

Afghanistan, The Longest War in US History: Forgotten, But Not Gone

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

Featured image: US Army paratrooper in Afghanistan's Konar province (Photo: Spc. Lorenzo Ware/US Army. Source: [Wikicommons](#))

The war in Afghanistan is the longest war in US history. Now in its 16th year (and third US President), one might expect the war to be winding down; however, with a resurgent Taliban, and ISIS allegedly present in the country as well, President Trump has recently [delegated](#) authority over prosecution of the war to the Pentagon. Now, additional US and NATO troops are being deployed to Afghanistan, and Secretary of Defense James Mattis (together with National Security Advisor HR McMaster) is developing a new, more [aggressive](#) strategy for the war. In short, there is no end in sight.

Although other wars have claimed this title in the past, [Afghanistan](#) is referred to by many as 'the forgotten war.' Even though it has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of US troops and many more people from Afghanistan, it sits nowhere near the forefront of public consciousness; it is more a vague blob in the public's peripheral vision. Nine years ago, in July 2008, PBS aired a video report from their correspondent embedded with US troops in Afghanistan. Even then, at a time before George W Bush had vacated the Oval Office, the title of the video was "[Afghanistan: The Forgotten War](#)". Then, eight years later at the height of 2016 presidential race, the *LA Times* published an editorial called "[Afghanistan: The campaign's forgotten war](#)", in which the author points out that neither Hillary Clinton nor Donald Trump even bothered to mention Afghanistan in their convention speeches.

Trump was critical of US military interventionism during his campaign however, and even before his bid for the presidency began, he was in the habit of taking to Twitter to lambast the Obama administration for perpetuating the war in Afghanistan.

Let's get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghanis we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense! Rebuild the USA.

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [January 11, 2013](#)

But that did not stop Obama – who promised to end the war by 2014 – from leaving the White House in January 2017 with 8,400 US troops still stationed in Afghanistan. It is also not stopping Trump himself from reversing course and presiding over the next escalation of US

involvement in the country.

With the Taliban now in control of more territory than it has been since the US first went into Afghanistan in 2001, and the supposed appearance of ISIS in the country, one has to wonder what the last 16 years have really been about.

Surge 4.0

For the past few weeks, the American mainstream press has been reporting on Pentagon plans to send additional troops to Afghanistan. Although the number 4,000 has been widely circulated, no official announcements regarding the number or strategy have yet been made. The new strategy is set to be publicly announced in mid-July, and it looks as though more US troops will be sent to Afghanistan to add to the 8,500 American troops already in country. Similarly, fifteen of the twenty-nine NATO member nations so far have also agreed to send more troops to Afghanistan to add to the current NATO presence of 5,000 troops. (It should be noted that there is not currently a US or NATO combat mission in Afghanistan; instead, foreign troops are there on a mission to train Afghan forces.)

There is serious doubt among informed observers as to whether an additional few thousand troops will make any difference. After the number 4,000 had been suggested, General Jack Keane, former vice chief-of-staff of the US Army, [suggested](#) that between 10,000 and 20,000 additional troops were needed to make a difference. Similarly, in the past few days, former CIA director and defense secretary Leon Panetta also [weighed in](#), echoing Keane's opinion that 4,000 troops would not change the momentum.

As Danny Sjursen (the author of the article below) points out, the upcoming 'surge' in troop levels would be the fourth such move made by the US, following three similar increases by Bush and Obama in the years 2008-2010. It is beginning to look like escalating (or, in the case of Bush, starting) war in Afghanistan is something of a rite of passage for new presidents, as all three commanders-in-chief who have presided over the war have done so within the first year of their first terms. The question is, what is the US government actually trying to achieve, and is 'winning' even possible?

Remember how the mainstream media treated the surge orchestrated by General David Petraeus in Iraq in 2007. The idea of the surge was received with fawning adoration throughout the media, and even by President Bush, who played his part in helping to advertise and hype up the strategy. And afterwards Petraeus had no problem taking all the credit for his 'success'.

Except it [wasn't a success](#). Its goals of ending sectarian violence and reconciling Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds were noble, but were not achieved with any meaningful staying power; the destabilization originally introduced by US intervention ultimately prevailed, and ISIS was the result. The point is that in Iraq, the surge was a triumph of marketing, a rebrand, a new sexy cover for a grisly reality. According to the [Boston Globe](#):

"For Americans, the myth of the victorious surge is so seductive because it perpetuates an illusion of control. It frames the Iraq War as something other than a geostrategic blunder and remembers our effort as something more than a stalemate. What's more, it reinforces the notion that it's possible to influence events around the world, if only military force is deployed properly. It's a myth that makes victory in the current Iraq mission appear achievable."

Now replace the word 'Iraq' with 'Afghanistan'.

One sad and daunting possibility is that Afghanistan has become a sort of operations 'incubator' used by the West, that one of the purposes served by a perpetual US and NATO presence there is to provide real-life training and experience to their troops, and to test weapons and equipment. Over time, a very significant number of foreign troops can be cycled in from various countries, and those countries then benefit from being able to test out new weapons, bombs, combat methods, training, and operational procedures and tactics. This prospect is even mentioned in Danny Sjursen's article:

"As one high-ranking Afghan official [recently](#) lamented, thinking undoubtedly of the [first use](#) in his land of the largest non-nuclear bomb on the planet, 'Is the plan just to use our country as a testing ground for bombs?'"

If that is even partly the case, the West requires a theater of war containing a long, infinitely extendable conflict in order to fulfill these requirements for the wider military-industrial complex. In Afghanistan, that's exactly what they have.

A Flawed Strategy

In a recent [article by independent journalist Gareth Porter](#), he points out that the US strategy in Afghanistan has a fatal flaw, which goes a long way toward explaining why the war is not being 'won':

"The real reason for the fundamental weakness of the US-NATO war is the fact that the United States has empowered a rogues' gallery of Afghan warlords whose militias have imposed a regime of chaos, violence and oppression on the Afghan population – stealing, killing and raping with utter impunity."

In Porter's view, American objectives and methods in ousting the Taliban may have been short-sighted, as the Taliban came to power partly as a response to the sexual violence and predatory behaviour of Afghan 'warlords'.

"The organization [Taliban] appeared in 1994 in response to the desperate pleas of the population in the south – especially in a Kandahar province divided up by four warlords – to stop the wholesale abduction and rape of women and pre-teen boys, as well as the uncontrolled extortion of tolls by warlord troops. The Taliban portrayed themselves as standing for order and elementary justice against chaos and sexual violence, and they immediately won broad popular support to drive the warlords out of power across the south, finally taking over Kabul without a fight."

Ever since the invasion in 2001, the US has played favorites with the warlords, pitting various leaders against one another; helping selected ones to become more powerful, allowing some to become regional governors, putting others on the CIA payroll, and eventually turning their private militias into the national police. Over the years several different US commanders have taken the reins of the war in Afghanistan, but this strategy of using the warlord militias persisted, since there was no other adequate source of manpower to provide security, not only for the general population in Afghanistan but also for the US-NATO coalition troops themselves.

The occurrence of 'green-on-blue' attacks by Afghan police or military against US/coalition forces (such as the [one](#) last month that killed three American soldiers) may be largely attributable to the strategy of using warlord militias, but it is worth mentioning that the Taliban also actively infiltrates both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. Moreover, in Helmand and Kandahar provinces in particular, profits from the drug trade provide temptation to every element in society. As one [article](#) stated,

"the two provinces burdened with the bulk of green-on-blue attacks are Helmand and Kandahar. It is no coincidence that these areas are where the Taliban are strongest, and where the country's highest levels of opium poppy cultivation help fund the insurgency."

Although the frequency of green-on-blue attacks has declined (corresponding with the reduced US presence in Afghanistan), the number of different groups and interests represented on the ground make for an exceedingly complex web of relationships in which it is not always easy to see an attack coming.

Coupled with the flawed and failing US strategy of alliances is an unwillingness to admit defeat amongst both civilian and military managers of the Afghan war. The combination of these two factors could be a significant contributing factor as to why the conflict shows no signs of ending. In an [interview](#) with Gareth Porter, radio host and antiwar activist Scott Horton made the point this way:

"It is the case that every one of these guys in the war cabinet are heavily invested in some sort of spin that they won or are winning, or that there is some kind of positive light at the end of the tunnel, because each and every one of them is wrapped up in it. [Secretary of Defense] Mattis was in the original war, and was the head of CENTCOM for a time in charge of the war. [National Security Advisor] McMaster was in charge of counter-corruption during the Petraeus-Obama surge in 2009-2012. You have the Secretary of Homeland Security who apparently has quite a bit of sway, Kelly, whose son died in Helmand province in Petraeus' surge, and they're not going to want to admit that that was a sunk cost lost, for understandable reasons. Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well, has been in charge of the Afghan war. So these men have everything to lose by admitting that they lost."

Porter agrees that there are other contributing factors to the war being seemingly unending and unwinnable, such as:

"the careers of the US officers who serve there; the bureaucratic stakes of the Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA in their huge programs and facilities in the country; the political cost of admitting that it was a futile effort from the start. Plus, the Pentagon and the CIA are determined to hold on to Afghan airstrips they use to carry out drone war in Pakistan for as long as possible."

A word that frequently gets used with regard to the Afghan conflict is "[stalemate](#)". After nearly 16 years, the Taliban now exercises control over about 40% of the territory in Afghanistan. They have allies such as the Haqqani network resupplying them from bordering Pakistan – considered something of a safe haven for terrorists despite being a US ally. As Danny Sjursen writes:

“if all goes well (which isn’t exactly a surefire thing), that’s likely to be the best that Surge 4.0 can produce: a long, painful tie.”

These criticisms may sound harsh to those hoping that the coming surge will make a difference, but the problems (and questions) regarding America’s involvement in Afghanistan are far deeper and broader than those presented above.

Fraud, Waste & Abuse

On a financial level, corruption and waste rule the day on both the Afghan and American sides of US involvement – and there is an astounding amount of money at stake. While the overall war has cost US taxpayers around a trillion dollars so far, funds appropriated for reconstruction stand at over \$117 billion. As usual, it looks like money in the form of government contracts may be a reason why there is little urgency to end the war. As Ryan Crocker, former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, [said](#):

“The ultimate failure for our efforts wasn’t an insurgency. It was more the weight of endemic corruption.”



Source: 21st Century Wire

John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)), makes quarterly reports to Congress about his oversight of spending on reconstruction in Afghanistan. Some of SIGAR’s findings over the years have been breathtaking. Take for example SIGAR’s finding that there may be 200,000 “[ghost soldiers](#)”, Afghan soldiers whose salaries are US-taxpayer funded but who seem not even to exist except on paper. Or the [gas station](#) that cost an absurd \$43 million to build, but that nobody uses and about which the Pentagon now has no knowledge. Or the \$28 million needlessly spent on [uniforms](#) for the Afghan army, in ‘forest’ camouflage, even though woodland covers only 2.1% of Afghan territory.

As of two years ago, there was [\\$35 billion](#) in reconstruction funds spent that could not be accounted for, with many projects failing to meet requirements or specifications. It would seem the contractors winning the bids to rebuild Afghanistan are doing rather well for themselves; underwritten by the US taxpayer, there appears to be no end to the amount of money in the trough. As Sopko told *WhoWhatWhy*:

“We have spent more in Afghanistan than we did on the entire Marshall Plan to rebuild postwar Europe. The American taxpayer has had to foot that \$114 billion bill, so they deserve to know not only the cost but also what it has gotten them.”

Bear in mind that SIGAR only covers reconstruction costs, not appropriations for bombs, arms, planes or other military equipment, vehicles or weaponry.



A US Marine patrols through a poppy field in Helmand province, Afghanistan (Photo: Cpl. John M. McCall, USMC. Source: [Wikicommons](#))

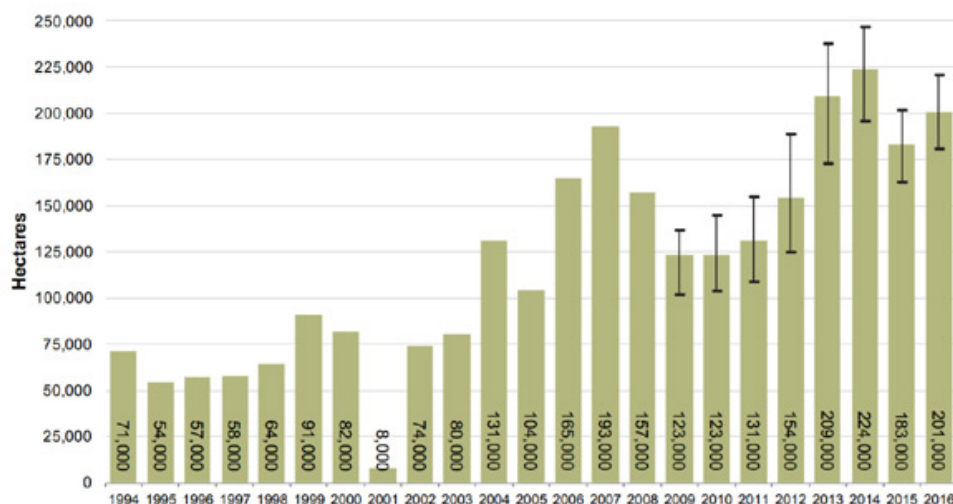
The Opium Question

Since the US military first invaded Afghanistan in 2001, production of [opium](#) in the country has increased dramatically. Although it is impossible to measure exactly how much opium is being produced, the UN produces yearly reports in which it estimates production levels, as well as how much land area is allocated for purpose of growing opium poppies. The latest UN figures for the year 2015-2016 show a significant increase in both the area used for opium cultivation (from 183,00 to 201,000 hectares, a 10% increase), as well as for potential production of opium (from 3,300 tons to 4,800 tons, a 43% increase).

In addition, despite \$8.5 billion spent on eradication, the area destroyed by eradication efforts decreased by 91% from 2015 to 2016 (from 3,760 hectares eradicated down to just 355 hectares eradicated), and yield increased by 30% (from 18.3 kg of opium produced per hectare to 23.8 kg). All this places [2016](#) into the top three years for opium cultivation since the UN Office on Drugs and Crime began monitoring opium in Afghanistan in 1994.

Afghanistan is the world's [largest opium producer](#) by a very wide margin, with a widely cited [statistic](#) being that opium from Afghanistan is in 90% of the heroin produced worldwide.

Figure 1: Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, 1994-2016 (Hectares)



Sources: MCN/UNODC opium surveys 1994-2016. The vertical lines represent the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval.

Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan to 2016 (Image: UNODC. Source: [Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016](#))

War on Drugs?

America's War on Drugs is rife with contradictions, but the fact that US troops (and [DEA agents](#)) have been stationed in a country responsible for 90% of the world's heroin market for 16 years, with production increasing and eradication declining, is, shall we say, counter-intuitive – especially when one considers that at home, media outlets across the country are reporting daily on America's heroin and opioid '[epidemic](#)'.

According to the [CDC](#), deaths due to opioid overdose in the United States increased by 16% between 2014 and 2015. Between 2002 and 2013, deaths due to heroin overdose nearly [quadrupled](#). (Opioids are a class of drug that includes opiates – natural, opium-derived drugs like morphine – as well as synthetic versions like oxycodone or fentanyl; both are lethal and rapidly-growing problems in the United States.) Of course this is to say nothing about the legions of people languishing in US prisons for the nonviolent crime of drug possession.

To assume that there is no [connection](#) between the country that helps supply 90% of the world's heroin on the one hand, and an explosion in America of heroin-related addiction and death on the other, is foolhardy to say the least.

It is also noteworthy that in July 2000, in cooperation with the UN, the Taliban outlawed the growing of opium, which is why production dropped sharply for the year 2001. As summarized in a 2004 [academic paper](#) for the *International Journal of Drug Policy*:

“Afghanistan was the main source of the world's illicit heroin supply for most of the 1990s. From late 2000 and the year that followed, the Taliban enforced a ban on poppy farming via threats, forced eradication, and public punishment of transgressors. The result was a 99% reduction in the area of opium poppy farming in Taliban-controlled areas... It is concluded that the reduction in Afghan poppy cultivation was due to the enforcement action by the Taliban. Globally, the net result of the intervention produced an estimated 35%

reduction in poppy cultivation and a 65% reduction in the potential illicit heroin supply from harvests in 2001. Though Afghan poppy growing returned to previous levels after the fall of the Taliban government, this may have been the most effective drug control action of modern times.”

If one only ever observed US involvement in Afghanistan, it might begin to look as though perhaps the United States is not actually waging a war on drugs. US troops are there, [in the poppy fields](#), production is rising, and live on Fox News, a USMC lieutenant colonel clearly [told](#) Geraldo Rivera

“we provide them [poppy farmers] security, we’re providing them resources”.

However, Afghanistan is not the only instance we have of the US government protecting drug traffickers. Abby Martin [explains](#):

In 2012, a Mexican government official from Juarez [told Al Jazeera](#) that the CIA and other international security forces “don’t fight drug traffickers” and that instead, the agency tries to “manage the drug trade.” Back in the fifties, the CIA turned a blind eye to drug trafficking through the Golden Triangle while training Taiwanese troops against Communist China. As William Blum reports in *Rogue State*:

“The CIA flew the drugs all over Southeast Asia, to sites where the opium was processed into heroin, and to trans-shipment points on the route to Western customers.”

These are far from isolated incidents. During the eighties, the CIA financially and logistically backed anti-communist contras in Nicaragua who also happened to be international drug traffickers. Former Representative [Ron Paul elaborated](#) on the CIA’s notorious corruption when speaking to a group of students about Iran-Contra:

“[Drug trafficking] is a gold mine for people who want to raise money in the underground government in order to finance projects that they can’t get legitimately. It is very clear that the CIA has been very much involved with drug dealings. We saw [Iran-Contra] on television. They were hauling down weapons and drugs back.”

There are certainly questions that the US government has to answer about its relationship with the drug business. But another aspect of Afghan opium production which deserves further investigation is the extent of Chinese involvement in the modern opium trade coming out of Afghanistan. It has been reported that Afghan poppy farmers have begun growing what they call ‘[Chinese seed](#)’, a genetically-modified poppy seed that allow farmers to grow poppies year-round and harvest their crops every two months. In March of this year, CNBC reported that ‘Chinese seed’ was in fact being grown legally in China for pharmaceutical purposes but had somehow crossed the border into Afghanistan.

Last month *21WIRE* featured the documentary [Afghan Overdose](#), about the Afghan opium trade, in our Sunday Screening series.

Afghanistan and Empire

To understand how globalist empire-builders view Afghanistan, however, we might direct readers' attention to a superb [video by James Corbett](#) for Global Research's GRTV. In the video, Corbett explains in a very concise fashion the greater historical and geopolitical context out of which the current conflict in Afghanistan arose.

The video provides evidence as to why 9/11 could not have been the real reason for the US invasion of Afghanistan, and what makes the country an extremely important asset in geopolitical and geostrategic terms. Afghanistan's position as the world's preeminent producer of opium alone would make the country very significant on the world stage; according to [UN figures](#) from 2010, the market for opiates worldwide is worth \$65 billion, although the actual figure today could be considerably higher. Another very important factor making Afghanistan an attractive economic prize is what lies under the ground in the country; in addition to a significant amount of oil and gas, Afghanistan is also home to a [vast wealth of minerals](#) such as iron, copper, cobalt, gold and lithium, estimated at over \$1 trillion in value. Let's also not forget its appeal as the potential location for energy [pipelines](#).

As Corbett explains, however, the real value of Afghanistan is its strategic location. Drawing on the geostrategic treatises of [Halford Mackinder](#) and [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), Corbett places Afghanistan at the very center of the new [Great Game](#), the battle between east and west for the crucial region of Central Asia, and ultimately the globe.

Should we really be surprised by any of this? Although the Hollywood/mainstream media/pop-culture view of America is that of a democratic, freedom-loving, law-abiding member of the international community, regular readers of *21WIRE* will already be aware that this image is largely a myth. In a recent [article](#) for *The American Conservative* deconstructing the myth of a 'rules-based international order', Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich points out that:

"Among the items failing to qualify for mention in the liberal internationalist, rules-based version of past U.S. policy are the following: meddling in foreign elections; coups and assassination plots in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, South Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua, and elsewhere; indiscriminate aerial bombing campaigns in North Korea and throughout Southeast Asia; a nuclear arms race bringing the world to the brink of Armageddon; support for corrupt, authoritarian regimes in Iran, Turkey, Greece, South Korea, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Brazil, Egypt, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and elsewhere—many of them abandoned when deemed inconvenient; the shielding of illegal activities through the use of the Security Council veto; unlawful wars launched under false pretenses; 'extraordinary rendition,' torture, and the indefinite imprisonment of persons without any semblance of due process."

The United States has not lived up to what the media tells us it is for some time. The war in Afghanistan is no exception.

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