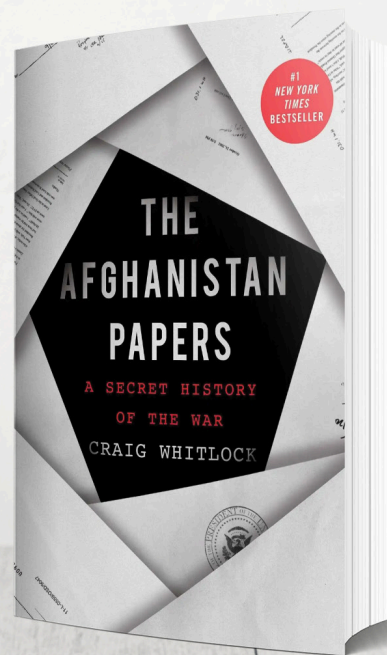


The Afghanistan Papers

A Secret History of the War



Craig Whitlock, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021, 368 pages

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What really happened in Afghanistan? How did the government and the Afghan National Army collapse so rapidly despite years of promises by senior-ranking military officers that progress was made and those entities would eventually be able to defend the country?

The contention of Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* is that senior military and political leaders routinely lied to the American public. If the title of the book has a familiar ring to it, that is no accident. It plays on the title of another dramatic release of information that revealed U.S. political and military leaders were lying about the state of affairs in Vietnam. With the release of *The Pentagon Papers*, Daniel Ellsberg provided a war-weary people a trove of documents that clearly showed the American government and its military had been complicit in a long-running attempt to deceive the American public about the true situation in the Vietnam War. The fact of the matter was the war was going poorly, but leaders offered up a steady diet of sunshine and rainbows detached from the reality on the ground to sidestep uncomfortable questions and prolong the war—up until then America's longest.

When America entered Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that had originated there, no one thought the war would end up lasting two decades. And with such a blatant attack against the United States, there was no need to lie or spin to justify the war at the outset. But eventually, the false assurances started, papering over setbacks. It seemed that no one was ready to acknowledge that the war started for a just cause had morphed into a lost cause. "From Washington to Kabul, an unspoken conspiracy to mask the truth took hold. Omissions inexorably led to deceptions and eventually to outright absurdities."¹ As the war continued, year after year, disillusionment set in with many. Many became outright dismissive of the military's statements that it was perpetually making progress and on the right track.

In 2016, the author received a tip. A massive collection of interviews

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existed, given by hundreds of people involved in the conflict who were unloading pent-up frustrations about the prosecution of the war. The interviews were conducted by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan for a project called “Lessons Learned.” The intent was to identify policy failures so the United States could avoid repetition of the mistakes in the future.² However, when Whitlock attempted to get his hands on the raw interviews, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan delayed and resisted each attempt. Ultimately, the *Washington Post* had to file two lawsuits against the government to get the documents released under the Freedom of Information Act.

The interviews revealed that “many senior U.S. officials privately viewed the war as an unmitigated disaster, contradicting a chorus of rosy public statements from officials at the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department, who assured Americans year after year that they were making progress.”³

The book chronicles how Washington and its executives in the field wasted over a trillion dollars in convoluted efforts to mitigate rampant corruption, build a reasonably competent Afghan military and police force, and snuff out the opium trade.⁴ That’s trillion with a “T!”

Lawmakers have expressed genuine fury when generals, diplomats, and other officials admitted the government had been dishonest with the public. Sen. Rand Paul has said he found the *Washington Post* exposé “extraordinarily troubling. It portrays a U.S. war effort severely impaired by mission creep and suffering from a complete absence of clear and achievable objectives.”⁵ Summing up this disheartening tale, Whitlock laments that “with their complicit silence, military and political leaders avoided accountability and dodged reappraisals that could have changed the outcome or shortened the conflict. Instead, they chose to bury their mistakes and let the war drift.”⁶

Things started off well enough in Afghanistan, save for the escape of Osama bin Laden. U.S. forces had toppled the Taliban government in less than six weeks. But Afghanistan had a history of gobbling up invaders. It was routinely referred to as “The Graveyard of Empires.”⁷ Alluding to previous forays into the sinkhole by Britain and Russia, President George W. Bush assured his audience that the United States would avoid the fate of other great powers who had invaded the country. “We’re not going to repeat that mistake.”⁸

But Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, greatly feared the U.S. military could get stuck there in part because it lacked a clear exit strategy, and he was careful to keep his doubts and concerns private. In an interview he gave early on, he was pointedly asked “How often are you forced to shave the truth in that briefing room, because American lives are at stake?” Rumsfeld brusquely replied, “I just don’t. I think our credibility is so much more important than shaving the truth.”⁹ The passage of time would utterly ravage that earlier pronouncement.

Richard Boucher, the State Department’s chief spokesman at the start of the war, says the United States “foolishly tried to do too much and never settled on a realistic exit strategy.” In effect, the United States set an impossible goal: to replicate U.S. practices in many ways. “[They were] trying to build a systematic government à la Washington, DC in a country that doesn’t operate that way.”¹⁰

The irony, though, is that the mushrooming objectives were far more circumscribed at the outset—eliminate al-Qaida; terminate Taliban rule. The initial plan did not anticipate U.S. troops staying long, since it was thought those same troops would be heavily engaged in antiterror operations worldwide. Having rapidly overthrown the Taliban, U.S. military commanders were unprepared for the aftermath and unsure what to do. In December 2001, only 2,500 American troops were on the ground in the country.

But swift and decisive military victories had heightened U.S. officials’ confidence and they subsequently added more goals to the “to do” list. In short, hubris was infecting outlooks. And so, the war “shifted into an ‘ideological phase’ in which the United States decided to introduce freedom and democracy to Afghanistan as an alternative to terrorism.”¹¹ But for that to happen and take hold, American troops would have to stay longer. Originally, Washington said, “We don’t do nation-building.” However, there was no way to ensure al-Qaida would not return. Once the Taliban had been decimated, many wanted to ensure the progress made was not lost.

In April 2002, Bush settled on a more ambitious set of objectives. He said the United States was obligated to help Afghanistan build a country free of terrorism, with a stable government, a new national army, and an education system that served both boys and girls. “True peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan

people the means to achieve their own aspirations.”¹² This was a dramatic ramp up in stated objectives. The goals were admirable, but the president offered no specifics or benchmarks for achieving them, nor did he mention a price tag or say how long it might all take. This was a huge blunder. But a new war in Iraq would soon overshadow Afghanistan and the tough questions associated with Bush’s new goals.

In the ensuing years, U.S. troops struggled to discriminate between the bad actors and everyone else. “The reality is that on 9/11 we didn’t know jack shit about al-Qaeda,” said Robert Gates.¹³ The Bush administration did not help matters when it began blurring the distinction between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Al-Qaida was mostly made up of Arabs, not Afghans, with a global presence and outlook; in contrast, the Taliban’s focus was entirely local. By 2002, though, few al-Qaida fighters remained in Afghanistan, having been killed, captured, or dispersed. Only the Taliban remained. And for two decades, the war was waged primarily against a group that was only indirectly connected to the 9/11 attacks. And therein lay a big problem.

One reason the war dragged on so long was because the United States never really comprehended what motivated its enemies to battle with it. In the simplistic thinking that dominated a distressing number of discussions about the war, “anybody willing to help the U.S. fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban qualified as a good guy—morals notwithstanding. Dangling bags of cash as a lure, the CIA recruited war criminals, drug traffickers, smugglers and ex-communists. While such people could be useful, they often found the Americans easy to manipulate.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, many Afghans learned that if they wanted to eliminate a rival in any sort of dispute, all they needed to do was tell the Americans their opponent belonged to the Taliban. Even elite soldiers, possessing a more nuanced understanding of the battlefield, were unsure who to fight.

On 5 December 2001, the Bonn Agreement was signed, naming Hamid Karzai as the interim leader along with a process for drafting a constitution and holding national elections. It was touted as a diplomatic victory. However, the Bonn Agreement had a flaw that was ignored at the time: exclusion of the Taliban. The United States saw the Taliban as a defeated foe. It also viewed the Taliban as equivalent to al-Qaida. And in the moment, there was no desire expressed, by any

attendees, to bring the Taliban into the peace process.

One experienced foreign service officer decried, “One of the unfortunate errors that took place after 9/11 was in our eagerness to get revenge we violated the Afghan way of war. That is when one sides wins, the other side puts down their arms and reconciles with the side that won. And that is what the Taliban wanted to do. Our insistence on hunting them down as if they were all criminals, rather than just adversaries who had lost, was what provoked the rise of the insurgency more than anything else.”¹⁵

In the “Lessons Learned” interviews, Zalmay Khalilzad, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, said America’s longest war might have gone down as one of its shortest had the United States been willing to talk to the Taliban in December 2001.¹⁶

Frustrated officers coming home from the war often grumbled the U.S. war effort was akin to “just spinning our wheels” and “lacking any kind of strategy.”¹⁷ There was a sense that this war would continue to muddle along aimlessly for years. In part, the drift was because Iraq had become the big shiny object garnering American attention. Army Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, the director of operations for the joint staff at the Pentagon, estimated he spent 85 percent of his time on Iraq and just 15 percent on Afghanistan.¹⁸ Lute’s candor was as surprising as it was depressing. “We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn’t know what we were doing. We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. . . . It’s really much worse than you think.”¹⁹

Whitlock’s book makes clear *one reason the generals failed: cowardice*. In some ways, the situation was akin to the one described by Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster in his book *Dereliction of Duty*, in which he says the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during Vietnam, were derelict in their obligation to speak truth to the White House about the fiasco unfolding there. One British general, Peter Gilchrist, who served as deputy commander of U.S. and NATO forces in the early years of the Afghan war, described his American counterparts cowering during meetings with then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. “This was a real culture shock for me. You should see these guys—and they’re great men, grown up, intelligent, sensible, but like the jellies when it came to going in front of the SecDef.”²⁰

Over time, “the contradictions between the generals’ happy talk and the discouraging reality on the ground became harder to ignore.”²¹ But ignore it the generals did. It seemed no general wanted to admit he couldn’t vanquish the Taliban.

However, there was one general that seemed to be willing to admit that things were not so rosy. Gen. David McKiernan surprisingly admitted “We don’t see progress. I won’t say that things are all on the right track.”²² While this candor, despite misfortunes on the ground, was encouraging, it apparently ruffled too many feathers; McKiernan would be pulled from command, inexplicably. And it is even more surprising given who dropped the axe on McKiernan.

Robert Gates, a former CIA director and later secretary of defense, had a reputation as an unemotional boss who held senior military leaders accountable. Dismissing a wartime commander had not really occurred since Douglas MacArthur was shown the door by President Harry S. Truman in 1951 for insubordination. Interestingly, Gates said the decision to replace McKiernan after eleven months in the position was not due to a refusal to follow an order, or for a particular misstep. He just said it was “time for new leadership and fresh eyes.”²³ Gen. Stanley McChrystal would be brought in as the new commander. So, there was no clear rationale for the replacement, except to consider he was the only flag officer in Afghanistan to openly admit the war was going badly. And while the secretary has the discretion to replace the commander as he sees fit, the message sent was this: he was let go because he had told the truth. Such a move may seem out-of-character for a leader like Gates, but a look at the statements of the generals in charge of the war effort, both before and after McKiernan’s firing, shows he was an outlier in terms of his candor with the press and public. Precisely why Gates felt the need to remove him remains a mystery, but the move certainly disinclined others to be truthful when briefing politicians and the American public.

McKiernan’s replacement, McChrystal, had grown close to Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq where they had worked together. Now that Petraeus was the Central Command boss, he recommended McChrystal for the lead in Afghanistan. Leveraging their experiences in Iraq, the two sought to adopt a revised counter-insurgency strategy for Afghanistan. But others in

Afghanistan felt a certain arrogance displayed by the two generals that seemed to ignore lessons learned by previous commanders there.

Eventually, McChrystal would convince the Obama administration to raise the troop level to one hundred thousand. With the additional forces in hand, McChrystal testified before Congress in December 2009 stating, “The next eighteen months will likely be decisive and ultimately enable success. In fact, we are going to win. We and the Afghan government are going to win.”²⁴ Of course, that would turn out to be utter nonsense. Michelle Flournoy, Barack Obama’s under-secretary of defense for policy, would offer similarly glowing statements. “The evidence suggests that our shift in approach is beginning to produce results.”²⁵ She, too, would prove to be wrong in her assessment.

The overly optimistic reports would continue unabated from Kabul for another decade, one general after another, all grossly distorting the truth on the ground. All the while, rampant buffoonery went unchecked, resulting in pervasive waste. Some instances related in Whitlock’s book parallel this writer’s own disheartening experiences in Afghanistan. As Lute points out, “the U.S. lavished money on dams and highways just ‘to show we could spend it,’ fully aware that the Afghans, among the poorest and least educated people in the world, could not maintain the massive projects once they were completed.”²⁶ In my own experience, working at the National Military Academy of Afghanistan during one deployment, I witnessed Afghan instructors outfitted with technology they had zero chance of maintaining after the U.S. gravy train ceased running. I recall saying to a colleague, “Why do we need to transport Afghans into the twenty-first century? The eighteenth or nineteenth will do just fine. Not computers and projectors, but paper and pencils, chalk and chalkboards.”²⁷ The point of the statement was this: If the Afghans couldn’t maintain it after the United States left, what was the point of it all? All the costs are lost—for good. Better we provide simple, but resilient solutions than ones that may ease our own proximate training headaches but do nothing to solidify long-term fixes. Undeniably, we have seen this numerous times when the United States goes into a place. We quickly begin to feel it is easier to give the recipient a fish than teach them how to fish. The latter process requires untold patience and time, luxuries the

U.S. soldier rarely has enough of; hence, the appeal of giving them a fish. Yet we also know how ineffective that option is in virtually all cases. It is really a simple case of “easy” versus “logical.” The siren song of easy is tough to ignore, especially if someone is breathing down a soldier’s neck for metrics to show some senior officer that “progress” is made on multiple fronts.

The U.S. military’s counterinsurgency doctrine, of course, treated money as a powerful weapon of war. Thus, as Whitlock astutely puts it, “from a commander’s perspective, it was better to spend that ammunition quickly than wisely.”²⁸ One Afghan who worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development as a project manager decried “the Americans were so intent on building things that they paid little attention to who was benefitting.”²⁹ Of course, of the numerous flaws with the nation-building campaign—the waste, the

inefficiency, the half-baked ideas—nothing was more troubling than the fact the Americans could never discern whether any of it was actually helping them win the war! According to the author, “mammoth civic works projects contributed to the failure of the nation-building campaign.”³⁰

There are so many more anecdotes that could be captured here to underscore the irrationality of what was done, said, and lauded in that caustic backwater. Whitlock (and the *Washington Post*, which fought the lawsuits against the government on his behalf) deserve our respect and admiration for producing this searing investigative journalism. We have no hope of doing better in the future unless we first learn from our mistakes. Though we often choose not to learn from previous errors, we should still seek them out with the hope that we can—and must—do better tomorrow. ■

Notes

1. Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), xii–xiii.

2. *Ibid.*, xiv.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, xvi.

5. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kentucky), as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, xviii.

6. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, xx.

7. While it may not have been “the” event to end an empire, it facilitated its demise.

8. President George W. Bush, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 4.

9. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 5.

10. Richard Boucher, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 7–8.

11. Stephen Hadley, deputy national security advisor, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 14.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Robert Gates, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 19.

14. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 21.

15. Todd Greentree, foreign service officer, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 27.

16. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 28.

17. *Ibid.*, 109.

18. *Ibid.*, 110.

19. Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 110.

20. British Maj. Gen. Peter Gilchrist, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 53.

21. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 113.

22. Gen. David McKiernan, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 110.

23. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 146.

24. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 153.

25. Michelle Flournoy, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 154.

26. Lute, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 159.

27. Dr. John H. Modinger—personal account.

28. Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 163.

29. Safullah Baran, as quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 165.

30. *Ibid.*, 166.