



# The Afghanistan Assumptions Project

Center for Strategic Studies



# For Want of a Nail: The Flawed Assumptions That Drove Twenty Years of US Engagement in Afghanistan

Michael Cohen, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic Studies, Fletcher School, Tufts University; Columnist, MSNBC and the *Daily Beast*

Christopher Preble, Ph.D., Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic Studies, Fletcher School, Tufts University and Senior Fellow and Director of the Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program at the Stimson Center

Monica Duffy Toft, Ph.D., Director, Center for Strategic Studies, Professor of International Politics, Fletcher School, Tufts University

June 1, 2023

This paper is the first in a series that investigates a core set of assumptions that underpinned America's twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan. It was prepared for the first Afghanistan Assumptions Workshop with our Expert Steering Committee on February 10, 2023. We would like to thank the generous support from the Charles Koch Foundation, Michael J. Zak, the Stimson Center, and the Center for Strategic Studies. Excellent research assistance was provided by Cassandra Cronin, Ariel Daniels, Jeff Polidor, and Syed Abdul Ahad Wasim.

## Executive Summary

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers commandeered four US commercial jetliners. Two of the planes crashed into the World Trade Center. Another struck the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and a fourth plane plunged into the ground in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In just a matter of hours, more than 2,977 innocents were killed—and America was fundamentally transformed.

9/11 was more than just a national tragedy. It marked the beginning of the Global War on Terror against al Qaeda—the organization that perpetrated the attacks—and any countries or groups allied with it. The conflict would reorient American foreign policy and send US troops to far-flung battlefields around the world.

On October 7, less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, US planes began hitting targets in Afghanistan, which was ruled by the Taliban and had been a safe haven for al Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. By early December, and with a minimal application of US military force, the Taliban government had been toppled. Al Qaeda lost its safe haven, and its members fled the battlefield.

Following the Taliban's ouster, the United States left behind a small force to take out Taliban stragglers and continue the hunt for bin Laden and his followers. The mission expanded to include assisting the new Afghan government—and the US troop presence eventually grew to over 100,000. As US troops finally prepared to depart the country in August 2021, Taliban insurgents quickly swept aside the US-backed government, which had been the recipient of billions of dollars of US assistance over two decades. The US mission had ended in humiliating failure.

This paper argues that the seeds of this failure were planted in those first few weeks after September 11.

- First, from the initial hours after the 9/11 attacks, US leaders assumed that the use of American military force in Afghanistan was unavoidable and even desirable. From September 11 until the initiation of hostilities on October 7, 2001, the Bush administration set out a clear and consistent path toward war in Afghanistan and largely rejected diplomacy or political negotiations. That pattern of favoring military over political solutions would continue for most of the war. By the time the United States shifted course and reconsidered its opposition to negotiating with the Taliban, it had surrendered its leverage for creating a better outcome for Afghanistan and its people.
- Second, beginning only hours after the 9/11 attacks, US officials treated Afghanistan as an abstraction, informed by simplistic and untested assumptions about Afghan politics, culture, and history. As the first of what US leaders expected would be many theaters for combating global terrorism, Afghanistan was seen as a venue for demonstrating American resolve rather than an independent country with unique characteristics. As a result, the United States failed to make key distinctions, including differentiating between the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Instead, the two organizations—despite their very different origins and character—were often conflated and treated as if they shared similar interests and objectives.

- Third, Bush administration officials assumed they could alter Pakistan’s strategic calculus pertaining to Afghanistan. They repeatedly glossed over the fact that Pakistan’s interests did not align with those of the United States. As a result, for the next two decades, Pakistan would often undermine US efforts in Afghanistan.
- Fourth, fearful of entanglement in a long-term nation-building project, US government officials assumed they could conduct the Afghanistan mission on the cheap, fob off responsibilities to others, and quickly wash their hands of the country. The United States set broad goals for the war on terrorism—and for the post-Taliban mission in Afghanistan—while failing to deploy commensurate resources and bureaucratic attention to achieve its objectives.

Above all else, however, US officials—in particular, President George W. Bush—framed the 9/11 attacks and the US response to them in simplistic, black-and-white language. In Bush’s narrative, America’s enemies were akin to Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union and, in effect, were therefore irredeemable. Within a strategic framework that treated states that harbored terrorist groups as no different from the terrorists themselves, in the administration’s view the Taliban became an implacable enemy that could have no place in Afghanistan’s political future. And by conflating the Taliban with al Qaeda, Bush significantly raised the political stakes for any US president to walk away from Afghanistan until the Taliban had been not merely defeated but thoroughly eradicated, incapable of ever vying for a role in Afghan society.

Bush’s approach to Afghanistan—and the assumptions that informed his judgment—limited strategic options, precluded political or diplomatic solutions, and created a policy straitjacket from which future administrations struggled to extricate themselves. Anyone tempted to consider alternatives to an open-ended war was deterred by fear of domestic political costs and damage to their reputation.

As the authors of this paper show, these assumptions and beliefs, forged in the initial, uncertain weeks after 9/11—and informed by anxiety, fear, sorrow, and a burning desire for vengeance—played a disproportionate role in US decision-making toward Afghanistan and set the US mission there on a path that ended in catastrophic failure.

## Cast of Characters

Mahmud Ahmed	Pakistan Intelligence Chief
Richard Armitage	US Deputy Secretary of State, 2001–2005
Thomas Barfield	Afghanistan Expert, Professor of Anthropology, Boston University
Joe Biden	United States Senator from Delaware; Vice President of the United States, 2009–2017; 46th President of the United States, 2021–Present
Osama bin Laden	Leader of al Qaeda Terrorist Organization
Tony Blair	British Prime Minister, 1997–2007
Lakhdar Brahimi	UN Special Representative to Afghanistan 2001–2004
George W. Bush	43rd President of the United States
Andrew Card	White House Chief of Staff, 2001–2006
Wendy Chamberlin	US Ambassador to Pakistan, 2001–2002
Dick Cheney	Vice President of the United States, 2001–2009
Hank Crumpton	CIA Intelligence Officer, 1981–2007
James Dobbins	American Diplomat, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
Mohammed Fahim	Afghan Politician, Defense Minister under the Afghan Transitional Administration
Tommy Franks	General in the US Army, Commander of Central Command
Al Gore	Presidential Candidate during 2000 US Presidential Election
Todd Greentree	Foreign Service Officer, Provided Lessons Learned Interview
Robert Grenier	CIA Station Chief in Islamabad, Pakistan, 2001; Author
Marc Grossman	Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, 2001–2005
Richard Haass	Director of Policy Planning, US Department of State, 2001–2003

Colonel Imam	One-Star-Rank Army General in the Pakistan Army [nickname for Sultan Amir Tarar]
Hamid Karzai	Afghan Statesman, Fourth President of Afghanistan, 2002–2014
Zalmay Khalilzad	US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Diplomat
Carter Malkasian	Historian, Former Advisor to American Military Commanders in Afghanistan
Ahmad Shah Massoud	Afghan Political and Military Commander, Minister of Defense 1992–2001
Pervez Musharraf	President of Pakistan, 2001–2008
Mullah Omar	Taliban Supreme Leader of Afghanistan 1996–2001
Colin Powell	US Secretary of State, 2001–2005
Ahmed Rashid	Pakistani Journalist, Author of <i>Descent Into Chaos</i>
Condoleezza Rice	US National Security Advisor, 2001–2005
Barnett Rubin	American Political Scientist, Leading Expert on Afghanistan
Donald Rumsfeld	US Secretary of Defense, 1975–1977, 2001–2006
King Zahir Shah	Last King of Afghanistan, served from 1933–1973
George Tenet	Director of Central Intelligence, 1997–2004
Paul Wolfowitz	Deputy Secretary of Defense, 2001–2005
Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef	Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan

## For Want of a Nail: The Flawed Assumptions That Drove Twenty Years of US Engagement in Afghanistan

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers with the terrorist group al Qaeda commandeered four US commercial jetliners. Their nationalities reflected both al Qaeda's origins and its evolution. Fifteen of the hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of al Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden. Their leader, Mohammed Atta, like al Qaeda's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, was Egyptian. Two others hailed from the United Arab Emirates, and another from Lebanon. Two of the planes crashed into the World Trade Center, toppling both the North and South Towers. Another struck the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and, after a passenger revolt, a fourth plane plunged into the ground in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all on board. More than 2,977 innocents were killed in just a matter of hours on a clear, blue-skyed late summer morning.

Few Americans had firsthand memories of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, but though the attacks on New York City and in Washington, DC, claimed a comparable number of lives, they were of a very different character. First, nearly all of the victims of the 9/11 attacks were civilians. Second, the attacks were televised. The searing images of iconic structures that had been reduced to dust and of ordinary Americans at the iconic "Windows of the World" restaurant, clad in business attire, jumping thousands of feet to their deaths were replayed countless times in the ensuing days and weeks, deepening the sense of horror and loss.

And dread. For though the United States had experienced acts of terrorism before, including the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, these incidents paled in comparison to the scope and audacity of the 9/11 attacks. Americans understandably imagined that they, or their loved ones, might be next. As the *New York Times* editorial page observed the next day, "If four planes can be taken over simultaneously by suicidal hijackers, then we can never be quite sure again that any bad intention can be thwarted, no matter how irrational or loathsome." "Everything [had] changed," the *Times*' editors concluded.<sup>1</sup> What happened on 9/11 was not merely a few acts of terrorism in distant cities; it was an attack on the entire country.

Over the next several weeks and months, and pushed along by similar emotions—anxiety, fear, sorrow, and a burning desire for vengeance—Bush administration officials made a series of policy decisions that would shape not only the immediate US response to the attacks but also the next two decades of American foreign policy. Nowhere was that more true than in Afghanistan, where less than a month after 9/11, US planes launched a series of bombing strikes that would lead to twenty years of costly US military and political engagement. All told, according to figures compiled by the Costs of War Project, the US war in Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of more than 176,000 persons, including 7,391 US military personnel, US contractors, and other allied troops. That figure also includes 69,095 Afghan security forces (military and police), and an estimated 46,000 Afghan civilians killed, along with 52,893 opposition fighters. The United States would spend more than

---

1 "The War Against America; An Unfathomable Attack." *Opinion, New York Times*, September 12, 2001, 26. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/opinion/the-war-against-america-an-unfathomable-attack.html>.



\$2.3 trillion over the next nearly twenty years, with future costs (including veterans care and interest payments on money borrowed) expected to total many hundreds of millions more.<sup>2</sup>

Formulated in those initial, uncertain weeks after 9/11, US decisions were guided by a set of assumptions about al Qaeda, terrorism, the Taliban, Afghanistan, and America's image in the world. Indeed, four throughlines of US involvement in Afghanistan were cemented in those early days in the fall of 2001.

First, from the initial hours after the 9/11 attacks, US leaders believed that the use of American military force in Afghanistan was unavoidable and even a preferred outcome. From September 11 until the initiation of hostilities on October 7, 2001, the Bush administration set out a clear and consistent path toward war in Afghanistan and largely rejected the path of diplomacy or political negotiations.

Second, US officials treated Afghanistan as an abstraction. As the first of what US leaders expected would be many theaters for combating global terrorism, Afghanistan was seen as a venue for demonstrating American resolve rather than an independent country with unique politics, culture, and history. As a result, the United States failed to make key distinctions, including differentiating between the Taliban and al Qaeda. Instead, both organizations were often conflated and treated as if they shared similar interests and objectives.

Third, Bush administration officials believed they could alter Pakistan's strategic calculus pertaining to Afghanistan. They repeatedly glossed over the fact that Pakistan's interests did not align with those of the United States. As a result, Pakistan would often undermine US efforts in Afghanistan for the next two decades.

Fourth, fearful of entanglement in a long-term nation-building project, US government officials believed they could carry out the Afghanistan mission on the cheap, fob off responsibilities to others and quickly wash their hands of the country. The United States set broad goals for the war on terrorism—and for the post-Taliban mission in Afghanistan—while failing to deploy commensurate resources and bureaucratic attention to achieve its objectives.

Above all else, however, US officials and, in particular, President George W. Bush, framed the 9/11 attacks and the US response to them in simplistic, black-and-white language that limited strategic options, precluded most political or diplomatic solutions, and created a policy straitjacket from which future administrations struggled to extricate themselves for fear of domestic political costs and reputational damage. The overarching assumption, reached within hours of the 9/11 attacks, was that a war between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan was necessary. The paradox is that within a matter of months the United States had defeated the Taliban and routed al Qaeda, but Washington had failed to fully recognize and effectively capitalize on that initial victory.

---

<sup>2</sup> "Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the US War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," *Costs of War*, Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, (August 2021), <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

## The “Inevitability” of War

President Bush’s framing of the conflict began in the moments after he was notified of the 9/11 attacks while seated in an elementary school classroom in Sarasota, Florida. In his memoir, *Decision Points*, Bush writes that when White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card whispered in his ear about a second plane hitting the World Trade Center, he determined that “someone had dared attack America” and “they were going to pay.” “My blood was boiling,” he wrote. “We were going to find out who did this, and kick their ass.”<sup>3</sup> When he found out soon after that a third plane had crashed into the Pentagon, it was a “declaration of war.”

Bush’s language is perhaps unsurprising. Attacks like those on 9/11 would generally be considered a declaration of war. But al Qaeda was not a nation-state. It was a global terrorist organization that, while enjoying a safe haven in Afghanistan, had loosely affiliated cells and members throughout the world. Al Qaeda had attacked US targets before—the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen—but these earlier attacks never achieved the level of death and destruction of 9/11 and did not take place on US soil.

Thus, in addition to laying the groundwork for the use of US military force, Bush’s words signaled a notable policy shift.

Up to this point the United States had largely treated al Qaeda’s terrorist attacks as law enforcement matters to be handled by the criminal justice system. Prosecutions of al Qaeda terrorists responsible for the embassy bombings—as well as others who had plotted attacks against US targets—took place in American courts and the guilty were incarcerated in American prisons. Bush’s initial impulse to treat the attacks as an act of war and insist that “somebody’s going to pay” dramatically shifted US counterterrorism strategy from law enforcement to the Department of Defense and put the country on an immediate war footing.

Of even greater importance, however, was the way the president described the attacks to the American people. Speaking at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana on the morning of 9/11, Bush said, “Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended. Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.”<sup>4</sup>

That evening, in an Oval Office address, Bush made another crucial rhetorical decision: he conflated the terrorists responsible for the attack with the countries who had provided them with a safe harbor. “We will make no distinction,” he said, “between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, Kindle Edition (New York: Crown, 2010), 127-128.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush. “Remarks by the President Upon Arrival at Barksdale Air Force Base.” Transcript of speech delivered at Barksdale Air Force Base, Barksdale, Louisiana, September 11, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-1.html>.

<sup>5</sup> George W. Bush. “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.” Transcript of speech delivered at the Oval Office, Washington, DC, September 11, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

The next day, after a press availability following a meeting with his national security team, Bush continued on the same theme. “This enemy attacked not just our people but all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world.” He continued, “The freedom-loving nations of the world stand by our side. This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.”<sup>6</sup>

On September 14, speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, Bush said the American people’s “responsibility to history” was clear, “to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” America, Bush said, is “peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger” and pledged that while the conflict was begun by others, “it will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing.”<sup>7</sup>

On that same day, Bush traveled to Ground Zero and, in perhaps his most memorable public utterances after the attacks, told rescue workers searching for victims in the wreckage of the World Trade Center, “I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people—and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!”<sup>8</sup>

The tenor of Bush’s rhetoric left little doubt that the United States would wage war against al Qaeda—and that such a war would be one of vengeance as much as an effort to protect Americans from future attacks.

This early commitment to war constrained diplomatic options. There would be no effort to initiate negotiations with the Taliban and no half-measures were seriously considered, including the expulsion of bin Laden from Afghanistan or having him turned over to a third country.

On September 20, Bush confirmed the US position in an address to a joint session of Congress. This was Bush’s first major conversation with the American people about the attacks and one that allowed him to explain what had happened on September 11—and the appropriate US response.

With an estimated 82 million Americans watching, Bush weaved the disparate threads of his initial comments after the attacks into a seamless and easy-to-grasp narrative that would define the US war on terrorism for the next two decades.<sup>9</sup>

At the outset, Bush said al Qaeda’s grievance had nothing to do with America’s actions, but rather what the country represented. “They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government,” said Bush. “They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of

---

<sup>6</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President In Photo Opportunity with the National Security Team,” Transcript of speech delivered at the Cabinet Room, September 12, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-4.html>.

<sup>7</sup> George W. Bush, “President’s Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance,” Transcript of speech delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington DC, September 14, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-2.html>.

<sup>8</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Salutes Heroes in New York,” Transcript of speech delivered at Intersection of Murray Street and West Street, New York, New York, September 14, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-9.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “82 Million Tune in to Bush Speech,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-sep-22-mn-48552-story.html>.

speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other . . . These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life.”<sup>10</sup>

America was, according to Bush’s narrative, not facing a normal or recognizable enemy. The terrorist group and its followers, he said, were “heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century” and “they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.” Their goal, said Bush, “is remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.” Accordingly, he explained, “This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

In perhaps the speech’s most memorable passage, Bush put the world—allies and enemies alike — on notice. “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make,” he warned. “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Bush delivered an ultimatum to the Taliban: “Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats, and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.”<sup>13</sup>

Bush made clear that anything less than the Taliban’s unconditional compliance with these demands would be unacceptable. “The Taliban must act, and act immediately,” he said. “They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.”<sup>14</sup>

For Bush, the response to 9/11 would also be a test of the American people’s resolve and character. “Our nation, this generation,” said Bush “will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.” For a country repeatedly told that America’s “greatest generation” had selflessly and courageously defeated fascism in World War II (the Tom Brokaw book of the same name came out in May 2001), the idea that the 9/11 attacks represented an opportunity to replicate such a triumph probably resonated with a generation of Americans who had come of age in an era of plenty.

Bush’s September 20 speech, his martial tone, and uncompromising, Manichean language (aided by the outsized microphone provided by the presidential bully pulpit), became the prism through which the American people viewed the war on terrorism, and in turn the war in Afghanistan. Although

---

<sup>10</sup> George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Transcript of speech delivered at the United States Capitol, Washington, DC, September 20, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

intended to “reassure Americans” and unify the country around a shared sense of ideals and purpose, Bush's words would, in time, offer no escape from a perpetual war on global terrorism.<sup>15</sup>

In Bush's telling, America had been attacked not because of any actions or fault of its own, but because of its most laudatory attributes—and the terrorists were on par with Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union—therefore, in the administration's view, America's enemies were, in effect, irredeemable. No quarter could be given to them, no path other than vigilance could protect America's security, and the only suitable outcome for the terrorists was elimination. By depicting the war on terrorism as a long twilight struggle between good and evil, Bush enshrined a binary framework for understanding the US war on terrorism: as a result, the administration's frame made it more difficult to contemplate alternate political paths in Afghanistan—including political compromise with the Taliban—both for his administration and future ones.<sup>16</sup>

By treating terrorists and states that harbored terrorist groups as one and the same, the Taliban became, by definition, an implacable enemy that could have no place in Afghanistan's political future.

By portraying terrorism as an existential threat to America and Americans' freedom—and conflating the Taliban with al Qaeda—Bush effectively precluded himself, or any of his successors from ever walking away from Afghanistan. Doing so, short of al Qaeda and the Taliban's defeat, would risk its falling back into the hands of both.

With the Global War on Terrorism as the focal point of American foreign policy, discrete security and regional concerns of nominal allies, like Pakistan, became secondary to the larger priority of fighting terrorism—and US leaders too willingly accepted the idea that they could ameliorate those worries.

In short, Bush's war-framing created a path dependency that limited options for present and future leaders—and, as the authors of this paper will show, ultimately doomed the US effort in Afghanistan.

---

<sup>15</sup> John M. Murphy, “Our Mission and Our Moment.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 607-32, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939868#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939868#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>16</sup> John F. Kennedy. 1961. “Inaugural Address.” Transcript of speech delivered at the US Capitol, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>.

## Afghanistan as Abstraction

When the September 11 attacks occurred, the United States was the largest humanitarian aid donor to Afghanistan and had, as recently as 1999, launched a series of cruise-missile strikes against the landlocked country in pursuit of Osama bin Laden. In addition, US officials had consistently portrayed al Qaeda, which enjoyed a safe haven in Afghanistan, as a significant national security threat to the United States.

Despite these ongoing policy concerns, the US national security bureaucracy was bereft of useful intelligence or information about Afghanistan. None of the key members of Bush’s national security team had any experience with the country or the region as a whole. Few understood the country’s politics or culture, and most were working off assumptions gleaned from the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and the country’s reputation as the “graveyard of empires.”

At the US State Department, the team responsible for coordinating Afghanistan policy, led by Richard Haass, director of Policy Planning, was cobbled together from bureaucrats with issue and regional area expertise elsewhere. The Pentagon had done no contingency planning for using force in Afghanistan—and had to devise a military strategy from scratch.<sup>17</sup>

The noted Afghanistan expert Thomas Barfield would later write, “It proved difficult to explain Afghanistan and its politics to those who took an interest in it only after 2001. Tired clichés passed as insights, and few policymakers thought of consulting any Afghans who could not speak English.”<sup>18</sup> Richard Haass, who worked on Afghanistan at the State Department in 2001 and previously as a member of the National Security Council in the George H. W. Bush administration said, when it comes to Afghanistan, “People have more prejudices than knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>

The lack of knowledge and interest in Afghan politics led the Bush administration officials to view Afghanistan—and its fractured politics—almost solely through the prism of counterterrorism.

In his speech to the nation on the evening of September 11, for example, Bush had directly conflated the Taliban and al Qaeda. He reiterated the point at the first National Security Council meeting that took place after the speech. “We have made the decision,” he told top administration officials, “to punish whoever harbors terrorists, not just the perpetrators.”<sup>20</sup>

Although such a conflation can be explained in the context of seeking to punish and deter nonstate actors, the Bush administration made the linking of terrorists and those that harbored them a defining element of US policy, post-9/11. Indeed, the combining of these two groups was hardly a new phenomenon. According to Robert Grenier, the CIA bureau chief in Pakistan and a key actor in

<sup>17</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition, July 1, 2003), 25, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Haass, interview by authors, Zoom audio and video, April 26, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, 31. Notably, the decision to lump states that provided terrorist safe haven with the terrorists themselves was not preceded by debate within the administration. Indeed, the statement had been included in Bush’s speech by his speechwriters, with no input from Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had spent the day traveling back from Peru.

the US war against the Taliban, officials at the National Counterterrorism Center would regularly send out documents, before September 11, that hyphenated the Taliban and al Qaeda.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the policy apparatus of the national security bureaucracy quickly followed Bush's lead. On September 14, 2001, the State Department issued internal guidance that called for giving the Taliban 24-48 hours to comply with a series of demands, including, "turn over UBL [Osama bin Laden] and all his associates responsible for terrorist attacks against the US, tell us everything they know about UBL and his Al Qaida associates, including their whereabouts, resources, plans for future terrorist acts, and access to WMD [weapons of mass destruction] materials," and "close immediately all terrorist training camps and expel all terrorists."<sup>22</sup>

While the memo outlined three possible responses, it considered the most likely to be a Taliban refusal to cooperate. Anticipating "the Taliban's political and military opposition," the document called for "an international effort aimed at capturing UBL and destroying his infrastructure." If the Taliban failed to comply, the United States would "begin to work with our friends and allies to remove the Taliban leadership from power."<sup>23</sup>

The Bush administration went through the motions of offering the Taliban leadership an escape hatch from war, but it was clear from the outset that few believed such an approach would work — or was even worth pursuing. In her memoirs, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote that in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, "We all knew that the outcome would be a declaration of war against the Taliban and an invasion of Afghanistan."<sup>24</sup> According to Haass, "Considering what had happened and what could happen again there was no real patience for negotiation that would get us halfway to what we were looking for. What people wanted were immediate results." In language befitting the moment and national attitude, Haass said, "What had happened was so traumatic and awful. The word unacceptable gets thrown around a lot but what happened on 9/11 was unacceptable." In his view, within the administration "there was a disinclination to compromise with the Taliban."<sup>25</sup>

Defenders of the Bush administration's approach in Afghanistan argue—not without evidence—that it was the Taliban that showed little interest in a peaceful resolution to US demands, thus making war inevitable.

It is certainly true that members of the Taliban, particularly the group's leader, Mullah Omar, were deeply resistant to turning over bin Laden—and most evidence suggests they were unaware of the 9/11 plot before it occurred (they initially joined the international community in publicly condemning the attacks). The Taliban and al Qaeda had struck a mutually beneficial alliance. The Taliban provided refuge to bin Laden and his followers after they were expelled from Sudan in 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Grenier, interview by authors, Zoom audio and video, March 24, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> United States Department of State, "Gameplan for Polimil Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan," Compiled by Sharon E. Ahmad. Washington, DC, 2001, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc06.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> United States Department of State, "Gameplan for Polimil Strategy."

<sup>24</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 83.

<sup>25</sup> Haass, interview.

In return, al Qaeda provided upwards of \$10-20 million a year to the Taliban, and its fighters served as shock troops in the Taliban's war against the Northern Alliance.<sup>26</sup>

In the week after the 9/11 attacks—and before the US public ultimatum from President Bush—Omar convened a *loya jirga* of several hundred Islamic scholars to advise him on what to do with bin Laden. The group told Mullah Omar that while it was incumbent upon him to protect a guest like bin Laden, that a “guest should not cause his host problems,” thus the terrorist leaders should have been asked to leave the country voluntarily.<sup>27</sup> Omar, however, was unmoved. Rejecting the jirga's counsel, he declared that he would neither turn over bin Laden nor ask him to leave. As Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn—two researchers who extensively interviewed Taliban officials and members—have concluded, Omar was already convinced that America's true aim was to topple the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan (a view reinforced in Taliban circles when in August 1998 the United States fired more than sixty cruise missiles at al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan as retaliation to the twin terrorist attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania) On September 25, Omar said of the United States “what they want in Afghanistan . . . is to end [the] Islamic system, create chaos and install a pro-American government here.” Moreover, he placed significant weight on the attitudes of the Muslim world and feared that handing bin Laden over to non-Muslims would tarnish the Taliban's Islamic image. Omar, who was as much a Muslim cleric as he was a political leader, appeared to place far greater importance on the former rather than the latter.<sup>28</sup>

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, would later write in his biography, *My Life with the Taliban*, that Omar's reluctance to turn over bin Laden stemmed, in part, from his refusal to believe that the United States would actually attack. “[Omar] reasoned,” writes Zaeef, “that America couldn't launch an offensive without a valid reason, and that since he had demanded that Washington conduct an official investigation, and deliver incontrovertible proof” of bin Laden's involvement in 9/11, he “would take no further steps” until “presented with such evidence.”<sup>29</sup>

Omar was operating from a position of ignorance and dangerous naiveté about the precariousness of the Taliban's position, post-9/11. He understood little about international politics and lacked the sophistication to appreciate that US leaders were not posturing. Moreover, the nature of Afghan culture and politics did not necessarily allow for a quick resolution to the crisis.<sup>30</sup>

Grenier, who helped to develop the initial US political and military strategy in Afghanistan and was in direct contact with high-level Taliban officials, would later write that Afghans “would operate on their own timetable and in their own way, not ours; and if we hoped to influence them, we would have to calibrate our timetable to suit. For their part, if senior elements in the Taliban were tempted

<sup>26</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, *Complete 9/11 Commission Report*. Compiled by Thomas H. Kean, et. al. Washington, DC, 2004, [https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report\\_Ch10.htm](https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Ch10.htm) [https://9-11commission.gov/staff\\_statements/911TerrFin\\_Ch2.pdf](https://9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/911TerrFin_Ch2.pdf), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*.

<sup>28</sup> Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), 56, Kindle.; Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *The Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 228, 234-5.

<sup>29</sup> Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, “Issue Indivisibility and Time Horizons as Rationalist Explanations for War?”, *Security Studies*, 15 no. 1, (2006): 64-69, DOI: 10.1080/09636410600666246.



to push Omar aside and to change policy on al Qaeda, they would have to meet in person and consult with one another.”<sup>31</sup>

Grenier noted that after the US military attacked Afghanistan, it became extraordinarily difficult to end the conflict because “to actually reach a consensus” among the Taliban leadership would have required them “to meet together to confer face-to-face, and at length,” something that was impossible once US bombs were raining down around them.<sup>32</sup>

On a practical level, fulfilling the US demands, particularly the dismantling of al Qaeda training camps, and compiling data on al Qaeda members, would have placed enormous logistical burdens on the Taliban. It would have likely been impossible to implement these measures in the time frame required by the United States. Indeed, at the time of the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban leadership did not know the whereabouts of bin Laden—and even before then did not keep close tabs on his location.<sup>33</sup>

Grenier also argues that Omar had an almost “mystical hold” over the Taliban organization. He sowed strong bonds of loyalty among his top lieutenants. In Grenier’s view, Omar viewed himself as a world historical figure, who was “bigger and more important than bin Laden.”

At the same time, internecine rivalry made it difficult for any Taliban officials to act assertively without Omar’s guidance and support. Moreover, even if those around Omar questioned his assumptions, they were practically powerless in reaching consensus and charting an alternate course. Omar’s control over the Taliban meant that the organization would sink or swim based on his decision-making and strategic acumen.<sup>34</sup>

It is easy to pass judgment on the actions of US officials in the weeks and months after 9/11 and point out all the ways in which they were wanting. But Omar’s actions and decisions are ripe for criticism as well—and not just in the fall of 2001. For years, US officials made clear their displeasure with Omar’s decision to give bin Laden and al Qaeda safe haven in Afghanistan. They engaged diplomatically with Taliban officials and third parties in an effort to bring the terrorist leader to justice (he was under federal indictment for his role in earlier al Qaeda attacks). Some within the Taliban leadership believed that bin Laden was more trouble than he was worth.<sup>35</sup> But Omar stubbornly rebuffed US demands, admitting that “Osama is like a chicken bone stuck in my throat. I can neither spit him out nor swallow him.”<sup>36</sup> When 9/11 happened, his options irrevocably narrowed. In the subsequent weeks his decision-making only made matters worse for the Taliban. But before the deaths and destruction in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, the die was cast—and Omar must share much of the blame.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandabar: A CIA Diary*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>33</sup> Van Linschoten and Kuehn, *The Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010*, 229.

<sup>34</sup> Grenier, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living* (London: Picador, 2015), 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Grenier, *88 Days to Kandabar*, 254. Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living*, 12-14.

*A Desire for Vengeance*

Even if Omar had been inclined to accept the unconditional US demands, this position would probably not have been sufficient to satisfy the US need for vengeance—and the abiding fear that al Qaeda was planning future terrorist attacks. Indeed, a mere week after the 9/11 attacks, letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to various public officials and media organizations, killing five people and injuring seventeen. On November 12, a plane crashed after liftoff from New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport plunging into a nearby residential neighborhood, killing 265 people. Although the crash was the result of pilot error and the origin of the anthrax attacks has never conclusively been determined, both incidents contributed to a national sense of fear and foreboding that another 9/11-style attack was imminent.

Administration officials would later note that in the first weeks after 9/11 they lowered the bar for reporting on potential terrorist attacks, which meant that even unsubstantiated and poorly sourced intelligence rose to the attention of top-level administration officials. Thus, while the Bush administration felt a strategic and political need to move quickly, Omar hemmed and hawed, caught between a desire to avoid war and a much stronger belief that to turn over bin Laden to the Americans would be a fundamental and anti-Islamic act of betrayal.

From a cultural standpoint, America and the Taliban had completely different patterns and approaches to politics, diplomacy, and consensus-building. Afghan politics had evolved over hundreds of years to achieve consensus by means of collective consultation—the most famous form of which was the aforementioned *loya jirga*. Leadership was not determined by elections, but by tradition, and it was limited to males of certain prominent families within each loosely bounded geographic space. In contrast, Western states, like the United States, operate in a top-down and hierarchical manner. Power is invested in a single leader to make quick decisions around security threats. In short, Bush and the US national security bureaucracy could move quickly while Omar needed time and space for consultation.<sup>38</sup>

Still, twenty years after the fact, it is worth asking: What if US demands had been softened? What if the United States had reached out to Omar with offers of carrots and not just sticks? What if US officials had provided evidence of bin Laden and al Qaeda’s guilt? Would it have led to a different outcome and avoided twenty years of senseless and bloody conflict?

It is impossible to know, but the historical record makes clear that the United States never truly made the effort. Although Bush privately issued an ultimatum to the Taliban before going public with his demands, this appeared to have been more of a diplomatic courtesy than a concerted effort to avoid war. For example, at no point in the weeks after 9/11 did Bush instruct his Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to open a diplomatic channel to the Taliban. Grenier, the CIA’s station chief in Islamabad, was the key conduit for negotiations with the Taliban, but he was operating mostly on his own authority, and without clear guidance from the Bush administration or the power to make

---

<sup>38</sup> Charles Tilly, “On the History of European State-Making,” in Charles Tilly, Ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 73–76.

guarantees to Afghan leaders. While Grenier sought to avert war, few others in the US government appeared to share the same goal.<sup>39</sup>

That attitude—of wanting to proceed with a war at the earliest opportunity—came from the top levels of the administration.

For example, in a phone call right after 9/11, Bush told British Prime Minister Tony Blair that he wanted to take military action that would hurt the terrorists, not simply to pacify Americans. “I want to get moving,” he said. That desire was influenced, in part, by Bush’s personal and political standing.

Bush would later tell author Bob Woodward that he “had the responsibility to show resolve. I had to show the American people the resolve of a commander-in-chief that was going to do whatever it took to win. No yielding. No equivocation. No, you know, lawyering this thing to death, that we’re after ’em. And that was not only for . . . the people at home to see. It was also vitally important for the rest of the world to watch.” He was particularly concerned about how world leaders would interpret his actions. “These guys were watching my every move. And it’s very important for them to come in this Oval Office, which they do, on a regular basis, and me look them in the eye and say, ‘You’re either with us or you’re against us.’”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, while Bush believed that immediate and aggressive action was vital to demonstrate resolve (domestically and internationally), Afghanistan itself appeared to be of little interest or importance to policymakers. The country and its people were considered peripheral or even an abstraction to broader US concerns about terrorism.

In any US foreign policy crisis, personality plays a crucial and often underappreciated role. No two presidents can ever be expected to respond to a situation in the same manner. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, John F. Kennedy overruled his entire national security cabinet—including his brother Robert—in seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis. It is hard to imagine that his successor, Lyndon Johnson, who counseled Kennedy to use force in Cuba, would have handled the situation in the same manner. In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed the head of the Soviet Union and announced policies of economic and political liberalization, many around President Ronald Reagan urged him to maintain US pressure on the Soviets. Reagan ignored the advice and gave Gorbachev the political space to pursue his reform agenda. Within a few years, *perestroika* and *glasnost* would contribute to the USSR’s dissolution.

Bush came into office in January 2001 having won the most closely contested presidential election in modern political history, with little foreign policy experience, and was perceived by many to be a political lightweight. As his comments to Woodward suggest, he took particular note of how his response to 9/11 would be viewed—and believed that demonstrating resolve and strength as a leader, as the president and commander and chief—both at home and abroad, was of paramount importance. That self-perception pointed Bush in the direction of using military force, not dawdling in search of diplomatic, legally hide-bound solutions.

<sup>39</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 96.

*War as a Demonstration Project*

Those around Bush reinforced his preferred outcome by arguing for the use of force, as much as a demonstration of resolve than as a tactical and discrete tool to lessen the threat of terrorism.

White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, for example, recommended that consideration should be given to simultaneous military actions in other parts of the world such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Yemen, or Somalia. Clearly, for Card, this was a global fight: “If you had 15 SEAL teams hitting 10 different targets on the same day, all at once, around the world that would send a message that we’re reaching out globally,” Card told the president. Card also proposed that the US “build up troops big-time” in the Persian Gulf. “It would show,” Card said, that the United States was “there to stay and would put them in a ready position to strike Iraq later on.”<sup>41</sup>

Few within Bush’s inner circle were more determined to treat the war in Afghanistan as a demonstration project than his Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. In a September 18, 2001, memo, Rumsfeld told the president, “If the war does not significantly change the world’s political map, the United States will not achieve its aim. There is value in being clear on the order of magnitude of the necessary change.” That change, said Rumsfeld, could include “new regimes in Afghanistan and another key state (or two) that supports terrorism... Syria out of Lebanon”; and “dismantlement or destruction of WMD capabilities” in a country, the name of which is redacted.<sup>42</sup>

In another memo, Rumsfeld outlined four critical objectives for US strategy in Afghanistan: (1) end the rule of the Taliban and its leadership; (2) terminate the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for terrorism; (3) do so in a manner that signals to the world community that harboring terrorists will be punished severely; and (4) finally, initiate steps to contribute to a more stable post-Taliban Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup>

Crucially, a key element of the war in Afghanistan—as stated in US planning documents—was to use the war in Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban from power for demonstration purposes. Rumsfeld wrote, “Making an example of the Taliban increases US leverage on other state supporters of terrorism.” All of this was consistent with an administration view that treated Afghanistan as merely a venue for fighting terrorism.

In one of Bush’s first post-9/11 meetings with his national security aides, he was famously told by Cofer Black, the CIA’s counterterrorism chief, “When we’re through with them, they will have flies walking across their eyeballs.” Perhaps of greater importance was another message from the CIA—that al Qaeda and the Taliban “were joined at the hip” and there was no workable plan “to keep the Taliban at bay so the al Qaeda (sic) could be engaged.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the CIA’s military strategy for Afghanistan (which Bush would later embrace) was focused on toppling the Taliban regime in order to deny al Qaeda a safe haven, clearly linking the two organizations. There was, ironically, little discussion of destroying al Qaeda training camps or

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>42</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, “Donald Rumsfeld to George W. Bush, Memorandum, ‘Strategic Thoughts,’” September 30, 2000, National Security Archive. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc13.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 52.

identifying and eliminating key al Qaeda lieutenants. This was due, in part, to the fact that the terrorist group's fighters had abandoned their training camps after 9/11. But the administration also viewed eliminating the Taliban as the most effective means for weakening al Qaeda—most notably with the initial focus on assassinating Taliban leader Omar. Amazingly, the US military commander in Afghanistan told reporters in mid-November that US officials did not consider Osama bin Laden a “target of this effort” in Afghanistan. “What we are about,” he said, “is the destruction of the al-Qa'eda network, as well as the . . . Taliban that provide harbor to bin Laden and al-Qa'eda.”<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps most important, there was no plan to put US troops on the ground to ensure the capture or killing of bin Laden when he and his lieutenants retreated to the group's holdout at the cave complex at Tora Bora. Like toppling the Taliban, that job would be left to the Afghans. The US presence was limited to three dozen Special Forces troops.<sup>46</sup>

At the time of 9/11, the Taliban remained engaged in a civil war with the Northern Alliance, a loose alliance of warlords and ethnic Tajik and Uzbek fighters that opposed the Taliban regime. Though outnumbered by the Taliban fighters (who were supported by foreign fighters and al Qaeda shock troops), the Northern Alliance had staved off military defeat—in part, due to the group's charismatic military leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud. But he had been murdered by two al Qaeda suicide bombers posing as Moroccan journalists two days before 9/11. Using the Northern Alliance to fight al Qaeda was controversial within the US military, which preferred a buildup of armed forces in a staging area, supported by a significant logistical train before launching offensive operations. But Afghanistan is landlocked, and none of the six states that border it were likely to provide viable staging areas. Moreover, US officials wanted to move quickly and not wait out a US military buildup.

That meant reliance on special operations forces supported from the air, as well as on-the-ground proxies. Given Soviet history and an Afghan tradition of stubborn and effective insurgency, that led to some trepidation among administration figures. But, unlike the mujahideen, who had enjoyed unflinching support during their own insurgency against the Soviet puppet government from 1979 to 1989, Taliban corruption, venality, and insensitivity had undermined the group's popular backing among the Afghan people.

One of the great ironies of the US mission in Afghanistan was that American fears of a protracted insurgency simply did not materialize in 2001–2002. While al Qaeda's ideologically committed forces often fought to the death, Taliban units largely melted away. Afghan civilians, as had often been the case in Afghan history, put their finger to the wind, recognized that the Americans were now in charge, and quickly accepted this new reality. The Taliban insurgency only reemerged after provocation from the US military's aggressive counterterrorism tactics, a refusal to view the Taliban and al Qaeda as separate entities, and the blocking of the Taliban's ability to play a role in Afghan politics.

Thus, the combination of Northern Alliance and US special operations forces would not only prove lethal to the Taliban, but it had the special bonus of sparing the United States from the risk and cost

<sup>45</sup> John Omicinski, “General: Capturing bin Laden is not part of mission,” *USA Today*, November 8, 2001, <https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/sept11/2001/11/08/pentagon-toll.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, “Lost at Tora Bora,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/lost-at-tora-bora.html>.

of putting significant “boots on the ground.” Instead, the United States waged war from the air—by providing close air support to Northern Alliance fighters.

### *What Comes Next?*

As military plans were developed, and top administration officials fanned out to seek overfly rights and supply networks from countries neighboring Afghanistan, little consideration was given to what a post-Taliban government might look like.

Indeed, in a lessons learned interview conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), one unnamed American official said the message of US intervention in Afghanistan should be “America goes to war without knowing why it does. We went in reflexively after 9/11 without knowing what we were trying to achieve.” According to some war planners, it was never clear whether regime change was the actual US objective.<sup>47</sup>

At various points, policymakers questioned whether the goal of US operations was to hasten cleavages within the Taliban to empower those willing to turn against bin Laden or simply seek to topple the regime. Once US war planners decided to support the Northern Alliance, questions were raised regarding whether the group should be allowed to take Kabul. US policymakers were fearful that, if this were to happen, it would alienate the country’s Pashtun majority.

Bush officials discussed the possibility of a political settlement between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance; they considered having Saudi Arabia work out a political resolution with the Taliban because the Saudis were the only other major government (besides Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates) that formally recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. But these discussions rarely appeared to go beyond theoretical, abstract conversations.<sup>48</sup>

For example, on October 11, Bush administration officials, including Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, and Rumsfeld, discussed US “objectives” in Afghanistan. They spoke of “a political vision,” “a rebuilding package,” “a vision for Kabul” and a “strategy for Kandahar.” Powell raised the prospect of the United Nations or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation taking responsibility for administering the capital Kabul and said “We’ll turn it over to the U.N.”

This debate on long-term plans for Afghanistan was taking place even though US military operations had begun four days earlier.<sup>49</sup>

Given the unclear political objectives at the start, Bush and other administration officials were notably vague about the conditions for a cessation of hostilities. At a prime-time press conference, Bush told reporters that if the Taliban “cough [bin Laden] up and his people today,” the United States would “reconsider what we’re doing to your country. You still have a second chance. Just bring him in, and bring his leaders and lieutenants and other thugs and criminals with him.” But

<sup>47</sup> Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 229–234.

short of an unlikely complete surrender by the Taliban, it was anyone's guess as to how the war could end.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of postwar planning, however, was not purely accidental. It also reflected a deliberate policy choice to prevent the United States from becoming tied down by postwar responsibilities in Afghanistan. An October planning memo, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," written by Rumsfeld made clear that post-Taliban planning was a secondary consideration: "The USG [US government] should not agonize over post-Taliban arrangements to the point that it delays success over al Qaeda and the Taliban." The impulse for action was clear: "US preference for a specific outcome ought not paralyze US efforts," Rumsfeld wrote.<sup>51</sup>

"Without slowing down the Northern Alliance's advance," he added, "the USG should begin discussing international arrangements for the administration of Kabul to relieve Pashtun fear of domination by Northern Alliance (Tajik-Uzbek) tribes." However, "engaging UN diplomacy . . . beyond intent and general outline could interfere with U.S. military operations and inhibit coalition freedom of action." Like Powell, Rumsfeld envisioned "some kind of international security arrangement for Kabul" and "a highly capable peacekeeping force drawn from allies in Europe, the Muslim world and elsewhere to help to secure Kabul until stability is achieved."<sup>52</sup>

Yet, minimal planning was made to secure such an arrangement.

Thus, on October 7, the US war in Afghanistan began with military strikes on key Taliban targets. An assassination attempt on Omar was called off because US policymakers feared collateral damage. Though Grenier was supportive of the initial strike on Omar, in the hopes that his demise might lead those Taliban leaders more willing to jettison bin Laden in order to take power, those kinds of gradations would soon disappear. As bombs started to fall, the United States almost exclusively treated the Taliban and al Qaeda as one and the same—a common enemy to be defeated as part of America's larger war on terrorism.

## **Failed to Reconcile US Strategic Objectives with those of Neighboring Pakistan, or Consider Alternatives**

Just as Afghanistan remained an abstraction to US officials, so too were Pakistan's longstanding strategic interests given short shrift. Islamabad had supported the Taliban as a hedge against rival India for years. In fact, Pakistani support was key to the Taliban's emergence, and the Taliban was essential to Pakistan's regional strategy in containing India's influence along its Western border.

It was ironic, therefore, that in the immediate wake of 9/11, US officials viewed Pakistan as the lynchpin of American strategy in Afghanistan. The Bush administration concluded that the United States needed Pakistan's cooperation to isolate the Taliban and, in turn, cripple al Qaeda. This was partly a function of habit. Pakistan had been the sole conduit for US aid to the mujahideen during the 1980s. At that time, with hostile Iran to the west, and the Soviet Union to the north, Pakistan

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>51</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to Douglas Feith, "Strategy," (October 30, 2001), with Attachment, "US Strategy in Afghanistan," National Security Council, October 16, 2001, 7:42 a.m., Secret/Close Hold/Draft for Discussion, Secret, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to Douglas Feith, "Strategy."

leveraged its privileged position to shape the scope and character of US assistance to the anti-Soviet insurgency. Logistics lines and bases established during that period remained viable after 9/11, or could be quickly revived.

The context in 2001 was different, however. The United States was seen on the right side of history even by its adversaries. Iran, for its part, hated the Taliban and offered to assist the US war effort. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union had produced no fewer than three countries to Afghanistan's north: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. One of those, Uzbekistan, hosted a US Special Operations unit at the Karshi-Khanabad (a.k.a. K2) military base. And although Russia no longer shared a border with Afghanistan, Moscow also initially supported US efforts to dislodge the Taliban and root out al Qaeda, and therefore offered to cooperate.

But rather than consider how Afghanistan fit into Pakistan's longstanding strategic interests—and how much those interests conflicted with US aims—the Bush administration bullied Pakistan into supporting US policy in Afghanistan. As was the case for much of the US engagement in Afghanistan, the United States exaggerated its ability to influence Islamabad's self-interested strategic calculus with respect to the Taliban and consistently ignored Islamabad's pleadings that the organization—and its supporters in Afghan society—not be completely excluded from the country's political future. Further, US officials remained oblivious to or simply ignored Pakistani intelligence ties to Omar and the Taliban.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, on September 12, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told General Mahmud Ahmed—the Director-General of the military's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency—who by chance was visiting the United States at the time of the 9/11 attacks, “You are either 100 percent with us or 100 percent against us—there is no gray area.”<sup>54</sup>

A day later, Armitage issued the following set of demands to General Ahmed.

“Stop al Qaida (sic) operatives at your border, intercept arms shipments through Pakistan and end all logistical support for bin Ladin (sic);

“Provide the U.S. with blanket overflight and landing rights to conduct all necessary military and intelligence operations;

“Provide as needed territorial access to U.S. and allied military intelligence, and other personnel to conduct all necessary operations against the perpetrators of terrorism or those that harbor them, including use of Pakistan's naval ports, airbases and strategic locations on borders;

“Provide the U.S. immediately with intelligence, [redacted] information, to help prevent and respond to terrorist acts perpetrated against the U.S., its friends and allies;

“Continue to publicly condemn the terrorist acts of September 11 and any other domestic expressions of support for terrorism against the [United States], or its friends or allies, [redacted];

<sup>53</sup> Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Hassan Abbas, “Inside Story of Musharraf-Mahmood Tussle,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 26, 2006, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/inside-story-musharraf-mahmood-tussle>.



“Cut off all shipments of fuel to the Taliban and any other items and recruits, including volunteers en route to Afghanistan, that can be used in a military offensive capacity or to abet the terrorist threat;

“Should the evidence strongly implicate Usama bin-Ladin (sic) and the al Qaida (sic) network in Afghanistan and should Afghanistan and the Taliban continue to harbor him and this network, Pakistan will break diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, end support for the Taliban and assist the [United States] in the forementioned (sic) ways to destroy Usama bin-Ladin (sic) and his al Qaida (sic) network.”

In reading these demands to Musharraf, US Ambassador to Pakistan Wendy Chamberlin echoed Armitage’s ultimatum. She asked the Pakistani president point blank, “are you with us or against us?” Pakistan, she said “could now be either a ‘clear enemy’ of the United States or a ‘clear friend.’”<sup>55</sup> To the surprise of US officials, Pakistan’s leaders (who were fearful of a potential US military strike against their country or worried that Washington might turn decisively to India as a new regional partner) acceded to the entirety of the US request.

Bush was not blind to the political risk taken by Pakistan. He told his cabinet early on, “We need to make it worth his [Musharraf’s] while. We should help him with a number of things, including nuclear security. Put together a package of support for Pakistan.”<sup>56</sup>

Bush removed all sanctions on Pakistan and asked Congress to allow Islamabad to reschedule repayment of outstanding loans and to provide more than \$500 million in fresh ones.<sup>57</sup> For the next two decades, Washington sought to mollify Pakistan by providing billions in military and economic assistance.

Although Pakistan would provide invaluable military and logistical support to the initial US war effort in Afghanistan, this did not deter Pakistan from meddling directly in Afghanistan’s affairs—and often counter to US interests. Pakistan viewed its Western neighbor as “strategic depth” and a bulwark against its rival, India, with whom it has fought three wars since 1947. In addition, Pakistani officials were fearful of Pashtun nationalists in Afghanistan who might advocate for separatism in Pakistan’s Pashtun-majority western frontier. Given this, Islamabad’s overarching goal in Afghanistan was to have a friendly government in Kabul; this situation had long favored Islamists who could be relied upon to resist entreaties from India and other regional powers. Indeed, in private, Musharraf portrayed his acceptance of the US demands as a tactical maneuver to appease the Americans. In the words of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the approach could be described as “First say yes and later say but . . .”<sup>58</sup>

In public, in a televised speech on September 19, Musharraf told Pakistanis that working with the United States was the most effective way to prevent Indian encroachment in Afghanistan. “They

<sup>55</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 53.

<sup>56</sup> Woodward, *Bush at War*, 81.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 89.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

[the Indians] want that America should come and side [with] them and they want Pakistan to be declared a terrorist state, and thus damage our Kashmir cause.”<sup>59</sup> (India-controlled Kashmir is disputed territory and has been witness to decades of low-level insurgency engaging India and Pakistan).<sup>60</sup>

Musharraf also said that Pakistan’s alignment with America was a “lesser evil” and a temporary decision that would protect Pakistan. He compared his actions to those of the Prophet Muhammad, who had allied himself with the Jews of Medina to defeat his rivals in Mecca before turning on his erstwhile Jewish allies years later. Never in the speech did he condemn al Qaeda’s actions on September 11.<sup>61</sup>

Although Musharraf made clear that he was “very concerned” about Afghanistan, his focus was unmistakable. “I am, at the moment, only worried about Pakistan,” he said.<sup>62</sup> The events of September 11 did not, in any significant way, change that calculus.

Privately, Pakistani leaders sought to influence the United States and push the country away from war. They repeatedly warned US officials about the dangers of ousting the Taliban from power. They strenuously argued that the Taliban and al Qaeda were not the same and that America’s new potential ally, the Northern Alliance, was composed of murderers and thugs who could not govern the country.<sup>63</sup>

On September 24, the ISI’s Ahmed counseled US Ambassador Chamberlin that “Real victory . . . would come in negotiations,” and that “reasoning” with the Taliban “to get rid of terrorism will be better than use of brute force.” Presciently, he warned that removing the Taliban would empower the nation’s warlords and would “produce thousands of frustrated young Muslim men” and make Afghanistan “an incubator of anger that will explode two or three years from now.” While acknowledging his concerns, Chamberlin made clear that the United States was on a “tight schedule” and that his diplomatic efforts “should not impede any of the military planning” that had already begun.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, in the days and weeks after 9/11, Pakistan played both sides in Afghanistan. Musharraf assured the United States of Islamabad’s support, but the Pakistani military was busily evacuating thousands of troops and advisors that had been assisting the Taliban in their fight against the

<sup>59</sup> Pervez Musharraf, “Televised Speech.” Partial Transcript of Speech Delivered on Nationwide Television, Islamabad, Pakistan, September 19, 2001, *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/pakistantext\\_091901.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/pakistantext_091901.html).

<sup>60</sup> Olivier Roy, *Islamic Radicalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, UNHCR Emergency and Security Service, January 2002, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3c6a3f7d2.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 32. To this day, many Pakistanis doubt that al Qaeda was responsible for 9/11. A poll taken in 2008 found that nineteen percent believed the United States was behind the attacks, while another seventy-two percent did not know.; Larisa Epatko, “10 Years Later, 9/11 Conspiracy Theories Linger in Pakistan,” *PBS*, September 2, 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/view-from-pakistan-on-911>.

<sup>62</sup> Pervez Musharraf, “Televised Speech,” September 19, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Steve Coll. *Directorate S*, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Wendy J. Chamberlain, “Mahmud Plans 2nd Mission to Afghanistan,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, September 24, 2001. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/>.

Northern Alliance.<sup>65</sup> ISI officials, including Colonel Imam [the nickname for Brigadier Sultan Amir Tarar], an infamous Pakistani military official and diplomat who had advised the Taliban in the group's fight against the Northern Alliance, urged Omar to resist US demands. He told Omar that the US air campaign would be short-lived and counseled him to wage a guerrilla campaign, as the mujahedin had done during the Soviet war. Omar received the same advice from the ISI chief, Ahmed, who even shared intelligence information with the Afghan leader on the expected US attack plan.<sup>66</sup>

Musharraf would eventually replace Ahmed, but Pakistan's double game continued. Even as Musharraf told US officials that he was, in Bush's words, "with them, not against them," factions within the Pakistani military were directly supporting the Taliban and seeking to thwart US strategic goals in order to secure their own. This double game would continue for the next twenty years.

### Actively Resisted Nation-Building

During the 2000 presidential campaign, President George W. Bush ran on a platform of opposing 1990s-era nation-building operations. For example, in a presidential debate in fall 2000 with Vice President Al Gore, he criticized the nation-building initiatives undertaken during the Clinton administration, spearheaded by the military. Bush argued, "Our military is meant to fight and win wars. That's what it's meant to do. And when it gets overextended, morale drops."<sup>67</sup>

This viewpoint became an article of faith within the Bush administration and implicitly shaped policy deliberations. Policymakers consistently resisted options in Afghanistan that would have necessitated a large US military presence. Part of the reason was a fear of replicating the mistakes made by the Soviet Union during its nearly decade-long occupation. "We wanted to avoid the big footprint the Soviets had had" Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith would later say. "The Soviets put 300,000 guys there and failed. We didn't want to re-create that error."<sup>68</sup>

According to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Afghans were "antiforeigner," which meant that the long-term presence of US troops would breed anger and contempt. Rumsfeld also believed a long-term US occupation would undermine US readiness and prevent the military from being deployed to other places to fight terrorism. Richard N. Haass, who served as the Bush administration's coordinator for the future of Afghanistan, would later write "[T]he consensus was that little could be accomplished in Afghanistan given its history, culture, and composition, and that there would be little payoff beyond Afghanistan even if things there went better than expected."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>67</sup> "User Clip: George W. Bush on Nation Building", C-SPAN, National Cable Satellite Corporation, filmed October, 11, 2000, video, 00:34:18, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4315725/user-clip-george-w-bush-nation-building>.

<sup>68</sup> Russell Riley and Douglas J. Feith, "Douglas J. Feith Oral History," The Miller Center, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, March 22, 2012, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/douglas-j-feith-oral-history>.

<sup>69</sup> Richard N. Haass, "Time to Draw Down in Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2010, <https://www.newsweek.com/haass-time-draw-down-afghanistan-74467>.

But, overhanging all administration debates was Bush's oft-stated opposition to nation-building. At a press conference on September 25, Bush made clear that the United States would not go down the same path as his predecessor Clinton. "We're not into nation-building," he said, "we're focused on justice."<sup>70</sup>

Fear that the US military would get bogged down in Afghanistan also drove the administration's military planning. General Tommy Franks, who ran the US military operation in Afghanistan as the head of Central Command (CENTCOM), told Rumsfeld "there's nothing to be gained by blundering about those mountains and gorges with armor battalions chasing a lightly armed enemy."<sup>71</sup>

Rather than deploy a significant number of American troops, the United States relied on the Afghans to do the fighting. The Pentagon adopted a war plan that called for the insertion of CIA officers and Special Forces troops into Afghanistan to work alongside the Northern Alliance to defeat the Taliban. However, after two weeks of airstrikes on traditional military targets, such as the Taliban's anti-aircraft defenses (which followed the Pentagon's traditional approach to military interventions), the situation on the ground had changed little—much to Bush's frustration.<sup>72</sup> The tide of battle did not shift until US bombers began attacking Taliban frontline soldiers directly.

Ironically, Bush later wrote in his autobiography, *Decision Points*, that he wanted to move the United States away from reliance on air power, which had characterized American war-fighting in the 1990s. "After al Qaeda killed nearly three thousand people in the United States," he wrote, "it was clear the terrorists had interpreted our lack of a serious response as a sign of weakness and an invitation to attempt more brazen attacks. After 9/11, I was determined to change that impression . . . This time we would put boots on the ground, and keep them there until the Taliban and al Qaeda were driven out and a free society could emerge."<sup>73</sup>

Yet, that was not how the United States fought in Afghanistan. Few American troops would be put in harm's way. At no point during the war did that decision loom larger than after the Taliban was routed in November and the remnants of al Qaeda's leadership, including bin Laden, took refuge at the mountain redoubt of Tora Bora in early December.

Even though American troops in the region could have been deployed to the area, the United States instead relied on local warlords to finish off bin Laden. That decision is seen by many today as one of the key reasons that bin Laden and many of his top lieutenants escaped into Pakistan. Indeed, in a war aimed to avenge 9/11 and wipe out al Qaeda's capabilities, most of the organization's top leadership escaped the American war unscathed.

The further irony of the US aversion to nation-building is that US policymakers, at least rhetorically, appeared to understand the importance of nation-building for Afghanistan.

<sup>70</sup> "America's New War: President Bush and Visiting Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi Hold a Press Conference" CNN, September 25, 2001, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/se/date/2001-09-25/segment/24>.

<sup>71</sup> David Loyn, *The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan since 9/11* (New York: St. Martin's, 2021), 29.

<sup>72</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, 61.

<sup>73</sup> Bush, *Decision Points*, 191.

For example, on November 12, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell told the UN Security Council that the war would “be fought with increased support for democracy programs, judicial reform, conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, economic reform and health and education programs. All of these together deny the reason for terrorists to exist or to find safe havens within those borders.”<sup>74</sup>

Even Bush allowed for the need for military operations after the Taliban’s ouster. On October 4, he told reporters at a prime-time press conference “that we should not just simply leave after a military objective has been achieved . . . we've got to work for a stable Afghanistan so that her neighbors don't fear terrorist activity again coming out of that country.”<sup>75</sup>

But Bush wanted others to take on the burden of a large and long-term effort in rebuilding Afghanistan after al Qaeda and the Taliban were routed. During his October 11 press conference, he was asked pointedly about the crucial role for nation-building in resolving the crisis in Afghanistan, to which he replied, “[T]he United Nations . . . could provide the framework necessary to help meet those conditions. It would be a useful function for the United Nations to take over the so-called ‘nation-building.’”<sup>76</sup>

In addition to Bush, members of Congress also made the case for continued US involvement even as they allowed that the US commitment to such a mission would be limited. Then-Senator Joe Biden observed at a Senate hearing in mid-October, “I know we are not going to use words like ‘nation-building,’ because that scares the hell out of the Republicans . . . but what I want to make clear here is we are talking about draining the swamp” and “once we drain the swamp, we had better plan something in that swamp.” In Biden’s view at the time, the long-term solution for Afghanistan included “such important items as secular education for both boys and girls.”<sup>77</sup>

In reality, Bush administration officials sought to quickly wash their hands of Afghanistan. In November 2001, Rumsfeld asked Franks to come up with a military plan for invading Iraq, seemingly indifferent to the fighting ongoing in Afghanistan. And, although it is clear that the administration wanted a liberal democracy to take root in Afghanistan, it didn’t want to do the necessary work—and allocate the appropriate resources—to make it happen. Bush and his team sought a quick fix even as they were claiming a long-term commitment to demonstrating resolve.

The incongruity of this approach was revealed during the negotiations that led to the creation of the first post-Taliban interim government.

On November 10, 2001, Bush spoke to the United Nations General Assembly and said that the United States would “work with the UN to support a post-Taliban government that represents all of the Afghan people.” According to Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin, turning things over to the UN

<sup>74</sup> Colin L. Powell, “Remarks to United Nations Security Council,” US Department of State Archives, November 12, 2001, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/6049.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> George W. Bush, “President Holds Prime Time News Conference,” The White House Archives, The East Room, October 11, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html#Nation-Building>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> *Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern And South Asian Affairs and the Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2001)(statement of Joe Biden, Senator from Delaware), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg75946/html/CHRG-107shrg75946.htm>.

checked that box without the United States taking responsibility for Afghanistan's post-Taliban future.<sup>78</sup>

With the Taliban in retreat, the United Nations convened a conference in Bonn, Germany, on November 29–December 6, 2001. The conference, led by Lakhdar Brahimi, an Algerian diplomat and close confidant of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, brought together two main Afghan factions—the Northern Alliance (United Front) and the Rome group around the former King Zahir Shah. They were joined by two other smaller groups—Iranian-sponsored emigres (the Cyprus Group), and the Peshawar Group, mostly Pashtuns who had fled to Pakistan. Considering the vast mosaic of tribes and ethnic groups that comprise the population of Afghanistan, it is difficult to argue that these groups were truly representative of the country's broad diversity.<sup>79</sup>

There were just two items on the conference's agenda: choosing an interim authority to take control of Afghanistan after the Taliban's ouster and establishing a plan to transition to a fully legitimate government that would command international recognition.

Accomplishing that much in nine days was hardly realistic. As Rubin later noted, "Afghanistan had been through twenty-three years of many-sided civil strife marked by the overt and covert involvement of regional and global powers, yet only nine days elapsed between the UN's opening of talks in the former West German capital and the affixing of signatures on December 5, 2001." To add further time pressure, a dentists' convention was scheduled to begin at the conference center on December 6.<sup>80</sup>

Realizing that successfully transitioning to a post-Taliban future in Afghanistan would require the cooperation of neighboring states, Brahimi invited Iran, India, and Pakistan, alongside representatives of Russia and the United States.

President Bush appointed James Dobbins as the senior-most American representative to the Bonn talks. He was assisted by Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American close to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. Khalilzad had emigrated to the United States from Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion as a teenager, but he still had a depth of understanding of his native Afghanistan and its people (he would play a prominent role in US policy in Afghanistan for the next two decades). According to Dobbins, "He [Khalilzad] was the only participant in the Washington policy process who had firsthand knowledge of that country and its leadership and the only one who could speak to the Afghan leaders in their own language."<sup>81</sup>

Although an experienced diplomat, Dobbins faced two challenges. First, he was viewed skeptically by the Bush administration because he had worked on several of the Clinton administration's nation-building missions, including in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia and Kosovo, missions that were regarded as "foreign policy as social work" by many in the Bush administration. Second, by November, the military situation on the ground had dramatically shifted.

<sup>78</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs To Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 135-6.

<sup>79</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>80</sup> Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*, location 2258; and Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War*, 150.

<sup>81</sup> Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 19.

After the first two weeks of war, the initial US strategic bombing campaign quickly faltered. But on October 21, the United States began providing close military support to the Northern Alliance fighters. US Special Forces teams, some riding on horseback, provided guidance for US bombers, whose weapons included massive 15,000-pound bombs. The Taliban fighters were little prepared for the ferocity of the American attacks. A Taliban commander later said of the bombing campaign, “The bombs cut down our men like a reaper harvesting wheat. Bodies were dismembered. Dazed fighters were bleeding from the ears and nose from the bombs’ concussions. We couldn’t bury the dead. Our reinforcements died in their trenches.”<sup>82</sup>

On November 9, Northern Alliance troops—with the help of US air support—broke through Taliban lines near the northern stronghold of Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban forces retreated in panic and the rout was quickly on. The next day Mazar was captured. Two days later Herat fell. On November 11, US planes began bombing Taliban lines north of Kabul. Within days, the Taliban abandoned the capital. Only Jalalabad and Kandahar remained under their control.<sup>83</sup>

As the complete defeat of the Taliban began to look like a near-term reality, the pressure increased to quickly come up with an agreement that would shape Afghanistan’s political future.

Indeed, Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman told Dobbins “that the military campaign was beginning to gain momentum but that the political track was not keeping pace. America was committed to overthrowing the Taliban regime in Kabul,” Grossman explained, but, as of late October 2001 US policymakers had “no clear idea of what group could be put in its place or how to do it.”<sup>84</sup>

Dobbins would later write in his memoir, “For almost all the issues discussed in Bonn, I had no written instructions and a good deal of leeway.” His job “was to get an agreement and almost any agreement would do, so long as it resulted in an Afghan government that would replace the Taliban’s, unite the opposition, secure international support, cooperate in hunting down al Qaeda’s remnants, and relieve the United States of the need to occupy and run the country.”<sup>85</sup>

Annan and Brahimi were focused on peacemaking and nation-building; the United States was focused on counterterrorism. In addition, the delegates in Bonn sought a potential leader who would be acceptable to the Northern Alliance but would not alienate Afghanistan’s large Pashtun population.

They settled on Hamid Karzai, a Popalzai Pashtun, and a descendant of Shah Shuja ul-Mulk, whom the British had chosen in the late 19th century to lead Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> Karzai’s father, a well-known tribal leader, had been assassinated by the Taliban in 1999. Unlike many Pashtuns, Karzai had resisted the Taliban prior to 9/11 and had entered Afghanistan (with the help of the CIA) in early November to resume the fight. (Karzai returned to the country again later that month with the support of the CIA and, when facing potential capture and almost certain death at the hands of the

<sup>82</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 65.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>84</sup> Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>86</sup> William Dalrymple, “The Ghosts of Afghanistan’s Past,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/opinion/sunday/why-karzai-bites-the-hand-that-feeds-him.html>.

Taliban, was rushed out of harm's way by the US military). As far as US officials were concerned, the very fact that Karzai had tried to spark a Pashtun revolt in the South, where the United States had few contacts and where it was assumed the Taliban were the most popular, was enough for them. Karzai would do.

But the officials meeting in Bonn saddled Karzai with a top-heavy governing structure composed mostly of individuals who had little personal loyalty to him. Several would later become rivals.<sup>87</sup>

He also was dependent upon others for security. The Bonn agreement stipulated that armed groups would be either disbanded or “reorganized” under the “command and control” of the new Afghan government. But the country's new Defense Minister and Northern Alliance alum, Mohammed Fahim, negotiated a deal that allowed his forces to remain in Kabul.<sup>88</sup>

Other Northern Alliance leaders were similarly reluctant to relinquish control of territory that they had seized by force. The pattern of warlords and power brokers defying the central government's authority would continue for the next twenty years. In the absence of a credible foreign peacekeeping force to keep order, Karzai was compelled to rely on them.

That suited US officials just fine. Rumsfeld would later block efforts to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) responsible for Kabul's security mandate beyond the capital, as Karzai and Brahimi wished, fearing that the presence of foreign peacekeepers could interfere with US efforts to hunt down al Qaeda and Taliban members.

US objectives conflicted with Afghan objectives in other ways, including for example, the idea of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban that would have allowed them to lay down their arms without fear of reprisal.

As the Bonn conference was finishing its work, the Taliban's resistance was crumbling around its final redoubt in Kandahar. On December 5, Karzai received a phone call from Bonn informing him that he had been selected as Afghanistan's next president (minutes earlier a US plane had mistakenly struck his position killing several American troops, 10 Afghans and only narrowly missing Karzai). That day, Karzai also met with senior Taliban leaders, all of whom reported directly to Mullah Omar, to explore a possible end to the fighting, allowing the Taliban leader to “live in dignity” in exchange for his quiescence.”<sup>89</sup>

On December 6, the two sides reached an agreement allowing the Taliban to leave Kandahar but ensuring amnesty for the group's foot soldiers. Omar allegedly had agreed to step aside and retire to northern Helmand.

But, as these negotiations were under way, a US special forces team working with a local Afghan warlord, Gul Agha Sherzai, took the Kandahar airfield and then the city itself. In a more significant

<sup>87</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 71; Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 95–96.

<sup>88</sup> Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 140; Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 109–110; Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living*, 47–48.

<sup>89</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 69.



blow—and one that would have severe repercussions for Afghanistan’s future—the United States vetoed Karzai’s deal with the remnants of the Taliban government.

At a Pentagon press conference that day, Rumsfeld publicly rejected any deal with the Taliban—and also privately warned Karzai that such an agreement would run counter to US interests.<sup>90</sup> Within days, Omar had disappeared, along with thousands of Taliban fighters who had either returned to their families or fled across the border to Pakistan.

To this day, the specifics of what was offered—and what the Taliban leadership agreed to—remains an open question. Zaeef has written that Mullah Omar had no intention of surrendering to Karzai and other sources have said that he intended to leave Kandahar and continue the fight against the Americans.

But one thing is clear: the possibility of reconciliation with the Taliban and a long-term agreement with the retreating remnants of the former government ended on December 6, 2001.

The assumptions that underpinned the immediate US response to 9/11 and the country’s attitude toward the Taliban were unchanged—the Taliban and al Qaeda were inseparable political movements and the Taliban, whatever their future actions, would be viewed as an implacable enemy to US interests with no place in a future Afghan government.

In a later “lessons learned” interview, foreign service officer Todd Greentree would perceptively note, “In our eagerness to get revenge we violated the Afghan way of war. That is when one side wins, the other side puts down their arms and reconciles with the side that won.” Indeed, today, Karzai lives in Kabul, largely unmolested by the Taliban leadership that waged an insurgency against him for a decade.<sup>91</sup>

Brahimi would later characterize the decision to exclude the Taliban from the Bonn meeting as the “original sin” that precluded a durable political settlement. But this argument benefits, in part, from hindsight bias. The United States had just defeated the Taliban on the battlefield—and, with a small military and financial investment, had done so in a matter of weeks. Flush with victory and emotions still raw from the horrors of 9/11—the fires at Ground Zero in lower Manhattan still burned, enveloping the city in acrid, pungent smoke—the United States was in little mood to compromise.<sup>92</sup> As Dobbins would later write, no consideration was given to including the Taliban in the Bonn talks. “Out of the question,” he said, “They have been defeated.”<sup>93</sup>

Still, there was a potential middle ground—including amnesty for Taliban fighters and a willingness to accept the surrender of Taliban leaders. Indeed, such acts of conciliation have a long history in Afghan culture and war-fighting.<sup>94</sup> But US political culture would drive the postwar process. In the weeks and months after the Taliban’s fall, the United States insisted on hunting down members of

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, 27.

<sup>92</sup> “Ground Zero stops burning, after 100 days,” *The Guardian*, December 20, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/20/september11.usa#:~:text=One%20hundred%20days%20after%20the,in%20Brooklyn%20and%20upper%20Manhattan>

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Jack Fairweather, *The Good War: Why We Couldn’t Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan* (London: Basic Books Publishing, 2015), 36.

<sup>94</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 59.

the group and sending many of those captured to the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay. This decision would, in time, provoke the Taliban's supporters and spur the insurgency that would take hold only a few years later.<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, Rumsfeld's veto would send an unmistakable signal to Karzai that, while the United States supported his ascent to power, he would not be allowed to make his own decisions or act in ways that did not enjoy the support and approval of the United States. In the weeks and months after 9/11, the Bush administration looked at Afghanistan as a venue for fighting terrorism and little more. That myopic perception would continue, even after the Taliban had been roundly defeated within two months, a victory the Americans and its allies failed to fully appreciate.

To US policymakers, Afghanistan would remain a place where the war on terrorism was waged — rather than a country with a unique culture and its own idiosyncratic politics. In those three months from September 11 to December 6, 2001, the roots of American failure in Afghanistan were planted.

---

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, 27.



**Center for Strategic Studies**  
The Fletcher School at Tufts University  
Cabot Intercultural Center  
160 Packard Ave, #605  
Medford, MA 02155