



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Need for a Congressional Inquest into America's Longest War

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Events in Afghanistan have come full circle, with the Taliban—whose government fell to US military advances in 2001—regaining power and taking possession of large stores of US arms and ammunition. The culpability of the four successive US administrations that waged this fruitless 20-year war, culminating in an abject political and military capitulation, must be investigated and exposed.

According to official estimates, the US expended a staggering \$982 billion on the Afghanistan war effort. However, the Costs of War Project at Brown University assesses the true figure at an astronomical \$2.26 trillion, nearly \$1 trillion of which went toward the budget of the Defense Department's Overseas Contingency Operations. A further \$530 billion was interest on the money borrowed by the US government to fund the war.

Afghanistan, an eternally embattled, landlocked country of 38 million, has one of the lowest GDPs in the world (\$21 billion), on par with that of Papua New Guinea. Its per capita GDP of \$509 is a shade higher than Madagascar's. Former president Ashraf Ghani said last year that 90% of the population of Afghanistan lived on less than \$2 a day.

By any reckoning, the enormous US investment there—whether official or the Brown University estimate—should have pulled the numerically manageable population out of poverty, uplifted the ravaged economy, vastly improved all indices of human development, and created a sound political, financial, administrative, and military framework. The resultant prosperity would have rendered internal terrorism less relevant and structured the resistance against the Taliban and its affiliates.

A splurge on that scale should have accomplished all the US had set out to achieve, and in far less time than two decades. After all, the Taliban and their allies were armed with little more than Kalashnikovs, shoulder-fired rockets, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and car bombs.

So where did all the money go?

As rifle-waving insurgents now take over an Afghanistan left shattered by the humiliating US retreat, they seem poised to mutilate the legacy of America's longest and murkiest war. Central to the prolonged fortified presence of the most powerful army in the world in that impoverished country is the question of whether it achieved its objectives in a war that proved exorbitant in terms of both costs and lives.

At a news conference on July 8, President Joe Biden rejected the notion that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was inevitable following the US military withdrawal, expressing confidence that Ghani's government and the 300,000 Afghan troops trained, armed, and compensated by the US (at a cost of \$83 billion) would be able to overcome the worse-equipped, smaller Taliban forces. He denied that the Afghan government would collapse, a claim belied by Ghani's flight with hordes of cash on August 15. He denied it even as the Taliban surged into Kabul, overrunning the country in less than 10 days, encountering little or no resistance from the Afghan army.

Perhaps Biden was unaware of assessments by his own officials that a US troop withdrawal could lead to Taliban gains on the battlefield, as the Taliban were positioned more strongly than at any point since 2001, controlling half the country.

The number of US and coalition forces peaked at 140,000 in 2011, supplemented by the 300,000 Afghan troops. Yet the Americans were unable to ward off ragtag anarchists whose strength is now estimated at around 60,000 full-time fighters.

The military campaign in Afghanistan was launched on October 7, 2001 by President George W. Bush to avenge the unprecedented terror strikes on American soil a month earlier, on September 11. It sought to oust the Taliban, who had been in power in Afghanistan since 1996, and crush the al-Qaeda terror network they supported and that was suspected of having perpetrated the attacks.

To avenge the loss of 3,156 innocent lives in the carnage—2,753 at the Twin Towers in New York, plus 403 firefighters, paramedics, and policemen—the

US reprisal led to the deaths of 2,448 American service members and 51,191 opposition fighters, including Taliban.

However, Brown University's Costs of War project calculates that an additional 47,245 Afghan civilians, as well as 66,000-69,000 Afghan military and police who had no involvement with 9/11, perished in US operations.

These are heavy costs and a heavier moral burden for Washington.

The CIA also armed and funded Afghan militia groups that have been implicated in grave human rights abuses and killings of civilians. The turmoil has studded the land with unexploded ordnance that slays and maims numberless Afghans annually, especially children.

In his remarks at the White House on August 16, Biden praised the US campaign in Afghanistan for severely degrading al-Qaeda in that country. However, his own government assessed at the time that al-Qaeda was still a major presence in Afghanistan and had sustained its decades-long ties with the Taliban, which had left unfulfilled its counterterrorism commitments concerning that group. The Defense Intelligence Agency assessed last year that some al-Qaeda members were "integrated into the Taliban's forces and command structure."

Biden defended the American withdrawal from Afghanistan by saying, "Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation-building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy." However, the State Department's January Fact Sheet on US relations with Afghanistan says, "In order to strengthen Afghanistan's capabilities as a partner, and to improve the lives of the Afghan people, we continue to invest US resources to help Afghanistan improve its security, governance, institutions, and economy."

Astonishingly, while in 2001 the US precipitated regime change in Afghanistan by overthrowing the Taliban for having harbored al-Qaeda, it sought last September to broker an interim "transitional" government that would include the Taliban leadership in the first direct peace negotiations between the Ghani regime and Taliban representatives in Qatar. President Ghani rejected the idea. The US had in fact held talks with the Taliban earlier, with the Afghan government unrepresented.

In a February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, the Trump administration committed to a conditional withdrawal of military forces by May 2021 if the Taliban committed to prevent other groups, including al-Qaeda, from acting against the US or its allies. UN sanctions monitors noted that the Taliban did

not fulfill those commitments, as violence between them and the Afghan government increased and their links with al-Qaeda remained intact.

During his August 16 remarks, Biden claimed, “We’ve developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed.” He left unsaid how his administration planned on executing those actions.

In June, Pakistani FM Shah Mahmood Qureshi maintained that his country (which neighbors Afghanistan and hosts the Taliban and assorted other terror outfits) would not provide any military base to the US for monitoring Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign forces from Kabul. “We have to see our interest,” he told local broadcaster Geo News. On September 2, America’s former ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley (of Indian origin), warned that China might move to take over the Bagram air force base in Afghanistan and “use Pakistan to get stronger to go against India.”

Though the four US presidents who presided over the Afghan war were both Republican and Democrat—Bush (R), Barack Obama (D), Donald Trump (R), and Biden (D)—it is imperative that a Congressional investigation be held into the conduct of the campaign across its 20-year history, which left Afghanistan far poorer and more dangerous than it was when American troops showed up to set the house in order.

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