

# The Never-Ending War: Barack Obama and the Selling of the War in Afghanistan

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America's longest war, the two-decade-long conflict in Afghanistan that began in response to the September 11 attacks, killed tens of thousands of people and dogged four US presidents. During the war, the United States initiated a series of attacks against Al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the fall of the Twin Towers, and propped up the Karzai government. Even with the massive cost of funding, the White House struggled to control the conflict in Afghanistan. It took a nearly failed democratic government, a staggering \$2.26 trillion in military funding, and four US presidents for America to realize that they had stayed for too long.

However, this wasn't necessarily the case. When Barack Obama joined the White House in 2009, there was strong hope and promise for the end of the war in Afghanistan. In his 2009 inauguration speech, Obama pledged that he would "forge a hard-earned peace" in Afghanistan and run extremists out of the country.<sup>1</sup> He wasn't not only going to just withdraw but also win the war. However, to what extent did Obama achieve these goals? Scholars such as Lisa Curtis, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, found the Obama administration was successful in disrupting Al-Qaeda forces.<sup>2</sup> He had the right elements to approach Afghanistan: more reconstruction assistance, an increase in troop size, and a counterinsurgency plan. However, Obama never gave them the time and resources to succeed; despite efforts to restore peace by helping the Afghan government fight against the Taliban and rebuild its war-shattered nation, corruption grew within the US-backed government, Afghans continued to live in poverty, and the Taliban slowly gained back momentum. While the United States did achieve success in short-term victories against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the media and the administration overplayed these victories as significant progress to avoid undermining morale. Furthermore, the costly attempt to reinstate and sustain democracy in Afghanistan did not go far enough to ensure stability, creating further distrust among Afghans and establishing Kabul as the center of the Taliban's attacks.

## Success in Afghanistan?

In December of 2001, the Bush Administration was successful in pushing the Taliban out of Afghanistan. Obama strongly echoed the sentiments of the Bush Administration for winning the war in Afghanistan, calling it a war of necessity given that Al-Qaeda terrorists that attacked the US were protected under the Taliban in Afghanistan. Under the belief that the Iraq War was distracting the US from the growing threat from Afghanistan, he promised to end the war in Iraq by withdrawing the majority of US troops within 16 months and pursuing a national security agenda with the following goals:<sup>3</sup>

1. End the war in Iraq responsibly;
2. Finish the fight against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan;
3. Secure all nuclear weapons and materials from terrorists and rogue states;
4. Achieve true energy security; and
5. Rebuild our alliances to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Although major politicians such as Republican presidential candidate John McCain disagreed with some of Obama's points (namely number 1), NATO/ISAF US commander General David McKiernan had already started efforts towards Obama's second goal by requesting the Bush administration provide 30,000 additional troops beyond the 35,000 troops already operating in Afghanistan to protect Afghan people from Taliban incursions and bolster local and national military forces. By focusing on these efforts, the US successfully put the Taliban insurgency on the run. Obama understood that 30,000 additional troops were not enough to defeat the insurgents permanently. Still, Obama's focus on counterinsurgency over the past eight years contributed to success against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: the Afghan insurgents' military chief was arrested, Osama bin Laden was killed, and major Taliban strongholds like Marjah were captured.

### **The Failure of Democracy**

The increased troop presence, the position change of US commander in Afghanistan, and the involvement of NATO prompted Obama in the spring of 2009 to adopt a stronger focus on counterinsurgency strategies, reconstruction efforts, and aid to Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration was keen on sustaining democracy in Afghanistan, claiming that the root of terrorism is poverty, bad governance, and oppression.<sup>5</sup> U.S. Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor saw potential with this strategy, saying that it could "transform the Taliban's fight with President Hamid Karzai's corrupt narco-state into a Pashtun war of liberation."<sup>6</sup>

In December of 2009, Obama delivered a speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point, in which he characterized the resurgence of the Taliban and the prolonged existence of Al-Qaeda across the border in Pakistan as a "cancer" that must be prevented from spreading once again.<sup>7</sup> He spoke with strong commitment to defeating extremists no matter the cost. US intelligence reported the following day that there were only 100 Al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan, reaffirming his patriotic words. At a Senate hearing, the former CIA Pakistan station chief, Bob Grenier, further testified that Al-Qaeda had already been defeated in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> However, the Obama administration underestimated Al-Qaeda's ideological influence, one that could quickly spread over the Taliban.

Bad governance, in fact, within the US-backed Afghanistan government convinced many Afghani residents to support the Taliban instead. Residents in Musashi said that they supported the Taliban government over their local government because of how efficient the Taliban was; for instance, long standing family feuds were finally being resolved in Taliban courts.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, corruption ran rampant in the Afghanistan government. The government failed to fully spend the flood of US aid for infrastructure projects and reconstruction efforts. Newly built hospitals and schools stood empty with no workers. Canals, roads, and highways fell into disrepair. Lack of proper oversight over where US money headed bred corruption that undermined government legitimacy. The enduring and growing popularity of the Taliban prompted the Obama administration to pressure the Karzai government to fight corruption and mismanagement to keep themselves from becoming despotic.<sup>10</sup>

However, there were already a number of holes in the relationship between Obama and Karzai. Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist covering Afghanistan, recalled a conversation with Karzai's advisors, where the sentiment against the United States was full of mockery. "In the

time an American wants Karzai to act, the president is still cooling his cup of tea.”<sup>12</sup> Although Karzai vowed to tackle the corruption within the government after his 2009 election, Karzai himself was deluded with conspiracy theories that the US was seeking to depose him. He even reportedly told top U.S. officials that of the three “main enemies” he faced—the United States, the international community, and the Taliban—he would side first with the Taliban.<sup>13</sup> Over the last eight years, Karzai and Obama’s relationship continued to be tense. From the incident of then-Senator Joe Biden throwing a napkin out of anger during a Kabul dinner in 2009, to the burning of copies of the Koran at a U.S. military base in 2012, both nations were not exactly on good terms with each other. Although Obama responded accordingly to Karzai’s demand for apologies after the incident at the military base, the lack of leadership willing to cooperate with Obama in Afghanistan shrunk the chance to fight corruption within the Afghan government.

Obama’s strategy for ending the war in Afghanistan was mainly through military force. However, American anti-war politicians such as Rep. Lynn Woolsey were vocal about the unnecessary spending on military solutions, calling for President Obama to “fundamentally change the mission in [Iraq and Afghanistan] to focus on promoting reconciliation, economic development, humanitarian aid, and regional diplomatic efforts.”<sup>14</sup> To sustain democracy within the Afghan government, the Obama administration poured billions of dollars into the nation in hopes of providing financial and military resources to Afghan and American operations to fight against Taliban insurgents. The Obama administration ended up signing a \$106 billion bill in June of 2009 for the Iraq and Afghan wars in hopes of ramping up operations in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> However, the Obama administration failed to acknowledge that nation-building does not occur in a short period of time. Afghanistan is an underdeveloped nation; with little education (25% are literate) and a GDP of about \$13 billion a year, Afghanistan is fragmented on a multitude of levels.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, many rural districts in Afghanistan became the target of Taliban interference. From Post-U.S. troop surge in 2012 to June of 2021, the Taliban control over Afghanistan’s 34 provinces grew from 32 percent to a staggering 85 percent.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Afghanistan does not have previous experience with successfully sustaining a democratic government without US dependence nor has the proper attention to managing one. Without the United States continually supporting Afghanistan financially, there was little chance for the Karzai regime’s success and political legitimacy.

Although the Obama administration predicted 2010 to be a fresh, new year for Americans to defeat the Taliban and rebuild Afghanistan, ironically, the Obama administration was starting the year facing the wrong direction. At the heart of the failure lay the tattered U.S. relationship with the Karzai government, an alliance that cost the United States more than \$300 billion and nearly 1,400 soldiers’ lives.<sup>18</sup>

### **At War with the Truth**

On the first of December 2009, President Obama affirmed in front of the American people not only an increase of troops in Afghanistan to rout the Taliban but a sure commitment to “bring the war to a successful conclusion” and build an exit strategy for soldiers to return home.<sup>19</sup> The plan followed: Obama would send in 30,000 troops over the next twelve months, but as soon those 30,000 troops were on the ground in Afghanistan the following year, Obama would withdraw them. The administration believed that increasing troop strength in Afghanistan would provide stability to Afghanistan, which showed through the short-term victories against the Taliban and

Al-Qaeda. However, the administration overstated these victories as significant progress, and the government's veneer of progress dissipated after decades of records within the White House were released.

The main message spread across the American public was that troops would fight in Afghanistan and win, no matter the cost. Despite this, public sentiment towards the Afghan war was low. However, the release of interviews and documents from *The Washington Post* in December of 2019 changed the landscape entirely. The interviews of more than 400 generals, ambassadors, diplomats, and other insiders lay bare pent-up complaints, frustrations, and confessions, along with a myriad of criticisms of what went wrong in Afghanistan and how those three presidents and their military commanders failed to deliver on their promises to prevail in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In one interview obtained by *The Washington Post*, an anonymous senior National Security Council official said that the Obama White House, along with the Pentagon, demanded data that showed President Barack Obama's announced surge in 2009 was succeeding.<sup>21</sup> This comes as no surprise; many of Obama's colleagues, as well as the US and Afghanistan people, were unhappy with his Afghan policy. The strategy of increasing troop strength didn't reflect public sentiment at the time, and Republican officials accused the administration of conforming to the demands of the Pentagon, American neoconservatives, and the wealthiest few in America. Ultimately by 2010, Obama's policy was painted as a strategy of colonialism.<sup>22</sup> The official reveals how it felt "impossible to create good metrics" because results were not coming to fruition from the administration's policy, so they were forced to manipulate those metrics.

This pressure seeped down to the troops on the battlefield, as they had to carry out the missions that their commander-in-chief had requested. The Afghan army was performing poorly in the field even with help from the US because US troops were unprepared to do so; therefore, the American "clear, hold, build" counterinsurgency strategy had little hope of succeeding.<sup>23</sup> Douglas Lute, a retired three-star Army general who helped oversee Afghanistan in both the Bush and Obama administrations, recalls how the troops "were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan" and "didn't know what [they] were doing."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis during a hearing described how the stories and operations he heard and observed "consistently revealed a war that could not be won, an Afghan force that was never up to the task, and an enemy that was committed to pay whatever price was necessary to win."<sup>25</sup> The accounts shared by these generals exhibit a complete 180-degree landscape from the hopeful one Obama had shared passionately with the cadets at West Point in 2009. One anonymous former State Department official even told government interviewers that Obama's policy of \$133 billion of Afghan aid was "idiotic," estimating the time frame of building a strong central government in Afghanistan to be 100 years.<sup>26</sup>

President Obama made numerous promises to the American public at the beginning of his presidency for a complete defeat of the Taliban and an exit strategy to bring troops home. However, the records and documents from officials working closely with President Obama showed that none of the promises that the president made back in 2009 were completely fulfilled. By the end of Obama's presidency, the Taliban took control or had heavy influence over half of the country, and President Obama kept 9,800 troops in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> The reality was, America was losing the war, and nobody was ready to admit it.

## Reaching the End of a Forever War, or Not?

After twenty years, it seems that America is ending its forever war in Afghanistan. President Biden decided that the last remaining 2,500 to 3,500 troops will all be fully out by September 11, 2021. Earlier in the war, the mission seemed clear: defeat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, throughout the decades, the lack of specificity and commitment in American goals for Afghanistan promoted the growth of corruption within the Afghan government, allowing for the Taliban insurgency to rise once again. The US and NATO leave behind an Afghanistan that is at least half run directly or indirectly by the Taliban, despite the billions of dollars poured into training and arming Afghan forces to fight them. Corruption riddled within the government has made it difficult to gain Afghani support. Despite this instability, Washington and its international allies are placing heavy pressure on the government and the Taliban to reach a peace deal without military engagement.

With the US being one of the largest military, technological and economic power in the world, the policies enacted by Barack Obama greatly shaped the war in Afghanistan, as have Donald Trump and the recent decision made by President Biden. Therefore, as the deadline comes near, we must weigh every serious risk and painful sacrifice that may arise with the withdrawal of US troops. While Afghanistan may not pose a major national threat or to the rest of the world at this moment, it is important to Afghans, many of whom put their lives on the line to help US troops and diplomats fight what became as much an American war as an Afghan struggle.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address" (address, Washington, DC, January 21, 2009), Obama White House Archives, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Mengli and Brinley Bruton, "Obama's Afghanistan Legacy: What Trump Faces in America's Longest War," *NBC News*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/president-obama-the-legacy/obama-s-afghanistan-legacy-what-trump-faces-america-s-longest-n708331>.

<sup>3</sup> Rathnam Indurthy, "The Obama Administration's Strategy in Afghanistan," *International Journal on World Peace* 28, no. 3 (September 2011): 14. JSTOR.

<sup>4</sup> "The US War in Afghanistan," Council of Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Jenkins, "Bush, Obama, And Trump: The Evolution of U.S. Counterterrorist Policy Since 9/11," *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2079/BUSH-OBAMA-AND-TRUMP#gsc.tab=0>.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "How Obama Lost Karzai," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/how-obama-lost-karzai-2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama, "The Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (speech, United States Military Academy, Westpoint, NY, December 1, 2009), *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/12/obama-were-in-afghanistan-to-prevent-a-cancer-030084>.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Grenier, testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Oct. 7, 2009, in *Confronting Al-Qaeda*, 39.

- <sup>9</sup> Brian Jenkins, “Bush, Obama, And Trump: The Evolution of U.S. Counterterrorist Policy Since 9/11,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2079/BUSH-OBAMA-AND-TRUMP#gsc.tab=0>.
- <sup>10</sup> Emran Feroz, “America’s failure in Afghanistan, explained by one village,” *Vox*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/world/2020/2/21/21146936/afghanistan-election-us-taliban-peace-deal-war-progress>.
- <sup>11</sup> Mohammad Rasouli, “The U.S. Approach to Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: A Comparative Analysis of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump Administration Policies in Afghanistan,” *CUNY Academic Works*, (February 2020): 30.
- <sup>12</sup> Rashid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Deidre Walsh, “Obama wants another \$83 billion for Iraq, Afghanistan,” *CNN*, April 9, 2009, [https://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/09/obama\\_war\\_funding/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/09/obama_war_funding/index.html).
- <sup>15</sup> Jeremy Pelofsky, “Obama signs \$106 billion bill for Iraq, Afghan wars,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-obama-budget-wars/obama-signs-106-billion-bill-for-iraq-afghan-wars-idUSTRE55N5TH20090624>.
- <sup>16</sup> Indurthy, “The Obama Administration’s Strategy in Afghanistan,” 26.
- <sup>17</sup> Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.
- <sup>18</sup> Rashid.
- <sup>19</sup> Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers: At War with the Truth,” *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Misled Public on War in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/world/asia/afghanistan-war-documents.html>.
- <sup>21</sup> Gibbons-Neff.
- <sup>22</sup> Debalina Chatterjee, “Obama’s Afghanistan Policy: A Review of Literature”. *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (2010): 5, JSTOR.
- <sup>23</sup> Whitlock.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Daniel Davis, testimony before the Subcommittee on Federal Spending, Oversight and Management of the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Feb. 11, 2020, in *The Afghanistan Papers*, 27-28.
- <sup>26</sup> Whitlock.
- <sup>27</sup> Sarah Almukhtar and Karen Yourish, “More than 14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Control Large Parts of Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html>.

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