

Even After the Afghanistan Papers, the Washington ‘Blob’ Still Embraces Staying Forever

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James Clad, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia, remembers the exact moment, back in 2001, when he learned that the U.S. had invaded Afghanistan. As chance would have it, he was in a meeting with a dozen or so South Asia experts at the Council on Foreign Relations.

“It was in early October of 2001,” he recalls, “and word came that U.S. warplanes had attacked three Afghan cities. Well, you could have heard a pin drop. I looked around the room and everyone was studying their shoes. And I thought, ‘well, this isn’t going to work.’ And we all knew it. All of us. This was going to be a morass.”

Clad wasn’t alone in his thinking. In the wake of the December 9 publication of the [Afghanistan Papers](#) in the Washington Post, retired CIA officer Robert Grenier, who ran covert operations in support of the 2001 U.S. intervention, reflected on the papers’ key finding – that U.S. officials lied about the 18-year campaign, hiding “unmistakable evidence” that the Afghan war had become unwinnable.

“Frankly, it strikes me as weird that people should only be waking up to this now,” he told me. “The Washington Post series doesn’t convey anything which those who’ve been watching with even moderate attention should long since have understood.”

Which may be why the papers, comprising some 2000-plus pages of interviews with generals, diplomats, aid workers and Afghan officials conducted by SIGAR, the Pentagon’s Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, landed with a thud – “a bombshell that has yet to explode,” as one commenter [described it](#). For good reason: celebrated as a second Pentagon Papers (the 1971 documents that bared the lies of the Vietnam War) the Afghanistan revelations didn’t actually reveal anything that foreign policy officials, or the American people, didn’t already know: that the U.S. was not winning and could not win in Afghanistan, that senior U.S. diplomats and U.S. military commanders knew this soon after the 2001 intervention, that the hundreds of billions of dollars spent to build a responsive Afghan government was squandered, misspent, diverted or stolen, and that officials consistently misled the American people about the prospects for victory in the war – promoting optimistic assessments in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

“In news conferences and other public appearances,” the Post report noted, “those in charge of the war have followed the same talking points for 18 years. No matter how the war is going – and especially when it is going badly – they emphasized how they are making progress.”

Among the most outspoken critics quoted by the papers is retired Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, who served as the Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama years.

“We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan – we didn’t know what we were doing,” Lute told SIGAR officials in an [oft-quoted judgment](#). “What are we trying to do here? We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking.”

In truth, the big “reveal” of the Afghanistan Papers came after their release, when most of official Washington reacted to their publication with a collective shrug. Despite this, though not surprisingly, while the State Department and White House remained silent on the revelations, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley rejected the claim that officials had purposely misled the public about the war.

“I know there’s an assertion out there of some sort of coordinated lie over the course of 18 years,” Milley [told reporters](#). “I find that a bit of a stretch. More than a bit of a stretch, I find that a mischaracterization.”

Optimistic reports on the war in Afghanistan, he argued, were “honest assessments” that were “never intended to deceive the Congress or the American people.” While Milley’s response was unusually strident, it was not a surprise for most Pentagon reporters, many of whom knew that senior military officers and Pentagon policy makers were carefully studying proposals that would keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan for at least the next five years – if not longer.

Among these is a paper authored by Michael O’Hanlon, the high profile Foreign Policy Director of Research at the influential Brookings Institution. Entitled “5,000 Troops for 5 Years,” O’Hanlon’s offering was previewed in an op-ed in The Hill in late October, presented formally by Brookings officials on the same day as the Post published the Afghanistan Papers, then circulated to a wider audience in an O’Hanlon-authored [op-ed](#) in USA Today on January 3. O’Hanlon provides a less outspoken critique of the Post story than Milley (calling it “badly misleading” and arguing that U.S. officials “have been consistently and publicly realistic about the difficulty of making progress” in the war), while acknowledging the “limits of the possible” in a “beleaguered and weak country.” Even so, O’Hanlon says in taking issue with the Post report, the Afghanistan mission “has not been an abject failure” because, as he argues, the Afghan government “continues to hold all major and midsize cities” and the U.S. has “not again been attacked by a group that plotted or organized its aggression from within Afghan borders.”

O’Hanlon concedes that while these are modest accomplishments, they are sustainable “at a far lower cost in blood and treasure than before.” Here then, is O’Hanlon’s payoff: “The United States needs a policy that recognizes Afghanistan for what it is – a significant, but not a top-tier, U.S. strategic interest – and builds a plan accordingly. That overall strategy should still seek peace, but its modest military element should be steady and stable, and not set to a calendar. Roughly 5,000 troops for at least five years could be the crude

mantra.”

O’Hanlon’s proposal has gained traction among a number of senior military officers who are frustrated with a war that drains military assets and erodes readiness, but who are loathe to concede Afghanistan to the Taliban – an outcome they believe is certain to follow a full U.S. withdrawal. Then too, O’Hanlon confirms, his proposal reflects the thinking of a large swath of Washington’s foreign policy community. “I think I am codifying and encapsulating and distilling the wisdom of a lot of people here, with a couple of my own twists,” he told me in response to a series of questions I posed to him in an email exchange. “I think the chances of something like this [being adopted] are therefore pretty good.”

Indeed, the O’Hanlon proposal seems to have something for everyone: it foregoes the large nation building expenditures that have characterized the U.S. intervention (\$7 billion to \$8 billion each year – “not trivial, but only 1 percent of the defense budget”), it maintains enough military capacity to check the growth of ISIS or al-Qaeda (the U.S. would maintain “two or three major airfields and hubs of operations” in the country), it allows time for the U.S. to put in place a more effective Afghan military presence (O’Hanlon provides five specific recommendations on how this can be done), it signals the Taliban that the U.S. will not leave the country out of frustration (that they cannot simply “stall for time”), and perhaps most crucially, it gelds the controversy surrounding the conflict by taking it out of public view: “By laying out a plan designed to last for several years,” O’Hanlon writes, “Washington would be avoiding the drama and the huge consumption of policy bandwidth associated with annual Afghanistan policy reviews that have typified the late Obama and early Trump years.” Which is to say:

maintaining a presence in Afghanistan at 5,000 troops (“I’d rather see 5,000 as a rough goal not a formal or legislated ceiling or floor,” O’Hanlon says) over an extended period takes the war off the nation’s front pages – it regularizes the U.S. deployment at an acceptable cost (that’s what sustainable means) and it makes the war in Afghanistan publicly palatable.

If any of this sounds familiar, it’s because it is. “5,000 Troops for 5 Years” seemingly institutionalizes what then-Afghan commander General David Petraeus called “Afghanistan Good Enough” in August of 2010: “This isn’t to say that there’s any kind of objective of turning Afghanistan into Switzerland in three to five years or less,” he said at the time. “Afghan good enough is good enough.” At the time, any number of pundits predicted that the Petraeus statement would come back to haunt him, but his mantra has been adopted by senior military officers who cite the O’Hanlon paper as a means of, if not exactly winning the Afghanistan war, at least not losing it – if victory isn’t possible, they argue, then “good enough” is next best. Or, as one senior military officer told me, the O’Hanlon proposal recasts the political calculus of Vermont Senator George Aiken on Vietnam, who said that the U.S. should “declare victory and get out.” In this case, the officer said, O’Hanlon is proposing that “the U.S. declare a stalemate and stay in.”

The O’Hanlon proposal details what has been quietly talked about in military circles for the last decade, but was given credence in a monograph written by retired Army Colonel David Johnson (“Doing What You Know”) published in 2017. Johnson, whose paper circulated widely in Army circles, argues that “good enough” might well be the most appropriate model for fighting counter-insurgencies – a form of warfare that has traditionally been outside of the U.S. military’s “strategic culture.” In these conflicts, what Johnson calls a “least bad outcome” might be all that the U.S. military should expect. In Afghanistan, this means accepting limits to success. “In Afghanistan, what is good enough is a government

that can successfully protect itself and take the fight to the Taliban with minimal U.S. support,” Johnson wrote. “Whether the Kabul government is corrupt or not representative is secondary to its ability to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a terrorist haven. That would be good enough.”

That this model might well be adopted in Afghanistan (and in Iraq), and in any of the other “grey zone” conflicts of the Middle East, is no longer at issue. The model is already in place, while O’Hanlon’s 5000 Troops for 5 Years is fast becoming a reality. But the adoption of the program has come at a price – in Afghan lives. While the U.S. has continued to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, it has escalated its air campaign against the Taliban (U.S. aircraft dropped 7423 bombs on Afghanistan in 2019 – more than any other year), thereby embracing a strategy that allows U.S. deployments to remain in place, but without the consequent escalation in U.S. casualties. (“More U.S. troops die in training accidents than in Afghanistan so, you know, there’s that,” a senior military officer told me.) Meanwhile, Afghan civilian casualties have spiked, reaching unprecedented levels in the period of July to September of 2019. That trend is likely to continue.

And so, the results of the Washington Post’s publication of the Afghanistan Papers “bombshell” in December have now come sharply into focus: Afghanistan is off the nation’s front pages, American casualties are “sustainable,” the war continues – and, ironically, the chances for ending it are now even more remote than before the Post published its revelations.

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Featured image: U.S. Army Sgt. Christian Cisineros takes a moment to speak with his interpreter March 17, 2009, while on a dismount patrol mission near Forward Operating Base Baylough in the Zabul Province of Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Mancini/Released)

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