

# These epic American blunders made this an unwinnable war.

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T

he images of the fall of [Kabul](#) will forever represent one

of America's biggest [diplomatic failures](#): Americans occupying the airport in Kabul, focusing on evacuating their own while terrified [Afghans cling](#) to the departing C-17 aircraft.

Virtually every American news channel has been focused on the fate of hundreds of thousands of Afghans who risked their lives to support the U.S. military and civilian mission. Everyone knows that the [Taliban](#) has a list of the so-called collaborators who are being hunted down and killed along with their families. But many Americans are in a quandary. They hear the figures recited: [2,448 U.S. service members killed](#) through April; all at an estimated price tag of [\\$2.3-6.5 trillion](#).

What they are less likely to hear are these figures: at least [111,000 Afghan civilians](#) have been killed or injured since 2009 alone. The [Taliban killed so many members](#) of the Afghan National Defense and Security forces in 2016 that the American and

Afghan governments decided to keep casualty figures a secret for fear of further eviscerating their morale.



Rightly so, many Americans are asking whether it was all worth it. But the truth is, this war was unwinnable from the get-go. Here's why.

## *Pakistan was always the problem.*

The biggest American blunder was going to war with the one country dedicated to undermining American objectives at every turn, even while raking in tens of billions of dollars in the fictive guise of supporting them: Pakistan. Pakistan's perfidy was evident from the earliest days of the war and it continues now, helping its assets—the Taliban—squeeze the democratic life from Afghanistan wherever and however it can.

The U.S. entered Afghanistan under the banner of [“Operation Enduring Freedom” with a small force of special operators](#) in October 2001. With the help of the Afghan militia group, the Northern Alliance, American-led forces quickly toppled the

Taliban, whose dedicated fighters fled to sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas. Meanwhile, the Americans granted Pakistan permission to conduct numerous sorties over two days in what is known as "[Operation Evil Airlift](#)." Pakistani army officers and intelligence advisers who were working with the Taliban and fighting alongside them in Afghanistan were airlifted back to Pakistan using U.S.-supplied transport aircraft. Special operators who witnessed this firsthand, and with whom I've discussed this operation, claim that the number of sorties was in the dozens, much larger than was reported. While the U.S. insisted it was supposed to be a limited evacuation of Pakistani operatives, [uncountable Taliban and al Qaeda fighters](#) were also ferried out of Afghanistan by Pakistan's "Evil Airlift." That probably should've been a sign of what the Pakistanis would do as the conflict progressed. Pakistan was just warming up.

A week after the U.S. entered Afghanistan, Pakistani President Musharraf chose a Taliban sympathizer—Lieutenant-General Ali Muhammad Jan Aurakzai—to lead Pakistani forces deployed to support the Americans, who in December 2001 were searching for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan's Tora Bora cave complex. According to all source intelligence reports, bin Laden was in [Tora Bora for several days in mid-December](#). Aurakzai's forces were supposed to be playing the "[anvil](#)" to America's "hammer," by catching and or killing al Qaeda and Taliban fighters escaping into Pakistan. That effort was short-lived: there is a general consensus that by the end of December 2001, bin Laden had [escaped Tora](#)

[Bora](#) and fled to Pakistan where he was eventually killed by U.S. special forces in 2011. He had been staying in a garish safe house in Abbottabad, a casual one-mile stroll from Pakistan's Military Academy, its equivalent to the U.S. West Point Military Academy.

Oddly, [despite bin Laden's escape with at least Pakistani passive if not active facilitation](#), the U.S. congratulated itself for its swift defeat of the Taliban. In fact, the Americans had only rerouted them. Safe again in their sanctuaries, the Pakistan state silently helped their allies regroup and prepare for what would be their reinvigorated offensive in 2005 which would persist until Kabul fell this week.

[While President Bush insisted that Musharraf was a loyal ally](#), the remaining sentient observers grasped Pakistan's unending [perfidious support to the Taliban](#), the [Haqqani Network](#), and other groups operating *against* American forces. No matter what Pakistan did, American officials found reasons to excuse it. Many believed that there was some magical combination of allurements that could transform Pakistan from the regional menace it was and is, into a state that is at peace with itself and its neighbors. President Trump, despite his numerous other outrages, at least cut off the aid to the country. But even Trump could not bring himself to do what needed to be done: apply every possible sanction against Pakistani military, intelligence, and political personalities for supporting the Taliban and other Islamist terrorist groups.

## *Corruption: we built it.*

Second only to our failure to properly handle the problem of Pakistan was corruption. America has spent at least \$2.3 trillion in Afghanistan, but very few know that because the U.S. relied upon a [complex ecosystem of defense contractors, belt-way banditry, and aid contractors](#). Of the 10-20 percent of contracts that remained in the country, the U.S. rarely cared about the efficacy of the initiative. While [corruption is rife within Afghanistan's government](#), the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction repeatedly alleged bewildering corruption by [American firms and individuals working in Afghanistan](#). In many cases, [American firms even defrauded Afghans](#). A military member of the International Security Assistance Force explained to Carlotta Gall: “[Without being too dramatic, American contractors are contributing to fueling the insurgency.](#)”

It's a story that Americans don't want to hear: that we contributed to the massive corruption in Afghanistan. In some cases, it happened because USAID didn't know how to distribute all the money it was expected to allocate and relied on enormous institutional contractors. [USAID was drinking from a fire hose](#), and didn't seem bothered by the fact that it was effectively transferring U.S. taxpayers' money into the bank accounts of institutional contractors who enriched themselves in the process. By the time the leftovers reached Afghan implementing partners, there was neither interest nor ability to monitor those activities.

Much of the funds were stolen or spent on poorly executed projects. Afghans quickly came to resent public displays of generosity when they understood that most of the money went into the pockets of U.S firms or dodgy Afghans who had little intention of aiding ordinary people. They also understood that the corruption was giving the Taliban grist for their mill of [decrying the legitimacy of the Afghan government](#).



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The advice of Pakistan experts was ignored, and General Stanley McChrystal didn't even [bother having a single competent Pakistan authority on his assessment team that produced the absurd aid proposal](#). McChrystal, in his leaked interim commander's report, also encouraged the United States to do something about the industrial-strength corruption in Afghanistan. But this was too



hard. To win in Afghanistan—by any metric of winning—the international community had to foster better [business practices among themselves and among their Afghan partners](#).

There is a darker side of the corruption fostered by the U.S. government too: it wanted to use corruption as a means of control. [It paid Afghans working in the government a secret, and often illegal, second salary so that those officials would be the eyes and ears of the U.S. government inside the palace](#). It could use the bribes to induce desired behavior among compliant Afghans. And when that relationship soured, as it so often did, the U.S. could denounce that person for being a corrupt, bribe-taking ne'er-do-well who traded his country in for personal gain.

### *The myth of the legitimate leader.*

If the corruption aided the Taliban's return to power, so did the failure of Afghanistan's political system to produce a so-called legitimate leader. Biden officials have been busy castigating Afghan political leaders for "failing to come together" in aid of their country. It would be a nice narrative if this was, in fact, the singular fault of dodgy Afghan leaders. Unfortunately, the U.S. and its partners foisted upon Afghanistan a political system that would always be characterized by political fragmentation and illegitimacy.

How? Part of the problem was that the U.S. wanted an Afghan government that would rubber-stamp its objectives. The easiest

way of achieving this was to have a strong man as president. The Americans thought that Karzai was going to be their man in Kabul. To make sure that he was, [they put several of his staffers on those afore-noted illegal salaries.](#)

[In 2003, President Karzai banned political parties.](#) The U.S. went along with this because it did not, in fact, want an effective Afghan parliament to get in the way of its big ideas. If there are no political parties, Afghan politicians would have to form coalitions repeatedly. This was one way of keeping the parliament out of America's way. Parties are now allowed to function; however, they are very weak institutionally and people have little incentive to affiliate with any party.



The next internationally-backed recipe for illegitimacy was the way in which Afghan elections are carried out. Elections for national and sub-national elections are not held on the same day. This means that each election is an opportunity for fraud, malfeasance in the election rolls, counterfeit ballots, and a raft of election-stealing techniques that the Afghans perfected, often with



American and international complicity. Elections for the lowest level of elected positions specified in Afghanistan's constitution never even happened. So Afghans were not governed by elected officials at the provincial level. Instead, they were governed by strong men appointed by the president. The electoral system of the [Single Non-Transferable Vote permitted persons to be elected to office often with less than 10 percent of the votes cast.](#)

## *Now what?*

Last night, during his address to the nation, President Biden doubled down on this criminal retreat that abandoned our Afghan partners to fend for themselves. Callously, he reiterated the same canards: that we couldn't stay forever, that the Afghans need to fight for themselves, that Afghans need to find unity amidst diversity, and other nauseating bromides meant to serve as a salve on a nation's heavy consciousness. Know this: all of this is a lie. We never gave the Afghans a fighting chance.