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What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

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ABSTRACT: Critics of the Afghan war have claimed it was always unwinnable. This article argues the war was unwinnable the way it was fought and posits an alternative based on the Afghan way of war and the US approach to counterinsurgency in El Salvador during the final decade of the Cold War. Respecting the political and military dictates of strategy could have made America's longest foreign war unnecessary and is a warning for the wars we will fight in the future.

Introduction: The Judgment of Failure

What went wrong in Afghanistan? Why did a nation predominant in all instruments of power, priding itself on winning its wars, lose to an inferior and unpopular extremist movement? This scenario was not the first time the United States blundered into misfortune under such circumstances. And it is unlikely to be the last. Self-inflicted defeat is a serious problem because there will be no guarantee of escaping consequences the next time, especially if we again ignore the basic dictates of strategy. For this reason, it is prudent to remember the wars we have fought may foreshadow the kind of wars we will fight in the future, even as the United States refocuses on great-power competition and the prospect of a major war.

The Afghan war is exceptionally well documented through authoritative histories, official reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, and social science research into the empirical problems of "proxy war."[1] Yet, lacking the agony of defeat, the loss in Afghanistan may well be forgotten.[2]

While military and civilian leaders voiced compelling reasons to continue in Afghanistan, despite the improbability of reversing the Taliban onslaught,

This article benefited enormously from comments by Kalev Sepp, Frank Hoffman, Bruce Hoffman, Emile Nakhleh, Carter Malkasian, and Hew Strachan.

1. Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (London: Vintage, 2017); Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021); and Eli Berman et al., *Deterrence with Proxies*, Minerva Research Initiative, research project, https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/Article/1699260/deterrence-with-proxies/.

2. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (NCTAUS), *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, official government ed. (Washington, DC: NCTAUS, 2004), https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-911REPORT.

they did not sway President Joseph Biden's belief that Afghanistan was no longer worth the cost, even if leaving meant risking a rise in terrorism and abandoning progress that had benefited so many Afghans. However dishonorable the endgame, the president's decision to withdraw on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 relieved the United States of a distraction from the increasing pressures of great-power competition, at least for the time being. Though the withdrawal seems an embarrassment in the short term, Eliot Cohen is right to note a long-term judgment of the Afghan war remains premature.[3] Unfortunately, it is not too soon to measure the immediate costs of strategic failure: approximately 2,324 American military deaths and $1 trillion expended, excluding the price tags of three dozen other coalition members; sanctioned violence that resulted in a grossly disproportionate body count on the order of 160,000 Afghans against the 2,996 people who died on 9/11; an overly ambitious democratic state-building project in shambles; Islamic extremists strengthened instead of weakened; and a vacuum in an unstable region left to be filled by adversarial parties such as China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia.[4]

To take stock of America's protracted commitment to this bloody, messy war, one criterion above all is indispensable—results. To what degree did the United States achieve its policy goals in Afghanistan? Proponents of withdrawal emphasize, no matter the contentious outcome, counterterrorist operations met the original aim of degrading al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations sufficiently and any recrudescence can now be handled from offshore. They argue, further, the war was always unwinnable and, in any case, continued involvement in combating the Taliban was futile. However compelling, these judgments insufficiently account for the policy, strategy, and performance deficiencies that yielded strategic failure. How accurately did US administrations conceive the nature and character of the war? Were alternatives to the chosen course of action considered? How timely were reassessment and adaptation? Were relations with allies and the partner government optimally managed? How effectively employed were the instruments of power? Did the United States act against its interests?

Another crucial issue regarding results is evident—failure was not inevitable. Afghans, no matter their shortfalls, are not to blame. The shock of 9/11 and the legacies of earlier wars forgotten or misremembered

3. Eliot A. Cohen, "Exit Strategy," *Atlantic*, April 13, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/exit-strategy/618590/.

4. US Department of Defense, *Casualty Status,* updated October 13, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf; "Costs of War," Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, updated October 15, 2021, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/; and United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), Reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA, 2008–21), https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports.

explain, but do not excuse, those in positions of authority who should have known better. The United States was not misled in Afghanistan but rather bears responsibility for its strategic myopia.

The Afghan War: Unwinnable—The Way It Was Fought

Although often overlooked, America's longest foreign war did not begin in 2001, but over 40 years ago as a war within the global Cold War. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, they became enmeshed in a creeping intervention to stabilize a communist revolution that confronted a rising Islamic backlash and was spinning out of control. While the United States levied a panoply of sanctions to punish Moscow, the only one to endure was President Jimmy Carter's authorization of covert action to arm the nascent mujahideen, whom Carter called "freedom fighters."[5] The mujahideen thrived with President Ronald Reagan and CIA Director Bill Casey's embrace of anti-communist insurgents and the largesse of "Charlie Wilson's War."[6] With Pakistan as the controlling agent, Saudi Arabia and other contributors matched the CIA program dollar for dollar and launched a parallel program to keep Islamic extremists—including Osama bin Laden—away from Mecca by helping them fight jihad in Afghanistan.[7] The mujahideen turned the Afghan war into the Soviet's "bleeding wound," compelled their withdrawal in 1989, and contributed to the bankruptcy and collapse of the Soviet system in 1991.[8]

The strategy imposed high costs on the Soviets. The costs to Afghans, however, were even more extreme: approximately five million refugees,

5. Zbigniew Brzezinski, to President Jimmy Carter, memorandum, December 26, 1979, document now declassified, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/docs_intervention_in_afghanistan_and_the_fall_of_detente/doc73.pdf; Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 142–43; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 288–330; and Vladimir Snegirev and Valery Samunin, *The Dead End: The Road to Afghanistan,* trans. and ed. Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcolm Byrne (Washington, DC: National Security Archive, 2012), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB396/.

6. George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003); and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret Story of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

7. Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015); and Kim Ghattas, *The Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry that Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 2, 71–90.

8. Mikhail Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986), 45; Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 316–18; CIA, *USSR: Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, special national intelligence estimate, March 24, 1988, document now declassified, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005564723.pdf; Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., *Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 1989: 20 Years Later* (Washington, DC: National Security Archive, 2009), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/; and Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979–89* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), x, 152.

one million dead, and civil war among the divisive mujahideen, who had no political project and were unprepared to govern. When US efforts to reconcile seven competing factions floundered, the United States abandoned Afghanistan.[9] The most devout among the mujahideen reformed themselves into the Taliban and, aided by Pakistan, campaigned to restore order to Afghanistan. They seized Kandahar as their religious center and then Kabul in September 1996. Declaring themselves an Islamic Emirate, they launched a brutal fundamentalist regime that governed by delivering a rough form of Sharia justice. They also welcomed the return of bin Laden.

The mujahideen had served America's purpose as anti-Soviet proxies, and no one at the time raised serious concerns regarding the risks of Islamic jihad. It would have required clairvoyance to see how these seeds of the Cold War would bear the poisonous fruit of terrorism in 2001. It was equally inconceivable the second US intervention in Afghanistan would—like the Soviets—flounder, dragging along dozens of coalition members and perpetuating another 20 years of Afghan tragedy. This unanticipated sum of contingencies should not obscure the central problem: Afghanistan was unwinnable—the way it was fought.[10]

Operation Enduring Freedom started well. The invasion of Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001, with just cause and clear aims as Commander in Chief George W. Bush had ordered: destroy al-Qaeda, which had attacked the United States on 9/11, and overthrow the Islamic Emirate, which had hosted them. As it had in the 1980s, the CIA took the lead with a small number of paramilitary operatives, alongside US and allied special operations forces, and directed airpower armed with precision-guided munitions to support allied Afghan ground forces in the north and south. By early December, they had routed al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It was a conventional victory achieved through unconventional means, but as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld proclaimed, it was not the triumph of a revolution in military affairs.[11]

Political-diplomatic action complemented military success. While air and ground operations proceeded, regional state representatives and other members of the international community, led by State Department troubleshooter James Dobbins, convened with a multiethnic, multifactional array of Afghans under

9. Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 336–52; and Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 243–66.

10. NCTAUS, *9/11 Commission Report*, 254–65; Bruce Hoffman, "The War on Terror 20 Years on: Crossroads or Cul-De-Sac?," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, March 18, 2021, https://institute.global/policy/war-terror-20-years-crossroads-or-cul-de-sac.

11. Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002); and Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2016).

UN auspices in Bonn, Germany.[12] During negotiations, they reconstituted Afghanistan as an Islamic Republic and endorsed American-anointed Hamid Karzai as its interim president. In this early phase, force and diplomacy succeeded by acting in harmony.

The model was not proxy war, but a joint venture in which, despite great asymmetries and wildly disparate cultures, international and Afghan partners shared resources, risks, and common interests—at least in principle.

After this venture, the way was lost. In December 2001, reluctance to concentrate available US forces in the mountains of Tora Bora enabled bin Laden to escape to Pakistan.[13] In March 2002, Operation Anaconda in the remote, cold, and high-altitude Shah-i-Khot Valley eliminated the final resisting concentrations of al-Qaeda and Taliban. The unexpectedly difficult and prolonged battle, however, foreshadowed the challenges of fighting an elusive and determined enemy in the arduous conditions of Afghanistan.[14]

On the political side, the joint venture quickly ran into trouble and never fully consolidated. Afghanistan's multiethnic Islamic population, with its fractious political clans and society corroded by warfare and misgovernment, paired poorly with the institutional and liberal transformation envisoned by Western state-building efforts. Despite meaningful progress, this mash-up produced the worst of both worlds: pervasive corruption fueled by billions of dollars of foreign aid; multiple actors—including the United States—vying simultaneously to constrain some warlords while patronizing others; and intractable friction between a half-conceived democracy stitched to a hyper-centralized state presided over by a president with quasi-monarchical prerogatives but limited authority.[15] By 2009, trust had eroded so deeply Ambassador Karl Eikenberry sent two highly classified cables addressed personally to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton containing a litany of complaints about America's Afghan partners and criticizing

12. James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008).

13. *Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get Bin Laden and Why It Matters Today: A Report to Members of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,* 111th Cong., 1st sess., Senate Print 111–35 (November 30, 2009), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-111SPRT53709/html/CPRT-111SPRT53709.htm; and Dalton Fury, *Kill Bin Laden: A Delta Force Commander's Account of the Hunt for the World's Most Wanted Man* (London: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009).

14. Adam Geibel, "Operation Anaconda, Shah-i-Khot Valley, Afghanistan, 2–10 March 2002," *Military Review* (May–June 2002): 72–77; Paul L. Hastert, "Operation Anaconda: Perception Meets Reality in the Hills of Afghanistan," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 1 (2005): 11–20; and Lester W. Grau and Dodge Billingsley, *Operation Anaconda: America's First Major Battle in Afghanistan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

15. Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Jonathan L. Lee, *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

President Karzai as "not an adequate strategic partner." When the cables leaked, they prompted analogies to what went wrong in Vietnam.[16]

Bringing order should have been an overriding priority; however, the strategic behavior of the United States became its source of instability. Behind affirmations of national interest and rational calculus, fear and passion drove the US response to 9/11. The so-called Global War on Terrorism was doubly misconceived—first, as an existential fight of good versus evil, and second, as a war against terror, which is a method rather than an enemy. With Americans rallying to avenge 9/11, the Bush administration funneled national purpose into a grand strategy of counterterrorism. Critically, American power concentrated this narrow and extrinsic interest initially on Afghanistan, where it conflated the Taliban with the hunt for al-Qaeda. The scheme to invade Iraq and bring democracy to the Middle East reduced Afghanistan to a secondary theater and inadvertently led allies creeping into not one but two quagmires.

Fixed on rooting out terrorists but leery of the "graveyard of empires" myth, US leaders disdained so-called nation building as a job for lesser powers.[17] British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government took the vanguard, attempting to merge military action with the liberal world order and convincing NATO to invoke its Article 5 collective defense clause for the first time.[18] While special operations forces fought the Global War on Terrorism, coalition countries joined the separate International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), signing up for remaining ad hoc tasks such as conducting armed development in Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Dragged reluctantly into it, the Bush administration acquiesced to investing in these wider undertakings; however, it persistently overestimated both the utility of force and America's ability to transform the nature of Afghanistan.[19]

Accidental Guerrillas and Accidental Counterinsurgents

One misconception led to another: al-Qaeda was defeated, its remnants on the run; the Taliban had ceased fighting, its emirate overthrown; the situation demanded stabilization. But bringing order to Afghanistan conflicted with

16. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972), 18–30; Karl W. Eikenberry, US ambassador to Afghanistan, to Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, "COIN Strategy: Civilian Concerns," November 2009, in "Ambassador Eikenberry's Cables on US Strategy in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 5, 2010; and Don Snow, "Watching Karzai, Seeing Diem," Atlantic Council, April 8, 2010, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/watching-karzai-seeing-diem/.

17. Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 125; and Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

18. Christopher L. Elliott, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89–92.

19. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Vintage Books, 2008); and James M. Dubik, *Accelerating Combat Power in Afghanistan*, report 2 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2009), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07878.

hunting terrorists. As foreign forces flowed in, they searched for combat. Most Pashtuns who sided with the Taliban had little sympathy for the Arabs of al-Qaeda or interest in international terrorism and tolerated the coalition because of their promise to end the chaos in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, all former and suspected Taliban became residual targets for indiscriminate coalition manhunting supported by ample airpower and assisted with mixed enthusiasm and motives by Afghan security forces and warlord militias. Thousands of Taliban suspects filled prisons in Afghanistan, and they—not al-Qaeda or other terrorists—became the largest category of prisoners at Guantanamo.[20] While rooting out fighters in the corners of Pashtun tribal lands, incidents such as serial bombings of wedding parties and government delegations led to tens of thousands of civilian casualties over the years.[21] Popular grievances grew, and the insurgency revived.

David Kilcullen coined a fitting aphorism: Afghans were accidental guerrillas, fighting foreign infidels because they happened to be in their space.[22] The same was true in reverse. The United States and its coalition partners became accidental counterinsurgents, fighting the Taliban for its support of al-Qaeda, which violated our space in the 9/11 attack. Viewed in this manner, the Afghan war, with one warrior culture attacking another, was literally an accident.

What, exactly, was fighting the Taliban expected to achieve? The mission became vague and open-ended but was prosecuted on an urgent timeline, confused with counterterrorism but intended somehow to build a stable and democratic Afghanistan by defeating insurgents who presented no direct threat to the United States and its partners. Neither was it clear how means matched ends: a fundamental source of strategic error. For the better part of two decades, ISAF struggled to hold the initiative, carrying out stabilization and reconstruction missions but never able to abandon combat operations. For most of that time, Afghanistan was an economy of force operation conducted to manage the war at low cost and sacrifice. Contradictorily, commanders and troops strove to assert control with extremely expensive combat power one valley and one *Groundhog Day* at a time while aspiring to win Afghan hearts and minds. In

20. *New York Times,* "The Guantánamo Docket," *New York Times*, updated October 14, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/guantanamo-bay-detainees.html.

21. UNAMA, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

22. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

fact, throughout most of the war what passed for strategy was reactive and amounted, as Hew Strachan explained, to a succession of operations.[23]

There were limits to the utility of force in what British General Rupert Smith called "war amongst the people."[24] Nonetheless, with the exception of Special Forces, this realization came slowly and very late. It took America until 2006 to recognize the Taliban had regrouped, and then another three years, including a presidential election followed by nearly a year of study and deliberation, before the United States adapted. In 2009, eight years into the war, General Stanley McChrystal issued his ISAF *Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance*, while General David Petraeus, who replaced McChrystal in 2010, had previously presided over the much-anticipated publication of *Counterinsurgency* Field Manual (FM) 3-24.[25] Their revised approach placed protecting the population ahead of firepower, derived from the lesson experience had taught the hard way: attrition is an insufficient strategy because killing and capturing provokes more insurgents. The *new* strategy, in fact, represented the belated revival of *Foreign Internal Defense* and *Internal Defense and Development*: US doctrines with pedigrees that predate World War II and the Cold War.[26]

With the Taliban rampant, however, there seemed little choice other than getting ahead of the curve by going big—the same purportedly miraculous strategy that had rescued Iraq from chaos in 2007.[27] In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced a surge that would bring combined US and coalition troops in Afghanistan to 130,000, along with a notional target of increasing Afghan security forces to 400,000.[28] For a brief period, force ratios and force employment aligned to reverse the deteriorating security situation. Not only was this escalation patently unsustainable, by declaring the surge would end in 18 months, Obama inadvertently created a strategic paradox. Everyone understood

23. Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (2010): 157–82.

24. Rupert Smith, "Interview with General Sir Rupert Smith," *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 864 (December 2006): 719–27.

25. Michael T. Hall and Stanley A. McChrystal, *ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance* (Washington, DC: NATO, 2009), https://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf; and *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24 /Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

26. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Foreign Internal Defense*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-22 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2021), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_22pa.pdf?ver=2018-10-10-112450-103; and US Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12–15 (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 1940).

27. William A. Knowlton Jr., *The Surge: General Petraeus and the Turnaround in Iraq* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010).

28. "President Obama on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," White House, December 1, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/president-obama-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan; US Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, a report prepared in accordance with the National Defense Authorization Act, June 2020, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF, 29; and Jens Stoltenberg, "Speech" (speech, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Lisbon, Portugal, October 11, 2021), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_187391.htm?selectedLocale=en.

what this decision meant. For ISAF, there would be no time to execute a conditions-based strategy.[29] Conversely, the Taliban knew it would suffer but merely had to wait for the preordained drawdown, which it did.

Although the US national security system appeared to work in Afghanistan, an astoundingly disconnected institutional apparatus left myriad contradictions unmanaged and magnified the complexities of the war.[30] Examples abound. Despite the prescriptions of FM 3-24, the US military was so oriented to warfighting even money became a "weapons system," while foreign aid fostered a corrupt and dependent rentier state.[31] Counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operated at cross-purposes, while illegal opium production remained the country's second-largest source of revenue, much of it flowing into Taliban coffers.[32] The United States paid handsomely for Pakistan's cooperation while lacking the leverage to stem its duplicitous support for the Taliban.[33] Organizationally, while the primacy of political strategy and whole of government was praised excessively, friction-filled bureaucratic politics persisted in Washington and Kabul. In the absence of unity of command, unity of effort was a second-best solution as military predominance, combined with an insurmountable lack of civilian capacity and authority, remained a source of civil-military estrangement.

Despite sincere intentions, the United States never did overcome the course initially set under George W. Bush. To America, Afghanistan remained Chinatown, a battlefield more than it ever was a nation.[34] Nothing symbolized this analogy more than the ISAF fortifications that encircled the country. As expedient as they were for protecting troops and serving as operational

29. Craig Whitlock, "At War with the Truth," in Whitlock, *Afghanistan Papers*.

30. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979); Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report RL30588 (Washington, DC: CRS, July 21, 2010); Todd Greentree, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 325–56; and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), https://www.sigar.mil.

31. *Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, handbook no. 09-27 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, April 2009); Scott Smith and Colin Cookman, eds., *State Strengthening in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned, 2001–14* (Washington, DC: US Institute for Peace, 2016); and Kate Clark, *The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering Inequality, Poverty and Lack of Democracy through the 'Rentier State' Lens,* special report (Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2020), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-causes-of-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/.

32. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Counterinsurgency, Counternarcotics, and Illicit Economies in Afghanistan: Lessons for State-Building," in *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization,* ed. Michael Miklaucic and Jacqueline Brewer (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), 189–209; and *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, June 2018), https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/counternarcotics/index.html.

33. Daniel Markey, "America's Perennial Pakistan Problem: Why Washington Failed to Win Over Islamabad—and Prevent a Taliban Victory," *Foreign Affairs*, September 9, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-09-09/americas-perennial-pakistan-problem.

34. Todd Greentree, "Triple Feature: A Letter from Kandahar," *American Interest* VI, no. 5 (May/June 2011): 110–16, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/05/01/triple-feature-a-letter-from-kandahar/.

platforms, these ubiquitous, cheap, and temporary Hesco bastions lacked the one message Afghans needed most—a sense of enduring commitment.[35] In the end, they were easier to abandon than they were to erect.

After a long flirtation with negotiations, the alibi for exit that ubiquitous Afghan-American middleman Zalmay Khalilzad finally achieved in February 2020 was profoundly deficient. The agreement legitimized the Taliban by dealing with its leaders directly, humiliated the government by excluding it, and committed the United States to full withdrawal on dubious Taliban promises to dissociate itself from al-Qaeda and hold national peace talks.

The uncritically accepted notion that Afghanistan, somehow, was an endless war is a fallacy. What drives effort, sacrifice, and duration in war is the perception of what is at stake.[36] All wars end; how they end matters most.[37] Exit is not war termination, and negotiated withdrawal is not negotiated peace. These are matters of strategic choice. Three presidential administrations—Bush, Obama, and Trump—wished to lower the stakes in Afghanistan but did not. The Biden administration finally did so decisively. Withdrawal, accompanied by rapid government collapse and Taliban victory in the summer of 2021, was merely the culmination.

Afghanistan: The Small COIN Option

Could Afghanistan have been a success instead of a failure? An option to Big COIN was certainly available. But, like the lessons of Vietnam, this option was forgotten in the diversion to counterterrorism, except in the collective memory of Special Forces and a few others.[38] In the accidental creeping counterinsurgency early on, small COIN was never seriously considered. There is no guarantee it would have worked in Afghanistan, but there was a precedent.

El Salvador in the 1980s was the single major US commitment to counterinsurgency between Vietnam and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The intervention was bloody, messy, and controversial, but it succeeded. Admittedly, this conclusion has long been disputed on the grounds that a decade of US support to the Armed Forces of El Salvador was insufficient to defeat

35. David Betz, "Citadels and Marching Forts: How Non-Technological Drivers Are Pointing Future Warfare towards Techniques from the Past," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 17, 2019): 33–34, https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.25.

36. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1973), 92.

37. Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

38. Linda Robinson, "How Afghanization Can Work," Council on Foreign Relations, December 2, 2011, https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/how-afghanization-can-work; H-Diplo, "Forum 9 on 'What Have We Learned? Lessons from Afghanistan & Iraq,'" H-Diplo/ISSF, July 8, 2015, https://issforum.org/forums/lessons-afghanistan-iraq-2; and Todd Greentree, "The Accidental Counterinsurgents: U.S. Performance in Afghanistan," in *Learning the Lessons of Modern War,* ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 157–78.

the insurgents of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, along with El Salvador's record of searing human rights violations and low-quality governance.[39] Nevertheless, to judge by results, the stalemate between the Armed Forces of El Salvador and Latin America's toughest guerrilla army proved sufficient to achieve US policy aims—Soviet/Cuban-backed communism was contained, and democracy took hold.

More than chance links the wars in El Salvador to Afghanistan. In the late 1970s, both countries spiraled into violent instability and became gray-zone cauldrons of the global Cold War.[40] At the same time the Carter administration began arming the Afghan mujahideen, it also laid the foundation of US support for insurgency and counterinsurgency in Central America. Reagan embraced and expanded the approach, even though the Iran-Contra scandal nearly wrecked his second term, while George H. W. Bush sustained it for over a decade with consistent strategy until the Cold War ended.[41]

The origin was the victory of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua over US-client dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July 1979. Secured with Fidel Castro's active support, the party's victory was America's first failure to contain communist-backed revolution in Latin America since Cuba in 1959. Neighboring El Salvador, on fire with leftist insurrection and rightist repression, was the next Marxist-Leninist target. To avoid another loss in Central America, the Carter administration took advantage of a reformist coup in October 1979 to forge an uneasy partnership between the Salvadoran armed forces and the Christian Democrat Party with the aim of building a democratic center where none had survived before. The new government offered change, but state terrorism sponsored by government security forces and right-wing extremists also did its job, as the death squads eliminated revolutionaries and sowed fear among the population. By 1981, the war had morphed into a protracted insurgency. For the next three years, it was a close-run thing. What made the difference was US commitment to a political-military strategy, dubbed "reform with repression," in which counterinsurgency

39. Andrew J. Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador*, special report (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1988); Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 217–88; and Ryan T. Baker, "El Salvador, 1979–92: Revisiting Success," in Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*, 137–58.

40. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1985); Westad, *Global Cold War*; Robert Strausz-Hupé et al., *Protracted Conflict: A Challenging Study of Communist Strategy* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1959); Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 8, 2018): 30–47; and Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

41. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Todd Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008).

complemented and reinforced state-building.[42] The joint venture between Americans and Salvadorans was hardly friction free and, compared with arming insurgent proxies, required entirely different types of responsibility and trust.

The tragedy of Vietnam was still fresh in the minds of the American public and armed forces and proved a major strategic constraint. Aversion to casualties and the prospect of another quagmire made it politically imperative that containing Soviet-backed expansion in the Western Hemisphere be pursued at the lowest possible level of cost and risk. On succeeding Carter in January 1981, Reagan's first foreign policy crisis was El Salvador. To secure support, the new administration reached an agreement with Congress to limit the Special Forces to 55 trainers. So sensitive was the issue that, on March 3, in Reagan's first television interview as president, Walter Cronkite's first question was, "Do you see any parallel in our committing advisers and military assistance to El Salvador and the early stages of our involvement in Vietnam?"[43] Despite fears to the contrary, Reagan assured the public he had no intention of sending US troops into combat in Central America. This was America's bright redline.

Counterinsurgency in El Salvador was more than a matter of keeping US boots off the ground. Small COIN substituted economy of force for combat power by focusing on training and assisting the Armed Forces of El Salvador.[44] By the mid-1980s, successive elections attracted strong popular turnouts, even in contested areas, and the performance of the Salvadoran Army gradually improved.[45] Concern in the United States relaxed as it became evident the situation had roughly stabilized.

Victory—in fact, any form of war termination—was no more a goal in Central America than it was in Afghanistan. After all, the Cold War was open-ended. Although El Salvador remained a source of controversy in Congress, with escalation off the table and ground troops absent, the Reagan and Bush administrations had sufficient means to manage US intervention for the duration of the conflict. By the time of the Soviet demise, authentic negotiations were underway between Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front insurgents and the Salvadoran government. With the signing of

42. William M. LeoGrande and Carla Anne Robbins, "Oligarchs and Officers: The Crisis in El Salvador," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 5 (Summer 1980): 1084–1103.

43. "Excerpts from an Interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, March 3, 1981, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/excerpts-interview-walter-cronkite-cbs-news.

44. Fred F. Woerner, *Report of the El Salvador Military Strategy Assistance Team, 1981,* document now declassified, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nsa/DOCUMENT/930325.htm; and T. E. Lawrence, Article 15, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin,* August 20, 1917.

45. Michael Childress, *The Effectiveness of U.S. Training Efforts in Internal Defense and Development: The Cases of El Salvador and Honduras* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1995), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR250.html.

the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992, the war ended definitively. The Salvadoran civil war was protracted, but it was not endless.

Afghanistan: The Afghan Way of War

In association with considering the Small COIN option, an alternative course of action is available and raises the possibility America's longest war was unnecessary altogether. Such a counterfactual idea based on pure speculation would court skepticism and be of little value. In Afghanistan, however, not only did a concrete option exist, it was proposed for decision at the time but summarily rejected.

By mid-November 2001, the Taliban had signaled the fall of their emirate by abandoning Kabul. Mullah Omar—amīr al-mu'minīn, the Taliban's commander of the faithful—fled from Kandahar to Pakistan. This culminating point of victory, married to the formation of a new government in Bonn, should have led to war termination but regrettably did not.

As coalition forces searched for enemies and followed the American way of war, something else was happening. In accord with the very different Afghan way of war, thousands of Taliban, ranging from erstwhile cabinet ministers to young recruits, had ceased fighting and were streaming in to swear fealty to the winning side.[46] Karzai's fledgling government was prepared to agree not to punish them; they would be welcome to resettle in their communities while enjoying benefits such as keeping their AK-47s for protection and receiving help to reunify family members residing in Pakistan. Nearly all Taliban were Pashtun; in seeking to negotiate, they were recognizing the authority of their new leader, Hamid Karzai, who shared their Islamic identity and possessed traditional legitimacy, both as a Southern Pashtun aristocrat from the Popalzai tribe and by virtue of his consensual endorsement by *loya jirga* in Bonn.

Karzai had a long association with the Taliban. Even though they had assassinated his father in 1999 and had tried to kill him just weeks earlier, he called them "my brothers."[47] However unfathomable this reconciliation may have been to Westerners, it fit the fluid pragmatism of Afghan politics and was strategic. The intent was to pacify and separate

46. Robert Warburton, *Eighteen Years in the Khyber, 1879–1898* (London: John Murray, 1900); and Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011).

47. Bette Dam, *A Man and a Motorcycle: How Hamid Karzai Became Afghanistan's President* (Utrecht, NL: Ipso Facto Publishers, 2014); and Hamid Karzai, "We Afghans Are Just Being Used against Each Other," interview by Susanne Koelbl, *Spiegel International*, May 22, 2021, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-afghanistan-president-hamid-karzai-we-afghans-are-just-being-used-against-each-other-a-81412b96-c7e5-4287-b423-fbc2b600f317.

them from their Pakistani patrons while consolidating Karzai's leadership and establishing a basis to stabilize Afghanistan. Once the Taliban dispersed to their communities across southern and eastern Afghanistan, only limited security forces would be needed to ensure their loyalty and prevent them from reconstituting, even if some hardcore leaders remained on the other side of the border and continued to enjoy sponsorship from Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence, the ISI.[48]

In December 2001, however, when Karzai and other Afghans advocated inviting a few Taliban representatives (vetted for their willingness to reconcile) to the Bonn conference, the Bush administration, along with non-Pashtuns from the Northern Alliance, vetoed the idea.[49] Seasoned UN negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi would later call this act the "original sin."[50] US leaders were simply unprepared to comprehend how magnanimity after victory could be the best way to terminate the war and bring order to Afghanistan. Instead, the CIA and special operations forces and willing Afghan partners set about killing or capturing the Taliban, thus provoking an insurgency where none had existed.[51]

Had this course of action been adopted, an entirely different set of strategic circumstances may very well have evolved. As reprehensible as the Taliban were, they had been defeated. They were not the enemy; al-Qaeda was. Even while counterterrorist operations continued, the United States and its allies should have focused on restoring order, training, and assisting Afghan security forces with more sustainable numbers, perhaps 50,000, while standing in the way of interference from Pakistan. We should have listened to the Afghans; it was their war to finish. Instead, by taking over, the United States caught the whirlwind. As Clausewitz observed, "in war too small an effort can result not just in failure, but in positive harm."[52] The same is true of excessive force unwisely applied.

48. Author communications with Karzai family and allies in connection with duties as director of Strategic Initiatives Group, Regional Command – South, 2010–11.

49. Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 157–58; James Dobbins, "Afghanistan Was Lost Long Ago: Defeat Wasn't Inevitable, but Early Mistakes Made Success Unlikely," *Foreign Affairs*, August 30, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-30/afghanistan-was-lost-long-ago.

50. Lakhdar Brahimi, Mary Sack, and Cyrus Samii, "An Interview with Lakhdar Brahimi," *Journal of International Affairs* 58, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 244.

51. Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007); Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, trans. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2011); Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014); and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001–2018* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019).

52. Michael Handel, "Corbett, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu," *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 106–24.

Conclusion—A Failure of Judgment

Strategic failure in the Afghan war was not a case of how the weak win, but how the strong lose.[53] It was neither preordained nor a matter of chance. The United States took over because it could. Notwithstanding the urgency of combating terrorism, making war on the Taliban was a failure of judgment and not in the national interest.[54] Once again, the core of the problem was the long-attested and largely disregarded overmilitarization of American foreign policy.[55] Small COIN using the El Salvador model, which balanced political and military strategies while keeping US troops out of combat, could have avoided an unnecessary war. It was worth a try. The warning is specific—if one finds oneself accidentally fighting Big COIN, it is too late.

If the US military was the instrument of failure, the error was misconceiving the situation in Afghanistan and ignoring the basic dictates of strategy. Here, responsibility lies with key US decisionmakers who believed they were masters of a technology-driven revolution in military affairs endowed with boundless power to reshape the nature of war. This hubris, combined with the panic of 9/11 and the opening of a new theater in Iraq, explains but does not excuse their folly. They should have known better. Unconstrained by the political imperative that kept combat forces out of El Salvador, and like the US leaders, who with heedless arrogance, delivered disaster in Vietnam, they may have been brilliant, but they behaved as fools.[56] Next time, we can and we must do better.

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53. Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof, eds., *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 400.

54. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

55. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, 38–40; George F. Kennan, *The Kennan Diaries*, ed. Frank Costigliola (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 742; and Robert Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy: The United States Must Recover the Full Range of Its Power," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (July/August 2020): 121–32.

56. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).