

Chronicle of a Defeat Foretold

Why America Failed in Afghanistan

By [July/August 2021](#)

In 2008, I interviewed the United Kingdom's then outgoing military commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, in a dusty firebase in Helmand Province, where international troops had been battling the Taliban on a daily basis for territory that kept slipping away. The war in Afghanistan could not be won militarily, Carleton-Smith told me. He was the first senior coalition military officer to say so publicly, and the story made the front page of the British *Sunday Times*. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates promptly denounced Carleton-Smith to the news media as "defeatist."

Thirteen years on, U.S. President Joe Biden appears to have reached the same conclusion as the British brigadier. In April, Biden announced that the United States would pull all its remaining troops out of Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11, ending what he referred to as "the forever war." But by now, such a withdrawal was all but a foregone conclusion: the Taliban had proved a stubborn enemy that was not going anywhere and that indeed controlled close to half the country's territory.

How the conflict once known as "the good war" (to distinguish it from the war in Iraq) went so wrong is the subject of a new book, *The American War in Afghanistan*, which claims to be the first comprehensive account of the United States' longest war. Its author, Carter Malkasian, is a historian who has spent considerable time working in Afghanistan, first as a civilian official in Helmand and then as a senior adviser to the U.S. military commander in the country. A sprawling history of more than 500 pages, the work stands in stark contrast to Malkasian's previous book, *War Comes to Garmser*, which

tells the compelling story of one small district in Helmand. In his new book, Malkasian considers just how it could be that with as many as 140,000 soldiers in 2011 and some of the world's most sophisticated equipment, the United States and its NATO allies failed to defeat the Taliban. Moreover, he asks why these Western powers stayed on, at a cost of more than \$2 trillion and over 3,500 allied lives lost, plus many more soldiers badly injured, fighting what the British brigadier and others long knew was an unwinnable war.

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Fatal Beginnings

The Afghan intervention seemed, at the start, a success story. The United States entered Afghanistan in October 2001 with the backing of the United Nations and fueled by worldwide outrage over the 9/11 attacks. It dispatched B-52 bombers, laser-guided missiles, and Green Berets, who worked alongside local militias to topple the Taliban within 60 days, with the loss of only four U.S. soldiers (three a result of friendly fire) and one CIA agent. The operation seemed a model of intervention and cost a total of \$3.8 billion: President George W. Bush described it as one of the biggest "bargains" of all time. Observes Malkasian: "The ease of the 2001 success carried away sensibility."

The Taliban fell, Osama bin Laden fled to Pakistan—and the Bush administration no longer seemed to know what it was trying to achieve in Afghanistan. Bush made much of women's rights, declaring in his State of the Union address in January 2002 that "today women of Afghanistan are free," after "years as captives in their own homes," when the Taliban forbade

girls from going to school and women from working, wearing lipstick, or laughing out loud. But Washington had no appetite for rebuilding Afghanistan and almost no understanding of the war-ravaged country, let alone of how much work would be needed to secure and reconstruct it.

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Malkasian argues that the United States made mistakes between 2001

and 2006 that set the course for failure. The catalog of errors he recounts is by now familiar. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld did not want to invest in the Afghan army—and by the end of 2003, just 6,000 Afghan soldiers had been trained. Warlords, whom most Afghans blamed for the country's descent into violence in the first place, roamed free and even became ministers and members of parliament. At the same time, the United States and its allies shut the Taliban out of talks on a political settlement, failing to appreciate that the group represented a point of view that many among the majority Pashtuns shared. The United States should have pressed its advantage, Malkasian suggests, at a time when the Afghan government had popular support and the Taliban were in disarray. Instead, it empowered militias and conducted overly aggressive counterterrorism operations that alienated ordinary Afghans and led the excluded Taliban to resort once more to violence.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration classed Afghanistan as a success and turned its attention to Iraq. The Taliban fled across the border to Pakistan, where they regrouped, raised funds, recruited in the madrasahs, and trained with the assistance of Pakistan's security service, the Inter-Services Intelligence. Many ISI officers had worked with Taliban leaders for decades and shared their worldview. Moreover, Malkasian notes that Islamabad's strategic thinking centered on its rivalry with India. Pakistan had fought four wars with its neighbor and feared that India would encircle it by gaining influence in Afghanistan. India had 24 consulates in Afghanistan, Pakistani

officials complained; in fact, it had only four.

Pakistan's role turned out to be fatal. Even as the United States prosecuted its war in Afghanistan, those it fought found refuge and training in the country next door. But the Bush administration not only turned a blind eye to Pakistan's machinations; it provided Pakistan with \$12 billion, more than half of which was a reimbursement for military operations, as American officials believed that Islamabad was helping in what they saw as the more important fight against al Qaeda.

The Heart of Afghanistan

Afghan officials like to blame Pakistan for the deepening war. But the Taliban had something more in its favor—something Malkasian calls "the Taliban's tie to what it meant to be Afghan." The heart of Afghanistan, by Malkasian's description, is the *atraf*, or countryside, with its mud-walled homes, hidden-away women, and barefoot children, a realm where "other than cell-phones, cars, and assault rifles, the 21st century was invisible." Into this space came [American soldiers](#) with night-vision goggles and missiles the price of Porsches. The last foreigners the villagers had seen were the Russians who occupied their country in the 1980s. The Taliban were able to use that memory as a powerful motivator in a country that prided itself on defeating superpowers and never having been colonized.

Malkasian believes that the Taliban profited from their posture as a force for Islam, against infidels. But my own reporting in Afghanistan suggests a somewhat more ambiguous dynamic. Mullahs in villages would rage against the foreign presence, but they collected their salaries from a government dependent on foreigners. Ordinary Afghans I spoke to suggested that religion was less important to them than pride in their history of defeating superpowers. The fact that the Taliban paid unemployed farmers further

boosted the group's advantage. Moreover, as Malkasian details, the Taliban exploited tribal rivalries that Western forces didn't understand. Many powerful Pashtun tribes, such as the Ghilzais, the Ishaqzais, and the Noorzais, felt cut out. They resented foreign troops for disrespecting their culture (entering women's quarters, bombing wedding parties) and attempting to eradicate their poppy crops.

The United States had [created conditions](#) that called for a more robust Afghan state than it had built. As Malkasian writes, "If a state faces a hostile safe haven on its border and mistreats various segments of its population, it had best have capable military forces of one form or another." When the Taliban reemerged in earnest in 2006, their forces were estimated at only 10,000, which should have been containable. But the foreign forces in Afghanistan were unfamiliar with the terrain, both geographic and cultural; the U.S. leadership was distracted by Iraq, where a civil war was spinning out of control; and Afghanistan had not even a small, capable army.



U.S. soldiers in Laghman Province, Afghanistan, December 2014

Lucas Jackson / Reuters

As for Afghan President Hamid Karzai, he was furious about NATO airstrikes and what he saw as British meddling in Helmand, where he had been forced to remove a governor. Increasingly paranoid, rather than unite tribes that might have stepped in to fight the Taliban, he tried to divide them, lest they become a political threat. Later, the Afghan security forces were ramped up and gained numerical superiority over the Taliban and at least equivalent ammunition and supplies. Still, they threw in the towel at decisive moments. "The Taliban had an edge in inspiration," writes Malkasian. "The average soldier and policeman simply wanted to fight less than his Taliban counterpart. Many could not reconcile fighting for Afghanistan alongside an infidel occupier and against a movement that represented Islam."

In stressing the religious dimension, however, Malkasian overlooks more material conditions that sapped motivation from many Afghan fighters. Some were reluctant to fight for a government whose insatiable demand for bribes they felt was the bane of their lives. Others were well aware that there would be no medevacs for injured security forces and that corrupt commanders were siphoning off their fuel and supplies, as well as pocketing the pay for "ghost fighters," who existed only on the books. They saw little utility in risking their lives for a predatory government when the Taliban seemed just as likely to return.

The Clocks and the Time

The United States, sucked in ever deeper, seemed to exhaust every strategy, from maintaining a light footprint to surging U.S. troops, increasing them almost threefold, to more than 80,000 by 2010. President Barack Obama, who was constitutionally wary of pouring troops and dollars into military

interventions, and who had opposed the war in Iraq at its inception, found himself sending more and more Americans to prop up a government that had lost the trust of its people. But he never considered getting out altogether: the cost was just too high. "The United States was stuck," writes Malkasian. And the Taliban expanded their influence with the support of [Iran](#) and Russia, both of which were interested in making life hard for the Americans.

So how did Washington come unstuck, and why now? U.S. President Donald Trump, with his "America first" policy, was never going to have much time for Afghanistan; indeed, one of his campaign promises was to end the war. By the autumn of 2018, with midterm elections approaching, Trump raged to his generals that their strategy had been "a total failure" and he wanted out. For the first time, talks with the Taliban took on real urgency. In February 2020, Washington signed a deal [promising withdrawal](#) by May 1, 2021. The Afghan government had been completely excluded from these negotiations. When Biden came into office, Kabul hoped the new president would not only delay the withdrawal but also leave a permanent force in place. In the end, it got only four months' grace.

In announcing a September pullout, Biden argued that the United States should "be focused on the reason we went in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective." But even this point is not entirely clear-cut. True, there hasn't been an attack from Afghanistan since 9/11. But al Qaeda has not gone away. In fact, the situation is more complicated than before, as there is not only al Qaeda to contend with but also Islamic State Khorasan, or IS-K, which is small in numbers but has conducted deadly suicide attacks in Afghanistan, including on maternity hospitals and schools, particularly in Kabul.

The current U.S. plan is to contain terrorism from afar, using drones, intelligence networks, and special operations raids launched from bases somewhere [in the region](#). William Burns, the CIA director, admitted that this plan involved "a significant risk." It was "not the decision we hoped for," said the British defense chief, Nick Carter.

"These are professional understatements," William Hague, a former British foreign secretary, wrote recently in response. "Most western security officials I know are horrified."

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Afghanistan's is not. In the last 15

years, more than 40,000 civilians have been killed. The Afghan government and the Taliban began peace talks in Qatar late last year—but since then, the fighting has intensified, causing even more casualties. When peace talks got underway between the Taliban and the United States in 2019, I asked young Afghans what peace would mean to them. "Being able to go for a picnic," said one. "Not having to wonder if you will come back again when you leave for work or study," said another. Most, however, could not answer at all. Fully 70 percent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25, and fighting has gone on since the Soviet invasion in 1979. These Afghans have only ever known war.

Malkasian's book raises a disturbing question: In the end, did the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan do more harm than good? "The United States exposed Afghans to prolonged harm in order to defend America from another terrorist attack," he writes. "Villages were destroyed. Families disappeared. . . . The intervention did noble work for women, education, and free speech. But that good has to be weighed against tens of thousands of men, women, and children who died."

Those "noble" achievements are not negligible, however. There are now 3.5 million Afghan girls in school (although more than two million still do not go). Women are working in all sorts of fields: law enforcement, cinema, robotics. The health-care system has been transformed, and life expectancy for Afghan women has increased by almost ten years. Afghanistan has flourishing media. Even the presence of cell phones indicates a society connected with the rest of the world. Young Afghans will not easily give up these hard-won rights.

The fear is that these gains may now be threatened. Since the peace deal was signed, there have been dozens of assassinations of judges, journalists, and human rights activists, as well as the horrific bombing of a girls' school. And however U.S. policymakers may seek to dress it up, to the Taliban, the American pullout is a victory. As the oft-quoted Taliban adage goes, "You have all the clocks, but we have all the time."

The Afghans, after all, never believed that the Americans would stay. Back in 2005, in the remote village of Shkin, a place of intense fighting in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, I watched local villagers happily accept health care and other help from U.S. soldiers in the day, then rocket their base at night. When I asked them why, they had a simple explanation: "In the end, they'll be gone, and the bad guys will still be here."