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The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" and U.S. Policy: Main Points and Possible Questions for Congress

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SUMMARY

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The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" and U.S. Policy: Main Points and Possible Questions for Congress

On December 9, 2019, *The Washington Post* published a series of documents termed "the Afghanistan Papers." The Papers comprise two sets of documents: about 1,900 pages of notes and transcripts of interviews with more than 400 U.S. and other policymakers that were carried out between 2014 and 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and approximately 190 short memos (referred to as "snowflakes") from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, dating from 2001 to 2004. The documents, and *The Washington Post* stories that accompany them, suggest that U.S. policies in Afghanistan often were poorly planned, resourced, and/or executed. These apparent shortcomings contributed to several outcomes that either were difficult to assess or did not fulfill stated U.S. objectives. Key themes of the SIGAR interviews include:

- **Negative effects of U.S. funding.** The most frequently discussed subject in the SIGAR interviews was (a) the large sum of U.S. money ($132 billion in development assistance since 2001) that poured into Afghanistan and (b) the extent to which much of it was reportedly wasted, stolen, exacerbated existing problems, or created new ones, particularly corruption.
- **Unclear U.S. goals.** Many of the interviewees argued that, from the beginning, the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, supported by the money noted above, lacked a clear goal.
- **Competing priorities.** The proliferation of U.S. goals in Afghanistan led to another complication: U.S. actions to achieve some of these objectives seemed to undermine others.
- **Organizational confusion and competition.** While U.S. efforts in Afghanistan were dominated by the Department of Defense, given the wide array of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, U.S. policy formulation and execution required input from many federal departments and agencies. The problems associated with trying to coordinate among all of these entities was a consistent theme.
- **Lack of expertise.** Multiple SIGAR interviewees criticized U.S. policies that they claimed failed to generate relevant expertise within the U.S. government or even disincentivized the creation or application of that expertise in Afghanistan.
- **Disorganized multinational coalition.** Many of the SIGAR interviewees who worked on coordinating U.S. and international efforts discussed what they saw as a disorganized system.
- **Iraq as a distraction.** U.S. officials who were working on Afghanistan in the first decade of the war held a nearly universal judgment, in SIGAR interviews, that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 distracted U.S. attention and diverted U.S. financial and other resources.
- **Pakistan's support for the Taliban.** A number of interviewees, particularly senior U.S. officials, attributed the Taliban's resurgence, and the failure of the U.S. to solidify gains in Afghanistan, to material support for the group from, and its safe havens in, Pakistan.
- **Other voices: U.S. efforts as relatively successful.** Some of the officials interviewed by SIGAR lauded arguable gains made and facilitated by the international community's work in Afghanistan since 2001, a perspective not generally included in *The Washington Post* stories.

The documents, released at a time when the United States is engaged in talks with the Taliban aimed at ending the 18-year U.S. military presence in the country, have attracted significant attention. Some Members of Congress have called for further investigation into U.S. policy in Afghanistan. However, there is debate over how revelatory the SIGAR interviews are: policymakers and outside analysts disagree about whether they contain new and relevant information and, if so, how the information should affect U.S. policy in Afghanistan going forward.

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"The Afghanistan Papers"

On December 9, 2019, *The Washington Post* published a series of documents termed "the Afghanistan Papers" (hereafter "the Papers"). The Papers comprise two sets of documents:

- Notes and transcripts of interviews with more than 400 U.S. and other policymakers conducted between 2014 and 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and
- Approximately 190 short memos (referred to as "snowflakes") from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, dating from 2001 to 2004.

The Washington Post contends that "the Lessons Learned interviews broadly resemble the Pentagon Papers, the Defense Department's top-secret history of the Vietnam War," although the SIGAR interviews and Pentagon Papers differ in several key ways. Perhaps most importantly, the Pentagon Papers were a contemporaneous recounting of the Vietnam War based mostly on classified material from the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the SIGAR Lessons Learned documents are unclassified records of interviews with a wide array of policymakers carried out as many as 15 years after the events described.

The documents, and *The Washington Post* stories that accompany them, suggest that U.S. policies in Afghanistan often were poorly planned, resourced, and/or executed. These apparent shortcomings contributed to several outcomes that either were difficult to assess or did not fulfill stated U.S. objectives.[1] The documents, released at a time when the United States is engaged in talks with the Taliban aimed at ending the 18-year U.S. military presence in the country, have attracted attention, and some Members of Congress have called for further investigation into U.S. policy in Afghanistan. However, there is debate over how revelatory the SIGAR interviews are, with some analysts contending that the information they contain was available at the time and remains so today (see "Reactions to "the Afghanistan Papers" below).

SIGAR "Lessons Learned" Interviews

SIGAR, an independent investigative body created by Congress in 2008,[2] conducted interviews with hundreds of U.S. and other policymakers as part of a lessons learned project, a self-assigned effort to "identify and preserve lessons from the U.S. reconstruction experience in Afghanistan, and to make recommendations to Congress and executive agencies on ways to improve our efforts in current and future operations."[3] Since 2015, SIGAR has published seven lessons learned

[1] Along with the snowflakes and the SIGAR interview notes and transcripts (partially redacted), *The Washington Post* published six lengthy stories summarizing their contents: Part 1: "At war with the truth," an introductory piece laying out the documents; Part 2: "Stranded without a strategy," on contradictory and unclear U.S. strategic goals; Part 3: "Built to fail," on U.S. nation-building efforts; Part 4: "Consumed by corruption," on U.S. aid and its role in fostering graft; Part 5: "Unguarded nation," on efforts to develop Afghan security forces; and Part 6: "Overwhelmed by opium," on counternarcotics.

[2] SIGAR was established by Section 1229 of the FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 110-181). The FY2008 NDAA stipulates that SIGAR will be terminated 180 days after unexpended U.S. funds for reconstruction in Afghanistan fall below $250 million. The current special inspector general is John Sopko, who has served in that role since July 2012; Sopko previously worked as a congressional staffer, including as General Counsel and Chief Oversight Counsel for the House Select Committee on Homeland Security. For a lengthy account of Sopko's tenure, including outside assessments of SIGAR and its interactions with Congress, see Nahal Toosi, "'The Donald Trump of inspectors general,'" *Politico*, May 1, 2016.

[3] "Lessons Learned Program," Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction, available at

reports on topics such as corruption, counternarcotics, and U.S. efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants.

The Washington Post obtained the interview notes and transcripts after submitting a series of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests beginning in August 2016. In response to an October 2017 lawsuit against SIGAR filed by the newspaper, SIGAR released the first document, a ten-page 2015 interview with Michael Flynn (who had served in several senior military capacities in Afghanistan). SIGAR subsequently released other requested documents to *The Washington Post*. After federal agencies reviewed the documents to determine whether they contained classified material, the final batch of interviews was delivered in August 2019.[4]

In total, SIGAR conducted 428 interviews with U.S., European, and Afghan officials. Sixty-two interviewees are identified while 366 are redacted; *The Washington Post* has sued SIGAR to disclose those names because, it argues, "the public has a right to know which officials criticized the war."[5] SIGAR contends that those individuals should be seen as whistleblowers and may face professional or other harm if their identities are made public. As of January 2020, a decision from the U.S. District Court in Washington, DC, remains pending.

Main Themes

In reviewing the Papers, which total roughly 2,000 pages and evade simple characterization, several key themes emerge, as outlined below. Dates in parentheses or noted in the text indicate when the interview was conducted. Quotes in this report, unless noted in the text as direct quotes from transcripts, are from SIGAR notes of interviews; CRS cannot independently verify or otherwise characterize the documents and the interviews the documents purport to describe. At least four of the named interviewees have contested the views attributed to them by SIGAR.[6]

Negative Effects of U.S. Funding

The most frequently discussed subject in the SIGAR interviews was (a) the large sum of U.S. money ($132 billion in development assistance since 2001) that poured into Afghanistan and (b) the extent to which much of it was reportedly wasted, stolen, exacerbated existing problems, or created new ones.

Nearly every SIGAR interviewee who discussed the issue argued that Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest and least developed countries in 2001, was unable to make use of the amount of financial resources that the U.S. and its international partners channeled into the country. Variations of the phrase "absorptive capacity" were repeated throughout the SIGAR interviews. One unnamed national security official offered some specificity, saying that Ashraf Ghani, then the Afghan Finance Minister and now President, had said in 2002 that "the Afghan capacity to absorb money was $2 billion a year, max. Everything else was wasted money" (October 1, 2014). The United States alone has contributed over $7 billion a year on average since 2001.

In answering why the United States delivered so much money into Afghanistan, many interviewees pointed to U.S. domestic politics. One U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official said, "How much money was put into political, military, and development [aid] became a proxy for our commitment" (December 9, 2015). This was largely driven by executive

https://www.sigar.mil/lessonslearned/index.aspx?SSR=11&SubSSR=59&WP=Lessons%20Learned%20Program.

[4] Craig Whitlock, "How The Post unearthed The Afghanistan Papers," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

[5] Craig Whitlock, "At war with the truth," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

[6] Craig Whitlock, Jenn Abelson, and Meryl Kornfield, "Responses from people featured in The Afghanistan Papers," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

branch agencies, according to one unnamed official, who observed that the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposed reductions between 2005 and 2007 because money from previous years remained unspent (April 13, 2015). However, other policymakers rejected these reductions, arguing that "the political signal by a budget reduction at [a] turning point in the war effort would adversely affect overall messaging and indirectly reconstruction efforts on the ground. The articulation of goals for the purpose of budgeting and programming was largely secondary to the political implications of budgeting."

However, some of those interviewed by SIGAR faulted Congress, not executive branch agencies, for wasteful spending. The same USAID official quoted above (December 9, 2015) said, "The Hill was complicit. They gave more money than was requested. Every year they asked why we weren't doing our jobs, but they gave the same amount of money or more." Douglas Lute, the Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan under President George W. Bush and President Obama, noted that Congress was subject to the same kinds of political pressures that drove executive branch officials to push for higher budgets in the absence of evidence that the funds would be effective:

> In terms of appropriations, Congress appropriated what the administration asked for… The thought is that if we don't spend, [the Government Accountability Office] or committees on the Hill will stop us from getting more funding. This leads to spend, spend, spend. The reason this is happening: no one is paying attention in an interagency sense to resources…..We were also pouring money into huge infrastructure projects to obligate money that was appropriated to show we could spend it. And we were building infrastructure in ways that Afghanistan could never sustain or even use in some cases.

This approach to resource allocation extended down the chain of command, according to some interview subjects. An unnamed U.S. Army civil affairs officer said that costs kept rising because "We had no reason to negotiate or hold contractors' feet to the fire because the money kept coming no matter what… We didn't get credit for saving money; in fact, we got credit for spending it" (July 12, 2016). Another said (on June 27, 2016) that because he or she was not given guidance on how to measure the impact of certain projects, "dollar figures were always the metric. No one said that money spent should be our metric, but without guidance, it was the only metric we could use….We did not stop and look back at what happened and whether it was effective. The emphasis was on completing more projects."

What was the impact of this flow of money on Afghanistan itself? Nearly all SIGAR interviewees contended that U.S. funding improved conditions in the country with regard to health, education, and other human development indicators, at least partly given the low level of the country's development in 2001 (see "Other voices," below). However, some positive assessments were qualified: one unnamed Afghan official said that "Yes, we have made gains, and generally speaking, life is better for people." However, he or she goes on to ask, "When we compare the gains to the resources, were the gains enough? No…Were the gains that were made sustainable? No. Most of the gains remain fragile" (October 21, 2015).

For some interviewees, this influx of money also created or exacerbated problems. One of the problems most often raised was the money's apparent role in helping drive corruption, which continues to undermine the very Afghan state that the funds were intended to support. Andrew Wilder, the Vice President of Asia Programs at the United States Institute of Peace, said in his SIGAR interview that, "Giving Afghans so much money actually delegitimized the government, which was either perceived to become more corrupt or actually became more corrupt as a result, and favored specific communities at the expense of others" (January 25, 2017).

Beyond the possibility for Afghans to redirect U.S. aid flows for political purposes, several interviewees argued that U.S. assistance had a structural bias that created perverse incentives for

Afghans. Former Afghan deputy cabinet minister Tariq Esmati said (on December 12, 2016) that "all the attention was to the insecure districts. And the districts that were relatively secure also became insecure in order to get some programs." One USAID official put it more bluntly: development programs targeted "worse case scenarios and [the] most insecure areas" which "rewarded bad behavior. Governors in [more secure areas] would come to Kabul and ask, "what do I have to do to get love from [the] Americans, blow some shit up?" (November 18, 2016).

In many cases, interviewees pointed to the grant contracting system to explain why so much money was wasted and to argue that few of the benefits were actually reaped by Afghans themselves. A senior U.S. official said (on December 11, 2015):

> We would buy American products, American grain, American consultants, American security experts, and they would implement our aid programs…. The Afghans used to tell me that somewhere between 10-20% actually shows up in Afghanistan, and less than 10% ever gets to a village. So you [the United States] tell us [the Afghans] that you just spent a billion dollars as we see $50 million worth of roads. You [the United States] hire a big contractor and inside the beltway consultant, who then hires 15 subcontractors. The first guy takes 20%, then next level takes 20% who would go hire a bunch of expensive American experts to do [for ten times the price] what Afghan diaspora refugees or Indian experts could do.... [These Americans we hire] travel to Afghanistan first class or at least business class with five security guys each…The money you spend doesn't get to the village, doesn't really help the Afghan government.

Beyond the practical effect of enabling corruption, some interviewees argued that ready U.S. money warped Afghan political culture (from a July 31, 2015, interview with a UN official):

> Afghan perceptions of the US were shaped by the Emergency Loya Jirga and Constitutional Loya Jirga [consultative assemblies held in 2002-2003]… Religious leaders were approached [and they] received nice packages from the US in return for accepting certain measures on women, human rights. The perception that was started in that period: If you were going to vote for a position that the [U.S. government] favored, you'd be stupid to not get a package for doing it. So that even those in favor would ask for compensation…So from the beginning, their experience with democracy was one in which money was deeply embedded.

Unclear U.S. Goals

Many of the interviewees argued that, from the beginning, the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, supported by the flow of money noted above, lacked a clear goal. One unnamed former National Security Council (NSC) staffer said, "I don't think we had an end state in mind. We kept planning; conditions kept changing. We were solving problems but there was no end state vision that you could point to" (January 5, 2015).

According to many respondents, lack of clarity was a product of how many objectives the U.S. had in Afghanistan. One USAID official (May 18, 2015) described U.S. policy as having "a present under the Christmas tree for everyone. By the time you were finished you had so many priorities and aspirations it was like no strategy at all. If you have 50 priorities then you don't have any priorities at all." This confusion reportedly extended even into specific areas of U.S. policy. An unnamed former United Nations official said in a June 1, 2015, interview that "on reconstruction, there was not a clear understanding of what we were trying to achieve; [there were] no clear objectives." On counternarcotics (CN), a former State Department official said that it was "unclear what the goal of CN was" (June 29, 2015).

Competing Priorities

The proliferation of U.S. goals in Afghanistan apparently led to another complication: U.S. actions to achieve some of these objectives undermined others. Interviewees repeatedly discussed this dynamic, particularly when referring to the U.S. project as being divided into military and nonmilitary lines of effort. According to interviewees, when U.S. security interests clashed with interests less directly tied to security, the former almost always prevailed.

The two areas that the interviews identified as particularly compromised, given an emphasis on security or other issues, were counternarcotics and anti-corruption. A State Department counternarcotics contractor told SIGAR on September 16, 2016, that "To the best of my knowledge chief of mission [in the U.S. embassy] never carried [the] message about CN to [the] Afghan government. Attitude was 'got so much else on my plate I have no time to deal with drugs.'" A senior U.S. official put it simply: "They [the United States] would payoff…local leaders to not fight them and would turn away when local leaders grew poppy" (March 29, 2016).

On anti-corruption, the contrast may have been even clearer: a USAID official said that the view of senior U.S. officials was "Be patient, we can get back to corruption. We have higher priorities on getting the bad guys" (August 24, 2015). In July 2015, a Treasury Department official attributed the U.S. "failure to be more aggressive" on prosecuting those responsible for the 2010 collapse of Kabul Bank (KB) to the higher importance placed on security objectives: "Petraeus made the point that yes KB is bad, but we're fighting a war here, there are bigger issues at stake." Sometimes even U.S. counternarcotics and anti-corruption goals, which appeared symbiotic according to some interviewees, were at odds: a former U.S. defense official said on May 17, 2016, that U.S. payments to governors to reduce poppy cultivation actually "undermined good governance. People saw us as complicit working with corrupt governors to take out opposition" when those governors targeted the opium cultivation of their political opponents but left alone opium cultivation of their allies.

Some U.S. officials argued that these contradictions were unavoidable, and that the United States had no choice but to pursue security interests over other, and by definition secondary, objectives. A former U.S. official at the U.S. Embassy said (on May 31, 2015) of the U.S. decision to partner with warlords with records of corruption or human rights abuses, "I'm not so sure we should have done it any differently. These 'warlords' equaled the ground force that just defeated the Taliban and al Qaeda—on the ground with US SOF [Special Operations Forces]… these weren't just random bandits running around."

Organizational Confusion and Competition

While U.S. efforts in Afghanistan were dominated by the Department of Defense, given the wide array of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, U.S. policy formulation and execution required input from many federal departments and agencies. The problems associated with trying to coordinate among all of these entities, and with the complex series of bureaucratic structures erected to facilitate that coordination, were another consistent theme of the SIGAR interviews.

By most accounts, interagency coordination was a consistent problem that various structures failed to solve. The performance of the Washington, D.C.-based Afghanistan Interagency Operation Group (AOIG), which was created in 2003, was co-chaired by the Department of State and National Security Council, and met weekly, generally received favorable reviews from interviewees.[7] The State Department's Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (SCRS),

[7] "At best, a modest help," Marin Strmecki, October 19, 2015; "a success," unnamed U.S. official, July 10, 2015; "contentious, but great," unnamed State Department official, July 28, 2015.

on the other hand, attracted particular criticism: various officials stated that it was "expensive and time-consuming…initially structured to fail and at the end it only made life horrible for everybody else" (June 25, 2015) and "failed at the operation level" (July 10, 2015). The State Department's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), established in 2009 and closed in 2017, also generally was criticized. One typical critique, from an unnamed State Department official in a December 10, 2014, interview, said that "the model is not sustainable. Desk officers are supposed to develop regional experience throughout their career so they have a couple of languages and they continually rotate back to their area or region of specialization…The SRAP set up created parallel structures."

Anti-corruption, counternarcotics, and other mission priorities rarely fit neatly under one agency or department's purview. The wide range of actors with equities in programs in these areas arguably bred not just confusion but competition. One former development contractor said about counternarcotics (interview on June 8, 2016) that there was "nobody really in charge, no one on top of the heap and saying to everyone this is what you need to do. Competitive personalities [were] not concerned about what makes sense but could they build their career." That competition, in turn, also presented opportunities for Afghans to exploit. An unnamed former US ambassador described for SIGAR interviewers on December 14, 2015, that "[former Afghan president Hamid] Karzai was trying to figure out how to manipulate the U.S., manipulating different U.S. agencies against one another for leverage. …*The mission starts to lose coherence; you have agencies snapping at each other's ankles* [italics original]."

Surveying the numerous problems of interagency coordination, Marin Strmecki, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's special advisor on Afghanistan, recommended (interview on October 19, 2015) a more unified command structure:

> When we operate in something like [Afghanistan], there needs to be unity of command, not unity of effort. So if it is a situation [where] there is a lot of lead flying in the air, it makes sense for the general of whatever task force that is deployed to be in charge of both the military and civilian elements. So the ambassador would essentially be his chief political officer. He should be able to give orders to that chief political officer just as he would another subordinate. Similarly, if it is more a stabilization operations and there is not as much lead flying in the air, the military should be put under the ambassador…. Our current system works if you are lucky and you get a Khalilzad and Barno or a Petraeus and Crocker, where for some reason they all agree on the priorities and work well together. They are in sync. That is basically luck.

Lack of Expertise

Multiple SIGAR interviewees criticized U.S. policies that they claimed either failed to generate relevant expertise within the U.S. government or even disincentivized the creation or application of that expertise in Afghanistan. For instance, regional subject matter expertise was a frequently cited problem. A number of interviewees criticized the United States for not training U.S. staff in local languages. Without knowledge of these languages, U.S. officials were reportedly less able to learn from, build trust with, or effectively partner with Afghan counterparts. Former director of intelligence for the NATO-led military effort Michael Flynn said that

> ...when we get to Afghanistan [in 2009], there is only one officer on the ISAF staff that could speak Dari…but he was only there briefly. The Air Force pulled him out in like July and sent him to Japan…we laughed about it because this is how insane this [system] is…Even today, we are still in Afghanistan and you go tell me how many actual U.S. members of the military or policy [community], or from State who speak Dari or Pashto. That is a shame and that is a policy decision.

The most commonly cited problem, regardless of the interviewee's national origin, position in government, or time of service in Afghanistan, was the loss of expertise and trust brought about by short-term deployments. A commonly repeated theme, as one U.S. official put it (April 12, 2016), was that the U.S. did not have one "14 year engagement, [but] had 14 1-year engagements." Numerous interviewees described the problems created by short tours as the greatest detriment to U.S. policy success:

- "At the strategic level, the single most disabling factor was our failure to maintain long-term leadership at the Embassy and at our military commands. We should have someone in the job for 3 to 5 years for continuity" (former U.S. official at the embassy in Kabul, May 31, 2015).
- "If you take away one thing, the one year rotation for USAID, DOS [Department of States] and DOD [Department of Defense] personnel is the biggest obstacle to success and the biggest single factor in our failure" (former USAID official David Marsden, December 3, 2015).
- "Biggest problem was turnover of people…the result is no institutional memory" (June 27, 2016).

The interview records suggest that there was no consensus on how to solve this problem. One proffered solution was higher pay for government employees deployed to Afghanistan: Strmecki said in his interview that talented staff leave "the government for our contractors and NGOs and our other implementing partners because [they] pay them so much more." However, one unnamed legal advisor who worked in Kabul said (on October 30, 2017) higher pay for some U.S. positions meant that those who filled the jobs "had very little understanding of the culture—they came in because the salary was lucrative…they saw this as a couple of years of opportunity to get rid of their house mortgages."

Lack of expertise arguably exacerbated many of the other problems facing U.S. policy. At times, Afghans reportedly exploited the lack of knowledge and institutional memory to shape U.S. policy to meet their own ends. In one extreme case, Afghanistan expert Thomas Johnson described how "we were used by the tribes" because suspects taken into custody by the United States as terrorists were actually "traditional tribal enemies that [U.S. partners] claimed were Taliban" (January 7, 2016).

Multinational Coalition: Too Many Cooks?

U.S. efforts in Afghanistan have been aided from the outset by a multinational coalition. From combat, to training Afghan forces, to providing development assistance, U.S. allies and partners have made significant contributions. However, this work has not been without complications, and many of the SIGAR interviewees who worked on coordinating U.S. and international efforts discussed what they saw as deficiencies.

The system that emerged in Afghanistan became known as the "lead nation" system, whereby each policy area was overseen by a different country: for example, Italy focused on developing Afghanistan's justice sector, Germany worked with Afghan police, and the British initially were responsible for counternarcotics. However, according to former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, "With this [multilateral] approach, everyone had small pieces of the sector and it then meant that [their respective policy areas] became everyone's second or third order priority so nothing got done."

Generally, interviewees who observed or participated in the system described it as disorganized: John Wood, NSC director for Afghanistan 2007-2009, said, "Everyone has a piece of the pie but

[there's] no coherence…Each lead nation left to determine how to approach things- each changed frequently. Even if things lined up with the lead nation none of them moving at same pace" (June 17, 2015). The difference in pacing and approach was explained by an unnamed NSC staffer, who argued "tasks were conditioned by what countries were willing to do," which "created some tensions between the coalition and the nation states" (July 14, 2015).

Iraq as a Distraction

Those U.S. officials SIGAR interviewed who worked on Afghanistan in the first decade of the war held a near-universal judgment that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 distracted U.S. attention and diverted U.S. financial and other resources, allowing the Taliban to regroup.

Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns described Iraq as the "higher priority" and Afghanistan as "the less acute theater." According to an unnamed NSC staffer (October 21, 2014):

> More specifically regarding why the U.S. and Department of Defense were anxious for someone else to take a robust leading role in Afghanistan, it was so we could have greater resources and capability to prioritize Iraq…. From early spring 2002, during my time at the Secretary's office, until 2011, Afghanistan *has* to be looked at with one eye on what is happening in Iraq. Even in the early and tail end (2009-2011) days, either materially or politically, it all seemed to be about Iraq.
>
> It was hard to come to terms with the reality that your whole portfolio is a secondary effort or, at worst, an "economy of force" mission. Your job was not to win, it was to not lose … We are bleeding resources away as things get worse in Iraq, and we were looking for more ways to make do in Afghanistan….In hindsight, there was a window between late 2002-2003 and early 2005 where there was relative peace in Afghanistan. The Taliban was on its heels and people were not that disillusioned.

One official (interviewed on September 23, 2015) said that between 2005 and 2007, "Iraq was all we could handle." Another said that a "significant pressure in the 2003 to 2010 timeframe was the draw of resources toward Iraq and away from Afghanistan" (April 13, 2015). By the time the United States began to draw down forces in Iraq and refocus on Afghanistan, many observers argued that the damage was already done: the Afghan state's military and governing capabilities (both effectively nonexistent in 2001) had not been adequately developed, allowing for the rise of a new Taliban insurgency that further undermined those abilities. One unnamed U.S. official said in a February 9, 2016, interview, "In all honesty, Afghanistan got neglected when we went to Iraq and when we got back to Afghanistan, we didn't have enough capacity."

Pakistan's Support for the Taliban

The war in Iraq arguably distracted U.S. policymakers from dealing with Pakistan's role in facilitating the Taliban's comeback. Early on, Pakistan "was not seen as bad guys," according to an international aid consultant in an October 9, 2015, interview. A number of interviewees, particularly senior U.S. officials, attributed the Taliban's resurgence, and the resulting failure of the U.S. to solidify gains in Afghanistan, to material support for the group from, and its safe havens in, Pakistan. A good deal of material related to the sensitive issue of Pakistani support for the Taliban appeared to be redacted, but the issue still emerged throughout the interviews.

Most interviewees who addressed the subject argued that U.S. and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan were fundamentally incompatible. One unnamed DOD or NSC staffer told SIGAR in an October 1, 2014, interview, "The belief that Pakistan's national interest aligned with the US because [then-Pakistani leader Pervez] Musharraf joins the [U.S.] effort after 9/11 is a false

belief." According to this view, the positive role Pakistan played with regard to Al Qaeda blinded U.S. policymakers to the Pakistanis' support for the Taliban. As Strmecki said in his October 19, 2015, interview,

> Because of people's personal confidence in Musharraf and because of things he was continuing to do in helping police up a bunch of the al-Qaeda in Pakistan, there was a failure to perceive the double game that he starts to play by late 2002, early 2003. You are seeing the security incidents start to go up and it is out of the safe havens. I think that the Afghans and Karzai himself, are bringing this up constantly even in the earlier parts of 2002. They are meeting unsympathetic ears because of the belief that Pakistan was helping us so much on al-Qaeda.

With U.S. attention to the issue reportedly low, Pakistan maintained support for the Taliban in order to maintain some of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. In at least one account, Pakistani leaders were forthright in private about this strategy. In the transcript of his January 11, 2016, interview with SIGAR, Ryan Crocker, who served as U.S. ambassador to both Pakistan (2004-2007) and Afghanistan (2011-2012), quoted then-head of Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI, Inter-Services Intelligence) Ashfaq Kayani as telling him

> You know, I know you think we're hedging our bets, you're right, we are because one day you'll be gone again, it'll be like Afghanistan the first time [when the United States turned away from Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989], you'll be done with us, but we're still going to be here because we can't actually move the country. And the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so, yes, we're hedging our bets.

Other Problems

Beyond the main themes discussed above, other issues impacting U.S. policymaking in Afghanistan surfaced throughout the SIGAR interviews:

- Positivity bias (e.g., Flynn interview on November 11, 2015: "As intelligence makes it way up higher [within the bureaucracy], it gets consolidated and really watered down; it gets politicized…because once policymakers get their hands on it, and frankly once operational commanders get their hands on it, they put their twist to it…Operational commanders, State Department policymakers, and Department of Defense policymakers are going to be inherently rosy in their assessments.")
- Not considering greater inclusion of or interaction with the Taliban at the outset (e.g., UN official on August 27, 2015: "Lesson learned: if you get a chance to talk to the Taliban, talk to them….At that moment [2001], most…Taliban commanders were interested in joining the government.")
- Powers granted to Afghanistan's central government (e.g., unnamed U.S. official, October 18, 2016: "why did we create centralized gov't in a place that has never had one…set us up for failure")

Other Voices: U.S. Efforts as Relatively Successful

Some of the officials interviewed by SIGAR lauded arguable gains made and facilitated by the international community's work in Afghanistan since 2001, a perspective not generally included in *The Washington Post* stories.

A number of interviewees argued, as one unnamed U.S. official did on June 2, 2015, "There's not enough recognition of the scale of achievements in Afghanistan…Afghanistan has given a higher

return on investment than almost any other reconstruction effort. From 2002-2012, [Afghanistan] made more progress in human development than any other country." Others contended (as referenced above) that one cannot assess the success or failure of U.S. efforts without considering the state of the country in 2002: "We have to remember what we were starting with in Afghanistan. Afghans were starting with nothing. Social and economic development was at the lowest level possible. And that's why Taliban and al Qaeda found a home there, and why we went in…You must look at where we were, what we tried to do, and where we got to" (unnamed senior State Department official April 26, 2016).

Some officials outside the United States echoed these sentiments in their interviews. A Danish official said on June 30, 2015, despite corruption and all of the other problems, "we'd be worse off without our [Afghanistan] intervention. The development side has had an impressive record." Abdul Jabar Naimee, who has served as governor of several eastern Afghan provinces, said in his March 6, 2017, interview:

> I am seeing that in the [W]est a thinking is going that they helped the Afghans but it was useless. This is a completely a wrong assumption. In the three provinces where I have been working as governor, in all the three places when I have share[d] programs with the people, or I have participated in the projects['] events, I have seen people are happy with the help they have received….The assumption that people of Afghanistan are not happy with the help that was done for their improvement, this assumption is wrong, people are grateful for the help and they still benefit from the work that was done.

Snowflakes (Rumsfeld Memos)[8]

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's "snowflakes" (the last of which is dated December 22, 2004), unlike the SIGAR interviews, provide a contemporaneous view into one senior policymaker's thinking over the first several years of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. Because they are brief and relatively informal, there are risks in taking them as representative of U.S. policy as a whole, but their on-the-ground perspective could still be useful in assessing U.S. policy in Afghanistan. They may also demonstrate that various perceptions noted in the SIGAR interviews—such as that Afghanistan was less of a priority than Iraq—had merit. Many of the approximately 200 snowflakes are minor; some notable excerpts are below.[9]

- Rumsfeld apparently did not anticipate long-term U.S. financial support for Afghan security forces. In an April 8, 2002, memo to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Rumsfeld wrote, "The U.S. spent billions freeing Afghanistan and providing security. We are spending a fortune every day. There is no reason on earth for the U.S. to commit to pay 20 percent for the Afghan army. I urge you to get DoS turned around on this—the U.S. position should be zero [underline original]. We are already doing more than anyone."[10]
- Rumsfeld expressed continual concern about not having a plan (e.g., "I am convinced we have to have a plan for Afghanistan and that nobody else in the

[8] The Department of Defense has been reviewing and releasing the memos since 2017 in response to a FOIA lawsuit from the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research institute based at George Washington University; the National Security Archive, in turn, shared them with *The Washington Post*. The term "snowflake" was evidently coined before Rumsfeld became Secretary of Defense in 2001. See Donald Rumsfeld, "About the 2001-2006 Snowflakes," The Rumsfeld Papers, 2012.

[9] See, for example, March 1, 2004, memo entitled "Hospital in Kabul" that reads in its entirety, "Please find out what is going on with that midwife hospital in Kabul. I am so disappointed and discouraged that it seems to not be going well."

[10] Powell responded on April 16, 2002 saying that "recognizing that others are unlikely to shoulder these burdens adequately unless the United States leads the way, we have pledged to do our fair share."

government is going to do it unless we do. What do you propose?" (October 17, 2002)

- Rumsfeld expressed an eagerness to reduce U.S. commitments in Afghanistan. In a September 25, 2003, memo to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith, he wrote, "We need a good conceptual speech that describes where the responsibility is (and moves the blame if it fails away from the U.S.), namely on the Afghan people and on the international community."
- Rumsfeld sought greater input over non-Department of Defense equities. He wrote to White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card on August 19, 2002, requesting "that I have an opportunity to interview any person who is proposed for Ambassador to Afghanistan, before the selection gets made and before the President is involved. The post is very important for the Department of Defense and I would like to have a good sense of who it might be and why."
- There is some evidence that Afghanistan, by 2003, may not have been a major focus for Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld received a November 7, 2003, letter from Afghan Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, who painted a picture of widespread Taliban activity and said "please do not forget the battle against terrorist and extremists in Afghanistan." Rumsfeld forwarded the letter in a memo to CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid on November 18, 2003, describing the letter as "worrisome" and saying "if he [Dostum] is correct that the Taliban are in control of that many areas within Afghanistan, that is news to me."

Reactions to "the Afghanistan Papers"

The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" have attracted significant attention, though policymakers and outside analysts disagree about whether they contain new and relevant information and, if so, what effect this information should have on U.S. policy in Afghanistan going forward.

In Congress, most of the Members who reacted publicly did so to reiterate previous calls to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Senator Tom Udall spoke on the Senate floor about the Papers on December 12, voicing support for S.J.Res. 12, introduced in March 2019 by Udall and Senator Rand Paul. The resolution would, among other provisions, mandate the removal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan within a year of enactment.[11] Senator Kirsten Gillibrand called for Senate hearings to investigate "these deeply concerning revelations about the Afghan war," and Representative Max Rose said that the Papers demonstrated that "the time to end this war and bring our troops home honorably is now."[12]

Top U.S. defense officials largely defended the U.S. conduct of the war, arguing that the Papers did not constitute evidence that former officials had lied to the American public, and that the Papers, as part of a Lessons Learned project, were structured to invite criticism, in hindsight, of the war effort. Pentagon Spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said on December 12, 2019,

[11] VIDEO: Following Release of Afghanistan Papers, Udall Appeals to the Senate to Reassert its Constitutional Authority over Authorizing War, December 12, 2019.

[12] Following Release of Afghanistan Papers, Gillibrand Calls For Senate To Hold Hearings For Complete Review Of Afghanistan Strategy, December 9, 2019; Rose on Afghanistan Papers: 'The time to end this war and bring our troops home honorably is now,' December 9, 2019.

> I would quibble with the idea that we weren't providing [accurate information] in the past. I think what we see from the report from The Washington Post is, looking at individuals giving retrospectives years later on what they may have believed at the time.…those statements appeared for the most part to be people looking back retrospectively on things that they had said previously -- and using hindsight to speak to comments they had made.[13]

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper dismissed claims that officials had lied,[14] saying "For 18 years now, the media has been over there [in Afghanistan]…The Congress has been there multiple times…We've had the SIGAR there. We've had IGs there. This has been a very transparent—it's not like this war was hiding somewhere and now all of a sudden there's been a revelation….So [the] insinuation that there's been this large-scale conspiracy is just, to me, ridiculous." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, appearing alongside Esper, said, "I know that I and many, many others gave assessments at the time based on facts that we knew at the time. And those were honest assessments, and they were never intended to deceive neither the Congress nor the American people." [15]

SIGAR Special Inspector General John Sopko wrote a December 17, 2019, letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* disputing some of the *Post*'s characterizations and saying that "the Afghanistan Papers is an important contribution to public discourse about the war in Afghanistan. But it is not a 'secret' history. SIGAR has written about these issues for years, including in seven Lessons Learned reports and more than 300 audits and other products."[16] On January 15, 2020, Sopko testified in front of the House Foreign Affairs Committee that U.S. policy in Afghanistan has been characterized by "institutional hubris and mendacity" and that "We have incentivized lying to Congress…the whole incentive is to show success and to ignore failure and when there's too much failure, classify it or don't report it."[17]

Outside observers have offered differing views of the Papers. One concurred with the *Post*'s assessment that in the Papers, "officials' indictment of policies for which they themselves were responsible lays bare the massive institutional deceit that forms the heart of what the United States has done" in Afghanistan.[18] Other observers have taken a softer line. One wrote, "it is apparent from the documents that many officials in power attempted to 'spin' a spiraling Afghanistan conflict for the public," though they did so because "the U.S. government has every incentive to paint a better picture of progress than is the reality on the ground."[19]

Still others have argued that the Papers contain little that has not already been readily and publicly available for years: "the only new information here is the identity of those making the criticisms."[20] Those making this argument have pointed to reports from SIGAR (including their seven publicly released Lessons Learned reports for which the interviews in "the Afghanistan

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[13] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant to the Secretary of Defense Jonathan Hoffman and Rear Admiral William Byrne, December 12, 2019.

[14] From 1998 to 2002, Mr. Esper was a professional staff member on the House Committee on Armed Services. From 2002 to 2004 he was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and from 2004-2006 he was the National Security Adviser to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist.

[15] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Esper and General Milley in the Pentagon Briefing Room, December 20, 2019.

[16] John Sopko, "Setting the record straight on 'The Afghanistan Papers," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2019.

[17] CQ Congressional Transcripts, House Foreign Affairs Committee Holds Hearing on Lessons Learned in Afghanistan, CQ.com, January 15, 2020.

[18] James Carroll, "Lessons to Be Learned from The Afghanistan Papers," *New Yorker*, December 12, 2019.

[19] Carrie Lee, "Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: The Politics of The Afghanistan Papers," December 18, 2019.

[20] Ryan Cooper, "The Afghanistan Papers were always hiding in plain sight," *The Week*, December 9, 2019.

Papers" were conducted) and other inspectors general, as well as media, academic, and other public accounts. One summarizes, "In short, if you're surprised by the Afghanistan Papers, you haven't been paying attention."[21] Another observer criticizes the *Post* for "putting sensationalist spin on information that was not classified, has already been described in publicly available reports, only covers a fraction of the 18 years of the war, and falls far short of convincingly demonstrating a campaign of deliberate lies and deceit."[22] Given that there has been evidence of shortcomings in the U.S. war and development effort for years, one observer argues that "Afghanistan is best seen, not as a morality play, but as a classic foreign policy dilemma in which all the options are bad ones":

> Reasonable people can debate, with the benefit of hindsight, whether the United States should have accepted these risks as the price of avoiding another two decades of war. But the tragic dilemma of Afghanistan is that there have always been costs of withdrawal as well as costs of continued intervention.[23]

Possible Questions for Congress

"The Afghanistan Papers" raise a number of potential questions for Congress to consider as Members evaluate the Trump Administration's Afghanistan policies.

- **U.S. Strategy**. What role, if any, has Congress played in compelling successive executive branch administrations to articulate U.S. strategy and/or policy goals in Afghanistan? What are the means by which Congress has attempted to shape or influence those goals? What have been the most and least effective of those means?
- **Congressional Oversight**. Members of Congress have conducted oversight of executive branch policy through various means, including appointing a special inspector general, public and closed hearings, Member and staff delegations to Afghanistan, letters to executive branch officials, and public statements. What have been the most and least effective methods of congressional oversight?
- **U.S Aid: Budgeting.** To what extent has Congress scrutinized executive branch funding requests? Have appropriated U.S. funding levels differed from those requests and if so, what changes have been made and why? To what extent have congressional budgeting decisions in Afghanistan been made due to political expediency? How, if at all, can Members of Congress insulate budgeting or other policymaking processes from political pressures?
- **U.S. Aid: Conditionality.** What conditions has Congress imposed on U.S. aid to Afghanistan and why? How, if at all, have those conditions impacted the delivery of U.S. aid, Afghan government actions, U.S.-Afghan relations, and congressional interactions with the executive branch? What kinds of changes, if any, to the Foreign Assistance Act or other relevant pieces of legislation might make U.S. development assistance more effective?
- **Reporting**. What has been the impact of congressionally mandated reporting on policy or outcomes? How, if at all, does Congress use these reports? What are the

[21] James Lyall, "If you're surprised by what's in the Afghanistan Papers, you haven't been paying attention," *Washington Post,* December 12, 2019.

[22] Jonathan Schroden, "There Was No 'Secret War on the Truth' in Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks,* December 16, 2019.

[23] Hal Brands, "The Afghanistan Papers Reveal a Tragedy, Not a Crime," *Bloomberg Opinion,* December 17, 2019.

- most and least useful reports that Congress receives on U.S. military and development efforts in Afghanistan? How, if at all, does Congress require agencies to evaluate their programs, and how does this inform reports to Congress? Has there been any evolution in specific monitoring and evaluation requirements?
- **Bureaucracy.** How has Congress shaped executive branch structure? Have these efforts been helpful? How direct a role should Congress play in mandating the establishment or nature of offices or other bureaucratic structures within the executive branch that work on Afghanistan?
- **Personnel Issues**. To what extent have U.S. efforts in Afghanistan been hampered by the frequent personnel turnover cited by many SIGAR interviewees? How, if at all, have congressional actions improved, undermined, or otherwise affected the ability of federal agencies to train and deploy capable workforces in Afghanistan? What congressional action, if any, is needed to help the executive branch, or individual departments, address this issue?
- **Recommendations**. What are the most important things that Congress could have been doing over the past 18 years to ensure U.S. success in Afghanistan? What can (and should) Congress do going forward?

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