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Lost in a sandstorm: the U.S. attempt to win the war in Afghanistan

Timothy C. Tyler

A Thesis in the Field of History

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

Why did the U.S. lose the war in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021? Why did the U.S. fail there, after we poured hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign aid into the country, and had tens of thousands of advisers working for decades trying to improve the country? Dozens of nations, in Europe, Asia, and Oceania, sent troops and gave aid to Afghanistan. Why did things utterly fall apart?

The U.S. government had successfully fought a counterinsurgency war in El Salvador from 1980 – 1993 against the communist FMLN guerillas. A combination of increased aid, highly motivated American military advisors and constant U.S. intelligence support enabled the El Salvadorian Armed Forces to defeat the FMLN and forced them to agree to an armistice in 1993. Why did a similar military strategy fail in Afghanistan?

My thesis will argue that the failure of the U.S. to create a combat capable Afghan National Army led to the eventual collapse of Afghanistan, and the capture of Kabul and all of the Afghan provinces by the Taliban in the summer of 2021.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Timothy C. Tyler is an author and yachtsman from Augusta, Georgia. He has written *The Decline and Fall of the Shah*, a history of the Iranian Revolution, and *A History of Panama 1502 – 2002*, a one volume history of Panama from its discovery by Christopher Columbus to the turnover of the Panama Canal. Prior to enrolling in the graduate program at the Harvard Extension School, he was stationed in Afghanistan for four years, where he worked as an intelligence adviser with the Afghan National Police, the Afghan National Army, the National Directorate of Security, and the Afghan Border Police in Kabul and Paktia Provinces. He was awarded the Afghan Medal of Merit by the Afghan Directorate of Police Intelligence for setting up a special counterintelligence program.

Mr. Tyler formerly worked as a civilian intelligence officer with the Department of Defense, and was assigned to the U.S. Embassies in Panama, Peru, and Bolivia. He was present for the turnover of the Panama Canal in 1999, and survived the Revolution of 2003 in Bolivia. Mr. Tyler is a U.S. Navy veteran, with service in Bermuda, Panama, Saudi Arabia, and Chile. His awards include the Joint Service Achievement Medal, the Navy Reserve Meritorious Service Medal, and the South West Asia Service Medal with one campaign star (Operation Southern Watch.)

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother, Mrs. Jo Ann Crawford Tyler, who was kind enough to help me go to the Harvard Extension School to get my master's degree in history. Without her love and support, I would not have made it.

Acknowledgments

Many people helped me and inspired me as I was writing this thesis. I was honored to have as a thesis director, Dr. Nikolas Gvosdev, who helped to make my thesis much better by sharing his experience and knowledge.

Joseph Rohn, a classmate of mine at the Harvard Extension School, was always a voice of wisdom to me as I navigated through the various rocks and shoals of graduate school. Amy Katru, a second Harvard Extension School classmate, was always there to provide a sympathetic ear whenever I had problems.

I had many interesting conversations about naval history with another of my Harvard classmates, Lieutenant Commander Daisuke Kojima-San of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces. Yasser Alvi and I always had some fascinating discussions about Pakistan. Colonel Daniel Oriesek, another member of my Harvard class, was kind enough to give me a copy of his book, and to share his thesis with me.

I could always count on Colonel Eddie S. Ray, USMC (Ret.), to encourage me when my enthusiasm flagged. Brendan Cunnie, a childhood friend, was another constant source of encouragement, and I am lucky to have had him as a friend for fifty years.

I was fortunate to have so many great and enthusiastic professors at Harvard: Dr. Stephen Shoemaker; Dr. Erez Manela; Dr. Tom Nichols; Dr. Briana J. Smith; and Dr. Kelly O'Neill. Thank you all for enriching my life, and making the journey more enjoyable.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government. The public release clearance of this information does not Department of Defense endorsement or factual accuracy of this material.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Operation Enduring Freedom (see glossary), the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, was the longest war in American history. It stretched from October 2001 to September 2021. Enduring Freedom ended ignominiously, with crowds of panicked Afghans swarming over the Kabul airport in the summer of 2021, the massive Afghan National Army shedding their uniforms and going home, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fleeing to Uzbekistan. The Taliban, who were thought to have been defeated in the initial U.S. military campaign in 2001, seized the entire country.

America had spent a staggering $146 billion dollars trying to rebuild Afghanistan since October 2001.[1] 1,910 U.S. soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen died in Operation Enduring Freedom. Another 1,233 contractors were killed in action there.[2] The U.S. and its allies never lost a battle in Afghanistan, but ended up losing the war.

Unlike the Vietnam War, Operation Enduring Freedom was never unpopular with the U.S. public. There were no demonstrations in U.S. cities against the war, no riots on college campuses protesting our military involvement in a faraway foreign land. Congressional support for Enduring Freedom remained strong almost twenty years.

Part of the reason that Enduring Freedom was different from Vietnam was that it was a direct response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, where almost 3,000

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[1] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Quarterly Report, October 30, 2021, i.

[2] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2021, 78.

Americans died. Part of the reason for the war's support was because all of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who served in Afghanistan were volunteers. The unpopular draft, which had caused many demonstrations in the U.S. during the Vietnam War, had ended on January 27th, 1973. No unwilling eighteen-year-old Americans had to worry about being drafted and sent off to die in a foreign land.

There was also impressive world support for our involvement in Afghanistan. Dozens of countries sent troops to Afghanistan, to serve as advisors, base security, or combat forces. Many other nations also gave the Afghan government financial aid.

Unlike South Vietnam, Afghanistan was a democracy. Men and women of all tribes could vote in an election every five years for a parliament and a new president. While the Afghan presidential elections were sometimes flawed, at least Afghanistan had regular elections, a rarity in the Middle East.

Despite all of these positive developments, the war was lost. Why? How did the U.S. do some many things right in Enduring Freedom, and still lose the war?

This thesis is partially informed by my own experience (I served in Afghanistan for four years, first as a civilian counterintelligence officer, then as an adviser to the Afghan National Security Forces in Gardez and Kabul. In my final tour in 2012, I was an intelligence analyst at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul) and then augmented by further research using firsthand accounts and official U.S. government reports.

This is not a first-person narrative; instead, I used my own experience to define the research questions and then augmented by further research using first hand accounts and official U.S. government reports. The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) provided a wealth of reports about the failing Afghan National

Security Forces (ANSF), all of which were primary sources, and based on ongoing official U.S. Government investigations.

So how do we analyze America's role in Afghanistan? As historian Donald Norberg once asked: "How do we, as scholars – social scientists and historians – respond to momentous contemporary events? Our instincts urge caution, but the events demand action."[3]

This is a first draft of history. Kevin M. Kruse, in his article "The Pitfalls of Writing the First Draft of History" points out that when a historian is trying to analyze recent events, that "so much of the material to which we would normally turn to just isn't there."[4] While Kruse is referring primarily to domestic policy events, his statement is accurate for foreign policy as well.

Kruse pointed out that "archival materials, the sources that serve as the backbone for most historical inquiry, typically takes decades to come into view."[5] Many of the more recent Department of Defense intelligence reports about the ANSF will remain classified for twenty-five years, and some of the key players in Afghanistan may remain reluctant to talk about their roles in what emerged as a major defeat for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Kruse concluded: "There are other sources that can help us fill the void left by archival absences: more quickly available records of congressional hearings and court cases, oral histories and press interviews with key participants, election results, polling

[3] Donald Nordberg, "First and Second Drafts of History: The Case of Trump, Foucalt and Pre-Modern Governance" *Geopolitics, History and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (June 2017): 107 – 117, DOI:10.22381/GHIR9220175.
[4] Kevin M. Kruse, "The Pitfalls of Writing the First Draft of History," *Process*, November 30, 2016, http://www.processhistory.org/the-pitfalls-of-writing-the-first-draft-of-history/.
[5] Kruse, "The Pitfalls of Writing the First Draft of History."

data, the deep dives of investigative journalists and studies by scholars in fields more attuned to the present, including sociology and political science. While some historians are skilled at using such tools of social science, for many it can prove to be unfamiliar territory. We need to tread carefully."[6]

While parts of this thesis may seem to be a first-person narrative, I have also, as previously noted, collected as many available, open source documents as possible to augment and widen my own direct experiences. Indeed, only by examining the facts of the war in detail can I prove my thesis. In many wars, the winning sides's military victories can ebb and flow. But in Afghanistan, I have concluded, based on that initial analysis, that the longer we were there, the more the Afghan government lost control of the country to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. I have not cherry-picked evidence, but have tried to carefully gather impartial information from a wide variety of sources that shows the slow disintegration of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces. Detail is necessary to prove my thesis.

From the time that I first started doing research on my thesis at Harvard, Kabul fell to the Taliban, and the war in Afghanistan abruptly ended. Events in the summer of 2021 moved rapidly, and the Afghan government collapsed in slightly over three weeks - despite U.S. government expectations that the Ghani administration could hold the capital and retain a nucleus of control in Afghanistan for months or years. As late as August 14th, 2021, the day before the Taliban captured Kabul, President Joseph Biden stated that official U.S. policy was to continue to "support President Ghani."[7] To the end, the

[6] Kruse, "The Pitfalls of Writing the First Draft of History."
[7] White House, "Statement by President Biden on Afghanistan, August 14, 2021, accessed October 22, 2021, www.whitehouse.gov.

prevailing policy narratives about the U.S. approach in Afghanistan concealed dangerous flaws.

Why, therefore, did policy makers embrace certain narratives about Afghanistan - and use them as the basis for making policy? As Chris Alden and Amnon Aran noted in their excellent book *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approach* (London: Routledge Press, 2011), policy analysis "is an investigation into decision making, the individual decision makers, processes and conditions that affect foreign policy and the outcomes of these decisions." In this thesis, I have tried to examine these factors: "the individual decision makers" and the "processes and conditions" that led to the U.S. losing the war in Afghanistan.

Complex strategies and policies are often represented by more digestible narratives. As R.A.W. Rhodes points out in his book *Narrative Policy Analysis: Cases n Decentered Policy* (Southampton, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) policy analysis provides "information, evaluation, advice and advocacy for policymakers" and that is often delivered via a specific narrative. Narrative policy analysis, therefore, examines not only foreign policy events, but how these events created narratives about foreign policy, about military strategy, about the way that armed forces are created and structured, and how the U.S. "wages peace" and does nation building.

So why do we need my thesis? Emery Roe, in his book *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* points out that "attention must be given to ways in which practitioners can better utilize the policy narratives that motivate blueprint development."[8] In Afghanistan, there seemed to be a prevailing belief among U.S.

[8] Emery Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1994), 35.

policymakers that if we gave the Afghan National Army (ANA) enough weapons, funding and training, then it would triumph against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. We heavily trained and lavishly equipped the ANA for nineteen years, but at the end they collapsed in three weeks. Why?

Roe adds: "One of the principal ways in which practitioners, bureaucrats and policymakers articulate and make sense of this uncertainty is to tell scenarios or arguments that simplify or complexify that reality."[9] When we first invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the various Afghan ethnic militias fought well against the Taliban, but the ANA, which was created later, always seemed to be combat ineffective. My thesis addresses this question, and tries to explain why this happened.

My hope is that my thesis will generate policy narratives that, in the words of Emery Roe, "can be operationalized into standard approaches with widespread application."[10] My thesis will also have a narrative policy analysis that produces a: "key role in establishing and fixing the assumptions for decision making under conditions of high ambiguity."[11]

In this paper, I will try and identify key narratives that drove U.S. policy in Afghanistan. I will further attempt to show that these narratives were not challenged by both the facts on the ground as well as Afghan historical experience. I will also discuss that these alternatives that might have worked were not considered because they did not conform to the preferred narratives.

[9] Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis,* 35.
[10] Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis,* 36.
[11] Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis,* 37.

I hope that this thesis will provide a valuable perspective to future policymakers about Afghanistan, and our war there. As someone who has worked at five U.S. Embassies around the world, I am painfully conscious that sometimes the right information does not find its way to the right people in Washington, D.C.

Chapter II.

An Unexpected Victory

The U.S. war in Afghanistan began on September 11th, 2001, when four U.S. commercial jetliners were hijacked by Arab terrorists. Two of the planes crashed into the World Trade Center complex in New York City, bringing down Towers One and Two; a third jet hit the Pentagon; and a fourth jet crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The fourth jet was believed to be targeting either the White House or the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Three thousand people, most of whom were Americans, were killed in the attacks.

The terrorists involved in the hijackings were members of Al Qaeda, an Islamic fundamentalist terrorist group. Al Qaeda was headed by Osama bin Ladin, a Saudi Arabian terrorist, and was based in Afghanistan, which was ruled by another Islamic fundamentalist group, the Taliban. U.S. President George W. Bush asked the Taliban leadership to hand over the members of Al Qaeda who were involved in the terrorist attacks. After some unenthusiastic negotiations, the Taliban ultimately refused to turn over any of the Al Qaeda terrorists.

President Bush proclaimed: "We will make no distinction between those who planned these acts and those who harbor them."[12] The U.S. had not liked the Taliban government of Afghanistan and their human rights abuses, but had largely ignored them. They had closed the American Embassy in Kabul in 1989, and the Central Intelligence

[12] Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 30.

Agency (CIA) had quit funding the mujahideen, the various anti-Soviet Afghan guerilla groups, in 1991. While some limited U.S. intelligence collection in Afghanistan continued, it was not always focused on the Taliban. One of the CIA's programs in Afghanistan concentrated on recovering Stinger anti-aircraft missiles from the mujahideen. A second CIA program focused on finding Mir Amal Kasi, a Pakistani terrorist who had murdered several CIA employees at their Langley headquarters in 1993, and who was believed to be hiding out in Afghanistan.[13]

Additionally, there had been a mostly unsuccessful U.S. missile strike on Osama bin Ladin's compound in Khost, Afghanistan in 1998 after it was discovered that Al Qaeda had been involved in bombing U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. But after three thousand Americans were killed by terrorists operating in Afghanistan, Washington's views about the Taliban changed dramatically.

So President Bush ordered the U.S. Department of Defense and the CIA to begin planning an invasion of Afghanistan, with the primary goal of killing and capturing members of Al Qaeda. A secondary goal was to destroy the Taliban, and to help bring a friendly government to power in Afghanistan.

By 2000, the CIA had already developed a contingency plan for military operations in Afghanistan called "Blue Sky." It involved outreach to various tribes in Afghanistan who were opposed to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.[14] The CIA had established liaison with the heads of seven mujahideen groups in the 1980s, (nicknamed "the Peshawar Seven") during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. They

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[13] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Ladin, from the Soviet Invasion to September 11th, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 5-6, 11-12.
[14] Morell and Harlow, *The Great War of our Time: The CIA's fight against Terrorism from Al Qaeda to ISIS* (New York: Twelve Publishing, 2015), 64.

gave weapons to the Peshawar Seven (see glossary) in conjunction with the Pakistani military intelligence agency ISI. After the Soviet withdrawal, the CIA had kept up regular contact with one of those mujahideen leaders, a moderate Tajik named Ahmed Shah Massoud.

The Clinton Administration (1996 – 2000) had vetoed the outreach, claiming that some of the Afghan tribal leaders were "thugs, serial human rights abusers, and drug dealers."[15] Robin Raphel, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, stated: "We do not see ourselves inserting in the middle of Afghan affairs" ignoring that an Afghanistan without any U.S. influence would likely get worse and worse.[16] After the September 11th attacks, the Blue Sky war plan was dusted off, and put into action.

About two weeks after the September 11th bombings, the CIA starting sending in paramilitary teams to establish liaison with the anti-Taliban remnants in northern Afghanistan. General Tommy Franks, the U.S. Central Command (Centcom) commander, reflecting a prevalent narrative within the U.S. military that deployment of a force takes months of preparation and planning - based in particular on the 1990 "Desert Shield" deployments to Saudi Arabia - had originally told U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that it would take several months to get a U.S. military force to Afghanistan. Rumsfeld cut him off, saying: "You don't have months."[17] The CIA was more flexible than Centcom, and was willing to immediately send in men into Afghanistan to help organize the U.S. invasion, so the Bush Administration turned to them.

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[15] Woodward, *Bush at War*, 35.
[16] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 45.
[17] Woodward, *Bush at War*, 43.

When President Bush visited the site of the World Trade Center in New York City, he stood among the smoking rubble and tried to speak to the rescue workers there. When one of the people in the crowd yelled that he couldn't hear the President, George Bush yelled back: "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon."[18] It was the most eloquent moment of the Bush presidency. Having stressed that Al Qaeda and the Taliban would "hear from all of us soon", the Bush team eschewed the careful, methodical, drawn-out planning of the uniformed military in favor of the paramilitary, ad-hoc, can-do risktakers of the CIA.

The CIA reached out to four different groups of guerillas in the north. The first guerilla force was a group of Uzbek soldiers, headed by General Abdul Rashid Dostum. General Dostum had once been an Afghan communist army general, and his unit of Uzbek fighters, the galam jam, was one of the most feared in the Afghan military. When the communist government of Dr. Mohammed Najibullah Ahmadzai started to collapse, Dostum switched sides and joined the Northern Alliance.

The collapse of the last communist government of Afghanistan eerily showed future trends in Afghanistan. General Dostum was a loyal communist, but he was an Uzbek. His titular superior, Minister of Defense General Shahnawaz Tanai, was a Pashtun. Although Najibullah's Parcham faction of the Afghan communist party was officially inclusive of all tribes, Tanai was actually a member of the rival Khalq faction, which only favored Pashtuns.[19] General Tanai did not like that an Uzbek had so much

[18] Woodward, *Bush at War*, 70.
[19] Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation in Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 156.

power, and schemed with Najibullah to remove Dostum from his command.[20] Communist party membership was suddenly much less important than tribal ties.

Dostum was warned by Ahmed Shah Massoud of his pending arrest, and he defected and joined the mujahideen. His division's defection was a major factor in the collapse of Najibullah's regime. He had his revenge on the Pashtuns in the communist government though: while Shahnawaz Tanai escaped, Dostum's troops seized the Kabul Airport, and prevented Najibullah from fleeing to India.[21] A few years later, Najibullah was captured by the Taliban, badly beaten, castrated, and hung from a lamppost by the Arg Presidential Palace.

The second faction of Afghan guerillas were the remnants of the Tajik Northern Alliance, now headed by Marshal Mohammed Qasim Fahim. The Northern Alliance's leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, a famous guerilla leader who had fought the Soviets, was one of the Peshawar Seven. Massoud had been assassinated by Al Qaeda on September 9th, 2001. Marshal Fahim was holding the Northern Alliance together, but it was shaky. Most of the Tajik soldiers were demoralized by Ahmad Shah Massoud's murder. The Northern Alliance was holding on to the Shomali Plains north of Kabul.

Massoud had been the best known of the mujahideen leaders, and was dubbed "The Lion of Panjshir" by the western press. The Soviet Army had invaded his home territory, the Panjshir Valley, six different times, from 1980 – 1982, and all six times his guerillas had defeated them, despite being hugely outnumbered. A moderate leader, Massoud spoke French, studied Mao Zedong's guerilla tactics, believed in women's

[20] Brian Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum, the Afghan Warrior who led the U.S. Special Forces to topple the Taliban Regime* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 140-141.
[21] Phillip Corwin, *Doomed in Afghanistan: A UN Officer's Memoir of the Fall of Kabul and Najibullah's Failed Escape, 1992* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 89-90.

rights and reached out to other tribal militias to try and establish a coalition government after the fall of Najibullah's regime.

Marshal Qasim Fahim was a Tajik who was Massoud's principal deputy, although he lacked Massoud's charisma. Fahim was much more heavy handed that Massoud had been: he once had a prominent Pashtun named Hamid Karzai arrested during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, and gave him a bloody interrogation. Karzai providentially managed to escape from when the building where he was being beaten up was accidentally shelled.[22]

Another Tajik guerilla leader in western Afghanistan was Ismail Khan. Ismail Khan was a man who was very in touch with his anger. In 1979, when he was a junior captain in the old Afghan communist army, he had inspired the entire Afghan 17th Army Division in Herat to mutiny and join the mujahideen. After they mutinied, they murdered all the Soviet advisers in the city, cut up their bodies, and led a march through the city with the Soviets' heads impaled on poles.[23] Khan subsequently became a mujahideen leader in Herat.

Khan had come a long way from his days as the commander of an anti-aircraft battery in the Afghan Army. He had formed a mujahideen group called the Amir Hamza Division, which consisted of five regiments of 600 – 900 men.[24] He was the dominant guerilla leader in western Afghanistan, and unlike the Peshawar Seven, had never been dependent on U.S. aid.

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[22] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 286-287.
[23] Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishing, 2001), 57.
[24] Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2002), 93.

Khan maintained a good working relationship with Iran. At one point, during the Taliban's attempt to take over Afghanistan, Iran had given sanctuary to eight thousand of Khan's men. Five training camps were set up near the city of Mashad in eastern Iran for Khan's insurgents.[25] He had also helped to transfer supplies from Iran to various Hazara Shia mujahideen groups using Shinand Air Base in western Afghanistan.

In central Afghanistan, there was an area called the Hazarajat, where the Hazara Shias lived. There were two Hazara factions, one headed by Karim Khalili, and the second group led by Mohammed Mohaqeq. When the Taliban came to power, they threw the Hazara leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, out of a helicopter, and had consistently persecuted the Hazaras ever since then.[26] The Hazaras would be a ready source of manpower to fight against the Taliban.

Although the Hazaras had been Shia Muslims for centuries, the Taliban were Sunni Muslim fanatics and viewed all Shia as heretics who should be executed. Mullah Niazi, a Taliban leader, proclaimed: "Now we are here to deal with you. The Hazaras are not Muslims and now we have to kill Hazaras. You either accept to be (Sunni) Muslims or leave Afghanistan."[27] The Taliban massacred several thousand Hazaras during their conquest of Afghanistan.

In addition to these armed groups in northern Afghanistan, three anti-Taliban Pashtun leaders were willing to enter southern Afghanistan and raise a rebellion there:

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[25] Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 111.
[26] S.A. Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1998), 174f.
[27] Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 74.

Abdul Haq, Hamid Karzai, and Gul Agha Shirzai. The Pashtuns were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, and dominated all of southern provinces.

Abdul Haq had been a famous mujahideen leader, who had made a number of guerilla attacks in Kabul during the Soviet occupation. He had even been invited to the White House to meet with President Reagan.[28] Shirzai had been a previous governor of Kandahar Province prior to the Taliban's rise to power, and was a tribal leader of the Barakzai Pashtuns in Kandahar. He had been deposed as governor by the Taliban when they took over Afghanistan, and harbored a grudge against them.

Hamid Karzai was the best known of the three Pashtun leaders. He was the leader of the Popalzai tribe of Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan, and was a descendant of Ahmad Shah, an Afghan king of the Durrani dynasty. Karzai was a moderate, who had once been the spokesman for Sibghatullah Mujaddedi's Pashtun mujahideen group, the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan, one of the Peshawar Seven. When the Taliban came to power, Karzai briefly served as their deputy foreign minister, but had quit in disgust over all of their human rights abuses. Karzai's father had been murdered by the Taliban, and he was willing to make a stand against them.

Gary Schroen, a Senior Executive Service member of the CIA Directorate of Operations, would be heading the Northern Alliance Liaison Team (NALT), the first group of CIA paramilitary officers to arrive in country. Schroen was one of the few case officers in the Agency who spoke Farsi, and Dari, the language of northern Afghanistan.

[28] Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 43.

He had served as the CIA chief of station in neighboring Pakistan in the early 1990s, and had met with Massoud in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal in September 1996.[29]

Gary Schroen was actually beginning to retire from the CIA on September 11th, 2001. He had started the Retirement Transition Program eleven days earlier, when he was yanked out to go into Afghanistan.[30] His mission would be to meet with the Northern Alliance, and to "convince them to cooperate fully with the CIA and the U.S. military as we go after Bin Ladin and Al Qaeda."[31] He was also assigned to evaluate the military capabilities of the Northern Alliance, and to decide what additional equipment and training they would need to prepare them to fight against the Taliban.

Schroen had his NALT personnel on the ground in northern Afghanistan on September 27th, 2001 – just sixteen days after the World Trade Center bombing.[32] The quick deployment reflected well on the CIA's capabilities in times of crisis. Schroen's men would eventually be joined by several U.S. Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA), or A-Teams, from the 5th Special Forces Group. Schroen divided his men into several smaller teams.

Team Alpha, headed by a CIA officer nicknamed 'RJ', would embed with General Dostum and his Uzbeks. General Dostum wanted to seize Mazar-e Sharif, the largest city in northern Afghanistan. Inside Mazar-e Sharif was the Blue Mosque, the shrine of Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Seizing the city and the shrine would be a major psychological blow for the Taliban, and would give legitimacy

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[29] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 3.
[30] Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of how the CIA spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 11.
[31] Schroen, *First In*, 15 -16.
[32] Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 6.

to Dostum and his troops.[33] RJ's eight-man team was joined by a U.S. Army Special Forces team, ODA 595.

The only working railroad in Afghanistan crossed a bridge from Uzbekistan, and entered Afghanistan at Termez, a speck on the map in the northwest corner of Afghanistan. If General Dostum's men could capture Mazar-e Sharif, they could also liberate Termez, and would open up a major resupply route for the Northern Alliance.

Uzbekistan would be a key ally in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan was ruled by Islam Karimov, who, despite his first name, was a former communist party official who was a secular Sunni Muslim. Karimov was an authoritarian ruler, whose government was threatened by an Islamic fundamentalist terrorist group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU.) The IMU was based in Afghanistan, and received some support from the Taliban.

So, as a counterbalance to the IMU, Karimov provided aid to General Dostum and the Uzbeks in Afghanistan.[34] For a while, General Dostum had his own little autonomous country in northwest Afghanistan, with its own university, and airline, complete with British stewardesses. Women in Dostum's area could wear western clothes, and did not have to huddle in the all-encompassing burkha, like in the rest of Afghanistan. General Dostum's troops also protected the natural gas fields in Sherbegan, which exported energy to Uzbekistan. Dostum's forces had expanded to 40,000 soldiers at one point, and had their own armored units and bombers.[35] After several years of

[33] Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum, the Afghan Warrior who led U.S. Special Forces to topple the Taliban regime* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 215.
[34] Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 83.
[35] Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan,* 28.

fighting the Taliban, Dostum's forces had withered away, and he had lost control of Mazar-e Sharif, the largest city in northern Afghanistan.

The Uzbekistanis were strong supporters of crushing the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and were a rare U.S. ally in central Asia. The IMU tried to assassinate Karimov on February 16th, 1999, blowing up six bombs in the capital of Tashkent. Karimov was not wounded, but immediately agreed to closer cooperation with the CIA to counter the Taliban and the IMU after the attack.[36] Karimov was wary of irritating Russia, so his support of U.S. operations in Afghanistan had to be very low key.[37] After September 11th, Karimov allowed the U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group to operate out of a former Soviet air base at Karshi Khanabad, Uzbekistan.

There was a Tajik militia group of the Northern Alliance based near the Uzbeks headed by Atta Mohammed Nur. The Tajiks and the Uzbeks, although ostensible allies in the fight against the Taliban, did not get along very well. Part of it was the tribal difference, but it was also personality based; Atta Mohammed Nur was a devout Sunni Muslim who prayed five times a day, while General Dostum liked vodka so much that the U.S. Army Special Forces team assigned to him showed up with several bottles as a gift.[38] Eventually RJ split part of his team off to join Atta Mohammed Nur's faction, since it was easier to have two different groups of advisers work with the two different factions.

The CIA's Team Charlie would contact Ismail Khan and his militia in western Afghanistan. Khan's men would try to capture Herat, the largest city in western

[36] Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 456.
[37] Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel Press, 2011), 382.
[38] Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of U.S. Soldiers who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan* (New York: Scribner's Press, 2009), 58, 62.

Afghanistan. The fall of Herat would also be another psychological blow for the Taliban. It was one of the four largest cities in Afghanistan, and is a key gateway to Iran. Herat had actually been part of the old Persian Empire. Iran and Afghanistan share a similar language, Dari, and there were several million Afghan refugees in Iran.

Iran had a consulate in Herat, and in July 1998, the Taliban captured the consulate and murdered eleven Iranian diplomats there.[39] The murders almost led to war between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran subsequently provided aid to the Northern Alliance, as a counterbalance to the Taliban, and even had intelligence officers from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) embedded with them.[40]

CIA Team Delta would join the Hazara guerillas in Bamian Province. The Hazaras had been massacred many times by the Taliban, who believed that since they were Shias, that they were infidels. They would enthusiastically join any fight against the Taliban. Team Delta would work with ODA 553, and their mission would be to seize the provincial capital of Bamian Province from the Taliban.

In southern Afghanistan, the U.S. mission was to find a Pashtun leader who would fight against the Taliban. This was going to be difficult. The Taliban, after all, was a Pashtun supremist movement, and the vast majority of Pashtuns were enthusiastic supporters of the Taliban.

There were only three prominent Pashtuns who were willing to fight against the Taliban: Abdul Haq, Gul Agha Shirzai, and Hamid Karzai. The CIA wanted to assign

[39] Timothy Tyler, *The Decline and Fall of the Shah* (Evans, GA: Barnes and Noble, 2017), 198.
[40] Gary Berntsen, *Jawbreaker: The attack on Bin Ladin and Al-Qaeda A Personal account by the CIA's key field commander* (New York: Random House, 2006), 49.

paramilitary teams to work with these three leaders, and help them to create guerilla cadres that would fight the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

But Haq was very headstrong, and insisted on immediately entering Afghanistan, even though the CIA counselled him to be patient, and wait a few weeks until the Taliban had been weakened by the U.S. bombing campaign. When he was a mujahideen leader battling the Soviets, Haq had a reputation for being fearless. Haq symbolically entered Afghanistan on a white horse, but he and a small group of followers were quickly overwhelmed by the Taliban in Logar Province, slightly to the south of Kabul, and killed. The CIA did send in a drone armed with a Hellfire missile to help him, but Haq's band was still massacred.

By contrast, Gul Agha Shirzai was smart enough to coordinate his activities with the CIA, and to take their advice. The U.S. Embassy in Islamabad supported the CIA teams in the south, and after some hesitation, the Pakistani government agreed to let the CIA and the U.S. Air Force operate out of Pakistani airstrips. Duane Evans, a CIA case officer who had served in the U.S. Army Special Forces, joined with Shirzai, and formed CIA Team Foxtrot.

When Evans flew into Kandahar to join Shirzai, he noticed that Shirzai had already recruited 600 – 900 men to join him. Shirzai was negotiating with the local Taliban to surrender, but Evans was suspicious, suspecting a trap. At the next meeting with the Taliban, the Taliban tried to ambush Shirzai and his men, but Shirzai, acting on the CIA's advice, had arrived early and set up defensive positions. They had a brief firefight, and Shirzai and his men escaped. There would be no more negotiating with the Taliban after that.

Shirzai wanted to capture the village of Takhteh-Pol, which would give control of Highway Four to his men, and would cut off the Taliban garrison at Spin Boldak. Shirzai's men captured Takhteh-Pol, and then set up checkpoints on the highway to Pakistan. They captured several Arab members of Al Qaeda, to include a Yemeni named Salim Hamdan who was driving a car full of surface to air missiles. Hamden turned out to be a bodyguard for Osama bin Ladin.[41]

The Taliban, after heavy bombing, eventually abandoned Spin Boldak and Kandahar City. Shirzai became the new provincial governor of Kandahar. Kandahar airfield became a major U.S. military base.

Evans rifled through an abandoned Al Qaeda safe house in Kandahar City, and found out information about a pending terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Singapore. There was also intelligence about a second planned attack against the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Carl Vinson. The invasion of Afghanistan had already prevented two pending terrorist attacks against Americans.

Hamid Karzai had even more adventures than Gul Agha Sherzai when he returned to Afghanistan. Karzai entered Afghanistan on a motorcycle, and drove up to Tarin Kowt, the capital of Uruzgan Province. He met with some tribal elders there, who were willing to rebel against the Taliban as long as Karzai could show that he had some American support.

The Taliban tried to capture Karzai in Tarin Kowt, and the U.S. flew in a helicopter to evacuate him. After a few days in Pakistan, Karzai returned to Afghanistan

[41] Duane Evans, *Foxtrot in Kandahar: A Memoir of a CIA officer in Afghanistan at the Inception of America's Longest War* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2017), 119.

with a CIA paramilitary team, Team Echo. Karzai was also assigned an U.S. Army Special Forces team, ODA 574, to help train guerillas and to keep him safe. At one point, Mullah Omar, the chief of the Taliban, called Karzai on his cell phone to ask him what he thought he was doing. Karzai told Mullah Omar to have the Taliban unconditionally surrender.[42] Karzai slowly rallied a group of Pashtuns to support him.

At one point during the campaign, a U.S. Air Force bomber accidentally dropped a bomb on Karzai's little group of guerillas. A CIA paramilitary officer, Greg Vogle, jumped on top of Karzai, and shielded him from the bomb blast, saving his life. Whatever problems Karzai would have in the future with U.S. government officials, he was always grateful to Vogle for saving him. Vogle would end up as the CIA station chief in Kabul, and was always able to get personal meetings with Karzai, even when Karzai's relations with other senior U.S. government officials were strained.

Up north, Gary Schroen was eventually replaced by Gary Berntsen, another case officer who was one of the handful of Dari linguists in the CIA's Directorate of Operations. Many CIA personnel in Langley were unaware that Schroen had been replaced by Berntsen, as they kept on talking to "Gary in Afghanistan." Berntsen was also a paramilitary officer, who had worked in Afghanistan before. In 2000, He received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, the CIA's third highest award for valor, for a classified operation overseas. Hank Crumpton, one of the CIA's most senior officers, remarked that Gary had been "one of the few CIA officers who could penetrate terrorist groups."[43]

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[42] Eric Blehm, *The Only Thing Worth Dying For: How Eleven Green Berets Forged a New Afghanistan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 91.
[43] Henry Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: A. Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 135.

Berntsen had no problem bringing the fight to the enemy. As a native New Yorker, he took the destruction of the World Trade Center very personally. Courageous and driven, he could work endless twenty hour days and be totally focused on the mission. Berntsen had previously flown into Afghanistan before in March 2000, and had met with Massoud and the Northern Alliance leadership, watching them battle against the Taliban. He had annoyed Al Qaeda so much during that trip that Osama bin Ladin put a



Figure 1. Gary Berntsen, during the 2001 invasion.

Source: New York Times, July 1, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/nyregion/02berntsen.html, accessed November 16, 2022.

three-million-dollar bounty on his head.[44]

Berntsen was a student of history, and had a very specific interest: precision guided munitions. In Operation Desert Storm, the 1991 war against Iraq, only 9% of the bombs dropped were precision guided munitions. By the time Operation Enduring Freedom, the invasion of Afghanistan, began, 70 percent of the bombs dropped would be precision guided munitions.[45]

Berntsen realized that with the accuracy of the precision guided munitions, a small U.S. force on the ground could call in bombings and destroy the enemy. Precision guided munitions could be guided three ways; by laser beams illuminating a target; geocoordinates punched into a GPS; or a camera on the bomb guided by a pilot. Berntsen would perfect the concept of a U.S. Air Force combat controller shooting a laser to an incoming Taliban tank, and a bomb dropped by a B-52 overhead would zoom in and destroy the tank. The Taliban thought that the laser beams were a death ray.

Schroen's job had been to establish initial contact with the Northern Alliance, and to start the flow of money and arms. Gary Berntsen was in Afghanistan to start the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. When he met with the Northern Alliance leadership for the first time, Berntsen simply said: "We are here to destroy the Taliban."[46]

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[44] Berntsen, *Jawbreaker,* 48.
[45] Benjamin S. Lambreth, *Air Power against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2005), xxii.
[46] Berntsen, *Jawbreaker,* 103.

The Taliban had a lot of former Afghan communist army officers in their ranks who had been trained by the Soviets. The Taliban would make massive tank attacks on the front lines of the Tajiks, like a reenactment of the Battle of Kursk in World War II. The Army Special Forces teams would shoot a laser beam at the incoming tanks, and a bomb dropped by a U.S. bomber far overhead would zoom in and obliterate the tank. If the CIA and the A Teams were not killing all the Taliban, they were certainly killing a lot of them, and most of the Taliban's ability to fight and win conventional battles in northern Afghanistan was fast fading away.

General Dostum had a very simple strategy: his troops, accompanied by ODA 595, would capture the Darya Suf River valley. The capture of that valley would mean that Mazar-e Sharif would have to surrender. And Mazar-e Sharif's capture would lead to the fall of Kabul. Dostum believed that many of the Taliban were not very motivated, and some key defeats would lead to the collapse of their morale. Dostum's Uzbeks and ODA 555 attacked the Taliban on horseback, marking the first time that the U.S. Army had fought on horseback since the Philippines Insurrection. Calling in constant bombing strikes, they destroyed the Taliban's artillery and tanks, and captured Mazar-e Sharif on November 8th, 2001.

One of the insurgents killed in the Northern Alliance's offensive was Juma Namangani, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.[47] So Uzbekistan's support of the U.S. offensive in Afghanistan was already paying off dividends.

The Hazaras in Bamian Province worked well with CIA's Team Delta, and ODA 553. They captured Bamian city, the capital of Bamian Province, on November 11th after

[47] Edmund Degen and Mark J. Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan 2001 – 2014* (Volume I) (Washington: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2021), 92.

some brief resistance from the Taliban.[48] The Hazaras were grateful to be liberated from the Taliban, and would become staunch supporters of the Americans.

Ismail Khan was also active in the west, and with special forces assistance, captured Herat on November 12th. Every time a major city was captured by the Northern Alliance, it was another psychological blow for the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Gary Berntsen led the Tajiks of the Northern Alliance to capture Bagram, the former Soviet military airfield north of Kabul. Kabul itself fell on November 13th. Berntsen recaptured the U.S. Embassy, which had been abandoned for eight years. The Tajiks were more interested in occupying Kabul, and forming a new government, so Berntsen reached out to other tribal militias for support. He had a Pashai tribal militia group move south to continue fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda as they retreated.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pointed out that the war in Afghanistan was a new type of war. Special Forces and CIA teams embedded with friendly tribal militias had inflicted devasting casualties on the Taliban and Al Qaeda by using precision guided munitions. Rumsfeld noted that the U.S. Air Force had dropped BLU-82 Daisy Cutter bombs on the Taliban, which was the "most powerful non-nuclear weapon in our arsenal."[49] He was also very satisfied that Afghanistan was conquered with almost no U.S. casualties. A single CIA paramilitary officer, Michael Spann, has been killed in the north, and two U.S. Army Rangers had been killed in a helicopter crash in the south. Rumsfeld seemed to embrace a narrative that the unconventional warfare

[48] Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2009), 92.
[49] Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, 396.

community, with CIA leadership, could quickly assemble Afghan tribal forces who could make rapid progress with the help of U.S. airpower and logistics.

On November 17th, 2001, General Tommy Franks, the Centcom commanding general, received an unexpected phone call from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld asked: "The President wants us to look at options for Iraq. What is the status of your planning?"[50] Franks admitted in his autobiography that although Centcom had a standing plan for invading Iraq, OPLAN 1003, that updating it would be a mammoth task. Franks dejectedly noted: "No rest for the weary…"[51] Just as with Afghanistan, the military wanted time to prepare, to consider options, and to consider how to best deploy a large conventional force to Iraq.

In December 2001, Gary Berntsen eventually cornered Osama bin Ladin and the remnants of Al Qaeda in Tora Bora, a mountainous redoubt near the Pakistani border. He called in round the clock bombing strikes, and had the Pashai tribal militia under Hazrat Ali try to close in to kill the Al Qaeda terrorists. He requested Centcom to send in a battalion of paratroopers, Rangers, or Marines to cut off the escape route into Pakistan. Berntsen shouted: "Let's kill this baby in the crib!"[52]

General Tommy Franks, the Centcom commander, refused to order any sizeable U.S. reinforcements to Tora Bora to corner and kill Osama bin Ladin. Centcom seemed to already be shepherding resources for the upcoming Iraq campaign and planning for

[50] General Tommy Franks and Malcolm McConnell, *American Soldier* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 2004), 315.
[51] Franks and McConnell, *American Soldier*, 315.
[52] Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA, and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 103.

that would take most of Centcom's time and attention. U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) - the part of the uniformed U.S. military most attuned to the CIA's paramilitary ways - did send in a small Special Operations Force (SOF) detachment to Tora Bora, but while the SOF soldiers killed a lot of terrorists, there were not enough of them to block all of the escape routes through the mountains.

Osama bin Ladin would escape into Pakistan, where he would live for another nine years. The chance of gaining a major strategic and psychological victory by killing Osama bin Ladin in the opening days of the war, was lost forever.

Gary Berntsen, who had managed the CIA's most successful paramilitary campaign since the Vietnam War, after Tora Bora was relieved and sent back to an obscure Latin American country.[53] Despite his role in breaking the back of the Taliban, and capturing Kabul, he was never asked again to share his expertise on Afghanistan. The U.S. was starting the war in Afghanistan by sacking their star quarterback.

The U.S. had quickly invaded Afghanistan after the September 11th attacks and achieved a series of stunning victories. With the assistance of CIA paramilitary teams and U.S. Army Special Forces, the various ethnic militias of the Northern Alliance quickly overwhelmed the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The CIA and the Special Forces responded to the public clamor for an attack against those terrorists who killed thousands of Americans. The larger questions of what the long term American role in Afghanistan was left unanswered. Would the United States continue to rely on ad hoc coalitions of tribal militias and regional powerbrokers in a largely anti-terrorism mission, or would the emphasis shift to creating Afghan institutions more in line with U.S. models?

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[53] Charles S. Faddis, *Beyond Repair: The Decline and Fall of the CIA* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2010), 17.

Chapter III.

Building a New Afghanistan

The CIA and the U.S. Army Special Forces had won a stunning victory in Afghanistan in just a few months. Despite the escape of Osama bin Ladin into Pakistan, there were some impressive achievements in the Afghan campaign. Kabul was captured; Mazar-e Sharif was captured; Herat was captured; and all thirty-four of the provincial capitals were now under the control of the coalition or the new Afghan government.

Gary Berntsen pointed out that it was the combination of deploying U.S. Army Special Forces teams and CIA paramilitary teams that led to the quick victory in Afghanistan. The Special Forces, while superbly well trained, did not have any soldiers with "relevant language or area experience" and the CIA lacked the firepower and logistics support to crush the Taliban and Al Qaeda.[54]

Gary Berntsen estimated that as many as 8,000 – 12,000 Taliban guerillas were killed in the initial 2001 campaign in Afghanistan. He believed that as many as 4,000 – 5,000 Al Qaeda terrorists were also killed or captured in the various battles that were fought against the tribal militias and the CIA and U.S. Army Special Forces.[55] It appeared that the war in Afghanistan was won.

Berntsen was not the only American who felt that way. General Tommy Franks, the Centcom commander, wrote in his autobiography *American Soldier* that the last of the

[54] Gary Berntsen, *Human Intelligence, Counterintelligence and National Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2008), 32.
[55] Berntsen, *Jawbreaker: The attack on Bin Ladin and Al-Qaeda,* 313.

enemy's forces were destroyed.[56] Major General Franklin Hagenbeck, the commanding officer of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division, which was deployed to Afghanistan, proclaimed that "the war, the fight in Afghanistan was over."[57]

One of the principal U.S. goals in Afghanistan was to create a new multi-ethnic government in Kabul that would fairly represent all Afghans, and not just Pashtuns. It was also important to the U.S., and to the international community, that the new government respect woman's rights. A new government with broad popular support would be a key factor in extinguishing the last political appeal of the Taliban.

The CIA and paramilitary assets which had responded to the first mission laid out by the President—that those who had organized and abetted the 9/11 attacks would "hear" from the U.S. quickly and rapidly—were being displaced as a new mission emerged. Rather than focusing on counter-terrorism, this newer mission embraced a narrative of "nation building" as a defensive strategy to prevent other terrorist threats from metastasizing. Instead of maintaining an ad hoc anti-Taliban/anti-Al Qaeda alliance, a strong, centralized Afghan state was now seen as absolutely essential for U.S. goals to succeed.

In 2002, there was a huge Loya Jirga (grand assembly) held in Kabul where the details of the new government were hammered out. Every tribe, ethnic and regional group, and social class was represented. Even Zahir Shah, the elderly king who had been in exile in Italy since the 1970s, showed up for the meeting.

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[56] Franks and McConnell, *American Soldier*, 380.
[57] Donald P. Wright, *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom October 2001 – September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 127.



Figure 2. King Zahir Shah

Source: "Mohammed Zahir Shah," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Zahir_Shah, accessed November 16, 2022.

Zahir Shah had been the King of Afghanistan from 1933 – 1972. Although he was disparaged by some observers as a listless leader, his reign had been a long, unparalleled period of peace in Afghanistan. He had kept Afghanistan neutral during World War II, and had managed to carefully walk a tight rope of neutrality between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Like previous Afghan monarchs, Zahir Shah cultivated regional leaders by promising aid and opportunities, while pursuing development of a more modern military and bureaucracy defined by personal ties of

loyalty to the monarchy. His willingness to curb the influence of the royal family was well received. Zahir Shah had even fired one of his cousins, Mohammed Daoud Khan, as prime minister when he pushed Pakistan too hard on the sensitive issue of Pashtunistan - [see glossary] the effort to unite the Pashtuns of Pakistan with their fellow tribesmen across the Afghan border (which would have required not only the seizure of Pakistani territory but would have upset the ethnic balances in Afghanistan itself.)

Even Soviet officials conceded that Zahir Shah was a better leader than many of the Afghan communists who later replaced him. Georgiy Arbatov, a senior foreign policy advisor, pointed out that the Soviet government: "had gotten along very well with the King" but that Hafizullah Amin, an Afghan communist who was the President of Afghanistan in 1979, was a "bloodthirsty tyrant."[58] (The Soviet government became so annoyed with Amin that they arranged for a KGB hit team dressed in Afghan presidential guard uniforms to assassinate him and his mistress in the Darulamen Palace in December 1980.[59])

The opposition to Zahir Shah came principally from the Islamic fundamentalists who had never supported his modernization program. Abu Sayyaf, a Pashtun mujahideen leader who had been one of the Peshawar Seven, stated in his first meeting with Gary Schroen that the U.S. government should not: "support bringing back the former Afghan king."[60] Abu Sayyef had impeccable Islamic fundamentalist credentials; Osama bin

[58] U.S. State Department, *Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State*, March 11, 1980.
[59] Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 133.
[60] Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of how the CIA spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 117.

Ladin had once worked with his insurgent group during Bin Ladin's time in Afghanistan.[61]

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a second member of the Peshawar Seven who was also a Pashtun fundamentalist mujahideen leader, disliked the King so much that he tried to assassinate him after Zahir Shah returned to Afghanistan.[62] Several hundred people were involved in the plot. Hekmatyar would eventually form Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), an insurgent group that would fight against the Afghan government and the U.S. military. Their narrative was that the king was a figure out of the past who could play no effective role for the future.

But there was some support for the king. A third Pashtun warlord, Pacha Khan Zadran, thought that Zahir Shah should run the new post-Taliban government. It was unclear whether Pacha Khan Zadran sincerely believed that the King would make a good leader, or if he felt that Zahir Shah's succession would lead to a weak central government that would benefit warlords like himself.

By 2001, the King, though, was elderly – eighty-seven years old. His first contact with the White House had been in President Franklin Roosevelt's first term.[63] Zahir Shah was also in indifferent health. He told Zalmay Khalizaid, the sole Afghan-American National Security Council staffer, that he welcomed a ceremonial role, but was not interested in heading the transitional government.

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[61] Schroen, *First in*, 116.
[62] Zalmay Khalizad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey through a Turbulent World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 143.
[63] Foreign Relations of the United States *Diplomatic Papers, 1934, Europe, Near East and Africa*, 1934, 748. King Zahir Shah sent a letter to President Roosevelt on April 24, 1934, requesting U.S. recognition of his regime. He called President Roosevelt his "Dearest Friend" in the letter.

Since 1972, Afghanistan had a bewildering number of different governments. They had a king; a neutralist president; four communist presidents (two of whom were assassinated in office, and a third who was hung from a lamppost); a moderate Islamic fundamentalist president, and a radical Islamic fundamentalist leader. There was no democratic tradition to build on, and it would be difficult for a new leader to automatically assume every Afghan's loyalty. Traditionally, Afghanistan functioned because different tribal and ethnic leaders pledged fealty to a monarch, not because they viewed themselves as a single sovereign people. Moving from a dynastic basis for leadership to popular election would be difficult. Yet the United States, in particular, wanted to emphasize the universality of democratic principles; a return to monarchy could be viewed, in contrast, as a regressive step.

The U.S. encouraged Hamid Karzai to become the new President of Afghanistan. It is an unwritten rule that all the leaders of Afghanistan must be Pashtuns. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Northern Alliance leader who had briefly served as president from 1992 – 1996, was a Tajik, as was Habibullah Kalakani, who briefly ruled Afghanistan in 1929. But all the other leaders of Afghanistan, whether they were kings, prime ministers, or presidents, have always been Pashtuns. Pashtun leaders in Kabul, however, also, in turn, deferred to regional leaders from the other principal ethnic groups in a rough-and-ready cohabitation.

To his eternal credit, Hamid Karzai did create a multi-ethnic administration in Kabul, where minority tribesmen and women were represented. The Pashtuns received eleven of the twenty-nine cabinet posts in the new government, although the all-important Ministries of Defense, the Interior (which controlled the National Police), and

Foreign Affairs remained in the hands of the Tajiks of the Northern Alliance. The Hazaras were given five cabinet posts, and the Uzbeks three positions. King Zahir Shah was granted the title "Father of the Nation" with the hope that he could serve as a unifying figurehead.

The Loya Jirga became the new Afghan Parliament, with an upper house, the Meshrano Jirga, and a lower house, the Wolesi Jirga. Women were allowed to serve as members of the Wolesi Jirga, and there were even a few women cabinet ministers. The Karzai administration was a pleasant contrast to the Taliban, which, as a Pashtun movement, prohibited Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras from serving in the government, and aggressively persecuted females of every ethnicity who sought any role in public life.

On paper, and at first glance, the Loya Jirga had apparently created a government that represented the whole of Afghanistan. This seemed to avoid the problems that had plagued America's nation-building efforts in South Vietnam.

William Colby, a CIA official who had served in the Vietnam War, always thought that the authoritarian Diem regime of South Vietnam alienated a lot of the South Vietnamese population, particularly the urban elite and opposition political parties.[64] He felt that was one of the reasons for the lack of success in the Vietnam War. Colby was not some obscure dissident CIA employee; he had served as the CIA's Chief of Station in Saigon; and ended up as the Director of Central Intelligence. Hopefully, Karzai's more inclusive government would gain a lot of support from the Afghan people, and that would lead to a victory against the Taliban.

[64] William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 73.

One huge mistake in the new post-war government, however, was how the central government would govern the provinces, and in particular how Hamid Karzai established the provincial governments. All thirty-four of the provincial governors would be appointed by the new President of Afghanistan. Even the district governors (a district is the equivalent of a county in the U.S.) - one step below the provincial governors - would be appointed by the Afghan President. Many of the Afghans, particularly in the Pashtun southern provinces, did not feel that Afghanistan was really a democracy when almost every important official outside of the Wolesi Jirga was appointed directly by the President. Hence, a real dilemma. When Afghanistan was ruled by a dynasty, a monarch had certain prerogatives that did not easily translate to a President who claimed to govern on the basis of a mandate from the people.

Some of the warlords ended up as provincial governors. Gul Agha Sherzai became the Governor of Kandahar Province, and Ismail Khan became the Governor of Herat Province. But other provincial governors had a more varied background. Said Fazel Akbar, the newly appointed Governor of Kunar Province, had run a hip hop clothing store in Oakland, California before his appointment.[65] Hakim Taniwal, the new Governor of Paktia Province, had been a sociology professor in Australia.[66] More ominously, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, the incoming Governor of Helmand Province, had been a major drug trafficker.[67]

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[65] Said Hyder Akbar, *Come back to Afghanistan: Trying to Rebuild a Country with my Father, my Brother, my One-Eyed Uncle, Bearded Tribesmen, and President Karzai* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 2.
[66] Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, xx.
[67] Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2014* (Volume I), 135, 199 – 200.

Karzai's remoteness from the provinces sometimes led to bad decisions. For instance, in Kandahar Province, Karzai wanted to appoint Mullah Naqib Alikhozai, a former Taliban leader, as the new head of security of the province. In addition to fighting against the coalition, Alikhozai had been involved in helping Al Qaeda terrorists escape from Kandahar city. With heavy pressure from the CIA, Karzai agreed to cancel Alikhozai's appointment.[68]

While not fully aware of some of these deficiencies, the United States was confident that if the new Afghan government, like Zahir Shah's government before it, could show meaningful improvement in the standard and quality of life of Afghans, it would help bolster Karzai's legitimacy. After World War II, the U.S. had helped to re-establish democracies in Western Europe and Japan, and to rebuild those countries' economies. The U.S. hoped to have similar success in Afghanistan. Many European countries agreed to fund development projects in Afghanistan, and the country slowly began to emerge from the dark ages. Schools and universities were reopened, and key infrastructure, such as the Ring Road highway, were slowly rebuilt. Various member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would join the newly created International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and would open up Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in 34 of the 35 Afghan provinces. Even European countries which were not members of NATO, like Sweden and Switzerland, would join ISAF, as would Asian countries like Mongolia and New Zealand.

The PRTs would supervise a lot of civic action projects throughout Afghanistan, which hopefully would win a lot of the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. The

[68] Evans, *Foxtrot in Kandahar*, 147.

Afghan people's support would then help win the war against the Taliban, and guarantee a stable, pro-Western government.

The U.S. tried to create a good foundation for a new Afghanistan. They had learned from their failures in South Vietnam, and encouraged the foundation of a

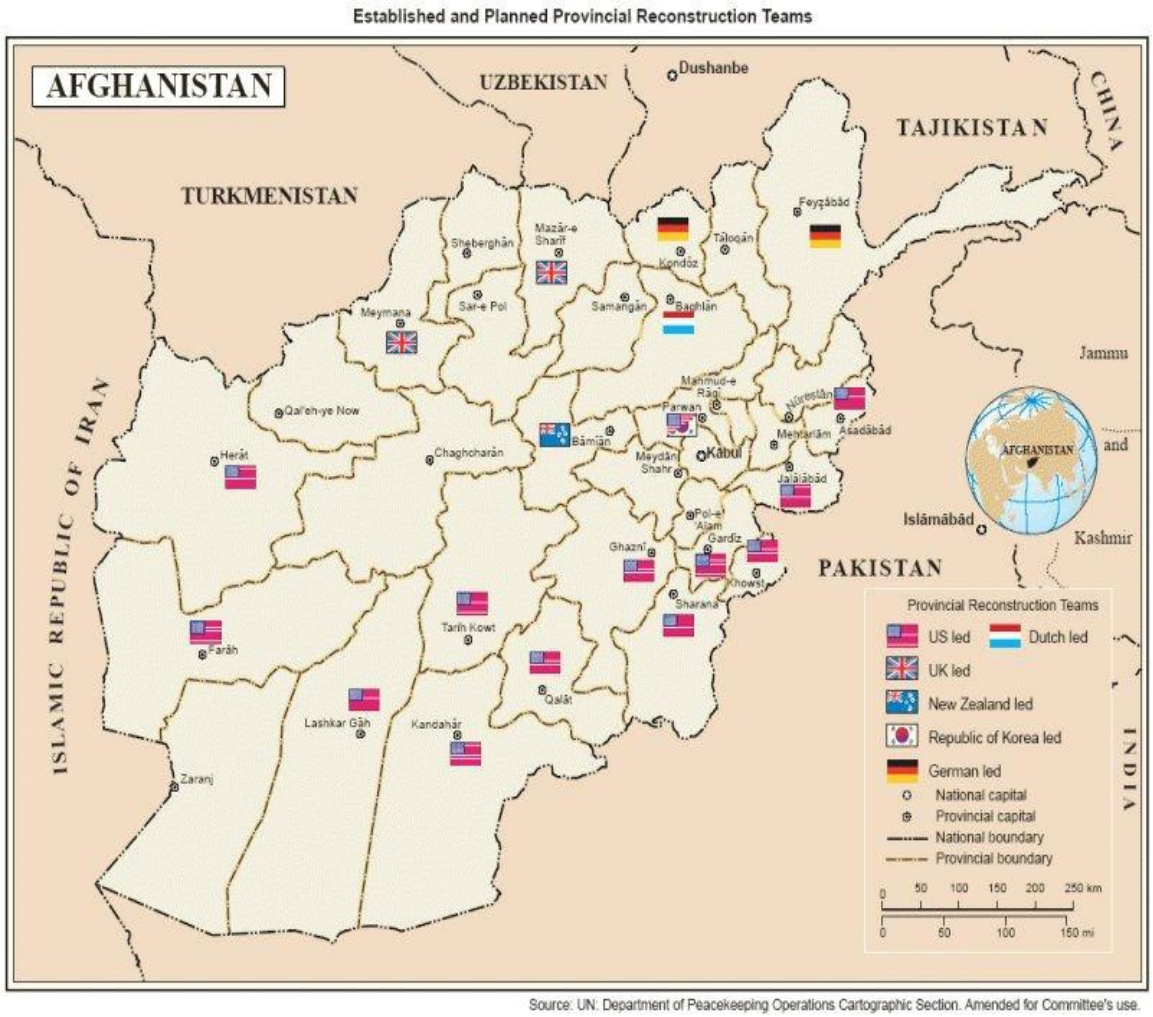


Figure 3. PRTs in Afghanistan.

Source: https://www.globalsecurity.org/jhtml/jframe.html#https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/images/prt-2004july-map2.jpg|||PRT%20Map%20July%202004, accessed November 16, 2022.

democratic Afghan government, that was inclusive of tribal minorities and women. The U.S. had also gotten an impressive amount of international support for their mission in Afghanistan, again unlike the Vietnam War, which was largely unpopular among most of the world's nations. Even though the Taliban and Al Qaeda still remained in Afghanistan, the assessment was that they could not regain their former support.

Chapter IV.

Creating the Afghan National Defense Security Forces

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual describes counterinsurgency as the "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic action taken by a government to defeat insurgency."[69] Politically, Hamid Karzai had certainly made some serious strides towards establishing a more inclusive administration. The ISAF nations were doing a lot of civic action missions, rebuilding infrastructure, which would hopefully win a lot of hearts and minds. But the military and paramilitary pieces of the counterinsurgency campaign still needed to be worked on.

There was still a serious insurgent threat in southern Afghanistan. While the U.S., and a few other coalition allies such as Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Denmark, Australia, and Estonia were willing to fight against the Taliban, a key factor in Afghanistan's long-term survival would be the establishment of a capable Afghan military. So the future of Afghanistan would depend on a newly created Afghan National Army.

The Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) originally consisted of four branches: the Afghan National Army (ANA); the Afghan National Police (ANP); the Afghan Border Police (ABP); and the National Directorate of Security (NDS), an intelligence agency which handled both domestic and foreign intelligence collection. (Later an Air Corps would be formed within the ANA.) Both the ANP and ABP were actually paramilitary organizations, armed with heavy weaponry such as assault rifles,

[69] *U.S. Army and Marine Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 2.

machine guns and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs.) The CIA would train NDS, and Centcom and ISAF would take the lead on training the ANA, ANP, and the ABP.

Later, many Americans would sagely nod their heads, and point out that America should never be involved in nation building. But since the end of World War II, the U.S. has actually had a long and honorable tradition of nation building, and training host nation militaries. The U.S. helped rebuild France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, and West Germany after Victory in Europe (VE) Day in May 1945. American forces would further assist Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan after their surrender in August 1945.

More recently, the U.S. would rebuild Grenada after the successful 1983 invasion, and Panama after Operation Just Cause in December 1989. One of the main priorities after the end of Operation Desert Storm in March 1991 was the successful reconstruction of Kuwait. In all of these countries, except for Grenada and Panama, the U.S. would also create functioning host nation militaries.[70]

But in all of these countries, the enemy had been decisively defeated before the rebuilding began. There was still a considerable insurgent presence in Afghanistan, men who had not surrendered and would not surrender. One senior CIA official estimated that there were "several hundred to two thousand" Arab members of Al Qaeda still alive in Afghanistan.[71] There were also tens of thousands of Taliban guerillas left in the heavily Pashtun southern provinces.

The U.S. Army fought the biggest battle of the war in March 2002. Operation Anaconda was a U.S. Army operation against Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists in Paktia

[70] In Grenada and Panama, the U.S. did create a national police force, and a small coast guard.
[71] Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA, and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 117.

Province, one of the southeastern provinces in Afghanistan with a high percentage of Pashtuns. Australian SAS special forces also participated in the battle, as did a few Afghan militia elements.

Anaconda became the model for future battles in Afghanistan. The U.S. and ISAF coalition did the majority of fighting, and performed well. There was a token Afghan military presence. (One U.S. Army general, David Barno, would later call the presence of Afghan forces during U.S. operations in Afghanistan 'window dressing.'[72]) Several Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents were killed in the battle. A part of Afghanistan that was previously dominated by the enemy was now slightly safer to operate in. But after 2001, none of the battles that ISAF fought ever emerged as a key victory, where the Taliban was decisively defeated, where the tide of the war could be turned. When the Taliban and Al Qaeda were defending fixed positions in northern Afghanistan, they could be bombed and killed in great numbers, but once they switched to a classic guerilla insurgency, they were much more elusive, and harder to kill.

In the aftermath of the fighting, it was also unclear how many insurgents had actually been killed in the battle. One American who fought there photographed about thirty dead corpses in an effort to try and identify the dead guerillas; but a U.S. Army general averred that at least 800 Taliban and Al Qaeda were killed in the fighting.[73] The question was: what happened to all of the enemy bodies? Three Taliban howitzers were captured after the battle, but did the guerillas really hastily bury all of their dead in unmarked graves as they retreated into Pakistan?

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[72] SIGAR 22-22 IP Evaluation Report, "Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that Led to Its Demise, 2.
[73] Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), 375.

Another ongoing problem in Enduring Freedom was the Pakistani support for the Taliban. Pakistan had helped to create the Taliban in the late 1990s, and had been its biggest international supporter. Soldiers of the paramilitary Pakistani Frontier Corps had served in the ranks of the Taliban.[74] Officers of the Inter Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence service had helped direct the Taliban's operations in Afghanistan. For a while, Pakistan's Consul in the Afghan city of Kandahar, was a Pakistani special forces officer, Brigadier Sultan Amir. Amir was better known as Colonel Imam. He had previously helped direct the Taliban's offensive on the Shomali Plains against the Northern Alliance.[75]

Officially, Pakistan was a U.S. ally in the War on Terror. The Pakistani government did arrest several Al Qaeda terrorists in Pakistan, and at least one minor Taliban leader. But there were twenty-five million Pashtuns in Pakistan, many of whom were sympathetic to the Taliban.[76] FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan, provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda and Taliban elements. Trying to cut off Pakistani support for the Taliban would be a key challenge for the U.S.

So, the U.S. was committed to creating an Afghan military that would be loyal to the central government and would be able to provide security for the entire country. However, the United States would commit what in retrospect appears to have been a fatal error: they pushed for the tribal militias—their erstwhile allies and partners in the 2001 campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban—to be disbanded.

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[74] Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, 74.
[75] Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan 2001 – 2014* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 20, 45-46.
[76] Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, 99.

Virtually every observer believed that the Afghan tribal militias had fought well against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in 2001 – 2002. The official U.S. Army history of the war agreed with this assessment. Donald P. Wright's *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001 – September 2005*, is the first volume of the official U.S. Army history of the war in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom.)[77] Wright had nothing but praise for the way that the Northern Alliance and other tribal militias fought against the Taliban.

Historically, ethnic militias had a good record of battlefield successes in Afghanistan. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, the Afghan communist regime of Dr. Mohammed Najibullah Ahmadzai was able to fight, and win several key battles against the mostly Pashtun mujahideen. A large part of Najibullah's survival was due to the 53rd Division, which was composed entirely of Uzbeks under the control of General Rashid Dostum. In the spring of 1989, the Uzbeks from the 53rd Division fought a battle for Jalalabad, one of the larger Afghan cities in the south, and defeated both the Pashtun mujahideen and Arab terrorists from Al Qaeda.[78] Even when Najibullah's regime finally collapsed in 1993, Dostum's Uzbeks stayed intact as a cohesive combat unit, and eventually retreated to the northern provinces to fight there.

When the British ran the old British Indian Empire, which consisted of the present day countries of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, each infantry regiment in the British Indian army was formed by soldiers of a single ethnicity. All of the ten

[77] Donald P. Wright, *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom October 2001 – September 2005* (Volume I) (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010).
[78] Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum*, 138.

Gurkha rifle regiments were composed of recruits from the mountains of Nepal.[79] The Khyber Rifles, which guarded the Khyber Pass, were formed by men from the Afridi Pashtun tribe, which straddled the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[80] All Sikhs had to enlist in one of the Sikh infantry regiments.[81] The British found that by placing men from one ethnicity in a combat arms unit, they fought better, and had higher morale.

This model is still used today in the Indian and Pakistani armies. Moreover, in the British Army today, there are still several elite units that are composed of men of one ethnicity. The Scots Guards enlisted ranks are almost 100% Scottish; the Welsh Guards are similarly composed almost primarily of Welshmen. All of British Guards regiments have had an unsurpassed record of success in battle for centuries.

In contrast, the modern U.S. experience has been to see military service as a way to break down ethnic, regional and class barriers. Moreover, there have been long-standing concerns that ethnic-based militaries can be destabilizing and erode democratic values. Kristen A. Harkness's research, for instance, has shown how ethnically and linguistically-based forces create problems for fragile states. For instance, in the west African country of Sierra Leone, when officers from the Mende tribe tried to dominate the Sierra Leone army, non-Mende officers and enlisted soldiers from other tribes coalesced into opposition, leading to a military coup.[82] When General Idi Amin took over

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[79] Byron Farwell, *The Gurkhas* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 33-34, 250. Five of the Gurkha regiments joined the British Army after India became independent, where they serve today. They are the sole remnant of the once huge British Indian Army.
[80] Jules Stewart, *The Khyber Rifles: From the British Raj to Al Qaeda* (Sparkford, UK: Sutton Publishing Company, 2005), 183.
[81] Byron Farwell, *Armies of the Raj: From the Mutiny to Independence 1848 - 1947* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1989), 182.
[82] K. A. Harkness, "The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coup Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 4 (2016): 587–616, https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1177/0022002714545332.

the east African country of Uganda in a coup, he immediately massacred Ugandan soldiers from the rival Acholi and Langoli tribes, viewing them as security risks.[83] Amin then recruited heavily from his own Kakwa ethnic group, and increasingly relied on mercenaries as well as Sudanese and Congolese recruits to produce an Ugandan army would obey all of Amin's orders without question, to include taking part in an increasing number of human rights abuses. For the U.S., the lesson seemed clear: ethnic-based units would not be loyal to Afghanistan as a concept, but only to their specific group.

In order to foster a better sense of national cohesion and identification with the central government, the U.S. pushed for disbanding Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and Pashai ethnic militias, which had fought well in the campaigns of 2001, and to try and merge their soldiers with new Pashtun recruits, creating a new Afghan National Army. This effort to combine soldiers who didn't like each other much (and who didn't always speak each other's languages), and then to place these mixed units under the command of officers who would not necessarily be trusted (or understood) by the men under their command, was cursed with low motivation and high desertion rates. Despite two decades of funding and training by ISAF, the ANA would never become an institution that could fight and win battles on its own, and its lack of combat effectiveness would become the major reason why Afghanistan would collapse in the summer of 2021.[84]

Unit cohesion, the concept of building individuals into a team, is a key principle of the U.S. Army. Command Sergeant Major Sam Young once wrote: "Soldiers want to be part of a team, they want to belong, and they need to be proud of who they are and

[83] Denis Hills, *The White Pumpkin* (London: The Quality Book Club, 1977), 119, 122.
[84] David Zuchinno, "Taliban capture Kabul, Stunning U.S. as a 20-Year Effort unravels in Days," *New York Times*, August 16, 2021.

what they do."[85] But after the American Civil War (1861 – 1865), it would be a full thirty-three years before former Confederate officers were trusted with leadership positions in the U.S. Army again. Reintegration proved to be a slow and difficult process. Old habits persisted; in one famous anecdote, General Wheeler, an ex-Confederate cavalry general, yelled during a battle during the Spanish-American War in 1898: "We've got the damn Yankees on the run!"[86] But the U.S. military leaders expected that Afghan militias that had been recently fighting against each other would seamlessly merge into better, more competent military units almost immediately, ignoring our post Civil War history

The tribal militias were disbanded because the U.S. and Hamid Karzai's new Afghan government wanted to get rid of the warlords' armies, but there did not seem to be any understanding that the basic structure of the Afghan National Army (ANA) was flawed from the very beginning. The ANA would be set up as a centralized organization which would mix and match recruits from all parts of Afghanistan under the assumption that service in a centrally-designed and organized national army would create a new sense of identity among its members—and that this would produce units that could serve anywhere in Afghanistan.

Hamid Karzai wanted to lessen the warlords' power in Afghanistan by dissolving their tribal militias. This move would also increase the central government's power. He was not interested in anything that might suggest a more decentralized approach to

[85] Command Sergeant Major Sam Young, "Team Building and Unit Cohesion" From One Leader to Another," *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College*, 2013.
[86] Walter Mills, *The Martial Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: The Literary Guild of America, 1931), 274.

recruiting and training forces based on common ethnic and tribal origins and connections to specific regions of the country.

It is true that one strategy for nation-building is to develop armed forces only loyal to national figures. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, pointed out that during the Mejii Restoration in Japan, the Japanese government pursued a similar program, dissolving all of the daimyos' feudal military units, and creating a national army.[87] The differences in the two countries was so vast though: What had worked in Japan - defined by a high degree of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity - would not work in Afghanistan. Moreover, the focal point of the Meiji military was not an elected leader but a dynastic Emperor to whom every Japanese was, in theory, bound by ties of allegiance.

The U.S. had tried this strategy before in a country with some similarities to Afghanistan - in Lebanon, with little success. In 1982, the Israelis invaded Lebanon, and eventually expelled most of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to Tunisia. Lebanon, even without the PLO, was still a hodgepodge of various armed tribal militias: the Christian Phalangists, the Shia Muslims, the Sunni Muslims, the Druze. The U.S. tried to disband those militias, and form a central army, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), from various groups that disliked and distrusted each other. As U.S. National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane pointed out, the LAF never really became the dominant armed force in the country. Indeed, the LAF was often itself drawn into conflict with other Lebanese militias rather than serving as an institution which could integrate the various communities. More importantly, many Lebanese of different ethno-religious

[87] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 95.

groups did not trust that the LAF would protect them better or more effectively than their sectarian militias.[88]

Some Afghan officials pointed out that the tribal militias were supposed to disarm, but the Taliban was not, creating an imbalance of power in different regions of the country. An U.S. government study also pointed out that in some parts of Afghanistan, the tribal militias were the only groups providing "a modicum of security"[89] - shades of the Lebanon experience from the 1980s. Disarming the tribal militias - when there was no effective or trusted Afghan security force to replace them--would actually create a vacuum that the Taliban and Al Qaeda would move into.

The official U.S. Army history of Enduring Freedom identified the poor quality of the new Afghan National Army from its inception. Donald P. Wright's book *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001 – September 2005* pointed out that in April 2002, the British Army trained an initial Afghan National Guard battalion (kandak) of 550 Afghan soldiers. 150 men had deserted from the kandak within two months.[90]

Two more new battalions of the hastily renamed Afghan National Army (ANA) were created later in 2002, but languished at only at 50% of their authorized strength due to heavy desertions.[91] The next two kandaks created only had a slightly better retention rate - 61% and 68% respectively.[92] Most of the new soldiers were inexperienced recruits;

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[88] Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 244.
[89] SIGAR Report, *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2019, 25.
[90] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 202.
[91] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 230.
[92] Degen, Edmund J., and Mark J. Reardon *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2014* (Volume II) Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2021, 230.

in the first three years, less than 2% of the soldiers who joined the ANA were former ethnic militia members.[93] In other words, one of the initial core assumptions—that the new ANA would absorb the experienced officers and fighters from the tribal and regional militias—did not occur. Indeed, although Karzai pushed for the official dissolution of the militias, he also relied on the old warlords for political support, and, over time, whether as "bodyguards" or in some other tribal capacity, these leaders retained some capacity to mobilize informal military forces. So, one of the most important reasons for creating the ANA—to have the national army be the sole bearer of arms—was soon honored in the breach.

Centcom created the Office of Military Cooperation – Afghanistan (OMC-A) to train and organize the new ANA. The OMC-A and its subsequent successor commands adhered to a model of recruiting a diverse military force reflecting the population but imbued with an "Afghanistan-first" ethos. Yet the plans assumed that relatively short training programs would produce a sense of loyalty to the central government and an identity that would transcend ethnic and tribal bonds. It also assumed that language would not be a problem, even though Afghanistan is marked by distinct ethno-linguistic groups. Even the use of Dari (spoken by many as a second language) raised concerns, while Pashto is not easily understood by non-Pashtuns.[94] From the start, however, Pashtuns found it difficult to follow instructions in Dari, and in some cases, Arabic, the language of the Quran, was used to bridge ethno-linguistic differences. Later, English was taught to officers to help build a common language of instruction and command.

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[93] U.S. General Accounting Office, "*Afghanistan Security: Efforts to Establish Army and Police Have Made Progress, but Future Plans Need to Be Better Defined*," GAO-05-575, June 2005, 11.
[94] Muhammad Dinakhel, "An Analysis of Conflict between Pashto and Dari Languages of Afghanistan," *Central Asia Journal* 83 (2018): 79-99, DOI:10.54418/ca-83.30.

Moreover, the critical cultivation of trust between officers and enlisted personnel could not be generated from short training programs. While officially, the ANA was showing "substantiative, measurable results" between 2002 - 2008, at least one semi-official U.S. military website praising the ANA's progress could not show a single battle they had won, or mention a single military campaign the Afghan soldiers had played a major successful role in.[95]

The Afghan government and OMC-A agreed to create seven ANA corps, based around the country. Each corps would be composed of nine infantry battalions. An eighth ANA corps would be based in Kabul.[96] The new ANA units were supposed to be a mixture of the different tribes in Afghanistan, although an official U.S. Army history warned that this approach in recruiting "ignored or trivialized centuries of ethnic tension."[97]

Moreover, it was not clear how Afghans in different parts of the country would respond to soldiers and police not of their region and ethnicity, or whether they would trust them for their security. In fact, over time, it became clear that Afghan security forces could not win local trust and were seen by locals as an outside predatory force.

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[95] "Afghanistan National Army," Institute for the Study of War, https://understandingwar.org/afghanistan-national-army-ana. While not an official U.S. government website, understandingwar.org had a group of retired U.S. Army generals and senior U.S. government officials affiliated with them. Their site was designed to point out the successes of the ANA.

[96] Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2014, Volume I,* 174.

[97] Degen and Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land: The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2014, Volume I,* 233.



Figure 4. ANA bases in Afghanistan.

Source: https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/ana-orbat.htm, accessed November 14, 2022.

Shahmahmood Miakhel, a former adviser to the Afghan Interior Ministry, recounted that district tribal leaders routinely complained to him "that the security people are not there to defend the people and fight Taliban, they are there to make money."[98] Miakhel said that many villagers "questioned who represented the bigger evil, the Taliban or the Afghan government."[99]

[98] Craig Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption" *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
[99] Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption."

In October 2002, Major General Karl Eikenberry took over as the OMC-A commander. General Eikenberry would always be admirably forthright in his assessments of the Afghan National Army. After the U.S. and ISAF nations trained the ANA for a year, Eikenberry characterized the ANA in 2003 as "not at all" mission capable.[100] Eikenberry did add that by 2006, the ANA was able to perform an occasional basic security mission, such as suppressing a riot in Kabul - but this was a far cry from being able to take over principal responsibility for the country's security.[101]

General Eikenberry had an impressive military background. He was a graduate of West Point, the U.S. Military Academy, and had master's degrees from Harvard and Stanford University. Unusually for a U.S. Army officer, he spoke Chinese, and had served in Beijing as the U.S. Defense Attaché. But for all of his varied military experience, Eikenberry did not have much experience in Afghanistan. He seemed unaware of the dangers of disbanding the tribal militias when he created the ANA. He did not appear to be aware of the successful model of the British Indian Army, where they created regiments from tribes of a specific ethnicity. Eikenberry thought that there were too many Tajiks in key ANA leadership positions, and stated that he wanted to create an ANA that was not "dominated by any one ethnic group"[102] - in keeping with prevailing U.S. views. Unlike many other U.S. Army generals, who seemed to view Iraq as the more important war, and would rotate there for promotions, Eikenberry would serve multiple tours in Afghanistan in key leadership positions. Yet there appeared to be no lessons learned from the failures of early training programs, even as feedback suggested

[100] Michael Brooks, *Eyewitness to War, Volume III: U.S. Army Advisors in Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 52.
[101] Brooks, *Eyewitness to War*, 52.
[102] Wright, *A Different Kind of War*, 232.

that they "were ill-designed, poorly coordinated and thinly staffed."[103] Only after leaving active duty would Eikenberry carefully reconsider his opinion of the ANA in future years.

The sole U.S. official who seemed to be able to come up with an alternate plan for creating a new ANA was Gary Berntsen. Noting the immense barriers of mistrust between Afghans of different tribal and ethnic groups, but also the respect and trust Americans seemed to enjoy, Berntsen proposed a transitional hybrid model that would allow time for a national army to eventually take shape. Pointing out that the U.S. Army had previously had units called the Philippine Scouts, which were infantry battalions with Filipino soldiers and U.S. officers, he proposed that the U.S. should form a similar unit in Afghanistan called the Freedom Corps, with Afghan soldiers and American officers. The Philippine Scouts, in turn, helped to provide the basis for the officer corps of the Philippine Commonwealth Army after 1935, with many of its veterans going on to serve in the military of the postwar armed services. In formulating his proposal, Gary would draw heavily from the U.S. Army Special Forces for the Freedom Corps officers, and give the Special Forces captains and sergeants a chance to hold temporary commissions, earning higher pay and having greater responsibility. Afghan soldiers who served in the Freedom Corps for five years - unlike the Philippine Scouts - would be eligible for U.S. citizenship, an incentive he felt would improve the quality of recruits.[104] Unfortunately, despite his sterling record in the 2001 anti-Taliban campaign, Gary was increasingly not

[103] Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption."
[104] Berntsen, *Human Intelligence, Counterintelligence and National Leadership: A Practical Guide*, 56-59.

consulted by senior U.S. military and civilian officials charged with developing Afghan policy after 2002, and his recommendations were ignored.

Berntsen's proposal was based on an assessment that Afghanistan would require a long period of American tutelage to create effective institutions, and, in essence, to create a new identity for ANA recruits. This would also require U.S. personnel to acquire extensive knowledge about Afghanistan and to commit to a long-term mission. This narrative ran contrary to the prevailing preferences: the emphasis on a light footprint; the desire to shift attention towards the looming Iraq war, and a belief in the efficacy of U.S. training missions backed by large amounts of funding to produce the necessary results. In particular, Berntsen's proposal would have required long-term deployments of U.S. trainers, which ran up against a preference for Western trainers to serve only months on the job, leading to what Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) interviewers later characterized as "the annual lobotomy" as there was little institutional memory.[105] Kori Schake, in assessing this, concluded that "U.S. training programs are also unsuccessful because we engage in short-term deployments that make it difficult to establish long-term influence."[106]

If an approach rooted in a past U.S. military experience did not resonate, it is even more striking that a model for creating a national military not by suppressing or papering over regional, ethnic and linguistic differences, but instead creating a national force comprised of distinct regional building blocks, apparently was never even considered. Despite the historical experiences in the region of putting together a combined force

[105] Craig Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption."
[106] Kori Schake, "Why the Afghan Army Folded," *Atlantic*, August 17, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/us-afghanistan-taliban-training/619774/.

comprised of distinctive local units, the United States and its NATO partners never considered developing combat units from a single ethnicity (i.e. the 1st Panshiri Rifles, the 2nd Hazara Infantry, etc.) - and then identifying officers who could be promoted to play "national" roles. This would have kept the cohesiveness of the former tribal and ethnic militia units that had performed so well in 2001, but placed them under the control of the central government. Yet this approach contradicted many elements in the prevailing policy narrative, both about the type of Afghanistan the U.S. wanted to create (democratic, post-ethnic) and the efficacy of U.S. training and nation-building efforts. By 2004, the Pentagon's talking points were proclaiming the end goal for the Afghan military and police: "a highly professional, multi-ethnic force."[107]

[107] Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption."

Chapter V.

Quagmire

By 2009, the U.S. and its ISAF allies had been in Afghanistan for eight years, twice as long as the U.S. involvement in World War II. A network of U.S. military bases had been built up across the country. The ANA and the ANP had grown in overall numbers. Civic action projects had taken place in almost every province of Afghanistan.

But victory in the war seemed elusive. The Taliban and Al Qaeda continued to be dominant in the southern provinces. The Afghan government held all of the provincial capitals, and most of the district capitals, but the various civic action projects that ISAF had undertaken in the southern provinces did not seem to undercut the appeal of the Taliban. No matter how many Taliban and Al Qaeda were killed by the U.S. and ISAF, they always seemed able to regenerate and replace their casualties. And the ANA and ANP did not seem to be becoming more capable in combat.

The U.S. and ISAF had fought a number of successful battles against the Taliban. In September 2006, ISAF fought Operation Medusa against the Taliban in Kandahar Province. It was the first time since the Korean War that the Canadian Army had fought in combat.[108] (The Royal Canadian Navy did send a couple of destroyers and an oiler to serve in Operation Desert Storm, the war against Iraq in 1990 – 1991.)[109] ISAF forces

[108] Major General David Fraser and Brian Hannington, *Operation Medusa: The Furious Battle that Saved Afghanistan from the Taliban* (Toronto: McClellan and Stewart, 2018), 1.
[109] Norman Friedman, *Desert Victory: The War for Kuwait* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 306.

advanced into the Arghandad River Valley, and fought to capture some villages held by the Taliban. American, British, Canadian, Dutch and Danish forces all fought side by side.

While Operation Medusa was a tactical victory, the Afghan National Army did not play any major role in the campaign. Major General David Fraser, a Canadian general who served as the ISAF commander in Kandahar, stated: "the usefulness of the ANA during our operations was limited at best."[110] Indeed, the reports about ANA effectiveness are in striking contrast to the praise about the vital contributions made by the Afghan tribal militias in the 2001 campaign.

The Taliban continued to be dominant in the majority of Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. The ANA did not step up to assist the U.S. Army and U.S. Marines in any major way. When the Marines captured the town of Now Zad, in Helmand Province, **none** of the ANA would join them on patrols in the town to be the coalition's "eyes and ears." An Afghan military that was being set up and funded by the U.S. and its partners to be able to take over basic security missions in its own country seemed unwilling and uninterested. One Marine, Corporal Matthew Lembke, lost both his legs to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Now Zad. An adviser with the Marines lamented: "If we had several ANA in Now Zad, we might not have lost that Marine."[111] But that lament did not address the fundamental question of why members of the ANA were not present.

U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald E. Neumann pointed out that after one successful U.S. military operation, the strategy was to garrison Nuristan Province with

[110] Fraser, *Operation Medusa: The Furious Battle that saved Afghanistan from the Taliban*, 105.
[111] Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 130.

ANA units, but that there "were too few Afghan forces available to hold what we took."[112] Ambassador Neumann knew Afghanistan well: his father had been the U.S. Ambassador in Kabul in the 1960s, and he and his wife had travelled all over the then peaceful country. He later served in the Vietnam War as an infantry lieutenant, and was familiar with counterinsurgency campaigns. Yet, as far as can be determined from the sources, he did not identify the disbanding of the tribal militias or problems with the model of standing up the ANA as contributing to the lack of capable Afghan forces.

While southern Afghanistan had always been restive, even provinces in the traditionally much calmer north were developing major problems with the Taliban insurgency. The Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest U.S. award for valor, would be awarded ten times to soldiers and Marines who fought in Kunar Province, a Pasthun stronghold in northeastern Afghanistan.[113]

By 2008, the U.S. had spent 10 billion dollars in training the ANA, but less than 2% of their units were rated as fully mission capable.[114] Of the 49 ANA infantry battalions, only one was rated as fully mission capable.[115] In June 2008, an ISAF inspection revealed 87,000 missing weapons from ANA depots, many of which may have found their way to the Taliban.[116] The Afghan soldiers who were supposed to be guarding the weapons depots on ANA bases were frequently found to be asleep, or worse yet, missing from their guard

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[112] Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 71.
[113] Captain Ronald Fry, *Hammerhead Six: How Green Berets waged an Unconventional War against the Taliban to Win in Afghanistan's Deadly Pech Valley* (New York: Hachette Books, 2016), xiv.
[114] U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-08-661, "*Afghanistan Security: Further Congressional Action may be Needed to Ensure Completion of a Detailed Plan to Develop and Sustain Afghan National Security Forces*" June 2008. Hereafter referred to as GAO-08-661.
[115] GAO-08-661, 20.
[116] U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-09-267, "*Afghanistan Security: Lack of Systematic Tracking Raises Significant Accountability Concerns about Weapons Provided to Afghan National Security Forces,"* January 2009, 3-4. Hereafter referred to as GAO-09-267.

posts.[117] In Khost Province, in southern Afghanistan, ANDSF personnel, to include a ABP battalion commander, openly sold weapons to the rebels.[118]

But for all of the shortcomings in Operation Enduring Freedom, it seemed that if a general made any negative comments about the direction that the war was heading than his career was over.[119] In September 2008, the U.S. commanding general in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, said: "In large parts of Afghanistan, we don't see progress. I won't say that things are all on the right track…So the idea that things might get worse before they get better is certainly a possibility."[120] The incoming Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, immediately relieved General McKiernan. No reason was given, but most observers concluded that McKiernan had become a victim of his own candor. McKiernan was the first wartime theater commander fired since General Douglas McArthur was relieved by President Harry S. Truman during the Korean War.

General Karl Eikenberry had transitioned from the senior adviser at OMC-A becoming the commanding general of Combined Forces Command – Afghanistan (CFC-A.) CFC-A had been in charge of the various military forces that were actively fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Unlike most U.S. Army generals, he had not pivoted to a senior command in Iraq, and had instead spent multiple tours in Afghanistan. General Eikenberry had now become the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan. There were a number of more enjoyable posts in the world to be a diplomatic envoy. Eikenberry likely wanted

[117] GAO-09-267, 17.
[118] GAO-09-267, 23.
[119] Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 114.
[120] Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 114.

to become the U.S. Ambassador to try and see if he could win the war by diplomacy and foreign aid.

In November 2009, Ambassador Eikenberry had expressed to Deputy National Security Adviser Tom Donilon that the war in Afghanistan was increasingly becoming unwinnable. [redacted] Eikenberry had been the senior U.S.

[121] [redacted]

[122] [redacted]

[123] [redacted]

military advisor to the ANA before he retired from the U.S. Army, so he was unusually familiar with - and had first-hand knowledge of - the ANA's shortcomings.

He also pointed out that Karzai was not an adequate strategic partner for the Afghan war. (At one point, Karzai had told Eikenberry that he had three "main enemies": the Taliban, the Americans, and the international community.[124] It was a shocking statement from the Afghan President, considering that thousands of Americans would die fighting in Afghanistan, and that tens of billions of dollars of U.S. aid were spent rebuilding Afghanistan.)

The last U.S. general who pointed out that the military of a major ally was incapable of fighting adequately in wartime because of corruption issues was General Joseph Stilwell in Nationalist China during World War II.[125] (For his candor, Stilwell was ultimately relieved and sent to a meaningless post in California. As will be noted later, the Afghan situation had clear parallels to the defeat of Nationalist China) It was professional suicide for a general to admit that the U.S. could not win the war in Afghanistan, but Eikenberry was evidently a man of high integrity.

Although Eikenberry's cable was classified, and limited in its distribution, the *New York Times* almost immediately published a copy of it on their website, which raised the question of who leaked it and why. Several months after his cable appeared in the *New York Times* website, Eikenberry was relieved as the U.S. ambassador, and retired from government service. He never received another government posting.

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[124] Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Course of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 346.
[125] Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby, *Thunder out of China* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1946), 220-222.

After Eikenberry's and McKiernan's relief, every new U.S. military commander in Afghanistan was always carefully optimistic about the ANA. General Stanley McChrystal, the incoming U.S. commander in Afghanistan in 2010, wrote in his autobiography, *My Share of the Task. A Memoir:* "In combat, the performance of Afghan National Army units had shown promise" which was a vague assessment at best.[126] McChrystal's strategy to win the war in Afghanistan was to increasingly rely on U.S. and ISAF forces, not the Afghan military, to defeat the Taliban in battle.

A large part of General McChrystal's military successes in Iraq had centered around using U.S. Army Special Forces to target terrorist groups. General McChrystal had been the SOCOM commander in Iraq. McChrystal's forces had been "extraordinarily effective" in Iraq; they had disrupted Al Qaeda's operations in Iraq and had killed Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a major insurgent leader.[127] Under General McChrystal, SOCOM had gone from doing a handful of missions in Iraq per month to hundreds of raids per month.[128] The White House hoped that McChrystal could duplicate his success in Iraq in Afghanistan, and win the war.

During his time as the commanding general in Afghanistan, McChrystal seemed to be only vaguely aware of any shortcomings in the ANDSF. McChrystal did mention in his 2013 autobiography that the ANA needed to be expanded, to a 240,000-man force. (He added that a 160,000-man Afghan National Police was also needed.) McChrystal correctly pointed out that the 92,000-man ANA was too small to win the war. But McChrystal seemed largely unaware of how bad the rank-and-file personnel of the ANA

[126] General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task, A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 346.
[127] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 201.
[128] Bergen, *Trump and his Generals: The Cost of Chaos*, 26.

were. He briefly touches on the problems of the ANA, saying that "uneven" leadership and corruption were two of the problems in the ANDSF.[129] Oddly, McChrystal says that the dominance of former Northern Alliance leaders in the ANA is also a problem.

The Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Pashais of the Northern Alliance were all opposed to the Taliban, which was (and is today) a Pashtun supremist movement. None of these ethnic minorities were security risks, unlike many of the Pashtun soldiers who were sympathetic to the Taliban. (Shortly after McChrystal left Afghanistan, a series of assassinations of American advisors broke out in the ANA and ANP. Almost all the assassinations were done by disaffected Pashtuns.)

McChrystal couldn't seem to grasp that the Pashtuns in the ANA were the weakest link in the ANDSF, and having a lot of former Northern Alliance leaders running the Afghan military could actually be a good thing. Most of the focus in the chapters in his autobiography that deal with Afghanistan focus on using ISAF forces to win the war. He pays relatively little attention to the ANA, and its problems. McChrystal never seemed to consider reorganizing the ANA among ethnic lines, and creating battalions of soldiers from a single ethnicity. Once again, an idea that had deep historical roots in the region, and which the British had successfully employed, never seemed to have been an option presented to him.

In 2010, U.S., British and Afghan military forces did an operation to relieve Marja, a town in Kandahar Province that had been captured by the Taliban. Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, asked General McChrystal if a company of U.S. soldiers in the operation could be replaced by a single

[129] McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 346.

ANA company. Holbrooke said that an example of the "clear, hold, build, and transfer" strategy was needed in Afghanistan. McChrystal thought about it, and replied: "No, we're not ready yet."[130] After nine years of training, the ANA could not even perform token security missions.

Holbrooke also pointed out to McChrystal that the ANP was suffering from a desertion rate of 25% per year. At that rate, not only was expanding them to 160,000 policemen impossible, but the force was actually shrinking every year.[131] While the ANP may have only had a supporting role in the counterinsurgency campaign to the ANA, the heavy desertions in the ANP were still not a positive factor in winning the war.

General McChrystal was eventually relieved of his command in Afghanistan after his staff got drunk while on a trip to Europe, and badmouthed President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden in front of Michael Hastings, a *Rolling Stone* magazine reporter. Hastings immediately filed an article about the drunken escapades, to include relating that some of the staff officers called Vice President Joe Biden "Joe Bite Me."[132] U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was not pleased by the article, and immediately retired General McChrystal. Hastings later commented that the reason why McChrystal's staff had reached out to *Rolling Stone* magazine was because: "of a very aggressive media strategy to establish McChrystal as a contender for the greatest general of his generation, on a par with [General] Petraeus."[133]

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[130] Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 353.
[131] Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 226.
[132] Michael Hastings, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), 54.
[133] Hastings, *The Operators*, 110.

As it turns out, General David Petraeus became McChrystal's successor as the commanding general in Afghanistan. He had previously been the Centcom commander and McChrystal's superior. Becoming the commanding general in Afghanistan was actually a demotion for him, but he accepted the position at President Obama's suggestion. One author pointed out that replacing McChrystal with Petraeus was "an exceptionally shrewd move," preempting any criticism that Obama was relieving "a perfectly fine commander" by replacing him with an even better known general.[134]

Petraeus had carefully groomed a coterie of journalists and sycophants to praise him and his ability as a general. He tried to create an aura of greatness about himself; one reporter even received an autographed photo of Petraeus.[135] At least three books had been written about Petraeus, giving him copious credit for winning the war in Iraq.[136] Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had once praised General Petraeus as "one of the nation's great battle captains."[137] While Petraeus had been praised for his leadership in Iraq, with hindsight his strategy, of creating a surge of additional troops to conquer parts of Iraq, only produced a temporary victory. Islamic fundamentalist insurgents would capture most of northern Iraq and eastern Syria after U.S. forces withdrew in 2011. Petraeus's reputation as a great military leader would become tarnished in future years.

Petraeus was already being talked about as a possible U.S. presidential candidate, and his reputation depended on military victories in Afghanistan.[138] Petraeus would use a

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[134] Kaplan, *The Insurgents*, 338.
[135] Hastings, *The Operators*, 8.
[136] Fred Kaplan's *The Insurgents: David Petraeus, and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*; Paula Broadwell's *All In: The Education of David Petraeus*; and Thomas Rick's *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Experience in Iraq*, all praised General Petraeus for winning the war in Iraq.
[137] Paula Broadwell and Vernon Loeb *All In: The Education of David Petraeus* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 100.
[138] Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, 267-268.

surge strategy in Afghanistan, as he did in Iraq, to try and win the war there. The surge strategy was basically to flood an area in Afghanistan with U.S. forces to overwhelm the Taliban and Al Qaeda—and then to have Afghan forces take over.

Petraeus carefully echoed the new official optimism about the ANA but also about the standard U.S. approach—to emphasize training and education - when he stated in 2011: "Investments in leader development, literacy, marksmanship and institutions have yielded significant dividends. In fact, in the hard fighting west of Kandahar in late 2010, Afghan forces comprised some 60% of the overall force and they fought with skill and courage."[139] Yet one senior U.S. general, David Barno, later remarked about the surge: "The Americans were doing all of the fighting, and the (Afghan National Army) were sitting by the side of the road, doing very little."[140] Ambassador Eikenberry had warned in 2009 that the presence of additional U.S. forces would increase Afghan dependency on U.S. forces, and his warnings were being proven correct.

McChrystal's and Petraeus's optimistic assessments were not supported by official DOD reporting during that time period. In a 2011 official Department of Defense (DOD) study, called "*A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*" by Jeffrey Bordin, there is no mincing of words about the poor quality of the ANA soldiers.[141] "They (the ANA) are stoned all the time, some even while on patrol with us" one U.S. soldier noted.[142] A second

[139] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Quarterly Report to United States Congress, July 30th, 2021, 72.
[140] SIGAR Interim Report: "*Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*," May 2022, 42.
[141] Jeffrey Bordin, "*A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility: A Red Team Study of Mutual Perceptions of Afghan National Security Force Personnel and U.S. Soldiers in Understanding and Mitigating the Phenomena of ANSF Committed Fratricide Murders*," Originally published for the U.S. Department of Defense on May 12th, 2011.
[142] Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 24.

GI said: "I think it is pretty obvious that many have informal truces with the insurgents."[143] The issue was raised repeatedly why the U.S. advisors could not fire the incompetent ANA. Another American advisor complained: "We can't even get rid of the worst ones; we have no authority to fire or transfer them."[144] A fourth American lamented: "Their officers are just useless. They avoid going out…They are rarely there anyway. Their one week vacations usually turns into a month."[145]

Assassinations of U.S. advisers working with the ANDSF were also on the rise. There were two assassinations in 2008, ten murders in both 2009 and 2010, and fifteen killings in 2011.[146] From mid-July 2010 – May 2011, 32 U.S. advisers were murdered by Afghan security forces they were working with.[147] Mutinous ANDSF personnel also killed British, Italian, Spanish, and German military advisers.

Again, the contrast to the reports filed by the CIA and U.S. Army Special Forces about their Afghan militia allies and partners could not be greater. Afghan forces, when organized into units comprised of people of the same ethnicity and from the same region and led by people who enjoyed trust on the basis of shared ethnicity and communal ties and obligations, had not exhibited any of these behaviors.

Other official U.S. government publications noted the poor performance of the ANA. An obscure U.S. government agency, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), regularly published negative reports about the war in

[143] Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 24.
[144] Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 25.
[145] Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 25.
[146] Edmund J. Degen and Mark J. Reardon, *Modern War in an Ancient Land, The United States Army in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2014* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2021), 385.
[147] Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 4.

Afghanistan. While SIGAR's focus was officially on corruption in Afghanistan, they also quietly reported on shortcomings in the ANDSF.

One of SIGAR's quarterly reports noted that there were "corrosive effects of corruption within the ANDSF (including the existence of ghost soldiers and police); the questionable accuracy of data on the actual strength of the force" and a difficulty in assessing "intangible factors such as the will to fight."[148] For instance, ANA soldiers received a bonus for completing their basic training – so soldiers would enlist over and over again, under different names, just to get the $240 bonus, and would then desert.[149] In November 2009, Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell, the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) commander, remarked that the ANA was "years away" from being able to take the lead in the counterinsurgency campaign.[150] CSTC-A was the new advisory command in Afghanistan, and General Caldwell's statement did not bode well for the future of Afghanistan.

SIGAR reporting at least was always straightforward about the problems - but never seems to have generated a push for a bottoms-up review of how the ANA and other Afghan security forces were stood up. U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton once remarked about SIGAR reporting that it: "provided amazingly accurate information about the war that any other government would have kept private."[151]

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[148] SIGAR Quarterly Report, July 30th, 2021, 72.
[149] Hastings, *The Operators*, 273-274.
[150] Hastings, *The Operators*, 274.
[151] John Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 214.

An ongoing problem in Afghanistan was that most Afghans did not want to serve in the ANDSF. The CIA estimated that there were 4.37 million Afghan men who were eligible for military service. Every year, 382,700 men became old enough to join the ANDSF.[152] (There were also a small number of female personnel in the ANA and ANP.) There were more than enough Afghans to man the ANDSF at 100% strength, but very few Afghans wanted to serve. One U.S. adviser wondered why the Afghans didn't have a draft. Yet these questions never led U.S. advisors or officials to ask the more fundamental question: what was it about service in the ANA and other parts of the Afghan security forces that did not produce willing volunteers?

Most Afghans in the ANDSF were trying to find a way to leave Afghanistan. ANDSF personnel who were sent to the U.S. for training had the highest desertion rate of any foreign military students. Between 2005 and 2017, 152 Afghans went AWOL from U.S. military schools. Most of the AWOL personnel were junior officers, who presumably would have been the next generation of leaders in Afghanistan, and who should have had higher motivation and better treatment than Afghan enlisted personnel.[153]

There seemed to be low morale all throughout the ANA. One Afghan Special Forces major, Khosh Sadat, remarked that most Afghans told him, "don't worry about this fight," and to concentrate on moving to India or Tajikistan. Major Sadat was a graduate of Sandhurst, the British Royal Military Academy, and had been an aide to General McChrystal, so it showed that the poor morale even affected elite officers.[154]

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[152] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2009, 58.
[153] SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from the U.S. Security Assistance Sector in Afghanistan*, 108-109.
[154] Hastings, *The Operators*, 178-179.

Even in more specialized units, such as the ANA Air Corps, there was a struggle to perform basic missions. Forest L. Marion's *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005 – 2015* tells of the challenges in trying to create an ANA Air Corps. He does not sugarcoat the difficulties the U.S. faced, noting that the Afghans seemed unable to record their flight hours, and could not plan scheduled maintenance for their aircraft. Marion does point out that while the ANA Air Corps struggled to perform simple tasks, a disgruntled ANA Air Corps pilot was easily able to assassinate nine U.S. advisers at Kabul Airfield in April 2011.[155]

General John R. Allen, a Marine who succeeded Petraeus as the new commanding general in Afghanistan in 2011, tried to downplay the assassinations. "Most Americans do not see the Afghans' commitment to their country, or the improving security that has emerged from our fight together. But I do."[156] Yet the general's comments did not seem to align with Afghan realities.

Hamid Karzai stepped down as the President of Afghanistan in 2014, and was replaced by Ashraf Ghani. Ghani was a technocrat who had lived in the U.S. for decades. One author noted that Ghani was: "beloved by American journalists and think tankers and diplomats."[157] He had studied at Harvard and Stanford, and worked at the World Bank. Given his technocratic background, there was some hope that he might see a need for change in policies that had not produced results. In the economic sphere, this proved to be the case. Yet, for all of Ghani's academic brilliance, he did not reverse the

[155] Forest L. Marion, *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005 – 2015* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018).
[156] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2012, 80.
[157] Hastings, *The Operators*, 95.

deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Even more troubling, Ghani started to show an ethnic bias in favor of Pashtuns, appointing many of them to key positions, which alienated the other tribal minorities.[158] Once again, it was hard for non-Pashtuns to determine whether Ghani was President for all Afghans, or just a Pashtun leader.

Ghost soldiers continued to be a serious problem in the ANA. By 2015, SIGAR estimated that 300 million dollars a year was being spent to pay the salaries of non-existent ANA soldiers. The larger problem was not only of funds being siphoned off; ghost soldiers also meant that ANA units were hollow with a much smaller number of men than was being officially reported, and that many of them would collapse if they ever faced serious combat.

In 2019, the ANA lost 10,000 soldiers in a day, when a U.S. run biometric program identified thousands of ghost soldiers who were then stricken from the payrolls. 25,000 nonexistent ANP were also cancelled from the payrolls the same day. [159] At least now the ANA's and ANP's troop strength was correct.

Desertions also continued to plague the ANA. As late as 2020, a quarter of the ANDSF deserted every year. The desertions were another indicator of low morale. General Masoud Andarabi, an Afghan Minister of the Interior, lamented to U.S. officials that: "No one wanted to die for Ghani, and…the people who were here to rob the country."[160]

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[158] SIGAR Interim Report: *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that led to its Demise*, 9.
[159] SIGAR Quarterly Report, July 30, 2019, 64.
[160] SIGAR Interim Report, 22-22-IP: *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that led to its Demise*, 9.

Ghani was more concerned about a military coup by his generals than he was in winning the war. He would replace competent U.S. trained officers with former Afghan communist generals who he felt were more loyal to him. Ghani also replaced dozens of ANP district commanders as well.[161] He seemed less and less focused on winning the war if it meant relying on officers who were not personally loyal to him and who could become political rivals in the future. Indeed, Ghani's behavior confirmed the assessments of political scientist Rachel Tecott, who noted: "Leaders facing societal upheaval, insurgency and civil war often prioritize preventing coups, consolidating political power, personal enrichment or personal survival above the strength of their nation's military."[162]

But despite all of these shortcomings, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan continued to be uniformly optimistic about the war. In January 2018, U.S. Army General John Nicholson proclaimed that the ANDSF: "have reached a turning point in the war, and are increasingly on the offensive."[163] Nicholson claimed that 64% of the population was under government control, 24% of the population was in contested areas, and that only 12% of the population was under the control of the Taliban. Despite Nicholson's optimism about the war, it was now so dangerous to drive from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to the international airport that diplomats had to fly there by helicopter, even though it was only slightly over a mile away.

The question was repeatedly raised by U.S. officials on when the ANDSF was going to become fully operational. The ANA Air Corps, which was now renamed the

[161] SIGAR Interim Report, 22-22-IP: *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that led to its Demise*, 9.
[162] Kori Schake, "Why the Afghan Army Folded."
[163] SIGAR Quarterly Report, January 30, 2018, 59.

Afghan Air Force, was not scheduled to be fully operational without U.S. advisers until 2030.[164]

At least one senior Trump White House official was appalled by the poor state of the ANA. Steve Bannon lamented: "We spent a trillion dollars to take the world's best fighters and turned them into the world's worst army."[165] While Bannon was known primarily as a former right wing media mogul, he had previously served as a U.S. Navy officer in the Persian Gulf during the Iran hostage crisis, and was one of the relatively few senior Trump White House officials with any military background.[166] Bannon, with no institutional loyalty to the military leadership, or to the policy choices of previous Republican and Democratic presidents, had no compunction for identifying U.S. efforts as a failure.

There continued to be a number of insider attacks in the ANDSF, both green on green (Afghans attacking other Afghans) and green on blue (Afghans attacking coalition military.) From January 1st to October 31st, 2017, there were 58 insider attacks, with 52 green on green attacks, and six green on blue attacks.[167] Three U.S. personnel and 102 ANDSF were killed in the attacks. Fratricide was another indication of low morale in the ANA and ANP.

The murder of U.S. advisers by Afghan military personnel was also eroding American support for continued involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom. Donald

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[164] SIGAR Interim Report: *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors that led to its Demise*, i.
[165] Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 127.
[166] Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 95-97. A few other Trump White House officials had served in the U.S. military. General Mike Mattis, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, was a career Marine officer, as was the White House Chief of Staff, General John F. Kelly. The first two National Security Advisers in the Trump Administration, Michael Flynn and H.R. McMasters, had both served as U.S. Army generals.
[167] SIGAR Quarterly Report, January 30, 2018, 90.

Trump, who would eventually become the U.S. President, tweeted: "Let's get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghanis as we train, and we waste billions there."[168]

The readiness rate for the equipment assigned to the various ANA corps was also declining. Part of the decline was due to battlefield losses, but poor maintenance management, a lack of trained leaders in logistics, underuse of contracted maintenance, failure to send in equipment for scheduled maintenance, and poor supply chain management were also cited as reasons.[169] After sixteen years of training the ANA and ANP, the U.S. was still unable to develop a group of trained logisticians and maintenance personnel.

The ANDSF leadership decided to classify all the information about their performance and readiness, so they could hide any problems with their forces. Rather than solving their various issues, they were now suppressing the release of the information to camouflage their shortcomings. The U.S. Congress, who routinely passed spending bills to support the ANDSF, now had difficulties in getting accurate information about the Afghan security forces. Even data about how many Afghan soldiers were properly trained was now classified.[170] SIGAR protested against this new policy. The ANDSF leadership seemed less and less focused on winning the war.

In 1948, the Nationalist Chinese Army was fighting the Chinese civil war against the communists. Like the Afghan government in 2021, the Nationalists were plagued by corruption, incompetent generals, and "resentful troops" who "refused to fight."[171] The

[168] Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, 115.
[169] SIGAR Quarterly Report, January 30, 2018, 103.
[170] SIGAR Quarterly Report, January 30, 2018, 82.
[171] Noel Barber, *The Fall of Shanghai* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1979), 55.

Nationalists controlled all of the major cities in China, and received heavy U.S. aid. Though the Nationalists outnumbered the communists, they would ultimately lose the Chinese civil war, an eerie echo of the war in Afghanistan. As 2021 continued, the question loomed: Could the Afghan government survive for much longer with a weak ANDSF? A definitive answer was provided on August 15, 2021.

From 2009 – 2021, the ANDSF showed terrible trends: low morale, poor performance on the battlefield, heavy desertions, pervasive corruption, and murder of American and NATO advisers. U.S. leaders ignored these warning signs, and refused to make changes in the ANA and other services that could change the course of the war. There seemed to be a wistful hope that somehow the ANA would magically become better, despite all of their long list of deficiencies. Loyalty to a narrative that said with enough training, education, and spending, an effective Afghan security force could be created precluded an honest assessment of U.S. efforts by the military and civilian agencies of the U.S. government, with the exception of SIGAR, whose reports were routinely ignored.

Chapter VI.

The End

By the spring of 2021, the government of Afghanistan started to collapse. While all thirty-four provincial capitals remained under government control, many of the four hundred and seven districts had fallen to the Taliban. After twenty years of continual war,

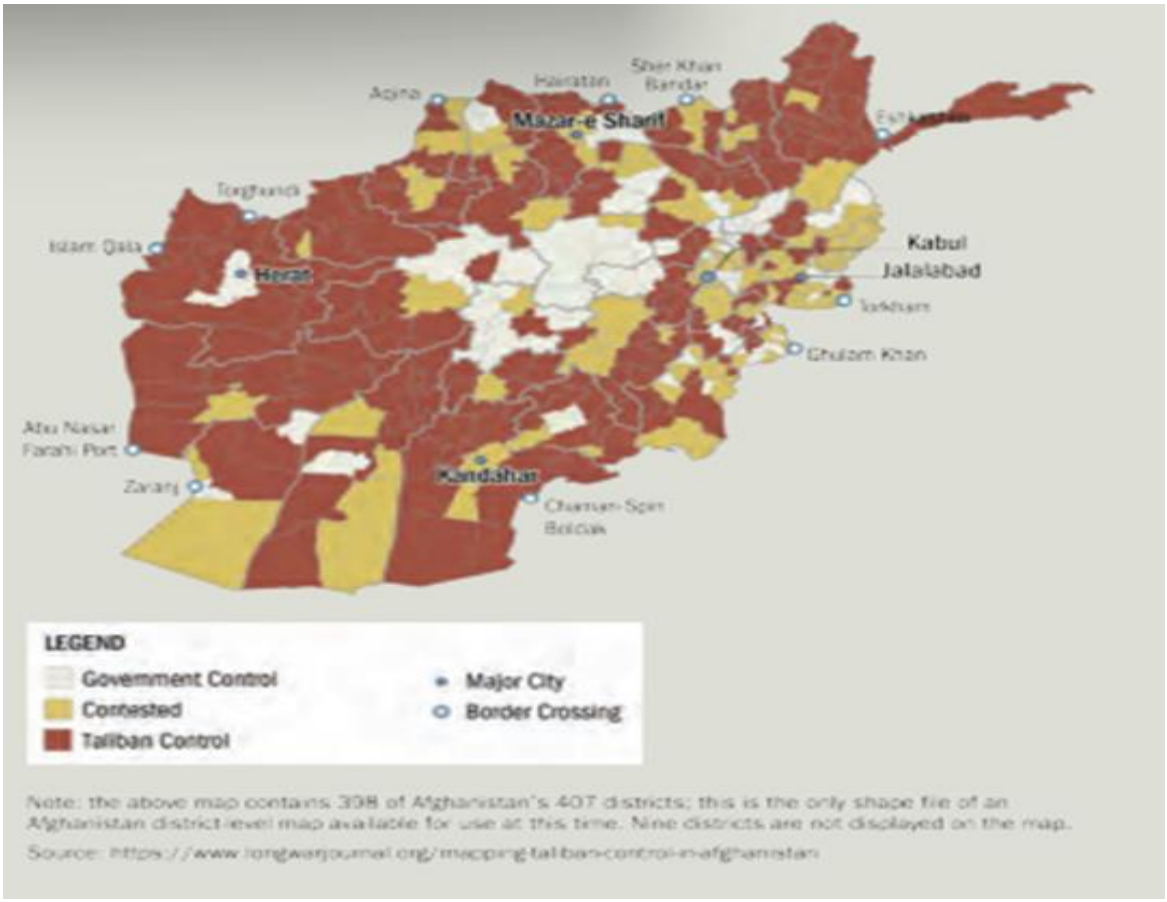


Figure 5. Taliban controlled districts in Afghanistan (2021)

Source: https:longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan, accessed November 25, 2022.

66,000 ANA soldiers had been killed in battle.[172]

President Joe Biden had earlier announced that all U.S. forces would leave Afghanistan by September 11th, 2021. The looming withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan seemed to demotivate the ANDSF, although after nearly twenty years of training and heavy financial assistance, the ANA should have been able to fight the war on their own.

By all the paper metrics, the ANA should have become a successful army, especially given the numbers of Afghan soldiers reportedly recruited, trained, qualified, educated, and equipped. Yet these same soldiers were unable to perform even routine non-combat missions. For years, the U.S. military had shipped ammunition to Kandahar Province, but with the U.S. force drawdown, the mission was now assigned to the ANA. The ANA was unable to organize motorized convoys, or helicopter resupply flights, to get additional bullets to the ANA units in Kandahar.[173] In case of a Taliban attack, the ANA would quickly run out of ammunition, and be forced to surrender.

On paper, the ANDSF had an overwhelming superiority over the Taliban, with an official strength of over 300,000 ANA and ANP.[174] There were 182,071 Afghan soldiers in various units scattered around the country, who were well armed with U.S. weapons and equipment. Despite an earlier agreement with the U.S. government to maintain a cease fire, the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements started an offensive in May 2021 which slowly overwhelmed the ANDSF in each province. On June 22nd, 2021, Deborah Lyons,

[172] SIGAR report, *"What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction*," vii.
[173] SIGAR Interim Report, May 2022: "Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise," 18.
[174] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, 82.

the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan announced that more than 50 district centers had fallen to the Taliban "since the beginning of May."[175]

Occasionally, the ANDSF fought the Taliban with great bravery. Twenty-three ANA special forces soldiers in Faryab Province, in northwest Afghanistan, were surrounded by the Taliban in a battle on June 23rd, 2021. Heavily outnumbered, the soldiers fought to the last man and last bullet. Their commanding officer, Colonel Sohrab Azimi, a renowned field commander, died in the battle with his men.[176]

After the ANA special forces team recaptured the district center of Dawlat Abad from the Taliban, 170 Afghan soldiers that were supposed to reinforce the ANA special forces refused to advance. One Afghan official pointed out that neither the ANA, nor the ANP, nor NDS would support the outnumbered troops.[177] No air support was given to the beleaguered soldiers, and they were wiped out.

Colonel Azimi was not your typical ANA officer. He was the son of a general, had a college degree from the U.S., and was married to an American citizen. His father noted that with his connections, Colonel Azimi could have chosen a safe staff job, or a posting at an Afghan embassy abroad, but chose to serve in the ANA special forces instead.[178] Since Azimi was a prominent Tajik officer, it did raise the question whether the Pashtun ANA troops refused to save him because of ethnic differences?

But increasingly, the ANDSF retreated without firing a shot. Badakhshan Province, in northeast Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban in July 2021. 1,600 ANDSF forces

[175] SIGAR Quarterly Report, July 30, 2022, 53.
[176] SIGAR Quarterly Report, July 30, 2022, 56.
[177] J.P. Lawrence and Zubair Babakarkhail, "Elite Afghan troops were left to die in battle with Taliban, officials say," *Stars and Stripes*, June 21, 2021.
[178] Pamela Constable, "Death of famed Afghan commander in Taliban massacre highlights the country's struggles and fears," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2021.

stationed there fled across the border into Tajikistan.[179] This collapse was troubling because Badakhshan had very few Pashtun residents, so the Taliban was switching from guerilla attacks, where they would blend into the population, to a conventional military campaign—and was expecting that non-Pashtun groups (Badakhshan is majority Tajik and Pamiris) were resigned to a Taliban victory.

On August 6th, Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz Province, was captured by the Taliban. Nimroz may have been one of the more obscure provincial capitals (it was the only capital to never have a PRT stationed there) but it was still an important symbol of the Afghan government's power. The ANDSF and government officials based there fled into Iran.[180]

The next day, three more provincial capitals fell to the Taliban: Kunduz, Taluqan, and Sar-e Pol. President Ashraf Ghani asked two former warlords, Marshal Dostum and Atta Mohammed Nur, if they could organize some ethnic militias to fight for the government. It was a belated acknowledgement by the Afghan government that the ethnic militias had been more efficient than the ANA.

Though there were several ANA corps that were still intact, the ANA soldiers in those units either took off their uniforms and went home, or retreated without fighting any battles. The ANA 217th Corps dissolved, and turned their weapons and equipment over to the Taliban.[181] Mazar-e Sharif, the second largest city in Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban on August 2020 without a shot being fired.

[179] SIGAR Quarterly Report, July 30, 2022, 51.
[180] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, 69.
[181] SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, 69.

President Ashraf Ghani abandoned Kabul on August 15th, 2022, and flew to Uzbekistan. While Ghani may have been a brilliant man, running away when the Taliban advanced on the capital did not earn him the admiration of any of the Afghan people. Bismillah Khan, the Afghan Minister of Defense; the NDS chief, and the speaker of the Wolesi Jirga all fled to the UAE. With the honorable exception of Colonel Azimi, none of the Afghan leaders were dying with their boots on. The Taliban entered Kabul, and captured the city.

There were still a few areas in Afghanistan that had not been captured yet by the Taliban. Bazarak, the provincial capital of Panshir Province, was still in government hands. The Panshiris has fought against the Taliban for decades, and there was still strong anti-Taliban support there. A single ANA unit, the 215th ANA Corps in Helmand Province, was still holding on, but there was no longer an Afghan government to defend.[182]

The U.S. government had earlier turned over Bagram, a fortified military airfield north of Kabul. Bagram would have been the perfect airport for an evacuation of Kabul, as it had heavy fortifications all around the airfield, plus hangars, fuel tanks, medical clinics, and even barracks for temporary housing of evacuees. Instead, the U.S. Air Force began to evacuate stranded Americans and Afghans from the Kabul International Airport, which did not have basic security measures, like a complete perimeter wall. Several American soldiers and Marines were killed in Kabul by a suicide bomber at a poorly designed checkpoint during the evacuation.

[182] SIGAR Interim Report, 22-22-IP, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 17.

General Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pointed out that the Afghans had: "the training, the size, the capability to defend their country." What they did not have, was the "will and leadership" to fight.[183] Six months after Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the Ukraine was invaded by Russia. Although the Ukrainian Army was heavily outnumbered by the Russians, the Ukrainians fought bravely, and destroyed several Russian units. The President of the Ukraine, Vladimir Zelensky, refused offers to flee, and gained worldwide admiration by his brave stand.

When questioned by Congress, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated that successfully fighting a war was a combination of capacity to fight, and the will to fight.[184] The ANDSF had the capacity to fight, but not the will to fight, and their country ended up being captured by the Taliban. The Ukrainians had both the capacity to fight, and the will to fight, and badly mauled the Russians.

The ANDSF collapsed in 2021 because decades of problems had not been addressed, and once U.S. combat forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Afghan military was unable to fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The U.S. defeat in Afghanistan was not due to a hasty decision by the Biden Administration, but rather the result of years of blindness by the U.S. leadership of both political parties about the ANDSF's shortcomings - and faith that with enough money and training, a credible security force created in America's image would eventually stand up. Perhaps no U.S. President wanted to be 'the man who lost Afghanistan', and so we continued on in a war which had lost its original purpose. But what the 20-year mission had demonstrated was

[183] Jerry Dunleavy, "Milley said there were no indications that the Taliban would take over this quickly." *Washington Examiner,* August 18, 2021.
[184] Mike Brest, "U.S. officials concede errors on 'will to fight' in Afghanistan and Ukraine," *Washington Examiner*, May 10, 2022.

that certain policy narratives about the path for success in Afghanistan had become entrenched orthodoxy, almost articles of faith, that were not only not challenged but continually repeated by senior U.S. officials, even as it become clear that these approaches were not producing success.

Chapter VII.

Conclusion

When the war in Afghanistan finally came to an end in August 2021, many people in America and the rest of the world asked: why did we lose it? On paper, the metrics all promised success: number of recruits trained, number of soldiers equipped, spending on salaries and equipment—all suggested that a cohesive, competent national army and security force was taking shape.

Was it listless leadership on the part of the Afghan government? A once inclusive government had slowly become corrupt and uncaring of its people. Was it the evil influence of Pakistan, which provided sanctuaries to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, enabling to fight a successful insurgency against the Afghan government?

One indisputable fact remained: Prior to 2002, when the ANA was created, the Afghans tribal militias fought well against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. After the ANA was formed, the Afghans ceased to win campaigns. What had happened? What was the difference?

The difference was the tribal militias were formed of men from one nationality, usually from the same region, and led by leaders who could expect loyalty based on ethnic and tribal bonds, while the ANA was composed of soldiers who didn't like each other, and who had, until recently, fought against each other. Its officers did not command loyalty and in turn did not trust the central government. Repeatedly, outside reports noted ethnic and tribal tensions in the ranks. In addition, a key part of the lack of trust was that within mixed units, co-ethnics often looked out for each other, especially in

terms of officers rewarding enlisted from their own tribal or ethnic groups, contributed to an overall erosion of morale.[185]

The ANA always suffered from low morale, high AWOL rates, corruption and lack of effectiveness in battle. The successful model of the British Indian Army, with infantry units composed of soldiers from a single tribe, was never followed by the U.S. generals in Afghanistan when they created the ANA.

Inclusion and diversity are two frequently cited goals in America. But we are a modern, industrialized society, with an educated populace. What works in America did not necessarily work in Afghanistan. After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the U.S. had to send forces to Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda, and their hosts, the Taliban. To quickly obtain victory, the CIA and Special Forces were more than prepared to apply traditional "Afghan solutions," especially to rely on tribal and ethnic militias. The initial victories of the Northern Alliance tribal militias were impressive and validated that approach. But then, in the service of a narrative about creating a post-ethnic, modern democratic nation-state, the U.S. disbanded the very ethnic and tribal militias that had carried the day, and created an unwieldy Afghan National Army that was never victorious in battle.

The U.S. military, and their NATO allies, had many battlefield victories in Afghanistan. But the political will to keep U.S. forces indefinitely in Afghanistan, taking casualties every year, did not exist. At some point, U.S. forces would have to withdraw and turn the war over to the Afghans. But we wanted to turn responsibility over to an

[185] Craig Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation: Afghan Security Forces, Despite Years of Training, were Dogged by Incompetence and Corruption."

Afghan army that corresponded to our preferences as to how such a military should be structured and controlled, and, as General Eikenberry predicted in 2009, that would lead to disaster.

Appendix 1.

Definitions of Terms

Afghan National Army (ANA) – The ANA was a composite Afghan army formed after the U.S. invasion in the fall of 2001. Composed mainly of Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns, it tended to be ineffective in combat against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, relying on the U.S. and ISAF forces to win battles.[186] Despite massive amounts of U.S. aid, and decades of training by ISAF nations, it melted away in ten days in the summer of 2021.[187]

Al Qaeda – A mostly Arabic Islamic fundamentalist terrorist group that was responsible for the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the U.S., killing almost 3,000 Americans. Al Qaeda took sanctuary in Afghanistan before the September 11th attacks, and the Taliban's refusal to hand them over after the attacks led to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.[188] Their leader, Osama bin Ladin, was a Saudi national who U.S. Navy Seals killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011.[189]

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[186] Donald P. Wright, *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom October 2001 – 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 262; Jeffrey Bordin, *A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility*, 26.
[187] David Zuchinno, "Taliban capture Kabul, Stunning U.S. as a 20-Year Effort unravels in Days.".
[188] Robert L. Grenier, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015). 113. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, refused to arrest Osama bin Ladin after the September 11th attacks, and would not even insist that he leave Afghanistan.
[189] McRaven, Admiral William *Sea Stories: My Life in Special Operations* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019), 321.

CIA – The Central Intelligence Agency is a U.S. intelligence agency who collects human intelligence (HUMINT) primarily from sources in foreign countries. Less well known is their paramilitary role, where CIA officers work with foreign militaries and guerilla groups.[190] CIA paramilitary officers deployed to Afghanistan were responsible for the capture of Kabul, and most of the other major Afghan cities in 2001.[191]

Hazaras – One of the two groups of Shia Muslims in Afghanistan, the Hazara Shias usually have Asian features, and are believed to be descended from the Mongol invaders. The Taliban believe that as Shias, that the Hazaras are not true Muslims, and heavily persecuted them while they were in power. Their leader, Abdul Mazari, was thrown out of a helicopter after the Taliban came to power.[192] Afghanistan's only Olympic medalist, Rohullah Nikpai, is a Hazara Shia, as was Karim Khalili, one of President Karzai's vice presidents.[193]

ISI – The Inter Services Intelligence Directorate is Pakistan's principal military intelligence agency. ISI had an Afghan Bureau in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, which funneled arms to the mujahideen.[194] Later, the ISI played a key role in supporting the Taliban, both before and after September 11th, 2001.[195]

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[190] Henry Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service*, 189-193.
[191] George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years with the CIA* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 187.
[192] Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, 174.
[193] Tyler, *The Decline and Fall of the Shah*, 189.
[194] Yousaf and Adkin, *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap*, 27.
[195] Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 153.

ISAF – The International Security Assistance Force was a group of forty-five nations which provided military forces in Afghanistan. ISAF was comprised of most of the members of NATO, plus traditionally neutral European countries such as Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland. There were also Asian and Oceanic members of ISAF: Australia, New Zealand, Mongolia, Singapore, and South Korea.[196] Even the tiny Pacific island nation of Tonga sent troops into Afghanistan under ISAF's banner.[197] But ninety percent of the military casualties in Afghanistan were suffered by four ISAF nations: the U.S., Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands.[198] Each country decided whether their forces would venture into combat (U.S., Britain, France, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, Estonia), provide base security (Mongolia, Macedonia), serve as advisors (Germany, Sweden, Albania, and all NATO nations except Iceland) or only be staff officers (Singapore, South Korea.)

Mujahideen – Afghan guerillas who fought against the Soviets during their occupation of Afghanistan (1980 – 1989.) There were Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Pashai mujahideen groups. The Hazara mujahideen received aid from Iran, and some of the Pashtuns received aid from Saudi Arabia. The best known mujahideen were the Peshawar Seven, a collection of six Pashtun and one Tajik guerilla groups based out of Peshawar, Pakistan. All seven groups received aid from ISI and the CIA.[199]

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[196] "ISAF Nations," https://www.nato.int/isaf/structure/nations, accessed November 20, 2021.
[197] Adam Mathis, "U.S. Airmen train Tonga troops for Upcoming Afghanistan Deployment," *Stars and Stripes*, April 17, 2013.
[198] "Germany's Non-Combat Caveats to be Reviewed by NATO," *Deutschworld*, November 28, 2006.
[199] Milt Bearden and James Risen, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* (New York: Random House, 2003), 233- 239.

NATO – The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a European defense alliance that was originally formed in 1947 to counter a possible Soviet invasion of western Europe. Article 5 of the NATO agreement stated than an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all members. The U.S. invoked Article 5 after the September 11th attacks to get assistance in Afghanistan fighting Al Qaeda and the Taliban.[200]

Northern Alliance – A mostly Tajik guerilla group that fought the Taliban in the fall of 2001 and captured Kabul, the Afghan capital.[201] Their leader, Marshal Fahim, would become the Minister of Defense in the new Karzai administration.[202] Frequently referred to as Panshiris, as they come from the Panshir region of Afghanistan.[203]

Operation Enduring Freedom – The invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. and other coalition forces. This military operation lasted from October 2001 until the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government in August 2021.[204]

Pashtunistan – The concept that all of the Pashtuns in southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan should unite and form a single country. Since this new nation would presumably be part of Afghanistan, and would take away a large part of the Pakistani population and about a third of her territory, the idea was not terribly popular with the Pakistani government.[205]

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[200] Woodward, *Bush at War*, 176.
[201] Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 174-177.
[202] Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House*, 181.
[203] Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Ladin, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10th, 2001*, 115-116.
[204] Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, 383.
[205] Kermit Roosevelt, *Arabs, Oil and History* (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1949), 220.

Pashtuns – Afghanistan's largest tribe, who also live in Pakistan. Except for two times, a Pashtun has usually served as the leader of Afghanistan, whether it has been a kingdom, a republic, a communist dictatorship, or an Islamic fundamentalist regime.[206] Many Western observers have accused the Pashtuns of being the most backwards tribe in Afghanistan, who seem to enjoy persecuting women and other minority tribes.

Peshawar Seven – A group of six Pashtun and one Tajik mujahideen groups that the CIA helped to fight the Soviet Army during their invasion of Afghanistan. Three of the Pashtun groups were moderate (Pir Sayyed Ahmad Gailani's National Islamic Front for Afghanistan; Sibghatullah Mojadeddi's National Front for the Rescue of Afghanistan; and Nabi Mohammed's Movement for the Islamic Revolution of Afghanistan.) Three Pashtun groups were Islamic fundamentalists (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin; Malauwi Yunis Khalis's Hezb-e Islami Khalis; and Abu Sayyaf's Itthiad-e Islami.) The CIA continued to help the moderate Tajik mujahideen group, Jamiat e-Islami, after the Afghan communist regime collapsed. Two groups of the Peshawar Seven, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, and Hezb-e Islami Khalis, would fight against the U.S. after they entered Afghanistan in October 2001.

Tajiks – Afghanistan's second largest tribe, the Tajiks were key members of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and were heavily represented in the Afghan National Army

[206] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), d13.

officer corps.[207] The Tajiks live mostly in northern Afghanistan and neighboring Tajikistan.[208]

Taliban – An Islamic fundamentalist group of Pashtun guerillas that first came to prominence in 1993, when they began to take control of Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban eventually would seize Kabul in 1996, and took control of all of the Afghan cities, and most of the provinces. Their leader, Mullah Omar, gave sanctuary to Al Qaeda, and after September 11th, 2001, caused the invasion of Afghanistan by his refusal to give them up to U.S. custody. In addition to being an Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Taliban is also a Pashtun supremist movement, who only share political power with Pashtuns, and block other tribes from any role in governing Afghanistan.[209] They are noted for suppressing Afghan women.[210]

Uzbeks – One of the four main tribes of Afghanistan. Traditionally opposed to the Taliban, they fought with U.S. special forces and the CIA after September 11th against the Taliban.[211] One of their leaders, Abdul Rashid Dostum, later served as a vice president of Afghanistan under President Hamid Karzai.[212] Portrayed in the Hollywood movie Twelve Strong.

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[207] Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House*, 182.
[208] Dilip Hiro, *Between Marx and Mohammed: The Changing Face of Central Asia* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), 204.
[209] Rashid, *Taliban*, 98.
[210] Melody Ermachild Chavis, *Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan: The Martyr who Founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 164.
[211] Brian Glyn Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum: The Afghan Warrior who led U.S. Special Forces to Topple the Taliban Regime* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 213-265.
[212] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 355.

Appendix 2.

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