

MATTHEW SARGENT, JASON H. CAMPBELL, ALEXANDRA T. EVANS,
CAITLIN MCCULLOCH, JORDAN R. REIMER, RICHARD S. GIRVEN

Staying the Unfavorable Course

National Security Council Decisionmaking and the
Inertia of U.S. Afghanistan Policy, 2001–2016



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RR808-1.

About RAND

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. To learn more about RAND, visit www.rand.org.

Research Integrity

Our mission to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis is enabled through our core values of quality and objectivity and our unwavering commitment to the highest level of integrity and ethical behavior. To help ensure our research and analysis are rigorous, objective, and nonpartisan, we subject our research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoid both the appearance and reality of financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursue transparency in our research engagements through our commitment to the open publication of our research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. For more information, visit www.rand.org/about/research-integrity.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© 2023 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-1044-3

Cover: US State Department/Alamy Stock Photo.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This publication and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited; linking directly to its webpage on rand.org is encouraged. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research products for commercial purposes. For information on reprint and reuse permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

Foreword

This report was written as a retrospective analysis while the United States was still engaged in the war in Afghanistan. Its intent was to focus on the period from 2001 to 2016, assessing the decisionmaking during the pivotal years of the conflict, while avoiding the sensitivities involved with interviews with sitting policymakers during the Trump administration. However, while the manuscript was undergoing peer review, America announced and executed its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The groundwork for the withdrawal was laid in the Trump administration when, in February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, which included provisions for the U.S. withdrawal of all military forces from the country by May 1, 2021. The Afghan government had not been included in the negotiations and objected to portions of the settlement agreement. In November 2020, the United States announced the withdrawal of many of the remaining U.S. forces, completing the drawdown by January 2021. With the reduction of forces, the United States was not in the position to provide significant military support to Afghan forces, which began to lose ground to the Taliban. When President Biden took office, he continued the withdrawal, announcing in April 2021 that the United States would remove all of its forces by September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that had precipitated the conflict. The withdrawal was completed on August 31 when the last plane took off from the Kabul Airport, marking the end of 20 years of conflict.

Though U.S. officials were initially optimistic about the ability of the Afghan military to operate independently, its forces quickly gave way to the Taliban advance. By the time of the final U.S. troops' departure, the Taliban had already captured Kabul, giving the United States insufficient time to evacuate its Afghan supporters. In the months that followed, the Biden administration was widely criticized for the rapid collapse of the Afghan government, the chaotic U.S. departure, and the failure of the Taliban regime to abide by the terms of the peace agreement. At the moment, the cost of the U.S. withdrawal has largely been borne by Afghan civilians, and only time will tell what security consequences the withdrawal will have.

About This Report

From 2001 to 2021, the United States pursued an unchanging policy objective in Afghanistan: to prevent a terrorist group from using the country as a safe haven in which to plan or launch an attack on the United States. However, despite deteriorating conditions and no apparent hope of military victory, America's goals remained constant even as successive leaders experimented with different strategies to achieve them.

The authors examined the reasons behind this policy inertia through interviews with the senior leaders involved in the policy deliberations between 2001 and 2016. The intent was to interview the decisionmakers involved in high-level discussions and policy formulation to establish the institutional, informational, and interpersonal dynamics that informed major decisions; capture common interpretations and assumptions; and reconstruct how the deliberative process functioned in practice.

Funding

Funding for this research was made possible by the independent research and development provisions of RAND's contracts for the operation of its U.S. Department of Defense federally funded research and development centers.

Notice Regarding Interview Sources

The interview protocol used in this report has been reviewed by a Human Subject Protections (HSP) review board, and the protocols used are in accordance with the appropriate statutes and U.S. Department of Defense regulations governing HSP. As part of this protocol, the interviews have been anonymized to allow those interviewed to speak candidly.

The views of those interviewed are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. government, or any other group or agency. At

the time of each interview, the interview subjects were retired from public service and were speaking in a purely private capacity.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the time and generosity of the national security decisionmakers whom we interviewed for this project:

- **Gen John Allen**, Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)
- **Richard Armitage**, Deputy Secretary of State
- **Anthony Blinken**, Deputy Secretary of State; Deputy National Security Advisor
- **GEN Martin Dempsey**, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Chief of Staff of the Army; Acting Commander, Central Command (CENTCOM); Deputy Commander, CENTCOM
- **James Dobbins**, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
- **Jeff Eggers**, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs
- **Douglas Feith**, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
- **Michele Flournoy**, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy
- **Marc Grossman**, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
- **Stephen Hadley**, National Security Advisor
- **Chuck Hagel**, Secretary of Defense
- **Anthony Harriman**, National Security Council (NSC), Senior Director for Afghanistan
- **Colin Kahl**, National Security Advisor to the Vice President
- **Stephen Kappes**, Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency
- **LTG Douglas Lute**, Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan; Director of Operations, CENTCOM
- **GEN Stanley McChrystal**, Commander, ISAF; Commander, United States Forces–Afghanistan
- **Carmen Medina**, Deputy Director of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency
- **James Miller**, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

- **Laurel Miller**, Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
- **Lisa Monaco**, Homeland Security Advisor
- **Richard Olson**, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
- **Jake Sullivan**, National Security Advisor to the Vice President
- **Robert Williams**, National Intelligence Officer for South Asia
- **Adm James Winnefeld**, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
- **Christine Wormuth**, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy

Additionally, we interviewed four members of the Intelligence Community who asked not to be identified.

Note: The positions listed above have been edited to focus only on those that were closely related to NSC policymaking in Afghanistan and include only those held in 2016 or before.

This project owes a particular debt of thanks to Laurel Miller, who conceived of the project when she returned to RAND after her service as acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Her insights into the debates and policy issues relating to the ongoing war in Afghanistan guided the project at its inception, and she conducted many of the early interviews. After leaving RAND to take the position of Asia Program Director for the International Crisis Group, additional interviews, the analysis, and writing were conducted without her involvement.

As the project was taking shape, early discussions with Professors Philip Tetlock (University of Pennsylvania) and Paul Adler (University of Southern California) provided many valuable insights and suggestions that improved the project. Later, feedback from our reviewers, Ambassador James Dobbins and an external expert, was immensely helpful in clarifying and improving our arguments. The advice and support of numerous RAND colleagues, including Howard Shatz, Lisa Jaycox, David Johnson, and Michael Spirtas, was invaluable, as was the editing and publication assistance provided by Nora Spiering and Beth Bernstein.

Summary

This report examines the question of how policymakers conduct national security decisionmaking when their policies are not achieving their intended results. This was clearly the case in Afghanistan, where, despite 20 years of effort and the deaths of more than 2,000 U.S. military personnel, the results of America's intervention and stabilization efforts were widely viewed as unsatisfactory.¹

The authors explore the reasons behind this policy inertia through interviews with the senior leaders involved in the policy deliberations between 2001 and 2016. Rather than assessing the efficacy of specific policies or the merit of particular strategic choices, we examined the psychological, institutional, and organizational factors that shaped the space of decisions that were seriously considered. The net effect of these factors was that, as America's experience in Afghanistan has demonstrated, decisions for how to navigate de-escalation from a conflict under conditions short of victory are tremendously difficult both practically and politically.

The expanding, open-ended mission in Afghanistan led America into a policy trap in which victory, at least in the traditional sense, was seemingly impossible to achieve. The absence of a functioning civil society and an entrenched enemy that could rely on safe havens in Pakistan for support created a situation in which America's Islamicist foes were resilient in the face of U.S. attacks and where Afghan institutions were not sufficiently developed to deal with them on their own. At the same time, however, withdrawal was not politically or psychologically palatable. As Chapter Three describes, the symbolic role of Afghanistan as the site where the nation would strike back against the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks and the uncertain results of U.S. withdrawal ensured that neither the George W. Bush administration nor the Obama administration could withdraw until some semblance of "mission accomplished" could be plausibly declared. The war's symbolic associations with 9/11 and the framing of Afghanistan as America's "good war" made withdrawal politically difficult and magni-

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Casualty Status," September 28, 2020.

fied policymakers' loss aversion. Moreover, early decisions, such as lumping together the Taliban and al Qaeda, precluded a political settlement in the early years of the conflict that might have made a negotiated peace attainable. American policymakers in Afghanistan had painted themselves into a corner; this was a scenario in which the United States could lose but not win.

As policymakers wrestled with how to respond to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the bureaucracy and decisionmaking processes of the Executive Branch shaped the range of policy options considered. As Chapter Four describes, the urgent crisis in Iraq that would command the bulk of the Bush administration's attention after 2003 was perhaps unavoidable. Yet the lack of institutional safeguards to ensure that time and resources were reserved for monitoring the situation in Afghanistan meant that basic assumptions were not questioned, early signs of the Taliban's resurgence were overlooked, and potential correctives were not formulated. Even as the security situation deteriorated over 2006 and 2007, there was little pressure to carve out space to review American policy. Institutional innovations, such as the creation of the war czar position, aided the administration's effort to design and execute a new strategy in Iraq. Similar efforts to dedicate resources to Afghanistan would have signaled the issue's importance, provided a mechanism to collect and coordinate information, and perhaps encouraged the articulation of new options.

The Obama administration recognized the need to institutionalize the deliberative process and construct multiple avenues for the collection, analysis, and deconfliction of information. Yet its highly centralized system was as likely to frustrate as to empower its participants. Intended to encourage a comprehensive debate, the system lagged behind the pace of events, leading to accusations that decisions made in Washington were no longer relevant to commanders, aid workers, and diplomats in Afghanistan. Built to promote inclusivity and diverse thinking, it instead overburdened cabinet officials and their staff and watered down their deliberations. Put simply, the Obama administration's procedures provided a platform that enabled new ideas to be voiced but drained decisionmakers' motivation to change course when opportunities arose. By Obama's second term, however, the President and his administration had resolved to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and stood firm in this resolve in the face of opposition from the other agencies. The rise of the Islamic State undercut these efforts, however,

and the administration settled on a dramatic drawdown as the best strategic alternative.

An added difficulty that impacted policymaking was the tension and mistrust that characterized civil-military relations during the period of our study. The friction present under President Bush worsened under President Obama and was rooted both in incidents that put pressure on the leaders involved and in the very nature of the warfare itself. As Chapter Five describes, Afghanistan was a lengthy conflict with uncertain metrics for success and a new focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare and nation-building. These factors forced the military into areas well beyond its traditional expertise and resulted in significant civilian involvement in the military's strategy and resourcing. Simultaneously, deference toward the military had increased in America since its Vietnam-era nadir, and, as a result, the military felt that it was the stakeholder with the most to lose, both reputationally and in the sense of the very real threat to service members' lives. As a result, the military carefully controlled the options that were presented to civilian leaders and often, from the civilians' perspectives, seemed to box decisionmakers into a narrow set of options.

In the end, however, when the Obama administration was seriously considering a major policy change based on a rapid drawdown of forces and eventual withdrawal, the resistance to the new policy did not fall along civil-military lines. Rather, the division in 2014 was between the White House and the agencies. While the White House was forcefully promoting its new agenda, the State Department, the Intelligence Community (IC), and the Pentagon were relatively united in the desire for a more conservative policy that kept U.S. troops on the ground. Thus, although the civil-military divide caused frictions in the policymaking and strategic planning processes, it did not fundamentally inhibit the implementation of a new strategic vision.

Finally, interviews with members of the IC revealed that many felt that there were fundamental limitations in the U.S. strategy that were either ignored or overlooked that hampered prospects for success from the outset. As Chapter Six describes, there were organizational factors that further limited a candid discussion of the strategic failures facing America in Afghanistan. Faced with such issues as a perceived U.S. duplicity when it came to counter Corruption because it supported leaders deeply involved in bribery scandals while decrying corruption, interviewees acknowledged that they

had been reluctant to more loudly raise alarms. As one leader recalled, “I never said anything at the time. A point of bureaucratic politics is that once you obtain a seat at the decisionmaking table, you don’t say anything that’s going to get you kicked off that table.” This raises the question of how many other senior officials discussing Afghanistan policy over nearly two decades were aware of similar issues tied to core constraints and also chose not to raise them for fear of losing clout.

The conclusion, Chapter Seven, assesses these reasons for policy inertia and provides suggestions for mitigating these issues in future conflicts. As was the case following America’s withdrawal from Vietnam, some might take the lesson that America should avoid future conflicts of this type.² The reality, however, is that policymakers are likely to have to make decisions regarding future COIN operations like those in Afghanistan, and, just as the military refined its doctrine for engaging in these types of conflicts, senior policymakers should learn from the experience as well.

Chapter Seven summarizes the findings of the previous chapters and argues that one determinant of responsive policymaking is shared definitions of success. As our interviewees noted, Afghanistan was organized around open-ended, ongoing goals that made it difficult to know when success had been achieved or, indeed, what it would even look like. Although a former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked that there was “unanimous understanding about what the primary objectives were in Afghanistan, essentially to turn this place into somewhere from which we are not again attacked,” a former International Security Assistance Force commander described the uncertainty regarding the means to this end: “Was there a clear consensus on what success looked like? I think the answer is clearly no.” The absence of clear, achievable metrics for success led to strategic scope creep as decisionmakers sought a strategy that would secure a positive outcome.

In addition, although broad policy goals, such as preventing future attacks, are not inherently bad, American policymakers should be particularly reticent to commit to ongoing “unwinnable” courses of action. As the opening sentence of a strategic review of Afghanistan delivered to President

² This policy is known as the Weinberger Doctrine.

Bush in 2008 made clear: “The United States is not losing in Afghanistan, but it is not winning either, and that is not good enough.”³ The result in Afghanistan was an escalation of the mission from what was essentially a counterterrorism campaign to an expansive COIN operation whose success was predicated on the (re)creation of a functioning civil society. One of the main attractions of the COIN paradigm for policymakers was that it promised a means for victory by envisioning an end state in which American troops could withdraw after having accomplished their mission. American strategic planners should be willing to accept objectives that accomplish the least bad outcome that accords with strategic objectives, rather than laudable but difficult-to-attain goals, such as nation-building and social reform.

During the course of the war in Afghanistan, policies and strategic objectives were difficult to adjust because of bureaucratic inertia and the related momentum of the existing mission. Once the United States had committed to state-building, scaling back objectives and realigning policies to address less expansive strategic aims proved difficult. After being set in motion, the early policy decisions that framed the United States’ policy goals in expansive terms were difficult to walk back, and, having framed the Taliban as a terrorist enemy, a negotiated settlement was difficult to achieve. As a senior civilian advisor observed, once the Taliban had been painted as the enemy, it was particularly difficult to reset the pieces and to shift policy to include the Taliban as potential partners in peace. One issue, they speculated, was the following: “It seems to me that when you go to war and you’re about killing people, there’s a necessity to painting the enemy in a very black-and-white and definitive manner.” A former military commander described a similar dynamic that made it difficult to end the conflict, particularly given its emotional and psychological ties to the September 11 attacks. As they explained, “There is the notion of if you’re going to ask me to go kill this guy, [the adversary] can’t be okay later—and, by the way, I lost my colleagues in the process, right?” They continued, “It can’t be that at some point we’re just going to not do it anymore. We need an end. . . . We sort of need that period at the end of the chapter in order to justify what it costs.”

³ Steve Coll, “We Can’t Win in Afghanistan Because We Don’t Know Why We’re There,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2018b.

An additional conservative force that shaped policy was limited bureaucratic bandwidth. As one military commander described, when Afghanistan became an economy-of-force operation after the invasion of Iraq, decisionmaking “reverted to bureaucratic behavior.” In his assessment, “as attention is diverted because of other policy initiatives, whether it’s Iraq or the economy, right, Afghanistan gets left to the bureaucracies.” The result, he explained, was that “we diverted our attention” and “just bumbled along like bureaucracies do.”

Overcoming these issues requires strong leadership. When inheriting an ongoing operation that has ill-defined goals, one central function of senior policymakers should be to bring clarity to the issue. As the body of this report describes, this can be difficult for a number of political and practical reasons. In such cases, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski observed, “My view has been throughout that difficult problems are best tackled soon rather than later.” His advice to policymakers stressed the importance of clarifying the goals of the mission: “What exactly is the threat that needs to be averted, and are there other ways of averting it?”⁴

In addition, American strategic planners should be willing to accept objectives that accomplish the least bad outcome that accords with strategic objectives, rather than laudable but difficult-to-attain goals, such as nation-building and social reform. As a senior official in the Bush administration remarked, “Someone’s got to stand up and say, ‘Screw it, enough’s enough.’”

⁴ Daniel Dombey, “President Procrastinator,” *Financial Times*, September 7, 2009.

Contents

Foreword	iii
About This Report	v
Summary	ix
Figures	xvii

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction	1
The Question: How to Explain Policy Stasis	3
A Road Map to the Report	5

CHAPTER TWO

The U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001–2016: A Brief Overview	7
Going In	7
Stasis	13
Rising Tensions	15
The Long Drawdown	20
Explaining Policy Stasis	26

CHAPTER THREE

The Memory of 9/11 and the Psychology of Decisionmaking in Afghanistan	31
Sacred Values: A Special Kind of War	33
A Symbolic Campaign and Sacred Values	34
Ongoing Impact	37
Risk Aversion	38
An Open-Ended Mission	41
Locked into Expansive Goals	43
Bureaucratic Inertia	46
Sunk Costs	48
Escalation of Commitment	50

CHAPTER FOUR

Bureaucratic Dynamics and the Structure of the Policy Process	55
The Bush Administration, 2001–2002	58

The Bush Administration, 2002–2008	62
The Obama Administration, 2009–2010.....	68
The Obama Administration, 2010–2016.....	72
Conclusion	76
 CHAPTER FIVE	
Civil-Military Relations	79
What Was the Nature of the Mistrust?.....	81
Were These Tensions Inevitable?.....	87
The Role of Data and Assessment.....	91
Conclusions.....	96
 CHAPTER SIX	
The Role of the Intelligence Community in the Policy Process	99
A Brief History of the Intelligence Community’s Role in Afghanistan..	101
New Demands in a New Administration	110
Searching for Strategic Alternatives.....	114
Conclusions.....	122
 CHAPTER SEVEN	
Conclusions	125
Create Shared Definitions of Success.....	127
Accept Conditions Less Than Victory That Achieve Policy Aims	129
Manage Bureaucratic Inertia and Momentum of the Mission.....	131
Overcome Limited Bureaucratic Bandwidth.....	134
Control Risk Aversion.....	136
Develop Shared Intelligence Assessments	138
 Abbreviations	141
Bibliography	143

Figures

- 2.1. Troop Levels in Afghanistan 18
- 2.2. U.S. and Coalition Fatalities in Afghanistan 21
- 2.3. U.S. Spending in Afghanistan 22

Introduction

During 20 years of military engagement in Afghanistan, America's stated policy goals remained unchanged even as the global strategic landscape changed dramatically. From 2001 to 2021, the United States pursued the same policy objective in Afghanistan: to prevent a terrorist group from using the country as a safe haven in which to plan or launch an attack on the United States. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 transformed the power structure of the Middle East and became the principle front for its "global war on terror." A decade later, the Arab Spring destabilized many of the regimes in the Middle East, causing ongoing civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. This destabilization created a fertile ground for the Islamic State to make extensive territorial gains in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Meanwhile, the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia led American strategy to shift its investment focus on force posture toward peer adversaries.

Through all of this, America maintained the goal that Afghanistan would never again be used as a base from which terrorists could attack the United States or its allies. This goal has had a significant cost. As of 2019, 775,000 U.S. service members had deployed to Afghanistan at least once, resulting in 2,400 deaths and more than 20,000 wounded.¹ Funding for military operations and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reconstruction grants totaled \$975 billion.² Why, then, did U.S. policy toward Afghanistan change so little, even as the war became America's longest conflict? Why did the United States never reduce or substan-

¹ Dan Lamothe, "How 775,000 U.S. Troops Fought in One War: Afghanistan Military Deployments by the Numbers," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2019.

² Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated," Costs of War Project, November 14, 2018.

tially redefine its policy aims in the country—particularly when the success of the open-ended policy seemed to hinge on the creation of a functioning civil society in one of the poorest countries in the world, whose political and social intuitions were largely tribal and whose institutions had been repeatedly attacked and undermined since the Soviet invasion of 1980?

This report's focus is on the deliberative patterns and organizational dynamics that shaped policy decisions; the authors do not assess the chosen strategy's efficacy or its consequences for the people of Afghanistan. Indeed, there already exists a large and growing body of scholarship evaluating U.S. strategy, its execution, and alternative approaches, including detailed reports by RAND Corporation researchers.³ But the persistence of this contradiction at the heart of U.S. policy in Afghanistan—the prolonged adherence to the status quo approach despite a general consensus that current

³ For samples of the breadth and scope of RAND's published research on Afghanistan, see Laurel E. Miller and Jonathan S. Blake, *Envisioning a Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2937, 2019; Daniel Egel, Charles P. Ries, Ben Connable, Todd C. Helmus, Eric Robinson, Isaac Baruffi, Melissa A. Bradley, Kurt Card, Kathleen Loa, Sean Mann, Fernando Sedano, Stephan B. Seabrook, and Robert Stewart, *Investing in the Fight: Assessing the Use of the Commander's Emergency Response Program in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1508-OSD, 2016; Victoria A. Greenfield, Keith Crane, Craig A. Bond, Nathan Chandler, Jill E. Luoto, and Olga Oliker, *Reducing the Cultivation of Opium Poppies in Southern Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1075-DOS, 2015; Colin P. Clarke and Christopher Paul, *From Stalemate to Settlement: Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved Through Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-469-OSD, 2014; Ben Connable, Walter L. Perry, Abby Doll, Natasha Lander, and Dan Madden, *Modeling, Simulation, and Operations Analysis in Afghanistan and Iraq: Operational Vignettes, Lessons Learned, and a Survey of Selected Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-382-OSD, 2014; Arturo Munoz, *U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001–2010*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1060-MCIA, 2012; Seth Jones and Arturo Munoz, *Afghanistan's Local War: Building Local Defense Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1002-MCIA, 2010; Andrew R. Hoehn and Sarah Harting, *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-974-AF, 2010; Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Volume 4*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-595-OSD, 2008; and Cheryl Benard, Kristen Cordell, and Olga Oliker, *Women and Human Security: The Case of Post Conflict Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RP-1291, 2007.

efforts were not producing the desired results—deserves special consideration if policymakers are to better understand the nature of American calculations and the feasibility of alternative paths forward. By delving into the factors that constrained American policy toward Afghanistan, the authors might also shed light on the broader question of why governments adhere to foreign policies even when they have failed to produce the desired result.

The Question: How to Explain Policy Stasis

The length of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan makes the rigidity in U.S. policy all the more remarkable. Between 2001 and 2016, the United States held four presidential and eight congressional elections, elected three presidents with starkly different views of Afghanistan, and witnessed regular circulations of the senior civilian and military personnel responsible for the war's planning, oversight, and execution. The intensity of the violence in the country has ebbed and flowed over time, as has public and congressional interest. All the while, the nature of the threats to U.S. interests have evolved as new factions are formed and the strategy and tactics of the insurgency adapt. Since the war began, every major presidential candidate has pledged to revise U.S. policy, and yet none managed to dislodge American policy from the set path until 2021.

What, then, explains this inertia? This report seeks to identify the elements that reinforced the status quo and discouraged substantial revisions to U.S. policy over the war's first 16 years. Beginning in 2018, RAND researchers conducted a series of interviews with senior policymakers, intelligence officials, and military commanders designed to assess how those formulating, assessing, or implementing U.S. policy understood the course of the war. The intent was to interview the decisionmakers involved in high-level discussions and policy formulation to establish the institutional, informational, and interpersonal dynamics that informed major decisions; capture common interpretations and assumptions; and reconstruct how the deliberative process functioned in practice. Between June 2018 and February 2020, we therefore interviewed 25 former senior officials who participated in National Security Council (NSC) discussions, NSC Principals Committee (the Cabinet-level senior interagency forum for discussion of

national security policy issues) discussions, and NSC Deputies Committee (a forum composed of the principals' relevant senior aides) discussions under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidential administrations. With the exception of interviews with four former members of the Intelligence Community (IC), all interviews were conducted in person and lasted between one and two hours. To ensure that we could have candid discussions, we agreed not to identify the interviewees by name in the report. A list of participants' names and the positions they held is in the acknowledgments section. Interviews were not conducted with officeholders in the Trump administration because of sensitivities involving interviews with sitting policymakers. The report was envisioned as a retrospective analysis, and its contents were therefore not significantly updated when America's withdrawal was announced in 2021.

Rather than produce a narrative account of U.S. policy over time (the Pentagon Papers genre), our report seeks to identify the underlying factors that shaped the policymaking process. Our intent is to investigate how participants understood their options and identify the factors that contributed to the stasis in American policy. We therefore draw upon the transdisciplinary literature on organizational behavior, human decisionmaking, strategic planning, and military interventions to contextualize individual testimony and test the utility of existing explanatory frameworks from the social science and historical literature. In particular, we concentrated on four common explanations for policy outcomes: the civil-military balance, bureaucratic dynamics and the structure of the policy process, cognitive framing and risk aversion, and the role of intelligence. Together, these four frameworks encompass both structural- and human-level explanations.

Two caveats are required. First, this report is not a comprehensive history of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan since 2001. It owes a debt to several journalistic and academic accounts of the war, which illuminated phases or facets of the conflict in depth.⁴ Nonetheless, a full and public accounting of the military effort is not feasible until a greater proportion of U.S. and coalition partners' governmental records are declassified. For a similar reason, the infeasibility of conducting unclassified but substantive interviews with

⁴ Citations to the various secondary accounts are referenced in the subsequent chapters.

participants in sensitive ongoing deliberations resulted in a decision to end the time frame covered by the report in January 2017 with President Donald Trump's inauguration. Second, the authors do not attempt to evaluate the efficacy of U.S. strategy, to offer specific explanations for why individual policies failed to fulfill their stated purposes, or to formulate alternative strategies for achieving the United States' aims in Afghanistan.

Through close examination of the patterns of U.S. decisionmaking, this report reveals the role of individual and institutional factors in shaping decisionmaking and circumscribing the policy options considered. It demonstrates how these factors inform decisionmakers' efforts to translate information into action and highlights how cognitive, bureaucratic, and interpersonal dynamics can privilege certain policy outcomes over others. By explaining the pattern of U.S. strategy, this report contributes to understanding of why governments maintain ineffective policies and suggests lessons for improving the design of national security decisionmaking processes and institutions.

A Road Map to the Report

The report is structured as follows. Chapter Two briefly summarizes the history of the war in Afghanistan, using interviews to highlight the factors and attitudes that informed the policy choices and encouraged stasis. Chapter Three analyzes the role of psychological and cognitive factors in decisionmaking. In particular, it explores the ways in which the memory of the September 11 attacks increased the scope of the war and expanded its mission while other factors, such as risk aversion and the desire to redeem sunk costs, led to a continued commitment. Chapter Four analyzes the bureaucratic dynamics and the policy processes within the Bush and Obama administrations to understand the ways that these may have shaped policymaking. Chapter Five details the role of the IC, the ways in which its mission and tasking changed over the years, and how this, in turn, impacted policymaking. Chapter Six details civil-military tensions during the period and describes how these impeded policymaking. The conclusion (Chapter Seven) summarizes the findings and offers preliminary suggestions for how these pitfalls and frictions could be avoided in the future.

The U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001–2016: A Brief Overview

“The ‘war of necessity’ to punish and root out those responsible for 9/11 had become an albatross around the nation’s neck.”

—Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates¹

“We’ve asked our military to take on things and accomplish things that they’re not capable of accomplishing.”

—Interview, senior policymaker, 2019

Going In

On September 14, 2001, as rescue crews continued to scour the debris at Ground Zero, President George W. Bush climbed to the altar of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., to address a crowd of mourners gathered for a remembrance service for those missing or killed in the terrorist attacks three days prior. “Our country was attacked with deliberate and massive cruelty,” he said, acknowledging that the list of casualties would grow in the days ahead. “Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history,” he added. “But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”²

¹ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 571.

² George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York: Random House, 2010, pp. 146–147.

Behind the scenes, preparations to retaliate against the organizers of the 9/11 attacks were already underway. Attention focused quickly on Afghanistan, where the Islamist Taliban regime had allowed al Qaeda to establish the core of its enterprise since 1996.³ “If you harbor a terrorist, you’ll be treated like a terrorist,” explained one former senior official, summarizing the prevailing sentiment in the White House at the time. “Secondly . . . we’re going to take the fight to the terrorists abroad, so we do not have to fight them at home.” “Those sound like slogans,” he explained, “but, in fact, they defined the policy.” Determined to avert further attacks on American soil, and under mounting personal and political pressure to retaliate, President Bush issued an ultimatum to the Taliban regime during a September 20 address before a joint session of Congress. Noting that the Taliban had granted al Qaeda a haven to train and plan overseas attacks, Bush issued five demands, including delivery of the group’s leadership to U.S. authorities, the closing of every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and the release of all foreign nationals held in the country.⁴ The Taliban did not comply, and the President subsequently secured congressional authorization to “use all necessary and appropriate forces against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.”⁵

Meanwhile, Bush approved a plan for a two-phased light footprint operation, in which Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) teams would bolster and prepare the fractious Northern Alliance for the arrival of U.S. and coalition special operations forces, which would then direct and coordinate a massive air campaign against Taliban and al Qaeda positions. By facilitating a

³ On al Qaeda’s ties to Afghanistan, see National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2004, pp. 62–68.

⁴ George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11,” *The American Presidency Project*, September 20, 2001.

⁵ “Authorizing Use of United States Armed Forces Against Those Responsible for Recent Attacks Against the United States,” Congressional Record, September 14, 2001, p. H5638.

Northern Alliance offensive, the United States might tilt the political balance in Afghanistan, encourage the overthrow of the Taliban, and either capture or kill bin Laden and his deputies. “Our footprint had to be small for military and geopolitical reasons,” Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Tommy Franks later explained.⁶ One benefit of the plan was that it could be executed quickly. Perhaps more importantly, senior officials also envisioned that it would allow the administration to avoid engaging in either “Clintonian nation-building” or the type of prolonged and costly war of occupation that infamously had entrapped the Soviet Red Army two decades earlier.⁷ “The goal was very clear,” a senior Bush administration official recalled: “Get al Qaeda originally. And get out of there, because Bush himself said we’re not going to nation-build.”

In late September 2001, a small CIA team, designated Operation Jawbreaker, landed in Afghanistan to make contact with fighters from the Northern Alliance, a disparate Afghan militia front that sought to topple the Taliban regime.⁸ The CIA team’s arrival marked the first phase of the administration’s strategy to topple the Taliban regime, destroy al Qaeda training camps and bases, capture or kill terrorists in the country, and deny the organization the safe haven needed to plot future attacks against the United States.⁹ Two weeks later, on October 7, the bombing campaign against the Taliban began. Backed by extensive U.S. air support, U.S. and Afghan forces conquered the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif on November 10, followed by Taloqan (November 11), Bamiyan (November 11), Herat (November 12), Kabul (November 13), Jalalabad (November 14), and Kunduz (November 26). On December 5–6, barely two months after the war had

⁶ Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 324.

⁷ Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011, pp. 65–66; Aaron B. O’Connell, “The Lessons and Legacies of the War in Afghanistan,” in Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: University Press, 2015, p. 309.

⁸ On this covert campaign, see Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaida*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2005.

⁹ George W. Bush, “Presidential Address to the Nation,” Washington, D.C.: White House, October 7, 2001.

begun, the United States and its partners captured Kandahar, a southern city in the province of the same name, completing the overthrow of the Taliban regime.¹⁰ By the year's end, approximately 15,000 Afghan forces affiliated with the Northern Alliance, 350 U.S. special operations forces, and 100 CIA officers had defeated a Taliban army of 50,000–60,000 forces and killed or captured a substantial proportion of al Qaeda fighters in the country.¹¹

The speed of the Taliban's collapse exceeded planners' expectations and appeared to vindicate the administration's light-footprint strategy, but officials disagreed over what to do next. One camp, represented by Secretary of State Colin Powell, Special Envoy James Dobbins, and Zalmay Khalilzad, advocated for the creation of a U.S. peacekeeping force, arguing, in Dobbins' words, that it was "naïve and irresponsible" to presume that the Afghans could secure and rebuild alone after decades of civil conflict.¹² Their proposal had support from the Afghans, the British, and other vital partners, but it confronted resistance from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, General Franks, and other military officials who opposed committing the United States to Afghan reconstruction.¹³ "Nation-building is not our key strategic goal," one senior defense official wrote Rumsfeld in late 2001, warning that past peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo had required the long-term commitments that the defense secretary sought to avoid.¹⁴

The administration's solution, devised in a principals-only meeting in early February 2002, was that the American forces in Afghanistan, at that

¹⁰ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-166-1-CENTAF, 2006; Walter L. Perry and David Kassing, *Toppling the Taliban: Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, October 2001–June 2002*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-381-A, 2015.

¹¹ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, p. xxii; Conrad C. Crane, "Military Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq: Learning and Adapting Under Fire at Home and in the Field," in Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: University Press, 2015, pp. 127–128.

¹² Jones, 2009, p. 110.

¹³ Jones, 2009, pp. 112–114.

¹⁴ Peter L. Bergman, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011, p. 179.

point numbering fewer than 10,000, would diffuse conflicts between the warlords; the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would remain focused on Kabul; and peacekeeping would be left to the Afghan government, in spite of the fact that it had no standing police force or military.¹⁵ Despite the initial reluctance to engage in nation building, in April 2002, President Bush pledged the United States' commitment to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Citing the "best traditions of George Marshall," he declared that the United States is "not content with military victory alone" and that peace would be achieved by "helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government," "train and develop its own national army," and erect an "education system for boys and girls."¹⁶ This vision continued to expand, and in 2004 the administration declared that its goal for Afghanistan was to "help the Afghan people build a responsible, self-sustaining market democracy that will never again harbor terrorists."¹⁷ The issue, one official explained, was that "even if you had a relatively limited definition of what we were trying to achieve, it still often evolved into an expansive remedy for how to achieve it." The result, as he recalled, was that:

a limited mission . . . nonetheless morphed in different people's minds into a much broader solution set. That, I thought, was the perennial problem . . . even if our mission was just focused on al Qaeda, the argument was, well, you can't really deal with al Qaeda in a sustainable way without dealing with the Taliban; you can't deal with the Taliban in a sustainable way without dealing with Afghanistan at large. That gets you into a much broader nation-building exercise than I think even people who wound up arguing for that really wanted.

This expansion in the scope of the U.S. mission was a logical response to the reality of the situation in Afghanistan, where endemic poverty, poor gov-

¹⁵ James F. Dobbins, *Foreign Service: Five Decades on the Front Lines of American Diplomacy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2017, p. 256.

¹⁶ George W. Bush, "Remarks at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia," April 17, 2002.

¹⁷ William Taylor, "Afghanistan Stabilization and Reconstruction: A Status Report," testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 27, 2004.

ernance, and insecurity had created the ideal conditions for radicalization. If the United States sought to ensure that the country would never again become an extremist safe haven, it therefore had to “help Afghans build a more free and democratic society, and to give concrete expression to an alternative vision to that of the terrorists, as a way to cut back on the recruitment,” one official explained. “So that’s what we thought we were doing on the security side” in the years following the invasion. “We were trying to help build responsive political institutions, but also to help economically, so you could create jobs” and “to help build a society based on popular will and freedom, which involved women’s education and to empower men and women and all the other things that come with that.”

The irony was that the same reasoning that had motivated the Bush administration’s decision to intervene in Afghanistan now led the President and his military advisors to embrace an open-ended mission that sounded strikingly like the nation-building operations they had sought initially to avoid. “We are now trying to build a free, democratic, and prosperous society in one of the poorest—I think it was in the fourth-poorest country in the world, that has lots of untapped resources and almost nothing by way of human resources,” one civilian official lamented, adding, “That’s what we were doing, and that’s a tall order.” Rather than lend clarity, the expansion in U.S. objectives also introduced new uncertainty over how best to achieve the expansive set of aims. The issue, as another senior policymaker described, was that “even relative clarity in the objective didn’t actually necessarily give you clarity in the mission, because there was just an ongoing argument about what was required to achieve the objective.”

U.S. planners would debate various alternate paths in the years ahead, but American policy remained stubbornly wed to this policy goal. As the level of violence in the country ebbed and flowed, and as senior personnel filtered in and out of office, successive U.S. administrations would struggle with the question of how to achieve the policy goal. The U.S. mission was enduring, and its goal was clearly defined. As a senior military leader remarked, there was “unanimous understanding about what the primary objectives were in Afghanistan—essentially to turn this place into somewhere from which we are not again attacked.” How long it would take, however, remained an open question. “Never again,” one senior official remarked, was “a very important line, because that leads us to forever.”

Stasis

At first, Afghanistan's political progress encouraged optimism. As coalition forces swept the remnants of the Taliban across the country, United Nations representatives convened in Bonn, Germany, in early December 2001 to establish an interim government and outline a timetable for the formation of a representative government. The resulting Bonn Agreement, signed on December 5, called for what became the ISAF and led the United Nations and its member states to a broad set of nation-building objectives, including to facilitate national elections and to "promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country."¹⁸ In June 2002, an Afghan Ioya jirga (grand council) chose Hamid Karzai to lead the transitional government. Karzai was a veteran of the Afghan National Liberation Front and a senior figure in the Popalzai tribe of the Durrani Pash-tuns, who had been selected in Bonn the previous year to chair the interim administration. In January 2004, the transitional government approved a new constitution, and presidential and parliamentary elections followed in October 2004 and September 2005, respectively. The results appeared to confirm broad popular support for the new government and reinforced the Bush administration's decision to maintain a limited but open-ended presence.

Beneath the surface, destabilizing forces were gaining strength. Hundreds of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters had evaded capture and fled to Pakistan over the war's early months, where they were offered safe haven and covert support.¹⁹ The Taliban leadership regrouped under a new leadership council, the Quetta Shura, and continued training and recruiting fighters for an offensive into Afghanistan. From safe havens and staging grounds in Pakistan, Taliban cadres flowed across the porous border to execute suicide attacks and roadside bombings and challenge U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops' control of previously liberated southern provinces. The incipient Afghan government was unready to respond to

¹⁸ United Nations Security Council, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," December 5, 2001.

¹⁹ Crane, 2015, p. 128.

the mounting crisis. High desertion rates and poor morale hampered efforts to train a new Afghan army, while British-led counternarcotic efforts struggled to manage a bumper crop of opium poppies, which fueled the regional drug trade and sustained the Taliban's operations. By the summer of 2004, the security situation in Afghanistan had so deteriorated that Médecins sans Frontiers withdrew its personnel from the country, citing safety concerns.²⁰

The danger signs were disregarded in Washington, where policymakers' attention, along with scarce intelligence and reconstruction resources, had been redirected toward the war in Iraq.²¹ The administration unveiled a "Marshall Plan" to accelerate rebuilding, including the use of provincial reconstruction teams to build schools, roads, and wells, but funding stalled at an average of \$3.4 billion a year between 2002 and 2007, or less than half the amount spent in Iraq.²² The number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan climbed from 8,000 personnel in 2002 to more than 20,000 in 2006, but the administration continued to emphasize the importance of keeping force levels low, occasionally raising proposals to reduce the U.S. commitment to as little as 3,000 forces.²³ Overall, the White House was willing to maintain the current approach indefinitely. "After 2003 and 2004 . . . I can't remember us ever saying, 'Should we still be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?'" Nicholas Burns, a career U.S. diplomat, later told government interviewers.²⁴ Looking back on the issue, a civilian advisor observed, "it seems to me that throughout . . . the goals were articulated as verbs. It was to stabilize, or the prevention—ongoing actions. . . . you could never quite

²⁰ David Rohde and David E. Sanger, "How a 'Good War' in Afghanistan Went Bad," *New York Times*, August 12, 2007; Carter Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad: America's Slow-Motion Failure in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2020.

²¹ For more on the relative under-resourcing of the war in Afghanistan compared with the effort in Iraq, see Jones, 2009, pp. 127–129.

²² Rohde and Sanger, 2007.

²³ Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009, p. 9.

²⁴ Craig Whitlock, "Stranded Without a Strategy," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019c.

measure progress, because it's the progress of a process that arguably . . . doesn't have defined end points to it."

Rising Tensions

A potential turning point arrived in the spring of 2006, when the Taliban carried out its largest offensive since 2001. The number of suicide attacks in Afghanistan quintupled, roadside bombings doubled, and armed attacks nearly tripled from 2005 to 2006 as thousands of fighters swarmed across the southern and eastern provinces, setting up checkpoints, assassinating government officials, and attacking British, Canadian, and Dutch troops.²⁵ The crisis illuminated the depth of public disillusionment with the Karzai government, the extent of corruption across all levels of the civil sector, the complicity of the Pakistani government and security forces, and the inadequacy of the U.S. and NATO security presence, which was too small to manage the escalating violence.²⁶ By March 2007, the total number of U.S. and NATO troops had climbed to 50,000 as the Taliban continued to gain ground.²⁷

With the end of his presidency nearing, and as military leaders pushed for a surge of U.S. forces similar to the one executed in Iraq, Bush ordered a review of the United States' war strategy and overall mission in Afghanistan in September 2008.²⁸ The results were turned over to the incoming Obama administration, which promptly accepted a Pentagon recommendation to deploy an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total number of U.S. forces in the country to nearly 70,000, and commissioned former intelligence analyst Bruce Riedel to conduct another 60-day policy

²⁵ Rohde and Sanger, 2007. Jones notes that "the overall number of insurgent-initiated attacks increased by 400 percent from 2002 to 2006, and the number of deaths from these attacks increased more than 800 percent during the same period" (Jones, 2009, p. xiv).

²⁶ Jones, 2009, p. xxiii.

²⁷ Malkasian, 2020.

²⁸ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "Bush Administration Reviews Its Afghanistan Policy, Exposing Points of Contention," *New York Times*, September 23, 2008.

review.²⁹ From the beginning, the new President sought to distinguish himself from his predecessor, whom he believed had neglected the war in Afghanistan and squandered international goodwill. Vice President-elect Joe Biden's trip to Afghanistan during the transition only reinforced his belief that a fresh look at U.S. strategy was necessary. "What Biden reported back . . . was that if you asked ten people what our objective was in Afghanistan, you got ten different answers," a member of the national security team recalled.

Unable to identify a better alternative, the new administration soon fell back into the familiar pattern established by their predecessor. Reflecting on the situation, one senior State Department advisor explained, "I thought that President Obama had [a] hundred percent that our interests in Afghanistan were to prevent another group of people like al Qaeda from planning or perpetrating another attack on America or our friends or allies. Period. But what happened was the bureaucracy then wants to make Afghanistan . . . perfect—it wants to recreate Afghanistan."

The Riedel review prompted the President, who had campaigned on a pledge to turn around the "good war" in Afghanistan, to send 4,000 more military personnel and an additional "civilian surge" to revitalize the Afghan economy, rebuild its infrastructure, and promote democratic political and social institutions over the summer.³⁰ Yet the war's strategy remained essentially the same: to deny al Qaeda a safe haven, degrade the Taliban, and strengthen the Afghan government and its security forces so that it could assume sole responsibility for internal security. "This is the famous three Ds, so disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat al Qaeda and prevent its return," one participant in the discussions explained, reflecting on the study's effect. "This is a dangerous Riedel hook, because the [last] clause is 'prevent their return to Afghanistan.' . . . that's the hook through which the whole counterinsurgency campaign drove the freight train." As a senior civilian advisor to the Obama administration noted, "even if you had

²⁹ John Gans, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019, pp. 176–177; "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 15, 2008.

³⁰ Gans, 2019, p. 179.

a relatively limited definition of what we were trying to achieve, it still often evolved into an expansive remedy for how to achieve it.”

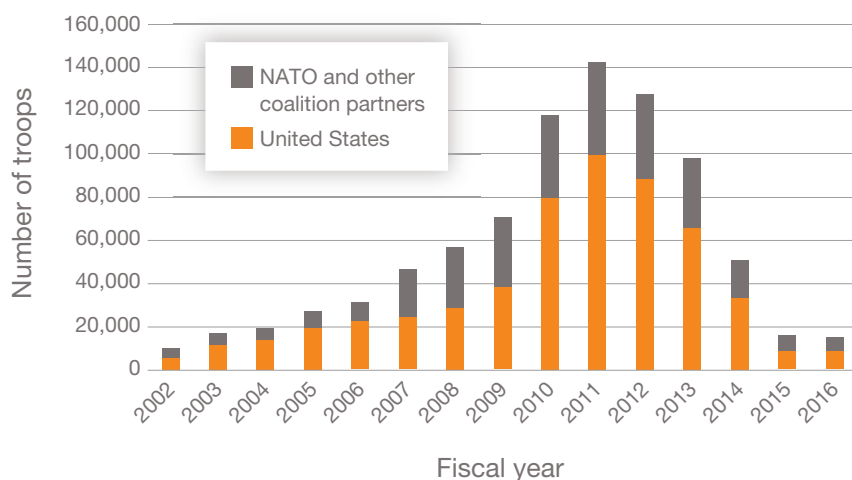
Indeed, by fall 2009, senior military officials were advising that a more ambitious counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, not just an increase in troop numbers, was needed to restore stability and erode the Taliban’s strength. In August 2009, General Stanley McChrystal completed a second assessment of the war in Afghanistan that called for the implementation of an Iraq-style surge of 40,000 additional forces tasked with winning over local hearts and minds by increasing the size and accelerating the training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF); building roads, schools, and basic infrastructure; and improving governance at all levels.³¹ Recalling the deliberations, an Under Secretary of Defense said,

the biggest thing when I look back on it is—we did ask ourselves those questions about national interest and the threats and things, but they were kind of woven through more at the second level of analysis rather than being the starting point and really the front end of the process. I think as a result of them being more woven in, we didn’t really have too many sessions where we really wrestled with just the core U.S. strategic fundamentals. We got tangled up in the numbers and the pieces right away.

The outcome was that after months of deliberation, and over opposition from civilian advisors, such as Vice President Biden, who favored a narrower counterterrorism approach, Obama settled on a compromise arrangement. During a December 1 speech at the U.S. Military Academy, the President unveiled a plan to deploy 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total number of U.S. troops in the country to approximately 100,000. (See Figure 2.1.) The caveat, however, was that President Obama imposed a strict 18-month deadline for the surge and promised to draw down the U.S. presence by the end of his presidency.³²

³¹ Eric Schmitt, “In Afghanistan Assessment, a Catalyst for Obama,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2009.

³² White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” transcript, December 1, 2009.

FIGURE 2.1**Troop Levels in Afghanistan**

SOURCES: U.S. troop levels for 2002–2007 (March numbers) are from Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014, pp. 81–84. U.S. troop levels for 2008–2016 (fiscal year second quarter/March numbers) are from Heidi M. Peters, Moshe Schwartz, and Lawrence Kapp, "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2007–2017," Congressional Research Service, April 28, 2017, pp. 4–5. Coalition troop levels for fiscal years 2002–2016 (numbers from March or month nearest March for which data are available) are from Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, "Afghanistan Index," Brookings Institution, September 29, 2017, p. 5.

The infusion of new forces and resources brought improvements in security and stability, helping to increase the size of the Afghan security forces, root out corruption, and stabilize targeted areas. Over the next three years, U.S. and NATO forces retook large swaths of Kandahar, Helmand, and other Taliban strongholds and stepped up drone strikes and counterterror raids in Pakistan, including the operation that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011. But the Obama administration also came to believe that the costs of the surge were unsustainable. More than 1,500 U.S. military personnel were killed and more than 15,000 were wounded between 2009 and 2012, more than any other period of the war. And at its height, the effort cost the

United States an estimated \$110 billion per year.³³ The watchword in the White House became “Afghan good enough,” a phrase that reflected the administration’s desire to shift from nation-building to the more limited objective of preventing Taliban victory, degrading terrorist networks, and bringing U.S. troops home.³⁴ The American people seemed to agree; in a Gallup poll held in May 2011, days after bin Laden was captured and killed, 59 percent of respondents believed that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan had been accomplished.³⁵

The surge had been envisioned as a means for securing a self-sustaining peace in Afghanistan that would lay the groundwork for a functioning civil society capable of providing its own security and policing. In reality, the COIN campaign had never been fully resourced. Although existing doctrine dictated that a fully resourced COIN operation in Afghanistan required 600,000 troops and police, at its peak the surge delivered roughly 140,000 U.S. and ISAF combat personnel.³⁶ As it turned out, however, lessons from the COIN campaign in Iraq were ill-matched for Afghanistan, where the Taliban had proven an intractable foe and the indigenous civil structures, which had been ravaged by the Soviet invasion, a prolonged civil war, and the subsequent Taliban regime, were substantially weaker. Compared with Iraq, Afghanistan had fewer social structures and centers of authority to draw upon in building a stable framework for peace. Moreover, the existence of neighboring Pakistan, which provided the Taliban with support and safe strongholds in the tribal areas of Waziristan, made it difficult to root the organization out entirely.

Even as the surge failed to produce a decisive shift in the country, there was still no clear sense of what a sustainable end state in Afghanistan would look like. Recalling the debate of what came next, one participant opined that “‘Afghan good enough’ [was] essentially . . . the NSC saying our ambi-

³³ Malkasian, 2020.

³⁴ Mark Landler, “The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2017.

³⁵ Malkasian, 2020.

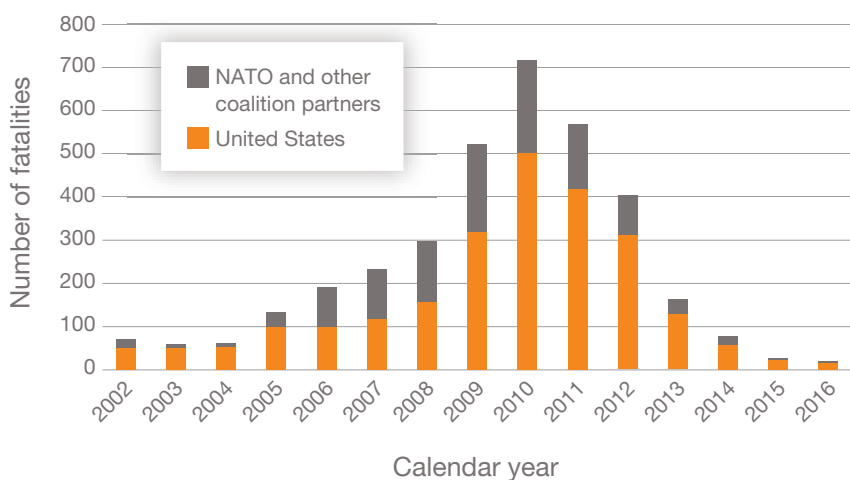
³⁶ Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, New York: Penguin Press, 2018a, p. 367.

tion was too great. Our end objectives were too far-reaching. So we need to dial back to good enough.” Defining a more attainable goal remained an elusive task, however. “Was there a clear consensus on what success looked like? I think the answer is clearly no,” a senior military commander commented. “I think it would run the span of we are going to try to leave Afghanistan as soon as we can, and the state of Afghanistan that people viewed as status quo ante, and that’s how far back you want to go. Everybody sort of set a different endpoint.” A civilian advisor agreed, noting, “part of the big problem going back was that people couldn’t agree on what the desirable or feasible end states were.”

One alternative strategic option that had been largely off the table during the Bush administration was a negotiated peace with the Taliban. Even in this scenario, however, U.S. officials recognized that continued military engagement would be required to train, advise, and equip the Afghan security forces. A stable peace, one Under Secretary of Defense outlined, entailed “getting the Afghan security forces to a place where they were adequately self-sufficient to provide security to underwrite the conditions that would lead to part two, which was some sort of a negotiated settlement.” As they recalled, “I definitely felt like ultimately there was going to have to be a political diplomatic solution, and the military was just a tool to enable that. The military was not the answer.”

The Long Drawdown

The Obama administration stuck with the surge’s 18-month deadline. The infusion of fresh troops and resources had brought limited gains, but it had come at a high price. The number of casualties suffered across Afghanistan ticked upward as the number of U.S. forces in the country expanded, reaching a record of nearly 500 deaths in 2010. (See Figure 2.2.) The growing cost of the effort also raised eyebrows among an administration that was working to revive the American economy and recover from the recession. (See Figure 2.3.) The death of bin Laden, the architect of the 9/11 attacks and the proximate reason for the initial invasion, sapped support for continued military engagement and heightened calls for a sizeable drawdown of U.S. troops. Meanwhile, new hotspots emerged in Yemen, Syria, and else-

FIGURE 2.2**U.S. and Coalition Fatalities in Afghanistan**

SOURCE: U.S. and NATO/coalition partner fatality data are from iCasualties.org, "Operation Enduring Freedom: Coalition Deaths by Year," undated.

where, shifting the locus of terrorist activity further from southwest Asia. Congressional opponents pressed the administration on the risks of withdrawal: With al Qaeda's leadership decapitated, and its ranks in Afghanistan depleted, was the organization still capable of mounting an attack on the United States? Was victory in Afghanistan worth the continued cost?³⁷

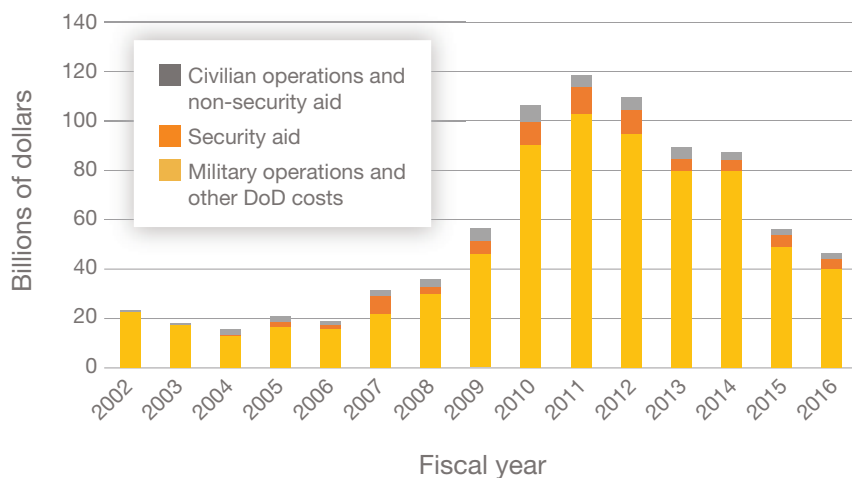
On June 22, 2011, Obama announced his decision to draw down the surge by returning 10,000 U.S. troops by the year's end and another 23,000 by the next summer.³⁸ In June 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates confirmed that the United States had entered into preliminary talks with the Taliban, although he cautioned against undue optimism.³⁹

³⁷ David E. Sanger, "Risks of Reversing the Afghanistan Surge," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.

³⁸ White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," transcript, June 22, 2011.

³⁹ Ginger Thompson, "Gates Acknowledges Talks with Taliban," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.

FIGURE 2.3
U.S. Spending in Afghanistan



SOURCES: Security and non-security aid data for 2002–2006 are from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014, pp. 226–227. Security and non-security aid data for 2007–2016 are from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2018, pp. 234–235. Total Department of Defense (DoD) funding for 2002–2007 is from Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014, p. 19. Total DoD funding for 2008–2016 is from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Chief Financial Officer, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request*, May 2017, p. 6-3.

NOTE: Non-security is the combined amount of U.S. funds for Afghanistan reconstruction in the governance and development, humanitarian, and civilian operations categories. Military operations and other DoD costs is calculated here as total DoD funding minus DoD security and non-security assistance.

The following May, Obama and Afghan President Karzai signed a strategic partnership agreement defining the terms of the bilateral relationship after 2014, when the last of U.S. combat troops in the country were scheduled to depart. In a televised statement from Bagram Air Base, Obama suggested that the agreement marked the beginning of a new era, “a future in which war ends, and a new chapter begins.” The United States and Afghanistan had committed to an “enduring relationship,” he noted, predicting “[t]he goal I set—to defeat Al Qaeda, and deny it a chance to rebuild—is

now within our reach.”⁴⁰ In private, however, the President expressed skepticism with the notion that U.S. assistance could build a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, indicating support for a narrower set of objectives set on minimizing and managing the danger of a terrorist enclave.⁴¹

By 2014, Obama had arrived at the decision to start a decisive drawdown of U.S. forces, ultimately ending in complete withdrawal. A senior military commander recalled that “Obama was very clear, and I think everybody in the PC [Principals Committee] was too, that our role, our combat role, active combat role, and it’s time for the Afghans to step up here.” As the official described, “I remember Obama was pretty clear-headed about it; he said, ‘If they can’t, then what’s the point of us continuing here, losing people and spending the kind of money we’re doing? This is just an endless mission that’s not going to end well. It won’t end. So the Afghans have to start taking some responsibility here.’” With drawdown in mind, the administration’s attention shifted toward reconciliation. Reflecting on this phase of the policy debate, one of the Bush administration’s policy advisors explained that “Mr. Obama faced this dilemma; he didn’t like being there, I’m sure. But he didn’t also want to be painted with a brush that he’s the guy that lost Afghanistan, and there’s the dilemma. Someone’s got to stand up and say, ‘Screw it, enough is enough, I’m going to keep 2,000 troops there or whatever is the right number for counterterrorism, we’re not going to let somebody use this territory to attack us.’”

For more than a decade after the 9/11 attacks, the underlying policy remained the same: that Afghanistan never again be used as a terrorist base of operations. However, during the years of conflict, the geopolitical conditions changed dramatically, including events such as the Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). This led one military commander to raise the possibility that Afghanistan was no longer the location of greatest risk, where America’s resources were being most effectively spent. Discussing the mission, a second official reflected of the preventive mission that “There is no end date. But there’s also no location

⁴⁰ Mark Landler, “Obama Signs Pact in Kabul, Turning Page in Afghan War,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2012.

⁴¹ David E. Sanger, “Charting Obama’s Journey to a Shift on Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2012.

specific to prevention, because there are at least, what, ten or 20 places as welcoming to that kind of transnational terror as [Afghanistan]. In fact, I would argue even more welcoming. So if you look at where the franchises of al Qaeda sprung up, all of those are perhaps better candidates for preventive action than Afghanistan itself.”

These concerns were assessed in an interagency review led by Obama and his White House staff that explored, among other things, whether the military commitment in Afghanistan was still proportional to the threat. By mid-2014, the President had concluded that it wasn’t and announced his decision to withdraw U.S. forces by the end of his term of office. As he announced:

At the beginning of 2015, we will have approximately 9,800 U.S. servicemembers in different parts of the country, together with our NATO allies and other partners. By the end of 2015, we will have reduced that presence by roughly half, and we will have consolidated our troops in Kabul and on Bagram Airfield. One year later, by the end of 2016, our military will draw down to a normal embassy presence in Kabul, with a security assistance component, just as we’ve done in Iraq.⁴²

But the envisioned force reductions Afghanistan never materialized. As the United States discussed plans for withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Islamic State began to expand rapidly into Iraq and Syria. The success of this movement, which included many former al Qaeda leaders, underscored the dangers of a premature departure. In Afghanistan, the situation was beginning to deteriorate as well. Despite improvements since 2009, the Afghan security forces were marred by corruption, and many units depended on U.S. advisors and air support in battle. The Afghans’ inability to manage the residual threat posed by the Taliban was demonstrated in 2015, when 300 Taliban fighters launched a series of offensives in Kunduz province, routing some 3,000 Afghan soldiers and police and capturing a provincial capital for the first time since 2001. In Helmand province, 4,500 Afghan soldiers and police fled their posts, allowing the group to regain all the territory it

⁴² Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, May 27, 2014.

had lost in the surge. Subsequent battles over the next year demonstrated that seven years of training and advising programs had still not made the Afghan security forces strong enough to contain the residual Taliban threat, which resurged as the number of U.S. troops in the country declined. In March 2015, Obama agreed to maintain 9,800 troops through the end of the year to provide air support and conduct counterterrorism operations after the IC cautioned that terrorist groups such as the Islamic State would otherwise establish safe havens in Afghanistan. With the Taliban continuing to regain ground, the President suspended the withdrawal in July 2016, months before the final U.S. troops were scheduled to return home.⁴³ Even in its reduced form, the plan called for the withdrawal of tens of thousands of American troops, the closing of bases, and the transfer of vast quantities of equipment. As a senior military leader observed, it was “a huge logistical issue that . . . has never been given appropriate credit or recognition.” Coupled with the logistical aspects of the drawdown was the question of what a reduced U.S. presence might look like. As he explained, “we pulled most all of the troops out, our capacities and capabilities and assets” but that raised the following significant questions: “What was going to be the role of the United States from here on? What will be the responsibilities, the capacity? . . . How many troops would we leave behind? Would the allies stay if we were bringing out the kind of force we were?” Although the scope of the mission could be reduced, there was a practical limitation to how small a footprint could be. Speaking to this point, a second senior military leader observed that as long as counterterrorism was a priority, “it became increasingly difficult to make greater reductions while still allowing for necessary enablers: HUMINT [human intelligence], SIGINT [signals intelligence], other key capabilities that required manpower.”

With the failure of the surge to engineer a decisive swing of momentum against the Taliban, the United States instead prepared for a low-intensity counterterrorism campaign of indefinite duration. It would require spending upward of \$40 billion a year by some calculations, but as a former Under Secretary of Defense argued, “[w]e’re a great nation. We can afford it . . . the Taliban is not a good idea whatever the timeline is.” A second former Under

⁴³ Malkasian, 2020.

Secretary concurred, noting that Afghanistan is “in a strategic neighborhood, and we’ve got a toehold there, more than a toehold. Why would we walk away from this? Because God knows the terrorists aren’t going away any time soon.”

Explaining Policy Stasis

From 2001 to 2021, the United States pursued the same policy objective in Afghanistan: to prevent a terrorist group from using the country as a safe haven in which to plan or launch an attack on the United States. Because this policy was framed around an ongoing negative—an absence of future attacks—there was no single objective to achieve. Instead, successive administrations judged that the United States would need a compliant and minimally competent Afghan government partner that, with American assistance, would eventually become able to secure its territory on its own. This final proposition has so far proved unachievable. The United States has helped develop a reliable and minimally capable Afghan government partner and, with its cooperation, prevented further terrorist attacks on the United States originating from Afghanistan, but that partner has not achieved the capacity to secure its territory unaided by American troops. In short, this open-ended policy objective required the United States to support a stable government in one of the poorest countries in the world. A senior military commander agreed, saying, “Afghanistan is a very unique country in many ways, not just the geography, but that’s a country that has really never been ruled and never been centrally governed.” Reflecting on this, he commented, “I don’t think we ever viewed the fundamental problems and differences, basically the history of Afghanistan, the way we should have.”

This report examines this policy stasis, which framed both America’s continued investments and the dramatic strategic evolutions that were designed to pursue it. In U.S. military doctrine, *policy* “is guidance that is directive or instructive, stating what is to be accomplished.” *Strategy*, by contrast, “defines how operations should be conducted to accomplish national policy objectives.”⁴⁴ Our focus is on policy, the ultimate goal-setting of U.S.

⁴⁴ Joint Publication 3-30, *Basic Doctrine*, Vol. 1, 2015.

objectives, that shifting military and political engagement strategies have attempted to realize. The underlying question is why this policy was never seriously reconsidered when it necessarily framed the strategic choices that were available to policymakers. Through interviews with former political and military leaders from the top echelon of the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidential administrations, this report identifies and analyzes the institutional, organizational, and psychological factors that shaped policy-making on the war between 2001 and 2016 and that could explain this stasis.

Rather than seeking to reframe or moderate America's policy, successive administrations have continued to wrestle with how best to achieve the original objective. The Bush administration's initial strategy can be summarized as follows: no nation-building, no peacekeeping, no COIN, no international forces, little support to the central government in establishing its authority over local warlords, no negotiation with the Taliban, and minimal economic assistance. Only as resistance to the American occupation of Iraq mounted were these strategy preferences definitively abandoned. Aid levels were increased, ISAF was placed under NATO command, and military presence was expanded beyond Kabul with a nationwide peacekeeping mission and, later, a COIN mission, coupled with serious efforts to build up a national Afghan army and police force.

Throughout Bush's presidency, Afghanistan remained, however, an economy-of-force operation. Obama entered office having promised to prioritize the war in Afghanistan. After some debate, he dramatically reinforced the American military presence in an effort to replicate the success of the surge in Iraq. He set a short deadline, however, and withdrew the additional forces at its expiration, effectively returning Afghanistan to an economy-of-force operation with an ever-diminishing U.S. military presence.

Beginning in 2010, the Obama administration reached out to the Taliban in an effort to open peace negotiations. In his second term, Obama began to question the need for American forces in Afghanistan. In mid-2014, following more than a year of intense interagency debate, Obama announced the immediate end to U.S. combat operations and his intention to withdraw American forces entirely by the end of 2016. These decisions were not implemented, likely because of two contemporaneous events. Only a few weeks after that announcement, the former al Qaeda in Iraq, having earlier

fled into Syria and rechristened itself the Islamic State, invaded Iraq and marched to the gates of Baghdad, thereby demonstrating the risks of premature withdrawal. At the same time, the Islamic State established a branch in Afghanistan.

Thus, over the 16 years covered by this report, two U.S. presidential administrations had repeatedly altered strategy in Afghanistan, oscillating between no nation-building and nation-building, between economy of force and a 100,000-troop surge and back, between no negotiations and attempts to negotiate, and between staying and leaving, although the decision to leave was never implemented.

The results of these strategic shifts were largely unsuccessful. Although U.S. operations hollowed out al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing or capturing many of the organization's leaders and weakening its operational capacity, the group has reemerged in recent years under the Taliban's protection, albeit in a weakened form.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Taliban has regained strength and has sustained a prolonged and costly insurgency against the government in Kabul while demanding a greater voice in the country's future. As of July 2020, the organization controlled dozens of Afghan districts; participated in intra-Afghan negotiations; and retained an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 active fighters who continued to attack U.S., Afghan, and international forces in the country.⁴⁶ Public assessments concluded that neither the Afghan national security forces nor the civilian leadership in Kabul was prepared to combat the Taliban and al Qaeda; \$83 billion in U.S. security assistance had bought only limited gains, and endemic corruption and

⁴⁵ In June 2020, CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie Jr. described eastern Afghanistan as the “home of Al-Qaeda,” noting that the organization's top echelon, or “core,” retains a presence in the country (“Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2020, p. 1; Bruce Riedel, “Al-Qaida Today, 18 Years After 9/11,” Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, September 10, 2019).

⁴⁶ United Nations Security Council, *The Tenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Established Pursuant to Resolution 1526 (2004), Which Was Submitted to the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) in Accordance with Paragraph (a) of the Annex to Resolution 2255 (2015)*, June 13, 2019; Lindsay Maizland and Zachary Laub, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” New York: Council on Foreign Relations, March 11, 2020; Mushib Mashal, “How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

ineptitude riddled all layers of government. Afghanistan remained chronically unstable.⁴⁷ Indeed, within weeks of the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, the 300,000 troops of the Afghan National Army had collapsed, offering little resistance to the Taliban forces. In fact, it was reported that, in many cases, troops had negotiated in advance to lay down their arms.⁴⁸

Why, then, did policymakers not reassess the aims of the mission? The Bush and Obama administrations never wavered from the fundamental goal of ensuring that Afghanistan would never again be used as a terrorist base of operations to attack the United States or its allies. The question has always been how best to achieve that goal. Explaining this stasis in American policy and the underlying dynamics that shaped policymakers' consideration of alternatives is the subject of this report.

⁴⁷ Craig Whitlock, "Built with Corruption," *New York Times*, December 9, 2019a; Craig Whitlock, "Consumed with Corruption," *New York Times*, December 9, 2019b; Craig Whitlock, "Unguarded Nation," *New York Times*, December 9, 2019d.

⁴⁸ Anatol Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces So Quickly Laid Down Their Arms," *Politico*, August 16, 2021.

The Memory of 9/11 and the Psychology of Decisionmaking in Afghanistan

“I think the reason we’re in Afghanistan after 17 years is because policy-makers look at the risks of leaving and those are easier to conceptualize than the risks of staying . . .”¹

—Andrew Exum, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy, 2018

“ . . . once you’re in, there’s a momentum to the mission regardless of whether it’s actually calibrated to the threats of the day.”

—Interview, former Under Secretary of Defense, 2018

As policymakers debated the strategies, goals, and resourcing of America’s actions in Afghanistan, the policy options that they debated were framed by psychological and cognitive factors that had powerful effects on their deliberations. Perceptions of risk, the memory of 9/11, an open-ended framing of the mission, and other factors made the debates over Afghan policy particularly difficult. As this chapter will argue, these factors combined to create what one military commander turned policy advisor referred to as a “bureaucratic inertia” that caused U.S. policymaking in Afghanistan to remain relatively stable and focused on the same ultimate objective of

¹ Wesley Morgan, “Is the Top General in Afghanistan in Too Deep?” *Politico*, March 5, 2018. The quoted sentence continues, “instead it’s left to military officers to tell the politicians when we’ve done enough.”

“never again,” even as the dynamics of the war and the will of the policy-making community changed.

The recognition that psychological and social dynamics play a powerful role in elite decisionmaking is, of course, not new. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld frequently recommended RAND historian Roberta Wohlstetter’s book *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, whose introduction made the case that there is a tendency in government decisionmaking to “confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable,” creating an obsession with “a few dangers that may be familiar rather than likely.”² In the wake of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1962, an analysis of the decisionmaking processes that led up to it gave rise to the concept of *groupthink* to describe the psychological drive to maintain social consensus at the expense of suppressing dissent and the appraisal of alternatives.³ Likewise, psychological processes aimed at validating past choices were identified as a major factor in President Johnson’s decision to send additional troops to Vietnam in 1965. This concept of “escalation of commitment” is now recognized as a reoccurring justification for continuing to invest in unproductive courses of action.⁴ Ultimately, the recognition that desire to avoid incurring a loss when additional expenditures might eventually lead to success was explained by the concept of prospect theory, which later won Daniel Kahneman a Nobel Prize.⁵

This chapter uses senior leader interviews to identify the patterns of thought and the operational, political, and psychological concerns that shaped the policy debates surrounding the war. By aligning our interview-

² Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002, pp. 22–23; Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962.

³ Irvin L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1972; Paul’t Hart, “Irving L. Janis’ Victims of Groupthink,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1991, pp. 247–278.

⁴ Barry M. Staw, “Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy: A Study of Escalating Commitment to a Chosen Course of Action,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Vol. 16, 1976.

⁵ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk,” *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, No. 2, March 1979, pp. 263–292. Amos Tversky died in 1996 and thus did not share in the 2002 prize.

ees' observations with specific theories, it is possible to more clearly articulate the factors that shaped elite decisionmaking. Rather than imagining the policymaking dysfunctions as unique to Afghanistan, the theoretical frameworks discussed below allow the specific issues to be generalized so that the parallels to other situations can be more easily recognized. One limitation of this approach is that although we can identify the theories that are consistent with the interviews, we cannot prove that a theory does not apply simply because our interviews did not show evidence for it. Accordingly, our intent here is to articulate the major themes from the interviews and to highlight their alignment with major theoretical concepts. By viewing the psychological drivers that shaped policymaking in Afghanistan, we can alert policymakers in future crises to the important influences of these factors on elite decisionmaking.

In outline, the story we describe is that the desire for revenge and a symbolic success in the aftermath of 9/11 set in motion a set of open-ended and essentially unachievable policy goals. Once set in motion, however, these expansive policy aims were difficult to walk back, and policymakers stayed the course because the nation's memory of 9/11 and the expectations that it would be avenged and would never be repeated hampered decisionmakers' willingness to assume the risks associated with withdrawal or a smaller, dramatically reconceived mission.

Sacred Values: A Special Kind of War

Conceived in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks, the United States' campaign in Afghanistan was symbolically charged from the outset. As an advisor to the NSC who had worked under both the Bush and Obama administrations remarked, "[The response had] nothing to do with the actual pieces of warfare, . . . [instead] there was almost the instinct of an obligatory response, because of the magnitude . . . it is comparable to Pearl Harbor." Both senior leaders and the American public felt the need to act at a visceral level. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, President Bush told Vice President Cheney, "We're going to find out who did this and we're

going to kick their a----.”⁶ This feeling was widely shared; as former Secretary of State Colin Powell recalled, “The American people wanted somebody killed.”⁷ Reflecting on the pressures that this placed on decisionmakers, a member of the Deputies Committee in the Obama administration observed, “there’s no question [that 9/11 was a] triggering mechanism and everything that [the attack] had done to our psychology, for sure, made it different than virtually any other foreign intervention.”

The deep emotional response to the memory of 9/11 that drove the initial entry into Afghanistan shaped policy decisions for years to come. As the interviews and analysis below will argue, America’s “good war” in response to 9/11 infused the campaign in Afghanistan with a symbolic weight that made it particularly difficult to scale back strategic goals and that magnified the perceived risk of failure or of future terrorist attack.

A Symbolic Campaign and Sacred Values

As America sought out a target for its vengeance, Afghanistan quickly became the primary focus of the U.S. response. Bin Laden had relocated from Sudan to Afghanistan in 1996, and the Taliban regime had allowed al Qaeda to build a safe haven in the country, where it had established a headquarters and training camps. As a former Under Secretary of Defense described, the focus on Afghanistan was a “simple, emotionally appealing, gut response to 9/11 that resonates probably within most Americans, including the government.” The U.S. focus on al Qaeda leadership and training camps in Afghanistan became the symbolic expression of America’s response, even though, as former CIA Director George Tenet warned at the time, al Qaeda operated worldwide.⁸

As policymakers debated the proper course of action, there was a concern that the response needed to appear sufficiently robust to match the nation’s moral outrage. “The antiseptic notion of launching cruise missiles

⁶ Woodward, 2002, p. 18.

⁷ Robert Draper, “Colin Powell Still Wants Answers,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2020.

⁸ Woodward, 2002, p. 33.

into some guy's, you know, tent, really is a joke," Bush said at the time. As he explained, "I mean, people viewed that as the impotent America . . . a flaccid, you know, kind of technologically competent but not very tough country." In his eyes, this led to the perception that "there is an image of America out there that we are so materialistic, almost hedonistic, that we don't have values, and that when struck, we wouldn't fight back."⁹ Voicing similar concerns, Cheney mused that, "Air operations without boots on the ground could look weak."¹⁰ Although Bush made clear that he did not want a "photo-op war," he also understood that the American people wanted a "big bang."¹¹

At the same time, Bush was also at pains to frame the United States' impending military response in terms of a higher purpose. While speaking from the National Cathedral in a televised ceremony days after the attacks, Bush framed the military actions in moral terms: "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."¹² His private discussions with senior advisors adopted a similarly righteous frame: "This will be a monumental struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail."¹³ As planning for the military response in Afghanistan began in earnest, Bush sought options that would align with this view. "Can the first bombs we drop be food?" he asked at one point, stressing the idea that he wanted America "to be viewed as the liberator."¹⁴

The fusion of these two logics—an inevitable, robust military response coupled with the belief that it would be a just war—proved to be a powerful force in policymaking that focused attention on Afghanistan and infused it with a symbolic weight. Remarking on this idea, a senior policymaker who served in both the Bush and Obama administrations reflected, "There are very . . . comfortable reasons why we initiated the conflict after 9/11, that set the flywheel in motion, and then the flywheel just has a ton of momentum

⁹ Woodward, 2002, p. 38.

¹⁰ Woodward, 2002, p. 159.

¹¹ Woodward, 2002, p. 49.

¹² Bush, 2010, pp. 146–147.

¹³ Woodward, 2002, p. 45.

¹⁴ Woodward, 2002, pp. 130–131.

and it's hard for all sorts of reasons to put a stick in the spokes and slow it down." Framed by this good versus evil rhetoric and the understanding that the American people wanted justice, the fight against terrorism had become a "sacred value" that politicians were expected to pursue at any cost.¹⁵

Scholars working at the intersection of psychology, economics, and political science describe *sacred values* as commitments that are viewed as absolute terms and that cause social ostracism when questioned or balanced with other considerations. They are not goals in which an outcome can be "good enough" or that are abandoned because they appear too costly; rather, such deeply held values resist any attempt to constrain them by applying a cost-benefit framework. To consider them in such instrumental terms brings negative social consequences for those who seem willing to violate a taboo.¹⁶

In the wake of 9/11, striking back at the terrorists who were responsible had become a sacred value, and the war in Afghanistan was its symbolic expression. This created an emotionally charged rigidity in the range of decisions that could be seriously considered and which precluded potential opportunities to exit early in the conflict. Once America had become deeply entrenched, it made walking back the objectives of rebuilding the country particularly difficult, and it magnified dynamics, such as the risk aversion associated with the avoidance of any potential of a future attack coming from Afghanistan.

In policy terms, the moral outrage and shared sacred value associated with mounting a robust response led to the framing of U.S. objectives in unusually immutable and open-ended terms. As a former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked, there was "unanimous understanding about what the primary objectives were in Afghanistan, essentially to turn this place into somewhere from which we are not again attacked." The framing conveyed the sacred mission that Bush and other senior leaders felt that they

¹⁵ Philip E. Tetlock, "Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol.7, No. 7, July 2003, pp. 320–324.

¹⁶ Philip E. Tetlock, Barnara A. Mellers, and J. Peter Scoblic, "Sacred Versus Pseudo-Sacred Values: How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 107, No. 5, 2017, pp. 96–99.

had a duty to undertake in the wake of 9/11. “Never again,” one senior official remarked, was “a very important line, because that leads us to forever.”

Ongoing Impact

This focus on Afghanistan as the “good war,” the place where America could strike back at al Qaeda, infused the war with a symbolic weight that persisted well into the Obama administration. Describing this dynamic, a former senior diplomat observed that during the formative period of 2001 and 2002, “it was painted in . . . stark terms that Afghanistan is the center of gravity,” and that, in the years that followed, “[the] idea that Afghanistan was the key node seemed to become very hardened against some actual facts, like the planning mostly didn’t even take place in Afghanistan.”

This association of Afghanistan with the United States’ battle against terrorism was hard for policymakers to escape and cast a long shadow over decisionmaking. Recalling policy debates in the Obama administration, a senior civilian advisor recalled the President asking, “Wait a second. If this is about not [having] another 9/11, preventing attacks in the United States, what’s the best way to allocate our resources? Is it really 95-percent Afghanistan?” “To me,” the advisor recalled, “that’s a smart question, but still requires overcoming this psychological—or maybe it’s the political reality of the psychological impact of 9/11, if that makes sense. If you say, ‘We’re drawing down Afghanistan to reduce the risk of terrorist strikes against the United States,’—it’s hard to explain.” Echoing this point, an Under Secretary of Defense described that the issue was that “it’s the good war, and there’s a cognitive aspect and a domestic/political aspect to that. . . . I think people were reluctant to say they’re doing something [i.e., considering withdrawal] because of concerns that they can’t work with domestic politics, so they convince themselves that it is still doable [i.e., success is still achievable].”

Over the years, this psychological pressure to complete the mission in Afghanistan has proven quite persistent. In the eyes of some policymakers, the weight of 9/11 was relatively short lived. Reflecting on the issue, a former ISAF commander felt that its influence on decisionmaking had long since passed: “I think the memory of 9/11, it went for a little bit, but it really got supplanted by the experience of Iraq.” Others felt that the weight of obliga-

tion was much more persistent. As a senior diplomat in the Obama administration argued, “The overriding emotion is 9/11. Everybody still saying paying these guys back, or Afghanistan has to succeed because this is where 9/11 started. It’s now, what, how many years from 9/11? 17, 18 years . . . but it’s still a powerful thing.” Framing the issue in more-personal terms, the diplomat observed, “The human beings who are your more-senior people in 2010 and ’11, ’12 are the people who were sitting in the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs office on 9/11. Mrs. Clinton was the senator from New York. People would say, ‘Why is she so interested in it?’ I said, ‘Because she was the senator from New York on 9/11, that’s why.’”

Risk Aversion

The persistent, symbolic weight of 9/11 further shaped policymaking by magnifying the perceived risks associated with a premature withdrawal that might lead to a future terrorist attack planned or executed from Afghanistan. Asked about the avoidance of risk in Afghan policymaking, a senior policy advisor agreed that it was common: “Absolutely, of course, sure, it’s the ultimate force protection question, right? How many decisions over the years have we made this way and not that way because you don’t want to do Khobar Towers again.¹⁷ Or you don’t want to have an embassy bombing like Dar or Nairobi again.¹⁸ It’s human nature, it’s how it is, it’s how people are.” As a senior civilian official described, the risk was both operational—in that American lives were at stake—and political. As he observed, “It would be suicide for a president to pull out of Afghanistan and pull out counterterrorism capabilities as well, in case there was a resurgence.”

The existence of these psychological pressures and the tendency of decisionmakers to overweight the risks of high-profile disasters such as terrorism was well understood by elite policymakers, yet, as a senior official described, the influence of these factors was inescapable. In his estimation,

¹⁷ This is a reference to the June 25, 1996, car bomb that detonated in front of a housing complex used by American personnel in Khobar, Saudi Arabia.

¹⁸ This is a reference to the August 7, 1998, detonation of bombs in front of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

this was well understood by policymakers and, he believed, “certainly to anybody who’s savvy enough on these issues to walk into the White House situation room.” “Yet,” as he observed, “those statistics will never get said in the White House situation room. Nobody will ever say, ‘You know, the risk is probably actually not that great.’ Because it’s a lot easier to say, ‘No, we will not accept another 9/11. Never again.’”¹⁹

One explanation for this reticence to accept risk is provided by Kahneman and Tversky’s Nobel Prize–winning work on prospect theory.²⁰ Among the theory’s key predictions is that decisionmakers are often risk adverse, meaning that the threat of potential losses typically outweigh the value of potential gains in their decision calculus. Viewed in these terms, even though a cost-benefit analysis might show that it was worth pulling resources out of Afghanistan because the risks presented by political instability in the country were rather small, decisionmakers would typically choose to avoid the potential for a future attack because of the greater psychological weight assigned to this negative outcome. Moreover, the memory of 9/11 magnified the political consequences for making a decision that might lead to a future terror attack, creating additional disincentives for risk-taking.

A senior civilian official offered a succinct assessment, concluding that perceived risk “probably drove policy more than it should have.” In his view, “If you challenge yourself to try to imagine what would happen if we just pulled out entirely, and even if the Taliban took over an even bigger chunk of the country,” it was not clear that the return of the Taliban would “actually have resulted in a reemergence of an al Qaeda sanctuary from which they would attack the United States.” Although he believed that the narrative “didn’t necessarily hold up to scrutiny,” he assessed, “I don’t think people wanted to make that argument.” As he described, “This goes to the risk aversion thing. I think even if there’s a ten-percent chance you’re wrong

¹⁹ Despite the resistance to discussing the war in these terms, these issues were finally discussed in the White House in 2013–2014, eventually leading to the 2016 withdrawal.

²⁰ For a summary of the prospect theory and its applications, see Nicholas C. Barberis, “Thirty Years of Prospect Theory in Economics: A Review and Assessment,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Winter 2013, pp. 173–196; Barbara Vis and Dieuwertje Kuijpers, “Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Underexposed Issues, Advancements, and Ways Forward,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2018.

on something that is as profound a question as that, I'm not sure anyone wanted to take a 10-percent chance that they were wrong."

Others felt that a U.S. withdrawal would indeed cause an increased threat. As a former ISAF commander described, policymakers "know that stepping away would allow the likely resumption of the terrorist position there, and politically and sort of morally nobody wants that." The tension, as he saw it, was that "we're frustrated because the Afghan government and Afghan society is progressing more slowly than we want it to and, therefore, there's not even a good horizon to look for if we do it for ten or 20 years." However, he commented, "People say, 'Well, we should just pull out and see what happens.' Maybe that's a better outcome, but there's risk, and it's pretty high." As a result, he believed that perceived risk encouraged policymakers to stay the course, or, as he put it, "People just say, 'Well, what else do we do?'" As a second senior military commander explained, "The refrain here was that al Qaeda was there and, despite the huge costs and limited success, nobody could say that losing 3,000 Americans in a terrorist attack every ten years was an acceptable risk."

An additional consideration was the desire to preserve the hard-won set of accumulated accomplishments that the U.S.-led intervention had achieved. By the end of 2002, al Qaeda had been suppressed and a compliant, minimally competent Afghan partner had been stood up. As time went on, Afghanistan made considerable progress in the areas of education, public health, freedom of expression, women's rights, democratic governance, and the development of civil society. Between 2002 and 2017, for example, the gross domestic product per capita of Afghanistan had increased by 78 percent, from \$330 to \$573 per capita, while the percentage of the population with access to electricity had increased from 23 percent to 98 percent.²¹ These gains carried significant psychological weight with policymakers, even though they were not the core objective of the U.S. mission. As a senior civilian advisor observed, "It was really hard, even for people who had a much more limited notion of what we should be doing, to say, 'Oh you know what, never mind, good luck to them, they'll just revert back to the way it was before.'" A second civilian agreed, explaining that

²¹ World Bank, "World Development Indicators," undated.

without any alternative platform for counterterrorism in the region, U.S. withdrawal would likely have resulted in the reversal of these gains and this provided a disincentive, a “reason to think twice about abandoning the mission.” Finally, they explained, as America drew down its forces, the benefits in terms of reduced casualties and cost savings that would be achieved by total withdrawal correspondingly diminished because of the small number of American troops who remained and the tight limitations placed on their actual activities. This meant, in essence, that policymakers’ intuitive cost-benefit optimization would weigh the increasing risks associated with complete withdrawal against the diminishing costs associated with staying at a reduced level—a calculation that would never favor complete troop draw-down. Framed in this way, one could advocate for escalation or drawdown, but there was little incentive to argue for complete withdrawal.

An Open-Ended Mission

Additionally, the symbolic importance of Afghanistan made course correction difficult, particularly in the early years of the conflict. “I mean, if you go back to the origin, it was al Qaeda, right?” reflected a senior policymaker on his time in the Bush administration. “[M]aybe because the al Qaeda part of it was done quite quickly, I mean a matter of weeks, right, where you’re sort of left saying, ‘Gosh, that was unexpected success. Now what?’” Without a defining endpoint to signal that America had been avenged, it was difficult for policymakers to know when they had completed the mission. “At Tora Bora, it could have all been over, the perfect way to get out,” reflected a senior civilian policymaker in the Bush administration, “and why . . . Mr. Rumsfeld and Tommy Franks let them out is beyond me. No one can explain it to me, nobody at CENTCOM has been able to explain it.”

The result was a rapidly expanding mission that promised to rebuild Afghanistan. As a Bush-era policymaker reflected of this period, “We found ourselves in the [nation-building] game without even realizing, I mean, just like that. We didn’t have any thoughtful, well-thought-out approach. To the extent there was any haste . . . well, there was a lot of haste involved.” As a result, a second advisor recalled, “By . . . ’07, the mission statement for

Afghanistan was a very fulsome paragraph that included market economy, inclusive government, [and] new perspective about minorities and women.”

Once set in motion, the early policy decisions that framed the United States’ policy goals in expansive terms were difficult to walk back, and, having framed the Taliban as a terrorist enemy, a negotiated settlement was difficult to achieve. As a senior civilian advisor observed, once the Taliban had been painted as the enemy, it was particularly difficult to reset the pieces and to shift policy to include them as potential partners in peace. One issue, they speculated, was that “[i]t seems to me that when you go to war and you’re about killing people, there’s a necessity to painting the enemy in a very black-and-white and definitive manner. I mean, I’m always struck by the way that people in uniform use personal pronouns to refer to the enemy, depersonalizing it, that necessity of painting the enemy in a certain way so that you can feel okay about killing them.” This habit had policy implications, they believed: “Does that get you sort of stuck in a way of thinking that isn’t readily adaptable to nuances, changes in circumstances?” A former military commander described a similar dynamic that made it difficult to end the conflict, particularly given its emotional and psychological ties to 9/11. As they explained, “[T]here is the notion of if you’re going to ask me to go kill this guy, [the adversary] can’t be okay later—and, by the way, I lost my colleagues in the process, right?” As they continued, “It can’t be that at some point we’re just going to not do it anymore. We need an end. This is the greatest question. We sort of need that period at the end of the chapter in order to justify what it costs.”

Yet this ending has proven elusive. As a former military leader recalled, “I can remember the Sunday night here when the President [Obama] made his speech about getting bin Laden.” Describing the scene outside the White House, he recalled that “the college students having had too much beer were in the trees in Lafayette Park, literally hanging from the trees shouting, ‘USA!’ It was like the Olympics, right? [We] looked at one another and said, ‘That’s it for Afghanistan,’ because we’d put the period at the end of al Qaeda paragraph.” The ending did not come with the death of Osama bin Laden, however, nor with the virtual defeat of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. As the military commander remarked, “The mission of al Qaeda has been—has been more fully completed than any mission on counterterrorism maybe ever, right? I mean, remember Farouq al-Qahtani? Who is like the last al

Qaeda guy, he went to, where was it, Nuristan, Kunar, or some place, and he lived there for years. We couldn't find him, and eventually we got him²²—he was like the last guy.”

In a counterterrorism or COIN campaign, without concrete markers of victory, one former military commander asked, rhetorically, “How do you ever know you’re done?” Looking back on the issue, a civilian advisor observed, “It seems to me that throughout . . . the goals were articulated as verbs. It was to stabilize, or the prevention—ongoing actions. . . . you could never quite measure progress, because it’s the progress of a process that arguably . . . doesn’t have defined end points to it.” As military scholars have noted, even the goals of the COIN doctrine amounted to a “reverse of the body count metric” whose success is measured by a lack of violence.²³ Summarizing the problem, a senior military advisor posed the issue as a question: “How much is enough prevention, right?”

Locked into Expansive Goals

An additional effect of the symbolic significance of the military operations in Afghanistan was that they precluded more-limited strategies with more-achievable but suboptimal goals. Instead, the United States sought strategic options that would allow it to “win,” as the opening sentence of a strategic review of Afghanistan delivered to President Bush in 2008 makes clear: “The United States is not losing in Afghanistan, but it is not winning either, and that is not good enough.”²⁴ Historian and former Army Colonel David Johnson has argued that U.S. military culture is unique for its “inability to imagine anything but success in any strategic environment.” Although, he argues, most nations do not start wars that they believe they will lose, American planning is driven by “a national sense of optimism” that fuels expectations of strategic success.²⁵

²² Farouq al-Qahtani was killed in an airstrike in Afghanistan in October 2016.

²³ David E. Johnson, *Doing What You Know: The United States and 250 Years of Irregular War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017, p. 72.

²⁴ Coll, 2018b.

²⁵ Johnson, 2017, p. 73.

In Johnson's estimation, American strategic planners should be willing to accept objectives that accomplish the least bad outcome that accords with strategic objectives, rather than laudable but difficult-to-attain goals, such as nation-building and social reform. As he argues, the United States was finally able to leave Iraq when it embraced a "least bad" strategy, supporting a corrupt and sectarian government to improve security conditions sufficiently that U.S. forces could depart. He believes that this adoption of "a sustainable least bad outcome" was the recipe for success in Iraq and that the failure to adopt this approach was the reason for America's failure in Vietnam. The lesson he takes from this, which stands in sharp contrast to the language of the Bush-era strategic review, is that "not winning is not losing; losing is losing."²⁶

At its core, the issue seemed to be that policymakers did not have a framework for assessing how to achieve their goals other than through military victory.²⁷ In contrast to the U.S. strategy that aimed to win in Afghanistan with the intent to "help the Afghan people build a responsible, self-sustaining market democracy that will never again harbor terrorists," Israel's ongoing military actions against Hamas have a similar goal of preventing terror attacks, but the mission does not have similar ambitions toward the recreation of a functioning, friendly state in Palestine.²⁸ Instead, Israel has, for years, conducted counterterrorism operations against Hamas and other Islamicist groups that call for the destruction of the Israeli state without a strategic goal of "winning" the conflict. Rather than attempting to occupy Gaza and destroy the Hamas regime, these objectives are "not on the agenda." Instead, it has adopted a strategy of "mowing the grass" in which "use of force . . . is not intended to attain impossible political goals, but a strategy of attrition designed primarily to debilitate the enemy capabilities" to create longer periods of calm between conflicts.²⁹

²⁶ Johnson, 2017, pp. 82, 85.

²⁷ Christopher D. Kolenda, "Slow Failure: Understanding America's Quagmire in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 7, 2019, pp. 992–1014.

²⁸ Taylor, 2004.

²⁹ Raphael S. Cohen, David E. Johnson, David E. Thaler, Brenna Allen, Elizabeth M. Bartels, James Cahill, and Shira Efron, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge: Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1888-A, 2017, p. 40.

A senior military commander recalled that General Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had suggested the “mowing the grass” strategy to Obama and the president “lit up” because he had apparently been thinking along the same lines, the interviewee remembered, “that maybe having to mow the grass wasn’t all that bad.”

In practice, however, this pared-down objective was difficult to achieve because, as an Under Secretary of Defense recalled, there was “very hardcore bureaucratic jamming where the CT [counterterrorism] community inside the U.S. government—including inside the White House—basically told the President, ‘If you go to zero [i.e., withdraw all troops], you will be taking on an unacceptable level of risk for the United States, vis-à-vis a future terrorist attack.’” Although this vision of a more limited role for the United States in Afghanistan encountered bureaucratic resistance, it accorded with the advice that Bush’s early national security team provided when the U.S. military entered Afghanistan. “Beware of raising false expectations, defeating them versus defeating their ability to threaten our way of life,” Rumsfeld had warned.³⁰ Likewise, Secretary of State Colin Powell had argued for a more open vision of how the U.S. policy goals would be achieved. “We want Afghanistan to be terrorist free,” he argued. “If the Taliban can do that, fine. If not, we will work with someone else as long as they make it terrorist free.”³¹

Once the United States had committed to state-building, however, it proved difficult to scale back objectives and realign policies to address less-expansive strategic aims. Commenting on the policy inflexibility that they had encountered, a former Under Secretary of Defense observed that institutional momentum hampered the adoption of more-flexible strategies that were more in keeping with the initial aims of the conflict. “I think there’s a sunk cost argument that we should really, really care about the nature of the government and whether the Taliban is in or out, and all that. If you have a constellation of governance that keeps us achieving that goal of it’s not a safe haven, then should we be fine with that? Should we not care as much about the complexion of the government?” As a second former Under Secretary of

³⁰ Woodward, 2002, p. 106.

³¹ Woodward, 2002, p. 130.

Defense commented, there was a persistent mismatch between the strategic goals and the “clearly inadequate means in terms of quantity of commitment and timeline” that were necessary to achieve them. In their assessment, “We needed to lower the bar,” but “that’s politically hard to do, right?”

Bureaucratic Inertia

As the war progressed, there were few options for stable end states that would have functioned as acceptably bad alternatives. Exploring the possible outcomes of a U.S. withdrawal, a 2018 *New York Times* analysis concluded that the available end states by that point in the conflict were a depressing array of options ranging from the breakdown of the current government, which would likely need to be entirely reimagined as a confederation of ethnic factions; an era of warring strongmen similar to Somalia in the 1990s; or another civil war.³² Echoing this point, a senior military commander observed, “it’s pretty clear to everybody. You’re not kidding anybody. You’re not going to have a decisive military victory, and you don’t want to lose.”

When asked about the continuation of the conflict, a former ISAF commander commented, “I think it’s literally people don’t have a better option. They know that to win would take more effort than we’re ever willing to do. They know that stepping away would allow the likely resumption of the terrorist position there, and politically and sort of morally, nobody wants that.” “It’s not that we’re not grappling with these problems,” a senior civilian advisor observed, “but we’re not getting solutions to these problems, we’re not cracking these problems.” The ISAF commander succinctly summarized this view: “If I had a clever idea, I’d give it to you, but there isn’t. I mean, kind of the best option is, ‘S---, what do we do?’”

Given this deep-seated understanding that policy was not working, how do we explain policymakers’ tendency to stay the course, even in the face of the apparent failure of existing strategies to produce the desired results? One senior policymaker framed it as a product of the organizational inertia and the bureaucratization of the war. As he explained, “When you’re in a

³² Max Fisher, “In Afghanistan’s Unwinnable War, What’s the Best Loss to Hope For?” *New York Times*, February 1, 2018.

mission as long as we've been there, it becomes bureaucratized." There may be, he speculated, "sort of a break point or a threshold where bureaucratic forces take over and, therefore, you do tomorrow very much what you did yesterday. Why? Because that's what bureaucracies do, right?"³³

One set of factors that drove this dynamic was that for most of the war, policymakers entered their positions to oversee a portfolio of ongoing programs and strategies. As a former Under Secretary of Defense explained, "[T]here was this sense of this wasn't the beginning, you were inheriting so much of defined objectives, defined goals, programs that had momentum but not enough, people who were invested. It wasn't a blank sheet of paper." This sense that policymakers were inheriting ongoing programs with few real alternatives led to an institutional inertia as decisionmakers tried to make existing efforts work. "I think there was an increasing awareness, that we were kind of stuck," a senior civilian advisor in the Obama administration described. There was constant pressure to give current strategies a little more time, he recalled; the argument was "always just one more year." As he reflected, "I'm not questioning anyone's motives at all, I think people genuinely believed it and had invested so much that they believed it." In his assessment, however, "I think if you stood back objectively and were looking at it, you had to say, wait a minute, we keep hearing the same arguments. The metrics, even in the best-case scenario, are not looking a whole lot better, and the worst-case scenario is they're actually looking worse."

Underlying the continuation of existing strategies was a persistent optimism bias, a senior policy advisor explained. When faced with the stagnant or deteriorating situation, "you can argue these things take time and who's to say we're not going to see a turning point in the future?" Or, he suggested, "they could say we haven't implemented every policy lever available to us." Because there are always additional factors that can be influences, he noted, the policy debate can be extended by focusing on these additional levers. Using this logic, he recalled that policymakers could argue that "If somebody just let us influence those . . . whether that's tightening the screws on Pakistan or loosening the kinetic authorities for forces on the ground, . . .

³³ See also Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-967-ARPA, 1972.

well now, things can be different in the future.” The effect of this dynamic on decisionmaking, he observed, was that the combination of factors “can lead people to go, ‘well you know, when you squint at this, and you imagine what we might do differently next year and downgrade our objectives a little bit, increase the resources and authority a little bit and squint at it, yeah, stick with it.’” The end effect, he observed, was that “there’s just an optimism bias,” meaning that policymakers rationalize “that, well, yeah, it’s not going well, but there’s always next year.”

This persistent optimism bias and institutional inertia shaped the set of strategic choices that were on the table. Discussing the issue of why it took so long to consider leaving and why the decision to leave was never fully executed, a senior civilian advisor observed, “It appears the issue was not posed earlier because no agency favored leaving nor did either President until Obama’s second term.”

Sunk Costs

An additional pressure on policymakers to stay the course was the issue of sunk costs. In economics, *sunk costs* refer to nonrecoverable expenses that have already been committed to a project. Viewed through the framework of rational cost accounting, the logic dictates that because these costs have already been incurred, decisionmakers should ignore them because there is no way that they can be recovered. Instead, future planning should be concerned only with whether ongoing investment in a project is worthwhile. Although the idea that “sunk costs are sunk” is well known among planners and policymakers, the psychological pressure to not walk away from the losses incurred and the resources already committed is a persistent and significant concern for decisionmakers. As political scientist Robert Jervis observed, “Cutting losses after the expenditure of blood and treasure is perhaps the most difficult act a statesman can make; the lure of the gamble that persevering will recoup the losses is often too great to resist.”³⁴ As such,

³⁴ Robert Jervis, “Political Implications of Loss Aversion,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 1992, p. 191.

policymakers tend to persevere in failing ventures, often pouring more and more valuable resources into them to justify the costs already expended.

Describing this logic, a former Under Secretary of Defense explained that “one thing I understood is some costs are sunk. . . . it’s a good reminder in the policy space, and I just don’t think we understood—we didn’t internalize that. It’s very hard for the military, in particular, to accept that some costs are sunk and you sometimes have to cut your losses.” As a civilian advisor recalled, “[T]hey were usually invested in Afghanistan, in the people, in their own comrades who had sacrificed, and no one wants to pull the plug on that kind of investment that’s literally an investment of blood. In other words, I would say it was more the latter, people just felt, my God, we’ve put so much in, we’ve lost so much, we can’t walk away from this.”³⁵

Speaking to this point, a second Under Secretary of Defense commented, “I do think on the military side there is a particular dynamic that happens, at a point where you have thousands of lives lost, . . . life and limb, PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder], all of the sacrifices that have been made of 17 years, and you take that, the amount of sacrifice and the can-do spirit . . . [gives you the] sense that it has to all add up to something.” This impacted policymaking, they believed, because of the perception that if the military feels “it’s been used in an unthinking manner, they’ve made all the sacrifice, they paid the price and now [the mission is more difficult than] we thought, so now we’re going to change our mind and hightail it out of here. That’s horrible bad faith.” Increasing this pressure was the broad base of support that the military enjoys in America. This “bad faith” would not simply cause ill feelings among Pentagon commanders but rather would extend to all who had been impacted by the war—active and reserve forces, national guardsmen, veterans, families, and their supporters.

Responding to this point, a senior military advisor commented, “There’s a counterargument which says, okay, look, if this were a business enterprise, you wouldn’t say, ‘Well, we’re going to keep investing in this just because we’ve invested in the past.’” Instead, he argued, “You’d cut your losses and

³⁵ For a related discussion on the Iraq war, see William A. Boettcher III and Michael D. Cobb, “‘Don’t Let Them Die in Vain’: Casualty Frames and Public Tolerance for Escalating Commitment in Iraq,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 5, October 2009.

try to salvage what you can and come out respectably, but you wouldn't keep investing in something, doing exactly next year what you did the last year." However, even if it was a logical fallacy from a purely investment perspective, the psychological significance of the military's sacrifices both within the military and among the American public gave the issue a continued weight in policy discussions. Even recognizing the emotional power of this argument, senior policymakers argued strongly against it. "This whole song about we can't let the sacrifice of our soldiers be in vain is just insane in my view, insane," a senior policymaker complained. There might be many valid reasons to go to war, he observed, but "it's not to validate the past suffering of four or five thousand people, by having another three or four hundred killed."

Escalation of Commitment

The psychological factors and biases toward staying the course described in the sections above are largely consistent with a decisionmaking theory known as *escalation of commitment* that describes the array of psychological factors that encourage leaders to continue with unproductive courses of action. The theory was first framed to explain America's sustained commitment to the Vietnam War, but in the decades since it has been developed to account for the tendency for business managers to continue to invest in failing strategies.³⁶ Escalation of commitment is an umbrella concept that includes numerous related and mutually reinforcing psychological factors that can drive decisionmakers to continue with unproductive courses of action. The framework is particularly broad because it addresses leaders' desires to justify past courses of action while also seeking to maximize future outcomes.

One consistent source of pressure that encourages continued commitment to failing policies is the public's expectations of its leaders. In America, managers are often rewarded for ignoring short-run disaster and for sticking it out through tough times. Accordingly, we associate persistence—"staying

³⁶ Barry M. Staw, 1976; Barry M. Staw and Jerry Ross, "Knowing When to Pull the Plug," *Harvard Business Review*, March 1987.

the course,” “sticking to your guns,” and “weathering the storm”—with strong leadership. Indeed, there is a widely shared belief in our society that administrators who are consistent are better leaders than those that change their minds. As a *Fortune* article commented about then-President Jimmy Carter, “A President must, plainly, show himself to be a man made confident by the courage of his own clear convictions. . . . The American people find it easy to forgive a leader’s great mistakes, but not his long meanderings.”³⁷ Indeed, as social psychologist Barry Staw observed, “If people see persistence as a sign of leadership and withdrawal as a sign of weakness, why would we expect leaders to back off of failing courses of action?” After Bush’s hard-fought 2004 presidential campaign against Senator John Kerry attacked Kerry as a “flip-flopper” who constantly changed his position on important issues, it seems likely that Bush and his leadership team were at pains to demonstrate that they embodied the trait of policy consistency and perseverance that they had championed.³⁸

A second critical ingredient was the years of resource constraint and lack of focus on Afghanistan between 2003 and 2007 while the NSC and the military focused on Iraq. During this period, conditions in Afghanistan had deteriorated to the point that when Bush reprioritized Afghanistan, the need to salvage and justify the continued presence of the United States was particularly salient. Decisionmakers’ expectations were still anchored in the immediate post-invasion years, when the security conditions and the prospects for rebuilding seemed rather good, however, and, consistent with the prediction of prospect theory, decisionmakers had a strong bias against withdrawing when the conditions were worse than they had been. The focus on improving conditions to improve the allies’ position in peace negotiations with the Taliban was likely anchored on the desire to reattain this position of advantage.

While decisionmakers in both the Bush and Obama administrations wrestled with policy options, the conflicting and incomplete intelligence

³⁷ E. J. Hughes, “The Presidency Versus Jimmy Carter,” *Fortune*, December 4, 1978, p. 58, quoted in Barry M. Staw, “The Escalation of Commitment to a Course of Action,” *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1981, p. 580.

³⁸ Jim Rutenberg, “The Ad Campaign: Bush Spot Portrays Kerry as Flip-Flopper,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2004.

assessments of American progress in Afghanistan allowed decisionmakers to believe that turnaround was possible.³⁹ From a psychological perspective, when people receive intermittent rewards, as from slot machines, they can become quite persistent in what are ultimately unproductive behaviors. Moreover, if a decline in the rewards is slow or irregular, people are likely to continue even after the rewards have disappeared. In the context of Afghanistan, the initial successes and prospects for success in rebuilding the country provided a psychological motivation to continue even as security conditions began to deteriorate. Additionally, when data are ambiguous (as they manifestly were in Afghanistan), they allow decisionmakers to filter information that matches their conceptions to justify their continued strategy.⁴⁰ When seeking to justify a continued action in the face of negative outcomes, this selective information biasing can also focus on exogenous and nonre-occurring setbacks that are framed as temporary obstacles that are impeding progress. In Vietnam, for example, monsoon rains, equipment failure, and lead time for training allies were presented as temporary setbacks that would soon be resolved, allowing U.S. strategy to succeed.⁴¹ As described above, the persistent one-more-yearism is symptomatic of this belief. Taken together, these factors created a psychological impetus to demonstrate perseverance and to salvage the war while setbacks and uneven successes could be interpreted in ways that justified continued optimism.

The issue, as a former senior military commander observed, was that “What we didn’t do is have the hard conversations . . . wipe the whiteboards clear and say, ‘Okay, what are the parallels [between] Afghanistan and Vietnam? What did we screw up in Vietnam? What are we en route to screwing up in Afghanistan, and how do we stop that?’ Now, let’s look at Afghanistan and let’s say, . . . ‘What’s achievable? What’s achievable for a cost we’re willing to pay?’” Instead, policies were allowed to continue because of a lack of real alternatives and because of an emotionally charged need for success.

³⁹ See Chapters Five and Six for additional analysis of the role of intelligence assessments.

⁴⁰ David F. Caldwell and Charles A. O’Reilly, “Responses to Failure: The Effects of Choice and Responsibility on Impression Management,” *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1982, pp. 121–136.

⁴¹ Staw, 1981, p. 580.

Remarking on this point, a former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan observed that “you would assume that the policy debates would center about force levels in Afghanistan, and strategy in Afghanistan would focus much more on what precisely is the nature of the threat there today . . . [than] it actually was.” For many years, they observed, “there wasn’t any kind of wholesale ‘let’s review the threat.’ It’s a bit of a mystery to me why—unless there are just explanations and once you’re in, there’s a momentum to the mission regardless of whether it’s actually calibrated to the threats of the day.” This bureaucratic and organizational inertia was, in part, the product of cognitive and psychological processes that made it politically and psychologically easier for policymakers to continue with the status quo than to seek reductions in strategic goals.

Building on this psychological drive informing policy discussions, the chapters that follow will explore the organizational factors that allowed it to continue.

Bureaucratic Dynamics and the Structure of the Policy Process

Organization cannot of course make a successful leader out of a dunce, any more than it should make a decision for its chief. But it is effective in minimizing the chances of failure and in insuring that the right hand does, indeed, know what the left hand is doing.

—President Dwight Eisenhower¹

Presidents get the national security process they deserve.

—National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley²

American foreign-policy decisionmaking is, by tradition and necessity, a group activity. The scale of the U.S. government's responsibilities and the complexity of the decisions it undertakes require a kaleidoscope of offices, organizations, agencies, and departments designed to aid the President in the formulation and implementation of policy. These intricate apparatuses are often concealed under a shorthand that describes "national governments as if they were centrally coordinated, purposive acts of individuals," Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow write in their formative study of crisis decisionmaking, but this simplification "obscures the persistently neglected fact of government: the 'decisionmaker' of national policy is obviously not

¹ Dwight David Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956–1961*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965.

² Quoted in Kori Schake and William F. Wechsler, *Process Makes Perfect: Best Practices in the Art of National Security Policymaking*, Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, January 2017, p. 17.

one calculating individual but is rather a conglomerate of large organizations and political actors.”³

How does the organization of an administration—and, in particular, the design of its policy process—inform its decisionmaking? As discussed in Chapter Three, scholarship on American foreign policy decisionmaking has demonstrated how patterns of organizational behavior—the process by which policy options are formulated, debated, and decided—mediate policymakers’ perception of information, risk, and opportunity. Within a collective decisionmaking environment, the structures of U.S. decisionmaking—defined here to include both the organizational system in which policy options are prepared, debated, and decided and the bureaucratic and interpersonal relations through which this information flows—helps to shape policy outcomes. As political scientist Richard Snyder wrote in his foundational 1962 study, “*who becomes involved in a decision, how, and why* is essential to an explanation of why decisionmakers decided the way that they did.”⁴

This finding would be self-evident to those whom we interviewed for this project. Our senior military and civilian interviewees expressed a shared belief that the structures of the Bush and Obama administrations’ decisionmaking processes constrained the range of viable policy outcomes for Afghanistan. In describing their personal experiences in formulating and debating American policy, interviewees stressed the importance of an orderly deliberative process, noting that a well-designed organization could enhance Presidential decisionmaking, just as a disorganized or insufficient process would undermine it. The quality of American policy, they suggested, was the direct result of how advice was structured for the President, the channels through which ideas were communicated to and from the White House, and participants’ trust in the analysis and decisionmaking processes themselves.

³ Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999, p. 3.

⁴ Emphasis in original. Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, p. 65.

To understand the inertia in American policy toward Afghanistan therefore requires confronting the internal mechanisms behind government actions. This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive study of the process by which American policy toward Afghanistan was made between 2001 and 2016. Nor does it offer an institutional history of specific decision points over the course of the conflict. In analyzing the relationship between policy structures and policy outcomes, it examines how the institutional context constrained, encouraged, or produced certain patterns of thought that influenced decisionmakers' perceptions of their options in Afghanistan. In particular, the speed, complexity, transparency, and diversity of the process informed policymakers' perceptions of their capacity to propose, let alone initiate, changes. Too often, the system discouraged consideration of contrary information or drained the focus needed to deliberate, design, and implement substantial course adjustments. The result was that even when U.S. policymakers expressed displeasure with their current approach, they struggled to dislodge American policy from the status quo ante.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations were aware of the importance of well-designed procedures, and each attempted to construct deliberative processes that complemented the President's temperament and challenges. The Bush administration's managerial process worked efficiently during the early stages of the war, when the President's attention was concentrated on Afghanistan. But its dependence on presidential leadership for monitoring and mediation of internal disagreements left it sensitive to changes in the policy environment. Once attention shifted toward Iraq, the administration lacked sufficient institutional checks to avert the resulting policy drift, to identify signs of a growing insurgency, and to devise a coherent strategy to build stability. This record informed the Obama administration's approach, and the new President entered office determined to redress his predecessors' errors. In an effort to promote new thinking, the administration constructed a broad and slow policy process designed to facilitate in-depth debate. During its eight years in office, the Obama administration planned and executed two major strategic shifts, the surge and the retrenchment. In the end, however, despite the Executive Branch supporting withdrawal, the United States remained enmeshed in Afghanistan with its basic policy aims challenged but unchanged.

The Bush Administration, 2001–2002

If an administration's policy process mirrors the character of its president, the George W. Bush White House reflected the tension between the President's relative inexperience and his expansive interpretation of executive power. Unlike his father, Bush had no national-level experience and little foreign policy expertise when he entered office in 2001 and was reliant on the skilled advice of his aides. To compensate, the President surrounded himself with bureaucratic and political veterans, such as his running mate, Richard "Dick" Cheney, and a cabinet roster of seasoned military officials and civil servants, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and NSC advisor, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who previously served in the same post under Gerald Ford and had held a variety of executive and legislative branch positions. Bush, who often equated the role of President to that of the chairman of a corporation, assumed a managerial role and delegated the tasks of devising, assessing, and narrowing options to his key advisors and staff. A good executive, he once explained to a reporter, "understands how to recruit people and how to delegate, how to align authority and responsibility, how to hold people accountable for results, and how to build a team of people."⁵

The arrangement was intended to "maximize the value of the President's time and voice," one close aide explained. Bush was "not one to engage people in long philosophical discussions about key issues. He likes people—his staff, his key advisers—to study the options . . . come to him [to] frame the issues; present or make a recommendation. Then he responds to that recommendation."⁶ By both temperament and design, Bush was therefore highly dependent on the quality of the policy process he and his staff had designed.

Observers of the Bush White House predicted that this arrangement would allow the cabinet secretaries to exert equal or greater influence than the White House staff. In particular, Secretary of State Powell and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld appeared to need little direction from the Pres-

⁵ Quoted in James P. Pfiffner, *Organizing the Presidency*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002, p. 165.

⁶ Clay Johnson, interview, *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2004.

ident.⁷ The secretaries' influence was counterbalanced, however, by Dick Cheney, who "catapulted the vice presidency to new heights."⁸ Beginning during the transition, Cheney and his aides coordinated closely with the President's staff, exercised significant control over the President's schedule, and helped to manage the flow of information through the White House. Cheney enlarged the Office of the Vice President, enabling it to "work the paper" and request information from the interagency,⁹ and promoted his chief of staff, Scooter Libby, to the rank of presidential assistant, a position that granted him access to all senior meetings and put him roughly on par with the national security advisor.¹⁰ This effort intensified after the 9/11 attacks, when the administration's shift to a wartime footing drove a subsequent expansion in the White House staff's responsibilities.¹¹ With the Vice President's assistance, the White House imposed greater discipline on the decisionmaking process by assigning individual responsibility for the handling and management of a given policy issue and establishing the framework for a "tightly disciplined coordination process," enforced by the chief of staff, to oversee interoffice collaboration.¹²

The events of 9/11, however, thrust Bush into the spotlight. In the weeks after the attack, as planning for the invasion of Afghanistan intensified, the President exerted top-down control over the policy process, maintaining the pressure necessary to break bureaucratic logjams and compel his

⁷ Pfiffner, 2002, p. 171.

⁸ Kathryn Dunn Tenpas and Stephen Hess, "The Bush White House: First Appraisals," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, September 2002, p. 580.

⁹ *The interagency* refers to the many departments and agencies within the government that must coordinate their actions and share responsibilities to meet the requirements set by the executive branch.

¹⁰ Bartholomew Sparrow, "Organizing Security: How the Bush Presidency Made Decisions on War and Peace," in Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry, eds., *41: Inside the Presidency of George H. W. Bush*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014, pp. 96–99.

¹¹ Pfiffner, 2002, p. 172; Tenpas and Hess, 2002, pp. 581–582. On Cheney's unusual vice presidency, see Joel K. Goldstein, "The Contemporary Presidency: Cheney, Vice Presidential Power, and the War on Terror," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Ethics and the Presidency, March 2010, pp. 102–139.

¹² Bradley H. Patterson, *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, pp. 13–24.

aides to act quickly and decisively. “From the very beginning the President decided he wanted to chair the NSC meetings,” one aide recounted. “In the earliest phases, he chaired and we had our intellectual discussions about strategy . . . with the President there.”¹³ To ensure a unity of effort and facilitate interagency coordination, he assembled a “war cabinet” that included Chief of Staff Andrew Card, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet and met frequently at the White House. Whereas Bush previously had viewed the presidency as a managerial role, he now thought of himself as “the calcium in the backbone” of his administration. “If I weaken, the whole team weakens,” he explained to reporter Bob Woodward.¹⁴

The President’s direct engagement in American planning for the invasion of Afghanistan lent direction and momentum to the administration’s efforts, but National Security Advisor Rice was tasked with ensuring that the deliberations were thorough and balanced. Embracing her role as an honest broker between the White House and the interagency, Rice pushed for comprehensive consideration of a full range of options by focusing the group discussions, ensuring equal interagency representation, and clarifying issues for the President.¹⁵ When Bush expressed frustration with the Pentagon’s request for additional time to plan the invasion, for instance, Rice explained the motivation behind their appeal, thereby allowing the military time to devise a successful operation and protecting the trust between the President and the military leadership.¹⁶ And when disagreements between Rumsfeld and Powell reached a stalemate, she effectively wielded her close relationship with the President to “bridge” the disagreement and help him

¹³ Quoted in John P. Burke, “The Contemporary Presidency: Condoleezza Rice as NSC Advisor—A Case Study of the Honest Broker Role,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Unilateral Powers, Vol. 35, No. 3, September 2005, p. 556.

¹⁴ Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006–2008*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008, p. 430.

¹⁵ Woodward, 2002, pp. 79–80.

¹⁶ Woodward, 2002, pp. 157–202. For military leaders’ view of the White House’s time pressure, see Franks, 2009, pp. 249–317.

make a decision.¹⁷ Although more junior than the other cabinet members, Rice navigated the minefield of personalities and bureaucratic grievances to impose discipline on the decisionmaking process and guarantee the quality of debate.¹⁸

The swift success of the invasion of Afghanistan was in part a reflection of Bush and Rice's ability to discipline the initial planning process. In contrast with its preparations for the later invasion of Iraq, the White House effectively moderated internal disagreements, solicited contrasting opinions, and evaluated a broad spectrum of options, ranging from inaction to coordinated cruise missile and bomber attacks to a substantial ground operation.¹⁹ The President's personal role in the deliberations and demonstrated willingness to chastise those who delayed the process lent both unity of purpose and momentum to policymakers' efforts, while Rice's meeting procedures ensured that relevant actors were included in the debate and participants' concerns were aired.

This moment of clarity was fleeting, however. The President had selected his aides on the basis of reputation, not personality, and did little to foster a collegial environment when relations among his experienced aides soured. Managing the increasingly acrimonious relationships among Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell would have been a challenging assignment for any national security advisor, but Rice—a generation younger and with only three years of experience in government—had few advantages over her more-seasoned colleagues, who chafed at her procedures and questioned her qualifications for her position.²⁰ She had navigated these relationships

¹⁷ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, New York: Viking, 2004, p. 315; Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*, New York: Harper, 2009, p. 144.

¹⁸ Burke, 2005, pp. 556–557. For more on Rice's role in formulating policy after 9/11, see Feith, 2009, p. 48.

¹⁹ For the procedural weaknesses related to the administration's decision to invade Iraq, see Fredrik Logevall, "Anatomy of an Unnecessary War: The Iraq Invasion," in Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010; and James P. Pfiffner, "Decision Making in the Bush White House," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2009, pp. 363–384.

²⁰ Sparrow, 2014, p. 97.

well in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when there was a general consensus that the United States needed to act despite policymakers' disagreements over the particulars. But as progress in Afghanistan stalled, and as sharp differences in opinion emerged, Rice lacked both the procedures and the personal authority needed to exercise discipline, modulate rivalries, reconcile disagreements, and foster the sense of common purpose needed to focus debate and force decisions.²¹

The speed of the administration's deliberations also prevented the articulation of a clear, coherent, long-term strategy for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. With the 2002 Bonn Agreement, the Bush team codified a vision for an internationally recognized, highly centralized, democratic government based in Kabul and outlined goals to modernize the country's military, economy, and civil institutions. Senior decisionmakers deferred, however, the equally important task of designing a strategy to achieve these ambitious objectives with the increasingly limited resources allocated to Afghanistan. Focused on maintaining a unity of effort to plan and implement the war's early phases, policymakers inadvertently narrowed the scope of deliberation and punted difficult questions to a later date. Unfortunately, these questions would resurface just as the Bush administration's resources and attention were directed elsewhere.

The Bush Administration, 2002–2008

Several interviewees described the Bush administration's waning interest in Afghanistan after March 2002, when the White House's attention shifted toward Iraq. To conserve the principals' limited resources, decisions regarding Afghanistan were relegated to the assistant-secretary level, where they often languished without resolution. "We'd send people out, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would go out, but it wasn't a focus," one senior State Department official recalled; "I think it's because, I think it's true of all governments, all administrations, that one good crisis at a time is about all we can handle." Without the White House's sustained engagement—and the

²¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2013, pp. 190–216.

corresponding pressure to work through disagreements—deliberations over the implementation of policy ground to a plodding pace. In this environment, a continuation of an existing approach often became *de facto* policy.

The debate over Iraq also weakened the deliberative procedures that had facilitated the administration's success in Afghanistan. Overstretched and undermined by the bureaucratic battle between Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell over Iraq, Rice retreated from her role as an honest broker and ceased to direct the administration's internal deliberations, allowing other actors to define the scope of debate in narrower terms.²² Frustrated State and Defense Department officials complained of a "dysfunctional" policy process characterized by deadlocked deputies' meetings, bureaucratic rivalries, and limited presidential guidance. Where Rice had previously "bridged" the tense relationship between Defense and State, senior officials reportedly began to skip interagency meetings arranged by the NSC staff to resolve policy differences.²³ As one former NSC staff member complained, no one was ready "to discipline the process, to drive decisions to conclusions and, once decisions are made, to enforce them."²⁴

The NSC's abrogation of its oversight role was all the more significant because the Bush administration had designed a policy process that required an active manager, either in the form of the President or the national security advisor, to oversee coordination and collaboration across the national security community. In selecting Powell, Rumsfeld, and Tenet to lead the State Department, Defense Department, and CIA, Bush brought valuable experience and diverse perspectives into his administration—and divided the three most important national security agencies among three determined and experienced bureaucratic veterans. The system worked so long as the White House was willing and able to mediate their disputes, but with Rice weakened and Bush and Cheney preoccupied with Iraq, their policy disagreements and personal rivalries caused policy paralysis.²⁵ The result was growing uncertainty over the administration's aims, a weakened ability

²² Burke, 2005, p. 561.

²³ Evan Thomas, "The 12-Year Itch," *Newsweek*, March 30, 2003.

²⁴ Quoted in Burke, 2005, p. 566.

²⁵ Mann, 2004, p. 276.

to coordinate diplomatic and military efforts, and the absence of a coherent process to evaluate progress in Afghanistan.

As evidence of the Taliban's resurgence accumulated in 2004 and 2005, intelligence analysts, diplomats, and other Afghanistan-watchers found that they had few avenues to voice their concerns or introduce alternatives for consideration.²⁶ On Afghanistan, as on other issues, Rice did not regularly request information from the various relevant agencies and departments and did not take it upon herself to ensure that a range of options were presented in meetings of the principals, instead allowing the scope of debate to be defined by the participants in the room.²⁷ Nor did Bush encourage his national security advisor to push for dissenting or contrary views.²⁸ As a result, discussions within the administration often followed a well-trodden path. Blind spots were not identified, dissenting information went unconsidered, and alternatives were neither raised nor seriously debated until the situation in Afghanistan had so deteriorated that policymakers were forced to acknowledge that their established theories of achievable end states were insufficient.

The need for top-down pressure was evidenced in the rare occasions when Bush intervened directly to force a decision or accelerate policy implementation. The President set the pace and "made the system do what it would not necessarily do," one interviewee attested, noting that Bush's personal intervention on construction of the Ring Road in Afghanistan was critical to the project's completion. Indeed, Bush himself recognized the need for clear and direct presidential guidance after the initial chaos of the occupation in Iraq, and he constructed a system of weekly meetings to review the situation and hold his advisors accountable. "An intervention into the bureaucratic life of this project was very helpful in bringing everybody online," one interviewee emphasized, noting that the regularity of the meetings helped

²⁶ RAND interview.

²⁷ Sparrow, 2014, pp. 97–98.

²⁸ J. Patrick Dobel, "Prudence and Presidential Ethics: The Decisions on Iraq of the Two Presidents Bush," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Ethics and the Presidency, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 2010, p. 62.

to align U.S. representatives in Baghdad with Washington.²⁹ Why the president chose not to exercise similar oversight of his administration's efforts in Afghanistan is unclear.

Without clear guidance or oversight from the White House, U.S. policy toward Afghanistan entered a prolonged period of drift just as the opportunity to capitalize on the Taliban's expulsion emerged. "We lost a moment, maybe, to capitalize on what we had accomplished over here in a couple of years. To really go into villages and places where we could have maybe done some things with USAID," one interviewee, a member of the Principals Committee, suggested; "But we lost all that, and the poor guys in Afghanistan just got lost. They didn't have resources, we pulled troops out of there, we pulled everything out of there." Without a senior champion in the White House or the Pentagon, the budget for Afghan reconstruction dwindled from \$942.1 million in the fiscal year 2002 budget to just \$151 million in fiscal year 2003—with only \$1 million delegated for foreign military financing.³⁰ Without clear direction or oversight from Washington, reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan were implemented haphazardly. "It was on such automatic pilot that if you go back and look at who was doing the training of the ANA [Afghan National Army] and stuff like that, at one time we even had an Air Force officer . . . in charge of it, which is insane," recounted one White House advisor. "The Afghan National Army trained by at least nominally by an Air Force officer. I think with occasional, during the Bush administration, lapses back to look at Afghanistan and see what was going on, they weren't really decision meetings after that, so on automatic pilot."

A series of personnel changes in 2005 spurred adjustments in the policy-making process that might have contributed to new thinking on Afghanistan, had not the crisis in Iraq competed for their attention. After Powell's departure and Rice's nomination as Secretary of State, Bush tapped Stephen Hadley, Rice's former deputy, for the role of national security advisor. In contrast to his predecessor, Hadley shied from the public limelight, describ-

²⁹ In recent years, several of the President's advisors have disputed Bush's public image as an incurious and impulsive leader, describing him instead as a knowledgeable debater and a sharp questioner (Leffler, 2013, p. 211).

³⁰ Dov Zakheim, "Confessions of a Vulcan: An Insider's Story of How the Bush Administration Lost Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2011.

ing his job in one interview as that as a “facilitator” for the President and his advisors. Having served on the Tower Commission investigating the Iran-Contra affair, he believed that “the NSC should serve only as staff, never as an operational agency,” but he took early action to strengthen his capacity to oversee the implementation of presidential policy.³¹ He instituted procedures to improve monitoring, increase feedback, and institutionalize regular reassessments of policy, including through the articulation of concrete execution timelines and the identification of measures of success.³²

Of Hadley’s procedural innovations, one of the most consequential was the establishment of the new position of Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, often called the “war czar.” General Douglas Lute, who assumed the role in 2007, described his primary purpose as to ensure that the wars had “increased, focused, full-time, real-time support” in Washington.³³ Granted direct access to the President, Lute could request and collect information from all relevant departments and agencies, improving coordination and overcoming the logjams that had previously bedeviled the administration.³⁴ “What we need,” Hadley explained in an interview discussing the new position, “is someone with a lot of stat-

³¹ Peter Baker, “The Security Adviser Who Wants the Role, Not the Stage: Hadley Prefers Audience of One,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2006; Mike Allen, “Woodward: Bush Tried Locking in Strategy,” *Politico*, September 8, 2008. “The Tower Commission emphasized that the NSC and the National Security Advisor should not get involved in operations, which is absolutely true,” Hadley later explained. “But I think one thing we’ve learned since the Tower Commission report is that implementation management is a task for the NSC—not to do the implementation, but to see that it is being done by the appropriate agencies of the government. . . . I think that is a new frontier for the interagency process; not that the NSC is going to run operations, but the NSC has the responsibility to ensure that the policy decisions coming from the President are actually implemented and executed effectively. We spent a lot of time doing that in the Bush 43 administration” (Stephen Hadley, Joseph Collins, and Nicholas Rostow, “An Interview with Stephen Hadley,” *PRISM*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2015, p. 146).

³² Alan G. Whittaker, Frederick C. Smith, and Elizabeth McKune, *The National Security Policy Process: The National Security Council and Interagency System*, Washington, D.C.: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, U.S. Department of Defense, November 2006, p. 22.

³³ Gans, 2019, p. 165.

³⁴ Hadley, Collins, and Rostow, 2015, p. 146.

ure within the government who can make things happen.”³⁵ Vice President Cheney was more blunt: Lute was to “ride roughshod, if necessary, over the bureaucracy to make sure we get the job done.”³⁶

These institutional modifications were designed to provide Hadley with greater flexibility while ensuring that the wars received consistent attention, but in practice Iraq continued to dominate both the national security advisor’s and his new war czar’s time and energy. “Man, I mean, it just took pounding and pounding” to focus attention on Afghanistan, recalled one interviewee.

Lute’s position organizationally linked Iraq and Afghanistan but did not provide any safeguards to ensure an even distribution of resources across the two conflicts. The disparity was perhaps best illustrated by another NSC staff innovation: the development of a system of benchmarks to comprehensively track progress toward a war’s objectives at regular intervals. Although the Bush NSC used the strategic implementation tool to calibrate its policies in Iraq, the practice was not adapted for Afghanistan until after the Obama administration’s arrival.³⁷

The Bush administration’s neglect of events in Afghanistan hampered its ability to monitor the security situation, develop effective metrics, and pick up on warning signs that the Taliban and other militant factions were resurging. Senior policymakers were aware of the risk that the country’s endemic corruption would erode support for the fledgling Karzai government, and they acknowledged that the United States’ limited military footprint, already hollowed out to meet competing demands in Iraq, was ill equipped to maintain long-term security. Distracted by events in Iraq, however, they failed to follow these warnings to their logical conclusion and to develop a plan in case a resurgent Taliban, al Qaeda, or other adversary attempted to overthrow the U.S.-backed Afghan government. “After

³⁵ As Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, who replaced Rumsfeld in December 2006, noted, “[T]his is what Steve Hadley would do if Steve Hadley had the time” (Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Quiet Bush Aide Seeks Iraq Czar, Creating a Stir,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2007).

³⁶ David Greene, “Lute Named to War Post; Duties Remain Unclear,” *NPR*, May 16, 2007.

³⁷ Gans, 2019, p. 179.

Tora Bora and Osama bin Laden's escape . . . Afghanistan was on automatic pilot," one interviewee explained. "The goal was very clear, get al Qaeda originally. Then as we started to have our attention wander over to Iraq, we just left it and it was on sort of an automatic pilot and our guys were still in combat." Iraq was the "war that we're at risk of losing in a way . . . in a dramatic fashion, whereas Afghanistan is something we're continuing to work at," another interviewee clarified. "It's not that we're not grappling with these problems . . . but we're not getting solutions to these problems, we're not cracking these problems."

As a result, the administration was caught on its back foot in 2006, when fighting in the country suddenly and dramatically intensified. Two years later, Bush ordered Lute to conduct a "soup-to-nuts" review of the war. But time had already run out; completed shortly after the November 2008 presidential election, the review was passed along to the incoming Obama administration for a decision.

The Obama Administration, 2009–2010

Obama continued the trend of centralizing decisionmaking within the White House but eschewed Bush's managerial model in favor of personal interaction and oversight. Where his predecessor had expected his national security advisors to function as honest brokers, summarizing and distilling other actors' disagreements for the President's consideration, Obama "insisted that dissenting perspectives be presented to him directly in front of those favoring the consensus policy."³⁸ He emphasized the need for multiple viewpoints and pushed his subordinates to confront and work through their disagreements in front of him and each other. "You've got to make decisions based on information and not emotions," he told one interviewer, framing his emphasis on personal engagement as critical to a rational approach to decisionmaking. "The President made it clear that he wanted every premise and assumption to be challenged, and that he knew everyone came into the room from whichever stakeholder you were, with a certain set of premises and assumptions, and he wanted to make sure they were

³⁸ Pfiffner, 2011, p. 247.

challenged and they stood up to scrutiny,” a former White House official explained, summarizing a view expressed by many of the other interviewees with whom we spoke.

The corollary to Obama’s conviction that careful and thorough deliberation could improve policy was his belief that his predecessor’s failure to build a robust decisionmaking process had contributed to the imbroglio in Afghanistan. “There was an initial lack of trust and respect for the experts who had been working the issue for years in the bureaucracy” but had nonetheless failed, in the incoming administration’s eyes, to devise a coherent strategy, said one interviewee. From Vice President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel’s pre-inaugural trip to Afghanistan, Obama had taken away the message that the deteriorating situation was the result of the Bush administration’s failure to impose discipline upon his policy apparatus. “The headline was ‘ask ten different people what our objective is and get ten different answers;’ that bothered him a lot,” recalled one interviewee; “I think he felt he needed to get to the bottom of that. . . . It was less getting out of Afghanistan and more of getting it right that was motivating him.”

Over the course of his first year in office, Obama held a series of formal meetings to debate the future size, composition, and role of the U.S. military commitment in Afghanistan. The approach hewed closely to the multiple advocacy model preferred by many scholars of presidential leadership and organization, but the new administration initially struggled to apply the framework.³⁹ Despite Bush’s effort to smooth the presidential transition by directing his staff to coordinate and cooperate fully, tensions between the new political appointees, outgoing officials, and career staff complicated the administration’s efforts to gather information and design and implement

³⁹ “The president wanted every question asked, every assertion examined, and . . . everyone on his team to have the opportunity to voice their opinions before a decision was made,” writes John Gans in his study of the NSC’s evolution. “If the president and his team played their respective parts, it was assumed, policy would improve, and Washington might just come to make decisions based on reason and principle” (Gans, 2019, p. 176). See also Pfiffner, 2011, pp. 246–247. For multiple advocacy models, see Alexander L. George, “The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 1972, pp. 751–778; and Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980.

new procedures.⁴⁰ The White House sought to include political appointees and career officials in its discussions, although members of the latter community complained that they were often excluded from the President's close circle of former campaign staffers. "The new administration coming in was pretty chaotic," recounted one interviewee, who suggested that the burden of imposing order fell onto the incomer. "The fact remains, loyalty trumps competence, especially in the immediate aftermath of a hard-fought campaign."

The slowdown frustrated military leaders, who unsuccessfully petitioned the White House for direction as the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. To avoid burdening his replacement with a policy that might narrow his options, Bush had deferred an earlier request to increase troop levels. Cognizant of the urgency of the request, military leaders were therefore disappointed when the White House demurred. "The military holds it until after the inauguration and hands it to the new administration, who goes, 'Hey, wait a minute. We just are in office like a day, and you're asking for more troops. This is like Vietnam escalation. We need time to look at it,'" recalled one participant in the debate. "The response by the military is, 'Well, we don't have time, because we need those troops to secure the election.' And the administration goes, 'Whoa, we got to review Afghanistan.' So there's this painful period when DoD [is saying], 'We actually need a decision on these troops.' The administration is going, 'Hey, don't rush us. We got to look at this.'"

The organization of the Obama administration's review process only compounded the military's concerns. The nine-week Reidel review, launched shortly after the inauguration, was "not properly led, ill-structured, and so painful that the President has never done anything like it since," one team member told an interviewer.⁴¹ Rather than clarify the administration's options, the review prompted the White House to commission General

⁴⁰ On the Bush administration's preparations for the transition, see William G. Resh, "Appointee-Careerist Relations in the Presidential Transition of 2008–2009," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December 2014, pp. 700, 703.

⁴¹ Quoted in Matt Waldman, "System Failure: The Underlying Causes of U.S. Policy-Making Errors in Afghanistan," *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 89, No. 4, July 2013, p. 833.

Stanley McChrystal and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry to produce two supplemental studies. The parallel reviews were plagued by high-profile leaks that strained relations between the military and diplomatic communities in Afghanistan and sowed distrust in the process.⁴² The complexity and pace of deliberations worsened the general perception that the new administration was unsure of how best to proceed. At a time when diplomatic and military officials in Afghanistan were looking to the White House for direction, the new administration appeared to have punted responsibility for articulating U.S. objectives and strategy to those responsible for implementing the President's policies.

Obama's efforts to solicit and consider a broad range of options deserves commendation. The President and his advisors engaged in a wide-ranging and inclusive deliberation and sought out diverse perspectives on the problem of Afghanistan. In soliciting external proposals before articulating a clear definition of its own objectives, however, the administration inadvertently skewed the debate toward the status quo. Recounting the 2009 debate, a senior participant in the Afghanistan policy review articulated an attitude shared by many of the interviewees with whom we spoke: "We really needed to have that discussion on what it is the mission is and what it is the end state is going to be. We needed to solve that. But people were trying to figure out, 'Well, you tell me what it costs, and I'll tell you how much I want to buy.' You can work both directions, but the bottom line, what happened is we didn't change the mission statement, we didn't change my understanding of the end state."

After nearly a full year of deliberations, Obama unveiled his Afghanistan strategy in December 2009 during a speech at West Point.⁴³ With the announcement, the White House signaled the President's intentions and addressed the demand for clear leadership from Washington. The speech was an important signal of the President's intentions, and it reflected his deep engagement with the issue over the previous year. Yet the delay in

⁴² RAND interview; Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010, pp. 195, 280.

⁴³ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the New Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Washington, D.C.: White House, December 1, 2009c.

articulating a clear and coherent policy had imposed its own costs. “I [was] shocked at the amount of emotional baggage there was from the original Afghanistan policy review. The way it manifested was in kind of a general hostility towards the Defense Department and suspicion and distrust,” one Pentagon official recounted. The perception that the President and his administration were either unwilling or unable to respond to changing circumstances in Afghanistan would color military leaders’ reactions to the White House’s actions in the years ahead, ensuring that missteps and miscommunications were interpreted as evidence of either micromanagement or malintent. The result, as John Gans writes in his history of the NSC, was a self-fulfilling prophecy: “When the NSC, including those with military experience like [James] Jones, Lute, and [John] Tien, began to more forcefully manage the Pentagon, there were additional frustrations and leaks at the Defense Department, which only led to stronger White House arm-twisting.”⁴⁴ In this environment, building the consensus necessary to design and implement a change in policy seemed a herculean task.

The Obama Administration, 2010–2016

The Obama administration developed a more consistent series of deliberative procedures over 2010. If the policy process had been organized previously along, in the words of one interviewee, “swirling Venn diagrams” of information, experience lent structure to the President’s analytical and management preferences. Forced to divide his attention between other issues, Obama relaxed his command of the decisionmaking process and increasingly delegated the task of disciplining deliberations to his aides.⁴⁵ “First kind of by accident/natural course of things, then by design, the Vice President played the role of chief premise challenger in the deliberative process, at least of the principals in the Cabinet level,” a former White House official noted. To preserve senior officials’ resources, questions were increasingly

⁴⁴ Gans, 2019, p. 184.

⁴⁵ RAND interviews. The back-channel and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiations with Iran, the rise of the Islamic State, and the United States’ ultimate intervention in Iraq and Syria demanded substantial presidential attention.

pushed down to the deputy level, where Lute and the NSC staff oversaw the flow of information to the President. “At the end of the day, the President is the guy who gets paid to make that decision, but we were making every effort, as good bureaucrats should, to have decisions made at the lowest possible level, so the president’s desk didn’t get cluttered,” one White House official explained. “To give him a recommendation, as opposed to options wherever we could, again, so his life was a little bit easier.”

In an effort to meet Obama’s standards for thorough debate, his aides subjected each proposal to a robust review procedure of multiple inter-agency meetings. Several interviewees credited the process for sharpening their ideas. As one interviewee noted: “[I]t really forced people to defend their arguments, not in an off-handed way, but to really be able to bolster what they advocated. I think it led to people modifying some of the things that they were recommending and some of the premises didn’t stand up to scrutiny. So I thought that aspect of things was quite well done and among the better I’ve actually seen in government.”

Others, however, complained that the process imposed an undue burden that stifled creative thinking and limited the administration’s effort to respond quickly as events evolved. “The worst words anyone’s heard in the English language is ‘let’s have a meeting,’” one interviewee noted. The administration was composed of “very smart, curious intellectuals who wanted to get everything exactly right,” another added, before complaining of the resulting “series of endless meeting after meeting trying to get everything right.” A senior Pentagon official was more blunt: “[T]he process we went through to land at the decision [to surge] was like a root canal.” To ensure that their positions were heard, some officials resorted to circumventing the established procedure. Feeling that their proposals were buried in the avalanche of meetings, advocates of a counterterrorism-plus model prepared and presented a paper directly to the President. “That was not formally part of the process and for which we got some flack,” one participant noted. “But we felt we had a higher obligation to make sure he had all the options in front of him.”

That Afghanistan was only one of the complex issues on the administration’s docket made the bureaucratic process seem particularly onerous. “There’s a real choke point,” said Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy, commenting on how the centralized White House

system could become overwhelmed. “There’s only so much bandwidth and there’s only so much they can handle at one time. So, things start to slow down.”⁴⁶ The paper production and logistics of maintaining the meeting schedule “overtaxed and overscheduled” the principals, “who had their own work to do and departments to manage, and grew to resent the heavy load,” Gans writes.⁴⁷ By 2014 and 2015, nuclear negotiations with Iran, the rise of the Islamic State, and a variety of other issues crowded the administration’s deliberations. “That affected, I think, the thinking too, as far as how many balls can you have up in the air here,” one interviewee explained. “Poor Afghanistan has just gotten caught in a downdraft all the time, through different events and scenarios and dynamics.”

Intended to build consensus and ensure interagency support, the prolonged deliberative process thus often wore down participants, who agreed to settle for a compromise out of a belief that *any* decision was better than continued uncertainty. Reflecting on the 2012–2014 period, one interviewee recounted their frustration with the administration’s “policy drift.” “We did everything that we believed possible and reasonable to make a case that . . . the lack of direction was harming conditions on the ground and making it more challenging to build the capacity of the ANSF and therefore undermining the very objectives that we said we want to pursue and the President had directed us to pursue,” they explained, articulating a frustration evident across other discussions with interviewees involved in the period’s deliberations. “We made it clear. . . . While we would prefer not to have a glide path that shows us getting to zero by the end of the administration, if that needs to be done, let’s do that.” Ironically, the administration’s efforts to draw out honest assessments and build a unified effort instead incentivized participants to settle for proposals that they did not support.

Rather than build trust in the process and support for the administration’s policies, the slow pace of deliberations also caused many officials to question whether the meetings were hosted in good faith. “The way the NSC . . . ran was to examine everything from every possible angle and to wire brush everything. . . . They really kneaded the dough before they brought it

⁴⁶ David Rohde and Warren Strobel, “The Micromanager in Chief: How Syria Overwhelmed an Overcentralized White House,” *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2014.

⁴⁷ Gans, 2019, p. 176.

to the President,” one Pentagon official recounted, noting that “you couldn’t always tell whether it was because the President truly had a position and they were trying to drive the decision that way, or whether they . . . kind of knew they were going to do something that . . . most of the interagency wanted to do, they still explored all of the other options, because I think they felt like they owed it to President Obama to look at every option.” Other interviewees viewed the delays as an effort to punt difficult or politically unpalatable decisions. “There’s a period of time where everybody at every level in the State Department and DoD were lined up sporting the same recommendations. Then we got into what was a near-infinite do loop that appeared to be nothing but stalling on the part of the National Security staff,” one interviewee described. “It was like, ‘Really? We’re going to spend two more weeks talking about 10,568 versus 10,483 or 9,993 three years from now?’ . . . we drifted for a full year, January 2013 to January 2014.”

This distrust in the Obama administration’s decisionmaking process was particularly pronounced among military officials, who expressed concern that White House staff deliberately misconstrued their advice. One interviewee, a former ISAF commander, complained that Lute “created a small empire for himself and began to grade our homework,” compelling the defense secretary and Joint Chiefs to instruct military officials to avoid communicating with the President’s advisor individually.⁴⁸ As a result, commanders in Afghanistan felt disconnected from deliberations in Washington: “I would get readouts and I would learn the state of play, but I would learn the state of play basically through my conversations with NSC staff, rather than from direct engagement,” the interviewee recalled. A former NSC official interviewed for this project acknowledged the possibility that some proposals were mistranslated during the effort to lighten the President’s burden. “We were making every effort, as good bureaucrats should . . . when there were options, to round off some of their rough edges so it wasn’t the sense of making such a stark black-or-white decision,” they noted. “I think they were inherently complicated and nuanced and difficult. . . . maybe that was a mistake.”

⁴⁸ RAND interview. For related discussion that Lute manipulated the flow of information or maneuvered to exclude military commanders, see Gans, 2019, pp. 183–185.

The Obama administration had hoped that a more deliberative policy process would strengthen American policy in Afghanistan. In practice, however, their procedures misaligned decisionmaking from events, limited policymakers' ability to respond to crisis, and curtailed the administration's flexibility.

In their study of the Kennedy administration's decisionmaking process during the Cuban missile crisis, Allison and Zelikow theorized that organizations would construct and emphasize "short-run feedback" mechanisms to balance the need for deliberation with the urgency of interventional events.⁴⁹ In reality, the Obama administration was defined by delays and backlogs that precluded quick adjustments. Military and civilian officials resented the policy development process, which was designed to solicit new ideas but often reinforced the status quo by default. Rather than produce incremental decisions with the expectation of correcting course frequently in response to new information, the administration became trapped in drawn-out debates that left officials unable to respond effectively to changes in the strategic environment. Moreover, the pressure to debate each decision "down to the fifth significant digit in order to satisfy the President that they had done their job, their due diligence" often left military and diplomatic officials in Afghanistan in limbo. When events outpaced the speed of guidance from Washington, officials were forced to improvise, producing a pattern of "policymaking by drift" that undermined U.S. objectives and drained momentum from efforts to formulate or implement new policies.

Conclusion

The task of designing an effective decisionmaking process is necessarily fraught. The burden confronting U.S. presidents is immense, resources are limited, and each leader must design procedures that reflect their own analytical tendencies—including both their strengths and their weaknesses. A manager must impose discipline while maintaining trust, direct attention while encouraging productive dissent, and foster a sense of unity of effort while guarding against groupthink.

⁴⁹ Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

How, then, did the structure of the deliberative process inform the direction of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan? Unexpectedly, two very different deliberative structures yielded the same result: an organizational tendency toward prolonged policy stasis. Despite their variations, both systems privileged maintenance of existing policies and discouraged serious consideration of alternatives, either by limiting the perspectives presented to critical decisionmakers, as in the Bush administration, or by overburdening principals so that they were unable to thoroughly vet or defend their options, as in the early Obama years. Analysis of the Bush and Obama administrations' records therefore underscores the importance of designing institutional mechanisms that sustain high-level attention on priority issues and shelter the necessary resources from competing demands and distractions.

In the end, however, the commitment of the Executive Branch offered the solution to the persistent bureaucratic inertia. Despite, or perhaps because of, the lengthy, minutiae-oriented policy process by 2014, the President and his staff developed and pushed a plan for withdrawal, even though it faced resistance by all of the relevant agencies.

That the urgent crisis in Iraq would command the bulk of the Bush administration's attention after 2003 was perhaps unavoidable. Yet the lack of institutional safeguards to ensure that time and resources were reserved for monitoring the situation in Afghanistan meant that basic assumptions were not questioned, early signs of the Taliban's resurgence were overlooked, and potential correctives were not formulated. Even as the security situation deteriorated over 2006 and 2007, there was little pressure to carve out space to review American policy. Institutional innovations, such as the creation of the position of a war czar, aided the administration's effort to design and execute a new strategy in Iraq. Similar efforts to dedicate resources to Afghanistan would have signaled the issue's importance, provided a mechanism to collect and coordinate information, and perhaps encouraged the articulation of new options.

The Obama administration recognized the need to institutionalize the deliberative process and construct multiple avenues for the collection, analysis, and deconfliction of information. Yet its highly centralized system was as likely to frustrate as to empower its participants. Intended to encourage a comprehensive debate, the system lagged behind the pace of events, leading to accusations that decisions made in Washington were

no longer relevant to commanders, aid workers, and diplomats in Afghanistan. Built to promote inclusivity and diverse thinking, it instead overburdened cabinet officials and their staff and watered down their deliberations. Put simply, the Obama administration's procedures provided a platform via which new ideas could be voiced but drained decisionmakers' motivation to change course when opportunities arose. By Obama's second term, the President and his administration had resolved to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and stood firm in this resolve in the face of opposition from the other agencies. The rise of the Islamic State undercut these efforts, however, and the administration settled on a dramatic drawdown as the best strategic alternative.

Civil-Military Relations

I've never heard a general say, "Give me fewer troops." They don't do it. They're in, they've got a reputation to maintain, and so they can't come before the public, the American public, and say, "I think we're failing." So they're caught in a mess, but the politicians put them in that position.

—Interview, former National Security Council member, 2019

The military has got to be careful we don't do that, we don't talk to policy-makers and go, "You wouldn't understand, Mr. President. We've got to do this, and just trust us military guys." That's not the way it should be, in my view.

—Interview, senior military commander, 2019

The American political system was intentionally organized to make military commanders answerable to civilian leaders, but this structure demands a balance between the soldier and the state—where policymakers must chart a careful course between respecting military expertise and still allowing for accountability through civilian supremacy.¹ Although some political theorists have argued for a system of military professionalization, where the military is far removed from politics,² the changing nature of war has caused military and political decisions to become increasingly entwined.³ During

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.

² Suzanne C. Nielsen, "American Civil—Military Relations Today: The Continuing Relevance of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*," *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2, 2012, pp. 369–376.

³ Nielsen, 2012.

the course of the war in Afghanistan, for example, civilian decisionmaking moved beyond high-level strategy and doctrine to mandate troop-level and force-size decisions.⁴ However, although the decisionmaking space was becoming increasingly blurred, professionalization was reducing the overlap between the groups. As a former senior military commander observed,

If you go back to the Executive Committee that President Kennedy put together for the Cuban Missile Crisis, of the people in that room, the vast majority were World War II veterans. They may not have been generals, but they knew what they were talking about, and they had a sense of it. When you come from completely different worlds—this very professional military and very professional policymaker group come together with no previous background—it's not conducive to a complete understanding early on, and we ought to admit how hard that is.

As the interviews discussed in this chapter demonstrate, the persistent overlap between spheres of responsibility and lack of shared experience resulted in friction and a growing lack of trust between civilian and military leaders. This dynamic is important because civil-military imbalance can negatively influence the speed of decisions, cloud assessments of success and failure, and promote destructive fragmentation of decisionmaking. In short, as one scholar has noted, “functional civil-military relations do not guarantee successful policy outcomes, but dysfunction in this critical area is sure to produce incomplete options and ineffective outcomes.”⁵ The fact that this mistrust persisted for so long, continuing through changes in presidential administrations and military leadership that saw the replacement of the entire military command and civilian administrative apparatus, suggests that the roots of this dysfunction are more systematic and organizational than personal.

⁴ Michael C. Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3, May–June 2007, pp. 97–108; George Altman and Leo Shane III, “The Obama Era Is Over. Here’s How the Military Rates His Legacy,” *Military Times*, January 8, 2017.

⁵ Christopher Patrick Gibson, *Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decisionmaking Process at the Civil-Military Nexus*, Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2008.

In the sections below, we discuss the nature of the distrust that emerged between civilian and military leadership and highlight its negative impact on effective decisionmaking. Additionally, we explore the ways in which this persistent interorganizational disfunction was exacerbated by the availability of vast quantities of conflicting reports, biased data, and incomplete intelligence. The interviews suggest that distrust and lack of agreed-upon objective assessments or a mutually accepted set of facts on the ground led to the perceived dismissal of civilian viewpoints and stalemated decisionmaking when the two sides met over metrics of success. These issues seem to have had several direct impacts: increasing difficulty making decisions around troop adjustments, increasing difficulty defining what constituted “victory,” and further slowing major reassessment. The lack of a civilian-military balance therefore appears to have slowed elite decisionmaking and made it especially difficult for them to correct course in the case of the war in Afghanistan.

What Was the Nature of the Mistrust?

Our interviews suggested a growing sense of mistrust between the civilian administrations and the military over the period of our study. However, because it was also widely acknowledged that Iraq was the principle focus during the majority of the Bush administration, these tensions did not seriously impact the planning process in Afghanistan until the end of his presidency.

President Bush came into office inexperienced with the military and with war but had the enthusiastic support of the military and had support for the military post-9/11.⁶ During his years in office, however, civil-military relations worsened as the country engaged in two massive military campaigns in which success seemed elusive.⁷ Although President Bush himself did not push the military on their policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, civilian leadership was seen as “immers[ing] themselves in operational issues such

⁶ Woodward, 2002; Anthony Cordesman, *The War in Afghanistan*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010.

⁷ Desch, 2007.

as determining force sizes” and “aggressive and relentless” in their questioning of military leaders.⁸ Retired generals called for Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to resign after military officials were overruled on troop numbers and deployment timing.⁹ Simultaneously, military leadership was out of step with the narrative that President Bush wanted to present around the ease of fighting and winning those wars, further creating a rift between the civilian leadership and the military leadership.¹⁰ One senior civilian official who served under President Bush recalled skepticism of both the military and the military’s recommendations regarding Afghanistan: “There was the sense of moving goalposts, of being unable to define victory. So we had a new commander out there, he goes out, and tells us we’re turning the corner. How many times have we seen this story? [It was always] just, ‘We’re almost there.’ We’re not almost there, we’re no closer now, in fact we may be farther away.”

These tensions became more pronounced when Obama entered office having run on the promise of getting out of Iraq and shifting focus to Afghanistan, the “good war.” As a presidential candidate, Senator Obama decried the Iraq war as “dumb” and a war of choice, pledging to reconcentrate American efforts on Afghanistan.¹¹ When President Obama took office in January 2009, he ordered a policy review on Afghanistan chaired by a former intelligence analyst, Bruce Riedel. However, even before the report had been completed, he accepted a Pentagon recommendation to send 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to combat the growing Taliban insurgency. Two months after taking office, President Obama announced a “stronger, smarter, and comprehensive” new strategy for Afghanistan: No longer would America deny resources to Afghanistan because of Iraq. Instead, the administration would enhance the military, governance, and economic capacity of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, recognizing the fundamental connection

⁸ Desch, 2007. Other scholars argue that this tension was merely an extension of the status quo and that, despite some fluctuations, the balance between the two did not change or worsen extensively during the Bush era.

⁹ Desch, 2007.

¹⁰ Nicolaus Mills, “Punished for Telling Truth About Iraq War,” CNN, March 20, 2013.

¹¹ Barack Obama, “The War We Need to Win,” speech delivered at the Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., *American Rhetoric*, August 1, 2007.

between the two countries. It would also marshal international support for the war and better integrate its own civilian and military efforts. The United States would not “blindly stay the course” but would “set clear metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable.”¹² Later that same year, another “thorough review” of Afghanistan strategy was unveiled.¹³

With these announcements, the administration made it clear that it was fundamentally changing America’s strategy that it had inherited from the Bush era, even while it continued to pursue the same high-level policy objective. The primary mission for the United States would be to deny al Qaeda safe haven and “reverse the Taliban’s momentum,” indicating a distinction between the groups lacking in the previous administration’s policy.¹⁴ Secondly, the United States would strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government and the ANSF—yet would not seek “open-ended nation building” or the creation of a “modern, centralized, Western-style” state, only the development of a “government structure . . . with the minimum set of capabilities” of any modern state.¹⁵ In pursuing these goals, the United States would show a “sense of urgency” for Afghanistan to take over security responsibilities, as it had no interest in “fighting an endless war.”¹⁶

These policy visions proved difficult to implement, however. As a senior military leader described, “As often happens that candidates make commitments based on limited understanding and then find things quite complex when they get into office, [they] see full intel and learn it’s more difficult than they thought to implement their campaign promises.” In his opinion,

¹² Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, March 27, 2009b.

¹³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, December 1, 2009c.

¹⁴ Obama, 2009c.

¹⁵ Robert M. Gates “Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 2, 2009, p. 7; Karl Eikenberry, “Continue to Receive Testimony on Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 8, 2009, p. 115.

¹⁶ Obama, 2009c.

there were then a lot of “very smart, curious intellectuals who wanted to get everything exactly right.”

In Afghanistan, then Syria, he believed that this led to a series of endless meetings trying to get everything perfect. Senior military leadership had built a good relationship with the NSC, he felt, but the administration still had a deep-seated fear that the military was going to drag them deeper into the conflict. “Which,” he reflected, “is exactly what ended up happening.”

Moreover, the sense that the new administration was coming into office intent on solving a perceived problem that the military had failed to contain caused tension from the outset. As a member of the IC recalled, Vice President Biden, who argued against increasing troop levels in Afghanistan, drew comparisons between the proposed surge and escalation in Vietnam. This framing, the intelligence official believed, angered the military and soured the relationship with the military early on. As he recalled, “Things got off to a bad start and did not foster productive deliberations. Once something like that is brought up, it has residual effect; it doesn’t stop professionalism, but it also doesn’t go away.”

During the summer of 2009, General Stanley McChrystal, the new commander of the ISAF, undertook a review of the situation in Afghanistan. His assessment concluded, “many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating. . . . NATO’s International Security Assistance Force requires a new strategy that is credible to, and sustainable by, the Afghans. This new strategy must also be properly resourced and executed through an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency campaign” Though he argued that “focusing on force or resource requirements misses the point entirely,” the strategy he outlined would require an additional 40,000 troops.¹⁷

Shortly after it was submitted, the assessment was leaked to the press. The leak, which McChrystal denies came from him or his office,¹⁸ was seen by some as limiting the President’s ability to conduct his own analysis and appraisal of the situation. As an Under Secretary of Defense for Policy described, “The president felt his hand was being forced, he was boxed in. It

¹⁷ Stanley McChrystal, NATO International Security Assistance Force, *Commander’s Initial Assessment*, August 30, 2009, Commander’s Summary 1-1.

¹⁸ Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2012.

was a total breach of trust with the military leadership, which soured a lot of that discussion.” The result, as McChrystal has described, was an “unfortunate deficit of trust” between the Pentagon and Obama administration officials eager to end the war in Afghanistan.¹⁹

In the eyes of a senior national security advisor, these events led to growing friction with the White House:

Some [DoD] missteps created—I don’t know how this fits your study, but created this sort of civil military tension. . . . I think [Obama] came in rather neutral. . . . the Afghanistan assessment report gets leaked. . . . It’s seen by that West Wing team as beginning to box the President in. If the situation is so dire, how can the President not do something about it? Then the troop numbers leaked, right? Then there were two or three incidents of McChrystal giving public remarks, which were viewed as pointing his thumb on options, which were still under consideration in the situation. Mullen did the same thing, by the way. . . . I don’t think that those were—that they had malign intent. They were clumsiness.

An Under Secretary of Defense for Policy who served during the Obama presidency reflected on the tensions that these episodes caused. “I don’t think the President had hostility,” the Under Secretary suggested. “I think the President probably grew in[to] his role as do most presidents who don’t have military service coming into the position. . . . But I think there was a view that Department of Defense is going to take us to the cleaners.”

With McChrystal’s assessment setting the tone of the policy debate, President Obama’s military advisors, backed by senior members of the NSC, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, pressed him to commit additional troops. The deteriorating situation in Iraq had been reversed with a resource-intensive surge of both troops and funding for COIN. Implementing this strategy in Afghanistan would require an additional 40,000 troops, his advisors told him, on top of the 17,000 that he had committed shortly after assuming office. His aides later said that he “felt hijacked by a military

¹⁹ McChrystal, 2012.

that had presented him with a narrow band of options rather than a real choice.”²⁰

In December, the President announced a more aggressive surge with an additional 30,000 forces, which would bring the total to more than 100,000 U.S. servicemembers in country. This was supplemented by 9,000 additional coalition forces, bringing the number of coalition forces to about 140,000.²¹ However, unlike with previous surges, the President announced that this infusion was temporary, with troops to begin withdrawing after 18 months. July 2011 was thus an “inflection point,” whereby the surge would end and the security transition process would begin. The administration emphasized that the actual withdrawal process itself was “conditions-based,” with no preordained timeline of withdrawal beyond the initial start date.²²

Although Obama would later oversee a dramatic force reduction in Afghanistan, lingering tensions with the military would remain through his first term. As a DoD official recalled of his experience during the policy debates at the time, “There was trust at the level of individuals, some trust, but there was distrust and high skepticism at the institutional level, notwithstanding high regard for John Allen and for Joe Dunford.”²³ An Under Secretary of Defense offered a more forceful assessment: “I [was] shocked at the amount of emotional baggage there was from the original Afghanistan policy review. The way it manifested was in kind of a general hostility towards the Defense Department and suspicion and distrust.”

²⁰ Landler, 2017.

²¹ Michele Flournoy, “The Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, June 15, 2010a, p. 9; Gates, 2009, p. 8; James Dobbins, “U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and the Regional Implications of the June 2014 Transition,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2014, p. 7.

²² Michele Flournoy, “To Continue to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, June 16, 2010b, p. 30.

²³ Gen. John Allen and Gen. Joseph Dunford both served as ISAF commanders.

Were These Tensions Inevitable?

Political scientists have argued that the unprecedented length of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the substantial COIN and nation-building operations involved in both wars made a high level of civil-military conflict almost inevitable because these tasks fall outside of the military's traditional expertise, making it more difficult to delegate tasks entirely to the military and much more difficult to define what "victory" might look like.²⁴

One source of tension was that the military decisionmakers felt that they had more at stake reputationally than civilian decisionmakers. As the security situation in Afghanistan began to deteriorate and President Obama reluctantly committed tens of thousands of troops to a broad COIN mission, the military leaders were eager to ensure that military efforts were successful. As one commander described, "The Army and United States Marine Corps Service Chiefs believed the reputation of their respective services was on the line. [They] were heavily invested; neither wanted to be in charge for a Vietnam-like collapse of the situation." A different commander reiterated this point, commenting that the "military side had a reputational stake, and believed they had better idea of situation because it was them on the ground in most places." Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who served under both Bush and Obama, stated his position on this point bluntly: "I believed we had to succeed there because the stakes were higher than perhaps any other senior official in the government understood. For Islamic extremists to defeat a second superpower in Afghanistan would have devastating and long-lasting consequences across the entire Muslim world."²⁵

Reinforcing this sense that the military had a greater investment to the war was the fact that it was their service members who were putting their lives at risk. A senior diplomat, the former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, observed this dynamic:

The thing is . . . if you sit in a National Security Council meeting, and there are 104,000 young men and women in uniform in a country, then they own that National Security Council meeting. And in a way

²⁴ Nielsen, 2012.

²⁵ Gates, 2014, p. 496.

they should, because all efforts should be made to make those 104,000 young men and women as effective as possible and there should be the least number of them killed as possible. So in a meeting like that, I can only imagine what it was like in Vietnam, but in the meetings that I sat in, the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they have a bigger voice, because they have 104,000 of our young people there.

As a result of these dynamics, the military was often able to place itself at the center of the policy debate. As a former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy observed, the “center of mass” shifted toward them: “People go to where the center of mass is, and whether it was in Iraq and Syria, or whether it was in Afghanistan, the center of mass often was around what the Department of Defense was doing, which I know is enormously frustrating to lots of folks” in the civilian administration.

This assessment was not shared by everyone who worked in the NSC. One participant, who was at DoD at the time, argued the contrary point: “I don’t think [the military] was too strong; I mean, Hillary Clinton was not a wallflower and she brought her own voice, and Leon Panetta was a very strong voice. There were plenty of voices around the table, Richard Holbrooke, nobody was cowed by the military.”

There was, however, the sense that the military bureaucracy and the inertia of such a large and multifaceted organization were difficult for civilian leaders to influence. As a senior military leader reflected, “[S]o the McChrystal report has been released. Petraeus is in Afghanistan, and the bureaucracy says, ‘Look, we know what you said in West Point,²⁶ but you don’t really mean it, right, because we need more troops for longer.’ Obama confronted the bureaucracy that summer of 2011 and essentially said, ‘No, actually, I meant what I said.’” However, he recalled, “When you no longer have that sort of presidential intervention, the bureaucracy sort of snaps back to bureaucratic preferences. . . . It is the tension between doing what the President has said and what the bureaucracy prefers. And what I’ve found is that whenever the President takes his eye off his policy issue,

²⁶ In this speech, President Obama announced that an additional 30,000 troops would be sent to Afghanistan but that they would begin to be withdrawn after 18 months. See Obama, 2009c.

thinking that he just took a decision, . . . as soon as you turn the corner from that decision, the bureaucracies tend to snap back to their preference.” This point was echoed by a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, who observed, “I think that the White House felt that they got railroaded into the Afghan surge. . . . There’s no doubt in my mind that very senior-level officials, not the President or the Vice President, but within the White House, felt that they got railroaded and pushed to do the surge. My own view was that it was almost predetermined.”

This frustration with the central role that the military was playing in the policy process was exacerbated by the recognition that although the military had significant power, the decisionmaking authority ultimately rested with the President. This asymmetry left civilian leaders with the sense that they were responsible for decisions that they were not in full control of. As one senior NSC advisor observed, “I think the military also, in a sense, is a powerful political apparatus, right? The military hasn’t taken the judgment. It puts the Commander in Chief in a very delicate political situation.”

Military and civilian leaders could, of course, collaborate effectively. One model for this interaction, based on the concept of military professionalization,²⁷ envisioned the function of senior military leaders in a neutral, advisory capacity. As a senior commander described:

The military has got to be careful we don’t do that, we don’t talk to policymakers and go, “You wouldn’t understand, Mr. President. We got to do this, and just trust us military guys.” That’s not the way it should be, in my view. You’re supposed to have an interrelationship between the civilian leadership and the military that’s kind of a check and balance. We work for them, and they’re supposed to be able to say, “Explain this to us. Why are you going to do this? How many casualties are you going to have?” Boom, boom, boom, explain.

The reality was often somewhat different, however. By fall 2009, the policy choices that the president was presented with were all variations of the military’s preferred COIN doctrine. Our interviewees often referenced the framing of the choices that the President was offered, often caricatured

²⁷ Nielsen, 2012.

as a set of three options in which the middle option, the one preferred by military leadership, was presented along with flawed alternatives.²⁸ A senior civilian advisor recalled this dynamic, saying that there was “clearly intent to marginalize” some options. The most notable example, he recalled, was that the Vice President’s office and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had worked to develop the “counterterrorism-plus option” to provide a less expansive option than the fully resourced COIN campaign then under discussion. As he recalled, “We were humored by others in the process who clearly did not want to do it, so we were able to talk about it at the table and go back and forth. But when it came time of presenting things to the President, the Defense Department basically ignored it or made it a footnote.”

This inability to present real policy options to the President because the military was in control of the mechanics of the process was a source of considerable annoyance to those who were involved in decisionmaking at the time. As one participant remarked:

I don’t think it’s the way to do business . . . [they] ended up going around the process to present the idea more robustly to the President. . . . [T]hat’s not the way things are supposed to work, but I think clearly the Chairman, for whom I have great respect and admiration, just did not want to go there; the Secretary of Defense did not want to go there. So we felt the President was not getting the full story on the option, so we basically gave him a paper that fleshed it out, that was not formally part of the process.

More generally, the fact that policy debates were framed by the military COIN doctrine meant that policy discussions revolved around the detailed logistical mechanics of launching complex military operations with technical jargon that created a barrier for civilian leadership. Describing this dynamic, a military commander commented,

I mean, it’s unfair for the military to throw military jargon stuff out and then expect people to know that the definition of defeat is much more nuanced than might be evident. And so it is just like what happened when the Obama administration took over, and the request

²⁸ Coll, 2018a.

for forces was parsed. The White House came back and said, “Okay. You’re asking for 34,000 troops.” I’m going to get some of this wrong, but the gist is right. “What is that?” “Well, that’s four brigades.” “Well, how many people in a brigade?” “Four thousand.” “Well, that’s 16,000, not 34,000. Who are the others?” “Enablers.” “What’s in an enabler?” “Well, helicopters, that kind of stuff.”

Rather than simply remaining a friction to interorganizational communication, the nuances of definition were exploited by military leaders eager to maximize the resources available to them. To civilian leaders, this gave the impression that the military was trying to take advantage of them. As one commander commented, “[General] Petraeus was very crafty at finding ways to account for additional troops, find loopholes in accounting rules . . . in the end, this hurt trust with military.”

The Role of Data and Assessment

“I was not happy with the metrics, and I’ll tell you why. We were kidding ourselves.”

—Interview respondent, 2019

These underlying tensions and sources of friction were exacerbated by the lack of agreed-upon, objective data about the conditions in Afghanistan. As the security situation began to decline in 2007, intelligence assessments worked to understand the dynamics that were driving the violence and to analyze the effectiveness of both military and nonmilitary interventions to counteract it. These assessments took on increased importance as the COIN doctrine was put into action early in the Obama administration. Rather than success on a military battlefield, the COIN doctrine required the creation of a stabilized civil society in Afghanistan that would make local leaders comfortable supporting ISAF in their fight against the Taliban.²⁹ To know whether this expansive strategy was working, detailed data on the state of Afghanistan were required. No longer was military assessment to

²⁹ McChrystal, 2009.

be measured in enemy casualties or vehicles destroyed; rather, the strategy's outcome would be detected in numerous indicators that measured the levels of corruption, economic opportunity, and absence of perceived risk that the Afghan populace experienced. The problem was that there was no standard way to assess these metrics for success. One member of the NSC recalled an example of this dysfunction: "[T]here was a very active debate between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense about just how capable or not the Afghan National Security Forces was. The [intelligence] community's position was generally, 'You guys are losing.' International Security Assistance Force and the Department didn't agree with that assessment."

One issue was that, unlike past engagements, the war in Afghanistan had an unprecedented volume of intelligence gathered by drones, satellite surveillance, signals intelligence, population surveys, and social science "human terrain teams"—all of which produced staggering amounts of data.³⁰ In essence, there was *too much information*, and those who needed to interpret it lost the signal for the noise. Moreover, the data were often of questionable quality, gathered to inform poorly defined problem statements, incompletely integrated, and from nonrigorous scientific methodologies.³¹ The data collected varied by commander and were collected by actors who had personal investment in the data results and, therefore, pragmatic reasons to skew data collection.³² As one civilian member of the NSC recalled, "During [my] time in the Obama administration, the different metrics we used for security were changing all the time." A civilian advisor remembered similar frustrations with the self-serving data manipulation that was used to bolster policy positions:

It was totally subconscious, but the people aggregating the data had aggregated in such a crazily biased way. If you talk to a statistician or

³⁰ Leo Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason Lepore, *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015.

³¹ Anthony Cordesman, *The Conflicting Assessments of the Trends in Combat in Afghanistan: 2014–2018*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 20, 2018; Blanken, Rothstein, and Lepore, 2015.

³² Cordesman, 2018.

any kind of Ph.D.-level academic that they're trained never to do this, you can't have arbitrary systems of aggregating data that are favorable to the thing you're trying to show, but that's precisely what it was. They put up this chart that was very green and very positive and I asked for the underlying data and then I looked at how they got from the underlying to the chart, and they had picked break points in the data that were arbitrary and told a great story.

One underlying issue was the need to simplify the complex realities of Afghanistan so that it could be briefed to senior leaders. As one military commander recalled,

I think some of the people who did the studies, who participated in the studies, developed a pretty good understanding. But by the time the study got boiled down and put into executive format, you know, review, it's pretty homogenized and pretty short, and it becomes oversimplified. I would say that the people who needed to understand how complex Afghanistan is—you couldn't just say, "It's complex." You really got to kind of draw them a picture, and you've got to explain how the different pieces are tugging in, pushing on each other. You say, "Well, that would take some time." Well, what's worth more time?

A different senior Defense Department decisionmaker was more circumspect. Although the data were available, she recalled, they had been simplified for officials who were not deeply steeped in the relevant Afghan culture. In her assessment, the depth of data discussed was limited because, as she recalled, "we are essentially outside parties operating in a space where most of us don't speak the language."

Another persistent problem was the need for data that would succinctly capture complex qualitative issues. One military leader remembered that they "didn't have [a] way to measure corruption, though we all knew this was [a] key factor." Other NSC participants recalled similar issues that compressed complex ideas into simplified numerical measures: "As I remember the metrics, they tended to be numbers-based. . . . this idea of [Afghan military unit] effectiveness was there, but it's very hard to quantify that." As several of our interviewees discussed, the solution was to use proxy metrics and expert judgments, but this created space for conflict and disagreement over both the measures and the conclusions that could be drawn from them.

A related issue was that data were often not collected in a similar format over a number of years, so data were not comparable and trends were not evident. Data were often collected by military assessment teams who measured what they felt was most useful for understanding and communicating their effectiveness.³³

Lastly, because there was so much incomplete and contradictory data, each side had its own set of the “facts” that it could use to support its points. Politicization impacted both the process of data collection and the interpretation of the data. Although this biased use of data in war was by no means new, and scholars have detailed similar processes at work in American conflicts from the Revolution through the Cold War, the scope of data collection in Afghanistan allowed age-old dynamics to spiral out of control.³⁴ The end result of this dysfunction was that while General McChrystal, the commander of coalition troops in Afghanistan, warned that the United States was “only ‘a little better than’ 50% of the way to reaching their war goals,” Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta could look at the same data and assert that “[one should] make no mistake: We are succeeding. . . . We are closer than ever to achieving our strategic objectives.”³⁵

How Did This Exacerbate the Civil-Military Divide?

This absence of politically neutral, agreed-upon, reliable assessments that could be used to arbitrate policy views contributed to difficulties in policy debates and decisionmaking. Given the preexisting tensions between civilian and military leaders, the politicization and cherry-picking of the data deepened distrust, stalled progress, and undermined assessments quantifying how successful previous actions had been. As one civilian leader lamented,

we couldn’t even agree on the simplest, most quantifiable objective metrics available to us, never mind the hard ones, the qualitative subjective ones. Even when you tried to get those really clear ones that you

³³ Blanken, Rothstein, and Lepore, 2015.

³⁴ Blanken, Rothstein, and Lepore, 2015; Cordesman, 2018.

³⁵ Blanken, Rothstein, and Lepore, 2015.

would think would be more objective and quantifiable, there was disagreement and tussling over them.

A second NSC participant made a similar observation:

How do you make sense of these very different assessments that you're getting from two institutions that you respect? Of course, that's when you really do try to look at every premise and every assumption that's gone into the judgments that they've reached. But it was like clockwork, whenever we were doing a review and we'd start with the Intelligence Community and we'd get a very pessimistic assessment and we have the annual assessments, the terrain assessments and all that, and then we'd get the very different coloring from the Pentagon. I think that was frustrating.

Faced with conflicting analyses, this interviewee recalled that "there really was an attempt to reconcile these different pictures . . . as opposed to saying one was right and one was wrong. . . . but there were also instances where actually there probably was a right and a wrong, just an error of analysis."

Often, these divisions would emerge along organizational lines. As one military commander recalled, the "Intelligence Community assessment was going to be more pessimistic than military. Every new commander assessment asked for more resources, and then the Intelligence Community would roll in with an unimaginably negative assessment." A civilian advisor agreed, "the Intelligence Community was just painting [a] darker and darker picture and essentially the Intelligence Community became without—I'm not saying this in a—I don't think they were ever unprofessional or crossed any of their boundaries, but just their presentations were a form of advocacy for drawdown. Just like they basically said, 'what we're doing is not working and it's not going to work,' repeatedly in every meeting."

A senior member of the IC commented on these tensions as well: "[T]here was even one DC [NSC Deputies Committee meeting] where . . . the Pentagon person, I'll just say—basically accused myself and the Deputy DNI [Director of National Intelligence] of dishonoring the war dead because of our pessimistic assessments." From their perspective, "The Community's assessments were remarkably consistent for that time frame, the whole

period, of seeing what was going to happen.” The issue, they believed, was that the assessment was viewed as a criticism of military performance rather than a neutral situational assessment. “I think it was very frustrating to DoD,” they recalled, “because they saw it as a report card rather—I think if they’d taken it for what it was, DoD could have used that same assessment to argue for more resources. But, again, they took it as a report card and dug in and aggressively defended their prior course of action and their progress to that point.”

With this consistent interorganizational conflict, the validity of the data sometimes became a casualty of the debate. As one official admitted, “we wanted to be able to use the metrics that made the argument for us, whether they’re a hundred percent factual is different.” As an example, he cited the omission of regional data that were deliberately left out of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reports to forestall questions of failure.³⁶

Conclusions

Civil-military relations around Afghanistan were characterized by tension and mistrust; there was friction under President Bush, which worsened under President Obama. This mistrust was rooted both in incidents that put pressure on the leaders involved and in the very nature of the warfare itself.

Afghanistan was a lengthy conflict with uncertain metrics for success and a new focus on COIN warfare and nation-building. These factors forced the military into areas well beyond its traditional expertise and resulted in significant civilian involvement in the military’s strategy and resourcing. Simultaneously, deference toward the military had increased in America since its Vietnam-era nadir, and, as a result, the military felt that it was the stakeholder with the most to lose, both reputationally and in the sense of the very real threat to service members’ lives. As a result, the military carefully controlled the options that were presented to civilian leaders and often, from the civilians’ perspectives, seemed to box decisionmakers into a narrow set of options.

³⁶ This lapse of data was also noted by policy researchers, such as Cordesman, 2018.

Additionally, the absence of clear goals or agreed-upon metrics for success made objectively neutral assessments of progress impossible and created tensions between the more pessimistic views of the IC and the military's relative optimism. In any debate, each side had ample evidence from which to choose to support its perspective. This lack of neutral, reliable data led to deepening divides between military and civilian policymakers, further compounding an already volatile situation.

In the end, however, when the Obama administration was seriously considering a major policy change based on a rapid drawdown of forces and eventual withdrawal, the resistance to the new policy did not fall along civil-military lines. Rather, the division in 2014 was between the White House and the agencies. While the White House was forcefully promoting its new agenda, the State Department, the IC, and the Pentagon were relatively united in the desire for a more conservative policy that kept U.S. troops on the ground. Thus, while the civil-military divide caused frictions in the policymaking and strategic planning processes, it did not fundamentally inhibit the implementation of a new strategic vision.

The Role of the Intelligence Community in the Policy Process

“The IC exists to support the policymaker. . . . [It] is a service community whose sole purpose is to assist policymakers with national security issues.”

—*Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence*, 3rd ed.¹

“At end of day, we only inform and advise, not make decisions. [However,] the IC was often made scapegoats for really bad decisions.”

—Intelligence analyst, 2019

“There were the usual status checks and mild course corrections, but the IC was asked to assess a strategy that was already largely determined.”

—Intelligence analyst, 2019

Although the official role of the IC is to provide information to assist policymakers with national security issues,² the IC is not always a neutral player in the policymaking process. “Good intelligence,” it has been argued, is “the backbone of good and proper policymaking and . . . it is the work of intelligence that guides the policymaker down the road to just and reason-

¹ Abram N. Shulsky and Gary J. Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence*, 3rd ed., Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2002, p. 1.

² The IC is a broad term encompassing 16 different agencies, of which the CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Agency (NSA), National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) are the most prominent.

able policy.”³ To achieve this goal, the IC relies on policymakers to task it with appropriate questions and requirements so that it can deliver actionable intelligence. Without this symbiotic working relationship, the system is ineffective.

This chapter examines the role of the IC in the senior policy decisions surrounding the war in Afghanistan and assesses the organizational, political, and cognitive factors that shaped its ability to contribute to the policy debate. By exploring the shifting demands that were placed on them, the evolving nature of the requests for intelligence, and the assessments of the oversights and missed opportunities of those involved, this chapter analyzes the dynamics of the policy process from the IC’s perspective.

Our interviews with approximately a dozen former and current intelligence officials involved in senior-level interagency meetings as Afghanistan subject-matter experts suggest that effective coordination between the IC and policymakers is often difficult to achieve. As a senior intelligence official recounted, “The biggest single gap we have . . . is the gap between [the] Intelligence Community and policymakers. The Intelligence Community does not generally know what serves the policymakers, what’s on their mind. Very often . . . I have to explain to the agency what . . . the policymakers are thinking. They have no idea.” This disconnect can frustrate policymakers who feel that they are not being provided the information they need to evaluate specific options or situations. For intelligence analysts, the disconnect also contributes to a skepticism of decisionmakers’ willingness to take their evaluations into account. Several intelligence analysts interviewed for this project raised concerns that they were consulted too late in the process to contribute. As an interviewee recalled of his time in the Bush administration, “There were the usual status checks and mild course corrections, but the IC was asked to assess a strategy already largely determined.” A second intelligence analyst made a similar observation, noting that during the first part of the Obama administration “the focus was on *how* the [COIN] surge would work, not *will* it work.”

³ Joe Harris, “Intelligence and Policy Making for the 21st Century: A Case-Study of the Benghazi Attacks and the Relationship Between Policy Makers and the Intelligence Community,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 25, 2014.

At the same time, simple bureaucratic pressures and organizational procedures shaped reporting to produce consensus. As one intelligence analyst observed, “[T]he sheer amount of material requiring coordination . . . made it difficult to dissent. . . . we get rated on how much we report, not how much we dissent and coordinate, so there is little incentive to go through the process of dissenting.” The result of these disconnects and organizational pressures transformed the ultimate goal of the IC in the eyes of some of its members. As a senior intelligence analyst described, “The conceit among [the IC] is that analysis is the lynchpin [of policymaking], and through the President’s Daily Briefing [PDB] and other reporting it shapes senior policymakers’ decisions.” Reflecting on their experience working on intelligence issues to support the war in Afghanistan, they offered a new assessment: “I used to think that, but not anymore. When you look at the role of analysis and the IC, we should try to ensure that we don’t let analysts . . . obscure fundamental policy failures.”

A Brief History of the Intelligence Community’s Role in Afghanistan

As enormous resources were poured into counterterrorism and intelligence-gathering, the IC expanded quickly and increased its focus on a part of the world that had long been a backwater, and where developing the necessary network and expertise was difficult and time consuming. Nevertheless, in the intervening years, the intelligence bureaucracy covering Afghanistan would expand exponentially and serve a customer base that became increasingly insatiable for new analytical products. Notably, it was during this period that the maturation of drones transformed the IC’s collection capabilities, enabling individuals to be observed, tracked, and targeted at an unprecedented scale. This new and evolving technical capability shaped the focus of the IC’s work, and the CIA was increasingly tasked with conducting the drone campaign and undertaking other covert paramilitary operations. The result, as one scholar has observed, was that “intelligence played

a larger role in efforts to prosecute and terminate the wars than it did in decisions to engage in the wars.”⁴

Growing Pains and High-Value Targets: 2001–2003

Following the attacks on the United States, the IC dedicated its resources to two parallel missions: preventing similar attacks initiated from abroad and providing support for military planning for a war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Haunted by their failure to anticipate the September 11 terrorist attacks, intelligence providers now erred toward overwarning in a desire to avoid underestimating a significant event again. As one senior civilian official recalled of this period, “the Intelligence Community was telling us . . . that 9/11 was the first of what would be a series of mass casualty attacks by al Qaeda, some of which could involve weapons of mass destruction.” The dire warnings validated the heightened anxiety—evident among intelligence, military, and political officials alike—over the danger of future attacks and a prevailing sentiment that the United States needed to embrace a new posture of anticipatory self-defense.⁵

The sudden prioritization of Afghanistan, a previously understudied region, introduced new organizational challenges. “After 9/11 we received additional funding that allowed us to hire a lot of new people,” one interviewee remembered. Yet the time required to identify and develop new sources and provide specialized analytical training made lags inevitable. As a result, the IC was “still resource constrained by 2005 and 2006 as we were still onboarding a lot of newer analysts without a lot of experience,” the same interviewee recalled. “Our biggest weakness at the time was not the number of personnel, but the quality of the data we were receiving and limited seasoned talent.” Even with the added resources, Afghanistan still competed with a host of traditional and new priorities related to the global war on terror for resources and talent. “We had a conceptual and intellectual constraint without enough talent to cover an array of new priorities, which also

⁴ Richard H. Immerman, “Intelligence and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 131, No. 3, Fall 2016, p. 478.

⁵ On the effect of the terrorist attacks, see Melvyn P. Leffler, “9/11 and American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, June 2005, pp. 395–413.

included Iraq, Syria, al Qaeda, and other issues,” one official remembered. Another former analyst echoed this point, recalling that “There was a huge influx of people. . . . There were some really good people covering Afghanistan, though some were very narrow and deep and others were both narrow and shallow. It was more of a mix of talent with huge variation in quality.”

The increase in resources and manpower came with additional bureaucratic challenges. Many of the former intelligence officials interviewed underlined the issue of delineating responsibilities and coordinating across overlapping, and even at times redundant, positions. “The IC community covering Afghanistan operated strangely,” said one former analyst. “The Taliban were handled by both CT analysts and regional analysts, depending on the agency,” an arrangement that led to “lots of inside baseball, battles going on within agencies, even though they tried to keep it quiet, as much as across them. There were regional issues, other issues, [it was] not the most functional community.” According to the analyst, this was “maybe not the most functional way to operate. It could be difficult to identify the best point person to engage in another [intelligence] agency on a particular issue.”

As intelligence resources poured into Afghanistan and military operations began in October 2001, the IC was tasked with providing more operational-level intelligence. Identifying senior militant leaders who might mastermind the next attack was an early priority for both senior Pentagon officials and President Bush, who were keenly interested in the whereabouts of senior Taliban and al Qaeda leadership and requested regular updates on the status of an expanding list of high-priority individuals. Bush reportedly kept a laminated lineup of the top 20 targets in his desk in the Oval Office to mark off militants as they were caught or captured.⁶ As one former senior intelligence official recalled, “The top priority was ‘Where is OBL?’ [Osama bin Laden] as well as other senior al Qaeda leadership. It was heavily target focused.”

The prioritization of these targets “affected everything else we did,” one senior official recalled. “POTUS [the President of the United States] was understandably also focused on preventing future attacks, and we knew that putting in details about the latest capture and intel grab would get lots of

⁶ Caren Bohan, Mark Hosenball, Tabassum Zakaria, and Missy Ryan, “Special Report: The Bin Laden Kill Plan,” Reuters, May 12, 2011.

attention in the PDB.” Yet the unintended consequence of “Bush’s insatiable appetite for this type of information” was that it “crowded out other things in ‘the Book.’ Especially when you have 30 minutes to brief, if he spends 15 minutes discussing the latest capture, you’re limited in what else you can cover,” explained an interviewee. In contrast to the pursuit of al Qaeda and Taliban leadership, “[i]ndicators regarding civil government were not sexy at the time,” one official explained. “They were also imprecise and difficult to quantify. Compared to hunting bad guys they seemed so vacuous, intangible, and irrelevant. But it was probably our fault. We published and brought to his attention fewer subjects than we should have.” The result, as some senior intelligence leaders reflected, was that the IC did not make the initial investments that it should have to understand the intricacies of Afghanistan. “We were trying to target people,” one interviewee explained. “But [we] did not, at the beginning of the conflict, make the basic investment of understanding tribal politics and relationships among people at the level that they needed.”

The confluence of these three factors—the inevitable delay in developing specialized talent and assets, the emphasis on tactical intelligence, and the preoccupation with high-value targeting—hindered efforts to devise a holistic strategy for Afghanistan and ensured that contradictions within the U.S. approach often went unaddressed. For instance, a senior intelligence official highlighted the tension between early U.S. efforts to combat corruption and encourage democratic political institutions in Afghanistan and its approach to intelligence collection, which required “throwing money around to localized powerbrokers to help facilitate our operations.” “It was nutty,” they recalled. “We [the United States] were definitely speaking with a forked tongue on the issue.”

On the Back Burner, 2003–2008

The focus on Afghanistan shifted dramatically less than two years later, however, as the immediate threat to the United States dissipated and the United States invaded Iraq to overthrow the Saddam Hussein government. As U.S. forces and resources began pouring into Iraq, Afghanistan remained in a state of strategic limbo. “It was just Iraq, Iraq, Iraq,” one intelligence analyst lamented. “Iraq sucked oxygen out of room.” As they recalled, from

2004 to 2007 the IC would provide a brief to the President that covered both wars, and the time spent on Iraq far outweighed that spent on Afghanistan, which now occupied “maybe the last five minutes of a 30-minute brief.”

The consequence of this divided attention was a substantial delay in recognizing the revival of oppositional forces in Afghanistan. As one senior intelligence official recalled, “It took a lot of effort between 2002 and 2005 to get folks to realize that there was a problem in Afghanistan,” even as evidence of the Taliban’s resurgence, endemic political corruption, and barriers to effective security force training accumulated. By late 2003, they recalled, “everything slewed toward Iraq. The [intelligence] community kept the pulse on Afghanistan and were the ones to warn and bring back attention to the issue of, ‘Hey, I think you have an insurgency here too.’ . . . I think it was 2006 before folks really had to refocus back again.”

The pendulum began to swing back toward Afghanistan late in Bush’s second term. During the initial years of the conflict, a senior intelligence official explained, the CIA had responsibility for providing quarterly regional reporting to the Principals Committee of the NSC on Afghanistan. In the interim, analysis would focus on three general points: the scope and scale of Taliban violence, political stability and improvement, and the state of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. This changed in 2006, when levels of violence began to rise and the Taliban had clearly become entrenched along the border with Pakistan. At about the same time, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf entered into a series of nonaggression pacts with warlords in the border areas, which caused concern among senior U.S. officials. An intelligence analyst recalled that some senior members of the administration “began kind of hitting the panic button,” and the demand for detailed briefings grew, which typically included “more bad news.” From then on, they concluded, more resources were dedicated to examining Pakistan’s role in abetting the insurgency.

As concern about the region increased, the IC was tasked with conducting strategic reviews of the situation. As one former senior intelligence official recalled, “It felt like at least once per quarter we were asked to take another look at the question of Pakistan’s involvement with the Taliban and other terrorist organizations and asked to write a major piece for the PDB. At times the question was asked frequently enough that I felt he was hoping

that we would come back with a different answer.” During the course of these reviews, the official recalled,

I became a skeptic of all the strategic reviews that were done on Afghanistan, and this was just in 2005 and 2006! You could set your watch or calendar to them [strategic reviews]. The skepticism stemmed from the fact that the same issues were discussed and we made the same decisions again and again. It reminded me of the long, slow demise of Sears Roebuck. Every few years someone would come along to revive it when fundamentally it was not revivable. There are many things only the passage of time can resolve, and the United States could not simply push for something or throw money at it. While you can’t completely fault policymakers, who had to do *something* after 9/11, the necessary conditions for success simply were not present in Afghanistan.

With the surge in Iraq on a downward slope and the Afghan insurgency demonstrating undeniable strength, Deputy National Security Advisor and Lieutenant General Douglas Lute organized a strategic review of Afghanistan in the summer and fall of 2008. Although President Bush elected to allow his successor to make the lion’s share of any adjustments, the review called for increased U.S. resources and a more concerted focus on COIN.

Misunderstanding the Potential for a Negotiated Peace

Even as analysts attempted to draw senior policymakers’ attention to the signs of a resurgent insurgency, the IC itself struggled to evaluate the odds for a durable negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Two factors skewed perceptions of the regional political dynamics: an analytical tendency to conflate the Taliban and al Qaeda that overlooked differences in their organization, strength, and role in Afghan society and a policy decision to exclude Taliban representatives, because of their association with al Qaeda, from Afghanistan’s political system. As a member of the IC described,

A policy decision was made early on that the Taliban and al Qaeda were one and the same and that the Taliban had no role in a new Afghanistan. This paradigm drove the intel cycle, and IC analysts did not challenge this. Orders came down that they were to be hunted down, and that’s where the focus was, and it was not challenged for a long time.

As a result of this sentiment, an interviewee commented that American analysts were slow to understand that the Taliban could be negotiated with. “We missed the boat that a battered Taliban movement from 2002 to 2005 was sending various signals through various channels that it was willing to reconcile,” he recalled. The persistent assumption that the Taliban were not interested in negotiating and that they existed only as an intractable military opponent took years to erase. As one intelligence analyst explained, “The Bush administration made the decision to slam the door on reconciliation.” Even after the Obama administration took office, they went on, Washington was slow to understand that the Taliban was moving in a more political direction: “The conventional view in 2007 and 2008 or so was that the Taliban would never negotiate with anyone, including the U.S. . . . In hindsight, this was a stunningly simplistic view. Actors can have more than one thought in their head.” The analyst concluded, “We were very slow to recognize this and associated opportunities. The Taliban were seen as ascendant, with no negotiations in a serious way worth pursuing. This view had calcified in the IC.”

It was only in 2012, when the Obama administration was exploring avenues for drawdown, that intelligence on a negotiated settlement became a focus. After over a decade of disinterest, one intelligence analyst recalled, the IC now received persistent questions about how serious the Taliban were about negotiating peace, what the Taliban ultimately wanted in Afghanistan, and what the Taliban would settle for in a comprehensive agreement. When the “surge was faltering and desired outcomes not recognized,” they recalled, “the emergence of the Doha channel [the Qatar-hosted talks between U.S. and Taliban representatives] established a requirement to better understand the Taliban’s negotiating position. What will scenarios look like for intra-Afghan dialogue? What are the areas of overlapping agreement between combatants? These became more prominent questions, especially at INR.” One reason for this lack of focus was that, as a former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan recalled, the perception was that “the timing was never right for actually really moving forward on reconciliation.” As they remembered, military leaders “accepted . . . you know, that as part of counterinsurgency you have a political settlement at the end. That’s what you’re working for.” However, it was never an immediate priority because “you had to teach the Taliban a lesson to get the position

right. [Throughout] my time, that's kind of what I felt everyone was always arguing. That we just have to use a little more military strength and then we will get the Taliban in a position to be able to negotiate."

A third factor hindered efforts to assess the likelihood of success: the difficulty in assessing Pakistan's role and motives in Afghanistan. The Bush administration expressed early concern about Pakistan's role in the country, in particular the extent to which its president, Pervez Musharraf, would comply with his initial pledge to cooperate in the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had developed a list of seven conditions that the United States expected Pakistan to adopt to show its support for the U.S.-led war on terror. In essence, the demands required that Pakistan help to combat and dismantle the Taliban, a movement that its intelligence and security forces had helped to create.⁷ Faced with an ultimatum from Powell, Musharraf had accepted the terms, but whether he would abide by them remained an open question. As one intelligence analyst described it, the ongoing debate was "Musharraf, friend or foe?" A former senior intelligence official echoed this, adding, "Bush had a deep interest in this and had the most at stake personally."

Perhaps due to Bush's sensitivity to the issue, one intelligence analyst believed that the IC was not sufficiently strident in warning of Pakistan's continued support to insurgent elements: "I felt that I, we, were too slow to recognize the destructive role of the Pakistanis. We used euphemistic language in our reporting." According to their assessment, Pakistan's assistance permitted the Taliban to "reorganize, consolidate" and served as a "basic lifeline that enabled the Taliban, as a broken insurgency in 2001 and 2002, to make a stunning comeback by 2005 and 2006."

Yet this message was not, the respondent felt, communicated effectively. There were structural reasons for the failure to deliver a stronger message on the subject. The IC tended to have analysts dedicated to either Afghanistan or Pakistan, leaving a considerable gap in coverage on some of the overlapping elements that were impacting the conflict. "The IC is very siloed," one analyst commented. "The Afghan team would come in and brief, then

⁷ Woodward, 2002, pp. 58–59.

the Pak team would brief, and neither would provide comprehensive discussion of cross-border issues.”

The Obama Transition

The Obama administration entered office with a clear intention to reprioritize the “good war,” as the President had described operations in Afghanistan during the campaign, while overseeing the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq.⁸ Accelerating the shift in momentum that had already occurred in the waning days of the Bush administration, 2009 would see no fewer than three major strategic reviews focused on Afghanistan, culminating in Obama’s speech at West Point in early December to announce a significant increase in U.S. forces and resources.

Despite the IC’s commitment to objective reporting, it was not sheltered from the effects of a major political transition. Although senior intelligence officials noted that “Obama understood history and the threat emanating from Afghanistan,” the changeover in political appointees was “pretty chaotic,” according to one former senior intelligence official. President Bush issued clear guidance to his staff to coordinate and cooperate fully with incoming personnel, but, as one official went on to explain, “[L]oyalty trumps competence, especially in the immediate aftermath of a hard-fought campaign.” The result was an “inherent bureaucratic slowdown as new styles get incorporated.” As was discussed in Chapter Four, the Obama administration’s preference for interactive deliberations, rather than the hierarchical procedures preferred by its predecessor, meant that intelligence officials had to adapt to “swirling Venn diagrams” of information that took time to settle. Relatedly, intelligence officials felt that there was an initial lack of trust and respect for the experts who had been working the issue for years in the bureaucracy. “People don’t realize that intel reporting just goes on regardless of who’s in the White House,” they contended.

⁸ Landler, 2017.

New Demands in a New Administration

Some of the intelligence analysts interviewed for this project chafed at the Obama administration's emphasis on COIN doctrine, which it conceived as a holistic strategy to restore trust, promote security, strengthen civil society, and prevent the populace from turning to the insurgency.⁹ This approach was "fashionable doctrine of the day" one official reflected. In their view, "Afghanistan was the smart war and needed to be properly resourced and we would get the desired outcome . . . no one questioned the fundamental flaws in the COIN premise." Yet if the Bush administration indicated that it was not interested in reporting that questioned the feasibility of its envisioned plan to transfer responsibility, the IC now was disincentivized from straying from what was understood to be a foregone conclusion: that an Iraq-style COIN strategy would work in Afghanistan. Reflecting back on it, the analyst saw a missed opportunity: "No one really wrote a sharply worded, well-argued counter piece of analysis challenging basic assumptions of COIN. It was already baked into the cake." A second intelligence analyst made a similar observation, noting that during the first part of the Obama administration, "the focus was on *how* the [COIN] surge would work, not *will* it work."

This failure to question the fundamental assumption of the COIN paradigm was not limited to the IC. COIN had emerged as a totalizing framework whose adherents, sometimes referred to as "COINdinistas," dominated policy discussions and left little room for debate. As a then-U.S. Army colonel and West Point professor argued, "Good strategy . . . demands the consideration of alternatives, yet the American Army's fixation on population-centric COIN precludes choice. . . . [and] because the United States has 'principilized' population-centric COIN into the only way of doing any kind of counterinsurgency, it dictates strategy."¹⁰

⁹ U.S. Army, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Fort Belvoir, Va.: Army Publishing Directorate, U.S. Army Field Manuals, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, May 2014; Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, New York: Simon & Schuster Press, 2013; Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, New York: The New Press, 2013.

¹⁰ Gian P. Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-Centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2009.

New Intelligence Demands

The Obama administration's emphasis on a COIN strategy also informed the types of information it expected the IC to provide. As troops surged into Afghanistan, intelligence officials recalled that there was a corresponding increase in the demand for detailed intelligence. As a former senior intelligence official described, "[T]he demand signal was everything from tactical to strategic." Policymakers were interested in an increasingly broad set of metrics, often derived from the macro, systems-level focus of COIN doctrine. Political stability and governance, the development of Afghan security forces, the maturation of the insurgency, and the changing roles of regional actors were each cited as growing areas of interest by multiple interviewees. This assessment of the "waxing and waning of territorial control was the single biggest metric the IC was on the hook to provide," the analyst recalled.

In a carryover from the Bush administration, policymakers continued to request deep-dive assessments on topics of particular concern as well. "Every six months or so," the former analyst explained, "we would have to go through these painful NIEs [National Intelligence Estimates] or some other similar review." They went on to remember that the assessments tended to incorporate "lots of stoplights [stoplight charts indicating red, yellow, or green to depict progress on a particular objective] and indicators. It often seemed policymakers wanted answers we weren't reporting, as if to say, 'No, look at this again.' After six months, have we seen changes in Pakistan's support for or stance toward the Taliban? Of course not." The frequency of these assessments might have increased their impact, however. According to one former senior intelligence official, in the period from 2011 through 2017, "In cases where we were asked to look one, two, three, five years out in support of the strategy process . . . those assessments, no kidding, shaped policy choices."

From some perspectives, however, the primary role of the CIA during this period had shifted from intelligence-gathering to paramilitary operations. As professor and former Assistant Deputy DNI for Analytic Integrity and Standards Richard Immerman argues, "While Petraeus directed the CIA, producing intelligence estimates was a secondary concern in the IC. It came no closer to answering questions about how many—if any—al Qaeda remained in Afghanistan or across its border with Pakistan, about the ties

between al Qaeda and the Taliban, about the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistani government, or about the severity of the threat posed by the emerging Islamic State (initially called the Islamic State of Iraq).” Instead, the agency’s focus had shifted to supporting the drone campaign. As Immerman writes, quoting a former intelligence official, the CIA was “chugging along” until Petraeus’s appointment, when he “turned it into one hell of a killing machine.”¹¹

Drawdown and Shifting Priorities

As the announced drawdown of U.S. forces neared, intelligence priorities shifted to reflect the changing environment. According to multiple former intelligence officials, the IC was now tasked with evaluating the consequences of various manning and resourcing scenarios. As one former analyst put it, “We’re going to draw down, so how much are we going to draw down? What could we accomplish with troop level A, troop level B, troop level C? How much would it cost? What would be the risk to security and the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces]?” The deliberations continued through the end of the Obama administration, even as the United States was “constantly pushing the deadline and revisiting question of how far down could we go.” The former analyst concluded by noting that the IC was also encouraged to develop its own scenarios and believes that the term *eroding stalemate* came from a CIA report.¹²

Yet even as these meetings produced additional demands for intelligence reporting, the reduction in the U.S. military footprint and the increase in the territory under Taliban control had the direct impact of curtailing intelligence collection. The controversial Afghan presidential election in April 2014 touched off a months-long political dispute and added another line of high-demand inquiry for the IC, straining an already taxed system. As one former analyst described it, “The demand for analysis was very high, and it

¹¹ Immerman, 2016, p. 498, quoted in Greg Miller and Julie Tate, “CIA Shifts Focus to Killing Targets,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2011.

¹² Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “An ‘Eroding Stalemate’ in Afghanistan as Taliban Widens Its Offensive,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2016.

was difficult to just keep abreast of the ever-evolving situation, what conversations were happening on the ground, et cetera.”

Although 2014 proved to be a challenging year, the high tempo might have prepared the IC for operating in an environment with fewer resources and collection sensors. One former analyst maintained that, by 2015, “we were a well-run, well-oiled machine with very loyal customers who at least looked at our assessments, even if they didn’t always agree.” The desire for precision, they continued, was higher, likely because of the higher political stakes. This led to persistent questions of “What’s behind this?” in reaction to reporting and analysis. Afghanistan was always a challenging environment for obtaining accurate information, and intelligence collection became more difficult as the U.S. presence decreased. According to the analyst, “We were always morphing presentations to show our methodology” and would often have to concede that “sourcing is decreasing.”

As the U.S. footprint began to diminish, there was increased pressure to meet high demands with fewer on-the-ground resources. One former analyst recalls that in 2014 and 2015, as the U.S. mission was transitioning away from combat operations and forces were decreasing, “demand was abnormally high . . . due to the 2014 [Afghan] election upheaval, questions surrounding the transition from combat to TAA [train, advise, and assist], the Kunduz attack, etc. We were held together with duct tape and bubble gum as people [policymakers] were more sensitive to tactical changes.” Nevertheless, putting it in broader perspective, the former analyst conceded that their agency “maintained a huge office dedicated to Afghanistan” and even though “wild cards would creep up all the time” in the form of detailed questions about a developing situation, they were able to “scramble and spend nights” because they “always wanted to do the due diligence.”

Another former intelligence analyst, however, was more direct in stating the limitations of collecting with a lighter U.S. presence. “The reduction of forces also impacted the IC,” they argued. “Less presence in the country meant less was in position to collect data. Things like District Assessments became less precise, primarily from losing U.S. unit reports that were pored over. There was less fidelity at every level. I used to see the [U.S.] military as 100,000 collectors on the ground, and that dwindled.” Once again, however, taking a wider view, the analyst acknowledged that Afghanistan was still a priority agency-wide: “There was a sense that we were there before military

and we'll be there after military. I don't recall our budgets declining at the same rate as the military during drawdowns."

Searching for Strategic Alternatives

Across the interviews conducted for this survey, former intelligence officials and analysts lamented that their warnings about the low probability of a strategic success in Afghanistan went unheeded. "At one point, it was about 2015, the strategy had about five pillars to it . . . everything from reconciliation to building up security forces to fight the Taliban, build a new government and economy . . . And your strategy says I'll have to succeed [in each of these pillars] to succeed overall," recounted one interviewee. "Okay, what's the probability of each one happening? . . . by the time we got the five probabilities and we multiply them together . . . the overall chance of success is 1.4 percent."

At the same time, intelligence officials and analysts were also pessimistic about the ability of the Afghan government to survive if the United States left. As the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq amply demonstrated, there were significant risks to a hasty departure as well. Thus, while intelligence assessments highlighted the failure of current policy initiatives, the grave assessments of the impact of premature withdrawal made it difficult for policymakers to translate the intelligence assessments into action.

Was the IC ever directly tasked with evaluating strategic alternatives in Afghanistan? Interviewees' responses to this question differed widely. Several former senior intelligence officials and analysts claimed that they were never tasked with examining alternative paths or revisions to American strategic objectives. One attributed this omission to existing policy decisions, which, they argued, precluded consideration of the full range of alternatives. As they explained:

. . . while the policy deliberations were all extensive, my interactions . . . were really constrained by things like . . . there's no Afghan economy to speak of and they're going to be dependent [on external assistance] for as long as we can see. Geography and the numbers [of forces] we have and they have is going to affect exactly what you can do and where you can do it. And once you start laying some of those drivers

or constraints on the situation, the analysis doesn't change very much even if we're asked to emphasize something else.

Another interviewee, reflecting on the period between 2010 and 2012, concurred, noting, "At that time, there were maximum resources on the ground and less of a decision to be made . . . because there was already a massive plan in motion. . . . There were the usual status checks and mild course corrections, but the IC was asked to assess a strategy already largely determined." As a third summarized, "There are really no checks in the process of unrealistic expectations, which is probably why the intel community constantly sounded like the most pessimistic person in the room."

Other analysts disagreed, however, recalling that the IC "would commonly get more general . . . strategically focused questions when there was senior leadership changeover," such as a theater commander or relevant cabinet secretary. "They would always ask 'what if' questions as they toyed with new ideas . . . or old ideas." Another analyst remembered the IC taking some proactive steps to consider alternative scenarios. "We were always throwing out red cell and alternative analyses," they explained. "[W]e wrote a lot of papers but feared they weren't actually being read. We tried to be proactive in conducting red cell analyses that posed alternatives. . . . We kept certain scenarios in our back pocket because conducting a fully fleshed-out analysis was very labor intensive, but we knew the questions would eventually come, the requests for thinkpieces, so we were always preparing."

Even though the IC was not tasked with conducting an explicit review of strategic alternatives, the majority of interviewees agreed that they did provide analysis of alternative force postures. "The question was always 'How many forces are we going to keep in country?'" one analyst recalled. Another added: "There was a Goldilocks approach surrounding troop-level discussion. Too much or too little? What is just right?" Even then, however, the range of options under consideration remained narrow. "There was a baked-in view that we would always have some military presence, as we were not going back to the pre-9/11 period with the same vulnerabilities," explained one analyst. "More could and should have been done to assess options if we have to either pull out completely or draw down significantly" in a short time frame. This sentiment was echoed by another former senior intelligence official, who recalled that "[e]ven when looking at scenarios

considering the end of the war in Afghanistan, the analyses never considered a U.S. troop presence of zero. . . . While it was evaluated, there was never a full withdrawal vision as the end state because of the counterterrorism considerations. Something had to be left behind, even if it was small, as insurance.”

Intracommunal and Interagency Tensions: The IC Perspective

If policymakers did not explicitly and consistently request assessments of strategic alternatives, institutional factors hindered the IC’s capacity to coordinate information and initiate holistic assessments on its own. The existence of interagency tensions within the IC is not, in itself, surprising; bureaucratic rivalries and organizational discoordination are a familiar component of operating within a large and complex governmental structure. The number of agencies tasked with contributing to such a high-profile national security priority ensured a degree of intracommunal friction, and nearly every interviewee from the IC raised this topic when asked more generally about interagency dynamics.

As one senior intelligence official commented, “You could look at intelligence and policy separately, but you don’t get the full picture. . . . there is a human dimension to it.” Efficient policymaking depended on interpersonal trust and productive collaborations that were often lacking. Describing a particularly good working relationship that they had with a senior military advisor, the intelligence official recalled, “[T]here was trust and confidence, a mutual understanding of our roles in that process, and it combined to be a very powerful enabler of the decisionmaking. . . . [Insights into ongoing policy discussions that this relationship afforded] allowed us to be even sharper in our assessments, more focused on what was needed, when it was needed.” This mutual respect and support was unusual, however. As they recalled, “I compare this with some of my other NIO [National Intelligence Officer] colleagues; they didn’t have relationships anything like this.”

In the early days of the Afghanistan conflict, relations among the various intelligence stakeholders were relatively placid. One former senior intelligence official from this time stated, “I don’t recall any heated, angry discussions about Afghanistan” among interagency actors. They did concede,

however, that after receiving some intelligence briefings at interagency meetings, “the ISAF commander would say, ‘That’s all BS, I don’t buy it,’” although the former senior official believed that this was the persistent feeling among all generals commanding in the field. According to them, this was all part of a functioning deliberative process in a bureaucracy, “I came to realize that the big policymakers, POTUS, the NSA, the senior-most officials were fine with differences between the IC and military assessments.” In fact, they continued, “the Bush administration saw this as fuel for discussion and valuable in that it brought up things that didn’t arise in single-channel assessments.”

Yet the number of institutional stakeholders in Afghanistan grew as the U.S. effort expanded, introducing new points of potential friction. Multiple interviewees contended that that this led to challenges in coordinating and vetting intelligence products. “You could get a wrench thrown at you from anywhere,” recalled one former intelligence analyst. Developing the PDB, another former analyst noted, was complicated by the task of identifying and coordinating with all of the disparate contributing authors, stretching analysts’ personal networks and producing new tensions when smaller teams were excluded or overlooked. “Afghanistan,” they went on, “was more competitive than other issues I’ve worked People wanted to be the first to scoop an issue or give a briefing. This ‘feed the beast’ mentality created pressure to say something new to get publication. Such competition was generally healthy but could delve beyond that at times.”

The pressure to report and contribute to high-profile products, such as the PDB, encouraged analysts to produce pieces that covered the latest news and developments instead of long-term trend assessments. “We largely focused too tactically, threat-based with less strategic understanding and focus at times,” one former analyst acknowledged. “There was a lot of reacting to threat reporting without necessarily fully understanding Taliban’s broader objectives and how this was contributing.” This was, they continued, a product of the imperative to ensure that the IC did not miss warning signs of another terrorist attack: “On the CT side there was extreme aversion to being the one who fails to warn of an attack. This contributed to a culture of over-warning” (though this was not unique to the Afghanistan portfolio).

Coordination requirements could also overwhelm those involved in the clearance process and lead to reports that were watered down to attain all

necessary approvals. As one former analyst described, “Were assessments more vanilla due to coordination requirements? Yes, especially with larger reports, like an NIE or even the PDB.” The former analyst went on to state that they did not recall feeling pressured to find consensus but that the sheer amount of material requiring coordination made it difficult to dissent. “I would really have to disagree with something to dissent,” they recalled, in part because “we get rated on how much we report, not how much we dissent and coordinate, so there is little incentive to go through the process of dissenting.”

Civilian intelligence analysts often clashed with their military counterparts, as CIA and DoD assessments of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan routinely diverged. In the short term, senior intelligence officials noted, these disagreements could foster productive debates. Persistent disagreements, however, produced logjams, rivalries, and distrust that slowed or hindered reporting and left decisionmakers in the lurch. As one former senior civilian official described, the problem was “a perennial thread throughout . . . and that’s a hard place, too, for the civilian leadership to be. How do you make sense of these very different assessments that you’re getting from two institutions that you respect?”

Multiple interviewees felt that the crux of the tension was rooted in cultural differences between the military and IC. As one former senior intelligence official argued, “DoD, being a very positive organization, results oriented, ‘we’ll take that hill, we got it, boss,’ [is] predisposed to those potential pitfalls: overaccentuate the positive, focus on the positive info, discount the negative. I saw a lot of that.” A former senior military official offered a similar sentiment as they gave a more general overview of some of the key stakeholders: “The intel community tends to be a little more negative on things, predicting chaos and a dark future. The State Department sees themselves as hyperrealistic, and therefore they’re going to take a look at the political cast. The military thinks they have a task. They think they’ve been tasked to produce an outcome, so they start to mentally say, ‘Well, that is the outcome we need, because that’s the outcome we’ve been ordered to produce.’” A senior civilian official also echoed this sentiment: “I was very aware that our military was emotionally and culturally invested in the mission. I understood there were kind of bureaucratic tensions between the Intelligence Community and the military that kind of arose from that.”

Similarly, a rupture emerged between intelligence analysts reporting from the ground in Afghanistan and those operating in the United States. “The friction between analysts in D.C. and military analysts deployed forward was consistent throughout,” one former analyst stated. “There was regular reoccurring tension between command elements in Kabul and D.C.-based analysts, both within agencies and between them.” The problem was not unique to civilian agencies. As a former senior intelligence official explained, “There were real divides within defense intelligence. And you could probably look at the spectrum of the combatant command on the one side and NGIC [National Ground Intelligence Center] all the way on the other. And DIA moved within that spectrum but was more center or right toward NGIC. It often didn’t lean too much toward CENTCOM and RS [Resolute Support Mission]—or previously ISAF—views.” This was, they continued, not unique to Afghanistan but was a typical characteristic of similar conflicts: “We’ve seen it in other wars that the theater intel element or the combatant command intel element reflected more of that ‘accentuate the positive or [downplay] the negative’ than the rest of the community that was more removed from it.” But tensions were magnified by the fact that the DIA was typically tasked with representing the diverse military IC at interagency meetings. As a former senior intelligence official explained, “DoD, when push came to shove on assessment, had to come down with a single defense view.” This could be a difficult proposition because it was not uncommon for the DIA representative at these meetings to communicate an assessment that conflicted with the one provided by senior military officials. As the former senior intelligence official concluded, “We didn’t have any tensions with the NSC. The tensions were all with DoD.”

As the IC’s assessments of the situation in Afghanistan became more dour, it also confronted new resistance from senior military leaders. Some military officials accused analysts of an overreliance on second- and third-order information that could produce, in one interviewee’s words, “colorful graphics” but obscured or misrepresented the situation on the ground. The hard feelings on the part of the military leadership seem to have endured in some cases. A former senior intelligence official recalled an unexpected interaction with a former senior official with whom they used to engage in interagency meetings: “A retired general who served in Afghanistan and I happened to be at an event together and they said, ‘Yeah, you guys did a

wonderful job,’ he goes, ‘But, man, your assessments were used by the White House to beat us into submission.’” Intelligence analysts interviewed for this study defended the accuracy of their reporting, although they acknowledged that it “was very frustrating to DoD because they saw it as a report card . . . I think if they’d taken it for what it was, DoD could have used that same assessment to argue for more resources. But, again, they took it as a report card and dug in and aggressively defended their prior course of action and their progress to that point.”

There are signs that as the IC’s reputation as the skeptical player in the interagency endured, its impact on senior-level policy deliberations and decisions might have waned. As one analyst put it, “Over time, our analyses remained pessimistic, and sometimes I got the feeling that some stopped listening to us, though everyone kept going through the motions.” Indeed, one former senior civilian official who served in the Obama administration remembered an IC with a persistently dour message. “The Intelligence Community is just painting [a] darker and darker picture, and essentially the Intelligence Community became without—I’m not saying this in a—I don’t think they were ever unprofessional or crossed any of their boundaries, but just their presentations were a form of advocacy for drawdown. Just like they basically said, ‘What we’re doing is not working and it’s not going to work,’ repeatedly in every meeting.”

A former senior intelligence official, without going so far as to state that the community openly advocated for U.S. force drawdowns, pointed out a fundamental component of their pessimistic assessments. According to them, such reporting was a product of “the lack of fundamental preconditions for sustainability of progress in Afghanistan. . . . The U.S. and its allies were the primary driver of what was happening. And when that driver wasn’t there, things were going to change. And not in a good way.” Thus, they concluded, while the military could indeed point to progress in areas of the country where forces were more heavily concentrated, the IC tended to believe that there was little evidence that the progress could endure after those forces were removed.

Later in the conflict, another element was added to the military and IC tension as debates about drawdowns impacted the ability of each entity to perform its mission. According to one former intelligence analyst, “There were some very heated discussions at very senior levels regarding draw-

downs and what it would mean for IC access.” Contributing to this was a feeling that those outside of the IC were not taking the security threat from the Taliban seriously enough following the end of the combat mission at the end of 2014. Referring to the Taliban, one former intelligence analyst saw their offensive in northern Afghanistan in 2015 as validating the warnings that had been coming from the IC: “With Kunduz we were finally seeing the manifestation of what we saw coming, that they are stronger than DoD thought. [My organization] had been saying this all along, but the difficulty was always ‘How do we present this to policymakers?’ It was a different narrative than the policymakers wanted, but we did our best to present stuff.”

In sum, the military-intelligence tension dynamic in Afghanistan was both predictable in a bureaucratic sense and unique in its longevity and consistency over the course of numerous rounds of personnel turnover, strategic deliberations, and resource commitments. According to at least one former senior civilian official, this dynamic, along with differing priorities at the State Department, contributed to a stasis of sorts at the strategic level:

The military wanted to keep doing the same mission with as many forces and as many authorities as possible. The Intelligence Community wanted as many platforms as possible for counterterrorism and saw value in doing those operations within an envelope of more military forces. The State Department had force protection concerns but was much more keen on the kind of political strategy and trying to keep the Government of National Unity intact, putting pressure on Pakistan, doing reconciliation, but faced an Intelligence Community that, in many respects, thought that the Taliban would never go for it, that there was no set of terms that they would accept, that the Afghan government would accept, and that we could accept. So basically, we were wasting time, and we should essentially focus on the counterterrorism mission and not worry about these political objectives. You had a Defense Department that seemed to not take a firm stand on reconciliation except to use it as an argument for getting more authorities.

Conclusions

In the interviewees' candid reflections of their respective experiences working in intelligence issues relating to Afghanistan, it was notable that a number of them felt that there were fundamental limitations in the U.S. strategy that were either ignored or overlooked that hampered prospects for success from the outset.

One aspect of this was the inherent contradictions of the missions as perceived and pursued by the various U.S. stakeholders, such as the former senior intelligence official who referred to U.S. duplicity when it came to counter Corruption. Even more significant is the admission that they were reluctant to bring this up in a senior interagency setting. "I never said anything at the time," they recalled. "A point of bureaucratic politics is that once you obtain a seat at the decisionmaking table, you don't say anything that's going to get you kicked off that table." This raises the question of how many other senior officials discussing Afghanistan policy over nearly two decades were aware of similar issues tied to core constraints and also chose not to raise them for fear of losing clout.

Other fundamental limitations that interviewees say were overlooked were the dire baseline conditions in Afghanistan, the time and resources it would take to rebuild a nation from scratch that had suffered decades of civil war, and the limitations of U.S. resources in diminishing the timeline. One former intelligence officer used a farming analogy to make the point: "You have to till the soil before you plant on it, and if the soil is rocky, you have to devote a lot of effort to prepare it for farming. The U.S. never tilled the soil in Afghanistan." Along these lines, a former intelligence analyst reflected that a lesson to be drawn from this is to better address nascent problems, such as Afghanistan prior to the 9/11 attacks, while also understanding the limited influence that the United States can have on shaping politics in such an environment. According to them, "Afghanistan is more of a chronic problem that you have to manage. In the 1990s, poor management led to 9/11. It could have been managed differently so it did not lead to that."

Relatedly, according to some, there was a persistent reluctance among U.S. officials to adequately incorporate into their reporting the limited ability of Afghan security forces and political officials to sustain progress inde-

pendently once U.S. forces were removed from an area. A former senior intelligence official, commenting on assessments touting progress in areas with increased U.S. presence, argued, “The same thing those studies also showed is as soon as the U.S. effort came off, everything started to revert. So we knew it was temporary. The solutions weren’t enduring.” This led, in their estimation, to senior policymakers conducting perpetual reassessments focused not on strategic victory but what they would be willing to concede: “None of it looked good. It was like the choice of varying degrees of bad and then what’s the acceptable—what’s the level of bad we can live with? . . . You can point to progress, but when we look immediately under the surface of it, you would see that the progress wasn’t sustainable, the sustainability components just weren’t there.”

Yet another fundamental disconnect seems to be gaps in the reporting chain from tactical levels to stateside-based analysts and policymakers. A former senior intelligence official shared a vignette from time they spent deployed to Afghanistan to conduct research for a report. While there, they learned that an Afghan Local Police unit had apprehended someone who was robbing compounds. Rather than hand him over to local authorities, they elected to bring him to a Taliban shadow court because they trusted that justice would be meted out and that the perpetrator would not be able to simply bribe an official to be released. “The disconnect between what we hoped to achieve and what was really happening on the ground and the progress that could really be made. It was so stark. It was extremely sobering to see that,” they recalled. Harkening back to the theme of sustainability, this episode had a profound effect on the official’s outlook on the prospects for a successful outcome in Afghanistan. “It was during the course of that field research that I realized we were never going to win this war,” they reflected, “because what was happening at the tactical level was not what was reported out of headquarters in Kabul. And when you looked at the interrelationships and dynamics, the people at the local level, you knew nothing was going to last . . .”

Over the course of the interviews, especially when discussing points of friction with other interagency stakeholders or even a White House that was distracted with other priorities, there was an undercurrent of a combination of sourness and validation. For many in the IC, the grind of producing report after report for an insatiable customer that was often critical or even

dismissive at times had a lasting impact. With this, however, came resolve; sticking with their analytic principles allowed them to warn against a growing Taliban threat in 2005 and 2006 and again in northern Afghanistan in 2015. Each warning was later proven accurate even if policymakers were slow in coming around. Interviewees also tended to acknowledge the flaws of the IC, such as a tendency to focus on tactical events tied to targeting and security, a labyrinthine intracommunal bureaucracy that could water down reporting, and a reluctance to point out fundamental disconnects for fear of losing clout.

Although the IC has remained committed to objective reporting, it faced a tumultuous and sometimes painful growth of its responsibilities during the war in Afghanistan. The shifting demands, from tactical intelligence to COIN and from high-profile targets to paramilitary action, inevitably led to bureaucratic growing pains. The IC was confronted with significant variation in the level of support for its tasks, such as the refocus on the Iraq war and the diminishing footprint in 2014. With evolving requests and fluctuating support, the Afghanistan war was a difficult period for the IC. Many in the IC community felt that they had spent time both before and during the war warning of their own limitations and long-term consequences of pushing the war and stabilization efforts further—and felt that they were unheeded at both points in time.

Conclusions

At its core, our report deals with the question of how policymakers deal with national security decisionmaking when their policies are not achieving their intended results. This was clearly the case in Afghanistan, where, despite 19 years of effort and the death of more than 2,000 U.S. military personnel, the results of America's intervention and stabilization efforts were widely viewed as unsatisfactory.¹ Hindering U.S. plans for handover of security responsibilities and withdrawal was the fact that neither the Afghan national security forces nor the civilian leadership in Kabul was prepared to successfully combat the ongoing Taliban insurgency. When America did eventually withdraw in 2021, the 300,000 troops of the Afghan National Army had collapsed, offering little resistance to the Taliban forces, forcing U.S. troops to withdraw from the Kabul airport while the Taliban controlled the city.²

After spending \$83 billion from U.S. security assistance programs that brought only limited gains, and facing endemic corruption at all layers of government, Afghanistan remained chronically unstable.³ However, despite deteriorating conditions and no apparent hope of military victory, America's policy aims remained relatively unchanged over nearly two decades. American aims appeared trapped in stasis as costs accumulated and the possibility of positive outcomes became more distant. "It's not that we're not grappling with these problems," a former member of the NSC observed, "but we're not getting solutions to these problems, we're not cracking these

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, 2020.

² Lieven, 2021.

³ Whitlock, 2019a; Whitlock, 2019b; Whitlock, 2019d.

problems.” A former ISAF commander shared this view. As he put it, “If I had a clever idea, I’d give it to you, but there isn’t. I mean, kind of the best option is, ‘S---, what do we do?’”

The expanding, open-ended mission in Afghanistan led America into policy trap in which victory, at least in the traditional sense, was seemingly impossible to achieve. The absence of a functioning civil society and an entrenched enemy that could rely on safe havens in Pakistan for support created a situation in which America’s Islamicist foes were resilient in the face of U.S. attacks and where Afghan institutions were not sufficiently developed to deal with them on their own. At the same time, however, withdrawal was not politically or psychologically palatable. The symbolic role of Afghanistan as the site where the nation would strike back against the perpetrators of 9/11 and the uncertain results of U.S. withdrawal ensured that neither the Bush administration nor the Obama administration could withdraw until some semblance of “mission accomplished” could be plausibly declared. The “sacred value” associated with 9/11 and the framing of Afghanistan as America’s “good war” made withdrawal politically difficult and magnified policymakers’ loss aversion. Moreover, early decisions such as lumping together the Taliban and al Qaeda precluded a political settlement in the early years of the conflict that might have made a negotiated peace attainable. American policymakers in Afghanistan had painted themselves into a corner; this was a scenario in which the United States could lose but could not win.

Faced with this lack of options, U.S. policymakers chose to stay the course for 20 years, until 2021. This report has examined the reasons behind this policy inertia through interviews with the senior leaders involved in the policy deliberations between 2001 and 2016. Rather than assessing the efficacy of specific policies or the merit of particular strategic choices, the authors examined the psychological, institutional, and organizational factors that shaped the space of decisions that were seriously considered. The net effect of these factors was that, as America’s experience in Afghanistan has demonstrated, decisions for how to navigate de-escalation from a conflict under conditions short of victory are tremendously difficult both practically and politically.

As was the case following America’s withdrawal from Vietnam, some might take the lesson that America should avoid future conflicts of this

type.⁴ The reality, however, is that policymakers are likely to have to make decisions regarding future COIN operations like those in Afghanistan, and, just as the military refined its doctrine for engaging in these types of conflicts, senior policymakers should learn from the experience as well.

In the summaries below, we highlight the key findings developed in the previous chapters and offer suggestions for how policymakers might avoid such pitfalls in future conflicts.

Create Shared Definitions of Success

One common thread among our interviewees was the observation that the conflict in Afghanistan was organized around open-ended, ongoing goals that made it difficult to know when success had been achieved or, indeed, what it would even look like. While a former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked that there was “unanimous understanding about what the primary objectives were in Afghanistan, essentially to turn this place into somewhere from which we are not again attacked,” a former ISAF commander described the uncertainty regarding the means to this end: “Was there a clear consensus on what success looked like? I think the answer is clearly no.” Much of the uncertainty that sprang from the phrasing of the mission around an ongoing absence of terrorism made its completion impossible. Summarizing the problem, a senior military advisor posed the issue as a question: “How much is enough prevention, right?”

The absence of clear, achievable metrics for success led to strategic scope creep as decisionmakers sought a strategy that would secure some sort of sustainable outcome. As a member of the Deputies Committee explained, “[E]ven if you had a relatively limited definition of what we were trying to achieve, it still often evolved into an expansive remedy for how to achieve it.” Indeed, by 2004, America’s stated policy goal was to “help the Afghan people build a responsible, self-sustaining market democracy that will never again harbor terrorists.”⁵ This expansion in the scope of the U.S. mission was a logical response to the reality of the situation in Afghanistan, where

⁴ This policy is known as the Weinberger Doctrine.

⁵ Taylor, 2004.

endemic poverty, poor governance, and insecurity had created the ideal conditions for radicalization. However, the expanding strategy meant, as one official lamented, that “[w]e are now trying to build a free, democratic and prosperous society in one of the poorest—I think it was in the fourth-poorest country in the world, that has lots of untapped resources and almost nothing by way of human resources.” The issue, as another senior policy-maker described, was that “even relative clarity in the objective didn’t actually necessarily give you clarity in the mission.”

This lack of clarity was evident in the ways in which progress was measured for much of the conflict. Looking back on the issue, a civilian advisor observed, “[I]t seems to me that throughout . . . the goals were articulated as verbs. It was to stabilize, or the prevention—ongoing actions . . . you could never quite measure progress, because it’s the progress of a process that arguably . . . doesn’t have defined end points to it.” Echoing this point, military scholars have noted that even the goals of the COIN doctrine amounted to a “reverse of the body count metric” whose success was measured by a lack of violence.⁶

To minimize these problems, policymakers should frame goals in concrete, achievable terms that can be used to guide strategy and resource planning. Developing a clear definition of what success looks like will aid strategic planning by allowing trade-offs regarding the most promising means to achieve the desired policy end. In the case of Afghanistan, the core policy goal of avoiding future attacks was paired, early on, with directives to create a functioning market economy and to deny the Taliban a role in the government of the country. This guidance caused a dramatic intensification of American involvement in reconstruction and nation-building despite being peripheral to America’s central strategic goal.

When inheriting an ongoing operation that has ill-defined goals, one central function of senior policymakers should be to bring clarity to the issue. As the body of this report has described, this can be difficult for a number of political and practical reasons. In such cases, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski observed, “My view has been throughout that difficult problems are best tackled soon rather than later.”

⁶ Johnson, 2017, p. 72.

His advice to policymakers stressed the importance of clarifying the goals of the mission: “What exactly is the threat that needs to be averted and are there other ways of averting it?”⁷

Accept Conditions Less Than Victory That Achieve Policy Aims

Although broad policy goals, such as preventing future attacks, are not inherently bad, American policymakers are particularly reticent to commit to ongoing “unwinnable” courses of action. As the opening sentence of a strategic review of Afghanistan delivered to President Bush in 2008 makes clear: “The United States is not losing in Afghanistan, but it is not winning either, and that is not good enough.”⁸ The result in Afghanistan has been an escalation of the mission from what was essentially a counterterrorism campaign to an expansive COIN operation whose success was predicated on the (re)creation of a functioning civil society. One of the main attractions of the COIN paradigm for policymakers was that it promised a means for victory by envisioning an end state in which American troops could withdraw having accomplished their mission.

American strategic planners should be willing to accept objectives that accomplish the least bad outcome that accords with strategic objectives, rather than laudable but difficult-to-attain goals, such as nation-building and social reform.

At its core, the issue seemed to be that policymakers did not have a framework for assessing how to achieve their goals other than through military objectives.⁹ In contrast with the U.S. strategy that aimed to win in Afghanistan with the intent to “help the Afghan people build a responsible, self-sustaining market democracy that will never again harbor terrorists,” Israel’s ongoing military actions against Hamas have a similar goal of preventing terror attacks. That mission, however, does not have similar

⁷ Dombey, 2009.

⁸ Coll, 2018b.

⁹ Kolenda, 2019, pp. 992–1014.

ambitions toward the recreation of a functioning, friendly state in Palestine.¹⁰ Instead, Israel has, for years, conducted counterterrorism operations against Hamas and other Islamicist groups that call for the destruction of the Israeli state without a strategic goal of “winning” the conflict. Rather than attempting to occupy Gaza and destroy the Hamas regime, these objectives are “not on the agenda.” Instead, it has adopted a strategy of “mowing the grass” in which “use of force . . . is not intended to attain impossible political goals, but a strategy of attrition designed primarily to debilitate the enemy capabilities.”¹¹ Borrowing this perspective, the United States could reduce its aims and focus on counterterrorism rather than COIN, with the intent of degrading the ability of extremists to threaten America’s interests abroad.

Rather than seeking to rebuild Afghan society, some policymakers we interviewed urged an open-ended, ongoing campaign that would achieve America’s objectives without imagining a comprehensive victory: “Spend \$40 billion a year on Afghanistan. . . . We’re a great nation. We can afford it, and now use that as a platform for negotiating,” a former Under Secretary of Defense argued. This is indeed what the United States has attempted since 2014. One core realization of this new approach is that if the central intent of the U.S. mission is the prevention of future terror attacks, this should be decoupled from the strategy of how to achieve it. There should be a clear divide between policymaking rather than the conflation of the two that has resulted in “national security guidance too detailed for policy, but insufficient to qualify as strategy.” Policy should set national goals and objectives while providing guidance on priorities, resources, and constraints.¹² This focus on the what and why of policy leaves the question of how—the strategy to be employed—as a separate debate.

¹⁰ Taylor, 2004.

¹¹ Cohen et al., 2017, p. 40.

¹² Christopher Kolenda, “America Wages War-by-Bureaucracy—and It Is Killing Our Chances to Win,” *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2016.

Manage Bureaucratic Inertia and Momentum of the Mission

During the course of the war in Afghanistan, policies and strategic objectives were difficult to adjust because of bureaucratic inertia and the related momentum of the existing mission. Once the United States had committed to state-building, it proved difficult to scale back objectives and realign policies to address less-expansive strategic aims. Commenting on the policy inflexibility that they had encountered, a former Under Secretary of Defense observed that institutional momentum hampered the adoption of more-flexible strategies that were more in keeping with the initial aims of the conflict. “I think there’s a sunk cost argument that we should really, really care about the nature of the government and whether the Taliban is in or out, and all that,” they suggested. “[I]f you have a constellation of governance that keeps us achieving that goal of it’s not a safe haven, then should we be fine with that? Should we not care as much about the complexion of the government?” As a second former Under Secretary of Defense commented, there was persistent mismatch between the strategic goals and the “clearly inadequate means in terms of quantity of commitment and timeline” that were necessary to achieve them. In their assessment, “We needed to lower the bar,” but “that’s politically hard to do, right?”

Once set in motion, the early policy decisions that framed the United States’ policy goals in expansive terms were difficult to walk back, and, having framed the Taliban as a terrorist enemy, a negotiated settlement was difficult to achieve. As a senior civilian advisor observed, once the Taliban had been painted as the enemy, it was particularly difficult to reset the pieces and to shift policy to include them as potential partners in peace. One issue, they speculated, was that “It seems to me that when you go to war and you’re about killing people, there’s a necessity to painting the enemy in a very black-and-white and definitive manner.” A former military commander described a similar dynamic that made it difficult to end the conflict, particularly given its emotional and psychological ties to 9/11. As they explained, “[T]here is the notion of if you’re going to ask me to go kill this guy, [the adversary] can’t be okay later—and, by the way, I lost my colleagues in the process, right?” As they continued, “[I]t can’t be that at some point

we're just going to not do it anymore. We need an end. . . . We sort of need that period at the end of the chapter in order to justify what it costs."

Faced with open-ended and ambitious goals for the reconstruction of a civil society in Afghanistan that seemed increasingly difficult to achieve, policymakers found it difficult to walk back their promises to address more-narrow and achievable goals. Describing this issue, a senior policy advisor remarked that the open-ended mission had locked America into a prevention strategy focused on Afghanistan that had symbolic weight but was drifting out of alignment with the real strategic goals. If America was interested in terrorism prevention, he argued, "[T]here are at least, what, ten or 20 places as welcoming to that kind of transnational terror as [Afghanistan]. In fact, I would argue even more welcoming. So if you look at where the franchises of al Qaeda sprung up, all of those are perhaps better candidates for preventive action than Afghanistan itself." A senior civilian advisor recalled President Obama raising this issue, asking, "Wait a second. If this is about not [having] another 9/11, preventing attacks in the United States, what's the best way to allocate our resources? Is it really 95-percent Afghanistan?" In the end, this was the core argument that led Obama to announce the 2016 deadline for withdrawal. At some point, the misalignment of America's policy goals and its ultimate objectives for geopolitical security needed to be addressed.

One force driving this need to continue the mission was psychological. "To me," the advisor recalled, "that's a smart question, but still requires overcoming this psychological—or maybe it's the political reality of the psychological impact of 9/11, if that makes sense. If you say, 'We're drawing down Afghanistan to reduce the risk of terrorist strikes against the United States,'—it's hard to explain."

A second reason for this was that once the mission was underway and vast resources had been committed to it, entailing a huge shift of the bureaucratic and logistic apparatus necessary to support the war, it acquired significant momentum. As the tasks and responsibilities were parceled out to numerous subordinates and executed in a variety of units, agencies, and departments, a major shift in strategic goals required a massive and wrenching set of organizational realignments. Absent strong direction from the President and the NSC, the bureaucracy would continue trying to achieve its subobjectives because, as one interviewee explained, "that's what bureaucra-

cies do.” Echoing the findings of *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, Robert W. Komer’s classic 1972 analysis of U.S. policymaking in Vietnam, we found that it is still the case that “constraints—largely inherent in the typical behavior patterns of . . . U.S. institutions involved in the conflict—made it difficult for them to cope with an unfamiliar conflict environment and greatly influenced what they could and could not, or would and would not, do . . .”¹³ This has resulted in policy debates that have often revolved around adjustments to troop strength and the resourcing of a chosen strategy rather than critical analysis of the suitability of the strategy itself.

Once the war had been bureaucratized and its management was delegated to lower levels of the Executive Branch, the Pentagon, and other agencies and departments, the day-to-day operations of the theater were largely being governed by individuals without the authority or scope of responsibility to undertake dramatic change. Rather, bureaucracies manage ongoing processes but do not seek or drive policy change. Once a path has been bureaucratized, numerous organizational dynamics increase lock-in to a specific course of action, silencing dissent and filtering out strategic alternatives. Describing the conservative forces at work that drove bureaucratic inertia, a senior intelligence official observed, “A point of bureaucratic politics is that once you obtain a seat at the decisionmaking table, you don’t say anything that’s going to get you kicked off that table.”

Overcoming institutional inertia requires significant force and, often, personal involvement from senior leaders to realign an organization around new goals. As a senior official in the Bush administration remarked, “Someone’s got to stand up and say, ‘Screw it, enough’s enough.’” That decisive leadership is often difficult to achieve for several organizational and institutional reasons, however. One challenge is that bureaucracies might withhold strategy alternatives or present leaders with only a handful of curated options, as occurred during several of Obama’s strategic reviews. A second challenge is that shifting strategies can anger groups that are deeply invested in seeing through the status quo, as evidenced by military leaders’ desire to

¹³ Komer, 1972, p. vi.

see the COIN doctrine through for “one more year” to see the imminent results.

To ease the transition, high-profile successes in the conflict should be leveraged as potential turning points. Our interviews pointed to the death of Osama bin Laden as a potential turning point when policymakers could have announced that the mission had been accomplished, allowing for a dramatic drawdown or change in strategic goal-setting. It was unclear, however, what turning points of successes were available that would allow such a realignment to occur.

Overcome Limited Bureaucratic Bandwidth

Undertaking and committing to a politically and practically dangerous reassessment and strategic realignment in an ongoing military campaign is a massive undertaking and requires significant focus from elite policymakers to overcome the massive bureaucratic inertia. In practice, however, this focus is very difficult to achieve. One reason is that the “‘decisionmaker’ of national policy is obviously not one calculating individual but is rather a conglomerate of large organizations and political actors.”¹⁴

Though the Bush and Obama administrations had very different policy processes, each one exerted a conservative influence on the ideas that were seriously debated at senior levels of the administration. This created a filter that, by design, delegated decisionmaking to lower levels of the bureaucracy, which, in turn, reinforced the continuity of policy. In particular, the speed, complexity, transparency, and diversity of the process informed policymakers’ perception of their capacity to propose, let alone initiate, changes. Too often, the system discouraged consideration of contrary information or drained the focus needed to deliberate, design, and implement substantial course adjustments. The result was that even when U.S. policymakers expressed displeasure with their current approach, they struggled to dislodge American policy from the status quo ante.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations were aware of the importance of well-designed procedures, and each attempted to construct delib-

¹⁴ Allison and Zelikow, 1999, p. 3.

erative processes that complemented the President's temperament and challenges. The Bush administration's managerial process worked efficiently during the early stages of the war, when the President's attention was concentrated on Afghanistan. But its dependence on presidential leadership for monitoring and mediation of internal disagreements left it sensitive to changes in the policy environment. Once attention shifted toward Iraq, the administration lacked sufficient institutional checks to avert the resulting policy drift, to identify signs of a growing insurgency, and to devise a coherent strategy to build stability. This record informed the Obama administration's approach, and the new President entered office determined to redress his predecessors' errors. In an effort to promote new thinking, the administration constructed a broad and slow policy process designed to facilitate in-depth debate. Rather than facilitate the design of a new strategy, however, the process' delays and lack of transparency sowed distrust in the process, narrowed the scope of deliberations, and reified the status quo.

Within the White House, every President has a policy process and set of organizational advisors and enablers that reduce the burden on the President by managing meetings and filtering the ideas and debates that are brought before the President. This was a necessary function because of what one military commander described as the limitations of bureaucratic bandwidth. In his view, when Afghanistan became an economy-of-force operation after the invasion of Iraq, decisionmaking "reverted to bureaucratic behavior." As he recalled, "Unless something really bad happened in Afghanistan, we basically didn't have the bandwidth, the bureaucratic bandwidth. So it's . . . a function of the way bureaucracies work, right?" "Look at the administration today,"¹⁵ he explained. "I mean, they're probably not really focused on Afghanistan. Why? Iran, North Korea, Russia, Europe, Mueller. I mean, at some point, there's no more time in the day." Following this logic, he argued that many people assumed that 2009 "was the year of Afghanistan for Obama." "No," he argued, "Actually, that was the year of the economy. What he was trying to do is keep the economy alive. So that's the bailout of the car companies, the big banks, the injection of federal funding to keep the economy running." In his assessment, "[A]s

¹⁵ This is referencing the Trump administration.

attention is diverted because of other policy initiatives, whether it's Iraq or the economy, right, Afghanistan gets left to the bureaucracies." The result, he explained, was that "we diverted our attention" and "just bumbled along like bureaucracies do."

Through much of the history of America's involvement in Afghanistan, policy adjustments were incremental and often focused on adjusting the dial on troop strength in the country. This incrementalism was a symptom of the bureaucratization of the conflict. Strategic reorientation requires senior leader involvement, but high-level engagement is a scarce resource, particularly in ongoing campaigns. One senior advisor who we interviewed commented that his biggest regret was not making better use of the President's attention when it was focused on the problem of Afghanistan.

Control Risk Aversion

The persistent, symbolic weight of 9/11 further shaped policymaking by magnifying the perceived risks associated with a premature withdrawal that might lead to a future terrorist attack planned or executed from Afghanistan. Asked about the avoidance of risk in Afghan policymaking, a senior policy advisor agreed that it was common: "Absolutely, of course, sure, it's the ultimate force protection question, right? . . . It's human nature, it's how it is, it's how people are." As a senior civilian official described, the risk was both operational—in that American lives were at stake—and political. As he observed, "[I]t would be suicide for a President to pull out of Afghanistan and pull out counterterrorism capabilities as well, in case there was a resurgence."

The existence of these psychological pressures and the tendency of decisionmakers to overweight the risks of high-profile disasters, such as terrorism, was well understood by elite policymakers, yet, as a senior official described, the influence of these factors was inescapable. In his estimation, this was well understood "certainly to anybody who's savvy enough on these issues to walk into the White House situation room." "Yet," as he observed, "those statistics will never get said in the White House situation room. Nobody will ever say, 'You know, the risk is probably actually not that great.' Because it's a lot easier to say, no, we will not accept another 9/11. Never

again.” A senior civilian official offered a succinct assessment, concluding that perceived risk “probably drove policy more than it should have.”

One factor that reinforced this risk aversion was the numerous overlapping and ill-defined sources of risk. In addition to the operational risk that a withdrawal would lead to further terrorist attacks or the political risks associated with withdrawal was the risk that U.S. withdrawal might damage its future credibility even if terrorism from the region was contained. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote,

I believed we had to succeed there because the stakes were higher than perhaps any other senior official in the government understood. For Islamic extremists to defeat a second superpower in Afghanistan would have devastating and long-lasting consequences across the entire Muslim world. For the United States to be perceived as defeated in Afghanistan at the same time we were suffering an economic crisis at home would have grave implications for our standing in the world. Nixon and Kissinger had been able to offset the consequences of U.S. defeat in Vietnam with the dramatic openings to Russia and China, demonstrating that we were still the colossus on the global stage. The United States had no such opportunities in 2010.¹⁶

It is worth noting that the fear that Gates articulates is independent of any actual terrorism threat from Afghanistan but instead hinges on potential reputational damage. This is significant because, as we have presented it, risk aversion falls into two broad categories—risks associated with the mission and perceived political and reputational risks that accompany failure. Both, we argue, are magnified by the tendency of decisionmakers to avoid accepting losses when there is the possibility that they might be erased by future success.

The first category of this risk calculus deals with the immediate consequences of premature withdrawal or mission failure in Afghanistan and focuses on the risks of terrorism or geopolitical instability that accompany the breakdown of civil society in Afghanistan and the return of Taliban control. These risks can be mitigated if policy-setting and strategic guidance are consciously crafted to minimize them at an acceptable cost. If America’s

¹⁶ Gates, 2014, p. 496.

goal is to prevent terror attacks against the United States and its allies, then policy and strategy should align with that goal. If a negotiated peace could ensure stability after a U.S. drawdown, then America's resourcing should align with that goal. The issue, as the rapid collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 illustrated, is that these risks may be impossible to fully mitigate in the aftermath of withdrawal.

The second category of perceived political or reputation risks should be considered separately. Policymakers should be careful not to conflate geopolitical risks with reputational risks. Although we should not understate the importance of these risks, it is worth noting that decisionmakers' assessments of the risk and its influence on their decisions have been consistently miscalibrated. Although our interviewees confidently argued that it would have been "suicide for a President to pull out of Afghanistan," it is not clear from our current vantage point that this would have been true. American electoral politics have been driven by other concerns for the last half decade, and a strategically calculated drawdown might have made little difference to the macro trends of presidential politics or the concerns of the American public. While there was indeed substantial political blowback in 2021, in the months that followed, popular opinion was focused first on domestic issues, such as rising inflation, and then on Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Additionally, the concern for America's standing in the world appears to have been similarly overstated. According to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, America's strategic focus has moved away from Central Asia to concentrate instead on the threats from peer adversaries. It is not clear that America's continued eroding stalemate in Afghanistan has improved or maintained its reputation in the eyes of its peer adversaries or aided deterrence of regional powers such as Iran. Indeed, as in the years following America's withdrawal from Vietnam, it appears that the continuation of America's power is best served by pivoting to face a new generation of threats while learning from its past mistakes.

Develop Shared Intelligence Assessments

An additional factor hampering policymakers' ability to make hard choices about Afghanistan was the absence of clear, agreed-upon assessments of

the status of the mission. This was particularly problematic because, rather than hinging on battlefield success, America's COIN strategy required the creation of a stabilized civil society in Afghanistan that would make local leaders comfortable supporting ISAF in their fight against the Taliban. To know whether this expansive strategy was working, detailed data were required. No longer was military assessment to be measured in enemy casualties or vehicles destroyed; rather, the strategy's outcome would be detected in numerous indicators that measured the levels of corruption, economic opportunity, and absence of perceived risk that the Afghan populace experienced. The problem was that there was no standard way to assess these metrics for success. One member of the NSC recalled an example of this dysfunction: "[T]here was a very active debate between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense about just how capable or not the Afghan National Security Forces was. The [intelligence] community's position was generally, 'You guys are losing.' International Security Assistance Force and the Department didn't agree with that assessment."

The absence of politically neutral, agreed-upon, reliable assessments that could be used to arbitrate policy views contributed to difficulties in policy debates and decisionmaking. Given the preexisting tensions between civilian and military leaders, the politicization and cherry-picking of the data deepened distrust, stalled progress, and undermined assessments quantifying how successful previous actions had been. As one civilian leader lamented, "[W]e couldn't even agree on the simplest, most quantifiable objective metrics available to us, never mind the hard ones, the qualitative subjective ones. Even when you tried to get those really clear ones that you would think would be more objective and quantifiable, there was disagreement and tussling over them."

Often, these divisions would emerge along organizational lines. As one military commander recalled, the "Intelligence Community assessment was going to be more pessimistic than military. Every new commander assessment asked for more resources, and then the Intelligence Community would roll in with an unimaginably negative assessment." In his view, "[T]heir presentations were a form of advocacy for drawdown. Just like they basically said, 'What we're doing is not working and it's not going to work,' repeatedly in every meeting." A senior member of the IC commented on these tensions as well: "[T]here was even one DC [NSC Deputies Committee

meeting],” they recalled, “where . . . —the Pentagon person, I’ll just say—basically accused myself and the Deputy DNI of dishonoring the war dead because of our pessimistic assessments.”

The issue was that the assessment was viewed as a criticism of military performance rather than a neutral situational assessment. “I think it was very frustrating to DoD,” the intelligence official recalled, “because they saw it as a report card rather—I think if they’d taken it for what it was, DoD could have used that same assessment to argue for more resources. But, again, they took it as a report card and dug in and aggressively defended their prior course of action and their progress to that point.”

This lack of shared metrics and agreed-upon assessments made strategic reassessments particularly difficult. In future conflicts, care should be taken to develop shared intelligence assessments that can help to bridge the civil-military divide. By promoting intelligence products that are viewed as neutral analysis rather than advocacy, policymakers will have an additional tool to guide them as they gauge the need for dramatic shifts in policy and strategy.

Abbreviations

ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
CENTCOM	Central Command; the U.S. Department of Defense's Geographic Combatant Command responsible for Afghanistan and Iraq
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DoD	Department of Defense
HUMINT	human intelligence
IC	Intelligence Community
INR	Bureau of Intelligence and Research
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization–led military and security force in Afghanistan
ISIS	the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGIC	National Ground Intelligence Center
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NIO	National Intelligence Officer

NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council
PDB	President's Daily Briefing
POTUS	President of the United States
PTSD	posttraumatic stress disorder
SIGINT	signals intelligence
TAA	train, advise, and assist
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Bibliography

“Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2020.

Allen, John, “The Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, March 22, 2012.

Allen, Mike, “Woodward: Bush Tried Locking in Strategy,” *Politico*, September 8, 2008.

Allison, Graham T., and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999.

Altman, George R., and Leo Shane III, “The Obama Era Is Over. Here’s How the Military Rates His Legacy,” *Military Times*, January 8, 2017.

“Authorizing Use of United States Armed Forces Against Those Responsible for Recent Attacks Against the United States,” Congressional Record, September 14, 2001, p. H5638. As of September 30, 2020: <https://fas.org/irp/threat/useofforce.htm>

Baker, Peter, “The Security Adviser Who Wants the Role, Not the Stage: Hadley Prefers Audience of One,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2006.

Barberis, Nicholas C., “Thirty Years of Prospect Theory in Economics: A Review and Assessment” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Winter 2013, pp. 173–196.

Belasco, Amy, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009.

Belasco, Amy, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014.

Benard, Cheryl, Kristen Cordell, and Olga Oliker, *Women and Human Security: The Case of Post Conflict Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RP-1291, 2007. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1291.html>

Bergman, Peter L., *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

Berntsen, Gary, and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaida*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2005.

Bird, Tim, and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011.

Blanken, Leo, Hy Rothstein, and Jason Lepore, *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015.

Boettcher III, William A., and Michael D. Cobb, “Don’t Let Them Die in Vain’: Casualty Frames and Public Tolerance for Escalating Commitment in Iraq,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 5, October 2009, pp. 677–697.

Bohan, Caren, Mark Hosenball, Tabassum Zakaria, and Missy Ryan, “Special Report: The Bin Laden Kill Plan,” Reuters, May 12, 2011.

Burke, John P., “The Contemporary Presidency: Condoleezza Rice as NSC Advisor—A Case Study of the Honest Broker Role,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Unilateral Powers, Vol. 35, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 554–575.

Bush, George W., “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11,” *The American Presidency Project*, September 20, 2001a. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-united-states-response-the-terrorist-attacks>

Bush, George W., “Presidential Address to the Nation,” Washington, D.C.: White House, October 7, 2001b. As of September 30, 2020: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>

Bush, George W., “Remarks at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia,” April 17, 2002. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2002-04-22/pdf/WCPD-2002-04-22-Pg642-2.pdf>

Bush, George W., “President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror,” speech delivered at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C., February 15, 2007. As of September 30, 2020: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/02/print/20070215-1.html>

Bush, George W., “President Bush Visits National Defense University’s Distinguished Lecture Program, Discusses Global War on Terror,” speech delivered at Fort Lesley J. McNair-National Defense University, Washington, D.C., September 9, 2008. As of September 30, 2020: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080909.html>

Bush, George W., *Decision Points*, New York: Random House, 2010.

Caldwell, David F., and Charles A. O’Reilly, “Responses to Failure: The Effects of Choice and Responsibility on Impression Management,” *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1982, pp. 121–136.

Campbell, John, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 12, 2015a. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-13%20-%202-12-15.pdf>

Campbell, John, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, October 6, 2015b. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-76%20-%2010-6-15.pdf>

Campbell, John, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 4, 2016. As of September 30, 2020: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/16-11_2-04-16.pdf

Clarke, Colin P., and Christopher Paul, *From Stalemate to Settlement: Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved Through Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-469-OSD, 2014. As of September 30, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR469.html

Clinton, Hillary, "Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses," New York, February 18, 2011. As of September 30, 2020: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>

Cohen, Raphael S., David E. Johnson, David E. Thaler, Brenna Allen, Elizabeth M. Bartels, James Cahill, and Shira Efron, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge: Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1888-A, 2017. As of October 24, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1888.html

Coll, Steve, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, New York: Penguin Press, 2018a.

Coll, Steve, "We Can't Win in Afghanistan Because We Don't Know Why We're There," *New York Times*, January 26, 2018b.

Connable, Ben, Walter L. Perry, Abby Doll, Natasha Lander, and Dan Madden, *Modeling, Simulation, and Operations Analysis in Afghanistan and Iraq: Operational Vignettes, Lessons Learned, and a Survey of Selected Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-382-OSD, 2014. As of September 30, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR382.html

Cordesman, Anthony, *The War in Afghanistan*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010.

Cordesman, Anthony, *The Conflicting Assessments of the Trends in Combat in Afghanistan: 2014–2018*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 20, 2018.

Crane, Conrad C., “Military Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq: Learning and Adapting Under Fire at Home and in the Field,” in Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: University Press, 2015.

Crawford, Neta C., “United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated,” Costs of War Project, November 14, 2018. As of September 30, 2020: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Crawford_Costs%20of%20War%20Estimates%20Through%20FY2019.pdf

Croco, Sarah E., *Peace at What Price? Leader Culpability and the Domestic Politics of War Termination*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Desch, Michael C., “Bush and the Generals,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3, May–June 2007, pp. 97–108.

Dobbins, James, “The Transition in Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 10, 2013.

Dobbins, James, “U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and the Regional Implications of the June 2014 Transition,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2014.

Dobbins, James F., *Foreign Service: Five Decades on the Front Lines of American Diplomacy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2017.

Dobel, J. Patrick, “Prudence and Presidential Ethics: The Decisions on Iraq of the Two Presidents Bush,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly, Ethics and the Presidency*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 57–75.

Dombey, Daniel, “President Procrastinator,” *Financial Times*, September 7, 2009.

Draper, Robert, “Colin Powell Still Wants Answers,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2020, updated July 17, 2020.

Dunford, Joseph, “The Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, April 16, 2013.

Egel, Daniel, Charles P. Ries, Ben Connable, Todd C. Helmus, Eric Robinson, Isaac Baruffi, Melissa A. Bradley, Kurt Card, Kathleen Loa, Sean Mann, Fernando Sedano, Stephan B. Seabrook, and Robert Stewart, *Investing in the Fight: Assessing the Use of the Commander’s Emergency Response Program in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1508-OSD, 2016. As of September 30, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1508.html

Eikenberry, Karl, "Continue to Receive Testimony on Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 8, 2009.

Eisenhower, Dwight David, *Waging Peace, 1956–1961*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965.

"Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement Between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," *GovInfo*, May 2, 2012. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2012-book1/pdf/PPP-2012-book1-doc-pg553.pdf>

Fearon, James D., "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1995, pp. 379–414.

Feith, Douglas J., *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*, New York: Harper, 2009.

Fisher, Max, "In Afghanistan's Unwinnable War, What's the Best Loss to Hope For?" *New York Times*, February 1, 2018.

Flournoy, Michele, "The Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, June 15, 2010a.

Flournoy, Michele, "To Continue to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, June 16, 2010b.

Flournoy, Michele, "Developments in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, March 16, 2011.

Franks, Tommy, "Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 7, 2002a. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-107shrg83471/html/CHRG-107shrg83471.htm>

Franks, Tommy, "Operation Enduring Freedom," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, July 31, 2002b. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-107shrg83471/html/CHRG-107shrg83471.htm>

Franks, Tommy, *American Soldier*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

Gans, John, *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019.

Gates, Robert M., “Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Status of U.S. Strategy and Operations and the Way Ahead,” testimony presented before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, December 11, 2007. As of October 1, 2020:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-110hhrg43957/html/CHRG-110hhrg43957.htm>

Gates, Robert M., “The Situation in Iraq and Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 23, 2008.

Gates, Robert M., “Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 2, 2009.

Gates, Robert M., *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

Gates, Robert M., and James Cartwright, “The Situation in Iraq and Afghanistan,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 23, 2008.

Gentile, Gian P., “A Strategy of Tactics: Population-Centric COIN and the Army,” *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2009.

Gentile, Gian P., *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, New York: The New Press, 2013.

George, Alexander L., “The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, September 1972, pp. 751–785.

George Alexander L., *Presidential Decision-Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980.

Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, “An ‘Eroding Stalemate’ in Afghanistan as Taliban Widens Its Offensive,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2016.

Gibson, Christopher Patrick, *Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decisionmaking Process at the Civil-Military Nexus*, Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2008.

Goldstein, Joel K., “The Contemporary Presidency: Cheney, Vice Presidential Power, and the War on Terror,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Ethics and the Presidency*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 102–139.

Greene, David, “Lute Named to War Post; Duties Remain Unclear,” *NPR*, May 16, 2007.

- Greenfield, Victoria A., Keith Crane, Craig A. Bond, Nathan Chandler, Jill E. Luoto, and Olga Oliker, *Reducing the Cultivation of Opium Poppies in Southern Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1075-DOS, 2015. As of September 30, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1075.html
- Hadley, Stephen, Joseph Collins, and Nicholas Rostow, "An Interview with Stephen Hadley," *PRISM*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2015, pp. 146–159.
- Harris, Joe, "Intelligence and Policy Making for the 21st Century: A Case-Study of the Benghazi Attacks and the Relationship Between Policy Makers and the Intelligence Community," *Small Wars Journal*, February 25, 2014.
- Hart, Paul't, "Irving L. Janis' Victims of Groupthink," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1991, pp. 247–278.
- Hoehn, Andrew R., and Sarah Harting, *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-974-AF, 2010. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG974.html>
- Hughes, E. J., "The Presidency Versus Jimmy Carter," *Fortune*, December 4, 1978, p. 58.
- Huntington, Samuel P., *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- iCasualties.org, "Operation Enduring Freedom: Coalition Deaths by Year," undated. As of July 10, 2018:
<http://icasualties.org/OEF/ByYear.aspx>
- Immerman, Richard H., "Intelligence and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 131, No. 3, Fall 2016, pp. 477–501.
- Janis, Irvin L., *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
- Jervis, Robert, "Political Implications of Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 1992, pp. 187–204.
- Johnson, Clay, "Interview," *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2004. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/choice2004/interviews/johnson.html>
- Johnson, David E., *Doing What You Know: The United States and 250 Years of Irregular War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017.

“Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership,” *GovInfo*, May 23, 2005. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-2005-05-30/pdf/WCPD-2005-05-30-Pg863.pdf>

Joint Publication 3-30, *Basic Doctrine*, Vol. 1, 2015.

Jones, James, “Afghanistan Stabilization and Reconstruction: A Status Report,” testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2004. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-108shrg93763/html/CHRG-108shrg93763.htm>

Jones, James, “From Coalition to ISAF Command in Afghanistan: The Purpose and Impact of the Transition,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, September 21, 2006.

Jones, Seth G., *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Volume 4*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-595-OSD, 2008. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG595.html>

Jones, Seth G., *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Jones, Seth G., and Arturo Munoz, *Afghanistan’s Local War: Building Local Defense Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1002-MCIA, 2010. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1002.html>

Kahneman, Daniel, and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk,” *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, No. 2, March 1979, pp. 263–292.

Kaplan, Fred, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, New York: Simon & Schuster Press, 2013.

Kolenda, Christopher, “America Wages War-by-Bureaucracy—and It Is Killing Our Chances to Win,” *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2016.

Kolenda, Christopher, “Slow Failure: Understanding America’s Quagmire in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 7, 2019, pp. 992–1014.

Komer, Robert W., *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-967-ARPA, 1972. As of October 20, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R967.html>

Lambeth, Benjamin S., *Air Power Against Terror: America’s Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-166-1-CENTAF, 2006. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG166-1.html>

Lamothe, Dan, "How 775,000 U.S. Troops Fought in One War: Afghanistan Military Deployments by the Numbers" *Washington Post*, September 11, 2019.

Landler, Mark, "Obama Signs Pact in Kabul, Turning Page in Afghan War," *New York Times*, May 1, 2012.

Landler, Mark, "The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama," *New York Times*, January 1, 2017.

Leffler, Melvyn P., "9/11 and American Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, June 2005, pp. 395–413.

Leffler, Melvyn P., "The Foreign Policies of the George W. Bush Administration: Memoirs, History, Legacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2013, pp. 190–216.

Lieven, Anatol, "Why Afghan Forces So Quickly Laid Down Their Arms," *Politico*, August 16, 2021.

Livingston, Ian S., and Michael O'Hanlon, "Afghanistan Index," Brookings Institution, September 29, 2017.

Loeb, Vernon, "Rumsfeld Announces End of Afghan Combat," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2003.

Logevall, Fredrik, "Anatomy of an Unnecessary War: The Iraq Invasion," in Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Lute, Douglas, and Denis McDonough, "A Cheer for Trump's Outreach to the Taliban," *New York Times*, September 7, 2018.

Magsamen, Kelly, "U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and the Regional Implications of the June 2014 Transition," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2014.

Maizland, Lindsay, and Zachary Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," New York: Council on Foreign Relations, March 11, 2020.

Malkasian, Carter, "How the Good War Went Bad: America's Slow-Motion Failure in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2020.

Mann, James, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, New York: Viking, 2004.

Mashal, Mushib, "How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage," *New York Times*, May 26, 2020.

McChrystal, Stanley, NATO International Security Assistance Force, *Commander's Initial Assessment*, August 30, 2009, Commander's Summary 1-1. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>

McChrystal, Stanley, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013.

McChrystal, Stanley, and Karl Eikenberry, “Continue to Receive Testimony on Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, December 8, 2009.

McKenzie, Jr., Kenneth, “Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2020.

Miller, Greg, and Julie Tate, “CIA Shifts Focus to Killing Targets,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2011.

Miller, James, “The Situation in Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, March 22, 2012.

Miller, Laurel E., and Jonathan S. Blake, *Envisioning a Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2937, 2019. As of September 29, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2937.html

Mills, Nicolaus, “Punished for Telling Truth About Iraq War,” CNN, March 20, 2013.

Morgan, Wesley, “Is the Top General in Afghanistan in Too Deep?” *Politico*, March 5, 2018.

Mullen, Michael, “Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Status of U.S. Strategy and Operations and the Way Ahead,” testimony presented to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, December 11, 2007. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-110hhrg43957/html/CHRG-110hhrg43957.htm>

Mullen, Michael, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 22, 2011.

Munoz, Arturo, *U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001–2010*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1060-MCIA, 2012. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1060.html>

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.

NATO—see North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Nicholson, John, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 9, 2017. As of September 30, 2020:
https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-08_02-09-17.pdf

Nielsen, Suzanne C., "American Civil–Military Relations Today: The Continuing Relevance of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*," *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2, March 2012, pp. 369–376.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "ISAF's Strategic Vision," April 3, 2008. As of September 30, 2020:
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8444.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Lisbon Summit Declaration," November 20, 2010. As of September 30, 2020:
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68828.htm

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan," May 21, 2012. As of September 30, 2020:
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87595.htm

O'Connell, Aaron B., "The Lessons and Legacies of the War in Afghanistan," in Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, eds., *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, New York: University Press, 2015.

Obama, Barack, "The War We Need to Win," speech delivered at the Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., *American Rhetoric*, August 1, 2007. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobamawilsoncenter.htm>

Obama, Barack, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan," Washington, D.C.: White House, February 17, 2009a. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-afghanistan>

Obama, Barack, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," Washington, D.C.: White House, March 27, 2009b. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

Obama, Barack, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the New Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Washington, D.C.: White House, December 1, 2009c. As of September 30, 2020:
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

Obama, Barack, “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, June 22, 2011. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>

Obama, Barack, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, May 27, 2014. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan>

Obama, Barack, “Remarks by President Obama and President Ghani of Afghanistan in Joint Press Conference,” Washington, D.C.: White House, March 24, 2015a. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/2015/03/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-ghani-afghanistan-joint-press-conf>

Obama, Barack, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, October 15, 2015b. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/15/statement-president-afghanistan>

Obama, Barack, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: White House, July 6, 2016. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/06/statement-president-afghanistan>

“Obama’s Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2008.

Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Chief Financial Officer, “United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request,” May 2017.

Panetta, Leon, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 22, 2011.

Panetta, Leon, “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the 48th Munich Security Conference, Bayerischer Hof, Munich, Germany,” February 2, 2012. As of September 30, 2020:

<http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4972>

Patterson, Bradley H., *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

Perry, Walter L., and David Kassing, *Toppling the Taliban: Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, October 2001–June 2002*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-381-A, 2015. As of September 29, 2020:

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR381.html

Peters, Heidi M., Moshe Schwartz, and Lawrence Kapp, "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2007–2017," Congressional Research Service, April 28, 2017.

Petraeus, David, "United States Policy Toward Afghanistan and Pakistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, April 7, 2009.

Petraeus, David, "The Situation in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, June 15, 2010.

Petraeus, David, "Developments in Afghanistan," testimony presented to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, March 16, 2011.

Pfiffner, James P., *Organizing the Presidency*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002.

Pfiffner, James P., "Decision Making in the Bush White House," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2009, pp. 363–384.

Pfiffner, James P., "Decision Making in the Obama White House," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2, June 2011, pp. 244–262.

Reiter, Dan, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2003, pp. 27–43.

Reiter, Dan, *How Wars End*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Resh, William G., "Appointee-Careerist Relations in the Presidential Transition of 2008–2009," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December 2014.

Riedel, Bruce, "Al-Qaida Today, 18 Years After 9/11," Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, September 10, 2019.

Rohde, David, and David E. Sanger, "How a 'Good War' in Afghanistan Went Bad," *New York Times*, August 12, 2007.

Rohde, David, and Warren Strobel, "The Micromanager in Chief: How Syria Overwhelmed an Overcentralized White House," *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2014.

Rumsfeld, Donald, "DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 12, 2002a. As of September 30, 2020:

<http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>

Rumsfeld, Donald, "Operation Enduring Freedom," testimony presented to U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, July 31, 2002b. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-107shrg83471/html/CHRG-107shrg83471.htm>

- Rutenberg, Jim, "The Ad Campaign: Bush Spot Portrays Kerry as Flip-Flopper," *New York Times*, May 26, 2004.
- Sanger, David E., "Risks of Reversing the Afghanistan Surge," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.
- Sanger, David E., "Charting Obama's Journey to a Shift on Afghanistan," *New York Times*, May 19, 2012.
- Schake, Kori, and William F. Wechsler, *Process Makes Perfect: Best Practices in the Art of National Security Policymaking*, Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, January 2017.
- Schmitt, Eric, "In Afghanistan Assessment, a Catalyst for Obama," *New York Times*, September 21, 2009.
- Schmitt, Eric, and Thom Shanker, "Bush Administration Reviews Its Afghanistan Policy, Exposing Points of Contention," *New York Times*, September 23, 2008.
- Shulsky, Abram N., and Gary J. Schmitt, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence*, 3rd ed., Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2002.
- Siegel, Jacob, "'Afghan Good Enough' May Be the Best We Can Hope for in Afghanistan," *The Daily Beast*, September 16, 2013, updated July 11, 2017.
- Snyder, Richard C., H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.
- Sparrow, Bartholomew, "Organizing Security: How the Bush Presidency Made Decisions on War and Peace," in Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry, eds., *41: Inside the Presidency of George H. W. Bush*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2018.
- Stanley, Elizabeth A., *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination, and the Korean War*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Staw, Barry M., "Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy: A Study of Escalating Commitment to a Chosen Course of Action," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1976, pp. 27–44.
- Staw, Barry M., "The Escalation of Commitment to a Course of Action," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1981, pp. 577–587.

Staw, Barry M., and Jerry Ross, "Knowing When to Pull the Plug," *Harvard Business Review*, March 1987.

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, "Quiet Bush Aide Seeks Iraq Czar, Creating a Stir," *New York Times*, April 30, 2007.

Taylor, William, "Afghanistan Stabilization and Reconstruction: A Status Report," testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 27, 2004. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-108shrg93763/html/CHRG-108shrg93763.htm>

Tenpas, Kathryn Dunn, and Stephen Hess, "The Contemporary Presidency: The Bush White House: First Appraisals," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, September 2002, pp. 577–585.

Tetlock, Philip E., "Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 7, No. 7, July 2003, pp. 320–324.

Tetlock, Philip E., Barnara A. Mellers, and J. Peter Scoblic, "Sacred Versus Pseudo-Sacred Values: How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 107, No. 5, 2017, pp. 96–99.

Thomas, Clayton, "Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan," Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2020.

Thomas, Evan, "The 12-Year Itch," *Newsweek*, March 30, 2003.

Thompson, Ginger, "Gates Acknowledges Talks with Taliban," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.

United Nations Security Council, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," December 5, 2001. As of September 30, 2020: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/AF_011205_AgreementProvisionalArrangementsinAfghanistan%28en%29.pdf

United Nations Security Council, *The Tenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Established Pursuant to Resolution 1526 (2004), Which Was Submitted to the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) in Accordance with Paragraph (a) of the Annex to Resolution 2255 (2015)*, June 13, 2019. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.undocs.org/S/2019/481>

U.S. Army, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Fort Belvoir, Va.: Army Publishing Directorate, U.S. Army Field Manuals, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, May 2014.

U.S. Department of Defense, "Casualty Status," September 28, 2020. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, *Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Status of U.S. Strategy and Operations and the Way Ahead*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 11, 2007. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-110hhrhg43957/html/CHRG-110hhrhg43957.htm>

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, *Developments in Afghanistan*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 16, 2011. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrhg65591/pdf/CHRG-112hhrhg65591.pdf>

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “U.S. Military Operations and Stabilization Activities in Iraq and Afghanistan,” February 3, 2005. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-109shrg27523/html/CHRG-109shrg27523.htm>

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing on Iraq and Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 3, 2006. As of September 30, 2020:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/03/AR2006080300802.html>

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “United States Policy Toward Afghanistan and Pakistan,” April 7, 2009a.

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Afghanistan: The Results of the Strategic Review, Part I,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 3, 2009b. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111hhrhg56006/pdf/CHRG-111hhrhg56006.pdf>

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Afghanistan: The Results of the Strategic Review, Part II,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 8, 2009c.

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 6, 2015. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-76%20-%2010-6-15.pdf>

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan,” February 4, 2016. As of September 30, 2020:

https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/16-11_2-04-16.pdf

U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Afghanistan," February 9, 2017. As of September 30, 2020: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-08_02-09-17.pdf

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "The Transition in Afghanistan," December 10, 2013.

Vis, Barbara, and Dieuwertje Kuijpers, "Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Underexposed Issues, Advancements, and Ways Forward," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2018, pp. 575–589.

Waldman, Matt, "System Failure: The Underlying Causes of U.S. Policy-Making Errors in Afghanistan," *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 89, No. 4, July 2013, pp. 825–843.

Wesley, Morgan, "Is the Top General in Afghanistan in Too Deep?" *Politico*, March 5, 2018.

White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," transcript, December 1, 2009.

White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," transcript, June 22, 2011.

"White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Homeland Security Digital Library*, March 27, 2009. As of September 30, 2020: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=38004>

Whitlock, Craig, "Built with Corruption," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019a.

Whitlock, Craig, "Consumed with Corruption," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019b.

Whitlock, Craig, "Stranded Without a Strategy," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019c.

Whitlock, Craig, "Unguarded Nation," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019d.

Whittaker, Alan G., Frederick C. Smith, and Elizabeth McKune, *The National Security Policy Process: The National Security Council and Interagency System*, Washington, D.C.: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, U.S. Department of Defense, November 2006.

Wohlstetter, Roberta, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962.

World Bank, "World Development Indicators," undated.

Wolfowitz, Paul, and Maureen Quinn, “U.S. Military Operations and Stabilization Activities in Iraq and Afghanistan,” testimony presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 3, 2005. As of September 30, 2020:

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-109shrg27523/html/CHRG-109shrg27523.htm>

Woodward, Bob, *Bush at War*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.

Woodward, Bob, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006–2008*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.

Woodward, Bob, *Obama’s Wars*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Zakheim, Dov, “Confessions of a Vulcan: An Insider’s Story of How the Bush Administration Lost Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2011.



From 2001 to 2021, the United States pursued an unchanging policy objective in Afghanistan: to prevent a terrorist group from using the country as a safe haven in which to plan or launch an attack on the United States. However, despite deteriorating conditions and no apparent hope of military victory, the U.S. goal remained constant even as successive leaders experimented with different strategies to achieve it.

The authors examined the reasons behind this policy inertia through interviews with the senior leaders involved in the policy deliberations between 2001 and 2016. They interviewed the decisionmakers involved in high-level discussions and policy formulation to establish the institutional, informational, and interpersonal dynamics that informed major decisions; capture common interpretations and assumptions; and reconstruct how the deliberative process functioned in practice.

As this analysis details, decisions for how to navigate de-escalation from a conflict under conditions short of victory are tremendously difficult, both practically and politically. With no clear definition of success, bureaucratic inertia took hold, extending the conflict and enabling focus on mechanical details of its execution rather than its ultimate intent. The dynamics of the policy process further prevented dramatic policy change. Psychological factors promoted risk aversion and a continued escalation of commitment, even when the mission itself became poorly aligned with national priorities. Additionally, frictions between civilian and military leaders and with the Intelligence Community further prevented fundamental reassessments of the mission.

\$32.00

ISBN-10 1-9774-1044-8
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-1044-3



www.rand.org

9 781977 410443