

Five Infuriating Takeaways From the 'Afghanistan Papers'

After an extensive [investigation](#) and a three-year long Freedom of Information Act legal battle, *The Washington Post* released a trove of documents entitled the Afghanistan Papers Monday, and there's a staggering amount of infuriating information contained therein.

The trove comes from a project entitled "Lessons Learned" commissioned by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR.) As part of the project, SIGAR staff interviewed over 600 people with firsthand knowledge of the war, including generals, diplomats, aid workers, and Afghan officials.

There's over two thousand pages of previously unpublished documents and notes from interviews showing that the U.S. government deliberately misled Americans about the progress of the war in Afghanistan and proffered misleading and dishonest claims that senior officials knew were untrue. The title "Afghanistan Papers" is an unflattering nod by *The Washington Post* to [the Pentagon Papers](#), which exposed the lies by the government in the Vietnam War.

1) The government suppressed its own "Lessons Learned"

Probably the biggest unintentional irony is the Pentagon's title for the project: "Lessons Learned." "The \$11 million project was meant to diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan so the United States would not repeat the mistakes the next time it invaded a country or tried to rebuild a shattered one," reports *The Washington Post*.

Instead, the witnesses' first-hand accounts and unvarnished truths were suppressed for years. SIGAR instead published documents "written in dense bureaucratic prose and focused on

an alphabet soup of government initiatives” leaving “out the harshest and most frank criticisms from the interviews.” The only reason these accounts are seeing the light of day is because the *Post* was able to withstand years of legal battle – which continues – as the U.S. District Court has yet to rule that the public has a right to know which public officials misled the American people on the war. The paper decided to publish in the meantime.

2) Staggering Amount of Money Wasted

Perhaps the most outrageous takeaway is the untold sums wasted in the war:

*One unidentified contractor told government interviewers he was expected to dole out \$3 million daily for projects in a single Afghan district roughly the size of a U.S. county. He once asked a visiting congressman whether the lawmaker could responsibly spend that kind of money back home: “He said h[***] no. ‘Well, sir, that’s what you just obligated us to spend and I’m doing it for communities that live in mud huts with no windows.’?”*

Three million dollars. A day. In one Afghan district.

The United States allocated more than \$133 billion to build Afghanistan – more than was spent, in inflation adjusted dollars, on the Marshall Plan, which encompassed all of Western Europe after World War II. After World War II, the Marshall Plan helped reconstitute well-developed first-world countries. The best estimates say over a trillion has been spent so far on the war in total. What do we have to show for it?

An unnamed executive from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is quoted in the article saying that he guessed 90 percent of what was spent was wasted: “We lost objectivity. We were given money, told to spend it and we did,

without reason.”

3) Who are the ‘Bad Guys’?

Officials repeatedly acknowledge in “Lessons Learned” that with so many competing agendas in Washington, it was like having no real war strategy at all.

Fundamental disagreements went unresolved. Some U.S. officials wanted to use the war to turn Afghanistan into a democracy. Others wanted to transform Afghan culture and elevate women’s rights. Still others wanted to reshape the regional balance of power among Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia.

‘With the AfPak strategy there was a present under the Christmas tree for everyone,’ an unidentified U.S. official told government interviewers in 2015. ‘By the time you were finished you had so many priorities and aspirations it was like no strategy at all.’

This made it easy for warlords and kleptocrats to exploit the huge U.S. cash infusion for their own purposes. U.S. officials publicly denounced the historic levels of corruption, but privately tolerated it.

Christopher Kolenda, an Army colonel who deployed to Afghanistan several times and advised three U.S. generals in charge of the war, said that the Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai had [“self-organized into a kleptocracy”](#) by 2006 – and that U.S. officials failed to recognize the lethal threat it posed to their strategy.

“Our biggest single project, sadly and inadvertently, of course, may have been the development of mass corruption,” said former U.S. ambassador Ryan Crocker, the top U.S. diplomat in Kabul in 2002 and from 2011 to 2012. Crocker sat for two interviews that yielded 95 transcribed pages. He

added, "Once it gets to the level I saw, when I was out there, it's somewhere between unbelievably hard and outright impossible to fix it."

The single most salient challenge for U.S. military commanders, however, was the struggle to articulate who they were fighting, or why. From the article:

Was al-Qaeda the enemy, or the Taliban? Was Pakistan a friend or an adversary? What about the Islamic State and the bewildering array of foreign jihadists, let alone the warlords on the CIA's payroll? According to the documents, the U.S. government never settled on an answer.

As a result, in the field, U.S. troops often couldn't tell friend from foe.

'They thought I was going to come to them with a map to show them where the good guys and bad guys live,' an unnamed former adviser to an Army Special Forces team told government interviewers in 2017. 'It took several conversations for them to understand that I did not have that information in my hands. At first, they just kept asking: "But who are the bad guys, where are they?"'

The view wasn't any clearer from the Pentagon.

'I have no visibility into who the bad guys are,' Rumsfeld complained in a Sept. 8, 2003 memo.

No one seems to have seriously questioned whether the U.S. should have invaded Afghanistan while possessing a foreign policy that only has room for "bad guys" and "good guys."

4) It was all fake news, lies and spin

[In response to a 2017 FOIA lawsuit filed by the National Security Archive](#), the Pentagon began reviewing and releasing hundreds of pages of previously classified memos about the

Afghan war dictated by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld between 2001 and 2006 – often called his “snowflakes.” The Archive shared the snowflakes with *The Post*, and together with the SIGAR interviews, they comprise a damning account of the ways officials kept Americans in the dark about what was transpiring in Afghanistan.

While Rumsfeld privately foresaw many of the problems that would continue to haunt the U.S. military over a decade later, he publicly scoffed at the idea that the war had turned into a “quagmire.”

In one note he wrote to several generals and senior aides:

“I may be impatient. In fact I know I’m a bit impatient. We are never going to get the U.S. military out of Afghanistan unless we take care to see that there is something going on that will provide the stability that will be necessary for us to leave. Help!”

That memo was dated April 17, 2002, just six months after the war started.

That wasn’t the face he showed publicly however.

In fact, the documents show Rumsfeld’s blessing on numerous tactics U.S. military officials used, borrowed from Vietnam, to manipulate public opinion.

These high-pressure tactics to spin the narrative so that any news, no matter how dire, would read as good news, continued unabated under Obama.

A person identified only as a senior National Security Council official said there was constant pressure from the Obama White House and Pentagon to produce figures to show the troop surge of 2009 to 2011 was working, despite hard evidence to the contrary.

‘It was impossible to create good metrics. We tried using

troop numbers trained, violence levels, control of territory and none of it painted an accurate picture,' the senior NSC official told government interviewers in 2016. 'The metrics were always manipulated for the duration of the war.'

Even when casualty counts and other figures looked bad, the senior NSC official said, the White House and Pentagon would spin them to the point of absurdity. Suicide bombings in Kabul were portrayed as a sign of the Taliban's desperation, that the insurgents were too weak to engage in direct combat. Meanwhile, a rise in U.S. troop deaths was cited as proof that American forces were taking the fight to the enemy.

'From the ambassadors down to the low level, [they all say] we are doing a great job,' Michael Flynn, a retired three-star Army general, told government interviewers in 2015. 'Really? So if we are doing such a great job, why does it feel like we are losing?'

Bob Crowley, a retired Army colonel who served as a counterinsurgency adviser in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers that at military headquarters in Kabul, "bad news was often stifled" because "the truth was rarely welcome."

"There was more freedom to share bad news if it was small—we're running over kids with our MRAPs [armored vehicles] —because those things could be changed with policy directives," he said. "But when we tried to air larger strategic concerns about the willingness, capacity or corruption of the Afghan government, it was clear it wasn't welcome."

Military officials would create color-coded charts proclaiming their positive achievements, devoting an "inordinate amount of resources" to the endeavor, said John Garofano, a Naval War College strategist who advised Marines in Helmand province in 2011.

“They had a really expensive machine that would print the really large pieces of paper like in a print shop,” he said. “There would be a caveat that these are not actually scientific figures, or this is not a scientific process behind this.”

But it didn’t matter that the process wasn’t scientific, because no one bothered to question the numbers behind the charts anyway.

5) Eighteen Years In, two parties responsible, no one accountable

After 18 years, encompassing three presidential administrations from both parties, no one has been held accountable for the vast U.S. taxpayer dollars – not to mention, blood, sweat, and tears – wasted on an exercise for a purpose that even the principle players seem unable to identify.

These papers show a clear attempt to mislead and deceive the American people about the extent of the administrative and bureaucratic waste and incompetence that was occurring. What these interviews reveal is mind-blowing; that no one has been unaccountable is criminal.

—

This [article](#) has been republished with permission from The American Conservative.

[Image Credit: Flickr-The U.S. Army, [CC BY 2.0](#)]