

Afghan Papers Inadvertently Document WaPo's Role in Spreading Official Lies

By [Joshua Cho](#)

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The Washington Post's publication of the "Afghanistan Papers" ([12/9/19](#)) unveiled over 2,000 pages of unpublished notes of interviews with US officials involved in the Afghanistan War, from a project led by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) to investigate waste and fraud. Hailed by some as the "[Pentagon Papers of Our Generation](#)" after the Post won access to those documents under the Freedom of Information Act in a three-year legal battle, the Post's exposé found that

senior US officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.

The paper published [direct remarks](#) on the war by US officials who assumed that "their remarks would not be made public":

["Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible,"](#) Bob Crowley, an Army colonel who served as a senior counterinsurgency adviser to US military commanders in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers. ["Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable but reinforced that everything we were doing was right and we became a self-licking ice cream cone."](#)

While more explicit admissions of deception on the part of US officials involved in wars are always appreciated, one question rarely discussed among the [reports](#) and opinion pieces praising the "Afghanistan Papers" is what this scoop says about the Washington Post.

If the Post is now publishing material demonstrating that US officials have been "following the same talking points for 18 years," emphasizing how they are "making progress," "especially" when the war is "going badly," shouldn't the paper acknowledge that it has been cheerleading this same line for all of those 18 years? Doesn't it have a responsibility to examine how it served as a primary vehicle for those officials to spread these same "talking points" to [spin the coverage](#) in the desired fashion?

FAIR has been tracking the Post's coverage of the Afghanistan War from the very beginning, when the paper—along with the rest of corporate media—was actively following the Bush administration's "guidance" on how to cover the war. In 2001, a FAIR survey ([11/2/01](#)) of the Post's op-ed pages for three weeks following the September 11 attacks found that

columns calling for or assuming a military response to the attacks were given a great deal of space, while opinions urging diplomatic and international law approaches as an alternative to military action were nearly nonexistent.

Eight years later, FAIR ([3/1/09](#)) found that the Post's cheerleading coverage didn't change much from 2001, as 7 out of 9 Post op-eds and 4 out of 5 editorials supported some kind of military escalation from the day Barack Obama was elected president (11/4/08) through March 1, 2009, as the US was debating a "surge" of additional troops in Afghanistan later that year.

Another study (Extra!, [11/1/09](#)) of the first ten months of the Post's opinion columns that same year found that

pro-war columns outnumbered antiwar columns by more than 10 to 1: Of 67 Post columns on US military policy in Afghanistan, 61 supported a continued war, while just six expressed antiwar views. Of the pro-war columns, 31 were for escalation and 30 for an alternative strategy.

The Post offered this lopsided coverage even though there were several polls at the time showing a majority of the US public opposed the war, because they believed that the Afghan War was "not worth fighting."

The Post also has a history of facilitating official spin for the war. When WikiLeaks posted tens of thousands of classified intelligence documents related to the Afghanistan War, FAIR ([7/30/10](#)) found that the Post either dismissed them as not being as important as the Pentagon Papers ([7/27/10](#)), or [absurdly spun the leaks](#) as good news for the US war effort ([7/27/10](#)) because the "release could compel President Obama to explain more forcefully the war's importance," and because they "bolstered Obama's decision in December to pour more troops and money into a war effort that had not received sufficient attention or resources from the Bush administration."

The Post also buried attempts by whistleblowers and other journalists who were working to expose official lies and war crimes in Afghanistan. When US Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning was sentenced to serve 35 years in prison for sharing intelligence documents that [first exposed](#) what the "Afghanistan Papers" are now corroborating, the Post, along with other corporate outlets, largely neglected Manning's legal trials and punishment (FAIR.org, [12/4/12](#), [6/18/14](#), [1/18/17](#), [4/1/19](#)). The New York Times, to its credit, did give Manning space for an op-ed ([6/14/19](#)) to explain why she risked her freedom to expose matters that the US military recorded but left unreported, including hundreds of US military attacks on Afghan civilians. The Post, for its part, found room to publish frequent op-eds by the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon (e.g., [11/16/09](#), [6/26/10](#), [6/3/11](#), [2/10/13](#), [7/12/13](#)) spouting the same optimistic US official talking points that the Post's "Afghanistan Papers" has now exposed as lies (FAIR.org, [1/3/14](#)).

In fact, one major reason why the Afghanistan Papers are unnecessary to discern deceit from US officials is that—as Michael Parenti pointed out in [The Face of Imperialism](#)—when US officials constantly provide new and different justifications for invasions, it's a sign that they're being dishonest, not incompetent.

The Post ([12/9/19](#)) admits this when it mentions that the US "largely accomplished what it

set out to do,” with Al Qaeda and Taliban officials “dead, captured or in hiding,” yet “veered off in directions that had little to do with Al Qaeda or 9/11.” This is consistent with FAIR’s finding (Extra!, [7/11](#)) that corporate media largely ignored the question of whether to end the Afghanistan War after the ostensible goal of the invasion—to capture or kill the leader of the group that carried out the September 11 attack—was accomplished in the death of Osama bin Laden.

It shouldn’t be a surprise that the Post’s Afghanistan Papers have inadvertently exposed the Post as a subservient accomplice in disseminating US official lies; corporate media rely on official sources for free content and “scoops” to subsidize their journalism, which often spreads dishonest but convenient talking points by these same sources to retain “access” to this information, trustworthy or not (Extra!, [5/02](#); New York Times, [4/20/08](#); FAIR.org, [12/12/19](#)).

Political cartoonist and journalist Ted Rall pointed out, in an account (Common Dreams, [12/11/19](#)) of being marginalized by corporate outlets like the Post:

“The Afghanistan Papers” is a [bright, shining lie](#) by omission. Yes, our military and civilian leaders lied to us about Afghanistan. But they could never have spread their murderous BS—thousands of US soldiers and tens of thousands of Afghans killed, [trillions of dollars wasted](#)—without media organizations like the Washington Post, which served as unquestioning government stenographers.

Press outlets like the Post and New York Times weren’t merely idiots used to disseminate pro-war propaganda. They actively censored people who knew we never should have gone into Afghanistan and tried to tell American voters the truth.

It’s this mutually beneficial relationship between the need for corporate media outlets like the Post for “access” to US official sources, and US officials who need corporate media outlets to propagate their preferred spin on US foreign policy to manipulate public opinion, that explains what the Afghanistan Papers expose as the Post’s own role in deceiving the US public. It’s why the Post’s coverage and [editorial board](#) can argue that the Trump administration shouldn’t “abandon the country in haste” (even though it’s been 18 years), and rally around the US’s “forever war” in Afghanistan (FAIR.org, [1/31/19](#), [9/11/19](#)), even as the paper investigates the official lies the continuing occupation depends on.

Of course, this is also the reason why it’s systemically impossible for corporate outlets like the Post to take the opportunity to raise more substantive and provocative questions about whether deceit is a constant and essential aspect of US foreign policy, and not merely confined to isolated military invasions of “quagmire” countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan, despite the Afghanistan Papers providing a perfect opportunity to do so. To say nothing of challenging a worldview that invokes “winnable” wars, in which predictions of increasing numbers of (enemy) human deaths are best described as “rosy.”

There’s quite a long history of US media assisting officials in fabricating moral pretexts for invasion—from fictional accounts of North Vietnamese attacks on American destroyer ships in the Gulf of Tonkin (FAIR.org, [8/5/17](#)), to conflating very different Islamic groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, or claims that formerly US-backed dictator Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs and the intent to use them against the US (CounterPunch, [6/11/14](#); FAIR.org, [3/19/07](#)).

Observers note that the Afghanistan Papers “only confirm what we already know” (Daily Beast, [12/14/19](#)), or that “the shocking thing about the Poststories...is how unshocking they are” (Atlantic, [12/9/19](#)); even the Washington Post ([12/12/19](#)) reminds us that only people who “haven’t been paying attention” to the Afghan War are “surprised” by what’s found in the Afghanistan Papers.

Perhaps instead of pursuing FOIA requests to confirm the obvious, the Post could just interrogate its own contradictory coverage of the Afghan War and stop functioning as credulous mouthpieces for the US government. But to do that would also require confronting the lie that this entire so-called “War on Terror” has any moral credibility, when the US is a [leading terrorist state](#) that consciously pursues imperial policies that inflame hatred against the US to [serve corporate interests](#) (FAIR.org, [3/13/19](#), [11/22/19](#)).

Absent that, an exercise like the Afghanistan Papers come off more as a “please consider” note to the Pulitzer judges than as an earnest effort to use the spotlight of journalistic investigation to speak truth to power and halt the ongoing, generation-long destruction of a foreign nation.

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Joshua Cho is a writer based in Virginia.

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