



The Afghanistan Assumptions Project

Center for Strategic Studies

Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: How the United States Lost the Peace 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

December 22, 2023

This paper is the second in a series that investigates a core set of assumptions that underpinned America's twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan. It was prepared for the second Afghanistan Assumptions Workshop with our Expert Steering Committee on June 7, 2023. We would like to thank the following individual and organizations for their generous support: former Marine Corps officer and military expert Michael J. Zak, Stand Together, the Stimson Center, and the Center for Strategic Studies. Excellent research assistance was provided by Cassandra Cronin, Ariel Daniels, Jefferson Ren, Megan Madeira, and Jeff Polidor.

Executive Summary

On December 22, 2001, 2,000 international dignitaries and Afghan leaders gathered in Kabul for a celebration that months earlier would have seemed unimaginable: the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's interim president alongside a 29-member interim cabinet that included two women.

A mere three months after the 9/11 attacks, the United States had won an extraordinary and near-complete military and political victory in Afghanistan. With minimal losses in blood and treasure, the United States along with its Afghan allies, the Northern Alliance, had swept the Taliban from power. A movement that had ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist had been scattered and delegitimized. The group's leaders had fled the country, and most rank-and-file members sought to return to their home villages, away from politics and conflict.

For the most part, the Afghan people, tired of decades of war, welcomed the American troop presence. For the first time in decades, the Afghan people had reason to hope for a peaceful future.

Yet, within a few years, the Taliban movement returned as an insurgent force, sending Afghanistan into a spiral of violence that would continue for nearly two decades and culminate in the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in August 2021.

In popular mythology, the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003—and take its proverbial eye off the ball in Afghanistan—was the decisive factor that allowed the Taliban to return. But such arguments ignore what the United States was actually doing in Afghanistan and how its actions spurred the return of the Taliban. America's errors were not ones of omission, but rather commission.

They were rooted in the same misplaced assumptions that drove US decision-making in the days and weeks after September 11, 2001. US officials viewed Afghanistan as an abstraction and merely one of many battlefields in a global war against terrorism. They resisted nation-building for both ideological reasons and because they assumed that a functioning and self-sufficient state would never materialize in Afghanistan—and that nation-building there would be a waste of US resources. US indifference and even open hostility toward nation-building meant that the peace dividend from the collapse of the Taliban failed to materialize for millions of Afghans.

But no assumption would cast a shadow on US policy as damaging as the belief that the Taliban and al Qaeda were strategic allies with similar political and ideological objectives.

In fact, the Taliban and al Qaeda had separate and distinct agendas. Osama bin Laden and the terrorist organization he led were focused on international jihad and waging war against the United States. For al Qaeda, Afghanistan was merely a launching pad for high-profile, mass-casualty terrorist attacks against the group's infidel Western enemies. The Taliban's strategic priorities were very different: the group was focused on Afghanistan's domestic issues and had little interest in international jihad.

The conflation of the Taliban and al Qaeda, which initially served as a strategic signal to deter global terrorism, became a cornerstone of the justification for a prolonged military presence in Afghanistan. It led US officials to vehemently oppose the attempted surrender of Taliban leaders in December 2001 and a formal end to hostilities that could have led to the Taliban's integration back into Afghan society.

Instead, US officials treated Taliban leaders as irredeemable and wanted to make an example of them for other countries that hosted or sponsored terrorists. The US military launched an aggressive counterterrorism campaign that although nominally targeting al Qaeda and the Taliban, focused most of its effort on the latter. The results were night raids in Afghan villages, detention of suspected terrorists or Taliban sympathizers, and military forays that often killed innocent civilians. Not surprisingly, the same Afghans who had welcomed the US intervention began to view the US military as the country's key source of instability.

To make matters worse, US officials allied with local warlords in their pursuit of the Taliban. These were many of the same individuals who had been responsible for the bloodletting in the early 1990s that had led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place. This strategy undermined the legitimacy of the newly formed Karzai government and also fueled corruption, violence, and resentment by those groups who were targeted by the United States and their warlord allies.

This paper shows how the conflation of the Taliban and al Qaeda—an assumption of shared purpose and goals that went largely untested in Washington—undid much of the goodwill produced by the US overthrow of the Taliban in the fall of 2001. The United States' binary approach to counterterrorism, coupled with the empowerment of local warlords, not only undermined the prospects of a stable Afghan state but also rekindled the Taliban insurgency, setting the stage for prolonged conflict.

Cast of Characters

Tayeb Agha	Chief of Staff to Mullah Omar
Sher Mohammed Akhundzada	Governor of Helmand Province, 2001-2005
Jason Amerine	US Special Forces soldier embedded with Hamid Karzai in December 2001
Haron Amin	Afghan Chargé d'Affaires to the United States, 2002-2003
Turki al-Faisal	Director General of the Saudi General Intelligence Presidency, 1979-2001, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States, 2005-2007
Thomas Barfield	Afghanistan Expert, Professor of Anthropology, Boston University
David Barno	Commander of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, 2003-2005
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
Cofer Black	Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2002-2004
George W. Bush	43th President of the United States, 2001–2009
Nick Carter	Deputy Commander, International Security Assistance Force
Sarah Chayes	Reporter; Special Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Ryan Crocker	US Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2002-2003 (acting), 2011-2012
Mullah Dadullah	Taliban Senior Military Commander
Karl Eikenberry	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2005-2007
Muhammed Fahim	Northern Alliance Military Commander, First Vice President of Afghanistan, 2009-2014
Mark Fallon	Special Agent at the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS)
Douglas Feith	Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, 2001-2005
Ari Fleischer	White House Press Secretary, 2001-2003
David Fox	American Military Advisor to Hamid Karzai

Tommy Franks	Commander of the United States Central Command, 2000-2003
Ed Giambastiani	Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Robert Grenier	Director of the CIA Counterterrorism Center, 2004-2006
Richard Haass	Director of Policy Planning, US Department of State, 2001–2003
Franklin Hagenbeck	Commander of the 10th Mountain Division
Jalaluddin Haqqani	Founder of the Haqqani Network
Maulvi Mohammad Haqqani	Taliban Deputy Minister
Azizullah Karzai	Uncle of Hamid Karzai
Hamid Karzai	Afghan Statesman, fourth President of Afghanistan, 2002–2014
John Keane	Army Vice Chief of Staff, 1999-2003
Akrem Khakrezwal	Vice Chief of Staff of the Afghan National Army
Zalmay Khalilzad	US Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2004-2005, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Diplomat
Fahim Khan	Defense Minister of Afghanistan
Jan Baz Khan	Afghan Informant, Militia Leader
David Kratzer	Commanding General of Coalition Forces Land Component Command's (CFLCC) Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force, 2002
Carter Malkasian	Historian, Former Advisor to American Military Commanders in Afghanistan
Scott Mann	US Special Forces Officer
Ahmed Shah Massoud	Minister of Defense of Afghanistan, 1992-2001, Anti-Taliban leader
John McColl	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2002
Dan McNeill	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2007-2008
Jan Mohammed	Governor of Uruzgan Province, 2002-2006
Malim Feda Muhammad	Taliban Military Commander
Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil	Taliban Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, 1999-2001
Mullah Naqib	Mujahideen Commander, Leader of the Alikozai Pashtun tribe

Mullah Obaidullah	Taliban Defense Minister of Afghanistan, 1997-2001
Barack Obama	United States Senator from Illinois; 44th President of the United States 2009–2017
Mullah Omar	Taliban Supreme Leader of Afghanistan, 1996–2001
Ahmed Rateb Popal	Cousin of Hamid Karzai
Colin Powell	US Secretary of State, 2001–2005
Condoleezza Rice	US National Security Advisor, 2001–2005
Donald Rumsfeld	US Secretary of Defense, 1975–1977, 2001–2006
Gary Schroen	CIA Field Officer
Gul Agha Sherzai	Governor of Nangarhar Province, 2005-2013
Abdullah Tawhidi	Northern Alliance’s Deputy Security Minister
George Tenet	Director of Central Intelligence, 1996-2004
Larry Wilkerson	US Army Colonel, Chief of Staff to Former Secretary of State Powell
Paul Wolfowitz	US Deputy Secretary of Defense, 2001-2005
Pacha Khan Zadran	Afghanistan Militia Leader and Politician
Abdel Salam Zaef	Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, 2000-2001
Dov Zakheim	Foreign Policy Advisor to George W. Bush, Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), and Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Defense

Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: How the United States Lost the Peace in Afghanistan

On December 22, 2001, 2,000 international dignitaries and Afghan leaders gathered in Kabul for a celebration that months earlier would have seemed unimaginable—the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan’s interim president alongside a 29-member interim cabinet that included two women.

According to the *New York Times*, “In Kabul and across Afghanistan, many people listened to radio broadcasts of their nation being reborn, and some later spoke with pride and satisfaction of the end of an era of terrorism and the beginning of another, promising peace if not prosperity.”¹

From the vantage point of late 2023, and after decades of bloody insurgency that took the lives of more than 170,000 Afghans, Americans, and coalition personnel, it is easy to forget that a mere three months after the 9/11 attacks, the United States had achieved an extraordinary and near-complete victory in Afghanistan.

In a matter of weeks—and with minimal losses in US blood and treasure—the United States along with its Afghan allies, the Northern Alliance, swept the Taliban from power. Most remarkably, the Taliban’s rule collapsed with relatively little resistance. Once the pivotal northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif was captured by the Northern Alliance, Taliban forces largely evaporated. Soon after, Herat, Jalalabad, and Kabul quickly fell. And aside from some sporadic fighting, the same was true of Kandahar, the spiritual home of the Taliban movement.

In contrast to al Qaeda’s Arab fighters, who often fought to the death, most of the Taliban forces, after witnessing the awesome and pinpoint precision of US air power, simply faded away. Many returned to their villages, while others—following long-established practices in Afghanistan—put their fingers in the air, assessed which way the political winds were blowing, and made peace with the country’s new political reality. As former State Department coordinator for Afghanistan policy in 2001 Richard Haass aptly put it, “[They] joined the front of the parade.”²

Contemporary estimates suggested that 8,000 to 12,000 Taliban fighters died in the fall of 2001; twice that number were wounded and incapacitated. Counting thousands of prisoners taken by the Northern Alliance, the Taliban lost nearly half of its 60,000 rank-and-file members. Among the dead were an estimated 600-800 fighters affiliated with al Qaeda (of an original total, according to the Army’s original history of the conflict, of 2,000-3,000).³

¹ Robert McFadden, “New Leaders in Kabul, Pledges of Support and the Cleanup Operation,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2001.

² Richard Haass, interview with authors, Zoom audio and video, April 26, 2023.

³ Edmund J. Degen and Mark J. Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States in Afghanistan, 2002-2014*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2021), 202. The true number remains unknown.

The Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, went into hiding; many of his closest followers eventually fled across the border to Pakistan. Some wanted to take up the mantle of jihad, while others preferred to work with the new Afghan government, or simply return to a private life, outside of politics and war. Many Talibs, including those who stayed in Afghanistan, had nothing but contempt for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda; they blamed the terrorist group for their exile and the loss of their country. Contrary to widely held assumptions about Afghan hostility toward foreigners (such assumptions were widely held inside the George W. Bush administration)—informed by stubborn Afghan resistance to the Soviet military presence in the 1980s—"the American military intervention was largely welcomed by Afghans," says Kate Clark, a former journalist and later analyst for the Afghan Analysts Network. At the June 2002 *loya jirga* that confirmed Karzai's position as president of Afghanistan, says Clark, the biggest round of applause came not for Karzai or the country's former ruler, King Zahir Shah, but instead for Gen. John McColl, a British officer who led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which patrolled Kabul with a small contingent of troops. Indeed, British soldiers would create instant traffic jams as local Afghans crowded around them and cheered their presence.⁴

Clark's perspective was echoed by Sarah Chayes, an NPR reporter who relocated to Kandahar and founded a organization focused on postwar reconstruction. Even though the Taliban movement began in Kandahar, Chayes noted that in December 2001, "There was no hostility to the American presence. On the contrary, Kandaharis were looking to the Americans for help. They expected the Americans to help them gain their country back."⁵ Maj. Gen. David Kratzer, commanding general of the Coalition Forces Land Component Command's (CFLCC) Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force, in 2002 noted that "every place we went, they would yell 'USA we love you.'"⁶

Zalmay Khalilzad, who served as US ambassador in Kabul from 2004 to 2005 and is Afghan by birth, expected the US presence to spark a backlash because of "Afghans' historic xenophobia." But he was surprised to discover in early 2002 that "ordinary Afghans . . . when they saw members of the local militia coming toward them on the street . . . tensed up, expecting to be harassed, robbed, or beaten for no reason. By contrast, when they saw a soldier from a foreign country, they relaxed."⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's demise, the United States was, in effect, pushing against an open door—welcomed by the Afghan people and facing little armed resistance.

Yet, within a few years, the Taliban movement returned as an insurgent force, sending Afghanistan into another spiral of escalating violence that would continue for nearly two decades and culminate in the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government in August 2021.

⁴ Kate Clark, "How the Guests Became an Enemy: Afghan Attitudes towards Westerners Since 2001," *Middle East Institute*, April 18, 2012, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-guests-became-enemy-afghan-attitudes-towards-westerners-2001>. See also Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War Through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

⁵ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 107.

⁶ Interview with MG David Kratzer, CFLCC Camp Doha, Kuwait, July 16, 2002, 11-12. Accessed at Center for Military History.

⁷ Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy* (New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2016). Location 2610, Kindle.

Analysts have long debated what went wrong and why the Taliban returned and sustained itself. In popular mythology, the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was a decisive factor. The United States took its proverbial eye off the ball in Afghanistan and sowed the seeds of the Taliban insurgency.⁸

In 2008, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama made precisely this argument to counter-balance his opposition to the Iraq War. “We could have deployed the full force of American power to hunt down and destroy Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and all of the terrorists responsible for 9/11 while supporting real security in Afghanistan,” he said in a campaign speech in July 2008. In failing to focus on security and post-conflict reconstruction, the United States created a political and military vacuum filled by the Taliban, or so the story goes.⁹

But such arguments ignore what the United States was actually doing in Afghanistan—and how its actions spurred the return of the Taliban.

In this light, the US failure in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003 was not a crime of omission but rather one of commission. It was rooted in the same misplaced assumptions that drove US decision-making in the days and weeks after September 11, 2001. US officials continued to view Afghanistan as an abstraction and merely one of many battlefields in a global war against terrorism. They resisted nation-building, in the belief that a functioning and self-sufficient state would never materialize in Afghanistan—and trying to achieve that goal was a waste of US resources.

But no assumption would cast a shadow on US policy as damaging as the belief that the Taliban and al Qaeda were strategic allies with similar political and ideological objectives.

Informed by this assumption, the United States waged an aggressive counterterrorism campaign against both groups that inflamed Afghan public opinion, both when innocent civilians were killed and when they were offended and dishonored by US actions. In addition, the US actively blocked former Taliban officials from playing a role in Afghanistan’s political future, believing that the movement had been defeated and that the Taliban needed to be taught a lesson for giving safe haven to al Qaeda. And, in its single-minded pursuit of the Taliban, the United States allied with Afghanistan’s warlords, empowering a rapacious set of actors whose growing influence directly undercut the newly established Afghan government in Kabul.

By relying on the warlords, the United States unwittingly inserted itself directly into the country’s complex and internecine tribal and local rivalries. The US presence sparked and inflamed tensions over access to aid dollars and military expenditures that were flowing into the country—and rather than bringing security to Afghanistan, contributed to the country’s insecurity. After the initial honeymoon period, Afghans increasingly viewed the United States military as a malignant presence that spread violence and instability.

⁸ See, for example, statement by Rep. Eliot L. Engel, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, on January 15, 2020, who declared, “We got distracted by the war in Iraq under an administration whose priority was defeating Saddam Hussein, not an end game in Afghanistan.” *U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives*, 116th Congress, Second Session (2020). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hhrg38915/html/CHRG-116hhrg38915.htm>.

⁹ “Obama’s Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2008.

US officials forgot the basic scientific truism that “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” In Afghanistan, US actions produced a fearsome backlash that laid the foundation for the Taliban insurgency, which eventually emerged.

Conflation of the Taliban and Al Qaeda

The night of the deadliest terrorist attack on US soil, Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet declared at a meeting of Bush’s foreign policy principals, “The Taliban and al Qaeda [are] really the same.”¹⁰

For Gary Schroen, the CIA field officer who led the first mission into Afghanistan in late September 2001, the simultaneous focus on both the Taliban and al Qaeda was an operational necessity. “I knew that the only way to get at bin Ladin (sic) was to go after him in Afghanistan,” he explained in his book *First In*, “and the only way to effectively chase him in that country was to eliminate the Taliban forces protecting him.”¹¹ Cofer Black, who ran the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center and influenced the thinking of key policymakers, would later say of the US military presence in Afghanistan, “Our mission was to engage, defeat, and destroy al-Qaida, and since they were inseparable from the Taliban, the Taliban too.”¹²

Such views, over time, became a de facto rationale for maintaining a US troop presence in Afghanistan long after al Qaeda had been chased out of the country. If the Taliban returned, or so the argument went, the terrorists would too. Up until the last days of the US military presence in Afghanistan, this assumption was used as justification for keeping US troops in the country. (In 2023, two years after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, US intelligence officials quietly concluded that al Qaeda was “unlikely” to revive itself in Afghanistan).¹³

The conflation of al Qaeda and the Taliban furthered a strategic purpose as well. According to Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, “remov[ing] the Taliban government” was seen within the Bush administration as “a way of communicating to state sponsors of terrorism that there are very heavy penalties to be paid for being associated with groups that attack the United States.”¹⁴

“Going after the Taliban wasn’t simply a matter of depriving al Qaeda of support, although that was also important,” said Feith, “it was sending a signal to other state sponsors of terrorism that they would be held responsible if they were associated with groups wanting to attack the U.S. ... We wanted to send a message that you better well damn pull the reins in or you’ll pay the price.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Quoted in Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), 33, Kindle.

¹¹ Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Presidio Press, 2005), 19.

¹² Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 110.

¹³ See “New US Intelligence Suggests al Qaeda Unlikely to Revive in Afghanistan, but Officials Warn ISIS Threat Remains,” *CNN*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/08/politics/us-intelligence-al-qaeda-afghanistan>.

¹⁴ Doug Feith, interview with authors, Zoom audio and video, September 20, 2023.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In Feith's view, attacking the Taliban would not just force al Qaeda out of the country, but it would scatter its members and, in the process, make them more visible and vulnerable to US counterterrorism efforts globally.¹⁶

So, United States pursued an aggressive counterterrorism mission that treated those even loosely affiliated with the Taliban as an enemy. In the wake of the deadliest terrorist attack on US soil, military officials often felt compelled to attack something or someone. "Units in country were told to capture or kill suspected terrorists regardless of the cost," writes Carter Malkasian in his history of the US War in Afghanistan. "Under this pressure... US operators started attacking former Taliban simply because they were there rather than for any clear tie to al-Qaeda."¹⁷

Those detained by the US military were subjected to harsh interrogation practices that met the international definition of torture. Counterterrorism disproportionately drove US policy in Afghanistan, and collateral harm to Afghans was the inevitable result.¹⁸

At home, US officials continued to lump the Taliban and al Qaeda into the same rhetorical bucket and treated the two nominal allies as though they were interchangeable. In April 2002, President George W. Bush spoke of US troops "hunting down the al Qaeda and Taliban forces" and boasted that "the United States and its partners [were] pressing forward with a military campaign against al Qaeda and the Taliban."¹⁹

Others in the administration spoke more directly about the relationship between the two groups — and focused as much on the Taliban as the actual terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. In January 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said US goals in Afghanistan were "to have the Taliban no longer be the government influencing Afghanistan, and that's been achieved. . . . Second to capture or kill the senior leadership of the Taliban And, third, to capture or kill [the] al Qaeda at all levels."²⁰

Department of Defense press releases would regularly speak of the two groups as one and the same and treated the goal of capturing al Qaeda terrorists and former Taliban as of equal importance.²¹

Similar sentiments were echoed by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who said in February 2002, that "al-Qaida was completely integrated with the Taliban" and the United States had destroyed the two groups "as functioning organizations."²² On the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, in remarks

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Malkasian, *The American War*, 11.

¹⁸ Franklin Hagenbeck, interview with authors, Zoom audio and video, June 29, 2023.

¹⁹ "Remarks by the President to the George C. Marshall ROTC Award Seminar on National Security, Cameron Hall, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia," George W. Bush, April 17, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020417-1.html>; "Radio Address to the Nation," President George W. Bush, April 20, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/coalition/cr/rm/2002/9998.htm>.

²⁰ Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, interview with C-SPAN, January 8, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121026054604/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=1089>.

²¹ Jim Garamone, "U.S. Using Intel to Foil Terror Attacks," American Forces Press Service, January 11, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121113170421/http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=43862>.

²² "Be Heard: An MTV Global Discussion with Colin Powell," February 14, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2002/8038.htm>.

at the United Nations, Powell boasted that “Coalition forces led by the United States have liberated the Afghan people from the dual tyranny of al-Qaida terrorists and the Taliban.”²³

However, a cursory examination of the two groups reveals they had different political and ideological origins and agendas — and viewed each other as much with suspicion as camaraderie.

Allies In Name Only

Osama bin Laden and the terrorist organization he led was focused on international jihad and waging war against the United States. For him, Afghanistan was merely a launching pad for high-profile, mass-casualty terrorist attacks against the group’s infidel Western enemies. From the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing targeting American service members in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and the US embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, to the suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000 and the 9/11 attacks, the terrorist group engaged in a sustained and asymmetrical conflict against the United States. In fact, after 9/11, bin Laden initially welcomed the US invasion of Afghanistan because he believed that, like the Soviet Union in the 1980s, American troops would become bogged down in a guerrilla war.

Just as the United States viewed Afghanistan as an abstraction and a venue for waging counter-terrorism, bin Laden acted the same: Afghanistan and its people were secondary to his larger jihadist goals.

The Taliban’s strategic priorities were very different. The group is an indigenous Afghan movement, founded by Mullah Omar and religious students in 1994, that arose in response to the corruption and human rights abuses of the mujahideen warlords—and the country’s increasingly bloody civil war. The Taliban’s ascent to prominence enjoyed, at least initially, broad domestic support.

Though unquestionably committed to a theological agenda they had little interest in international jihad—and generally disapproved of al Qaeda’s provocations. After they seized Kabul in 1996, the Taliban sought to improve ties with the United States and the international community.²⁴

The Taliban was focused on establishing international legitimacy and recognition for their nascent regime. That Omar would repeatedly undermine that goal—from the regime’s brutal treatment of women to the internationally condemned destruction of ancient Buddhist statues in Bamiyan in the spring of 2001—speaks to his stubbornness, flawed decision-making, and profound misunderstanding of international attitudes. But his behavior was not evidence of intent to antagonize US and Western publics (even if it had that effect).

Religious standing was crucial to Omar and bin Laden’s relationship—and the latter frequently played on the former’s insecurities. Bin Laden had sworn allegiance to Omar, a religious oath, calling him “the commander of the faithful,” a rarely invoked religious title that dates from the time of the

²³ Secretary of State, Colin L. Powell, “Remarks to the Security Council of the United Nations,” September 11, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2002/13407.htm>.

²⁴ Peter Bergen, testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 24, 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg67892/html/CHRG-112shrg67892.htm>.

Prophet Muhammad. Omar took seriously his image in the Muslim world and resisted calls to turn on the terrorist leader.²⁵

The divergent goals of the two groups created near-constant tensions and fostered an attitude of suspicion and mistrust. Al Qaeda's leaders and foot soldiers were predominantly Arab, originating largely from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, and were purposely segregated from the civilian population in Afghanistan by the Taliban. They looked down on ordinary Afghans, and generally considered the Taliban poor fighters. After a particularly disastrous battle against the Northern Alliance in 1997, some of al Qaeda's more hardcore members pushed for bin Laden to leave the country, owing to fear that a Taliban military defeat would leave them vulnerable.²⁶

The mistrust ran both ways.

Indeed, right before the Taliban captured the city of Jalalabad in 1996, a major military victory, bin Laden made his public declaration of war against the United States. The call led to numerous media interviews, which frustrated Taliban leaders, who were then forced to answer pointed questions from foreign diplomats about their meddling "guest." Some Talibs even worried that bin Laden was an American plant tasked with creating problems for their movement.²⁷

Omar practically begged bin Laden to stop with his public statements and provocations of the West. One of Omar's requests came the day before al Qaeda operatives attacked the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, which bin Laden failed to tell the Afghan leader about in advance.²⁸ Many of those around Omar were furious (as were some members of al Qaeda, who felt the attack had needlessly inflamed the Taliban and killed so many fellow Muslims). They began to see bin Laden as a liability who needed to be removed. Omar was concerned enough that he paid a visit to the terrorist leader and requested that bin Laden "not make military or political statements against anyone from our soil." (Omar renewed this demand in 2000 while also forbidding al Qaeda to plot attacks against the United States while on Afghan soil.)²⁹

As was often the case with the mercurial Taliban leader, who died in April 2013, Omar's motivations are difficult to decipher and are emblematic of his often contradictory decision-making regarding bin Laden and al Qaeda. Only months before the embassy bombings, after a visit by the Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, Omar agreed to turn bin Laden over to Riyadh in exchange for military support in the Taliban's war against the Northern Alliance insurgency. Yet, even while acknowledging that bin Laden remained a problem for the Taliban, Omar reneged on the deal with al-Faisal and accused the kingdom of illegitimacy for allowing American troops—infidels—to remain on sacred Islamic soil. He "is like a bone in my throat," Omar reportedly said at the time of bin Laden. "I can't swallow it

²⁵ "Afghanistan: The pledge binding al-Qaeda and the Taliban," BBC, September 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58473574>.

²⁶ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 178; Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (Hurst, 2015), 231-2, Kindle.

²⁷ Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War*, 218, 220.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 235, 237.

²⁹ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 162-64; Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, 239.

nor can I get it out.” Yet he also believed that “my people will lynch me if I hand him over. He is a hero.”³⁰

US cruise missile attacks launched against terrorist bases in Afghanistan after the 1998 embassy bombings hardened Omar’s determination to resist outside pressure. He redirected his anger, which had been growing against bin Laden, back toward the United States. According to some Taliban sources, the US strikes were viewed as an attack against Afghanistan—and an effort to destroy the Islamic emirate—rather than a legitimate response to al Qaeda’s actions. One close aide to Omar would later argue that “the sixty cruise missiles essentially drove him into bin Laden’s arms.”³¹

Omar’s fears that he would be perceived as not sufficiently devoted to Islam were also a major driving force in his deliberations. Turning on bin Laden could potentially cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate and undermine Omar’s authority as its leader. As international demands ramped up on Omar, his intransigence only grew. Those around him who questioned the relationship with al Qaeda were increasingly marginalized. Still, whatever Omar’s internal conflict, one thing was obvious: his unwillingness to turn against bin Laden had little to do with support for global jihad. Omar was an Afghan first and foremost, committed to establishing a doctrinaire Islamist regime.³²

In the wake of 9/11, the essential differences between al Qaeda and the Taliban became even more apparent. There is little evidence that bin Laden had given Omar a warning about the impending attack or that the Taliban knew what was about to unfold in New York; Washington, DC; and the skies above the United States. The murder of Ahmed Shah Massoud, a key Northern Alliance military commander, in Takhar Province in northeastern Afghanistan on September 9, 2001, by two al Qaeda suicide bombers might have been intended to weaken the rebel group, but, as with 9/11, it does not appear that Taliban leadership was told in advance of bin Laden’s plans.³³

When US bombs started falling on Afghanistan in October 2001, al Qaeda leaders had long since closed up and fled their terrorist training camps. Their fighters stayed on the front lines against the Northern Alliance insurgents, offering fierce resistance. Taliban fighters, witness to the fearsome nature of US air attacks, surrendered or simply fled, while al Qaeda elements retreated to the cave complex at Tora Bora for a fight to the death against the US invaders (many, including bin Laden, would eventually escape across the nearby border to Pakistan).

After the fall of the Taliban, the next major military engagement in Afghanistan took place in Shahi Kot, known in American military campaign jargon as Operation Anaconda. In early March 2002, thousands of foreign fighters, with some Afghan support, tenaciously fought US forces. The battle was the last major military confrontation of the post-9/11 war between US forces and the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. As Taliban leaders regrouped in Pakistan near Quetta, or plotted their next steps inside Afghanistan, al Qaeda leaders coalesced their forces in Pakistan’s North Waziristan region. The terrorist group continued planning and carrying out new attacks against US and Western

³⁰ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 166; Malkasian, *The American War*, 48.

³¹ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 162-4; Bette Dam, *Looking for the Enemy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 209, Kindle; Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 51.

³² Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 168; Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, 47, 51.

³³ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 205-07.

targets—and after the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq al Qaeda leaders shifted their focus there. The Taliban and al Qaeda, dispersed and diminished, mostly pursued separate agendas. Yet, American policymakers never shifted their strategy: the assumption of al Qaeda and Taliban conflation went unquestioned.³⁴

Missed Opportunity

In the wake of the Taliban's defeat in December 2001, the transformation of Afghan society away from harsh Islamic edicts ensued at a rapid pace. Schools long-shuttered under Taliban rule quickly reopened. Music, which had been banned by the Taliban, again blared from markets. Aid workers flowed into the country. For Afghan men, one of the immediate and celebrated changes was that barbers could suddenly ply their craft and trim beards that the Taliban had long forbidden them to cut.

Of far greater political significance was the near-overnight disappearance of the Taliban. The group's foot soldiers, for the most part, either returned peacefully to their villages or switched sides and declared their allegiance to Karzai and the country's new leadership. In some Pashtun areas, they handed over vehicles and keys to government offices to community elders.³⁵

But creating a truly new order would have also meant providing former Taliban and those allied with the group a role in Afghanistan's future. Between late 2001 and 2004, elements of the Taliban openly and frequently sought such an arrangement. Each time, they were rebuffed, representing a true missed opportunity for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

That Taliban outreach began in the fall of 2001, even as US bombs were falling on the group. Officials close to Mullah Omar contacted Karzai to discuss handing over power to the country's new leader (reporting indicates that Karzai and Omar had been in touch for weeks beforehand). On December 5, led by Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah and Tayeb Agha, a close Omar aide, a Taliban delegation traveled to meet Karzai under the watchful eye of US Special Forces troops. The group agreed to surrender their weapons and offer no resistance to the new Karzai government.³⁶

On December 6, Karzai announced to reporters that a deal had been struck. "The Taliban have decided to surrender Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul [provinces] to me," said Karzai, "and in exchange, we have offered them amnesty and they can go home to their homes without trouble."³⁷ A transition would be completed "in two to three days," he said, and the agreement had the full support of Omar, and "the Taliban would lay down their weapons and go to their homes with honour and dignity." In extending an olive branch to the country's former leaders, Karzai explained, "The Afghan Taliban are our brothers, and there is no cause for them to worry . . . Let there be no revenge and no vendetta." He even suggested that former Taliban officials could play a role in a future Afghan government.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., 264.

³⁵ Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, 32.

³⁶ Gopal, *No Good Men*, 46- 47.

³⁷ Quoted in Col. Nathan S. Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2001-2002: From the Sea* (United States: Tannenber Publishing, 2011), 151.

³⁸ "Taliban Agree to Surrender Kandahar: Power Transfer Begins Today," *Dawn*, December 7, 2001.

While declaring a “general amnesty” for ordinary Taliban fighters (“they can go home”) and insisting that “foreign terrorists” must be expelled and tried, Karzai said that the interim government would decide how to deal with the movement’s leaders. “The specifics would be worked out by the cabinet,” he told reporters. And he made clear that “Mullah Omar must distance himself completely from terrorism, from the presence of foreign terrorists in Afghanistan. He must condemn terrorism in Afghanistan. He must acknowledge that these terrorists have ruined Afghanistan and killed the Afghan people and have hurt the international community. If he doesn't do that, he will not be safe.”³⁹

Karzai, however, stressed his independence when it came to Omar’s fate, telling the BBC that he had not consulted with the United States on the question of whether Omar would face justice. “This is an Afghan question,” he declared.⁴⁰

Karzai’s views were echoed by a close confidante, his uncle Azizullah Karzai, who said that “tribal elders will decide what to do with [Taliban leadership and al Qaeda members].” However, “Until then, they should not be harmed.”⁴¹

There are conflicting views as to whether Omar personally intended to surrender or was even fully on board with the outreach. According to Bette Dam’s painstaking reconstruction of the debate among Taliban leadership in her book *Looking for the Enemy*, Omar was the primary holdout. He pleaded with the group to launch a guerilla war, but his lieutenants were done fighting. “We all knew time was up,” a military commander later told the journalist Anand Gopal. “Fate laughs at even the best schemes.” Rather than demand fealty, Omar handed over power to Obaidullah and told his fellow Talibs, “Whatever he decides has my support. Do what he says.” And then he departed.⁴²

Abdel Salam Zaeef, the Taliban’s ambassador to Pakistan, publicly announced the surrender, though with an important caveat. “We have agreed to surrender weapons not to Hamid Karzai but to tribal elders,” Zaeef said at a news conference in Islamabad. Omar viewed Karzai as an American lackey and was loath to acknowledge his legitimacy. Zaeef also made clear that the Taliban had received assurances that Omar would be allowed to “live with dignity” while remaining in Afghanistan. “Karzai and the tribal leaders have promised him (Omar) protection,” he told reporters.⁴³

<https://www.dawn.com/news/9630/taliban-agree-to-surrender-kandahar-power-transfer-begins-today>; “New Afghan Leader Sets Out Aims,” *BBC*, December 6, 2001.

³⁹ “Taliban Agree to Surrender Kandahar,” *Dawn*, December 7, 2001.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/9630/taliban-agree-to-surrender-kandahar-power-transfer-begins-today>; Bruce Pannier, “Afghanistan: As Kandahar Surrenders, Is Political Accord Unraveling?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 6, 2001; “Afghan Chief Karzai Declares Amnesty for All, Daily Says,” *Kyodo News*, December 5, 2001.

⁴⁰ “Taliban Official, New Afghan Leader Says Omar Is Set to Surrender Kandahar,” *Dow Jones Business News*, December 6, 2001.

⁴¹ Sarah Chayes, “Taliban Agrees to Surrender Kandahar,” *NPR: All Things Considered*, December 6, 2001.

⁴² Dam, *Looking for the Enemy*, 302; Gopal, *No Good Men*, 47.

⁴³ Bruce Pannier, “Afghanistan: As Kandahar Surrenders, Is Political Accord Unraveling?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 6, 2001. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1098184.html>; Robert Reid, “Taliban Agrees to Surrender Last Bastion, Southern City of Kandahar,” *Associated Press*, December 6, 2001.

So what went wrong? There is no simple answer, but it appears to have been a combination of the fog of war and pressure from US officials who had no interest in seeing the Taliban treated with dignity.

From a narrow perspective, the negotiated surrender of the Taliban to Mullah Naqib was scuttled by Gul Agha Sherzai, an Afghan warlord who was approaching Kandahar from the South with his own militia forces. Karzai called Sherzai, asking him to stand down and allow Naqib to take control of the city, but to no avail. “I don’t take orders from Hamid Karzai,” Sherzai shouted. “I don’t know Hamid Karzai, and I don’t know Mullah Naqib. Kandahar is mine.”⁴⁴

The irony of the situation was that both Karzai and Sherzai were receiving assistance from embedded US Special Forces. Yet, in an indication of the chaotic and haphazard nature of the war in Afghanistan, it does not appear that Sherzai’s capture of Kandahar was either planned or encouraged by US forces.

On December 7, Sherzai’s brother Pashta, a fellow militia member, conducted a reconnaissance mission into Kandahar and reported back that there was no Taliban resistance. As Sherzai’s American advisors sought guidance on how to proceed, the warlord took the initiative, gathered up hundreds of troops, and drove to the governor’s palace. Faced with what amounted to a fait accompli, the Americans soon followed and became the first foreign troops to enter the city.⁴⁵

Fearing a potential internecine war, US troops convinced Karzai to work out an arrangement with Sherzai. Col. David Fox, an American advisor to Karzai, asked him point-blank: “Do you want to start a civil war?”⁴⁶ Karzai had little choice but to back down. Days later, after a humiliating meeting at the palace in which Sherzai treated Karzai more like a supplicant than the country’s new president, Karzai agreed to allow Sherzai to become governor of the province. Although there is no evidence that Sherzai’s power play was orchestrated by the Pentagon, it did further one of the key US objectives in the fall of 2001: preventing reconciliation between the new government and the Taliban.

The question of how direct a role the United States played in scuttling the surrender agreement is a matter of intense debate. According to Dam, Karzai told her that he received a phone call from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who was angry and demanded that he rescind the surrender offer. Gopal claims Karzai told him the same thing. Jason Amerine, a Special Forces soldier embedded with Karzai, is 95 percent sure the two men spoke multiple times between November 17 and December 5, but he could not remember with absolute certainty – and can’t speak to the substance of these conversations. In his book *The Good War*, Jack Fairweather reports that Fox was “directed” to tell Karzai that “such an arrangement with the Taliban was not in American interests.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue*, 60.

⁴⁵ Charles H. Briscoe, Richard L. Kiper, James A. Schroder, and Kalev I. Sepp, *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (United States: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003), 178.

⁴⁶ Jack Fairweather, *The Good War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) Location 1145, Kindle; Briscoe, et. al., *Weapon of Choice*, 182-183.

⁴⁷ Anand Gopal, Bette Dam, and Jason Amerine, interviews with authors; Fairweather, *The Good War*, Location 1130.

Further complicating the issue, in a 2021 BBC interview, Karzai denied that the United States pressured him. Rumsfeld, for his part, skipped over the issue in his memoir, arguing that the fall of Kandahar came quickly because “the Taliban apparently knew that they could not win, so they had decided to regroup to fight another day.” According to an aide close to Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense never spoke to Karzai in the fall of 2001 and met him for the first time in mid-December at a freezing, bombed out hangar at Bagram Air Force base near Kabul.⁴⁸

Whether the phone call took place or not, there is little question that US officials both publicly and privately denounced these overtures to the Taliban. None played a more significant role than Rumsfeld, and his attitude toward reconciliation became more intractable as the possibility began to loom larger.

On November 19, he was asked at a Pentagon press conference about “reports that Mullah Mohammed Omar is trying to negotiate a surrender from Kandahar . . . and if so, what are the terms of the surrender the United States will accept?” Rumsfeld was circumspect. He said that the United States “is not inclined to negotiate surrenders,” nor because of the “relatively small numbers of forces on the ground to accept prisoners.” His position was decidedly aspirational. While noting that such talks were taking place—and that the United States was speaking to anti-Taliban forces—he explained, “It’s our hope that they will not engage in negotiations that would provide for the release of Al Qaeda forces” or other non-Afghans. He also emphasized that the United States would not “knowingly” allow Omar to flee Kandahar. “But,” Rumsfeld added, “we’re not in a position of determining or controlling this.”⁴⁹

He adopted a similarly detached attitude on November 26. When asked about the possibility of widespread Taliban defections, he said, “They clearly have done a vicious job on the people of Afghanistan. I think the people of Afghanistan would be ill-advised to leap forward to bring them in and embrace them and have them participate in the new government, *but that’s for the people of Afghanistan to decide*.”⁵⁰

Days later, however, Rumsfeld’s tone hardened. He went out of his way to tell reporters that surrender would not be an acceptable outcome. “There’s been some speculation in the press that Omar conceivably could be attempting to find some way to negotiate a surrender of [Kandahar],” he said. “I can assure you that the United States would vigorously oppose any idea of providing him amnesty or safe passage of any type.”⁵¹

In late November, the idea of a Taliban surrender was still speculative. By December 6, it appeared to be a real possibility, which makes Rumsfeld’s comments that day at a Pentagon press conference all the more telling. Citing reports that a deal had been reached with Omar to allow him to remain in Afghanistan, Rumsfeld was asked whether the United States would “accept that kind of a situation.”

⁴⁸ Dam, *Looking for the Enemy*, 302; Anand Gopal, interview with authors, June 6, 2023; Lyse Doucet, “A Wish for Afghanistan: The President” *BBC*, September 15, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct2jn9>; Donald Rumsfeld. *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2012), 400, Kindle; Ed Giambastiani, interview with Authors, September 8, 2023.

⁴⁹ DOD News Briefing, “Secretary Rumsfeld,” November 19, 2001. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121026060743/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2444>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The Defense Secretary left little doubt about the US position. “If you're asking,” he said, “would an arrangement with Omar where he could, quote, ‘live in dignity’ in the Kandahar area or someplace in Afghanistan be consistent with what I have said, the answer is, no, it would not be consistent with what I have said.” In reinforcing the point, Rumsfeld issued a veiled threat to the country’s new leaders. “We obviously have a lot of things we have been doing to assist the opposition forces . . . and to the extent our goals are frustrated and opposed, obviously, we would prefer to work with other people, who would not oppose our goals.”⁵²

When asked if he was suggesting that the United States might refuse to support Afghan groups—including the country’s new interim president—if they ignored US demands vis-a-vis the Taliban, Rumsfeld did not dismiss the notion. “Our goals have been very clear,” he said. “They have been publicly expressed. They have been privately expressed to the opposition leaders. There is no ambiguity about them.” He denied “reports in the press” suggesting that talks between the Taliban and the interim government might have taken place and reiterated that such negotiations “would be inconsistent with our interests.”⁵³

At the White House, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer backed Rumsfeld, branding Omar “a combatant against the United States and other nations.” In an interview the same day, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was asked about Karzai’s offer of amnesty for Omar and said, “We made it clear it was totally unacceptable. And I think he has fallen off that position if he ever held it for very long.”⁵⁴

Speaking in Hawaii on the 60th anniversary of Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Bush—perhaps unintentionally—backed up members of his administration. Calling terrorists “heirs to fascism,” he said, “like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased. They must be defeated. This struggle will not end in a truce or a treaty. It will end in victory for the United States, our friends, and for the cause of freedom.”⁵⁵

While the public statements of US officials left little ambiguity, it appears the same message was sent privately. According to reporting by NPR’s Tom Gjelten, “US officials were very aware of what negotiations he [Karzai] was undertaking with Mullah Omar” and had “made very clear throughout these discussions that [the US] would not support any deal” that allowed Omar to escape justice.⁵⁶

Other Afghans claim to have heard similar warnings. The Northern Alliance’s envoy in Washington, Haron Amin, told the Associated Press, “It has been communicated to us that if we arrange a plan that allows for the release of Omar, Karzai would lose support from America and the Northern Alliance would lose the support of the coalition. That has been made very clear to us.”⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ DOD News Briefing, “Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Pace,” December 6, 2001. <http://web.archive.org/web/20121026041223/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2604>.

⁵⁴ Brian Knowlton, “Rumsfeld Rejects Plan To Allow Mullah Omar ‘To Live in Dignity’: Taliban Fighters Agree to Surrender Kandahar,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2001; “CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer,” *CNN*, December 09, 2001. <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/le/date/2001-12-09/segment/00>.

⁵⁵ “President Bush on Pearl Harbor,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2001. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext_120701.html.

⁵⁶ Mullah Mohammed Omar Said To Be Ready To Surrender Kandahar,” *NPR: Morning Edition*, December 6, 2001.

⁵⁷ Kathy Gannon, “Taliban Surrender Is Conditional,” *Associated Press*, December 6, 2001.

Whether this message was transmitted directly to Karzai is still unknown. But what is clear is that in the immediate wake of the George W. Bush administration's public dismissal of his surrender initiative, Karzai's language shifted—and, according to Amerine, Karzai closely monitored the public statements of US officials.⁵⁸

On December 8, in an interview with Reuters, Karzai did an about-face from his earlier comments. He said that Omar and top Taliban leaders must be held accountable. "For the higher-ranking Taliban, if there is a case against them, they must face trial. It is for all those who committed crimes, including him [Omar]. He has not made even a statement regretting what he has done. If he is found, he must face trial."⁵⁹

Days earlier, Karzai had said Omar would be safe as long as he renounced al Qaeda and terrorism. Now, he accused Omar of renegeing on his part of the surrender deal telling reporters, "Of course, I want to arrest him. He is a fugitive from justice."⁶⁰

Karzai was not just under pressure from the United States. Sherzai's spokesman accused him of making a "very, very wrong decision in Kandahar" and striking a deal with Omar.⁶¹ Members of the Northern Alliance weighed in as well. "Karzai is taking the side of the enemy of the people of Afghanistan," said Abdullah Tawhidi, the group's deputy security minister. "If that is the case, if he is going to support Mullah Omar, we do not follow him."⁶²

Others argued that Karzai had undercut his credibility by switching course on the question of amnesty—and that his move risked upsetting Omar's fellow Pashtuns. According to Ahmed Rateb Popal, a cousin of Karzai and intermediary in talks with the Taliban, "The Pashtuns are looking very seriously at what he's saying about Mullah Omar and the way he's handling the situation in Kandahar. The way he has made his statements and changed them—that will create mistrust."⁶³

As for the Americans, they continued to hammer the point even after the surrender agreement had fallen apart.

In December, Rumsfeld traveled to Kabul. He told reporters that when it came to the Taliban, "the only thing you can do is to bomb them and try to kill them. And that's what we did, and it worked. They're gone. And the Afghan people are a lot better off." But Rumsfeld warned, "There still are al Qaeda and Taliban people in the country, in the mountains, hiding in the cities, in the caves, and across the borders. There are a lot of fanatical people. And we need to finish the job." And he made

⁵⁸ Jason Amerine, interview with authors, July 13, 2023.

⁵⁹ Michael R. Gordon & Norimitsu Onishi, "A NATION CHALLENGED: TALKS CONTINUING; OFFER IS MADE TO SURRENDER TALIBAN'S LAST STRONGHOLD; DEAL MAY HINGE ON AMNESTY," *New York Times*, December 7, 2001.

⁶⁰ Laura King, "Omar: Unwanted by Many, Wanted by New Rulers," *Associated Press*, December 8, 2001; "Troops Abandon Kandahar," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 8, 2001.

⁶¹ Mark Baker, "Last City Falls, But No Hint Of Bin Laden," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 8, 2001.

⁶² David Rohde and Morimitsu Onishi, "Taliban Abandon Last Stronghold; Omar Is Not Found," *New York Times*, December 8, 2001.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

clear that he delivered the same message to Karzai and his incoming defense minister, Muhammed Fahim, “to make sure we're all on the same wavelength as to what's left to be done.”⁶⁴

Days after, Rumsfeld insisted that the Afghan government would assist US counterterrorism efforts. At a press briefing in Brussels, he issued another veiled threat. If “we find people who aspire to high office . . . have been involved in preventing us from getting our hands on people who are responsible for what is going on in Afghanistan, [they] will find the United States not terribly friendly to their aspirations.”⁶⁵

When asked by reporters what assurances he had received from Karzai that he would “stick with the U.S. in going after al Qaeda and the Taliban,” Rumsfeld replied, “I just sat down with the interim leader of Afghanistan, and he looked me in the eye and told me so . . . We intend to find as many of those people as we can. Everyone in that country knows that. We have told every one of the anti-Taliban forces. We have told the interim government. . . And I can't believe anyone . . . isn't aware of that being our intention, nor has anyone indicated to me that they are opposed to that.”⁶⁶

There is little documentary record outlining the US position regarding the Taliban's role in post-2001 Afghanistan. According to Col. Larry Wilkerson, who worked in the Office of Policy Planning at the State Department and later became Powell's chief of staff, he could recall no debate within the administration over a potential Taliban surrender—and no pushback from the State Department on the issue.⁶⁷

The closest evidence is a memo Rumsfeld penned in January 2002 outlining “Major Directional Decisions” in the war on terrorism.⁶⁸ Emblematic of the administration's declining interest in Afghanistan, the US mission there is barely mentioned in the 25-point document. According to Rumsfeld, “the U.S. is not there to stay.” Rather, the US presence in Afghanistan was intended “to help fight terrorism, liberate the Afghan people from the Al Qaeda and the Taliban, assure that it does not harbor terrorists in the future, assist with humanitarian assistance, and help establish the conditions to ensure the new Afghan government has the opportunity to succeed.”⁶⁹

But when it came to the just completed war, Rumsfeld said, “Success required recognizing that *defeating the Taliban regime had to be a goal, rather than preserving it to avoid chaos in Afghanistan* or separating

⁶⁴ Thom Shanker, “Rumsfeld Visits Afghanistan, Calling U.S. Goals Unfulfilled,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2001.

⁶⁵ Secretary Rumsfeld Media Availability en route to Brussels,” December 18, 2001.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121026041126/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2663>.

⁶⁶ “DOD News Briefing, “Secretary Rumsfeld” December 19, 2001.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121026041148/http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2677>.

⁶⁷ Col. Larry Wilkerson, interview with the authors, Zoom audio and video, October 25, 2023.

⁶⁸ Although the memo is dated May 2002, in Dov Zakheim's memoir, he asserts that that document was distributed by Rumsfeld to senior Pentagon staff on January 19, 2002. See Dov Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 127-8.

⁶⁹ Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale*, 128. Also “Major Directional Decisions,” Memo from Don Rumsfeld to Dick Cheney, September 3, 2002. <http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/992/2002-09-03%20to%20Vice%20President%20Richard%20B%20Cheney%20re%20Decision-%20Memo%20Attachment.pdf>.

“good” Taliban from bad ones. Afghan reconstruction (and rehabilitation of ‘good’ Taliban) could only come after the defeat of the Taliban regime.”⁷⁰

This is as close to a declarative sentence from inside the Bush administration on its attitude toward reconciliation that appears to exist in National Security Council (NSC) documents recounting internal debates about the war in Afghanistan remain classified). Such a stance precluded even the possibility of a Taliban surrender.

If the Bush administration had documented such a formal policy in writing, it has not publicly surfaced in the ensuing two-plus decades. But a written policy was hardly necessary. The message from administration officials was unambiguous: The war against the Taliban would continue. They would be given no quarter. And any talk of political reconciliation with former Taliban willing to swear allegiance to the new Afghan government was a nonstarter.⁷¹

The failed outreach in early December 2001, in the midst of a confusing and unresolved war, would not be the last time that the Taliban sought to reconcile with the Karzai government.

In late 2001, Mullah Omar’s former aide Tayeb Agha approached a close tribal ally of Karzai and handed over a letter he claimed was from Omar, asking for the Taliban to play a role in Afghanistan’s future. As recounted in Steve Coll’s *Directorate S*, according to an American official familiar with the entreaty, Omar told Karzai, “We want to be part of Afghanistan’s future, and I’ll let my Shura decide how to do this.” The Afghan president allegedly wanted to explore the possibility, but the Bush administration shot it down.⁷²

In January 2002, former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil was convinced by Afghan interlocutors to surrender to CIA officials. He traveled to Kandahar to discuss a plan to create a new political party consisting of former Taliban who would ally themselves with Karzai. The proposal was sent to Washington, eventually landing on the desk of Vice President Dick Cheney, who rejected it with a blunt rejoinder: “We’re not doing that.” Mutawakil was instead arrested and sent to a detention facility at Bagram Air Force Base. He remained there until late 2003.⁷³

Mutawakil was not alone. The former Taliban ministers of foreign affairs, defense, justice, interior, vice and virtue, information, health, commerce, industry, and finance, along with military commanders, key governors, and diplomats, surrendered or defected to the Karzai government. According to Anand Gopal, who has written extensively on this period, the “whip-wielding religious police” who had enforced the Taliban’s harsh religious edicts “were among the earliest to defect.” Other Taliban officials declared their intention to participate in future Afghan elections.⁷⁴

⁷⁰“Major Directional Decisions,” Memo from Don Rumsfeld to Dick Cheney, September 3, 2002.

<http://library.rumsfeld.com/doclib/sp/992/2002-09-03%20to%20Vice%20President%20Richard%20B%20Cheney%20re%20Decision-%20Memo%20Attachment.pdf>.

⁷¹ Thom Shanker, “A NATION CHALLENGED: NEWS ANALYSIS; A Cornered Enemy.” *New York Times*, December 7, 2001.

⁷² Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 140–1.

⁷³ Malkasian, *The American War*, 100; Coll, *Directorate S*, 141 and Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 271.

⁷⁴ Gopal, *No Good Men*, 105.

According to a spokesman for Sherzai in Kandahar, “Ministers of the Taliban and senior Taliban are coming one by one and surrendering and joining with us.” Elsewhere, Taliban who wanted to capitulate to the new government were rebuffed or struggled to find new members of the government who could accept their surrender.⁷⁵

Even the brother of mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, head of the Haqqani Network, which maintained close ties to al Qaeda and was among the most violent of Taliban-allied groups, approached intermediaries with a message to Karzai about a possible rapprochement. That, too, went nowhere.⁷⁶

Yet, the efforts continued. In November 2002, senior Taliban officials gathered in Pakistan to discuss a new round of outreach to the Karzai government. Although many of the group’s top leaders supported the initiative, infighting within the groups blocked a formal offer of surrender. According to researchers Felix Kuehn and Alex Strick van Linschoten, who maintained unusually close relations with the Taliban, had the movement’s leadership “been given some assurance that they would not be arrested upon returning to Afghanistan . . . they would have come, but neither the Afghan government nor their international sponsors saw any reason to engage with the Taliban at that point in time.”⁷⁷

When Taliban figures continued their outreach into 2003 and 2004, the Bush administration responded with a “blacklist” listing individuals with whom the Afghans were forbidden to contact. Karzai even went so far as to reach out to senior Taliban leaders in Pakistan to tell them that peace was not on the table but that the Americans would accept the surrender of individual Talibs. Not surprisingly, the Taliban had little interest in the offer.⁷⁸

Counterfactuals, particularly around war and peace, can be difficult to assess, but looking back at the missed opportunities for peace from late 2001 to 2004, flexibility on the part of US officials regarding the Taliban’s future could have led to a very different outcome for Afghanistan. By December 2001, the Taliban was a vanquished political movement with little leverage and a clear desire for reconciliation. To turn an old expression around, there was no fight in this dog.

As Thomas Barfield would later argue, the “time to win the peace is at the end of a war,” and an official Taliban surrender would have had dramatic catalytic effects. It would have, says Barfield, “formally recognized the termination of [the Taliban’s] claim to be the government of Afghanistan” and allowed for “the outlining of a reconciliation and reintegration plan for those who had fought for the Taliban.”⁷⁹

A surrender agreement would have reassured Taliban fighters they need not fear a Karzai government and that they had a role to play in Afghanistan’s future. From a security standpoint, it would have smoothed the path for nation-building because it would have put a formal end to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 105, 121.

⁷⁶ Christia Fotini and Michael Semple, “Flipping the Taliban.” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2009).

⁷⁷ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 249-50.

⁷⁸ Malkasian, *The American War*, 101.

⁷⁹ Thomas Barfield, “Statebuilding, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism Complementary or Contradictory Strategies?” (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, April 2016), 10.

military hostilities. However, the US government was wedded to the view that al Qaeda and the Taliban were interchangeable and refused to show any leniency or create a path for Taliban reintegration. If the Taliban wanted a role in Afghanistan’s future, they would have to fight for it.

US Lack of Actions Creates a Political Vacuum

Security

The Bush administration’s disinterest in reconciliation with the Taliban was closely matched by its indifference regarding Afghanistan’s future.

With Washington’s focus quickly shifting to the coming war with Iraq, Bush’s national security principals relegated Afghanistan to the assistant-secretary level of the bureaucracy, impeding proper discussion of overall strategy, policy, and resources. As early as November 2001, with the war in Afghanistan still unfinished, Rumsfeld ordered CENTCOM Commander Gen. Tommy Franks to draw up war plans for Iraq.⁸⁰

On matters of reconstruction and security, US officials reverted to the “graveyard-of-empires” assumption, believing that a significant international presence would upset Afghans. Writing in his memoir, Bush captured the prevailing attitude within his administration: “we were all wary of repeating the experience of the Soviets and British who ended up looking like occupiers.”⁸¹

In May 2002, Wolfowitz said Afghanistan was “notoriously hostile to foreigners and notoriously difficult to govern . . . Just think of the history of the British in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century or even the Soviets in the last century.” Yet, in the same interview, Wolfowitz said that the US goal in Afghanistan “is to try to create conditions so that [the country] does not revert to the same kind of haven for terrorists that it became after the Soviets left.”⁸²

There was a fundamental and unbridgeable divide between the administration’s rhetoric and the resources and attention it was willing to expend to achieve its goals.

By seeking to minimize an active US presence in Afghanistan, efforts to improve the living standards of Afghan civilians lacked focus, were poorly implemented, and under-resourced, and took an inevitable back seat to security considerations and anti-terrorism efforts. This approach also ensured that security would be outsourced to Afghan warlords, many of whom had agendas and concerns quite separate from those of the United States.

It was not just that US officials wanted to keep a small footprint for US troops—they preferred to keep others out as well. The ISAF force, consisting of a small number of British troops, that patrolled Kabul was considered an initial success story in maintaining order in the capital. As noted

⁸⁰ Matthew Sargent, et. al., *Staying the Unfavorable Course: National Security Council Decisionmaking and the Inertia of U.S. Afghanistan Policy, 2001-2016* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), 62; Carter Malkasian, interview with authors, October 28, 2022.

⁸¹ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2011), 207.

⁸² Fred Hiatt, “Underachieving Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2002.

above, they were welcomed by Afghans, many of whom had watched rival warlords lay waste to Kabul after the fall of the Communist leader, Najibullah.

However, a British proposal to increase the ISAF force to 25,000 and station them outside the capital was met with skepticism by Rumsfeld. (Karzai made a similar request in January 2002, as did then-Senator Joe Biden, who at a congressional hearing in June 2002 questioned the Pentagon's opposition to "any expansion of ISAF when everyone has called for an expansion.")⁸³

Richard Haass, the State Department's Director of Policy Planning, who had been tasked as the US government's coordinator for the future of Afghanistan, picked up the mantle. In early 2002, at an NSC meeting he proposed that the administration support a US military presence of "some 25,000–30,000 troops (matched by an equal number from NATO countries) . . . to help maintain order after the invasion and train Afghans until they could protect themselves."⁸⁴ That too was rejected.

In a later interview, Haass added: "There was deep pessimism about what could be accomplished. And I couldn't definitively say that it was wrong. I thought reasonable things could be achieved, but I couldn't prove it. There was no inclination to get involved there at all. Afghanistan was a black hole, culturally and politically resistant to what we were trying to accomplish—forever tribal, forever decentralized. For all the enthusiasm during that period about remaking Iraq, you had the opposite in Afghanistan."⁸⁵

Rumsfeld and other top Pentagon officials also feared that the presence of foreign troops would constrain US military operations, which were focused on rounding up al Qaeda and Taliban operatives. But, above all, was the continued aversion of Bush administration officials to anything that smacked of nation-building.⁸⁶

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the administration's ambivalence about Afghanistan was its approach toward security. As noted above, senior officials—including Bush himself—preferred a small US military force, fearing a negative Afghan reaction to the presence of a large occupying army. "At the time," Bush explained, "13,000 troops seemed like the right amount."

But at the same time, the Bush administration dragged its feet on building an indigenous Afghan army. The Bonn Agreement envisioned a force of up to 70,000, but Rumsfeld doubted that a country as poor as Afghanistan could ever support a force that large; he fought to keep the size of the army as small as possible. That Karzai and his minister of defense, Fahim Khan, wanted as many as 250,000 Afghan National Army troops is further evidence of the chasm between the Bush administration and its Afghan partners. Yet, by 2004, the Afghan National Army totaled approximately 16,000 troops, a woefully inadequate number (it finally reached 70,000 in 2009, as the Taliban insurgency was at full force). By failing to provide security, the US not only undermined

⁸³ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (New York: Penguin Press), 134; Astri Suhrke, *When Less Is More* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 80-83; Amy Waldman, "Afghan Leader Warily Backs U.S. Bombing," *New York Times*, January 2, 2002.

⁸⁴ Richard Haass, "Time to Draw Down in Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/haass-time-draw-down-afghanistan-74467>; Fairweather, *The Good War*. Location 1367.

⁸⁵ Richard Haass, interview with authors, Zoom audio and video, April 26, 2023.

⁸⁶ Rashid, *Descent*, 134; Astri Suhrke, *When Less Is More* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 80-83; Amy Waldman, "Afghan Leader Warily Backs U.S. Bombing," *New York Times*, January 2, 2002.

confidence in Karzai's new government, but it also created a vacuum—one that would be filled by Afghan warlords.⁸⁷

Reconstruction

Skepticism about Afghanistan's future was also reflected in the Bush administration's first post-9/11 budget. In February 2002, the White House proposed spending a mere \$151 million in aid to Afghanistan for fiscal year 2003, including only \$1 million for the new Afghan Army.⁸⁸

The United States, notes Steve Coll, "had spent \$4.5 billion on the 2001 war . . . Yet the administration would not propose to spend even 10 percent of the war's cost on Afghanistan recovery or to secure the peace with new Afghan forces." Robert Finn, who in March 2002 became the US ambassador in Kabul, later observed, "You get what you paid for, and we paid for war."⁸⁹

Even some Bush administration insiders expressed frustration over the disconnect between grandiose US aims and the resources the White House proposed expending to achieve them. Pentagon comptroller Dov Zakheim, who would be named coordinator for Afghan reconstruction, called the \$1 million figure "laughable." He would later ruefully note that "the US simply could not maintain its focus on an area that no longer has crisis written all over it."⁹⁰

After congressional intervention and State Department protests, the total aid number would jump to nearly \$1 billion, but that amount was still woefully inadequate.⁹¹

In April 2002, however, Bush appeared to up the ante. Speaking at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), he called for a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan. His remarks sent shock waves through the administration because there had been virtually no internal discussion about such an initiative—and it represented a clear break from Bush's oft-stated opposition to nation-building.

Rumsfeld largely ignored Bush's VMI speech, and the president did not follow his words up with actions. According to Khalilzad, the speech did not lead to a "fundamental shift in policy."⁹²

Bush was so disengaged from what was taking place in Afghanistan that in October 2002, when asked by Rumsfeld if he wanted to meet with Gen. Dan McNeill, the US military commander in Afghanistan, Bush asked, "Who is General McNeill?"

When told by Rumsfeld that he was "the general in charge of Afghanistan," Bush replied, "Well, I don't need to meet with him."⁹³

⁸⁷ Bush, *Decision Points*, 207; Coll, *Directorate S*, 135; Malkasian, *The American War*, 94.

⁸⁸ John F Sopko, "Afghanistan Reconstruction: Lessons from the Long War," PRISM, 8, No. 2 (October 4, 2019). <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1980479/afghanistan-reconstruction-lessons-from-the-long-war/>. For reference, by 2021, the United States was spending \$4 billion annually on the Afghan military.

⁸⁹ Coll, *Directorate S*, 129.

⁹⁰ Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale*, 168-69.

⁹¹ Degen and Reardon, *Modern War*, 19.

⁹² Khalilzad, *The Envoy*, Location 2661, Kindle.

⁹³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to [redacted], Subject: "Meetings with President,"

US Counterterrorism Efforts Spur the Insurgency

To the extent that high-level administration engagement about Afghanistan occurred, it revolved around a near-exclusive focus on terrorism and security. Once again, Rumsfeld and the Pentagon took the lead.⁹⁴

On December 22, 2001, two weeks after the fall of the Taliban, Central Command issued Operational Order 03, which called for the US military to “support setting the conditions to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations with global reach in Afghanistan.” This matched Bush’s rhetoric, which broadened US objectives in Afghanistan to include preventing a terrorist safe haven from again taking root there. However, as a practical matter, because al Qaeda’s leadership and most of its fighters had been killed or fled to Pakistan, the focus of US operations quickly became the Taliban.⁹⁵

In April 2002, DOD guidance to Lt. Gen. Dan K. McNeill, who had responsibility for all conventional combat operations in Afghanistan, and his immediate superior CENTCOM Commander Tommy Franks, identified “the need to remove militarized Islamic fundamentalists from Afghanistan.” As Franks wrote in the order dispatching McNeill’s headquarters, “The exploitation of intelligence from sites, detainees, and materials enabling the preemption and disruption of future global acts of terrorism [will be] . . . the most critical product of our [Phase III] operations.”⁹⁶

In reality, however, the Pentagon offered modest direction to military commanders on the ground. According to Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck, who commanded the 10th Mountain Division and led Operation Anaconda, he received “very little guidance from above.” He noted that the political leadership didn’t believe there was much to do in Afghanistan, and little effort was made by higher-ups to coordinate the various US military forces in the country (the Army, CIA, and the Joint Special Operations Command). Hagenbeck would later note that during a visit from Wolfowitz in March 2002, the Pentagon’s number two official pointed in the direction of Iraq and said, “by this time next year we’ll be over there.”⁹⁷

Lt. Gen. David Barno, who took over command of US forces in the Fall of 2003, said that when it came to Army leadership, “there was no interest whatsoever in providing us with anything but the absolute minimum level of support.” As for his experiences with Rumsfeld, he noted that the defense secretary was focused on limiting US financial costs in Afghanistan above nearly all other considerations.⁹⁸

5:50 p.m., not classified,” National Security Archive, October 21, 2002. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24552-office-secretary-defense-donald-rumsfeld-snowflake-redacted-subject-meetings>.

⁹⁴ Malkasian, *The American War*, 82.

⁹⁵ Degen and Reardon, *Modern War*, 129.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹⁷ Franklin Hagenbeck, interview with authors, June 29, 2023.

⁹⁸ Christopher N. Koontz, editor, *Enduring Voices: Oral Histories of the U.S. Army Experience in Afghanistan, 2003–2005* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2008), 49; David Barno, interview with authors, October 4, 2023.

Keeping the Footprint Small . . . And Having the Opposite Effect

Indeed, US officials went to great lengths to keep the US footprint in Afghanistan as small as possible. According to McNeill, Army Vice Chief of Staff General John Keane told him, “Don’t you do anything that looks like permanence. We are in and out of there in a hurry.” Kratzer recalled that in 2001 General Franks “told me directly, with his finger in my face, that I not get involved in nation-building.”⁹⁹ Ryan Crocker, a career foreign service officer who briefly served as chargé d’affaires in Kabul in early 2002, explained, “The Pentagon’s view was our job is done, and let’s get out of here. We got rid of the evil and we should not get stuck.” That viewpoint traveled all the way up the chain of command to the president himself, who told Khalilzad, “Zal, we’re not there to fix their problems!”¹⁰⁰

According to the official US Army history of military operations in Afghanistan from October 2001 to September 2005, while there was no official cap on the number of US troops in Afghanistan, “The pressure to keep numbers low was keenly felt by all deploying commanders as they tailored their units for operations in country.”¹⁰¹

The problem with this strategy would only become evident later. By focusing on counterterrorism, ignoring security for the Afghan people, and allying the United States with warlords, the Bush administration unwittingly inserted itself into local disputes and rivalries.

Indeed, this would become a chronic issue for the United States and one that policymakers never appeared to grasp—anything the United States did, either acts of commission or omissions—garnered a reaction in Afghanistan, and usually one that American officials either did not expect or fully understand.

One of the more telling examples occurred in April 2002, when Karzai requested American help in taming one of the more problematic warlords: Pacha Khan Zadran, a Pashtun leader from the eastern city of Gardez. Khan was demanding that Karzai recognize him as the provincial governor and threatened civil war if he did not get his way.¹⁰²

The request created a fractious debate within the Bush administration. Secretary of State Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice argued that Karzai needed US support to legitimize his leadership and solidify his position as the country’s new president. Rumsfeld took the opposite view. The issue, he wrote in a May 2002 memo, “is whether the Afghan government will be required to take responsibility for its actions—political and military—or whether it will be allowed to become dependent on US forces to stay in power.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Interview with MG David Kratzer, CFLCC Camp Doha, Kuwait, July 16, 2002, 23. Accessed at Center for Military History.

¹⁰⁰ Coll, *Directorate S*, 134; Khalilzad, Location 2674; Rashid, *Descent*, 134.

¹⁰¹ Wright et al, 131.

¹⁰² Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 406-407.

¹⁰³ Rumsfeld to Bush et al., “US Role in Gardez Situation—or, more broadly, whether or not the US should intervene in Afghan vs. Afghan conflicts,” May 10, 2002 as found in Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 407.

From the Secretary of Defense’s perspective, Karzai could only succeed if he moved forward without US support. As he would later write in his memoir, “I was convinced Karzai needed to learn to govern the Chicago way (where Rumsfeld had grown up).” He continued:

In the 1960s, Mayor Richard J. Daley ruled Chicago—a city of many diverse and powerful elements—using maneuver, guile, money, patronage, and services to keep the city’s fractious leaders from rebelling against his authority . . . instead of giving Karzai the freedom to throw around the weight of the U.S. military, he should learn to use patronage and political incentives and disincentives to get the local Afghan warlords, governors, and cabinet officials in line.¹⁰⁴

This viewpoint was consistent with Rumsfeld’s position that the United States should not involve itself in intra-Afghan politics. But what Rumsfeld failed to appreciate was that keeping out of political disputes was, in effect, involving the United States. By refusing to back Karzai, Rumsfeld was giving a tacit boost to the warlords and undercutting the Afghan president in the process.

For all the efforts to maintain a small footprint, the US military effort would ensure that American forces played an outsized role—both in practice, but also in the imagination of Afghan powerbrokers. Once again, American leaders treated Afghanistan as they imagined it to be, not as it actually was.¹⁰⁵

Military Operations

Yet, even as military operations continued, the lack of success was notable. Hagenbeck would later note that after Operation Anaconda, al Qaeda and the Taliban had largely been wiped out as potent military forces. Operation Mountain Lion, launched in April 2002, focused on an area in Khost Province near the Pakistani border. Though the US employed a large number of combat units and “eliminated over 120 sanctuaries, nearly 500 weapon caches and destroyed over 1.2 million pounds of captured ammunition,” US troops “failed to find, fix, and destroy the enemy.” Indeed, not a single enemy combatant was killed or captured.¹⁰⁶

One of the major problems affecting US efforts was the lack of reliable intelligence, which pushed military planners to rely on worst-case assessments of potential enemy actions rather than verified information. This problem would become even more acute in August, during Operation Mountain Sweep near Gardez in Paktia Province. It was the largest US military operation since Anaconda, and its objective was to capture a former Taliban official and destroy arms caches in the area. But mission planners failed to reach out to two Special Forces detachments in the area. According to an after-action report, there was “no intelligence to indicate that any of the targets sought . . . [were] actually in the area.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 407-408.

¹⁰⁵ Donald P. Wright et al. *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) October 2001–September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 131, 190, 194. <https://history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/GWOT/DifferentKindofWar.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Degen and Reardon, *Modern War*, 184, 219.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

According to Gen. Dan McNeill, the Taliban had gone “to ground,” al Qaeda was a non-factor, and the United States was chasing “a lot of straws in the wind.”¹⁰⁸

The situation was little different for US Special Forces teams. One group that operated around Kandahar would report “capturing low-level leaders or people who were associated with the Taliban,” but never a “confirmed al-Qa‘eda member.”¹⁰⁹

In the places where US troops were deployed, the astonishing lack of knowledge about Afghanistan created additional problems and missteps. Graeme Smith, who covered Afghanistan for Canada’s *The Globe and Mail*, was warned by an intelligence official from the US-led coalition in Kandahar in one of his first trips to the country to avoid certain areas because they were rife with Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. When he asked how the US military determined the presence of insurgency fighters, he was told those were areas where Afghans fired at US helicopters. The Americans simply assumed that anyone firing at their aircraft were Taliban or al Qaeda.¹¹⁰

Quite often, other factors played a role in US operations—including a desire for vengeance. According to Scott Mann, a special forces officer, “Most of us wanted retribution. Even Green Berets, who normally thrive on an indigenous approach, didn’t have much use of working by, with, and through the local population. Not this time. We were more interested in avenging the 9/11 attacks by putting bullets through al-Qa‘eda and the Taliban.”¹¹¹

Ignorant of the granularities of Afghan politics and staked with a mission to kill terrorists, the US military’s actions—from night raids and air strikes to cultural ignorance about the mixing of men and women and affronts to Afghan honor—inflamed entire communities and alienated pro-American and pro-Karzai populations. The American troops, noted Astri Suhrke, a Norwegian political scientist, “acted like an occupation force, moving at will anywhere their operational plans required.” It created fertile territory when the Taliban emerged from their sanctuaries in Pakistan to launch an anti-government insurgency. In Logar Province, elders complained that the “Americans bomb the wrong kind of people and imprison innocent people” even though their communities were untouched by the violence. America’s reputation for violence preceded US troops and increasingly colored the view of Afghans about their presence in the country.¹¹²

“The original sin was not realizing at a strategic level that we brought in a lot of the actors whose own misdeeds and misconduct had led to the [earlier] success of the Taliban,” said former ISAF commander Karl Eikenberry. “We saw the world as black and white: Taliban evil, government of Afghanistan, pretty flawed but good guys. That was the biggest strategic mistake we made.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 221.

¹⁰⁹ Malkasian, *The American War*, 111.

¹¹⁰ Graeme Smith, interview with authors, June 12, 2023.

¹¹¹ Scott Mann, *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists* (Leesburg, VA: Tribal Analysis Publishing, 2015), 47, as cited in Malkasian, *The American War*, 113.

¹¹² Malkasian, *The American War*, 6; Suhrke, *When Less Is More*, 55.

¹¹³ Karl Eikenberry, interview with the authors, Zoom audio and video, June 14, 2023.

Detention Operations

The military focus on counterterrorism inevitably led to the arrest of thousands of ordinary Afghans, which fanned the flames of popular anger toward both the United States and the Karzai government. In many cases, US officials were seeking information about al Qaeda and potential future attacks against the United States. But the operations garnered precious little intelligence information about the terrorist organization. More often than not, these detentions generated anger and resentment.

Many of these prisoners were first interrogated in the field by US military personnel, or at the primary detention facility at Bagram Air Force base outside of Kabul. Some were eventually sent to the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base—a.k.a. Gitmo—in Cuba. But the vetting process ranged from poor to nonexistent. Possessing a rifle, or having once visited a safehouse where al Qaeda operatives might have passed through, could qualify as a reasonable suspicion of aiding and abetting terrorism. One of the more absurd cases involved a “popular model of Casio digital wristwatch,” which had been used as timers for bombs (and Osama bin Laden was once seen wearing one). Explains Mark Fallon of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, “There were actually detainees held at Gitmo because they had been wearing a Casio watch.”¹¹⁴

The first planeload of supposedly high-value detainees arrived at the hastily re-opened Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo in January 2002. During the first six months, detainees—most of these apprehended in Afghanistan—were arriving faster than the Navy Seabees could build pens to house them. Gitmo was supposed to hold house the “worst of the worst,” according to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, but the Afghans who passed through the facility during its long history were mostly victims of an overzealous effort to vacuum up as many suspected terrorists as possible, pump them for information, and sort out the guilty from the innocent at a later date—if ever.¹¹⁵

Fallon, who headed up the Criminal Investigative Task Force at Guantanamo during this period, would later explain why so many Afghans ended up there. US helicopters were “dropping flyers offering bounties for capture of members of the Taliban or al Qaeda.” One read (translated into English):

Get wealth and power beyond your dreams. . . . You can receive millions of dollars helping the anti-Taliban forces catch al-Qaida and Taliban murderers. This is enough money to take care of your family, your village, your tribe for the rest of your life. Pay for livestock and doctors and schoolbooks and housing for all your people.¹¹⁶

Fallon concluded that most of the Afghans “who ended up at Gitmo were picked up by the Northern Alliance or other groups that didn’t necessarily have any interest in the global war on terror, aside from picking up a \$5,000 per head bounty.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Mark Fallon, *Unjustifiable Means: The Inside Story of How the CIA, Pentagon, and US Government Conspired to Torture* (New York: Regan Arts, 2017), 50.

¹¹⁵ Katherine Seelye, “Some Guantánamo Prisoners Will Be Freed, Rumsfeld Says.” *New York Times*, October 23, 2002.

¹¹⁶ Fallon, *Unjustifiable Means*, 49.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

What's more, many of those who arrived at Gitmo were not, like the nineteen 9/11 hijackers, of Arab descent, but rather Afghan and Pakistani. This was another result of the untested assumption of lumping the Taliban together with al Qaeda in the early months after 9/11. According to Fallon, at Camp X-Ray at Gitmo "The detainee list was full of Afghan and Pakistani names such as Iqbal, Khan, and Ahmadzia. Whoever they were, they weren't part of the core Al Qaeda network—the Egyptians, Saudis, and other Arabs we'd been tracking for years."¹¹⁸

A review of publicly available information on the approximately 780 detainees held at Guantanamo, assembled by the *New York Times*, confirms these impressions. Afghan citizens were the single largest contingent, and by a wide margin (219 to Saudi Arabia's 134, the second largest). But of these, only one—Muhammad Rahim, a.k.a. Muhammad Rahim al-Afghani, a.k.a. Abdul Basir—remains in some form of detention. Rahim, captured in Lahore, Pakistan, in June 2007, was the last detainee to be sent to Gitmo.¹¹⁹

The detention of so many Afghans—including at prisons throughout Afghanistan—generated precious little information about al Qaeda, but it generated significant anger and resentment among the Afghan people toward the United States. In many instances, innocent people were caught in the dragnet, while the bin Laden trail went cold.

Death From Above

Another factor that contributed to the rise of the insurgency, was the increasing death toll of Afghan civilians from US bombs.

In late December 2001, American planes hit an ammunition dump in the village of Niazi Qala south of Kabul, killing 52 people. Though reporters could find no evidence that terrorists had set up camp there, Pentagon officials insisted that the village had been used "by Taliban and Al Qaeda senior leadership." Military officials relied on intelligence from the aforementioned Pacha Khan Zadran, who fed the United States information about a convoy heading to Kabul for Karzai's inauguration that allegedly carried al Qaeda fighters. In fact, the group was elders from the province of Khost, who had been pressured by Zadran to support his bid for provincial governor. A US air assault wiped out the group and then US military members turned their guns on a local village where the survivors of the initial raid had fled for safety. As many as 42 people in the village were killed. US officials insisted that the "convoy and the villages were valid military targets filled with enemy forces, and that several senior Taliban leaders were killed or wounded." According to one of the survivors, "The Americans' big mistake was to give satellite telephones to a man who has only one interest, and not the same one as the Americans."¹²⁰

In July 2002, US planes bombed a wedding party in Uruzgan after the attendees fired celebratory gunshots into the air. Fifty-four people were killed, and more than 120 injured. According to the US Army's history of the war in Afghanistan, "from the start of the conflict through July 2002, on

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁹ "The Guantánamo Docket: Detainees at the Prison at Guantánamo Bay," *New York Times*, Last updated December 11, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/guantanamo-bay-detainees.html>.

¹²⁰ Dexter Filkins, "Flaws in U.S. Air War Left Hundreds of Civilians Dead," *New York Times*, July 21, 2002. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/21/world/flaws-in-us-air-war-left-hundreds-of-civilians-dead.html>.

eleven occasions, American air strikes killed or wounded approximately 400 innocent Afghans.”¹²¹ An American nonprofit, Global Exchange, put the number at more than double that: 812 Afghans killed by American air strikes.¹²²

In a pattern that would become familiar in the Global War on Terror, the Pentagon denied that their bombing raids, which frequently relied on intelligence from local warlords, had led to civilian casualties. In another pattern that would become familiar, an account of the massacre in Uruzgan noted, “The raid on July 1 was the sixth since January that the United States had carried out to hunt Taliban leaders in southern Afghanistan. So far, Americans have not detained even a single important Taliban leader but have killed more than 80 people.”¹²³

Allying with the Bad Guys

The failure of US policy in Afghanistan has frequently been tied to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That decision, or so the argument goes, took attention and resources away from the situation in Afghanistan.

US involvement in Iraq, however, cannot excuse the flawed decision making in Afghanistan. Long before US troops crossed the border into Iraq in March 2003, the Bush administration chose to pursue an aggressive counterterrorism mission while at the same time limiting the US troop presence and that of international security forces. By failing to provide security, and largely ignoring reconstruction, the United States created a vacuum that was initially filled by the same warlords who had done such damage to the country in the mid-1990s.

In its single-minded pursuit of the Taliban, US officials saw the warlords and their militias as key allies. The Afghans could be relied on to provide intelligence about their former Taliban, or so the Americans believed. But, in reality, the warlords used the Americans as a tool for furthering their own power, eliminating rivals, and lining their pockets. The US reliance on local warlords bred instability and pushed many Afghans, who might have otherwise applauded the US presence or paid little attention to it, to take up arms.

The rise of Gul Agha Sherzai is a telling example and helps explain how and why things fell apart so quickly.

As noted earlier, Sherzai slipped into Kandahar in early December 2001 and supplanted Karzai’s choice to be governor of the province, Mullah Naqibullah. Sherzai drew a cynical lesson from his experience in Kandahar: the Americans could be easily manipulated.

As the key powerbroker in southern Afghanistan, Sherzai quickly became the primary conduit for resourcing the US military. He rented land to the US forces for millions of dollars. He seized gravel quarries, which were instrumental in reconstruction work, and charged the Americans exorbitant prices. He supplied the US troops with vehicles and fuel and even provided them with a steady flow

¹²¹ Degen and Readron, *Modern War*, 194.

¹²² Jill Treanor, “US Raids ‘Killed 800 Afghan civilians,’” *Economist*, July 21, 2002.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jul/22/afghanistan.jilltreanor>.

¹²³ Filkins, “Flaws in U.S. Air War.”

of workers. In the process, he created his own militia of loyal soldiers, providing him with a power base—and fighting force—that operated outside government jurisdiction.

But Sherzai's greatest tool for gaining favor with the Americans was in providing them with intelligence about the Taliban. Akrem Khakrezwal, who would later become Kandahar's chief of police, said, "The Americans were such amateurs. Anyone Sherzai or his interpreter told them was a Talib, they would take it on faith, and act on the accusation."¹²⁴

Col. Nick Carter, one of the top British military officials in Afghanistan, would later bemoan the decision to follow Sherzai's lead. "He made us flatten a whole load of people he wanted to get rid of. He claimed they were all Taliban, and we believed him. And the upshot of that is that we drove people into the arms of the insurgency." He added, "my suspicion was that some of those who purported to be Taliban would have been easier to govern with than Gul Agha [Sherzai]."¹²⁵

Harassment, arrest, and torture of former Taliban commanders by Sherzai's lieutenants pushed many of them to take up arms against the new government. According to Gopal, writing in 2010, "Elders in Panjwayi district . . . estimate that nearly every former mid-level Taliban commander, along with their relatives and friends, fled Afghanistan in the first years of the Sherzai government and are now in the insurgency." Former Taliban quickly realized that there was no place for them in post-Taliban Afghanistan and that remaining in the country put their lives in danger. Many fled to Pakistan and joined the incipient insurgency.¹²⁶

Sherzai's supplanting of Naqib and his rise to prominence also provided a cautionary tale for Karzai: for all his trappings as Afghanistan's new leader, he ultimately was not in charge. While the Americans had pushed for him to become president, the fall of Kandahar showed that they were not willing to expend political capital to solidify Karzai's political control. The Afghan analyst and Karzai biographer Bette Dam would later argue that losing control of Kandahar convinced Karzai to rely more heavily on his network of loyal allies, no matter their competence or effectiveness.¹²⁷

In few places did this approach backfire more disastrously than in the southern province of Uruzgan. Karzai appointed an old ally, Jan Mohammad, as governor. Mohammed had been detained and tortured by the Taliban, and Karzai had worked personally to ensure his release. Upon walking out of prison, he declared "Kill the Taliban, kill the Taliban." As governor, Mohammad carried out a violent policy of retribution against those who he believed had wronged him. He would accompany US Special Forces troops to point out the location of people he claimed were former Taliban, who the Americans would then dutifully arrest. These incidents fed a backlash against Mohammad and the government, but also the Americans who were doing his bidding.¹²⁸

A similar process would play out across southern Afghanistan. Rival warlords and powerbrokers used the Americans as muscle in their feuds and business disputes. Entire tribes, such as the Ishaqzai

¹²⁴ Chayes, *Punishment of Virtue*, 77.

¹²⁵ David Loyn, *The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan Since 9/11* (New York: St. Martin's, 2021), 39.

¹²⁶ Anand Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2010), 10-11, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep10483>.

¹²⁷ Bette Dam, *A Man and a Motorcycle: How Hamid Karzai Came to Power* (Netherlands: Ipso Facto, 2014), 188, Kindle.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 192-196.

in Maiwand, a district near Kandahar, were denounced as Taliban supporters and subsequently targeted by US forces. In 2003, US troops raided the home of Hajji Burget Khan, a prominent Ishaqzai leader. Khan was killed and his son was badly wounded. The injuries cost him the use of his legs, turning him into a paraplegic. Other Ishaqzai accused of Taliban sympathies were arrested. It was never clear why US forces targeted Khan. The overarching assumption is that a tribal rival had put the Americans up to it. Whatever the case, according to Gopal, “The killing of Hajji Burget Khan is often cited as the single most important destabilizing factor in Maiwand district and other Ishaqzai areas.” Three Taliban commanders who Gopal interviewed in 2010 “mentioned the killing as one of the main factors that led them to join the insurgency.”¹²⁹

Another infamous story recounted by many Taliban fighters involved Malim Feda Muhammad, a former schoolteacher who joined the mujahideen during the Soviet occupation and later became a Taliban military commander in the north. After the Taliban’s demise, he returned to his village in Panjwayi and abandoned politics. Nonetheless, he was picked up by US forces, sent to a detention facility at Kandahar Airfield, and subjected to humiliating interrogations in which he was stripped naked, beaten, and attacked by dogs. Muhammad’s story was repeated often by elders in Panjwayi as an explanation of why Afghans opposed the American troops. Muhammad later fled to Pakistan to rejoin the Taliban.¹³⁰

In Helmand province, which is to the west of Kandahar and directly borders Pakistan, it was much the same. The Karzai-appointed governor, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, revitalized the drug trade, doled out patronage to his supporters and targeted his political rivals in the province. According to research done by Antonio Giustozzi and Theo Farrell, corruption, abuse of the local population, particularly by the reviled Helmandi police, and even murders ensued as soon as the central government put down roots in Helmand. Writing in 2013, Giustozzi and Farrell reported:

Abusive governance was a major factor driving villagers toward the Taliban....[On] their return to Helmand, the Taliban were able to present themselves as the shari’a (that is, ‘law and order’) party. Pro-government warlords and their militias also harassed and targeted former Taliban commanders in Helmand who were trying to stay away from trouble in their villages after the demoralizing defeat of 2001....[M]any former Taliban returned to the insurgency in self-defence.¹³¹

In addition, specific tribes received favorable treatment in obtaining sought-after government positions (and subsequent access to resources), while others were left on the outside looking in. This further upset the delicate power balance in Afghanistan. Those tribes who saw their interests ignored, and plum government jobs and contracts handed out to rival groups, would, in time, form the backbone of the insurgency. These grievances also allowed the Taliban to expand their reach. Although some groups would take up arms against the Americans and the Karzai government for religious or ideological reasons, others did so with more parochial motives—frustration over mistreatment by US or pro-American forces or incessant corruption by American allies. So even as

¹²⁹ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 251; Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan*, 18.

¹³⁰ Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan*, 17-18.

¹³¹ Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012,” *International Affairs* 89, No. 4 (2013), 848; also see Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land*, 199-200.

Taliban elements had different motivations for fighting, their enemy was the same.¹³²

The US presence created a feedback loop that bred more, not less, violence. As Afghanistan experts Andrew Wilder and Paul Fishstein would write in a much-cited paper published in 2013, the US reliance on the warlords encouraged the Afghans to “maintain an insecure environment” and, in effect, “creat[e] a problem to solve a problem.” In one case, a guerrilla commander, Jan Baz Khan, was suspected of organizing an attack on an American military outpost, Camp Salerno, and then turning over suspected Afghans to the Americans. One of those detained, Dilwar, was killed by US guards, a story told in the award-winning documentary *Taxi to the Dark Side*. As the security situation worsened, US attention in a particular place would increase—as would their spending and cooperation with the local warlords. For America’s warlord allies, insecurity was good for business.¹³³

The Taliban Insurgency Begins

Without US actions and those of their warlord allies—all in pursuit of an enemy that had been wrongly assumed to be allied with al Qaeda—it’s debatable as to whether the Taliban insurgency would have unfolded the way that it did. In his history of the Taliban at war, Giustozzi wrote that in 2002 and up to early 2003, embryonic efforts to launch an insurgency against the new government found few takers. The Taliban were unable to raise money, and “tribal elders were almost unanimously opposed to any notion of the Taliban starting a new war and denied them support and facilitation.” As Robert Grenier, the CIA station chief in Islamabad, would later ruefully note, “The Taliban knew better than the United States did that they were defeated. They realized how much popular support they had lost.” For its part, Pakistan had little interest in a Taliban revival, and, to the extent they paid attention to the group, it was to arrest key leaders and hand them over to the Americans.¹³⁴

What changed? Giustozzi found that Taliban rank-and-file “almost universally” reported that the ability of the Taliban to build popular support and re-establish themselves as the leader of an insurgent force was “the arbitrary and abusive treatment of many former Taliban, as well as of others even very loosely linked to the Taliban regime.”¹³⁵

Gopal makes a similar claim based on his research in southern Afghanistan, particularly around Kandahar, home to much of the Taliban’s senior leadership. “The resurgence of the Taliban was not inevitable nor preordained,” he writes, but rather the result of specific actions and decisions made by US officials to shun reconciliation and target Taliban leaders.¹³⁶

¹³² Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan*, 12-13.

¹³³ Gopal, *No Good Men*, 109; Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Understanding the Relationship Between Aid and Security in Afghanistan* (Boston: Feinstein International Center, January 2012); Tim Golden, “In U.S. Report, Brutal Details of Two Afghan Inmates’ Deaths,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2005.

¹³⁴ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19, Kindle; Robert Grenier, interview with authors, March 24, 2023

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

¹³⁶ Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan*, 1.

According to Kuehn and van Linschoten, “By 2003, communities in southern and eastern Afghanistan had found themselves sidelined and openly targeted by new authorities. In a replay of processes last seen in 1994 in southern Afghanistan, parts of the communities started reaching out to Taliban.”¹³⁷

Would a larger and more committed US presence have avoided this outcome? If anything, because of the US focus on counterterrorism, it might have hastened it.

The US military’s unrelenting counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan was built upon untested assumptions. The conflation of the Taliban with al Qaeda, the reliance on warlords for intelligence and resources, and the inability to provide basic security (the basis of any government’s political legitimacy)—would, over time, have a catalytic effect on those elements pushing for an anti-American insurgency. Over time, confronted with a stark choice between the Taliban or government forces and warlords allied with the United States, many Afghans opted for the former.

By the end of 2002, a year after the wellspring of hope that accompanied Karzai’s inauguration, America’s action and inaction had laid the groundwork for a political backlash. Growing frustration with arbitrary detentions, abuse, corruption, and occasional strikes on innocent Afghans created fertile soil for a renewed push by the Taliban.

In February 2003, Omar publicly “called on all Afghans to wage jihad against the United States in Afghanistan” and warned that the Taliban would target anyone working with the Americans. Later that year, in June, Omar assembled a ten-member leadership council (that later grew to as many as 33 members), which would come to be known as the Quetta Shura. At the same time, financial support began to flow from outside donors initially affiliated with al Qaeda.¹³⁸

Omar advised his subordinates against striking prematurely, fearing that small-scale attacks would be dismissed as crimes or acts of personal vengeance. He wanted to create the impression that the Taliban were operating from a position of strength. Giustozzi speculates that some Taliban leaders were focused on “forcing Kabul to accept a settlement.” But others were confident that they could achieve a military victory. Of these, Dadullah Lang (a.k.a. Mullah Dadullah) would play a large role in the ensuing insurgency and eventually become the senior-most military commander in Afghanistan.¹³⁹

Initially, Taliban leaders began issuing threats to teachers in parts of southern Afghanistan. Soon after, Mullah Dadullah launched a series of attacks. In March 2003, for example, he ordered the execution of Ricardo Munguia, an engineer with the Red Cross. By the summer, Afghan military outposts were targeted. Assassinations, particularly of pro-government clerics, became increasingly commonplace. So too did night letters warning Afghans not to collaborate with the Americans.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 262.

¹³⁸ Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, 67-68; Malkasian, *The American War*, 115-16; Barnett Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 231.

¹³⁹ Rubin, *Afghanistan*, 232.

¹⁴⁰ Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War*, 20-21.

In June 2003, four German soldiers who were part of the ISAF mission were killed in a suicide bombing attack in Kabul. Previously, suicide attacks were rare in Afghanistan. Not even the brutal Soviet invasion and occupation had prompted Afghans to want to kill themselves and others to achieve their political objectives. But under Dadullah's leadership, attitudes changed and suicide attacks became a key tool in the Taliban's arsenal.

Dadullah also reached out to insurgents from Iraq. He brought them to Pakistan, where they taught Taliban fighters new tactics and the latest technology. The most effective of these, as demonstrated in Iraq, were improvised explosive devices (IEDs). A former Taliban deputy minister, Maulvi Mohammad Haqqani, would later report that foreign fighters started to visit and provide the latest IED and suicide bombing technologies. He explained that, "Until 2004 or so, we were using traditional means of fighting like we used against the Soviets—AK-47s and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. But then our resistance became more lethal, with new weapons and techniques: bigger and better IEDs for roadside bombings, and suicide attacks."¹⁴¹

Even more ominously, Taliban sanctuaries and safe havens started to appear inside Afghanistan, which suggested that the insurgency, though headquartered in Pakistan, had many Afghan sympathizers. Throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan, small "fronts" of fighters, under the leadership of a former Taliban figure began to organize. In time, they would ally themselves more directly with the Quetta Shura and operate under the umbrella of the Taliban.¹⁴²

Of particular note, however, was the Taliban's post-war interaction with al Qaeda. Again, the relationship between these two groups was a key rationale for the continued US counterterrorism campaign after December 2001. Yet, by and large, the two groups went their separate and distinct ways. The Quetta Shura organized the insurgency to reclaim Afghanistan, while al Qaeda and its affiliates carried out a number of high-profile terrorist strikes in London, Madrid, Casablanca, Sharm al-Sheikh, and Amman. Al Qaeda continued to try and strike US targets, though in the case of Richard Reid, the so-called "shoe-bomber," in 2001, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called "underwear bomber," in 2009, they were unsuccessful. Beyond these attacks, al Qaeda was increasingly focused on the emerging insurgency in Iraq. Afghanistan was barely on the group's radar screen. The Taliban, by contrast, remained laser-focused, as they had in the past, on Afghanistan, not international jihad.¹⁴³

Conclusion

Although the United States made a litany of errors in the period after the fall of the Taliban, the ultimate and most portentous mistake was in conflating the Taliban and al Qaeda and treating the groups as though they were two sides of the same coin. The Taliban did not embrace al Qaeda's nihilistic world view or its desire for global jihad. With the notable exception of Omar and several of his lieutenants, the group's key leaders were content to walk away from the fight and, in longstanding Afghan tradition, make peace with the country's new leaders. Had US officials accepted that the Taliban were a distinct organization with distinct interests from al Qaeda, and had

¹⁴¹ Sami Yousafzai, "The Taliban's Oral History of the Afghanistan War," *Newsweek*, September 25, 2019.

¹⁴² Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War*, 21.

¹⁴³ Malkasian, *The American War*, 117; Kuehn and van Linschoten, *An Enemy*, 264.

they recognized the tradition of postwar reconciliation embedded in Afghan political culture, the space for their surrender, eventual reconciliation, and perhaps even peace, might have opened up.

Instead, caught up in a desire for vengeance, a limited, binary view of those who were “with the terrorists” and those who were not, and an indifference to Afghan politics and culture, the United States pursued a counterterrorism mission that laid the groundwork for the insurgency to develop. And by relying heavily on duplicitous warlords, the United States unintentionally immersed itself as a protagonist in the internal tribal politics of Afghan society. In their willingness to work closely with bad actors willing to assist in the Global War of Terrorism and in undercutting the nation’s democratically elected president, US officials planted the seeds of the crippling co-dependency that would come to define the 20-year US odyssey in Afghanistan.

Afghans caught in the crossfire—or left out of the new Afghanistan under President Karzai—saw little option but to fight back. And who was there to absorb and support them? The Taliban, which resurged into a full-fledged insurgency by 2006. It was this insurgency that the United States and its allies had to contend with until the withdrawal in August 2021. And it was this insurgency that toppled the US-installed government in Kabul that same month.

Malkasian concludes, “Even without US counterterrorism operations, war may have returned. High-ranking Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, Jalaluddin Haqqani, and Dadullah Lang, never settled into a peaceful life. They probably would have re-formed the movement, regardless of US counterterrorism operations, especially after early peace feelers had been turned down.”¹⁴⁴

But would they have succeeded had the civilian population in Afghanistan, as well as tribal elites, not viewed the Taliban insurgency as a necessary counterweight to US troops, rapacious warlords, and the Karzai government? The answer to this question, of course, is ultimately unknowable, but the historical evidence suggests that US actions seeded the turf.

Contrary to the arguments of those who blame the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 for the return of the Taliban insurgency and the ultimate failure of US policy in Afghanistan, acts of commission—not neglect—led to that result. As Gopal pointedly noted, “It was not the existence of a new government, per se, that drove these former Taliban back, but the *behavior* of that government. Likewise, it was not the presence of foreign troops as such that spawned opposition from these former Taliban, but the *behavior* of those troops.”¹⁴⁵

The solution was not for the United States to do more—it was to question its assumptions and do something different.

¹⁴⁴ Malkasian, *The American War*, 114.

¹⁴⁵ Gopal, *The Battle for Afghanistan*, 20. Emphasis in original.



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