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Failure to Deliver: The US State-Building Mission in Afghanistan

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Executive Summary

This paper tests one of the core assumptions underlying the United States' mission in Afghanistan: US officials believed that it could deliver a stable functioning government that would provide basic services that could be established in Afghanistan and that such a government would be an effective partner in fighting al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups.

This assumption proved to be wrongheaded. From the moment that US troops arrived in Afghanistan in October 2001 until their final ignominious departure in August 2021, three successive presidential administrations, countless military and diplomatic officials, and a legion of advisors, commentators, and US officials imagined an Afghan state that matched a vision in their heads, but never aligned with the reality of Afghan culture, politics and capacity. Indeed, the belief that such a goal of building an effective and legitimate state could be achieved was arguably as flawed as any other US assumption about Afghanistan.

The failure of US state building in Afghanistan was the result of a myriad of factors, too numerous to address fully in this paper. However, five crucial misjudgments stand out and offer insights for future US policymakers.

- **A lack of policy attention from the president on down, which led to inadequate resourcing, and no clear prioritization by US officials**. The United States was unwilling to devote adequate money, troops, or time to create the stable, democratic and functioning state that US officials hoped could take root in Afghanistan. As the International Crisis Group would pungently note in 2006, the United States had opted for "for a quick, cheap war followed by a quick, cheap peace." For two decades, US officials repeatedly failed to match their rhetoric about Afghanistan with resources.

- **An inability to understand Afghan culture and politics, a failure to rely on the country's traditional governance structures, and an unwillingness to listen to the Afghan people**. US officials simply did not view Afghanistan as a country with a unique set of political, cultural and social attributes. Rather, it was a venue for waging war against terrorism. This ignorance and indifference toward Afghan culture and politics would manifest itself in countless ways over 20 years, leading to the creation of a "war-based economy" that incentivized instability, undermined the development of Afghan capacity, and made effective state building impossible.

- **Amidst frequent clashes between US and Afghan interests, US officials refused to subjugate US interests to improve the process of state building in Afghanistan**. Indeed, oftentimes, US officials imagined these conflicts away. Believing that US and Afghan interests were sufficiently aligned precluded any consideration of prioritizing certain US objectives over others.

- **A misguided belief that democracy, economic development, and human rights in Afghanistan were interlinked, and vital national security interests were at stake**. In fact, democracy in Afghanistan, and a stable, secure state that recognized human rights, was of little practical importance to US interests.

- **US officials were confident that America's military and diplomatic institutions possessed the core competencies to conduct state building in Afghanistan**. As US officials would soon discover, the US government is not set up or properly resourced to perform these missions, yet many held firm to the belief that with sufficient effort, attention, and time, success in Afghanistan was just around the corner. As former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates would write about the war in Afghanistan, "There was a terrible mismatch between our aspirations to change Afghanistan and our ability to do so."

The lesson from the US failure to help build a viable and sustainable state in Afghanistan was that the mission was simply too vast and too difficult for the United States to accomplish — and never should have been undertaken.

Cast of Characters

Sher Mohammed Akhundzada	Governor of Helmand Province, 2001-2005
Thomas Barfield	Afghanistan Expert, Professor of Anthropology, Boston University
Rick Barton	Co-Director of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2002-2009
Ramazan Bashardost	Afghan Politician and Former Minister of Planning, 2004
Tony Blair	Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2007
George W. Bush	43th President of the United States, 2001–2009
Sarah Chayes	Reporter; Special Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
James Dobbins	American Diplomat, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
Karl Eikenberry	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2005-2007
Richard Haass	Director of Policy Planning, US Department of State, 2001–2003
Abdul Rahman Jan	Helmand Province Police Chief and Former Drug Smuggler
Hamid Karzai	Afghan Statesman, fourth President of Afghanistan, 2002–2014
Zalmay Khalilzad	US Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2004-2005, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Diplomat
Ismail Khan	Governor of Herat Province, 2001-2004
Mohammed Khan	Helmand Province Intelligence Director and Opium Seller
Elisabeth Kvitashvili	USAID Acting Mission Director and Project Development Officer, 2002-2003
John McColl	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2002
David McKiernan	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2008-2009
Dan McNeill	Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, 2007-2008
Atta Muhammad Nur	Governor of Balkh Province, 2004-2018
Barack Obama	44th President of the United States, 2009–2017
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
King Zahir Shah	Last King of Afghanistan, served from 1933–1973

Failure to Deliver: The US State-Building Mission in Afghanistan

From the moment that US troops arrived in Afghanistan in October 2001 until their final ignominious departure in August 2021, three successive presidential administrations, countless military and diplomatic officials, and a legion of advisors, commentators, and US officials imagined an Afghan state that matched a vision in their heads, but never aligned with the reality of Afghan culture, politics, and capacity.

A product of magical thinking, the American effort at state building in Afghanistan culminated in the near overnight fall of a government that the United States had spent blood and billions in treasure to stand up.

Indeed, the belief that such a goal could be achieved was arguably as flawed and wrongheaded as any other US assumption about Afghanistan. At least the other assumptions had an air of plausibility. Al Qaeda and the Taliban *were* allies and al Qaeda *might* have reestablished a safe haven in Afghanistan if the Talban returned to power. A properly executed counterinsurgency strategy *might* have blunted the Taliban's rise and created an opening for a political settlement to the conflict. Pakistan *could* have come around, with proper inducements, to support US policy – as it did in the immediate wake of September 11. These assumptions were speculative and largely untested, but until 2021 they were never definitively refuted.[1]

However, the state-building assumption stands out as unequivocally disproven by events. The state that the United States and the United Nations crafted at Bonn, that was ratified at the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga, formally anointed as a democracy for the first time in the nationwide elections of 2004, and supported to the tune of an estimated $2.3 trillion by the Costs of War Project over 20 years, survived for only a matter of days after the United States finally withdrew its last military assets from Afghanistan.[2]

The seeds of US failure were planted in the first weeks and months of the conflict, by policymakers who were uninterested in the granularity of Afghan politics, wedded to unshakeable pre-conceived notions about the country in which they had gone to war and unwilling to fully commit resources and attention to achieve the vision they confidently promoted. Over time, another set of policymakers embraced this idealistic view of Afghanistan's future, but were also disinclined to test the underlying assumptions and pathologies that took root in those frenetic early days.

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[1] For the full list of assumptions considered in the Afghanistan Assumptions Project, see https://sites.tufts.edu/css/aap/.

[2] " Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," Costs of War, Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022.

President George W. Bush had campaigned against nation building as a candidate for the presidency in 2000. After 9/11 he shifted direction. Or, more accurately, his rhetoric changed. Whereas Bush had once denigrated nation building, in his 2002 State of the Union address he declared that "America and Afghanistan" were now "partners in rebuilding that country." He explained:

> We know that true peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan people the means to achieve their own aspirations. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan train and develop its own national army. And peace will be achieved through an education system for boys and girls which works.[3]

Looking back on this period in his memoir, Bush was unabashed in his reversal. "Afghanistan was the ultimate nation-building mission," he wrote, and he explained that Americans had both "a moral obligation to leave behind something better" than the Taliban's "primitive dictatorship." According to Bush, America "had a strategic interest in helping the Afghan people build a free society."[4]

The embrace of nation building was reflected in the statements of other administration officials. In January 2003, for example, Secretary of State Colin Powell celebrated the fact that "ten-thousand American soldiers" were in Afghanistan "helping to create conditions of security." He noted that "a new representative government [was] in place" and "we see new roads, new hospitals, new schools – where girls can attend and gain the skills they will need to lead productive, meaningful lives."[5]

In a July 2003 Pentagon memo, titled "Principles for Afghanistan – Policy Guidelines," the administration outlined an extraordinarily ambitious plan for Afghanistan's government.

- Moderate and democratic, though understanding that Afghans will not simply copy US-style institutions;
- Representative of all responsible elements in Afghan society and formed through the political participation of the Afghan people;
- Capable of effectively controlling and governing its territory;
- Capable of implementing policies to stimulate economic development; and
- Willing to contribute to a continuing partnership with the Coalition in the global war against terrorism.[6]

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[3] George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President to the George C. Marshall ROTC Award Seminar on National Security," Cameron Hall, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia, April 17, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020417-1.html.

[4] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 205.

[5] Secretary Colin L. Powell, "Remarks at the World Economic Forum," Davos, Switzerland, January 26, 2003, https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/16869.htm.

[6] Department of Defense, "Principles for Afghanistan: Policy Guidelines, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy," July 7, 2003.

"Success," the memo stated, "could create a model for the region and the Muslim world and [serve as] an example to other terrorist states."

In addition, US officials increasingly made a direct connection between Afghan democracy and US national security interests, claiming that free societies and stable nation-states were uniquely suited to combat terrorism.

As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said in a 2003 speech, "The United States and many other nations are helping Afghans rebuild their country and form a representative government, with democratic institutions, so that Afghanistan is never again a haven for terrorism."[7]

Bush made the linkage even more explicit, declaring in February 2007 that, "Our goal in Afghanistan is to help the people of that country to defeat the terrorists and establish a stable, moderate, and democratic state that respects the rights of its citizens, governs its territory effectively, and is a reliable ally in this war against extremists and terrorists."[8]

If such a government failed to take root, warned President Barack Obama in 2009, al Qaeda would return to Afghanistan and the country would once again become "a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can."[9]

To prevent that from occurring, Obama pledged that a redoubled US commitment to Afghanistan would "advance security, opportunity and justice" and "help the Afghan government serve its people and develop an economy that isn't dominated by illicit drugs." Investments in Afghanistan's future, said Obama, would "make the American people safer."[10]

These and other statements from US government officials in the years after 9/11 reveal a key assumption undergirding US policy throughout the 2000s and indeed the entire nearly 20-year mission in Afghanistan: namely that, with sufficient outside economic and political assistance, the government in Kabul could serve as an effective partner in fighting the war on terrorism and would be rebuilt as a functional, effective, and stable democratic actor that could provide essential government services to the Afghan people. US policy further assumed that such a government would enjoy political legitimacy and command the respect and support of the Afghan people.

None of these assumptions turned out to be correct.

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[7] Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks to Veterans of Foreign Wars," San Antonio, Texas, August 25, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/08/20030825-1.html.

[8] " President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror," The Mayflower Hotel Washington, D.C., February 15, 2007, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/02/20070215-1.html#:~:text=Our%20goal%20in%20Afghanistan%20is,war%20against%20extremists%20and%20terrorists.

[9] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," Washington, DC, March 27, 2009. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

[10] Ibid.

Why Did the United States Fail at State Building in Afghanistan?

The failure of US state building in Afghanistan was the result of a myriad of factors, too numerous to address fully in this paper. However, five crucial misjudgments stand out and offer insights for future US policymakers.

- **A lack of policy attention from the president on down, which led to inadequate resourcing, and no clear prioritization by US officials**. The United States was unwilling to devote adequate money, troops, or time to create the stable, democratic and functioning state that US officials hoped could take root in Afghanistan. As the International Crisis Group would pungently note in 2006, the United States had opted for "for a quick, cheap war followed by a quick, cheap peace." For two decades, US officials repeatedly failed to match their rhetoric about Afghanistan with resources.[11]

- **An inability to understand Afghan culture and politics, a failure to rely on the country's traditional governance structures, and an unwillingness to listen to the Afghan people.** US officials simply did not view Afghanistan as a country with a unique set of political, cultural and social attributes. Rather, it was a venue for waging war against terrorism. This ignorance and indifference toward Afghan culture and politics would manifest itself in countless ways over 20 years, leading to the creation of a "war-based economy" that incentivized instability, undermined the development of Afghan capacity, and made effective state building impossible.

- **Amidst frequent clashes between US and Afghan interests, US officials refused to subjugate US interests** to improve the process of state building in Afghanistan. Indeed, oftentimes, US officials imagined these conflicts away. Believing that US and Afghan interests were sufficiently aligned precluded any consideration of prioritizing certain US objectives over others.

- **A misguided belief that democracy, economic development, and human rights in Afghanistan were interlinked, and vital national security interests were at stake**. In fact, democracy in Afghanistan, and a stable, secure state that recognized human rights, was of little practical importance to US interests.

[11] "Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes," *International Crisis Group,* November 2, 2006.

- **US officials were confident that America's military and diplomatic institutions possessed the core competencies to conduct state building in Afghanistan**. As US officials would soon discover, the US government is not set up or properly resourced to perform these missions, yet many held firm to the belief that with sufficient effort, attention, and time, success in Afghanistan was just around the corner. As former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates would write about the war in Afghanistan, "There was a terrible mismatch between our aspirations to change Afghanistan and our ability to do so."[12]

Two decisions made in late 2001 and early 2002, discussed at length in the first two papers for this project, significantly compounded the challenges for US state-building efforts in Afghanistan:

- The failure to secure an official surrender from the Taliban in December 2001; and
- The conflation of the Taliban with al Qaeda, which led US officials to wage an aggressive counterterrorism against remnants of the defeated former government and eschew political reconciliation with Afghanistan's former leaders.

Whatever course the US chose in Afghanistan, it would have proved easier had the Taliban leadership been brought into the country's political fold or at the very least been allowed to remain in the country unmolested by US forces, so long as they did not return to violence (which at least some initially did). By leaving the Taliban outside the political tent, the group became a repository for grievances and frustrations that would build up in the initial post-war years. As Afghanistan's post-9/11 experiment in self-governance faltered, the Taliban reaped the political rewards (though they also clearly played a role in hastening its failure). In addition, by actively targeting the remnants of the Taliban and treating them as little different from the group that had attacked the United States on 9/11, the United States created enemies where previously they did not exist.
The marginalization of the Taliban, the refusal to provide the group with a political outlet, and the war waged against its former members and supporters, would prove to be the original sin of the US war in Afghanistan.[13]

State Building Is (Always) Hard

At the outset, it's essential to note the herculean nature of the state-building task in Afghanistan. Even if everything had gone perfectly for the United States, and even if the Afghan government had been allowed to pursue a policy of reintegration and reconciliation with the former Taliban, success in Afghanistan would have been difficult to achieve.

[12] Robert M. Gates, *Exercise of Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 165.
[13] Michael Cohen, Christopher Preble, and Monica Duffy Toft, "Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: How the United States Lost the Peace in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Assumptions Project Working Paper no.2, December 22, 2023.

More than two decades of war had left Afghanistan one of the poorest and most dysfunctional countries on the planet. The rural population was mostly illiterate, and the World Bank reported that the infant mortality rate was 85 per 1000 births, amongst the highest in the world.[14] In 2002, some UN officials estimated that Afghanistan might need as much as $25 billion over the next 5 years to fulfill its basic needs. Millions of refugees lived across the border in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere and their subsequent return to Afghanistan only compounded the challenges facing the country's new government.[15]

The country's newly appointed leader, Hamid Karzai, was largely isolated in Kabul, with little control outside the capital. He had neither the resources nor the authority to rebuild his shattered country. As noted in the two previous papers, the Bush administration had little interest in providing significant economic assistance to Afghanistan, requesting from Congress a mere $151 million in aid in February 2002. Western donors had pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in outside aid, but little had arrived, and that which did largely went to humanitarian assistance, with only a fraction spent on reconstruction. Compared to other contemporary post-conflict situations, including those in the Balkans, Afghanistan received far less money and a meager peacekeeping force.[16]

In Kabul, international troops patrolled the streets to the adulation of the local population. In the country's provinces, however, there were no national security forces. In places where police forces did exist, they often used their power to harass, steal from, and abuse Afghan civilians. Afghanistan's local warlords, many of whom had contributed to the violence during the bloody civil war in the 1990s, continued to exercise outsized influence on the country's politics. While many provided a measure of stability, others expanded and sustained their power and wealth through intimidation and violence, directly undermining the new government's legitimacy and popular support.

US troops, mainly stationed in the country's southern and eastern provinces, were focused on locating and eliminating the remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban. US personnel relied heavily on warlords and local powerbrokers for intelligence gathering, though such support was often incomplete, misleading, or self-serving. Indeed, the information shared with US officials was often as likely to target the warlord's rivals as it was actual Taliban or al Qaeda.

[14] In 2001, the NGO Save the Children estimated that 27 percent of men, and a mere 5.6 percent of women, were literate. "Afghanistan: Low literacy rates static for 20 years," Reliefweb, June 7, 2001, https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-low-literacy-rates-static-20-years. World Bank infant mortality rates can be found here: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN?locations=AF&most_recent_value_desc=false.

[15] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 62.

[16] 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-lessonsfrom-the-long-war/. For reference, by 2021, the United States was spending $4 billion annually on the Afghan military. 89 Coll, *Directorate S*, 129. Also see "Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes" International Crisis Group, November 2, 2006 https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/countering-afghanistan-s-insurgency-no-quick-fixes.

Back in Washington, US officials showed little interest in Afghanistan's present or its future. Decisions about the war were shifted from the administration principals to the assistant-secretary level, where they often remained unresolved. According to a 2023 Rand study that looked at National Security Council decision-making on the war in Afghanistan, 'Frustrated State and Defense Department officials complained of a 'dysfunctional' policy process characterized by deadlocked deputies' meetings, bureaucratic rivalries, and limited presidential guidance … As one former NSC staff member complained, no one was ready 'to discipline the process, to drive decisions to conclusions and, once decisions are made, to enforce them.'"[17]

By the autumn of 2002, Bush was so disconnected from the situation in Afghanistan that when asked if he wanted to meet with the US military commander in Afghanistan, General Dan McNeill, Bush asked "Who is General McNeill?" When he was told who McNeil was, Bush responded, "Well, I don't need to meet with him."[18]

The president and top administration officials were focused on making the case for war in Iraq. At the Pentagon, military planning for the coming war took precedence over the situation in Afghanistan, which by all accounts operated on autopilot, with military commanders receiving little instruction or guidance from Washington.[19]

Rumsfeld, the administration's most influential voice on Afghanistan policy, had long expressed skepticism about a long-term US role in the country – not only because he feared the United States would find itself immersed in a civil war, but also because US troops were needed for Iraq. At the end of December 2001, Rumsfeld explained to reporters the US exit strategy for Afghanistan:

> We know what we want to do, and when we've done it, we'll do it someplace else…. we want to capture or kill the senior Taliban leadership and see that they are punished. We want to make sure that the Taliban is out of power, which it now is. We want to make sure that the rest of the Taliban are disarmed and/or have become part of various other forces and no longer trying to kill people. And with respect to the al-Qaeda (sic), we want to capture or kill the senior leadership, and we want to catch and imprison the remainder so that they don't go back to their countries and terrorize people and kill people. . . . When those things have been accomplished, from a military standpoint we will have done our job.[20]

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[17] Matthew Sargent, Jason H. Campbell, Alexandra T. Evans, Caitlin McCulloch, Jordan R. Reimer, and Richard S. Girven, *Staying the Unfavorable Course: National Security Council Decisionmaking and the Inertia of U.S. Afghanistan Policy, 2001–2016*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA808-1.html, 62.

[18] Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to [redacted], Subject: "Meetings with President," October 21, 2002, 5:50 p.m., not classified, 1 p., ("Who is General McNeill?") https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24552-office-secretary-defense-donald-rumsfeld-snowflake-redacted-subject-meetings.

[19] Researcher Interviews with Franklin Hagenback, June 29, 2023 and David Barno, October 4, 2023.

[20] 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), 130.

Privately, he pushed the same message, telling Bush in a November 2001 phone call, "Sending U.S. servicemen and -women in pursuit of an effort to remake Afghanistan into a prosperous American-style nation-state or to try to bring our standard of security to each of that nation's far-flung villages would be unwise, well beyond our capability, and unworthy of our troops' sacrifice."[21]

On few issues was Rumsfeld more stubbornly resistant than in calls for the United States to provide security assistance or a peacekeeping force for Afghanistan. He even blocked others from performing this role.

The Bonn conference in December 2001 had approved an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to serve in Afghanistan as peacekeepers. The British government proposed a force of 25,000 troops, and Prime Minister Tony Blair (against the counsel of his military advisors) personally lobbied Bush to support the idea. In Washington, the State Department's James Dobbins pushed for a similarly sized force, as did Richard Haass, the Department official responsible for Afghanistan's post-war government. Rumsfeld fought these proposals every step of the way.[22]

While he supported the deployment of a small ISAF force in Kabul, Rumsfeld consistently resisted calls to expand the force's footprint to the rest of the country. The British commander of ISAF forces, General John McColl, recalled that "Every week delegations were coming to Karzai to request that ISAF deploy outside Kabul." The new interim president, in turn, asked the Americans to accede to these requests, but the Pentagon rebuffed them all.[23]

According to US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, whenever he traveled around the country, ordinary Afghans would ask him about expanding the peacekeeping force: "Why are you only in Kabul?" Khalilzad, who was born in Afghanistan, and in the Bush administration had the greatest understanding of the nation's politics and culture, was surprised by the reaction. Like many US officials, he assumed that Afghans would fall back on their traditional mistrust of foreigners. But with the Americans, at least initially, the opposite was the case.[24]

"The failure to extend the ISAF beyond Kabul in 2002 and the focus by US troops on confronting an al Qaeda enemy that had largely decamped to Pakistan created a power vacuum," explains anthropologist Thomas Barfield, a leading expert on Afghanistan. "The new Afghan government lacked the capacity to extend its power into the provinces. As a result, the former regional military leaders of the old United Front [also referred to as the Northern Alliance] retained their political importance in the non-Pashtun regions of the north and west even after their militias were officially demobilized."[25]

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[21] Quoted in Gates, *Exercise of Power*, 182.
[22] See Paper #2.
[23] David Loyn, *The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan Since 9/11* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 44–5.
[24] Researcher Interview with Zalmay Khalilzad, March 28, 2024.
[25] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 314.

Authors Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie, who had more than two decades of combined experience living and working in Afghanistan, noted in 2004 that "For almost all Afghans, by far the most important issue is security. 'Get rid of the guns' is a constant plea."[26] But to no avail.

It is reasonable to question whether an outside security force could have been assembled and whether they'd have been able to operate without resistance. Foreign troops are not a panacea, and the peacekeeping requirements for a country the size of Afghanistan – with its byzantine political and tribal rivalries – are substantial. Moreover, as the Norwegian journalist Astri Suhrke has persuasively argued, "a stronger international presence in the early post-invasion phase might simply have introduced at an earlier point the negative reactions and problems that emerged in the [later] half of the decade." Her warning, though a counterfactual, is a reasonable antidote to the confident claims made later in the war that a larger US troop presence could have maintained peace and stability indefinitely.[27]

However, the fight over peacekeepers is a good example of how American vacillation created its own set of problems. The United States neither abandoned Afghanistan nor fully embraced post-conflict stabilization, which arguably made the situation worse than if they had simply chosen one path over the other. Since it was impossible to fully assess US intentions, Afghans hedged their bets – or, in the case of the warlords, closely allied with the United States to gain leverage over their opponents. In Khalilzad's view, the crucial question for the United States was how did it "preclude Afghanistan from becoming a threat again? Either we help them do it with a modest US presence or we take responsibility and run the country." At various points the US leaned in both directions, never fully committing to either. In short, the lack of security in the post-war period was bad, but the security and political vacuum created by American indecision was even worse.[28]

One solution to the problem of security would have been to fast-track the creation of an Afghan National Army, either by incorporating elements of the warlord militias or building one from scratch. Karzai strongly advocated for a national army, even asking Khalilzad for "a big showy army" that would allow him and his government "to project force" and credibility.[29]

Once again, the United States took the path of least resistance, eventually choosing to create a new national military, but only after many months of indecision and with the same spirit of half-heartedness that defined its overall effort at state building. Efforts to construct a capable and effective Afghan army were one of the greatest US failures during the 20-year mission in Afghanistan. US officials ignored Afghan history and culture and designed an Afghan security forces that in the words of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan, were "a mirror image of U.S. forces which required a high degree of professional military sophistication and leadership" that was

[26] Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace* (New York: Zed Books, 2004; second edition 2008), 34.
[27] Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 13.
[28] Researcher interview with Zalmay Khalilzad, March 28, 2024.
[29] Researcher interview with Zalmay Khalilzad, March 28, 2024.

lacking among Afghan forces. Over two decades, the US spent nearly $90 billion on security sector assistance in Afghanistan).[30]

In an August 2002 memo, Rumsfeld made clear his disdain for US military involvement in Afghanistan's political affairs. "I am persuaded that the critical problem in Afghanistan is not really a security problem," he wrote:

> Rather, the problem that needs to be addressed is the slow progress that is being made on the civil side. [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai needs the institutions of government, a budget that is funded, and resources from the international community so he can develop political strength in the regions. He needs to be able to show the Afghan people that he is delivering for them and that it is in their interest to help keep the Taliban out. Only with progress on the civil side will Karzai gain the strength and leverage he needs with the regional political leaders (warlords).[31]

In one sense, Rumsfeld was correct. Karzai's legitimacy, in the eyes of the Afghan people, was dependent on his ability to "show the Afghan people that he [was] delivering for them" and that the post-Taliban era provided benefits for ordinary Afghans.[32] In Rumsfeld's view, producing results would smooth the path to stability. But Rumsfeld, like many US officials, was applying a US-centric frame to Afghanistan. Throughout Afghan history, the central government in Kabul never developed a reputation for providing services to the people, and the assumption that Karzai could break that mold fundamentally hamstrung the new president. US officials kept trying to get Karzai to do what was impractical, ahistorical, and largely impossible.

In his unsparing prose, Rumsfeld concisely summarized the prevailing view within the Bush administration on Afghanistan—more troops would lead to more commitment, which would lead to "nation building" and, in turn, mission creep.

But the larger lesson from Rumsfeld's efforts to thwart an expanded US presence was in highlighting the enormous gap between the rhetoric of US officials about the importance of Afghan state building and the resources and attention they were willing to devote to the task.

General David McKiernan, who led US troops into battle during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and later commanded all US and Western forces in Afghanistan, put his finger on the fundamental disconnect in Rumsfeld's argument – and, in turn, US policy in Afghanistan:

> The argument that I'm not sure has been accepted among political leadership is, sometimes it takes more ground presence *after* major kinetic operations than it did *during* the major

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[30] "Why The Afghan Security Forces Collapsed," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, February 2023, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf.
[31] Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Memo from Donald Rumsfeld to President George W. Bush, subject: "Afghanistan," August 20, 2002, not classified, 2 pp. Note: "Slow progress."
[32] Ibid.

> kinetic operations. When you want to control the environment, when you want to protect [the] population, when you want to restore services, when you want to protect infrastructure, when you want to get basic conditions, and some form of government back on its feet … somebody has to do it.[33]

It's certainly possible that, even with greater US involvement, state building in Afghanistan still would have failed. But the limited engagement of US officials in the early years of the mission suggests that they were barely attempting to succeed. In hindsight, US officials would have been far better off making difficult choices and focusing on a limited set of state-building goals in Afghanistan – informed by a realistic appreciation of what could be achieved, and perhaps, even more important, what *needed to be achieved* to further US national security interests.

But that reckoning never occurred. As if on autopilot the United States continued to embrace – aspirationally, at least – ambitious objectives for Afghanistan. US officials linked US security to the success of state building in Afghanistan. Only years later, after the country was mired in insurgency and instability, did they devote more resources and attention to the task. By that point, it was too late.

An Afghan Government Not Built for Afghanistan

What made the state-building challenge in Afghanistan particularly acute was the unwieldy and ultimately unmanageable structure of the Afghan government created at the Bonn Conference in December 2001.

The Afghan government that emerged out of Bonn – and was eventually ratified at the Emergency Loya Jirga six months later– was neither well-suited to the Afghan people's needs, nor grounded in the country's history. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that the United States didn't seek input from a broad swathe of groups within Afghanistan (and created the government in a strikingly expedited manner). The Loya Jirga was not a consultative body; it was used merely to ratify decisions already made and that entailed concentrating significant authority in the hands of the country's new president, Hamid Karzai.

The flaws in the Bonn arrangement were apparent to those who had studied Afghanistan for decades. While based on the country's 1964 constitution, the new governance structure still failed to take into account Afghan history and political culture. For example, the new government lacked a unifying head of state, like the former king Zahir Shah, who stood distinct and separate from the head of government. Instead, Hamid Karzai aspired to serve in both roles, but he lacked legitimacy to do either. He also had far too much on his plate.

[33] Loyn, *The Long War*, 44.

The Afghan government that emerged was one of the most centralized governments in the world. The president was given a broad scope of decision-making powers, including the appointment of all ministers, provincial governors, and even local police chiefs. Local communities had no control over the selection of their provincial or district leaders. Indeed, in some districts, self-elected councils were dismantled and replaced by those that were government sanctioned. Those rewarded with positions on the new council were most likely to be allies of Karzai. In addition, all taxes flowed to the central government. In fact, the provinces were technically not allowed to collect revenue for themselves. Not surprisingly, such an arrangement encouraged local officials to seek revenue sources via illicit means.[34]

A more decentralized system that acknowledged greater regional autonomy would have been a far better fit.

As Dipali Mukhopadhyay, a leading expert on Afghanistan, observes, "regions wanted a direct choice in how they were to be governed at the local level." Instead, "President Karzai and his coterie consistently demonstrated an inclination to exploit the highly centralized architecture of the formal state in order to ensure that key political decisions in Kabul and the provinces ultimately made their way to the president's desk." In short, "the president and his team micromanaged provincial politics," using provincial governors "as proxies, prods, and partners in different scenarios in order to inject [Karzai's] influence into intra-provincial dynamics."[35]

Conversely, while Karzai had power over the picayune, he lacked authority in an area of greater concern to his Afghan subjects: reining in the excesses of the US military. Still focused on waging a counterterrorism mission and rounding up former Taliban officials, the US military and intelligence agencies operated with virtual impunity, occasionally killing or detaining innocent Afghans in their single-minded pursuit of suspected terrorists. Few US actions did more to undermine Karzai's standing.

As anthropologist Tom Barfield notes, "Because the Karzai administration had no control over US counterterrorism operations that killed or captured Afghans deemed to be terrorists, opponents called the government's practical sovereignty into question. Sensitive to this criticism, Karzai regularly condemned the operations in the hopes of displaying his independence. But because he could neither ban them nor limit their tactics, he only highlighted his lack of authority and the weakness of the Afghan state."[36]

The United States' proclaimed commitment to the newly centralized state as essential to US interests was belied by US actions, which put the counterterrorism mission first. A weak, decentralized state

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[34] Carter Malkasian, The American War in Afghanistan (New York: Oxford University Press), 88; Anand Gopal, "Rents, Patronage, and Defection: State-building and Insurgency in Afghanistan," Thesis, Columbia University 2017, 110.
[35] Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 57–58.
[36] Thomas Barfield, "State Strengthening in Afghanistan Lessons Learned, 20012014," US Institute of Peace. Also see, Suhrke, *When More Is Less*, 16.

would not only have been more aligned with Afghan traditions, it also would have been a more pliable partner in the US war on terrorism. Instead, the US government put its eggs in the basket of a strong, stable, respected and capable central government in Kabul, out of the belief that doing so was the only way to ensure that al Qaeda and the Taliban did not return.

As a result, supporting the Afghan government increasingly became a justification for maintaining a US troop presence in the country. If the government in Kabul fell, the Taliban could come back into power, potentially creating another al Qaeda safe haven — or so the argument went. But in placing such importance on standing up the Karzai government, US officials ignored or failed to appreciate Afghanistan's traditional governance models.

"There's invisible governance in Afghanistan," explains Barfield, a leading expert on the country. "You trip over it when something goes wrong, [but] when something goes right, you don't know it's there."[37]

Kate Bateman, from the United States Institute of Peace, concurs. "It's not that the Afghans didn't have any governance structures." Many of these "mirror the values of what we were trying to set up, including things like basic fairness and justice." She continues, citing work by Barfield and Scott Smith: "a lot of the traditional tribal mechanisms are very democratic and very participatory." Quite simply, there were different, and often informal, structures that were largely ignored. US policy "privileged formal, rational, legal models of governance and power," because that's what Americans know. But, Bateman continues, "we weren't able to see and understand those alternative structures that do exist, mostly because we're not looking for them. They don't look like what we're used to looking at."[38]

A Problem of Too Much

Beyond the unwieldy structure of the new Afghan government lay a more serious challenge — the incapacity of Afghanistan's new leaders and its hastily constructed new government. This issue would manifest itself in an unusual manner: the state was overwhelmed by the billions of dollars in aid money that flowed into the country.

In the initial period, after the fall of the Taliban, too much money hardly seemed like a problem for Afghanistan. Aid totals were relatively modest and mostly addressed humanitarian issues, including poverty, hunger, and lack of shelter, especially for returning refugees. But, by mid-decade, outside assistance reached approximately $5 billion a year. According to some estimates, $46.1 billion was delivered in aid from 2002-2009 with about two thirds of the money coming in during the second half of the decade.[39]

[37] Afghanistan Assumptions Project Steering Committee Meeting, April 4, 2024.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Suhrke, *When More Is Less*, 121.

Critics would argue that this wasn't nearly enough for Afghanistan's vast development and economic needs, but, paradoxically, it was also too much. Afghanistan simply lacked the capacity to absorb this volume of aid. As the Norwegian journalist Astri Suhrke would later note, "To efficiently spend foreign aid on the order of several billion dollars a year required an administrative infrastructure that was lacking in the early post-Taliban period … the aid flow was destined to overwhelm local absorptive capacity and – combined with the parallel structures that followed in its wake to administer the money – would undermine the principle of local ownership."[40]

With an Afghan government incapable of managing the vast amounts of money pouring into the country, a parallel public administration arose — consisting, often, of outside consultants and NGOs. This parallel entity obstructed the creation of institutional capacity, but turned Afghanistan into a proverbial self-licking ice cream cone. Outside consultants and NGOs had every incentive to ensure the continued flow of money into the country, but little incentive to craft state institutions that could stand on their own — because doing the latter risked putting them out of business.

The United States and NATO bolstered this perverse incentive structure. As their interest in Afghanistan's future success rose — and as state building purportedly became a national security imperative — they demanded short-term gains. That need for immediate results promoted even greater reliance on foreign NGOs and consultants because these were the groups that could produce them. For Afghan leaders, however, both at the national and local level, the demand for quick wins only deepened their dependence — and incentive to employ corrupt practices, including kickbacks and bribes, to ensure that the aid spigot remained open.[41]

The esteemed Afghan scholar Barnett Rubin would observe in 2005 that, in the country's budget that year, "less than a quarter of all expenditures were channeled through the Afghan government's budget." Rubin explained, "The internationally sponsored public sector operates according to its own rules. Its salary scales tend to suck capacity out of the national government by drawing most qualified nationals into the service of international organisations. Its inflationary effect on price levels may further depress the real value of state salaries." Things had gotten so bad, noted Rubin, that "Former Minister of Planning Ramzan Bachardost has become one of the most popular politicians in the country by campaigning against NGOs, which he has said are more dangerous than al-Qaeda."[42]

By 2007, foreign aid supported approximately 90 percent of all official expenditures. A 2008 World Bank report on public administration reform concluded that "many functions expected of government are still performed by the international community or not performed at all." The report predicted, "Realistically this will remain the case for many years to come."[43]

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[40] Ibid, 123, 125.
[41] Ibid, 135–140.
[42] Barnett Rubin, "Constructing Sovereignty for Security," *Survival* vol. 47, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 101.
[43] Quoted in Suhrke, *When More Is Less,* 128.

While a few key ministries operated at a high level (the Ministry of Finance and, perhaps most notably, the Ministry of Public Health) they were the exception not the rule. Afghanistan had become, for all intents and purposes, a rentier state, almost completely dependent on aid and a cadre of foreign NGOs to support itself – and awash in corruption.

Even worse, Afghanistan's economy became increasingly and paradoxically dependent on insecurity. The more the Taliban made gains — and the greater the violence in the country — the more aid dollars flowed into the country to try and stop it. After the US surged 50,000 additional US troops between early 2009 and mid-2010, even more money was sent to Afghanistan, often in the hands of military commanders with deep pockets and incentive to get "results." In Kandahar alone, the US government budgeted an astounding $656 million in 2010–11 in discretionary spending for local military commanders. Thus, a province of 500,000 people was suddenly awash in American aid dollars.[44]

The open spigot of foreign money to combat insecurity created what Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder referred to in a widely cited 2012 study as a "war-aid economy" that generated "competition and conflict over aid resources, often along factional, tribal or ethnic lines; creating perverse incentives to maintain an insecure environment." Fishstein and Wilder noted that the US troop presence — and the subsequent flow of American aid dollars — was "fuelling conflicts between communities over locations of roads and the hiring of laborers; and, causing resentment by reinforcing existing inequalities and further strengthening dominant groups, often allied with political leaders and regional strongmen, at the expense of others."[45]

And, as Fishstein and Wilder noted, there was little empirical evidence to show that outside aid lessened either political violence or support for the Taliban insurgency. On the contrary, it seems, aid flows did little to further near-term US interests and actually made Afghanistan's long-term viability more precarious and the US state-building effort more likely to fail.

The Warlord Paradox

Nowhere did the war-aid economy more clearly manifest itself than in the US relationship with Afghanistan's warlords and local powerbrokers. The reliance on these actors reveals the challenge faced by US officials, the blind spots in how they thought about Afghanistan, the shortcuts taken in the name of fighting terrorists, and the overall incoherence of American policy.

Afghan warlords were both a fount of instability that helped to spur the Taliban insurgency, and also, in many parts of the country, a source of stability. The warlords both inhibited and enabled US efforts.

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[44] Ibid, 136.

[45] Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan," Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, January 2012, 3.

In late 2001, the United States had little choice but to ally with local militias and warlords. Without a plan to insert a large number of US troops or the logistical capability to do so — and wanting to act swiftly after 9/11 — the Bush administration worked with those who could immediately further US interests. Doing so enabled them to achieve immediate and decisive military success.

However, after the fighting ended, the United States continued to rely on these local power brokers as useful sources for intelligence about al Qaeda and the Taliban, particularly in the country's south and east, where al Qaeda fighters initially retreated and which had been strongholds for the Taliban movement from its founding. Yet, as Barfield notes, "These were some of the least densely populated and most economically insignificant parts of the country. Historically, the people there had rarely been under any government's direct control, and their lands were pejoratively labeled *yagistan* (land of rebels)." Still, they quickly became the focus of US military operations.[46]

Dependence on the warlords sparked a backlash — one that was evident at the time and commented on by those on the ground in Afghanistan.

For example, in the summer of 2002, Michael Ignatieff, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, noted the "essential contradiction in American efforts to stabilize Afghanistan is that in the south, at least, winning the war on terrorism means consolidating the power of the very warlords who are the chief obstacle to state-building."[47]

A year later, in June 2003, Sarah Chayes, a former *NPR* reporter who had set up an NGO in Kandahar after the fall of the Taliban, wrote in the *New York Times* that "no matter what they say, these warlords aren't going to behave. They are not reformable, because it is not in their interest to reform. The warlords' livelihood depends on extremism and lawlessness. That's how they draw their pay; that's what allows them to rule by the gun in an unofficial martial law, looting villages under the pretext of mopping-up operations, extracting taxes and bribes, crushing opponents."[48]

Writing a decade later, Fishstein and Wilder noted that reliance on the warlords actually boomeranged against US interests. Since the warlords benefited from the US presence, they preferred an environment of insecurity, which, unsurprisingly, undermined state-building efforts. At the very least they had every incentive to pump the Americans with intelligence about potential terrorists.[49]

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[46] Thomas Barfield, "Statebuilding, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism Complementary or Contradictory Strategies?" in *State Strengthening in Afghanistan Lessons Learned, 2001–2014*, Scott Smith and Colin Cookman, eds. (Washington, DC: USIP, 2016), 13.

[47] Michael Ignatieff, "Nation Building Lite," *New York Times Magazine*, July 28, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/28/magazine/nation-building-lite.html.

[48] Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan's Future, Lost in the Shuffle," *New York Times*, July 1, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/01/opinion/afghanistan-s-future-lost-in-the-shuffle.html.

[49] Fishstein and Wilder, "Winning Hearts and Minds?; Also see, Antonio Giustozzi, "Warlords into businessmen: The Afghan transition 2002-2005. Preliminary findings from a research trip, May 2005," Paper presented at: Transforming War Economies Seminar, Plymouth, UK, 16-18 June 2005.

Moreover, Anand Gopal argues that the US military presence in the south and east — and the subsequent close relationship with warlords — created a system of winners and losers. "Patterns of local violence are the result of the way in which state makers included some elites in networks of patronage and violently excluded others," argues Gopal. The "presence of U.S. forces, who offered large sums of money and other inducements (including reconstruction contracts and land leases) for actionable intelligence," writes Gopal, "incentivized local elites to inform on rival elites." Since the Americans were deeply reliant on local warlords to "tell friend from foe" it ensured that some groups received greater benefits than others and could use the US military as a shock force against its political and business rivals.[50]

Empowering the warlords would in time spark a backlash among ordinary Afghans, especially in the Pashtun-dominated south and east where the warlords were particularly rapacious or vindictive against their former adversaries — and where residual sympathy for the Taliban was the greatest.

The post-Taliban situation in Helmand, in southeastern Afghanistan, offers a useful lesson in how the US relationship with the warlords undermined the larger goal of building a functioning state.

In late 2001, Helmand was the last province abandoned by the Taliban. It was quickly taken over by Sher Mohammed Akhundzada (aka SMA), a militia chief who was among the most corrupt and abusive Afghan warlords. Helmand was a prime poppy-growing region and Akhundzada immediately sought to profit from the lucrative opium trade. He appointed as police chief Abdul Rahman Jan, a former drug smuggler. Akhundzada's pick for intelligence director, Mohammed Khan, ran Helmand's biggest opium bazaar.[51]

The province's police forces used their position to line their wallets, regularly shaking down the local population at omnipresent checkpoints — all the while participating actively in the drug trade. The only foreign military presence in the province was US Special Operations forces, which relied on Akhundzada for tips to hunt suspected al Qaeda and Taliban.

As Rajiv Chandrasekaran would later write in his book *Little America*, the relationship with the United States dramatically expanded the warlords' power. "If you crossed them, you risked having them falsely report you to the Americans as a Talib, and that often meant zip cuffs, a black hood, and a trip to the military prison on Bagram Airfield."[52]

Subsequently, as the insurgency took root — spurred by the behavior of the province's leaders – Taliban forces were welcomed into Helmand as "old friends," Chandrasekaran explains. "It wasn't

[50] Anand Gopal, "Rents, Patronage, and Defection: State-building and Insurgency in Afghanistan," Thesis, Columbia University, 2017, 108.
[51] Fairweather, *The Good War*, 59–60.
[52] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 42.

that people there had fond memories of their brutal reign, [but] rather that what had followed was so much worse."[53]

By early 2005, the Taliban had seized control of the province's northern districts and Helmand once again became an epicenter of poppy production, becoming the world's leading producer of opium. The United States asked NATO to take the lead in pushing back on the Taliban's operations and British troops deployed to Helmand, leading to sustained fighting. The resulting military campaign would eventually be taken over by American forces.[54]

In the post-2001 period, the backlash in Helmand followed a similar pattern across southern and eastern Afghanistan. In Kandahar, Ghazni, and Wardak, southern and eastern provinces that saw a significant US military presence, the collateral harms from military operations angered Afghans and created sympathy for the Taliban insurgency, which had initially failed to amass popular support. As Gopal has noted, the deaths of tribal leaders at the hands of the US military were well-known in Kandahar and repeatedly cited as rationales for opposing the US and its Afghan allies.[55]

According to Antonio Giustozzi, who has written extensively about the Taliban, "the immense power displayed by the US air campaign started turning civilians against the Americans and their Afghan allies." But of equal importance to "Taliban expansion was the persistence of the abusive attitude of the local Afghan authorities" and local allies. Rather than focus on the group's Islamic fundamentalist views, the Taliban "positioned themselves as avengers against an unjust order." Doing so, explains Giustozzi, allowed them to "be seen by a whole range of disenfranchised and disgruntled Afghans as a viable opposition movement." Specifically, for many Afghans, the Taliban became the sole political vehicle for exacting revenge against the Karzai regime and its US military supporters.[56]

A vicious cycle then ensued. As the United States became aware of the Taliban's growing strength – often incorrectly equating these activities with al Qaeda terrorism – the US military ramped up operations to stamp it out. This made the Karzai government look both inept (against the Taliban) and powerless (against the foreign patron often acting recklessly). But above all, notes Giustozzi, it "created a base of support for the insurgency."[57]

The rising violence also hampered reconstruction efforts. Such projects, mostly carried out by NGOs and USAID contractors, often failed to get off the ground due to concerns about security. Fear of Taliban attacks resulted in the diversion of aid funds to security. One USAID memo to NGOs in 2004 approved the diversion of up to 40 percent of budgets for security.[58]

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[53] Ibid, 44.
[54] Ibid, 45.
[55] Anand Gopal, "The Taliban in Kandahar," in *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, Peter Bergen, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.
[56] Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War* (Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, 2022), 54–5.
[57] Ibid, 54.

[58] Johnson and Leslie, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*, 2.

Development projects cannot succeed and will not be undertaken in the first place if those responsible for them do not feel that their employees will be safe from violence. The diversion of critical resources made the process of development and reconstruction that much more difficult.

Writing in 2007, the international economist Robert Rotberg put his finger on a problem that had only gotten worse since the fall of the Taliban in 2001:

> Without the ability to project state power beyond Kabul, and without a monopoly of force, the new state is bound to continue weak and troubled. If its writ fails to run very far, if the state seems more and more unable to protect villagers from the Taliban and from criminal gangs, and if the moral authority of the state seems weaker rather than stronger, state-building becomes a much tougher project than ever before. Consequently, nearly every other item on the state-building agenda will continue to be held hostage to security weaknesses and failures.[59]

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Warlord Governance

In Afghanistan, insecurity begat further insecurity, blocking desperately needed economic development and eroding the Afghan government's authority in the process.

But what complicates this tale is that, in many parts of the country, the warlords were a force for stability and order. Warlordism impeded effective post-9/11 state building in Afghanistan, but warlordism also contained the seeds of effective governance. Within a looser federalized system, warlords could act as the key nodes within a network of patronage linking local leaders to the central government. These potential linkages were often invisible to those lacking a deep understanding of Afghanistan's history and culture – meaning most Americans.

Given Afghanistan's geography of many small towns and villages separated from one another by mountains, or situated at great distances from the capital city, it was unrealistic for the government in Kabul to control all of the territory nominally under its remit. Instead, the Karzai government attempted to coopt local leaders within the wider state-building project. These leaders were incentivized to work with the central government, but otherwise operated with a wide degree of latitude. The locals thus governed in ways that served their own interests, but importantly, often those of the people in their communities as well.

Services were provided at the regional or local level, not by any central government. To the extent that there were formal institutions for ensuring basic security, they operated more like a national gendarmerie, called on during crises, but not tasked with enforcing laws on a day-to-day basis.

[59] Robert I. Rotberg, "Renewing the Afghan State," in *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg, ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, World Peace Foundation, 2007), 3-4.

The system worked best when local leaders were strong and enjoyed a level of authority and legitimacy within their community, but not so strong vis-à-vis other provincial leaders that they didn't benefit from cooperation with the central government. The system broke down when these local power brokers no longer saw such cooperation as beneficial or necessary.

Afghanistan's history is marked by its complex tapestry of tribes and ethnic groups, which play a significant role in the country's social, political, and cultural fabric. Unlike most modern nations, Afghanistan has never been a society structured around individual rights. Rather, its governance and social order have been historically decentralized, with power, authority, and legitimacy often vested in tribal leaders and local communities.

This decentralized nature can be traced back to Afghanistan's geographical and cultural diversity. The rugged terrain and the lack of strong central authority made it difficult for any single entity to impose control over the entire region. And although, throughout history, Afghanistan has seen numerous invasions and occupations, from the Persian Empire and Alexander the Great to the Mongols and the British Empire, the tribal structure largely remained intact.

Given this history, it's unsurprising that efforts to establish a strong central government often clash with the entrenched power of tribal leaders and local authorities. Therefore, any attempt to consolidate control over the warlords, or forcibly bring them under the central government's authority, was likely to fail. "The political center in Kabul," explains Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "was not (and has never been) a collection of formal, bureaucratic institutions working in concert to penetrate the unwieldy periphery of wayward warlords, defiant mullahs, and rebellious tribal chieftains." "Instead," Mukhopadhyay continues, the system relied on "forging links to the countryside through partnerships with power holders who could sometimes expand the scope of the state by engaging it."[60]

The behavior and actions of various warlords operating in Afghanistan from 2002–2009 must be assessed in this light. They were neither uniformly corrupt nor cruel. Some were quite successful. In Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan, for example, Atta Mohammed Nur had a high degree of control and he used that power to benefit himself, but also affirm Karzai's authority and legitimacy. Atta transformed himself from a ragged military commander to a clean-shaven and well-dressed functionary.

A similar case played out in Herat in Western Afghanistan near the Iranian border. There, Ismail Khan established control over the province while providing security, and spearheading economic development and reconstruction. Though Khan has been accused of human rights abuses, unlike other warlord leaders, he was not associated with the widespread abuses committed by warlords during the Afghan Civil War in the mid-90s.

[60] Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 18.

Crucially, what made these warlord's fiefdoms oases of stability, in part, was the lack of an American military presence. Without the distorting influence of the US military, local warlord leaders were forced to work with their local political rivals, rather than side the US military on them in the name of fighting terrorism.

Indeed, the situation in Helmand is emblematic of the complexity of managing relationships with warlords and local powerbrokers. As noted earlier, the provincial governor Sher Mohammed Akhundzada and police chief Abdul Rahman Jan — and the omnipresence of an opium economy — contributed to an atmosphere of lawlessness in Helmand that built popular support for the Taliban.

But, as Carter Malkasian has written in his book *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier*, a tale of corrupt and kleptocratic warlords undermining US interests, and in turn the Karzai government, only tells part of the story. For example, in Hemand's Garmser district, the governor Abdullah Jan lacked direct support from the Karzai government and could not rely on US military assistance. As a result, Jan was forced to craft a governance structure based on an old tribal militia system in which local communities fielded fighters, manned checkpoints, and maintained security. In addition, he decentralized power, and encouraged the participation of local leaders. Malkasian writes:

> Abdullah Jan oversaw security, collected taxes, and delivered goods and services, but he allowed the tribal leaders to resolve disputes as they wished, levy their own taxes as they wished, and grow poppy as they wished. Each tribal leader, or sometimes group of tribal leaders, again held his own fiefdom. Granting the tribal leaders these privileges was necessary to keep them together behind the government and behind his district governorship, a balancing act that Abdullah Jan had to perform. It was not the best arrangement and demanded no small amount of diplomatic skill, but the national government, which was still forming, afforded him little assistance. He needed the tribal leaders. Without them, Garmser could not be controlled.[61]

Jan also established a tribal council "composed of representatives from every area of the district" to resolve disputes and ensure buy-in from local communities. Over time, the Karzai government would provide greater assistance through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), one of the few successful Afghan-led government programs in the initial post-war years.[62] Development gains in

[61] Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser* (New York: Oxford University Press), 75.
[62] According to the World Bank, the National Solidarity program was the largest development program in Afghanistan. Since its inauguration in 2003, the NSP established 32,000 Community Development Councils (CDCs) across 361 districts in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and financed nearly 65,000 development projects. Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia and Ruben Enikolopov, *Randomized impact evaluation of Afghanistan's national solidarity programme (English).* Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, July 1, 2013. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/411061468186864557/Randomized-impact-evaluation-of-Afghanistans-national-solidarity-programme.

the district were uneven but still notable. Schools were built and well-attended and, by and large, security was maintained and the Taliban kept out.[63]

But then, in December 2004, Akhundzada removed Abdullah Jan from power, in part because Jan's poppy eradication initiatives undermined the provincial governor's lucrative involvement in the drug trade (the power to remove Jan should have come from Kabul, but because of Akhundzada's political power and close relationship to Karzai he was able to make the change on his own). As Jan left office, he stood down his tribal militia, which had a cascade effect on other armed groups that had allied themselves with Jan. The district governors that came after Jan were incapable of reconstructing the security system that Jan had used to keep the Taliban in check for so many years. In September 2005, a new police chief arrived: Kabeer Khan, who extorted money and mistreated the local population. Since Khan had been appointed by the Ministry of Interior in Kabul, the district governor could not rein him in. With Jan gone and the jerry-rigged governance structure he had created in tatters, it didn't take long for the Taliban to reestablish themselves in Garmser – and for the excesses of the provincial leadership to build popular sympathy for the insurgency.[64]

The story of Garmser, and Helmand in general, speaks to the extraordinary complexity facing US officials in Afghanistan. Managing Afghan warlords and local leaders required a deep reservoir of knowledge about Afghan culture and local politics — not just at the national level, but at the provincial, district, and village level. As Malkasian notes, the conflicts in Garmser were not just about the United States, Karzai or conflicts about allocation of aid, but rather decades of development in and around the district, which had created a discrete set of winners and losers, and also suspicions and long-standing grudges.

As the anthropologist Noah Coburn would note in his book, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town,* similar challenges would play out in the small town of Istalif, north of Kabul on the Shomali Plain. In Istalif, the Kabul government was a minor and relatively inconsequential player among a much larger and complicated set of political, cultural, and economic powerbrokers, which included long-standing influential families, religious figures, a wealthy merchant class, former militia members, and international groups, including NGOs and the military. If the Kabul government could not adequately manage these multi-varied set of actors and ensure that its authority was respected, what hope was there for US officials?[65]

According to Gates, from the benefit of hindsight, "We so little understood the web of tribal and clan networks, we didn't realize that in helping one tribe we often antagonized its rival neighbor. Our efforts to persuade or coerce such folks to work together more often than not resembled shotgun weddings rather than reconciliation. Our goodwill and lofty aspirations ran headlong into ancient and contemporary enmities."[66] To be sure, the issue wasn't just one of ancient enmities, it

[63] Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser*, 77.
[64] Ibid, 84–5.
[65] Noah Coburn, "Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town, Stanford University Press: Stanford: 2001, 106-141.
[66] Gates, *Exercise of Power*, 189.

was also a problem that both the US and Kabul government were viewed by many communities as an alien and meddlesome force. In Istalif, for example, notes Coburn, "the state was seen as the product of Kabul and modernization, which Istalifis perceived as suspiciously un-Islamic and intrusive."[67]

What might work in one region with one leader could potentially fail miserably in another. There was no one-size fits-all structure that could possibly succeed in Afghanistan. State building relied on nuance, patience, well-developed diplomatic skills and, perhaps, above all humility. These attributes, however, were in short supply among US officials, particularly lower-level US military units that rotated out of the country after less than a year and therefore sought short-term successes.[68]

The US military, which was the lead actor in Afghanistan, is not trained to do nuance. It exists to fight and win wars. Expecting US military personnel to operate in a foreign environment where they didn't speak the language, spent perhaps a year in the country, and worked in a culture that could not have been more different from that in the United States, was profoundly unrealistic. As General Karl Eikenberry, who did three tours in Afghanistan, rose to the level of US military commander and later because the US Ambassador in Kabul, observed, "The typical 21-year-old marine is hard-pressed to win the heart and mind of his mother-in-law; can he really be expected to do the same with an ethnocentric Pashtun tribal elder?"[69]

But this problem was not unique to troops in the field. Even at the highest levels of the US government, American officials understood little about Afghanistan and its complex politics, traditions, and social norms. If they were ignorant of the country in which the United States was operating, how could anyone expect those further down in the chain of command to figure it out? The surprise was not that the US officials struggled to grasp the complexities of Afghanistan and made myriad errors; it's that anyone expected a different outcome.

Interests In Conflict

In a quote that appeared in a 2002 essay in the *New York Times Magazine*, Elisabeth Kvitashvili, the head of programs in Afghanistan for USAID, would neatly and unintentionally summarize one of the greatest impediments to US state building in Afghanistan: "We're not here," she said, "because of the drought and the famine and the condition of women. We're here because of 9/11. We're here because of Osama bin Laden."[70]

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[67] Coburn, "Bazaar Politics," 134.

[68] See, for example, Wesley Morgan, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* (New York: Random House, 2021).

[69] Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: The Other Side of COIN," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2013, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/limits-counterinsurgency-doctrine-afghanistan.

[70] Quoted in Ignatieff, "Nation Building Lite."

It was a sentiment shared at the highest levels of the US government. As far back as fall 2001, before the US war in Afghanistan had begun, Rumsfeld made clear that America's top priority in Afghanistan was "shaking Bin Laden's tree."[71]

For the United States, success in Afghanistan meant defeating terrorism. The country was merely a venue in which to wage that fight. For Afghans, their concerns were, not surprisingly, far more parochial. Throughout the US time in Afghanistan there was an unbridgeable gap between US and Afghan interests.

"For the military establishment," writes researcher Conor Keane, "nation-building came second to the destruction of the enemies of the United States." Keane continues:

> The miltary's engagement with those nation-building issues was often arbitrary, undertaken without the consultation of civilian officials, and usually displaying a combat-minded mentality. Even when there was a civilian presence in a province that the military operated in, the structure of the military command in Afghanistan determined that US soldiers were more likely to reject the unfamiliar and somewhat ambiguous strategies employed by the civilian agencies in favour of the more regimented and straightforward objectives of their commanders.[72]

Ahmed Rashid notes, "The CIA wanted every U.S. aid program to be used to help capture bin Laden and strengthen the warlords rather than to rebuild the country."[73]

The military and CIA operated under their own set of rules, and placed counterterrorism operations above all other considerations. US state-building initiatives were focused on near-term results that would allow the United States to show progress, rather than the long-term, painstaking steps needed to create state capacity in Afghanistan.

The decision to prioritize US counterterrorism efforts had numerous unintended downstream effects — all of which undermined the goal of creating a stable, secure and democratic Afghan state.

None of this should come as a major surprise — US government officials are always going to put their country's interests first. Indeed, they are duty-bound to do so. However, such attitudes undermined a state-building exercise that would have occasionally demanded the subsuming of US interests for the benefit of Afghan allies.

Indeed, this misalignment of US and Afghan interests ensured that the prospects for foreign-supported state building in Afghanistan were inauspicious from the start. Even when US officials begrudgingly recognized that the situation in Afghanistan was spiraling out of control, it didn't

[71] Quoted in Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 102.
[72] Conor Keane, *US Nation-Building in Afghanistan,* 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 90.
[73] Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group), 175.

produce better results on the ground, or prompt a commitment on their part to rethink the US approach.

In June 2003, for example, a meeting of the National Security Council, chaired by President Bush concluded that the US must do more in Afghanistan. The ensuing "Accelerated Success Initiative" led to more spending on schools, roads, and army training, as well as a near-doubling of the US troop presence. Its architects hoped it would constrain the more rapacious warlords and bring about much needed reform of key government ministries. American officials also sought to expand the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, a military program started in 2002 that included representatives from US civilian agencies and the Afghan government and sought to expand the reach of the central government in Kabul.[74]

In a January 2005 memo, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote that Accelerating Success had "led to transformative changes in governance, security, and reconstruction in Afghanistan."[75]

But, in reality, the project brought little in the way of tangible or sustainable success. For example, according to a Government Accountability Office report, "USAID intended to rehabilitate or build 286 schools by the end of 2004. However, owing to poor contractor performance and security problems, by September 2004 it had completed only 8."[76]

In a harbinger of larger problems to come, the GAO report also noted that "Deteriorating security rendered large areas inaccessible to the assistance community."[77]

"Accelerating Success" was a US-driven initiative; there was little coordination with America's European allies, the United Nations, or the Afghan government. The plan suffered from the same problems that had hamstrung the US state-building effort in general — a lack of coordination and an unwillingness to focus on sustainability. Above all, it failed to address the major strategic issue in Afghanistan — a lack of host government legitimacy combined with an increasingly bold insurgency far more attuned to the needs and desires of Afghan civilians.[78]

Instead, the initiative was a public relations endeavor — intended to provide some semblance of normalcy before the 2004 Afghan presidential election (which Karzai won) and Bush's own reelection effort that same year (which he also won). Indeed, as Rashid notes, once Bush secured

[74] Greg Roberts, "America's War on 'Ungoverned 'Space in Afghanistan," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2016, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27001421, 97–107.
[75] Quoted in Christopher D. Kolenda, *Zero-Sum Victory: What We're Getting Wrong About War* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2021), 129.
[76]" Despite Some Progress, Deteriorating Security and Other Obstacles Continue to Threaten Achievement of U.S. Goals," Government Accountability Office, July 2005, https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-05-742-highlights.pdf, 1.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 189-90.

another four-year term in office, US support for "accelerating success" decelerated. Moreover, US attention remained focused on the war in Iraq and the emerging sectarian violence there.[79]

A paradox of the situation in Afghanistan is that the 2004 presidential plebiscite, which US officials saw as a crucial way to strengthen the legitimacy of the Karzai government, had the opposite effect. While Karzai prevailed in an orderly election that was deemed free and fair, it had the proverbial effect of putting lipstick on a pig. The structure of the government headed by the now-popularly elected Hamid Karzai remained fatally flawed.[80]

Moreover, the gap between the electoral legitimacy of Karzai and his ineffectualness as the country's leader became a problem with no easy solution. Afghans knew Karzai was their country's leader, yet they could also see that he was beholden to the Americans. He could not stop the rising tide of collateral damage caused by US military operations. He could not rein in the warlords who needed reining in. And his government could not provide Afghans with security or basic services. Not only did the American stance undermine Karzai, but it also undermined Afghans' faith in democracy.

The US Government Is Not Set Up for Successful State Building

This paper and others in this series have noted the lack of coordination at the highest levels of the US government when it came to overall policy in Afghanistan. This filtered down to state building as well. Without any one department or agency responsible for the mission in Afghanistan, competition ensued. Different entities seized upon elements of state building that were their strong suit, or that key actors cared deeply about. But there was insufficient capacity to achieve long-term progress. Moments of success were quickly undone by inadvertent or poorly thought-out policies that cut against these very successes.

This is not a new phenomenon. In a classic study for the RAND corporation published in 1972, Robert Komer described the many reasons why US state building failed in South Vietnam. Komer was uniquely qualified to comment. He directed the primary initiative for pacification in Vietnam, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary [later Rural] Development (CORDS) program, from its inception in 1966.[81]

Four decades later, Todd Greentree, a former US foreign service officer who served in Afghanistan, came to similar conclusions as Komer about the US war in Afghanistan. State building failed because of deep-seated institutional resistance and incapacity within the US government. No single department or agency ever had that mission as its number one priority. So they all muddled along, often just going through the motions. As Rick Barton, a diplomat with deep experience in peacebuilding, and who led independent reviews of both Iraq and Afghanistan policy during the

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[79] Ibid, 189-90; Kolenda, *Zero-Sum Victory*, 131.
[80] David Barno, interview by authors, October 4, 2023.
[81] Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972).

2000s, noted, "Institutions are going to do their thing" and in ways that often undermine larger strategic goals.[82]

That two vastly different missions conducted more than 40 years apart and in wildly different contexts could come to similar ends – the Republic of Vietnam and the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan both collapsed within a short time after US support was withdrawn – suggests that little had been learned from the first instance of US failure.

But that isn't the only explanation. The fact is, state building is extremely difficult, time-consuming, and requires vast resources and attention—and only on the rarest of occasions (e.g. post-Imperial Japan) has the United States demonstrated the willingness to see its efforts through to fruition.

State building is more than writing a constitution, creating the semblance of a democratic government, and holding elections. Those are merely the outward elements of a state-building enterprise – and they often come not at the beginning but rather at the end of a very long and challenging process. The importance of visible signs of progress cannot be fully discounted, but the real actions of state building happen behind the scenes. And the enduring success of foreign-assisted state building can only be assessed after several electoral cycles – especially by how the victors treat their defeated foes and how the losing side responds. A true democracy is one in which parties lose elections, and don't resort to violence to overturn them.[83]

As Melissa Lee, Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, notes, building functional, effective, and sustainable state institutions necessitates a near radical political and social transformation. "It requires," she writes:

> altering the basic rules governing a society's political order. Those rules determine who can access state power and how that power is to be organized and exercised. Put simply, they determine the most basic considerations in politics: who gets what, where, when, and how. These questions are deeply, even violently, contested.[84]

The major political actors in Afghanistan — from Karzai and the Northern Alliance to the warlords and the Taliban — "had profoundly different ideas about what those rules should be," says Lee. And that's not even taking into account the interests of neighboring states (Pakistan and Iran) and the United States.

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[82] Todd Greentree, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36:3 (2013), 325-256, DOI:10.1080/01402390.2013.764518; Researcher Interview with Rick Barton, March 23, 2024.

[83] See, for example, Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[84] Melissa Lee, "How not to Build a State," Modern War Institute, October 5, 2021, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/how-not-to-build-a-state/.

These tensions are often endemic to foreign-supported state building. According to political scientist David Lake, "Except in rare cases where the policy preferences of the statebuilder and the population of the country whose state is to be built coincide," Lake writes, "promoting a leader 'loyal' to the statebuilder undermines that leader's legitimacy at home."

"This trade-off between legitimacy and loyalty is the statebuilder's dilemma."

Lake continues:

> Statebuilding is a process of restoring—or in some instances creating for the first time—that monopoly of violence and especially its legitimacy. Yet legitimacy is neither something that is conferred by the international community on a state nor a principle that inheres in particular institutions that can be exported to fragmented societies. Rather, legitimacy can be conferred on a state only by its own people.
>
> […]
>
> The larger the statebuilding effort required, the more acute the dilemma becomes. States are not altruists. They do not engage in statebuilding haphazardly or from the goodness of their hearts. Especially in the industrialized democracies most capable of the effort today, voters demand a return on the blood and treasure expended. The greater the costs of statebuilding, therefore, the more the statebuilder will insist on the installation of a leader likely to be loyal to its interests—as defined by its own constituents.[85]

The state-building mission in Afghanistan was not a puzzle to be unlocked with more money, more soldiers, better inputs or a better strategy. Success in a state-building enterprise — particularly when the United States and not the Afghan government had a monopoly on the legitimate use of force — — required that the United States immerse itself deeply in Afghan affairs. It would not be sufficient to simply hope that Karzai and his new government could establish these rules on their own while at the same time not running afoul of the interests of foreign states and NGOs operating in Afghanistan.

But the United States had little interest in, and a poor understanding of, Afghan politics. When confronted with the need to address them, US officials punted the issue back to the Afghans. Beyond the counterterrorism mission, which did not require a large, on-the-ground presence, no US administration was willing to commit the attention, time, and resources that might have been warranted if vital US interests were at stake. The lack of sustained attention and resources was an implicit confirmation that US officials didn't truly believe that successful state building in Afghanistan was essential to US security.

[85] David Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 4, 7.

Indeed, aside from counterterrorism, core US interests were never at stake in Afghanistan. US elected officials were reluctant to admit to this increasingly obvious reality. Instead, they picked up on issues that could justify a continued US presence or fulfilled parochial bureaucratic needs. Some adopted the cause of women's rights. Others stressed the importance of establishing a functioning democracy in Afghanistan. Still others, recognizing Afghanistan's crushing poverty, and the war-ravaged state of the country's infrastructure, wished to see more foreign assistance flow there. On their own, these were undoubtedly noble objectives. But the layering of goals, one on top of the next, did not combine to produce a vital US interest. Instead it produced a "deepening involvement," says Suhrke, in which "bureaucratic momentum, organizational interests, aid lobbies and a cascading of objectives… [made] it progressively harder to turn around and change course." Indeed, the more the United States identified key objectives in Afghanistan, the greater became the justification for maintaining a US troops presence until the job was done, even as the true object – "the job" – remained indeterminate.[86]

Ironically, the Bush administration's initial attempts to limit the resources dedicated to Afghanistan may have been more correct than it looks in retrospect. Afghanistan's political future was tangential to vital US national security interests. Ultimately, Afghanistan's influence on long-term US security ended the moment the Taliban were swept from power. So long as Afghanistan was no longer a safe haven for terrorism, the structure of Afghanistan's government, its economy, and even its respect for human rights, did not directly impact American's lives. And arguably, with the reforms that took place after 9/11 to secure the US homeland from terrorist attacks, even then, a safe haven in Afghanistan would not have presented a serious risk to the United States.[87]

Put differently, the US government's systemic failure to succeed at state building — or even try — can be a sign of Americans' collective common sense. Yet rather than admit that Afghanistan's future was not a matter of urgent concern, the US government constantly sought a middle ground on state building between doing something and doing nothing.[88]

As the war dragged on in both Afghanistan, and in Iraq, the State Department and the Department of Defense belatedly attempted to improve their state-building competencies. At State, the effort fell under the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS). At Defense, it was codified in a formal directive 3000.05, "Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations," issued on November 28, 2005, but in development for more than a year.[89]

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[86] Suhrke, *When Less Is More*, 4–5.

[87] See Michael Cohen and Micah Zenko, *Clear and Present Safety: The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[88] Benjamin H. Friedman, Harvey M. Sapolsky, and Christopher Preble, "Learning the Right Lessons from Iraq," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 610, February 13, 2008, 12. See also Justin Logan and Christopher Preble, "Washington's Newest Bogeyman: Debunking the Fear of Failed States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Summer 2010): 17-38.

[89] See Col. Daniel B. Leatherman, USA, "Making Peacekeepers: The Evolution of United States Policy on Stability Operations," US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, March 15, 2006. See also Craig I. Fields and Philip A. Odeen, 2004 Summer Study on Transition to and from Hostilities, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, December 2004, and Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Institutionalizing Stability Operations within DoD, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, September 2005.

Even as these efforts ramped up within the US government, however, they could not overcome the pathologies outlined in this paper: the prioritizing of counterterrorism operations over state building, the disjuncture between US and Afghan interests, the systemic weakness of the Afghan government, and the emerging Taliban insurgency.

This is not to say that every US initiative was a failure. Development assistance in Afghanistan during the past two decades directly contributed to significant advances in human development, including decreases in infant and maternal mortality, dramatic increases in school enrollment rates for boys and girls, a media revolution, major improvements in roads and infrastructure, and greater connectivity through telecommunication networks. One consequence of viewing aid resources first and foremost as a stabilization tool or "a weapons system" is that these major development gains have often been under-appreciated because they did not translate into tangible security gains. But on the core question of whether the United States created a functioning Afghan state that could stand on its own, the conclusion is stark: it did not.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to test one of the core assumptions undergirding the United States' mission in Afghanistan: US officials believed that it could deliver a stable functioning government that would provide basic services in Afghanistan and that such a government would be an effective partner in fighting al Qaeda and other transnational terrorist groups. American officials knew that this new Afghan government would need resources, including money and expertise, from outsiders, but they expected that these needs would diminish over time – or be met by others. Key officials in the Bush administration, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld chief among them, believed that the provision of government services would produce security and increase the legitimacy of the new regime. The Afghan people, so the argument went, upon seeing themselves and their families well taken care of by their leaders, would pledge fealty and resist any effort to join forces with anti-government elements. In short, the Afghans themselves, not foreign militaries, would be the ultimate guarantors of Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence.

Metaphorically, the United States's eyes were bigger than its stomach. The United States never fully committed to building a functioning independent state in Afghanistan. It both failed to provide resources and attention, and, when clashes emerged between US and Afghan national interests, it persistently privileged the former over the latter. US policy was focused on creating the appearance of a functioning independent state. That facade collapsed the moment US forces left (and was eroding for years before).

The lesson from the US failure in state building in Afghanistan was not just that the mission was simply too vast and too difficult for the United States to accomplish, but that the United States had little hope for success and never should have undertaken this mission in the first place.

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