



Sgt. 1st Class Scott Kehn of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 101 Airborne Infantry Division, conducts a patrol through poppy fields near Nalghan, Afghanistan, 21 April 2011. One of the many intractable features of the war in Afghanistan was attempting to entice Afghan farmers to give up highly lucrative opium poppy cultivation and replacing it with crops that were more difficult to grow and much less profitable. (Photo by Pfc. Justin A. Young, U.S. Army)

# Military Power Is Insufficient

## Learning from Failure in Afghanistan

Lt. Col. John Q. Bolton, U.S. Army



**T**he 2021 collapse of the Afghan National Army (ANA) prompted a rollicking debate and re-criminations. At issue: Who lost Afghanistan? Lt. Gen. (ret.) H. R. McMaster blamed an apathetic public and political class, saying they sent troops “into battle without dedicating themselves to achieving a worthy outcome.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is an understandably incorrect reading of what happened in Afghanistan. Though an apathetic public undoubtedly dissuaded accountability and policy makers supported (but often did not endorse) the war, blaming them for Afghanistan is intellectual scaffolding for a profound military failure. Both categorically (the Afghan state collapsed) and by the military’s own metrics (billions spent on ultimately ineffective Afghan security forces), American efforts did not achieve promised outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Lt. Gen. (ret.) Daniel Bolger came to a similar conclusion: “As I and my fellow generals saw that our strategies weren’t working, we failed to reconsider our basic assumptions; we failed to question our flawed understanding.”<sup>3</sup> For military professionals, acknowledging failure is the hard but necessary medicine required to better our institution. Military leaders should heed three lessons: (1) military strategy derives from political will, (2) poor strategy leads to compromises that mar the military ethic, and (3) technology is no panacea.

## **Military Strategy Derives from Political Will**

*The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.*

—Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*<sup>4</sup>

As a host of examples ranging from French and American counterinsurgencies in Vietnam to Russia’s bungled 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrate, force alone cannot achieve political outcomes; military strategy requires a political predicate. In Afghanistan, though the initial rationale for intervening after 9/11 was clear, a staying rationale faded over time, certainly after the Obama “surge” ended in 2011. American policy makers clearly did not believe Afghanistan was a vital American interest. Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden all

looked to leave Afghanistan. Each pursued “Afghan good enough” policies minimizing American commitments to Afghanistan. Rather than end, the Afghan war became perpetual, acquiring a momentum of its own. Consequently, military strategy suffered.

Much of the fault lies with military leaders who mistook *military competence* for *national will* while becoming unduly attached to a mostly self-prescribed, military-centric Afghanistan strategy. In retrospect, it seems Obama and Trump both endorsed strategies they did not believe in, convinced (or coerced) by a national security establishment that never considered ending the war. In the former, the 2009 leaking of a classified assessment on Afghanistan preemptively tied Obama’s hands; in Trump’s 2017 case, a cadre of retired and current officials pressured him into escalating the war despite his clear desire to withdraw.<sup>5</sup> Ambivalent policy makers left a strategic void, and the military proffered a counterinsurgency (COIN) solution that, though intermittently effective, was strategically unsound, operationally expensive, and tactically exhausting. Tragically, presidents, Congress, and the public rarely (and never forcefully) questioned these military assessments or promises.

Even when disasters such as the loss of American soldiers at Wanat or Camp Outpost Keating occurred, the resulting inquiries largely focused on “small bore questions of specific orders and decisions” rather than the broader question of whether putting small units of Americans in tactically untenable locations served a larger strategic purpose.<sup>6</sup> Even the debate over the Afghan “surge” in the early Obama administration was about numbers of troops, not strategy.<sup>7</sup> According to one journalist, had Obama questioned military arguments, “he might have turned the tables on the military’s leadership and told them that they needed to sort out their command structure and use the existing troops [in Afghanistan] more efficiently.”<sup>8</sup>

Because these debates were limited to superficial arguments about troops and tactics, the corresponding lack of political will and strategic theory of victory negated American advantages in firepower, technology, and money, ensuring military efforts would fail over time. The Taliban simply had a willpower asymmetry over Western forces. An eschewing of political reality in favor of military action occurred in Vietnam as well. In his analysis of that war, Lawrence Summers argues American military officers “see war



as something separate and apart from the political process.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in Afghanistan, military leaders ignored signs that the American public undoubtedly “supported the troops,” but the American political system did not embrace loftier *military-endorsed* goals of endowing Afghanistan with a parliamentary democracy. Policy makers may share “blame” insofar as they drifted from supporting the war to ambivalence to wanting American troops out.<sup>10</sup> But it was military assessments regarding a “sustainable approach” and a “declining Taliban” coupled with prognostications about the supposed effectiveness of COIN doctrine that convinced (cajoled) Congress to keep American troops in Afghanistan.

American military leaders, who exercised enormous influence over Afghanistan policy, failed in three regards.

## A Long-Term COIN Approach

First, military leaders pioneered, developed, endorsed, and deployed a long-term COIN approach while ignoring obviously diminishing political support at home (see figure 1, page 66). In seeking a decent interval by killing enough Taliban while building the Afghan Security Forces, military leaders oversimplified the qualified success of the Iraq “surge”—which was due as much to Sunni politics as additional American forces—to promise likewise results in Afghanistan. According to scholar and former military advisor Carter Malkasian, the surge let “policymakers, military officers, and commentators [used the surge] to show how the right numbers and methods could defeat an insurgency.”<sup>11</sup> For many military leaders and supportive policy makers, COIN doctrine became dogma—a remedy for any conflict rather than a localized approach with, at best, 50 percent success rates.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as documented by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), military leaders consistently oversold incremental ANA progress and often masked capability shortfalls that American airpower or expertise covered.<sup>13</sup>

The story of the Iraq surge became simultaneously a stretching of real success in Iraq and an oversimplification. Slapping a semisuccessful approach used Iraq onto Afghanistan, military leaders argued that all they needed was time and money. Sufficient troops, bombs, and dollars could make Afghanistan a democracy, complete with a competent army, modern notions of

women’s rights, and a diverse, participant electorate. This story was initially well-received, especially in its first decade when officials used the legacy of 9/11 to argue failure in Afghanistan would invite another attack on the American homeland. But the good story employed specious assumptions about Afghanistan as a base for terrorism, the utility of force in transforming societies, and the tactical efficacy of American/NATO forces. These linkages were never really challenged, either by Congress, policy makers, or the public. Afghanistan became the albatross no one wanted to support but still lingered on, especially after Osama bin Laden’s death in 2011.<sup>14</sup>

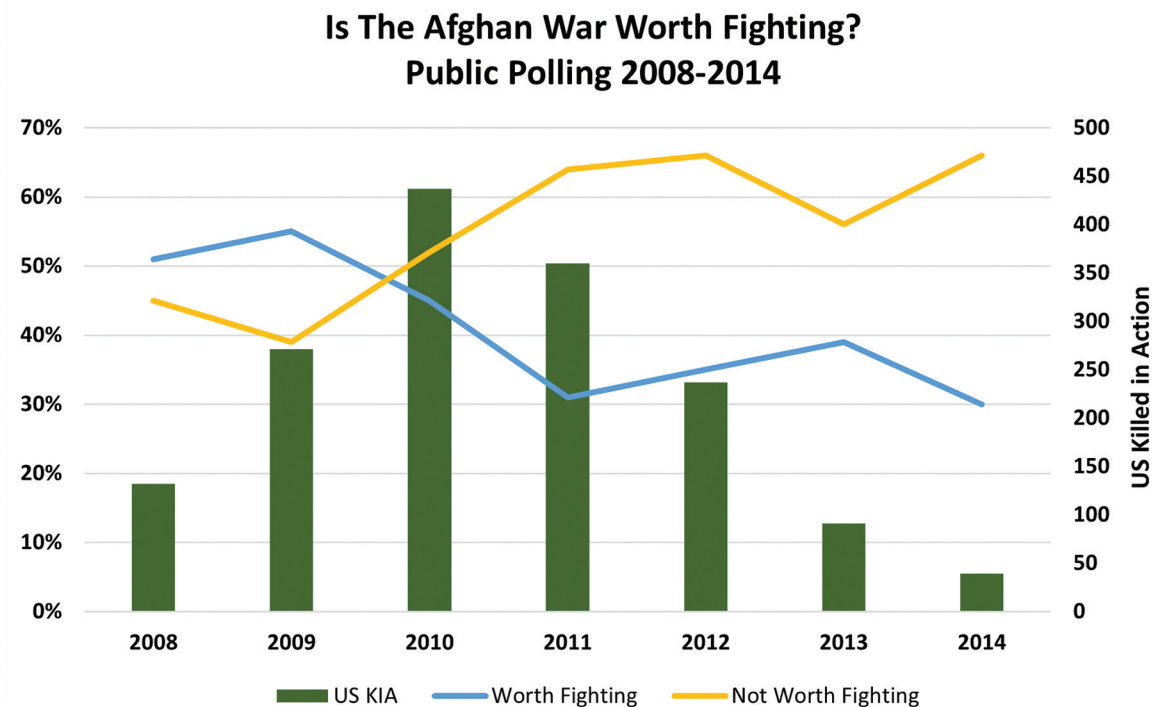
Defense scholar Mara Karlin argues military leaders framed recommendations as apolitical “best military advice,” which presented policy makers binary choices on issues of profound complexity. “Best” implies no other options while “military advice” tends to ignore political realities, placing risk unduly on policy makers.<sup>15</sup> This Huntingtonian model of separate spheres—political directors and military doers—is deeply embedded in the U.S. military. Too often, however, to avoid partisanship, military analysis and recommendations avoid *politics* and *political factors* entirely, benefiting neither policy makers nor the military.

*These failures are shared by a generation of military commanders and policymakers, who let occasional tactical successes in a counterterrorism mission become a proxy for a strategy that never was ... it was subtly abetted by journalists ... [who] let the senior officials continue their magical thinking.*

—David Ignatius<sup>16</sup>

**Lack of structural changes.** Second, the military made surprisingly few structural changes despite endorsing

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(Figure from author's compilation of data from ABC News/Washington Post Poll, December 2013)

**Figure 1. Support for the Afghan War, 2008–2013**

long-term occupations. Foremost was using unit-level deployments. Aside from limited niche specialties, units rotated wholesale to Afghanistan. Military analyst John Amble argues turnover created repeated losses of local knowledge as unit-level operational focus swung wildly between “key leader engagements and firefights, funding projects, and launching raids.”<sup>17</sup> While the rotational model has benefits, it is less effective during long-term stability operations, a fact the Army/Marine COIN field manual points out.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, nearly every deploying unit employed ad hoc to build training teams; not until 2018 did the Army employ a purpose-built training organization. Though the security forces assistance brigade is a competent force structure, its creation took nearly two decades.

Two Air Force officers called this metrics-driven, short-term approach coupled with unit turnover the “perfect storm of myopic decision-making.”<sup>19</sup> Required to demonstrate performance during twelve- or nine-month deployments, units inevitably confused *measures of performance* with *measures of effectiveness*.<sup>20</sup>

**Mirror imaging.** Third, military leaders time and again replicated Vietnam-era “mirror-imaging”

errors in building the Afghan military. The ANA resembled the American military—diverse, ostensibly meritocratic, with effective special operations forces, and dependent upon aerial fires and maneuver.<sup>21</sup> Profoundly misreading (or ignoring) Afghan’s diverse cultural makeup, the American-supported, NATO-coordinated program to recruit and train the ANA overrode Afghanistan’s tribal structures. Rather than work through local culture, NATO and American forces supplanted it with Westernized bureaucracy. A Pashtun recruit from Kandahar might attend basic training in Kabul and then find himself guarding the Afghan-Uzbek border alongside an Afghan Tajik who likely spoke a different language. Though anathema to Western sensibilities, cultural differences built over millennia of geographical separation and empowered by religious fervor could not end by forced integration or Western training. This culturally uninformed approach contributed to ANA ineffectiveness.<sup>22</sup>

ANA equipping likewise overemployed means (money) without considering ways (effectively spending funds), giving Afghans fantastic equipment but not necessarily what they needed. Whether Afghanistan’s

security situation or geography needed a combined arms army instead of an effective police force seemed irrelevant. Money became a literal “weapons system” in military doctrine.<sup>23</sup> The United States spared no expense, providing over \$50 billion in rifles, night-vision goggles, vehicles, and aircraft.<sup>24</sup>

An anecdote illustrates this folly. In 2017, I asked the senior American commander in Afghanistan why we were providing Afghanistan UH-60M utility helicopters when their on-hand MI-17s were nearly as effective but more familiar and less reliant on American contractors. He responded not with the common refrain that Congress directed U.S. sourcing but with a performance-based rationale: “Because we want them to have the best equipment ... to be able to conduct air assaults above 8,000 feet.”<sup>25</sup> Despite its mountainous geography, most of Afghanistan’s population lives below six thousand feet. The pressure to give them “the best” coupled with a utilitarian desire to sell weapons overrode basic force design.

*The ultimate point of failure for our efforts wasn’t an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.*

—Ambassador Ryan Crocker<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, American largess hindered ANA effectiveness. American war managers did not seem concerned that Afghans could not handle the heavy maintenance burden of modern equipment amid a tenuous supply chain only made possible with American maintenance contractors and logistical support.<sup>27</sup> The SIGAR found profound lapses in accountability for equipment given to the Afghans. With Western spending and aid comprising over 50 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP, millions worth of equipment unsurprisingly found its way off ANA bases and fueled corruption. Moreover, the glut of Western money led to ANA commanders fudging the rolls, creating the so-called “ghost soldiers.”<sup>28</sup> This hollow force of supposedly two hundred thousand collapsed as approximately fifty thousand Taliban advanced.

*We must focus our energies beyond the guns and steel of the military, beyond just our brave soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. We must also focus our energies on the other elements of national power that will be so crucial in the years to come.*

—Secretary of Defense Robert Gates<sup>29</sup>

Despite the billions poured into the ANA, stability-producing forces such as the Afghan National Police were relatively underfunded.<sup>30</sup> This partly stemmed from a never-realized civilian surge which forced nonmilitary training requirements the military.<sup>31</sup> Units habitually assigned marginal personnel to police and governmental training teams, leaving them undermanned, underskilled, and untrained.<sup>32</sup> In one case, an incoming division headquarters disbanded police advising teams to “focus on kinetic strikes” seventeen years into the war.<sup>33</sup>

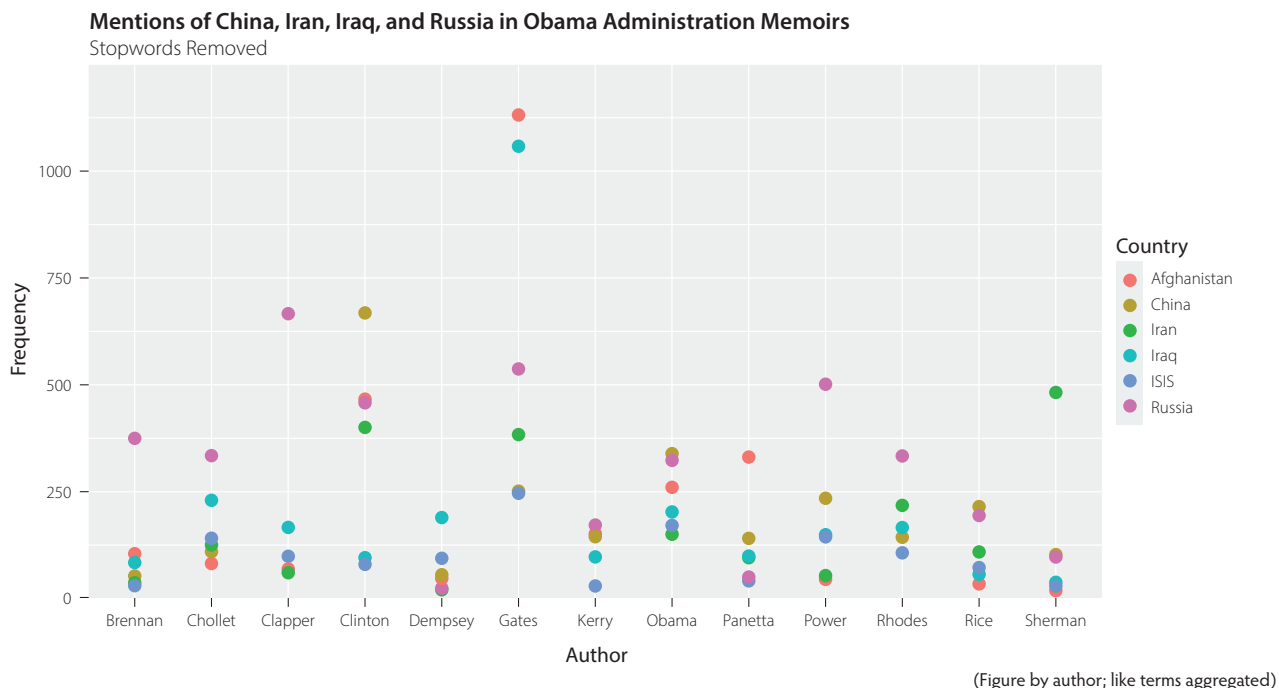
Thanks to bureaucratic momentum, Afghanistan enjoyed an undue share of senior officials’ time. Afghanistan is markedly front and center in the memoirs of senior Obama administration officials, despite some pundits calling the war “small” or “manageable” (see figure 2, page 68).<sup>34</sup> That this prevalence occurred during the Obama administration’s supposed “pivot” to Asia illustrates troubling aspects of bureaucratic capture. The time and attention of senior leaders is finite, and Afghanistan ultimately took resources and focus precisely when the Obama (and Trump) administrations wanted to focus American foreign policy elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

How could military leaders pursue this politically and historically ignorant strategy? Because policy makers and Congress allowed it to do so. Aside from reviews during the early Obama administration, the military strategy in Afghanistan encountered little oversight from the White House or Congress. Applying French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau’s oft-cited adage that “war is too important to be left to the generals,” the military would have likely employed different strategies had policy makers directed more circumspect policy or skeptically interrogated military promises. Instead, policy makers weighed the political risk of a terrorist attack from Afghanistan against the negligible political costs of continuing the war. The military strategy, despite its costs, folded nicely into this void by promising eventual success but eschewing difficult tradeoffs.

*David, you shouldn’t have assumed I wouldn’t do what I told the American people I would [regarding Afghanistan].*

—President Barack Obama to Gen. David Petraeus regarding a drawdown of troops in Afghanistan in 2012<sup>36</sup>

And while policy makers placed (some) limits on troop levels, a military operating without constraints is unrealistic. Complaints that commanders “weren’t supported” or



**Figure 2. Country Mentions in Obama-Era Memoirs**

“faced constraints” ignore the historical record (see figure 3, page 70). All militaries face constraints, and all wars have limits, whether geographical, political, or in terms of means employed. The U.S. military restored the *ex status quo ante* in Korea amid constraints that prevented full-scale war with China or World War III with the Soviet Union. The means to achieve “victory” had limits based on global factors and resource scarcity. Blaming policy makers for reasonable boundaries is a bit like complaining to a banker about account balances.

But unclear policy or strategic guidance does not abrogate military responsibility. If Clausewitz’s first dictum is to not start a war without being clear-eyed about one’s goals, the military corollary is to help policy makers understand the utility and limits of force. As Karlin illustrates, ignoring political realities is the fatal flaw of the “normal” theory of civil-military relations.<sup>37</sup> Policy makers don’t simply make goals and hand them off to burdened military officers for execution as Huntington suggests. Policy making is an active process, requiring political and military input throughout. When military options outstrip evident political will or obligations require what Petraeus called a “generational commitment,” military leaders must encourage an honest, if unequal, dialogue with policy makers.<sup>38</sup>

## Poor Strategy Leads to Compromises that Mar the Military Ethic

These military choices—endorsing a long-term strategy despite insufficient political support, rotational force deployments, and building a first-world army for a third-world state—inevitably created contradictions. But few of the prognoses below were scrutinized.

*Afghanistan military, economic, political, and diplomatic activity ... has shown interesting progress. I think 2005 can be a decisive year.*

—Gen. (ret.) John Abizaid, 2005<sup>39</sup>

*I am not prepared to say that we have turned the corner... the situation is serious but I think we have made significant progress in setting the conditions in 2009, and beginning some progress, and that we’ll make real progress in 2010.*

—Gen. (ret.) Stanley McChrystal, February 2010<sup>40</sup>

*2011 will go down as a turning point in Afghanistan.*

—Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, December 2011<sup>41</sup>

*I think we are on the road to winning.*

—Gen. (ret.) John Allen, February 2013<sup>42</sup>



*[I am] confident that we'll continue to be successful. The road before us remains challenging, but we will triumph.*

—Gen. (ret.) John Campbell, December 2014<sup>43</sup>

*I would say overall our mission in Afghanistan is on a positive trajectory.*

—Gen. (ret.) John Nicholson, March 2016<sup>44</sup>

*[We] have turned the corner ... the momentum is now with Afghan security forces.*

—Gen. (ret.) John Nicholson, November 2017<sup>45</sup>

As Sen. Elizabeth Warren exclaimed during a 2018 hearing, “We’ve supposedly turned the corner so many times that it seems now we’re going in circles.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, contrary reports existed. In 2012, a U.S. Army officer’s op-ed wrote that conditions in Afghanistan bore “no resemblance to rosy official statements by U.S. military leaders.”<sup>47</sup> Some nongovernmental organizations said NATO reports were “sharply divergent” from reality and cautioned that military reports were “intended to influence American and European public opinion” rather than provide “an accurate portrayal of the situation [in Afghanistan].”<sup>48</sup>

But, as in Vietnam, reporting optimism wandered into deceit. Positivity was rewarded while negative reports could potentially be seen as “not being a team player.”<sup>49</sup> Endowed by inaccurate assessments from senior officials, the endemic pressure to make reports “green” or “complete” corroded the military ethic. As described by Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras in a scathing 2015 Army War College report, “repeated exposure to overwhelming demands” had made Army officers “ethically numb” and untruthfulness “surprisingly common.”<sup>50</sup> Lt. Gen. (ret.) Dave Barno and Dr. Nora Bensahel argued prevalent cultures of dishonesty resulted from the “corrosive effects” of long-term rotational deployments. They argue a mindset of “taking care of the troops” morphed into dishonest compliance as leaders struggled to balance a culture of zero defects with limited time and troops.<sup>51</sup>

The U.S. military deserves credit for mostly avoiding the worst types of wartime atrocities.<sup>52</sup> Criminal incidents such as Abu Ghraib or the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl by a company descending into madness as described in *Blackhearts* are rightly condemned as aberrations from the American military ethic. Certainly, the moral failure of the Special

Immigrant Visa program was mostly nonmilitary.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, widespread false reporting is troubling both professionally and practically. The military relies on implicit trust between the profession of arms and the American public. The trust allows for management of internal affairs and freedom of action. Practically, the Russian army’s failings throughout 2022 show the deadly consequences of a force built on false reports.

*No one expects our leaders to always have a successful plan. But we do expect—and the men who do the living, fighting, and dying deserve—to have our leaders tell us the truth about what’s going on.*

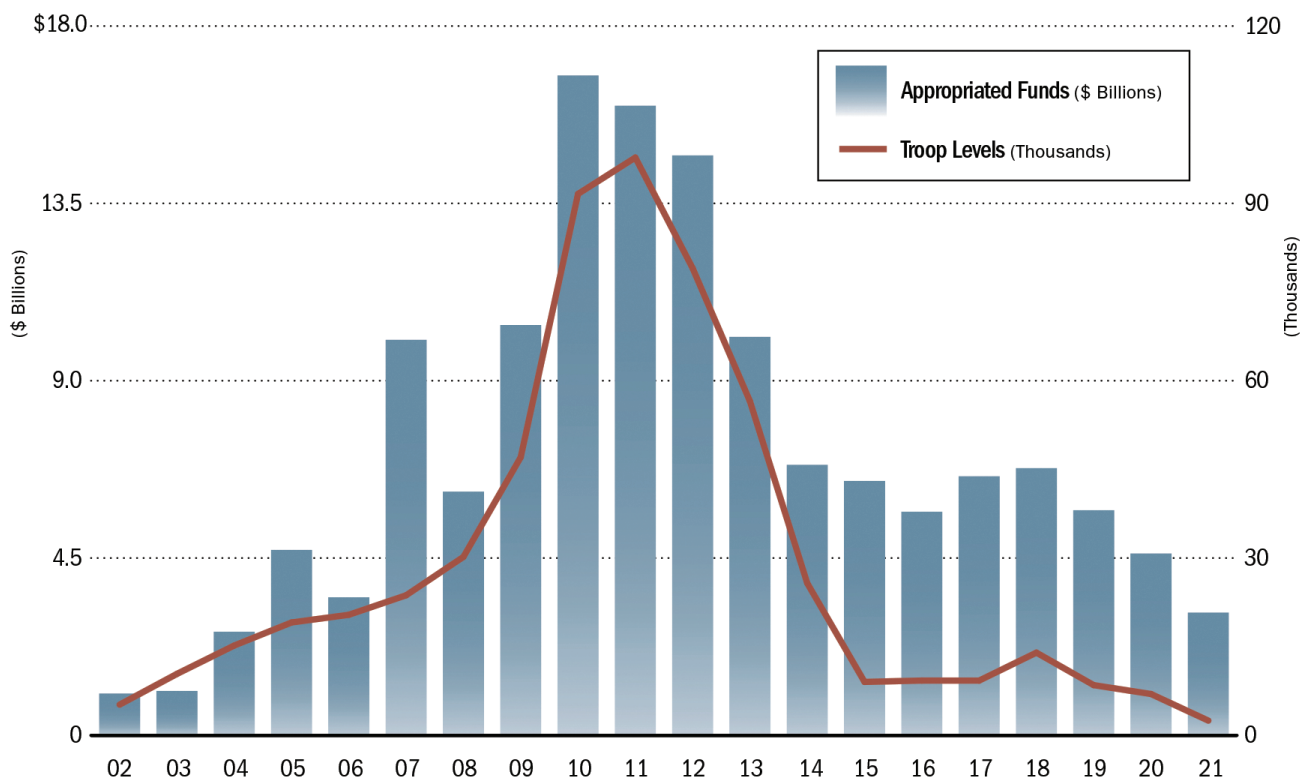
—Lt. Col. Daniel Davis<sup>54</sup>

In 2018, the Modern War Institute at West Point debated the merits of optimistic versus pessimistic generals.<sup>55</sup> Optimistic leaders are certainly endorsed within the U.S. military. Leaders naturally want their units and partners to do well. But excessive optimism contributed to an inability to accurately assess Afghan forces. In an email circulated during the evacuation of Kabul, an Army general conceded this bias: “I was naïve ... I knew and spoke about [corruption] ... It was a debilitating pall cast over everything we tried to accomplish ... But I served with some true Afghan heroes ... they were patriots in their own way. I now know and accept that these honorable, noble Afghans were unrepresentative.”<sup>56</sup>

More important than personality debates, however, is the honesty military professionals owe Congress, presidents, and the American people. As shown by the *Washington Post*, years of Afghanistan policy hinged on tortured explanations of incremental progress often informed by biased, if not outright false assessments of Afghan security and ANA progress.<sup>57</sup> This yearslong cavalcade of senior leaders offering Theranos-like promises of eventual success undoubtedly projected confidence. This façade masked the reality of Afghanistan and set the stage for the apparently “shocking” collapse of the ANA in 2021.

## Technology Is No Panacea

A technology-centric approach abetted professional dishonesty by distorting views of the battlefield. True understanding about Afghanistan



Note: Data from FY 2002 through FY 2007 are annual data, while data from FY 2008 through FY 2017 are averaged quarterly data. Data from FY 2002 through 2017 come from Congressional Research Service reports. Data from FY 2018 and FY 2019 come from the Brookings Institution, as no U.S. government data on U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan are publicly available for this period. Data from FY 2020 and FY 2021 come from public statements made by U.S. officials.

Source: SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014, pp. 226–227; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2021, pp. 172–173; U.S. Congressional Research Service, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Costs and Other Potential Issues,” R40682, July 2, 2009, p. 9; U.S. Congressional Research Service, “Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020,” R44116, updated February 22, 2021, pp. 7–8, 13–14; The Brookings Institution, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan,” August 2020, p. 5; Elizabeth McLaughlin, “Trump says ‘it is time’ for US troops to exit Afghanistan, undermining Taliban deal,” *ABC News*, May 27, 2020; White House, “Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan,” January 15, 2021.

(Figure from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*)

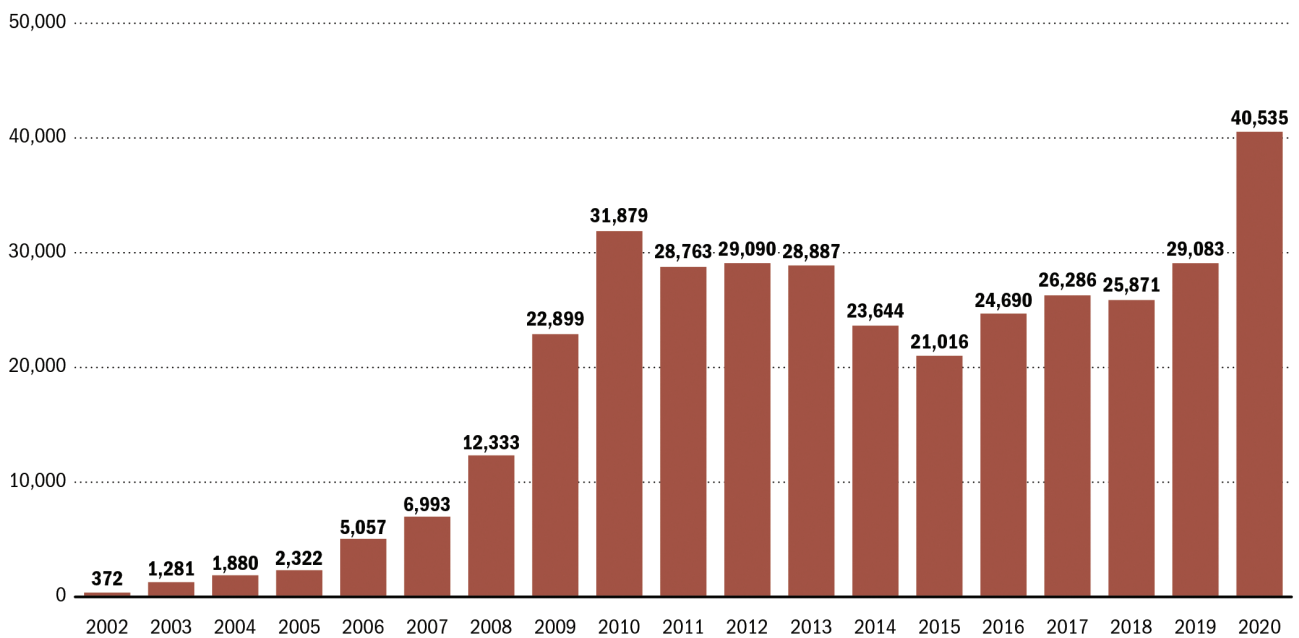
### Figure 3. U.S. Appropriations and Troop Levels in Afghanistan by Fiscal Year, 2002–2021

remained incomplete despite decades spent there. As in Vietnam, aside from major campaigns in 2010–2013, the enemy in Afghanistan retained the initiative (see figure 4, page 71). With few Western troops living among the population, intelligence assessments were often little more than speculation.<sup>58</sup> Rather than temper assessments, operating with opaque views of the enemy and unclear information, senior military leaders were free to select assessments that suited narratives of progress.

The military’s preference for information over understanding was years in the making. A plethora of

’90s-era technologies promised “information superiority,” which would simplify battlefield complexities. It was “Clausewitz out, computer in.”<sup>59</sup> But instead of a clear picture of battlefield and political realities, military leaders became overwhelmed with information. In the late ’90s, a prescient U.S. Army captain recognized as much: “In the mythical world created by the most devoted information age disciples, our enemies lie helpless before our forces while we, armed with complete and perfect information, dispatch them at our leisure. While such images are fun to contemplate, they are altogether unlikely.”<sup>60</sup> Instead, as McMaster explained,





Note: The chart reflects data on enemy-initiated attacks sourced from the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency for the years 2002 to 2009, and from the U.S. military headquarters in Afghanistan for the years 2010 to 2020. Defense Intelligence Agency data are generally derived from a larger number of sources and therefore captures more incidents, but these additional sources were not available for the full 19 years.

Source: Resolute Support, response to SIGAR data call, April 1, 2021, and June 12, 2021; Resolute Support, response to DOD OIG vetting, October 2019; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, response to SIGAR data call, April 2015.

(Figure from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*)

## Figure 4. Enemy-Initiated Attacks, 2002–2020

supposed omniscience can create intellectual “recidivism and resistance to changes.”<sup>61</sup>

Undoubtedly, the drone is the prototypical example of this technological bias. Interlinked, near-continuous battlefield observation via drones is a phenomenal achievement, but even this technology gave only snap shots or “soda straw” views. Drones too often replaced good analysis based on insightful local knowledge. A drone-centered, bombs-over-boots approach increased “kinetic” action at the cost of innocent lives (see figure 5, page 72).<sup>62</sup> Every errant airstrike eroded support for the Afghan government and Western troops. Faced with nighttime raids and often indiscriminate death from above, many Afghans found even brutal Taliban actors provided better governance than empty promises from Kabul.<sup>63</sup>

## The Military after Afghanistan?

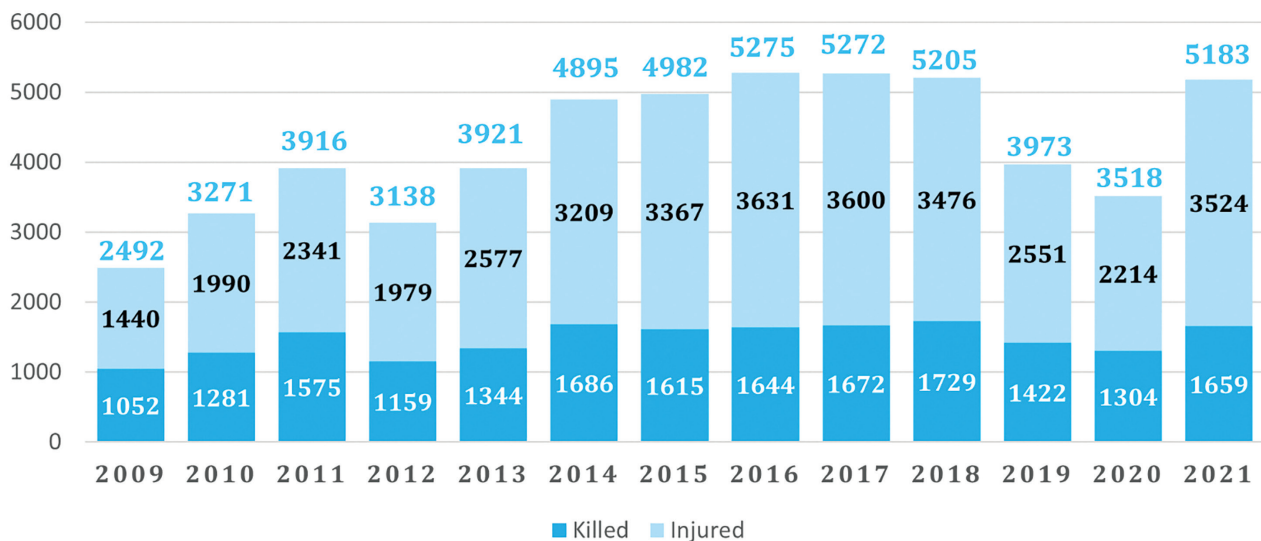
After Afghanistan, the military can retreat into cloistered corners, lamenting how the public and politicians failed them as the Army did after Vietnam.

Adopting a “stabbed in the back” mentality, however, is dangerous because, as Barno and Bensahel point out, a professional force “faces a greater risk than a conscript force of developing a belief that it is morally superior to the society it serves.”<sup>64</sup> Additionally, a distant military will increasingly be a political football as American politics becomes polarized. Military leaders should instead focus on three issues.

First, the military needs a renewed relationship with Congress, one that emphasizes honest discussions on the limits and utility of military power. One way to avoid trouble is for policy makers to better understand the means of getting into it. Scholar Hal Brands makes this point: “Expansion can create vulnerabilities that must be defended at a high price.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, accepting limits in some regions to ensure security elsewhere is good, rational policy. The clear prospect of budget cuts for the Army makes limits even more prudent.

Second, military leaders must rejuvenate the professional military ethic. As Wong and Gerrass show,

## TOTAL CIVILIAN CASUALTIES 1 JANUARY TO 30 JUNE 2009-2021



(Figure from United Nations, *Afghanistan 2021 Midyear Update on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*)

**Figure 5. Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan, 2009–2021**

perverse incentives can corrode institutions. Unclear goals and poor matching of ends to means can warp institutional values in ostensible service of the mission. Institutional honesty is paramount, especially if the military is to retain a position of trust with the American public. This requires both training and honest dialogue. Placing officers in ambiguous training scenarios tests their character and actions under pressure and fosters a culture of operating in environments characterized by uncertainty and limited resources. However, senior leaders and commanders at all levels must foster discussions about use of training time and be willing to accept “red” or “incomplete” marks on some tasks (nonessential training or otherwise). Discussion regarding the pressure officers felt to manipulate reports on Afghanistan is a good start.

Third, the military must reinvest in professional military education (PME). Much ink has been spilled on *training versus education* and whether PME is “rigorous” or even necessary.<sup>66</sup> But the failures of strategic assessment described above could have been ameliorated, or at least mitigated, by an officer corps predisposed to skeptical interrogation of the battlefield and implicit operational assumptions. Fundamentally, this involves

the crafts of research and writing. As scholar Eliot Cohen has argued, “More than one might think, sound foreign policy making rests on the basics of bureaucratic behavior: clear and concise memorandums, crisply run meetings, well-disseminated conclusions, succinct and unambiguous guidance from above. Good process does not guarantee good policy, but it increases the odds of it.”<sup>67</sup> Reinvigorating PME to emphasize writing, research, and making strategy toward limited ends using limited means is paramount.

More broadly, PME has not resolved the seemingly intractable problem of mistaking tactical ability for strategic success. Col. (ret.) Antulio J. Echevarria II argues that, despite twenty years of COIN (and perhaps because of it), the U.S. military still substitutes tactics for strategy. In his words, “[America’s military] assumes winning battles suffices to win wars.”<sup>68</sup> PME cannot fundamentally fix American political dysfunction or force policy makers to provide clear guidance. But PME can, however, create an officer corps that is endowed with the historical understanding to prompt better civil-military relations and explain the utility and limits of force. PME can prepare officers to discuss *political ramifications* and requirements of policy while nevertheless remaining *apolitical*.



Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid (center) addresses the media at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 13 August 2021. The Taliban joyously fired guns into the air and offered words of reconciliation on 31 August as they celebrated defeating the United States and returning to power after two decades of war that devastated Afghanistan. (Photo by Wakil Kohsar, Agence France-Presse)

No three steps alone can be simple panacea for the post-Afghanistan military. However, senior military leaders can move the institution forward nobly by learning from Afghanistan rather than blaming others. An honest assessment of the failures in policy,

doctrine, and execution seen over twenty years is vital—as is renewing the professional ethic so essential to a professional military culture and proper civil-military relations. The three areas described above can be a foundational start. ■

## Notes

1. H. R. McMaster, "Honor Veterans by Having the Will to Win a War," *Wall Street Journal* (website), 10 November 2021, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/honor-vets-the-will-to-win-war-military-service-veterans-day-afghanistan-taliban-mcmaster-11636576955>.

2. Jason Dempsey, "Coming to Terms with America's Undeniable Failure in Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, 11 February 2019, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/coming-to-terms-with-americas-undeniable-failure-in-afghanistan>.

3. Daniel Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), i.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Beatrice Heuser, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *Oxford World's Classics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

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