

After a three-year legal battle, the Washington Post won the release of thousands of US government documents pertaining to the war in Afghanistan. These documents reveal that senior US officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.

- The documents released full of quotes questioning what the US was doing in Afghanistan and how they were doing it.
  - “We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan - we didn’t know what we were doing” Douglas Lute, a three-star Army general who served as the White House’s Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama administrations told government interviewers in 2015.
    - He added: “What are we trying to do here? We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking.”
  - Lute went as far as to blame the deaths of US military personnel on bureaucratic incompetence among Congress, the Pentagon, and the State Department by saying, “If the American people knew the magnitude of this dysfunction... 2,4000 lives lost... Who will say this was in vain?”
- Since 2001, more than 775,000 US troops have deployed to Afghanistan, many repeatedly. Of those, 2,300 died there and 20,589 were wounded in action according to Defense Department figures.
- The US government has not carried out a comprehensive accounting of how much it has spent on the war in Afghanistan, but the costs are staggering.
  - Since 2001, the Defense Department, State Department, and US Agency for International Development have spent or appropriated between \$934 billion and \$978 billion, according to an inflation-adjusted estimate by Neta Crawford, a political science professor and co-director of the Costs of War Projects at Brown University.
    - These figures don’t include money spent by other agencies including the CIA and the Department of Veterans Affairs.
  - The US has allocated more than \$133 billion to build up Afghanistan - more than it spent, adjusted for inflation, to revive the whole of Western Europe with the Marshall Plan after WWII.
  - Jeffrey Eggers, a retired SEAL and White House staffer under Bush and Obama told government interviewers, “What did we get for this \$1 trillion effort? What is worth \$1 trillion?” He added, “After the killing of Osama bin Laden, I said that Osama was probably laughing in his watery grave considering how much we have spent on Afghanistan.”
- The documents also contradict public statements from US presidents, military commanders, and diplomats who assured Americans year after year that they were making progress in Afghanistan and the war was worth fighting. Several of those interviewed described explicit and sustained efforts by the government to deliberately mislead the public.

- Interviewees said it was common at military headquarters in Kabul - and at the White House - to distort statistics to make it appear the US was winning the war when that was not the case.
- Bob Crowley, an Army colonel told interviewers, “Every data point was altered to present the best possible picture. Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable but reinforced that everything we were doing was right and we became a self-licking ice cream cone.”
- The interviews that were released are the byproduct of a project led by John Sopko, the head of the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Known as SIGAR, the agency was created by Congress in 2008 to investigate waste and fraud in the war zone.
  - In 2014, at Sopko’s direction, SIGAR departed from its usual mission of performing audits and launched a side venture. Titled, “Lessons Learned”, the \$11 million projects were meant to diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan. The Lessons Learned staff interviewed more than 600 people with firsthand experience in the war. SIGAR has published seven Lessons Learned reports since 2016 that highlight problems in Afghanistan.
  - The Washington Post had to twice sue SIGAR in federal court to compel it to release the documents.
- Throughout the interviews are torrents of criticism that refute the official narrative of the war, from its earliest days through the start of the Trump administration.
  - At the outset, the US invasion of Afghanistan had a clear, stated objective - to retaliate against al-Qaeda and prevent a repeat of 9/11. Yet the interviews show that as the war dragged on, the goals and mission kept changing and a lack of faith in the US strategy took root throughout the government.
  - Some US officials wanted to use the war to turn Afghanistan into a democracy. Others wanted to transform Afghan culture and elevate women’s rights, and others wanted to reshape the regional balance of power among Pakistan, India, Iran, and Russia.
    - An unidentified US official told interviewers in 2015, “With the AfPak strategy there was a present under the Christmas tree for everyone. By the time you were finished you had so many priorities and aspirations it was like no strategy at all.”
- The Lessons Learned interviews also showed how US military commanders struggled to articulate who they were fighting and why. In the field, US troops couldn’t tell friends from the enemy.
  - “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 US government never settled on an answer.
  - An unnamed former adviser to an Army Special Forces team told interviewers in 2017, “They thought I was going to come to them with a map to show them where the good guys and bad guys live. 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?’”

- In a 2003 memo, Donald Rumsfeld wrote, “I have no visibility into who the bad guys are. We are woefully deficient in human intelligence.”
- As commanders in chief, Bush, Obama, and Trump all promised the public the same thing, they would avoid falling into the trap of “nation-building” in Afghanistan.
  - “Our policy was to create a strong central government which was idiotic because Afghanistan does not have a history of a strong central government. The timeframe for creating a strong central government is 100 years, which we didn’t have.” told an unidentified former State Department official to interviewers in 2015.
  - One unnamed executive with USAID guessed that 90% of what they spent was overkill: “We lost objectivity. We were given money, told to spend it and we did, without reason.”
  - 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 US county. He once asked a visiting congressman whether the lawmaker could responsibly spend that kind of money back home: “He said hell 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.’”
  - By allowing corruption to fester, US officials told interviewers, they helped destroy the popular legitimacy of the Afghan government they were fighting to prop up. With judges and police chiefs and bureaucrats extorting bribes, many Afghans soured on democracy and turned to the Taliban to enforce order.
    - One official told interviewers, “Our biggest single project, sadly and inadvertently, of course, may have been the development of mass corruption. Once it gets to the level I say, when I was out there, it’s somewhere between unbelievably hard and outright impossible to fix it.”
- For years US generals have said in public they are making steady progress on the central goal of their strategy: to train an Afghan army and national police force that can defend the country without foreign help.
  - In Lessons Learned interviews, however, US military trainers described the Afghan security forces as incompetent, unmotivated and rife with deserters. They also accused Afghan commanders of pocketing salaries - paid by US taxpayers - for tens of thousands of “ghost soldiers.”
  - More than 60,000 members of Afghan security forces have been killed.
  - One unidentified US soldier said Special Forces teams “hated” the Afghan polices whom they worked with, calling them “awful - the bottom of the barrel in the country that is already at the bottom of the barrel.”
  - A US military officer estimated that ⅓ of police recruits were “drug addicts or Taliban.”
  - “Thinking we could build the military that fast and that well was insane,” an unnamed senior USAID official told interviewers.

- Since 2001, an estimated 157,000 people have been killed in the war in Afghanistan.
  - 64,124 Afghan security forces
  - 43,074 Afghan civilians
  - 42,100 Taliban fighters and other insurgents
  - 3,814 US contractors
  - 2,300 US military personnel
  - 1,145 NATO and coalition troops
  - 424 Humanitarian aid workers
  - 67 Journalists and media workers
- 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 metrics were always manipulated for the duration of the war.”
  - 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. A rise in US troop deaths was cited as proof that American forces were taking the fight to the enemy.
  - The NSC official told interviewers, “It was their explanations. For example, attacks are getting worse? ‘That’s because there are more targets for them to fire at, so more attacks are a false indicator of instability.’ Then, three months later, attacks are still getting worse? ‘It’s because the Taliban are getting desperate, so it’s actually an indicator that we’re winning,’”
- Bob Crowley, a retired Army colonel told interviewers that “truth was rarely welcome” at military headquarters in Kabul.
  - “Bad news was often stifled. There was more freedom to share bad news if it was small - we’re running over kids with our MRAPs - because those things could be changed with policy directives. 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.”
- Joshua Cho wrote a piece for FAIR examining what the Afghan Papers say about the Washington Post and other media outlets. Cho wrote:
  - “If the Post is now publishing material demonstrating that US officials have been ‘following the same talking points for 18 years,’ emphasizing how they are ‘making progress,’ especially when the war is going badly, shouldn’t the paper acknowledge that it has been cheerleading this same line for all of those 18 years? Doesn’t it have a responsibility to examine how it served as a primary vehicle for those officials to spread these same ‘talking points’ to spin the coverage in the desired fashion?”

- A FAIR survey of the Washington Post's op-ed pages for three weeks following 9/11 found that columns calling for or assuming a military response to the attacks were given the majority of space while opinions urging diplomatic approaches were nearly nonexistent.
  - Eight years later, FAIR found that the Washington Post's coverage didn't change much from 2001, as 7 out of 9 op-eds and 4 out of 5 editorials supported some kind of military escalation from the day Obama was elected through March 1, 2009, as talks of a military surge escalated.
  - Another study of the first ten months of the Washington Post's opinion columns that same year found that pro-war columns outnumbered antiwar columns by more than 10:1. Of 67 columns on US military policy in Afghanistan, 61 supported a continued war, while just 6 expressed antiwar views.
- Joshua Cho continued to write, "The Post offered this lopsided coverage even though there were several polls at the time showing a majority of the US public opposed the war because they believed that the Afghan War was 'not worth fighting.' The Post also has a history of facilitating official spin for the war. When WikiLeaks posted tens of thousands of classified intelligence documents related to the Afghanistan War, FAIR found that the Post either dismissed them as not being as important as the Pentagon Papers or absurdly spun the leaks as good news for the US war effort because the 'release could compel President Obama to explain more forcefully the war's importance.'"
- "The Post also buried attempts by whistleblowers and other journalists who were working to expose official lies and war crimes in Afghanistan. When US Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning was sentenced to serve 35 years in prison for sharing intelligence documents that first exposed what the 'Afghanistan Papers' are now corroborating, the Post, along with other corporate outlets, largely neglected Manning's legal trials and punishment."
- Political cartoonist and journalist Ted Rall wrote:
  - "'The Afghanistan Papers' is a bright, shining lie by omission. Yes, our military and civilian leaders lied to us about Afghanistan. But they could never have spread their murderous BS - thousands of US soldiers and tens of thousands of Afghans killed, trillions of dollars wasted - without media organizations like the Washington Post, which served as unquestioning government stenographers. Press outlets like the Post and New York Times weren't merely idiots used to disseminate pro-war propaganda. They actively censored people who knew we never should have gone into Afghanistan and tried to tell American voters the truth."

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