

THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS A secret history of the war

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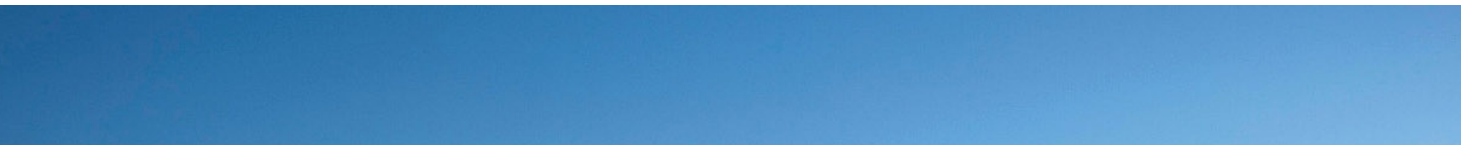
Afghan security forces, despite years of training, were dogged by incompetence and corruption

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



For almost two decades, U.S. military commanders have assured the public they are making progress on the cornerstone of their war strategy: to build a strong Afghan army and police force that can defend the country on their own.

KABUL, 2009 (Emilio Morenatti/AP)







“We’re on the right track now,” Marine Gen. Jim Mattis told Congress in 2010.

“The Afghan forces are better than we thought they were,” Marine Gen. John Allen told Congress in 2012. “The Afghan national security forces are winning,” Army Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson told reporters in 2014.

But in a trove of confidential government interviews obtained by The Washington Post, U.S., NATO and Afghan officials described their efforts to create an Afghan proxy force as a long-running calamity. With most speaking on the assumption that their remarks would remain private, they depicted the Afghan security forces as incompetent, unmotivated, poorly trained, corrupt and riddled with deserters and infiltrators.


In one interview, Thomas Johnson, a Navy official who served as a counterinsurgency adviser in Kandahar province, said Afghans viewed the police as predatory bandits, calling them “the most hated institution”  in Afghanistan. An unnamed Norwegian official told interviewers that he estimated 30 percent of Afghan police recruits deserted with their government-issued weapons so they could “set up their own private checkpoints”  and extort payments from travelers.




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Ryan Crocker, a former U.S. ambassador to Kabul, told government interviewers that the Afghan police were ineffective “not because they’re out-gunned or out-manned. It’s because they are useless as a security force and they’re useless as a security force because they are corrupt down to the patrol level.” 

Victor Glaviano, who worked with the Afghan army as a U.S. combat adviser from 2007 to 2008, called the soldiers “stealing fools”  who habitually looted equipment supplied by the Pentagon. He complained to government interviewers that Afghan troops had “beautiful rifles, but didn’t know how to use them,”  and were undisciplined fighters, wasting ammunition because they “wanted to fire constantly.” 

Since 2002, the United States has allocated more than \$83 billion in security assistance to Afghanistan, a sum that dwarfs the defense budgets of other developing nations. In 2011, at the peak of the war, Afghanistan received \$11 billion in security aid from Washington — \$3 billion more than what neighboring Pakistan, which has a stockpile of nuclear weapons and a far bigger army, spent that year on its military.



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.](#)

Yet after almost two decades of help from Washington, the Afghan army and police are still too weak to fend off the Taliban, the Islamic State and other insurgents without U.S. military backup.



Two Afghan soldiers wounded in an IED explosion are carried to a U.S. helicopter in Kandahar province in 2010. (David Guttenfelder/AP)

Government watchdogs and journalists have chronicled severe shortcomings with the Afghan security forces over the years. But the interview records obtained by The Post contain new insights into what went wrong and expose gaping contradictions between what U.S. officials said in public and what they believed in private as the war unfolded.

On paper, the Afghan security forces look robust, with 352,000 soldiers and police officers. But the Afghan government can prove only that 254,000 of them serve in the ranks.

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For years, Afghan commanders inflated the numbers so they could



pocket salaries — paid by U.S. taxpayers — for no-show or imaginary personnel, according to U.S. government audits. As a result, Washington now asks the Afghans to produce biometric data, including fingerprints and face scans, to verify the existence of

people in uniform.

The army and police have suffered so many casualties that the Afghan government keeps the exact numbers a secret to avoid destroying morale. Estimates are that more than 60,000 members of Afghan security forces have been killed, about 17 times the number of U.S. and NATO troops who have lost their lives.

The national army accounts for most of the Afghan security forces, with about 162,000 troops. It reports to the Defense Ministry and includes the Afghan air force and other units.

The national police number about 91,000. They report to the Interior Ministry and are more of a paramilitary force than a crime-fighting agency. The police guard the border, staff security checkpoints and try to hold territory that the army has cleared of insurgents.

With the Afghan security forces lagging in quantity and quality, the U.S. military has been unable to extricate itself from the faraway conflict. Although the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan has dwindled from 100,000 eight years ago to 13,000 today, the Trump administration has had to escalate the war from the skies to prevent the Taliban from taking over.

President Trump has said he wants to withdraw more U.S. troops, and his diplomats are engaged in peace talks with the Taliban. But during his presidency, U.S. military aircraft have pounded Afghanistan each month with three times as many bombs and missiles, on average, as they dropped per month during President Barack Obama's second term, according to Air Force statistics.

In the interview documents obtained by The Post, U.S. and NATO officials partially blamed themselves for the predicament. They said they moved too slowly to build up the Afghan forces during the first few years of the war when the Taliban presented a minimal threat. Then, after the Taliban rebounded, they rushed and tried to train too many Afghans too quickly.



U.S. Army advisers train Afghan police in close-quarters battle techniques in 2010 in Kandahar province. (John Moore/Getty Images)

Marin Strmecki, a civilian adviser to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, told government interviewers in 2015 that the poor timing and inept planning were mortal setbacks.

“These are strategic consequences to this,” Strmecki said. “This is not just doing good or it would be nice to be able to operate better. You succeed or fail on whether you can do these things in a timely manner.”

The interviews were conducted by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, an agency created by Congress to uncover fraud and waste in the war zone. In 2014, SIGAR launched a special project titled “Lessons Learned” to examine policy failings from the war. It interviewed more than 600 people who played a direct role in the conflict, from military commanders to aid workers.

Drawing partly on the interviews but largely on other government documents, SIGAR published [two Lessons Learned reports](#) in 2017 and 2019 that highlighted an array of problems with the Afghan security forces. The reports followed several SIGAR audits and investigations that had pinpointed similar troubles with the Afghan army and police.

But the Lessons Learned reports omitted the names of the vast majority of those interviewed for the project, as well as their most biting critiques. The Post obtained notes and transcripts of the interviews under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) after a three-year legal battle.

“We got the [Afghan forces] we deserve,” Douglas Lute, an Army lieutenant general who served as the White House’s Afghan war czar under Presidents George W. Bush and Obama, told government interviewers.

If the U.S. government had ramped up training between 2002 and 2006, “when the Taliban was weak and disorganized, things may have been different,” Lute added. “Instead, we went to Iraq. If we committed money deliberately and sooner, we could have a different outcome.”

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

Feb. 15, 2007

“The United States and our allies will help President [Hamid] Karzai increase the size and capabilities of the Afghan security forces. After all, for this young democracy to survive in the long term, they’ll have their own security forces that are capable and trained.”

— President George W. Bush, in a speech about Afghanistan

The disconnect between what U.S. officials really thought about the Afghan security forces and what they said in public became ingrained during the early stages of the war.

In October 2004, the Pentagon distributed a set of talking points that bragged about the Afghan army and police. The document praised the 15,000 soldiers in the nascent Afghan army as “a highly professional, multi-ethnic force, which is rapidly becoming a pillar of the country’s security.”

It also touted how the Afghan national police — partly under the tutelage of NATO ally Germany — had 25,000 newly trained officers.

But internally, Bush administration officials shared anxieties and sounded alarms. In February 2005, Rumsfeld forwarded a confidential report to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about the Afghan National Police, or ANP. The report was titled “ANP Horror Stories” and described how most of the police were illiterate, underequipped and barely trained.

“Please take a look,” Rumsfeld wrote in a memo, accompanying the report. “This is the Afghan National Police situation. It is a serious problem. My impression is that these two pages were written in as graceful and non-inflammatory a way as is possible.”

One month later, Rumsfeld sent another confidential memo to national security adviser Stephen Hadley, complaining about a tangled arrangement between the Pentagon and the State Department to train Afghan police that was going nowhere.

Saying he was “ready to toss in the towel,” Rumsfeld added: “I don’t think it is responsible to the American taxpayers to leave it like it is. We need a way forward. I’ve worked on it and worked on it. I am about to conclude that it is not possible for the U.S. Government bureaucracy to do the only sensible thing.”



Left: Afghan National Police cadets at the Kabul academy in 2012. (Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images) **Right:** Quick Reaction Force officers training in 2012. (Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images)

Rumsfeld disclosed the two memos about the Afghan police when he published a memoir in 2011. The memos and other documents show that Rumsfeld pushed to train the Afghan forces quickly yet wanted to keep them small so the U.S. government would not get stuck with the expense of sustaining a massive foreign army and police force.

In the Lessons Learned interviews, however, other Bush administration officials said Rumsfeld was stingy and shortsighted. They said Washington would have saved money in

the long run — and perhaps even subdued the Taliban — if it had built a bigger Afghan army and police force sooner.

The first years of the war were marked by a “disorganized, unprepared, ridiculous U.S. approach” to training the Afghan security forces, one unnamed former U.S. official told government interviewers. At first, the Bush administration insisted on a cap of 50,000 Afghan soldiers and police — a number that the official called “totally irrelevant for security needs.”

Zalmay Khalilzad, who served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2004, said the Afghan government wanted Washington to pay for security forces of 100,000 to 120,000. But he said in a Lessons Learned interview that Rumsfeld drew a hard line and held the training program “hostage” until the Afghans agreed to the 50,000 cap, which led to long delays.

“So we were fighting in 2002, 2003 about those sort of numbers,” Khalilzad told government interviewers, saying it was apparent more Afghan forces were required. “Now we’re talking about God knows what, 300,000 or whatever.”



Afghan soldiers patrol in Konar province in 2006. (Gary Knight/VII/Redux)

Strmecki said the dispute dragged on even as it became clearer in 2004 and 2005 that the Afghan forces needed to expand quickly to fight a resurgent Taliban. “The way it gets resolved is the way everything gets resolved in Washington — by not getting resolved,” he said.

In his Lessons Learned interview, Strmecki said another fundamental problem was that the U.S. government lacked the capacity to train and equip large foreign armies from scratch.

“You wouldn’t invent how to do infantry operations at the start of a war. You wouldn’t invent how to do artillery at the start of a war,” Strmecki said. “Right now, it is all ad hoc. There is no doctrine, no science to it. It gets done very unevenly. When you are

creating security forces for another society, it is the most important political act you will ever do. That requires an awful lot of thought and sophistication.” 

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

Nov. 19, 2008

“I will report to you that the army is on the right path. The Afghan army has good soldiers. We are developing that army from scratch. It is well trained. It is well led.”

— Army Gen. David McKiernan, commander of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, in remarks at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington

When Obama took office in January 2009, the war was going badly. He eventually unveiled a new counterinsurgency strategy and nearly tripled the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to 100,000.

Obama told the American people that the surge in U.S. troops was temporary. He later promised to bring home all U.S. troops by the end of his presidency in January 2017.

His war strategy hinged on implementing a huge expansion of the Afghan security forces, from 200,000 soldiers and police to 350,000. The idea was for U.S. and NATO troops to train and advise the Afghans until they could take over the fight on their own.

Despite a persistent shortage of trainers and recruits, U.S. military commanders and other senior officials assured the public time and again that the Afghan security forces were constantly improving and that U.S. troops would eventually no longer need to serve in combat.

(Video by Joyce Lee/The Washington Post)

“This is the worst nightmare for the Taliban, that the Afghan army is increasingly effective, partnered with our forces and moving against an enemy that they know better than anyone,” Mattis, the Marine general who later served as Trump’s defense secretary, told a Senate panel in July 2010. “I think this is very heartening.”

Five months later, at a White House news conference, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the Afghan security forces were progressing “ahead of schedule,” adding, “They are performing well in partnership with coalition troops and will continue to improve with the right training, equipment and support.”

Members of Congress from both parties also lavished praise on the Afghans.

“The growth in the size and capability of the Afghan security forces and control of territory by those forces is robbing the Taliban of their propaganda target and bringing us closer to the success of the mission,” then-Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said at a March 2011 hearing.

“Afghan security forces are growing in quantity and improving in quality even faster than planned,” added Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the senior Republican on the committee at the time. “We are turning around the war.”



Afghan and American soldiers return from a patrol in Kandahar province's Zhari district in 2010. (Chris Hondros/Getty Images)

In 2011, Obama ordered a partial, staged withdrawal of U.S. troops. With fewer Americans in the fight, setbacks began piling up for the Afghan security forces, and the Taliban slowly seized more territory. But U.S. commanders kept telling the public everything was going according to plan.

“This army and this police force have been very, very effective in combat against the insurgents every single day,” then-Army Lt. Gen. Mark A. Milley said during a 2013 press briefing from Kabul. “Have there been one or two outposts that have been overrun? Yes. But you’re talking about 3,000 to 4,000 outposts that are in the country.”

Today, Milley is a four-star general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

As the war continued, news reports from the front made clear that the Afghan security forces were struggling to hold back the Taliban.

In public, Pentagon officials started to revise their assessments. They still said the security forces were making progress but acknowledged that maybe they had overstated the Afghans' abilities in the past.

“Why is . . . the interior minister sitting here half falling asleep and half sabotaging you? Because he has a vested interest in making sure this doesn't work.”

— Michael Callen, an economist who specializes in the Afghan public sector

 Listen

“It's not that the Afghans aren't good at fighting. They are,” Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said during a visit to Kandahar in February 2015. “But just a few years ago there really was no Afghan national security force at all.”

During another visit to the war zone 10 months later, Carter said: “The Afghan security forces are getting there. . . . If you'd have asked me to bet on it five years ago, I don't know. I'd maybe give you even odds on it or something. But it's coming together.”

By the time Obama left office in January 2017, the plan had fallen short. Instead of ending the war as he had promised, Obama left 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Less than a year later, his successor in the White House decided that was not enough and sent back several thousand more U.S. troops to help the Afghans. Today, about 13,000 U.S. service members remain the country.

“The stronger the Afghan security forces become, the less we will have to do,” President Trump said in August 2017 during a speech at Fort Myer, Va.

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC

June 1, 2016

“[They] performed better this year than they were performing last year, and based on that, we are cautiously optimistic about the coming months.”

— Army Brig. Gen. Charles Cleveland, in a news briefing on the Afghan security forces

In the Lessons Learned interviews, U.S. and NATO officials said the glowing progress reports delivered to the public were largely an illusion and glossed over major deficiencies that were visible from the outset.

For starters, only about 2 in 10 Afghan recruits could read or write. U.S. and NATO trainers put them through crash literacy courses, but those lasted only a few weeks.

Other gaps in basic knowledge had to be bridged. One U.S. Special Forces trainer told government interviewers that the Afghans mistook urinals in the barracks as drinking fountains [1]. Another U.S. trainer said he had to teach conscripts basic human anatomy: “They didn’t understand how a tourniquet could help stop bleeding if you’re not even putting it over the wound.” [2]

Questionable motivations and loyalties snaked through the ranks of the army and police. Ethnic and tribal tensions posed a perpetual problem, with the officer corps dominated by warlords who doled out promotions based on patronage, according to the interviews.

Filling specialized billets was especially tough. It took nearly a decade to get the Afghan air force off the ground, because of not just a lack of qualified pilots but also a dearth of mechanics who could read repair manuals.

One U.S. military adviser assigned to the Afghan air force told government interviewers that “Afghans would come to them with ‘pilot wings’ that they found or purchased, claiming to be pilots but having no flight experience.” [3]

The unnamed U.S. adviser said that the air base where he worked was plagued by “shenanigans” [4] and that many Afghans reeked of jet fuel when they left each day because they were smuggling out small containers of it to sell on the black market.



Left: An Afghan pilot trains in a simulator in Kabul in 2018. (Rahmat Gul/AP) **Right:** Members of the Afghanistan air force prepare a Mi-17 helicopter for a flight in 2017 at Kandahar Airfield. (Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)

Petty corruption was rampant. In a 2015 Lessons Learned interview, an unnamed U.N. official described how Afghan police recruits would undergo two weeks of training, “get their uniforms, then go back to the province and sell them.” [\[1\]](#) Unworried that they might get in trouble, he said, many would reenlist and “come back to do it again.” [\[2\]](#)

U.S. advisers constantly tried to plug holes in the system to prevent looting and stealing but said they were often stymied by Afghan government officials who did not want things to change.

“The less they behaved, the more money we threw at them,” [\[3\]](#) a former U.S. official told government interviewers in 2015. [“There was no real incentive to reform.” \[4\]](#)

For much of the war, Washington paid the salaries of the security forces by transferring huge sums of money to the Afghan government, which in turn paid soldiers and police officers in cash — after commanders often took an illicit cut for themselves, according to the interviews and news reports.

Today, to prevent skimming, most of the security forces receive their pay by electronic bank account transfers, but graft persists.

In a 2015 Lessons Learned interview, Michael Callen, an economist who specializes in the Afghan public sector, recalled working with a newly arrived U.S. colonel who wanted to set up a secure system that would pay Afghan police officers by mobile-phone transfers instead of cash.

“This colonel had just rotated in and he had a bee in his bonnet and he was really [\[5\]](#) excited and he said we’re going to pay mobile monies — we’re going to pay salaries using [mobile monies,](#)” [\[6\]](#) Callen said.

Callen said he and the colonel tried to sell the idea to an unnamed Interior Ministry official, who wasn’t buying. [“He’s falling asleep and has no interest. Then he’s like, ‘Sure, if](#)

you want to go do it, go do it in places where there aren't mobile money agents. . . . Go do it in places where cell phones don't work.' 📄

"Why is 📄 . . . the interior minister sitting here half falling asleep and half sabotaging you? Because he has a vested interest in making sure this doesn't work." 📄

Mobile phones are common in Afghanistan, and the Interior Ministry eventually set up a pilot program to pay a small number of police officers with mobile-phone credits. U.S. officials said the experiment worked well, but the Afghan government did not implement it widely.




U.S. Marines in 2010 at a joint U.S.-Afghan outpost in Marja, in Helmand province. (Mauricio Lima/AFP/Getty Images)


Virulent corruption compromised the security forces in other ways. Over time, the Afghan public became so disgusted by all the bribery and extortion that many questioned who

represented the bigger evil — the Taliban or the Afghan government.

In a 2017 Lessons Learned interview, Shahm Mahmood Miakhel, a former adviser to the Afghan Interior Ministry, said he once got an earful from district tribal leaders who could not stand either side.

“I asked that why is it possible that a large number of about 500 security forces cannot defeat about 20 or 30 Taliban. The community elders replied that the security people are not there to defend the people and fight Taliban, they are there to make money”  by selling their weapons or fuel, recalled Miakhel, who now serves as the governor of Nangahar province in eastern Afghanistan.

“I asked the elders that ok the government is not protecting you, but you are about 30,000 people in the district. If you don’t like Taliban then you must fight against them.” 

“Their response was that we don’t want this corrupt government to come and we don’t want Taliban either, so we are waiting to see who is going to win.” 

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC



July 23, 2018

“We’re on the right track. Again, this is a tough war. It’s a war. A war is a contest of wills. The Afghan army and police are demonstrating a will to succeed.”



Over the course of the war, U.S. military officials have made distinctions in their appraisal of the Afghan security forces. Despite its problems, there is a consensus that the army has made strides and earned a measure of respect from the Afghan public. Elite special-operations units often receive praise for their combat effectiveness.

In the Lessons Learned interviews, U.S. officials aimed much of their criticism at the Afghan police, which function more as a paramilitary force than officers on the beat.

In particular, they heaped scorn on units known as the Afghan Local Police, or ALP. With about 30,000 personnel, the local police are militias organized at the village level. Although they were established in 2010 at the behest of the United States — and trained by the U.S. military — they quickly generated a reputation for brutality and drew complaints from human rights groups.

One unnamed U.S. military official told government interviewers in 2016 that about a third of the local police “seemed to be drug addicts or Taliban.”  He added that their “main concern was getting fuel from their U.S. unit, they always wanted fuel.” 

Marine Gen. John Allen, who served as commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2013, defended the local police and described them as a major success.

“The ALP stood their ground 80 percent of the time they were attacked,”  he told government interviewers. “Indeed, the Taliban were more concerned about ALP than almost any other single measure taken to protect the Afghan people.” 

But almost no one else who was interviewed for the Lessons Learned project agreed with Allen. Robert Perito, a former analyst at the U.S. Institute of Peace who studied the Afghan

police, called the local police “dysfunctional” and said that in many areas it was “a corrupt force, run by warlords.”



Left: Arrested Afghan police personnel board a U.S. V-22 Osprey to be shipped out after being caught smoking narcotics at a Marine base in Marja in 2010. (Mauricio Lima/AFP/Getty Images) **Right:** Afghan policemen after their graduation ceremony in Marja in 2010. (Mauricio Lima/AFP/Getty Images)



One unnamed adviser to a U.S. Special Operations team officer told government interviewers in 2016 that his unit worked with an ALP chief who was “definitely corrupt” and that his militia was rife with thieves and saboteurs.


“They would say something was broken, or they would ask for fuel and then they would sell it in the market,” the adviser said. “Or they would say their vehicle was broken down. . . . There was one instance when our mechanic took the trucks and discovered that they had been intentionally destroyed. It was something really obvious, they cut a pipe or something like that.”

Scott Mann, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, told government interviewers that the local police training expanded too rapidly between 2011 and 2013, causing the program to deteriorate.

“If you use surrogates or take shortcuts, you get what you pay for,” Mann said. “You get unaccountable militias that prey on the population.”

In the Lessons Learned interviews, officials said the United States and NATO deserved a large share of the blame. They said the training programs for the Afghan security forces — not just the police — were ill-designed, poorly coordinated and thinly staffed.



One former U.S. trainer said he was selected for the job because he “had a pulse.”  When government interviewers asked him in 2017 which U.S. official was in charge of police training, he replied that no single person was and that he “wasn’t sure who he would say fills a role that could be considered as such.” 



Others said the programs were plagued by inconsistency and hamstrung by the fact that U.S. and NATO trainers served for only six to 12 months at a time. One called the loss of institutional knowledge “the annual lobotomy.” 



Afghan police trainees at the Kabul academy in 2004. (Emilio Morenatti/AP)

For years, the United States and NATO could not find enough certified law enforcement professionals to train the Afghan police. To fill the gap, the Pentagon assigned regular troops to the job, even though they knew little about police work.

Victor Glaviano, the former combat adviser, told government interviewers that it “made no sense”  for U.S. infantry troops to train the police. Yet Glaviano, who had experience as a military police officer, said the Afghan police had such a poor reputation that he “didn’t complain”  when he was assigned to work with an Afghan army unit instead.

“Thinking we could build the [security forces] that fast and that well was insane,”  an unnamed former U.S. official told government interviewers in 2016. “We can’t even stand up a sustainable local police unit in the U.S. in 18 months. How could we expect to set up hundreds of them across Afghanistan in that time frame?” 



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.

PART 1

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U.S. officials constantly said they were making progress. They were not, and they knew it.

PART 2

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Bush and Obama had polar-opposite plans to win the war. Both were destined to fail.

PART 3

Built to fail

Despite vows the U.S. wouldn’t get mired in “nation-building,” it has wasted billions doing just that

PART 4

Consumed by corruption

The U.S. flooded the country with money — then turned a blind eye to the graft it fueled

PART 5

Unguarded nation

Afghan security forces, despite years of training, were dogged by incompetence and corruption

PART 6

Overwhelmed by opium

The U.S. war on drugs in Afghanistan has imploded at nearly every turn

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It took three years and two federal lawsuits for The Post to pry loose 2,000 pages of interview records

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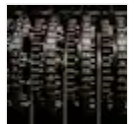
"Effective security forces are basically the way this thing ends," the top Afghanistan war watchdog said.

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