identify as having given an interview to SIGAR. Their responses are [compiled in a separate article](#).

Sopko, the inspector general, told The Post that he did not suppress the blistering criticisms and doubts about the war that officials raised in the Lessons Learned interviews. He said it took his office three years to release the records because he has a small staff and because other federal agencies had to review the documents to prevent government secrets from being disclosed.

“We didn’t sit on it,” he said. “We’re firm believers in openness and transparency, but we’ve got to follow the law. . . . I think of any inspector general, I’ve probably been the most forthcoming on information.”

The interview records are raw and unedited, and SIGAR’s Lessons Learned staff did not stitch them into a unified narrative. But they are packed with tough judgments from people who shaped or carried out U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

“We don’t invade poor countries to make them rich,”  James Dobbins, a former senior U.S. diplomat who served as a special envoy to Afghanistan under Bush and Obama, told government interviewers. “We don’t invade authoritarian countries to make them democratic. We invade violent countries to make them peaceful and we clearly failed in Afghanistan.” 



From left, Gen. David H. Petraeus, Joint Chiefs Chairman Michael Mullen, Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki and Defense Secretary Robert Gates at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., in 2009 as President Barack

Obama publicly outlined his plans for a troop surge in Afghanistan. (Christopher Morris/VII/Redux)

To augment the Lessons Learned interviews, The Post obtained hundreds of pages of previously classified memos about the Afghan war that were dictated by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld between 2001 and 2006.

Dubbed “snowflakes” by Rumsfeld and his staff, the memos are brief instructions or comments that the Pentagon boss dictated to his underlings, often several times a day.

Rumsfeld made a select number of his snowflakes public in 2011, posting them online in conjunction with his memoir, “Known and Unknown.” But most of his snowflake collection — an estimated 59,000 pages — remained secret.

In 2017, [in response to a FOIA lawsuit filed by the National Security Archive](#), a nonprofit research institute based at George Washington University, the Defense Department began reviewing and releasing the remainder of Rumsfeld’s snowflakes on a rolling basis. The Archive shared them with The Post.

Together, the SIGAR interviews and the Rumsfeld memos pertaining to Afghanistan constitute a secret history of the war and an unsparing appraisal of 18 years of conflict.

Wording in Rumsfeld’s brusque style, many of the snowflakes foreshadow problems that continue to haunt the U.S. military more than a decade later.

“I may be impatient. In fact I know I’m a bit impatient,”  Rumsfeld wrote in one memo to several generals and senior aides. “We are never going to get the U.S. military out of Afghanistan unless we take care to see that there is something going on that will provide the stability that will be necessary for us to leave.” 

“Help!”  he wrote.

The memo was dated April 17, 2002 — six months after the war started.

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

April 17, 2002

“The history of military conflict in Afghanistan [has] been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure. We’re not going to repeat that mistake.”

— President George W. Bush, in a speech at the Virginia Military Institute

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.

Bound into 47 volumes, the 7,000-page study was based entirely on internal government documents — diplomatic cables, decision-making memos, intelligence reports. To preserve secrecy, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara issued an order prohibiting the authors from interviewing anyone.

SIGAR’s Lessons Learned project faced no such restrictions. Staffers carried out the interviews between 2014 and 2018, mostly with officials who served during the Bush and Obama years.

About 30 of the interview records are transcribed, word-for-word accounts. The rest are typed summaries of conversations: pages of notes and quotes from people with different

vantage points in the conflict, from provincial outposts to the highest circles of power.

Some of the interviews are inexplicably short. The interview record with John Allen, the Marine general who commanded U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2013, consists of five paragraphs.

In contrast, records of interviews with other influential figures are much more extensive. Former U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker sat for two interviews that yielded 95 transcribed pages.

Unlike the Pentagon Papers, none of the Lessons Learned documents were originally classified as a government secret. Once The Post pushed to make them public, however, other federal agencies intervened and classified some material after the fact.

The State Department, for instance, asserted that releasing portions of certain interviews could jeopardize negotiations with the Taliban to end the war. The Defense Department and Drug Enforcement Administration also classified some interview excerpts.

The Lessons Learned interviews contain few revelations about military operations. But running throughout are torrents of criticism that refute the official narrative of the war, from its earliest days through the start of the Trump administration.

At the outset, for instance, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had a clear, stated objective — to retaliate against al-Qaeda and prevent a repeat of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.



A joint artillery training session at a combat outpost in Jaghatu, in Wardak province, in 2012. (Lorenzo Tugnoli for The Washington Post)

Yet the interviews show that as the war dragged on, the goals and mission kept changing and a lack of faith in the U.S. strategy took root inside the Pentagon, the White House and the State Department.

Fundamental disagreements went unresolved. Some U.S. officials wanted to use the war to turn Afghanistan into a democracy. Others wanted to transform Afghan culture and elevate women's rights. Still others wanted to reshape the regional balance of power among Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia.

"With the AfPak strategy there was a present under the Christmas tree for everyone,"  an unidentified U.S. official told government interviewers in 2015. "By the time you were finished you had so many priorities and aspirations it was like no strategy at all." 

The Lessons Learned interviews also reveal how U.S. military commanders struggled to articulate who they were fighting, let alone why.

Was al-Qaeda the enemy, or the Taliban? Was Pakistan a friend or an adversary? What about the Islamic State and the bewildering array of foreign jihadists, let alone the warlords on the CIA's payroll? According to the documents, the U.S. government never settled on an answer.

As a result, in the field, U.S. troops often couldn't tell friend from foe.

"They thought I was going to come to them with a map to show them where the good guys and bad guys live,"  an unnamed former adviser to an Army Special Forces team told government interviewers in 2017. "It took several conversations for them to understand that I did not have that information in my hands. At first, they just kept asking: 'But who are the bad guys, where are they?'" 

The view wasn't any clearer from the Pentagon.

"I have no visibility into who the bad guys are,"  Rumsfeld complained in a Sept. 8, 2003, snowflake. "We are woefully deficient in human intelligence." 

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

Dec. 1, 2009

"The days of providing a blank check are over. . . . 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.”

— President Barack Obama, in a speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

As commanders in chief, Bush, Obama and Trump all promised the public the same thing. They would avoid falling into the trap of "nation-building" in Afghanistan.

On that score, the presidents failed miserably. The United States has allocated more than \$133 billion to build up Afghanistan — more than it spent, adjusted for inflation, to revive the whole of Western Europe with the Marshall Plan after World War II.

The Lessons Learned interviews show the grandiose nation-building project was marred from the start.

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.

“Our policy was to create a strong central government which was idiotic because Afghanistan does not have a history of a strong central government,”  an unidentified former State Department official told government interviewers in 2015. “The timeframe for creating a strong central government is 100 years, which we didn’t have.” 

Meanwhile, the United States flooded the fragile country with far more aid than it could possibly absorb.

During the peak of the fighting, from 2009 to 2012, U.S. lawmakers and military commanders believed the more they spent on schools, bridges, canals and other civil-works projects, the faster security would improve. Aid workers told government interviewers it was a colossal misjudgment, akin to pumping kerosene on a dying campfire just to keep the flame alive.



U.S. soldiers wounded by an IED are transported by medevac in Kandahar province in 2010. (Linda Davidson/The Washington Post)

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.” 

Many aid workers blamed Congress for what they saw as a mindless rush to spend.

One unidentified contractor told government interviewers he was expected to dole out \$3 million daily for projects in a single Afghan district roughly the size of a U.S. county. He once asked a visiting congressman whether the lawmaker could responsibly spend that kind of money back home: “He said hell no. ‘Well, sir, that’s what you just obligated us to spend and I’m doing it for communities that live in mud huts with no windows.’” 

The gusher of aid that Washington spent on Afghanistan also 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.” 



A banner depicting President Hamid Karzai in Kabul shortly after the country's 2004 election. (Emilio Morenatti/AP)

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.

“Our biggest single project, sadly and inadvertently, of course, may have been the development of mass corruption,”  Crocker, who served as the top U.S. diplomat in Kabul in 2002 and again from 2011 to 2012, told government interviewers. He added, “Once it gets to the level I saw, when I was out there, it’s somewhere between unbelievably hard and outright impossible to fix it.” 

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

Sept. 4, 2013

“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.”

— Then-Army Lt. Gen. Mark A. Milley, praising the Afghan security forces during a press briefing from Kabul. Milley is now a four-star general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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.

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.”

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.



Afghan army recruits in Kabul in 2009. (Emilio Morenatti/AP)

One unidentified U.S. soldier said Special Forces teams “hated” ¶ the Afghan police whom they trained and worked with, calling them “awful — the bottom of the barrel in the country that is already at the bottom of the barrel.” ¶

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.

“Thinking we could build the military that fast and that well was insane,” ¶ an unnamed senior USAID official told government interviewers.

Meanwhile, as U.S. hopes for the Afghan security forces failed to materialize, 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. Last year, 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.” 



Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel speaks to U.S. troops in 2013 at Camp Bastion, in Helmand province. (Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

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.

“It was a dog’s breakfast with no chance of working,” 📄 an unnamed former senior British official told government interviewers.

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.

“It was sad to see so many people behave so stupidly,” 📄 one U.S. official told government interviewers.

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

Sept. 8, 2008

“Are we losing this war? Absolutely no way. Can the enemy win it? Absolutely no way.”

— Army Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Schloesser, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, in a news briefing from Afghanistan

The specter of Vietnam has hovered over Afghanistan from the start.

On Oct. 11, 2001, a few days after the United States started bombing the Taliban, a reporter asked Bush: “Can you avoid being drawn into a Vietnam-like quagmire in Afghanistan?”

“We learned some very important lessons in Vietnam,” Bush replied confidently. “People often ask me, ‘How long will this last?’ This particular battlefield will last as long as it takes to bring al-Qaeda to justice. It may happen tomorrow, it may happen a month from now, it may take a year or two. But we will prevail.”

In those early days, other U.S. leaders mocked the notion that the nightmare of Vietnam might repeat itself in Afghanistan.

“All together now — quagmire!” Rumsfeld joked at a news conference on Nov. 27, 2001.

But throughout the Afghan war, documents show that U.S. military officials have resorted to an old tactic from Vietnam — manipulating public opinion.

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.”

“The Afghan national leadership are collectively terrified that we will tip-toe out of Afghanistan in the coming few years — leaving NATO holding the bag — and the whole thing will collapse again into mayhem,” McCaffrey wrote in June 2006.

Two months later, Marin Strmecki, a civilian adviser to Rumsfeld, gave the Pentagon chief a classified, 40-page report loaded with more bad news. It 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.



Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, left, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in March 2002. (Robert A. Reeder/The Washington Post)

In October 2006, Rumsfeld's speechwriters delivered a paper titled "Afghanistan: Five Years Later." Brimming with optimism, it highlighted more than 50 promising facts and figures, from the number of Afghan women trained in "improved poultry management" (more than 19,000) to the "average speed on most roads" (up 300 percent).

"Five years on, there is a multitude of good news," it read. "While it has become fashionable in some circles to call Afghanistan a forgotten war, or to say the United States has lost its focus, the facts belie the myths."

Rumsfeld thought it was brilliant.

"This paper," he wrote in a memo, "is an excellent piece. How do we use it? Should it be an article? An Op-ed piece? A handout? A press briefing? All of the above? I think it ought to

get it to a lot of people.”

His staffers made sure it did. They circulated a version to reporters and [posted it on Pentagon websites](#).

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.

“And this includes the State Department, ambassadors, you know, down at the local level. 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?”

— Michael Flynn, a retired three-star Army general

 Listen

In March 2011, during congressional hearings, 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,” Petraeus responded.

One year later, 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.

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

March 27, 2009

“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

During Vietnam, U.S. military commanders relied on dubious measurements to persuade Americans that they were winning.

Most notoriously, the Pentagon highlighted “body counts,” or the number of enemy fighters killed, and inflated the figures as a measurement of success.

In Afghanistan, with occasional exceptions, the U.S. military has generally avoided publicizing body counts. But the Lessons Learned interviews contain numerous admissions that the government routinely touted statistics that officials knew were distorted, spurious or downright false.

THE TOLL OF WAR

Since 2001, an estimated 157,000 people have been killed in the war in Afghanistan.

Afghan civilians
43,074*

Afghan security forces
64,124*

U.S. contractors	2,300	Taliban fighters and other insurgents	42,100*	aid workers
	U.S. military personnel	1,145		67 Journalists and media workers
		NATO and coalition troops		
				<i>*estimated</i>

Note: U.S. military number is current through November 2019. The other figures and estimates are current as of October 2019.

Sources: Defense Department; Costs of War Project, Brown University; U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; Committee to Protect Journalists

A person identified only 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.



The remains of Army Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene, 55, arrive at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in August 2014. Greene was the first U.S. general killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. (Linda Davidson/The Washington Post)

“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.”

In other field reports sent up the chain of command, military officers and diplomats took the same line. Regardless of conditions on the ground, they claimed they were making progress.

“From the ambassadors down to the low level, [they all say] we are doing a great job,” 
Michael Flynn, a retired three-star Army general, told government interviewers in 2015.
“Really? So if we are doing such a great job, why does it feel like we are losing?” 

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, U.S. Army brigade and battalion commanders were given the same basic mission: to protect the population and defeat the enemy, according to Flynn, who served multiple tours in Afghanistan as an intelligence officer.

“So they all went in for whatever their rotation was, nine months or six months, and were given that mission, accepted that mission and executed that mission,”  said Flynn, who later briefly served as Trump’s national security adviser, lost his job in a scandal and was convicted of lying to the FBI. “Then they all said, when they left, they accomplished that mission. Every single commander. Not one commander is going to leave Afghanistan . . . and say, ‘You know what, we didn’t accomplish our mission.’ ” 

He added: “So the next guy that shows up finds it [their area] screwed up . . . and then they come back and go, ‘Man this is really bad.’ ” 



Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez arrives at Forward Operating Base Pasab in Kandahar province for a transfer-of-authority ceremony in 2011. (Mikhail Galustov for The Washington Post)

Bob Crowley, the retired Army colonel who served as a counterinsurgency adviser in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers that “truth was rarely welcome”  at military headquarters in Kabul.

“Bad news was often stifled,”  he said. “There was more freedom to share bad news if it was small — we’re running over kids with our MRAPs [armored vehicles] — because those things could be changed with policy directives. But when we tried to air larger strategic concerns about the willingness, capacity or corruption of the Afghan government, it was clear it wasn’t welcome.” 

John Garofano, a Naval War College strategist who advised Marines in Helmand province in 2011, said military officials in the field devoted an inordinate amount of resources to

churning out color-coded charts that heralded positive results.

“They had a really expensive machine that would print the really large pieces of paper like in a print shop,”  he told government interviewers. “There would be a caveat that these are not actually scientific figures, or this is not a scientific process behind this.” 

But Garofano said nobody dared to question whether the charts and numbers were credible or meaningful.

“There was not a willingness to answer questions such as, what is the meaning of this number of schools that you have built? How has that progressed you towards your goal?”  he said. “How do you show this as evidence of success and not just evidence of effort or evidence of just doing a good thing?” 

Other senior officials said they placed great importance on one statistic in particular, albeit one the U.S. government rarely likes to discuss in public.

“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 in 2009. “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.



Craig Whitlock

Craig Whitlock is an investigative reporter who specializes in national security issues. He has covered the Pentagon, served as the Berlin bureau chief and reported from more than 60 countries. He joined The Washington Post in 1998.

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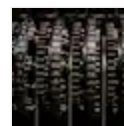
The United Nations says more civilians have died between July and September this year than during any other three-month period in the last 10 years.

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