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Editors' Note: We received the following from a reader and feel it is important to share. What is revealed by the revelations of the Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers," as noted below, are stark assessments within the U.S. military of the actual progress of the longest running war in U.S. history, which contrast sharply with public statements about the war by top military and political leaders, including presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

"The Afghanistan Papers" was published at a time of major differences in the U.S. ruling class about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, started by Bush and continued by Obama—what Trump calls "endless wars"—and is reflective of those differences. A lot can be learned such as what is true, in contrast with what was made public, and the contrast between the "invincibility" of the U.S. military that is projected and trumpeted vs. the "reality on the ground" in these wars, which in fact were almost continuously "bogged down" and unable to achieve their major imperialist objectives.



People of Afghanistan mourn some who were killed by U.S. airstrikes, June 2019. "The Afghanistan Papers" mentions an estimated 43,000 Afghan civilians killed during the years of

the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Photo: AP

In December 2019 the *Washington Post* published “[The Afghanistan Papers: A secret history of the war](#)” (hereafter, “TAP”). The first installment, titled “At War With the Truth,” was shocking to many because it juxtaposed numerous rosy public pronouncements about how the war was going—including from presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama—against the extremely negative tone of *internal* reports and discussions. In other words, it laid bare a policy and practice of cynically lying to the American public about matters of life and death importance.

TAP is based on hundreds of interviews with members and leaders of the military and diplomatic corps of the U.S. and its “coalition” allies. These interviews were done between 2015 and 2018 by a U.S. government agency known as “SIGAR,” [Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction] in order to examine “the root failures of the longest armed conflict in U.S. history.” TAP also draws on hundreds of declassified memos from Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense in the early years of the war in Afghanistan.

The War in Afghanistan: A Horrendous Imperialist Crime AND a Disaster for Imperialism

In October 2001, under President Bush, the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan, initiating a war that has utterly ravaged it, killing tens of thousands of civilians, [driving several million](#) from their homes, and plunging an already poor country into deeper crisis. Eighteen years later, about 13,000 U.S. troops are still there, wreaking violence and terror. In 2017, [1.3 million children](#) under the age of five faced malnutrition. In 2018, 100,000 Afghans became refugees. In the first six months of 2019, at least [1,400 civilians were killed](#), double the rate of 2018, the majority killed by U.S. and U.S.-backed forces.

This unjust and unending war stands as a stark indictment of American capitalism-imperialism, which has raised mass slaughter to a monstrous science that it keeps applying and “improving” in country after country. What jumps out at me in looking at all this is that a system that repeatedly inflicts so much suffering on so many in pursuit of the narrow interests of a tiny minority of the world’s people has to be gotten rid of, through revolution, at the soonest possible time.

But this war has *also* proven to be a disaster for the imperialists themselves.

The Afghanistan war was presented as a “good war” against Islamic terrorism and fundamentalist theocracy. And it was launched in response to the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. that were orchestrated by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization, which at that time was operating freely in Afghanistan, under the protection of and in alliance with the brutal and “Dark Ages” Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, which ruled most of Afghanistan. The U.S. had a great need to respond in an overwhelming way to those attacks in order to maintain its imperialist-gangster “street cred”—“If you dare touch the United States, we will unleash exponentially greater violence on you.”

As the U.S., under George W. Bush, launched the war against Iraq, all of this got folded into the larger “War on Terror” and was about U.S. imperialism violently breaking and subduing those forces (Islamic fundamentalists, so-called “rogue states” and others) in the Middle East/Central Asia region that were posing threats to the U.S., or making it impossible for the U.S. to exercise effective domination in this resource rich and militarily strategic part of the world ¹. (For a deep and nuanced analysis of the “War on Terror,” and how different sections of the U.S. ruling class perceived and responded to the necessities they faced, and that war’s roots in imperialism and relation to imperialist interests, see [Bringing Forward Another Way](#) [BFAW] by Bob Avakian.)

But what actually happened? Over the course of 18 years, three administrations have deployed nearly [800,000 troops](#) (2,400 of whom were killed), dropped 40,000 bombs, filled the skies with high tech drones to spread terror and direct air strikes, and spent at least a trillion dollars. Again and again their best political and military strategists have come up with new plans and spent years trying to implement each one.

But as TAP sums up, “military commanders have been unable to deliver on their promises to prevail.” The U.S. backed-Afghan government is notoriously weak, corrupt, and brutal. The Taliban—once widely hated and feared by Afghan people—has become the “lesser evil” to many, and is leading a growing insurgency that the U.S. has been unable to defeat or contain. The U.S.-backed government now has “[control or influence](#)” of *at best* about half the country.

The U.S. is now in the situation of having to negotiate with the Taliban (the Islamic fundamentalists that it *overthrew* in 2001) to set up a new government that the U.S. hopes will be compliant with U.S. interests and objectives, and stable enough to keep Afghanistan out of the hands of other U.S. foes—in other words, they are close to being back where they started in 2001.

“The Afghanistan Papers” Asks: Why Didn’t the U.S. Military “Prevail”?

It is *this* disaster (and *not* the disaster that the U.S. has inflicted on Afghanistan) that TAP sets out to understand, in order to avoid similar mistakes in the future—because *of course*

the U.S. will end up invading other nations in the foreseeable future! And this is the same imperialist “spirit” that guided the initial SIGAR interviews and reports, and that the people being interviewed are grappling with. So on one level, TAP is a survey of the views of hundreds of people—most of whom are war criminals or enablers of war crimes—agonizing about why they weren’t able to succeed in conquering Afghanistan, and venting about other people’s mistakes.

Still, exactly because these people are genuinely upset about this defeat for the empire they serve, these interviews *do* reveal some of the actual nature of the U.S. occupation—and it isn’t a pretty picture!

“They Lied to Us and They Deceived Themselves”

TAP hits hard at the “explicit and sustained efforts by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public” into thinking that the war was going well, and was “winnable.” It quotes the head of SIGAR saying: “The American people have been constantly lied to” about how well the war was going and the prospects of victory. Over and over for nearly two decades, U.S. political and military leaders went before the cameras to declare that they had a solid and effective plan, that things were improving, that victory was inevitable.

At first this appeared to be *true*—the Taliban had neither broad popular support nor a powerful military with which to oppose the U.S. invasion, and it had many internal foes among the powerful warlords that had emerged in the course of the previous war after the Soviet Union

had invaded (in 1979). TAP says that “Within six months, the United States had largely accomplished what it set out to do. The leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban were dead, captured or in hiding,” and the Taliban government dismantled. In May of 2003, Donald Rumsfeld “announced an end to ‘major combat activity’ in Afghanistan.”

But things soon started to unravel. As BA points out in BFAW:

[T]hese imperialists are good at invading countries and knocking over regimes, but then when they find themselves in the position of occupying the country and they have a population that gets aroused against them, it becomes a different dynamic, and it is not so easy for them. It is not so easy for them to maintain “order” and to impose the changes they want to impose in accordance with their interests. It is not so easy to impose this “from the top down”—which is the only way imperialist occupiers can impose changes.

But this is a reality that the imperialists refused to and could not come to grips with—even as the Taliban insurgency mounted and plan after plan failed, they continued to insist—to us and to themselves—that they could and would overcome these problems.

Or as BA also put it in BFAW: “They lied to us... and deceived themselves.”

TAP brings out that in 2006 there was a mounting tide of negative reports from the field. Advisors warned Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that “enormous popular discontent is building” against the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Retired general Barry McCaffrey conducted a fact-finding mission, reporting that the Taliban had made a major comeback, and predicting that “we will encounter some very unpleasant surprises in the coming 24 months.” McCaffrey warned that if the U.S. military left Afghanistan, “the whole thing will collapse again into mayhem.”

How did the U.S. military and government handle these grim reports? Rumsfeld sought to bury the bad news—as an Army colonel and counterinsurgency advisor reported to SIGAR, “Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible.” Meanwhile, Rumsfeld pushed out a very different report highlighting “50 promising facts and figures” about how well things were going.

In 2008, as problems mounted, the commander of the 101st Airborne division asked-and-answered: “Are we losing the war? Absolutely no way. Can the enemy win it? Absolutely no way.” In 2013, then-Army Lt. General Mark Milley praised the Afghan security forces: “This army and this police force have been very, very effective in combat against the insurgents every single day.” And both Bush and Obama gave speeches proclaiming that America would not spend “long years of floundering followed by ultimate failure” (Bush 2002) and was not “fighting an endless war in Afghanistan” (Obama, 2009).

Looking back on the whole sweep, U.S. General Mike Flynn told SIGAR, “From the ambassadors to the low level, [they all say] we are doing a great job. Really? So if we are doing such a great job, why does it feel like we’re losing?”

Three-star General Douglas Lute, who was the Afghanistan war czar under both Bush and Obama, said this:

If the American people knew the magnitude of this dysfunction ... 2,400 lives lost. Who will say this was in vain?

In other words, if they had told the truth about how badly things were going, people would not have supported the war. (Which, to be very, very clear, no one with a conscience should have supported it in any case.) So they cynically lied their asses off, as the slaughter and devastation engulfed the lives of millions of Afghans, and tens of thousands of Americans.

Naked Colonialism Under the Cover of “Spreading Democracy”

TAP also sheds light on how the U.S. pursued its objective of “standing up” an Afghan government with sufficient legitimacy among the population and enough reliable armed forces to stabilize Afghanistan, keep it in the U.S. camp, and allow U.S. troops to leave—and how the U.S. way of doing this actually undercut it.

For starters, while waging the war under the banner of democracy and human rights, the U.S. sought out the most oppressive, brutal, and corrupt forces in the Afghan society, both to fight the Taliban *and* to control the Afghan people.

According to a SIGAR report, "Early on, the United States allied with Afghan warlords—many of whom had committed war crimes against fellow Afghans—to seek their help with eliminating al-Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban. Many warlords were brought into the government, where they continued their abuses, maintained private militias, and had links to narcotics, smuggling, and criminal networks."

For instance, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, now one of Afghanistan's vice presidents, had "fought alongside CIA operatives and U.S. Special Operations forces after 9/11. He was accused of war crimes after his militia suffocated hundreds of Taliban prisoners in November 2001 by locking them in airtight shipping containers. ... allegations of atrocities—rape, torture, murder—dogged Dostum over the years."

Warlords like Dostum allied with the U.S. and in turn were allowed to carve out their own mini-kingdoms in different parts of the country. TAP reports that "at the outset of the war ... the CIA, the U.S. military, the State Department and other agencies used cash and lucrative contracts to win the allegiance of Afghan warlords in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban ... binding the United States to some of the country's most notorious figures for years."

Under these warlords, corruption and brutality were the order of the day. The impoverished Afghan masses had to pay bribes for everything, a system in which the poorest always lose out. The "democratic courts" the U.S. set up were so corrupt that many people preferred to take local crimes and grievances to the Taliban who were seen as "brutal but fair."

To oversee and cohere all this and to give it a façade of Afghan democracy, the U.S. set out to cobble together a "legitimate" Afghan government, *but*, according to TAP, one in which "power was centralized in the hands of one man." TAP notes that this kind of government "conflicted with Afghan tradition" of "decentralized power," but "with Afghanistan beaten down and broke, the Americans called the shots."

And who did "the leader of the free world" select to head this government? According to TAP:

U.S. leaders had a potential Afghan ruler in mind. Hamid Karzai, a tribal leader from southern Afghanistan, belonged to the country’s largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns.

Perhaps more importantly, Karzai spoke polished English **and was a CIA asset...** the CIA would keep Karzai on its payroll for years to come. [Emphasis added.]

In 2013 the *New York Times* [reported](#) that Karzai received monthly “bags of cash” totaling tens of millions of dollars for years, some of which went to make \$100,000 a month payoffs to General Dostum.

Karzai remained president of Afghanistan until 2014.

Utter Contempt for the Lives of the People of Afghanistan

TAP documents (but does *not* call out) some of the open racism even towards the Afghans who were fighting and dying in the U.S. war effort. U.S. Special Forces operatives “hated” the Afghans they trained, saying they were “awful—the bottom of the barrel in the country that is already the bottom of the barrel.” A U.S. officer called them “stealing fools.” Villagers were referred to as “speaking derka derka”—a racist term for “the language Muslims speak.” (As if all Muslims spoke the same language!)

U.S. functionaries also chronically blamed the Afghan people for not responding better to the U.S. occupation, and for being “too backward and ignorant” to appreciate or utilize everything the U.S. was doing for them! “We were bringing 21st-century stuff to a society living in a different time period”; the Afghan people “didn’t really want schools. They said they wanted their kids out herding goats”; we were “providing electricity to communities in Kandahar who had no concept of what to do with it”; “It was difficult to bring a region that is [a] hundred years ... behind out in a few years.” (Elisions are TAP’s.) [2](#)

As to the slaughter of Afghan people, it rarely comes up, and when it does it is in the context of the problems this may create *for the stability of the U.S. occupation*. The first mention of Afghan deaths is more than 3,000 words into TAP. "More than 60,000 members of Afghan security forces have been killed, a casualty rate that U.S. commanders have called unsustainable." This is *25 times* the number of Americans killed, but the U.S. is unconcerned by these human lives violently cut short at an early age. No, from the U.S. perspective the problem is "hey, we can't find and train enough Afghan cannon fodder fast enough to sustain effective military operations."

Similarly, one interview casually mentions that "we're running over kids with our MRAPS [armored vehicles]," and TAP refers in passing to the estimated 43,000 Afghan civilians killed [3](#), but *only* because these are problems *for the U.S. war effort*, "pissing people off" and driving them into the arms of the Taliban.

With all this, is it any wonder that the U.S. occupation and the government it propped up were despised, or that even the reactionary Taliban could find support in their insurgency?

Conclusion

It is unusual, to say the least, for major media in the U.S. to openly expose the fact that top political and military leaders are essentially *lying* to the masses about questions of war—normally, no matter how sharp the disagreements, the media does little that might lead ordinary people to question the "call to arms" from the ruling class. So it is significant that the *Washington Post* came out with this major piece at this time.

Although there is intense crisis in the U.S. ruling class at this time (Trump was impeached a week after TAP was published), and this struggle is often very sharp around issues of war and foreign policy (as came out when Trump nearly led the U.S. into a major war with Iran that many ruling class forces considered a very bad idea), it is not clear how TAP fits into this struggle.

A major aspect of TAP is that it is a polemic against “nation building,” at least in a poor and undeveloped country like Afghanistan. TAP argues that the “fundamental mistake” the U.S. made after overthrowing the Taliban and dismantling al-Qaeda was to turn down an opportunity to negotiate with a section of Taliban leaders who were open to being part of the new government the U.S. was trying to set up. Instead the U.S. tried to prop up a more “democratic” and less openly reactionary government, carry out some social and economic reforms, etc., in the hope of stabilizing a pro-U.S. regime with some popular support.

But while this may have been a sharp controversy in the ruling class in 2015, when SIGAR began conducting interviews, at this point it does not seem to be. There seems to be a consensus in the ruling class that Afghanistan was a disaster and a view to avoid those kinds of efforts in the future. (Whether that will actually be *possible* for them is another question.) In line with this, there seems to be support from significant sections of the ruling class for Trump’s ongoing efforts to bring the Taliban into the Afghan government—efforts that are being carried out without the participation of the current government!

So it may be at this point that TAP is being put out there simply as a “cautionary tale”—a warning against imperial arrogance, against the belief that because the U.S. has vast military and economic power that it can always get what it wants. Afghanistan (and Iraq, and Libya, and Vietnam) stand as stark warnings against that kind of thinking, and in this sense may be meant as a warning to Trump in particular. Trump claims that he can use American power—including its nukes—to bludgeon away all obstacles, and there is a very severe danger that this outlook will result in even more massive suffering among millions of people, and even threaten the world as a whole. Sections of the ruling class (like those *The Post* speaks for) may be using TAP as flashing yellow light: “Be careful, toppling governments and consolidating friendly power is easier said than done.”

The problem *for the ruling class* is that while they *do* have capacity to inflict incredible violence on the world in pursuit of their *need to* dominate as much of it as possible, they do *not*

have a really reliable and long-term effective way to “subdue” antagonistic forces—neither rival imperialists like China, local reactionaries like the Islamic fundamentalists, nor the masses of people—short of all-out war. And yet the nature of their system continues to drive them in that direction.

Which I think brings us face to face with the problem, as I understand it—for *humanity*: “How do we get rid of this system before it gets rid of us?”

1. One very striking example of how cynically the U.S. used the "War on Terror" label is that when Obama took office in 2009, he "repeatedly declared the goal of the [Afghanistan] war being to 'disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al-Qaeda,'" according to TAP. But at that point, "al-Qaeda had all but disappeared from Afghanistan." An even more powerful example is that the U.S. used its early victories in Afghanistan as a springboard to invade *Iraq*, a country with no connection to 9/11 or al-Qaeda and which in no way threatened U.S. territory or citizens. [[back](#)]

2. Here I would just like to point out that while TAP seems to largely *agree* with the view that some people and countries are just too backward to receive the fruits of modern civilization, the experience of communist revolution is that broad masses of peasants and others who have been *kept in* very backward situations can be united to take up the struggle to develop education, spread electrification, etc., as an integral part of overthrowing all the backward political and economic forces that hold them down and transforming society in the direction of eliminating all forms of oppression. See "[The Communist Revolution and the REAL Path to Emancipation: Its History and Our Future](#)," chapters 3 and 4 in particular. [[back](#)]

3. Some respected experts estimated [220,000 war-related civilian deaths](#) . [[back](#)]