

Section II

Afghanistan and GWOT

Retrospective: Will We Forget?

The January-February 2023 edition of *Military Review* thematically commemorates the end of U.S. involvement in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) that is generally regarded as having commenced on 11 September 2001 with a terrorist attack on the United States and is generally considered to have ended with completion of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021. This section features articles derived from *Military Review's* 2022 DePuy Writing Competition that critically examine various dimensions of the Afghan conflict, some addressing unique issues not having been treated exhaustively in the professional literature thus far published. Just as significantly, this edition includes a selection of articles that thematically examine the relationship of the military as an institution to the civil-military political process overall in the direction and management of war, with particular focus on those aspects salient to explaining the unsatisfactory conclusion to the GWOT.

Among the more essential lessons that the U.S. military experience in the GWOT may teach future generations of military leaders that might find themselves in the process of becoming ensnared in so-called “low-intensity conflict” is that historically *counterinsurgency* is only possible under highly unusual circumstances, and that the mantra “winning the hearts and minds” can become an enticing delusion that political leaders as well as future military planners might carefully avoid using unless there is good reason to believe that it is even possible in a given situation. In Afghanistan, successive iterations of commanders and their planners largely ignorant of the culture and history of Afghanistan built their counterinsurgency campaigns over a twenty-year period, with only modest deviation, on achieving success by employing the chimerical concept of “winning hearts and minds.”

All such efforts were built on a stubbornly enduring assumption passed to each succeeding effort that it was possible to bribe the native groups overtime to set aside their historic, deeply entrenched ethnic differences and radically change their culture, traditions, and lifestyles with a combination of Western materialistic enticements together with a coerced effort to adopt Western methods of governance and socio-economic administration. As history now appears to attest, despite the best intentions, each iteration over the twenty-year duration of the conflict achieved the same failed results.

Whatever positive enduring influence the United States and its allies may have had on the peoples of Afghanistan over two decades using the hearts and minds approach is at present hard to discern. Rather, whatever positive effects the U.S. military presence appeared to be having at any given time in retrospect appears to have been minor in impact, short lasting, and very often counterproductive—many such efforts in the end producing additional popular resentment and multiplying enemies.

A third lesson learned is that much of the failure of the GWOT may be attributed to a lack of sophistication among the political class guiding the conflicts in areas of anthropology and sociology as they applied to the regions of the world in which they had mandated that wars be waged. Following the 9/11 attacks, the political class of the United States in general was in retrospect woefully ignorant not only of the political dynamics but the cultural and social dynamics of the societies against which they were about to declare war. Additionally, over the course of the conflict, the political class maintained a single-minded obsession for imposing Western liberalism on the countries in which we were waging war that colored and distorted a realistic

assessment of what was possible in societies with no history of liberalism or foundation for it. Consequently, the collective ignorance and hubris of the political class directing and managing the war precluded a good faith effort to understand the social and ethnic context of the enemies we were fighting, which in turn precluded any clear vision of what might actually be attainable in the GWOT. A dreary feature consistent throughout the period was that the political leadership seemingly did not care to listen, would not learn, and resisted change to policies even as obvious chains of errors in political judgment built on specious assumptions guiding the effort was leading to the needless loss of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars with little to show for it.

A fourth lesson, perhaps the one of greatest value to the rising generation of new leaders, may be that

after twenty years of prosecuting the GWOT, the Nation may actually be more vulnerable today to the type of large-scale terrorist attacks that originally precipitated the war while at the same much less secure from peer enemies—most notably China—that spent the same twenty years investing in improving its economy and advancing its military-related technologies in a wide variety of fields. If nothing else our Chinese adversary has shown a penchant for pragmatism that may well be worth emulating, placing its own national interests above everything else. This lesson might be perhaps the most useful if taken to heart by rising generations of young national leaders both in and out of the military as they weigh where in the future how to best invest both the Nation's treasure and lives in securing its interests. ■

—Editor

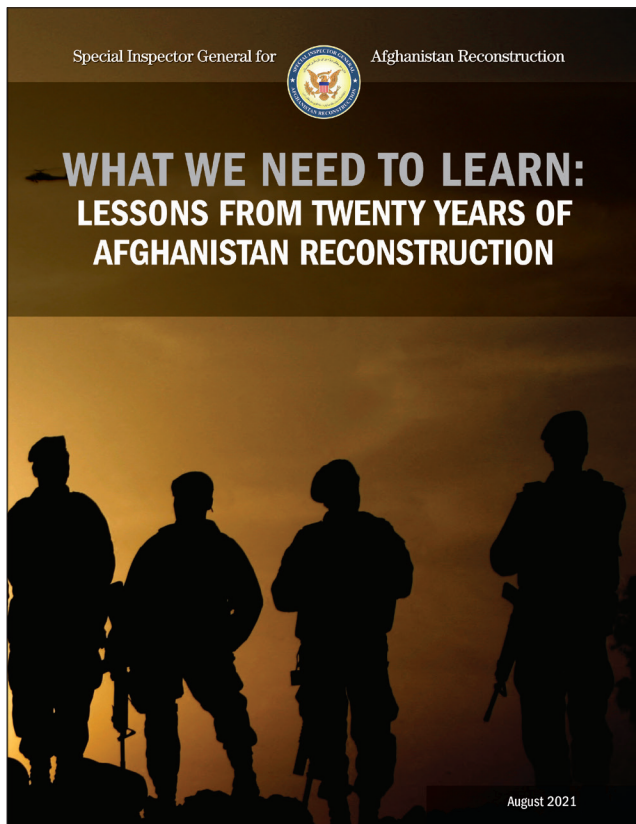


Soldiers assigned to the 10th Mountain Division stand security 15 August 2021 at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan. Soldiers and marines assisted the Department of State with an orderly drawdown of designated personnel in Afghanistan. (Photo by Sgt. Isaiah Campbell, U.S. Marine Corps)

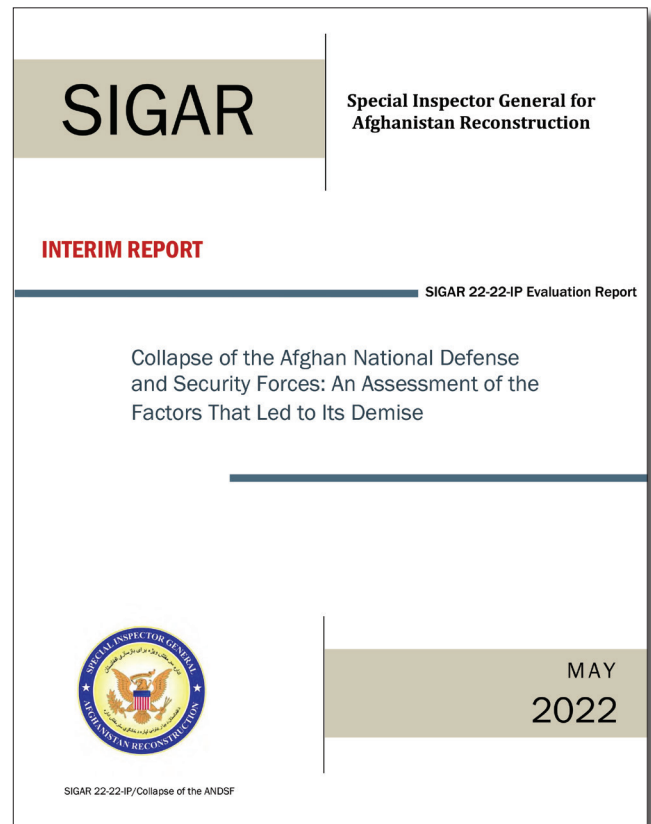
Military Review

Invites Your Attention to

The Special Inspector General reports noted below examine the past two decades of the U.S. assistance and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. They detail how the U.S. government struggled to develop a coherent strategy, to understand how long the stabilization missions would take and what would be required to ensure the projects were sustainable, to effectively staff the efforts with trained professionals, to negotiate the security challenges posed, to tailor efforts to the Afghan cultural and political context, and to understand the long-term impact of programs undertaken. The reports highlight certain bright spots but also reveal how the effort ultimately failed after spending twenty years and more than a trillion dollars trying to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan. Examining and implementing the programs initiated will be essential to identifying critical lessons to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse in future reconstruction missions elsewhere around the world, and mainly to save lives.



To view *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, visit <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/what-we-need-to-learn/index.html>.



To view *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that Led to Its Demise*, visit <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>.

Military Review

WE RECOMMEND

Haunted by Clausewitz's Ghost

Moral Forces in the Collapse of the Afghan Military

J. B. Potter

The under-resourcing of Afghanistan was much deeper and wider than even I thought. It wasn't just about troops. It was intellectually, it was strategically, it was physically, culturally.
—Adm. Michael Mullen

With the West looking east to Ukraine, the war in Afghanistan seems like an episode from the distant past. Though they may be a fading memory, the chaotic scenes of desperate Afghans swarming planes on the tarmac at Kabul Airport are not even a year and a half old. Nine months after the U.S. withdrawal, in May 2022, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR) issued an interim congressional report on the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Titled *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*, this seventy-page document concludes that “unless the U.S. government understands and accounts for what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how it went wrong in Afghanistan, it will likely repeat the same mistakes in the next conflict.” To learn from its twenty-year experience in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army should consult one of the oldest friends of its profession, Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831).

Ahead of his time, Clausewitz perceived that battlefields are decisively shaped by intangible moral forces. As a case study in this quintessentially

Clausewitzian idea, the end of the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that successful military operations and nation-building efforts must strike a balance between two approaches: war as a science and war as an art. By favoring the former over the latter, U.S. strategy in the Hindu Kush developed a major blind spot, one that the Taliban wasted no time exploiting when American troops withdrew. Because the art of war is the focal point of his writing, Clausewitz offers a perspective that was all too often neglected in U.S. policies toward Afghanistan.

Clausewitz's name is synonymous with his posthumously published magnum opus, the eight-part work *On War* (*Vom Kriege*). This tome is frequently boiled down to its most famous maxim: “War is simply the continuation of politics with other means.” This adage overshadows other ideas in the first chapter of the first book that are essential to the Prussians' theory of war. In the opening paragraphs, for instance, Clausewitz defines war as “an act of violence to force the enemy to do our will.” With competing wills grounding his reasoning, he later claims that any theory of war, in order to have real-world applications, “should also consider the

Next page: Afghan refugees crowd into a U.S. Air Force Globemaster III C-17 for evacuation from Kabul Airport in Afghanistan on 19 August 2021. The evacuation resulted from a rapid withdrawal of U.S. military forces and the subsequent takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban. The author contends that the United States failed in Afghanistan because U.S. strategists did not pay enough attention to the moral forces that are fundamental to the art of war. (Photos by Sgt. Arman Brandon Collier, U.S. Air Force.)



Haunted by Clausewitz's Ghost

Moral Forces in the Collapse of the Afghan Military

In this first place winner of *Military Review's* 2022 DePuy Writing Competition, J. B. Potter critiques the outcome of U.S. involvement in the twenty-year conflict fought in Afghanistan using the concepts of war outlined by Carl von Clausewitz in his master work *On War*. He asserts that a principal cause for strategic failure in Afghanistan was the overly mechanistic method U.S. strategists attempted in waging the conflict without due consideration of the underlying moral forces Clausewitz emphasized with regard to underpinning an enemy's motivation and resilience.

To view “Haunted by Clausewitz's Ghost” from the November-December 2022 edition of *Military Review*, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2022/Potter/>.