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Washington Post reporter Craig Whitlock has just won a George Polk Award for Military Reporting for his in-depth investigation called “The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War.” He joins us to describe how, after getting a tip, he fought for three years to get the federal government to release a trove of confidential interviews it conducted with people directly involved in the nearly two-decade-long war. He ultimately obtained more than 2,000 documents that revealed how presidents, generals and diplomats across three administrations had intentionally misled the American public about the longest war in U.S. history.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!* I’m Amy Goodman. We’re looking at Afghanistan, where there have been nearly 80 violent attacks since last month’s U.S.-Taliban peace plan was announced. The violence could derail the deal that calls for U.S. troops to withdraw over the next 14 months and end the longest war in U.S. history. We’re speaking with

*Washington Post*

reporter Craig Whitlock. He has just won the George Polk Award for his

[investigation](#)

“The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War,” that reveals how officials misled the public about the war for decades. It shows how three successive presidencies — President George W. Bush, President Obama and President Trump — bungled the War in Afghanistan, despite deploying 775,000 U.S. troops since 2001. More than 2,000 U.S. soldiers have died in Afghanistan; 20,000 have been wounded.

This is an excerpt from the video released with the report. It begins with our guest, Craig Whitlock, and includes former Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Nicholas Burns and retired Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** There’s a clear pattern that what was said in private in these interviews contrasted so greatly with what U.S. officials — presidents, members of Congress, military commanders — what they had been saying in public over 18 years. Usually the talking points were all pretty similar. They would say, “The war is — it’s a tough place.”

**LT. GEN. DOUGLAS LUTE:** Conditions that are very trying.

**GEN. STANLEY McCHRYSTAL:** It was a tough year.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** “Afghanistan, there’s still fighting going on.”

**ERIC EDELMAN:** Increase in Taliban violence.

**GEN. DAVID McKIERNAN:** A higher level of violence.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** “But we’re making progress.”

**ZALMAY KHALILZAD:** Progress.

**MAJ. GEN. JEFFREY SCHLOESSER:** Progress.

**GEN. DAVID PETRAEUS:** Progress.

**DEFENSE SECRETARY ROBERT GATES:** Significant progress.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** You know, “We’re going in the right direction.”

**MICHÈLE FLOURNOY:** We are on the right road.

**DEFENSE SECRETARY LEON PANETTA:** In the right direction.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** “And our strategy is sound.”

**ERIC EDELMAN:** I think it’s important to understand that we do have a strategy that’s quite broad.

**DEFENSE SECRETARY ROBERT GATES:** Our strategy is succeeding.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** And they would give a very detailed case for why the American people should keep having to fight this war halfway around the world. But when you read these interviews, people would say that this was a lot of spin and lies, to some extent.

**NICHOLAS BURNS:** After '03, '04, once we're fully engaged in both wars, I can't remember us ever saying, “Should we be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?”

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** There were people in the White House who were giving interviews saying very explicitly that statistics or figures about the war, that were indicators of who was winning and losing or how things were going, were being twisted around or manipulated or almost made up.

**LT. GEN. MICHAEL FLYNN:** As intelligence makes its way up higher, it gets consolidated, and it gets really, really watered down.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** One of the most sobering things to read, for me, was just how many people involved in the war were very blunt and candid that the strategy, the war strategy, under Obama and Bush and Trump, they all said it was worthless.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That’s a clip from *The Washington Post* video produced by Joyce Lee that accompanies “The Afghanistan Papers,” as we continue our conversation with Craig Whitlock, *The Washington Post* reporter who uncovered the Afghanistan Papers. I mentioned the death toll of U.S. soldiers. It’s believed something like, what, 150,000 Afghans also died during this 19-year period. Is that about accurate? Although those numbers, we don’t — we will never actually know.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Well, that’s right. Those are estimates. There hasn’t been a reliable count of Afghan civilians that have died throughout the duration of the war. The United Nations has tried to keep track for the last 10 years. It’s much harder even to count the number of dead of Afghan insurgents, but it’s also impossible to get a reliable count of the number of Afghan security forces — in other words, the Afghan National Army or Afghan police — because their losses have been so steep in recent years that the Afghan government keeps that number classified to avoid destroying morale in the ranks.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, talk about, Craig Whitlock, what you found. Talk about the tip you got, and take us on the journey that took you years to get the explosive documentation that you got.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Sure. So, this all started the old-fashioned way in reporting. Back in August of 2016, I got a tip. At that time, I had just finished several years covering the Pentagon.

I was on our investigative desk. I got a tip that Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who we all know these days as being a Trump supporter, had given a very blistering interview to an obscure government agency called the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan. Flynn had just retired from the Army. He was becoming well known for campaigning for Trump and leading the crowds in chants of "Lock her up" about Hillary Clinton. So he was in the news quite a bit. But he was also a highly respected Army general in military intelligence. So, when we found out he had given this long interview about the Afghan War, we wanted to know what he had said, because he was a pretty forthright officer when he was in the military.

We asked the inspector general if we could get a transcript of it. And at first, they said, "Sure. It shouldn't be a problem." We then had to file a Freedom of Information Act request, which is the federal public records law to obtain government information. We thought we were going to get this in a matter of a couple weeks. But as the campaign went on and then Trump won, the inspector general started dragging its feet. And then, when Michael Flynn was named national security adviser to Trump, the very next day the inspector general denied our public records request. So, we were frustrated because we wanted to know what Flynn said. But in the meantime, we had also heard that the inspector general had conducted hundreds of interviews with other key figures in the war, from military commanders to ambassadors to White House officials. And we were trying to find out what all these people said in these interviews.

Long story short, we had to file two Freedom of Information Act lawsuits in federal court in Washington to compel the inspector general to release these interviews. It took three years for us to get our hands on them. And we're still not done. We still have litigation pending to get more interviews and the identities of a lot of these people who spoke about the war. But the end result, as you pointed out, were about 2,000 pages of documents, of interviews that had been kept under wraps for a number of years, in which people who were in charge of the war admitted that the strategy was a mess, that they misled the American public and that there were fundamental flaws with how the war was being fought for over 18 years. And that's what we finally brought to light.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In this clip from *The Washington Post* video released as part of "The Afghanistan Papers," you ask the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, John Sopko, about why the papers were not released earlier.

**JOHN SOPKO:** We don't have classifying authority.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Right.

**JOHN SOPKO:** So we have to send it back to — under FOIA, send it back to the agencies to review. And as a matter of fact, some of the material that I think may be in the Flynn review, but I know some of the interviews, was classified.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Of the 400 interviews that were released, only about 15, 16 of them had any classified information redacted.

**JOHN SOPKO:** Yeah, but we still have to review the information. We also have to then go through a whole process on it.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** But you weren’t trying to slow roll it?

**JOHN SOPKO:** No, no, no. No one’s asked us to slow roll it. And we wouldn’t slow roll it. I think of any inspector general, I’ve probably been the most forthcoming on information. We’re firm believers in openness and transparency, but we’ve got to follow the law.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, if you can explain the significance of who he is and what he was saying?

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Sure. So, this is John Sopko. He is the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction. He’s appointed by Congress. And his job, for the past more than a decade now, has been to investigate fraud, waste and abuse in the war zone, right? We’re spending billions and billions of dollars there, and his job is to report to Congress and the public when money is being wasted or spent inefficiently. He’s kind of like an auditor, if you will.

But his office, back in 2014, decided to do a side project. And this side project was called Lessons Learned, because the country assumed at that point, back in 2014, that the war was coming to an end. President Obama had said, "Combat operations are over," and he was going to pull out all U.S. troops by the end of his presidency in 2016. Well, that didn't happen. But these interviews that the inspector general had done with hundreds of people involved in the war were sitting on their computer files and in their offices in northern Virginia. And they started to do some public reports on these subjects, about lessons learned with mistakes made in Afghanistan. But what we found is that they left out the harshest commentary, the most strident criticism from these interviews that we did and which we published.

It's important to recognize that everything *The Washington Post* obtained was obtained legally, and it's public information. None of this was leaked to us. These are all public records. The public owns them. They have a right to see what they are. Yet it took the inspector general more than three years to release all this information to us. So when he says he wasn't trying to slow roll it, well, I think most people would take that with a big grain of salt. Over three years, many, many, many unaccountable number of people have died in Afghanistan. The United States has been spending billions and billions of more dollars. We certainly think that it would have helped to have this information come to light a long time ago.

**AMY GOODMAN:** On Capitol Hill in January, the top government watchdog for Afghanistan reconstruction told lawmakers that U.S. officials have routinely lied to the American public throughout the U.S.-led War in Afghanistan. Again, this is Special Inspector General John Sopko testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

**JOHN SOPKO:** The problem is, there's a disincentive, really, to tell the truth. ... And when we talk about mendacity, when we talk about lying, it's not just by lying about a particular program, it's lying by omissions, by saying, "Oh, I can't tell you about the casualties," or "I can't tell you about how good the Afghans [inaudible] weapons," or "I can't tell you this and that." Turns out that everything that's bad news has been classified over the last few years.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And this is Democratic Congressman Gerald Connolly of Virginia questioning the special inspector general, John Sopko, in January.

**REP. GERALD CONNOLLY:** Can you just give us some examples of hubris and especially mendacity?

**JOHN SOPKO:** Some of the statements made by AID about the great success on life expectancy, it was statistically impossible to double the life expectancy over the time given. I think it's a combination of hubris and mendacity that anybody can do that. I mean, the next thing you know is we're going to be walking on water on an AID program. The education, where we claimed millions of children were in school, and AID knew that the data was bad, but they still reported it, as if there was millions of children. Is that hubris? Is that mendacity? Probably a combination of both.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, if you can respond to what the inspector general, Sopko, said, Craig Whitlock? Explain what he is talking about with administration officials lying repeatedly.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Right. It's a little hard to keep track of. There's some irony here, right? So, here is the inspector general telling Congress that for years the federal government has lied about some very important measurements of how progress was being made, or lack of progress, in the Afghan War. Uses words like "mendacity" and "lies" and "hubris" and things like this. And, you know, that's all true. I agree with him on that, and our reporting backed that up. The irony is that the inspector general's own files, his own interviews that his agency conducted with people in the war, revealed this, revealed many more examples, and yet he suppressed them for three years, and we had to sue him twice to pry them loose. So, I think he's accurate in his description of the falsehoods and spin and lies and so forth, but why he tried to cover that up for so long, you know, honestly, I don't have a good answer for you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Craig, what most surprised you in all that you found? Talk also about the confusions that the presidents have around issues of who is al-Qaeda, who is Taliban, confusing the organizations.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Well, they're just — when you read these interviews, they're really raw. They're raw in the human emotion, in the frustrations, the exasperations, that are expressed by people who played varying roles in the war. And that's what was striking about it. Unlike most government reports, which are kind of dry and hard to get through, these are notes and



transcripts of interviews with real people who played roles in the war, again, from military commanders on down to people in the field to aid workers to people back in the White House. And the frustrations that come out are really striking.

You talk about the difficulty in identifying who we're fighting. There were a number of interviews with Army soldiers or mid-level commanders in the field who had expressed their frustration about even being able to identify who's the enemy. As they would put it, "Who were the bad guys? We went over there to try and fight and do our job, but nobody could tell us who the bad guys were. You know, who's the enemy in this war?" People couldn't really tell in the field. Then we also got documents from former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. He wrote hundreds of thousands of memos during his time in office. He's using the same language in his memos to senior people in the Pentagon. He would say, "I don't have any insight into who the bad guys are. We need better intelligence: Who are the bad guys?" So, when you're fighting a war and you can't even identify the enemy, most people would understand that you're kind of in big trouble at that point.

People have to understand, the reason we went to Afghanistan in 2001 was to fight al-Qaeda, to respond to the 9/11 attacks, to try and find Osama bin Laden. Within the first six months, by the spring of 2002, we had largely accomplished that goal. Al-Qaeda was virtually erased from Afghanistan. They had either been killed, captured or had fled, like bin Laden went to Pakistan. There were very few al-Qaeda foot soldiers left in Afghanistan. But in these interviews we obtained, person after person says, "That's when things started to go off the rails. That's when our mission got fuzzy. We had a hard time figuring out who the enemy was, what we were trying to accomplish, what the objectives were." So, since 2002, that's been very blurry. And that really explained a lot about why the war has gone on and on and on. Nobody was quite sure how to end it or what the objectives were.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You also show opium production in Afghanistan actually has gone up since the U.S. invasion, saying in your reporting, last year, quote, "Afghan farmers grew poppies — the plant from which opium is extracted to make heroin — on four times as much land as they did in 2002." Explain how that happened, Craig.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Well, that's a good question. This is another byproduct, a very negative byproduct, of the war, was Afghanistan is the largest producer of opium in the world. And this is different from laboratory-made opiates that we're having such trouble with in the United States right now. We're talking about opium that's used and grown in the fields to make heroin and morphine and drugs like that. The irony is, when the war started, there was very little opium production in Afghanistan, because the Taliban, in the year 2000, had issued a ban on growing

opium, that was actually largely successful. But after the war started and the Taliban was booted from power, opium production skyrocketed in Afghanistan, because this is a very profitable crop.

And the United States never quite figured out what to do about it. Was this part of the war strategy? Was this something the United States needed to do something about? That wasn't why we went to war, but it was obviously a big factor fueling corruption and illicit production in Afghanistan. The United States has spent over \$8 billion just trying to tackle the opium problem in Afghanistan since 2001. And yet, as you point out correctly, production of it has gone up by more than four times. The last few years there have been record harvests. So, again, this is — things have gotten worse in Afghanistan on this front, despite our presence and despite the spending of billions and billions of dollars there.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And finally, Craig, one of interviews talks about USAID officials saying, “We were just getting crazy amounts of money.” Over a trillion dollars was spent on the War in Afghanistan. But, of course, most important is the lives lost. But a trillion dollars, a lot of that money has gone missing. If you could comment on that? And then, finally, these most recent U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, you also show that through the years there were a number of opportunities for this to have taken place.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** That's right. You make a number of really important, critical points here. So, one thing people need to recall, to put this in perspective, the United States since 2001 has spent more money trying to rebuild or reconstruct Afghanistan, in development, in humanitarian aid, than it did in Europe with the Marshall Plan after World War II, and that's after you adjust for inflation. So that's the scope of what we've spent in Afghanistan trying to rebuild the country.

The first several years of the war, under the Bush administration, we actually didn't spend that much. And there was a lot of criticism in the Afghanistan papers that if the Bush administration had spent more, and spent more thoughtfully, trying to build up Afghanistan in the early years, it could have made a real difference. Then, by the time President Obama took power, the war wasn't going well. We sent 100,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan as part of a surge. And simultaneously, we spent billions and billions and billions of dollars in a really short amount of time trying to build up the Afghan government, as long as we had all the troops there. Now, in these interviews in the Afghanistan Papers, again, person after person complains that the spending was really mindless. One word that keeps popping up is the word “insane,” that they were just told to spend as much money as possible building schools, clinics, roads — anything to just make it look like they were doing something, and that, in retrospect, of course, it didn't

make any sense, and they don’t know whether any of it did any good. And this led to —

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is not to mention the money spent bombing the country at the same time.

**CRAIG WHITLOCK:** Well, exactly. And most people would say that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, right? We’re bombing the heck out of the country, but yet we’re spending all this money simultaneously trying to blow it up.

And this gets to your other point, which you brought up about the Taliban negotiations have been going on in recent months. There are a number of interviews in the Afghanistan Papers from people who say, you know, we had better opportunities to do this when we had more leverage, including as far back as 2002. There was a real opportunity, perhaps the best opportunity, to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban then, because it was largely defeated. It was out of power. It was on its heels. And that would have been the time, particularly when the Taliban was most interested in talking, that we could have cinched a peace deal in Afghanistan that may have at least minimized the need for us to be there. Instead, the war has gone on for year after year.

I think you have to remember, back in 2002, 2003, everybody thought we were victorious in Afghanistan. And militarily, we were, for the moment. So there was a real reluctance to negotiate with a defeated enemy. I think this gets back to one thing. We never really understood who we were fighting or why they were fighting us in Afghanistan, so we kind of thought the Taliban would disappear. But they’re so integrated in the fabric of society, that was a fundamental miscalculation. And here we are, 18 years later, trying to negotiate with them, when the Taliban is, frankly, stronger than ever, and so it’s been a much, much tougher proposition.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Craig Whitlock, we want to thank you for being with us, staff writer at *The Washington Post* who uncovered the Afghanistan Papers. We’ll link to this remarkable [exposé](#) at [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org).

