

The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War

Craig Whitlock (Simon & Schuster, 2021), 346 pages, endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

With *The Afghanistan Papers*, *Washington Post* investigative reporter Craig Whitlock has tendered a summary of US involvement in Afghanistan beginning with the 2001 invasion and ending in summer 2021, just after the Biden administration announced plans for a complete withdrawal. *The Afghanistan Papers* lacks a fitting climax because it concludes immediately before Taliban forces seized control of the country in September 2021, as two decades of blood and treasure disintegrated almost overnight. Whitlock's survey, however, suggests the collapse was inevitable simply by asking the people who knew the ground truth. He draws persuasively from interviews of more than 1,000 people directly involved in the war culled from lessons-learned interviews,^a Defense Department memos, State Department cables and other government reports previously hidden from public view.

The Afghanistan Papers makes for sober, sometimes emotional reading that demonstrates how historical amnesia, hubris, cultural ignorance, and unfounded optimism confounded successive generations of politicians, policymakers, and military minds. Whitlock's crisp survey is a worthy examination of a complex, sometimes successful, and ultimately tragic episode in US history with more than coincidental echoes of *The Pentagon Papers* and Vietnam.

Whitlock often sketches with broad brush strokes when covering key moments during the Afghanistan war. *The Afghanistan Papers* includes summaries of the initial invasion, the hunt for Osama bin Ladin at Tora Bora, the Bonn Conference, Hamid Karzai's fraudulent 2009 election, the Abbottabad raid in 2011, the aborted US withdrawal in 2014, and the endless negotiations with an increasingly confident Taliban. He argues persuasively, albeit with the benefit of hindsight, that the United States and its allies had numerous opportunities to leave Afghanistan with their prestige intact and al-Qa'ida

all but eliminated as a viable force inside its borders. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, however, the mission transformed from one of righteous vengeance into a nation-building project that consumed first tens and then hundreds of billions of dollars. A small military footprint eventually swelled to over 100,000 by 2010 with rising casualties to match. Successive civilian and military policymakers insisted that Afghanistan had turned the corner, but Whitlock provides compelling evidence, sourced directly to interviews, that they were cherry-picking and even outright distorting the data. Opium production, kleptocratic-level corruption, and civilian deaths continued. Rigorous reviews of Afghanistan policy under successive administrations and generals were nearly as frequent as assurances of improvement. But again, Whitlock marshals testimony from those who were there that they lacked a clear definition of the enemy, the mission, and the criteria for departure.

Perhaps paradoxically, Whitlock often makes his most vivid impressions with small stories illustrating how the Afghanistan experience was born under a bad sign, despite US goodwill and the sincere commitment of many who served there. For example, he recounts how psychological operations forces distributed soccer balls to Afghan children with the flags of several countries as a gesture of goodwill. To their chagrin, the balls triggered protests because the Saudi flag on them depicted the Koranic declaration of faith in Arabic. The reader winces while learning that, while US combat deaths rose, German rules of engagement prohibited night time patrols or combat missions. The German contingent elected instead to perform a short-lived police training mission while ensconcing their small contingent on a base with copious supplies of beer and wine. Efforts at nation-building often seemed to achieve little. Afghan police were unable to understand the door-opening mechanism on an expensively designed and constructed facility featuring a

a. The interviews were part of a Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) project to diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan. The *Washington Post* sued for the interviews under the Freedom of Information Act and obtained more than 2,000 pages of unpublished notes and transcripts from SIGAR interviews conducted from 2014–18.

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glass atrium. USAID workers sparked backlash through a public health project aimed at teaching people to wash their hands, since hand washing was routinely performed five times a day before prayer. On another occasion, aid workers realized to their chagrin that they had paid one Afghan to repair a sabotaged bridge that his Taliban-affiliated brother had recently destroyed with just this goal in mind.

These vignettes provide Whitlock's account with a potent, often unexpected, punch. Not for the first time in US history, they beg a painful but essential question: How, despite their first-world technology and cutting-edge militaries, could the United States and its allies have hoped to win a conflict whose parameters they could not define and to build a nation whose culture and people they did not fundamentally understand?



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA officer in CSI's Lessons Learned Program.

Additional Readings in *Studies in Intelligence*

J. Daniel Moore, review of *First In*, by Gary C. Schroen, *Studies* 49, no. 4 (December 2005).

J.R. Seeger, review of *The Horse Soliders*, by Doug Stanton, *Studies* 53, no. 3 (September 2009).

Stephen J. Garber, review of *Triple Agent*, by Joby Warrick, *Studies* 55, no. 3 (September 2011).

J.R. Seeger, review of *The Thistle and the Drone*, by Akbar Ahmed, and *The Way of the Knife*, by Mark Mazzetti, *Studies* 57, no. 4 (Winter 2013–2014).

J.R. Seeger, review of *The Last Warlord*, by Brian Gwynn Williams, *Studies* 58, no. 2 (June 2014).

John H. Kavanaugh, review of *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan*, by Carlota Gall, *Studies* 59, no. 1, (March 2015).

J.R. Seeger, review of *Foxtrot in Kandahar*, by Duane Evans, *Studies* 61, no. 4, (December 2017).

J.R. Seeger, review of *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, by Carter Malakasian, *Studies* 65, no. 4, (December 2021).

Mike R., review of *First Casualty*, by Tony Harnden, *Studies* 66, no. 1 (March 2022).