

# Obama's Broken Promises in Afghanistan

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*By 2008 US president George W. Bush was no longer talking about winning in Iraq. Around 500,000 American soldiers had been sent to Iraq between 2003 and 2008, but the US military was unable to overcome the Middle East country. Bush's expectations of victory in Iraq gradually disappeared and the defeat dealt a severe, permanent blow to America's standing as a global power.*

The election victory in November 2008 of an African-American, Barack Obama, seemed to signal an ongoing decline for America's white elites, those who had long controlled the centres of power in the US; but shortly before Obama's inauguration on 20 January 2009, he proposed another bailout of America's private banks worth \$1.18 trillion, and after he assumed the presidency he dispensed with a further \$412 billion in 2010.

With the US military position in Iraq irretrievable by the time Obama became president, he directed much of his attention instead towards the US war in Afghanistan (2001-21), a landlocked Asian country located over a thousand miles to the east of Iraq. Obama escalated the offensive against the insurgency in Afghanistan, by sending an extra 30,000 troops there from late 2009, added to the 70,000 US soldiers already in the country along with 30,000 NATO-backed personnel (1). The NATO offensive was made more difficult, by the fact that the number of Taliban fighters quadrupled from 2006 to 2009.

Obama spent \$100 billion in 2009 alone with his troop surge in Afghanistan (2). He wanted to continue this military campaign because of what he said was a "war of necessity" until victory was secured. The increase in US troops led to a worsening in sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia elements. In addition out of the many thousands of NATO casualties in Afghanistan, the majority of them were American deaths.

Between 2006 and 2007 the US Geological Survey, an agency of the US government, analysed 70% of Afghanistan's terrain from the air using magnetic and gravitational equipment. The Americans discovered that the area of Afghanistan which they surveyed

contains \$1 trillion worth of natural resources, including lithium, oil, natural gas, copper, gold and iron (3). This wealth was virtually untapped because of the lack of infrastructure to exploit it, along with the unstable nature of the country.

The Pentagon appointed the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations, with the aim of dividing up Afghanistan's areas of economic significance. In May 2010 Germany's president Horst Köhler informed the media that the German troops in Afghanistan, as part of the US-led NATO, were there due to economic reasons. The 5,350 German soldiers on Afghan soil were not "combatting terrorism" but, as Köhler said, they were in Afghanistan "to protect our interests" which included "free trade routes" (4). Köhler, who was telling the truth, resigned from the presidency a few days later due to strong criticism of his remarks.

The NATO assault on Afghanistan related further to the country's strategic importance, as it borders Central Asia, Iran, Pakistan and to the far north-east, China. Should the US have succeeded in subduing Afghanistan, it would have allowed Washington to increase its encirclement of Iran. Therefore a NATO defeat in Afghanistan would be a major setback to US hegemony, which it was, on top of the debacle in Iraq.

President Obama in 2010 designated \$688 billion for the Pentagon's military budget, which had more than doubled since 2001, when weapons expenditure amounted to around \$316 billion that year (5). Even had Obama wanted to, it would have been difficult for him to change the structure of the American state, which is dominated by the interests of private sectors like the military-industrial complex. Some of America's biggest states, such as California and Texas, are heavily reliant on income from Pentagon spending.

The "wars on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq had cost Washington about \$2 trillion each year. The invasions were funded to a large extent by loans, with interest payments that added further hundreds of billions of dollars to the final cost. The main beneficiaries of this expenditure were the arms manufacturers, the military-industrial complex.

The driving force behind Afghanistan's economy has been poppy cultivation, relating to the production of opium, a highly addictive drug. During the second and third years of Obama's presidency, opium production in Afghanistan increased from 3,600 tons of opium (in 2010) to 5,800 tons (in 2011). In the year that Obama's presidency ended, 2017, Afghanistan's opium production reached a record level of 9,000 tons produced. (6)

The size of land for poppy cultivation in Afghanistan amounted to 131,000 hectares in 2011. By 2017 there was 328,000 hectares of Afghan land devoted to the poppy (7). Obama had said in a pre-election campaign speech of July 2008 that, once in power, his government would "invest in alternative livelihoods to poppy-growing for Afghan farmers, just as we crack down on heroin trafficking". More broken promises.

Opium can be manufactured into heroin, another very addictive substance. American soldiers in Afghanistan were increasingly found to be consuming heroin. From 2002 to 2010, the number of US troops caught taking heroin in drug tests increased tenfold, to 116 in 2010, and eight died from drug overdoses between 2010 and 2011. In the opening 5 months of 2012, a remarkable 154 American soldiers killed themselves. (8)

US forces struggled to adapt to the harsh climate, as Afghanistan is among the world's highest and most mountainous nations, where the air is thin and the land arid. No outside

power ever really managed to secure a military victory in Afghanistan, mainly because about 80% of the country is covered by either mountain or desert. The local forces were well accustomed to the conditions. Attempting to defeat the anti-American opposition in the Hindu Kush mountains, which stretch across Afghanistan into neighbouring Pakistan, was beyond the capabilities of the US military. The 1,500 mile border between Afghanistan and Pakistan also offers numerous, unmanned entry and exit points.

NATO troops in Afghanistan were often guarding the opium-producing areas, which was disguised under the pretext of counterinsurgency operations. Matthew Hoh, an ex-captain in the US Marine Corps, said that in protecting the poppy fields and opium production lines, "The logic was 'we [NATO] don't want to take away the livelihoods of the people.' But really, what we were doing at that point was protecting the wealth of our friends in power in Afghanistan" (9). The Afghan drugs trade was operated by many of the warlords and politicians collaborating with the Americans. Afghanistan was in effect a narco-state.

US intelligence agencies, such as the CIA, were aware of the location of the big heroin processing laboratories in Afghanistan and where the drugs were sold, but did not prevent the operations from continuing.

The historian Alfred McCoy rightly accused the CIA of involvement in the narcotics industry (10). He wrote in 2010, "the CIA successfully mobilized former warlords long active in the heroin trade to seize towns and cities across eastern Afghanistan. In other words, the Agency [CIA] and its local allies created ideal conditions for reversing the Taliban's opium ban and reviving the drug traffic". McCoy noted further "in their counterinsurgency operations, U.S. forces worked closely with local warlords who proved to be leading druglords".

The narcotics produced in Afghanistan was regularly flown out of the country in US military planes, where most of the drugs were flown to European and Central Asian states to be sold. This provided the Americans with \$50 billion of yearly profit, which helped to sustain NATO forces in Afghanistan. (11)

According to Hamid Gul, the former Director General of Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI), some of the drugs produced in Afghanistan was sent directly to America. General Gul felt it was "most disturbing" that US warplanes were being used to transport drugs (12). He also said that the intelligence service created by the US with the assistance of India, Research and Analysis Milli Afghanistan (RAMA), was used primarily to cause instability in Pakistan.

General Stanley McChrystal, appointed by Obama as overall commander of US-led forces in Afghanistan in June 2009, believed he would be able to pacify the country with 80,000 NATO soldiers in a kill/capture offensive. McChrystal later admitted the Americans had "a frighteningly simplistic view" of Afghanistan's recent history, and that his own understanding of Afghanistan was "very superficial", which he said was the case with many of his colleagues.

In May 2009, just before McChrystal's arrival, US elite troops from the Special Operations Forces (SOF) carried out 20 military raids that month. In November 2009, five months after McChrystal's appointment as overall commander, the US SOF executed 90 kill/capture raids in Afghanistan. By the spring of 2010, the US SOF was carrying out almost 250 night raids per month, and in the summer of that year the number had risen to nearly 600 each month. It continued rising and by the spring of 2011 the US SOF may have been executing over

1,000 raids a month in Afghanistan, or up to 40 every night. (13)

Two senior American commanders told the Washington Post that, on at least half of these raids, the US special forces had not targeted the right house or person. The American public was becoming disillusioned with the military's continued presence in Afghanistan, a far away and remote country. More than 11 years after the US invasion began a survey was conducted in March 2012, by CBS News/New York Times, which stated that 69% of Americans did not want their country involved in the conflict in Afghanistan (14). Their views were ignored and the fighting went on.

Even though US troops were equipped with some advanced military hardware, the limits of Washington's power was evident in Afghanistan, as it had been in Iraq and Vietnam. Instituting a popular US-friendly regime in the Afghan capital Kabul proved a fantasy, and the Taliban was growing stronger. Washington and its NATO allies did not attain any of their strategic objectives, and with no stability or legitimacy they could not exploit Afghanistan's mineral wealth.

The NATO-led Afghan National Army contained around 195,000 soldiers, and it was meant to assume control of Afghanistan by 2014. The reality was that the Afghan National Army was in a sorry condition. Over half of its soldiers were spending their time intoxicated on chemical substances. Around 33% of them deserted every year and Kabul found it hard to find replacements (15). The deserters complained about corruption among their officers, lack of money, inadequate medical care and food supplies.

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## Notes

1 "Obama's Afghan plan represents big gamble", NBC News, [2 December 2009](#)

2 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, The Second Cold War: Geopolitics and the Strategic Dimensions of the USA (Springer; 1st ed., 23 June 2017) p. 112

3 Ibid., p. 117

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6 "Afghan opium production jumps to record level, up 87 per cent: Survey", United Nations, [15 November 2017](#)

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10 Bandeira, The Second Cold War, p. 119

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12 Ibid., p. 120

13 “How McChrystal and Petraeus built an indiscriminate ‘killing machine’”, Truthout, [26 September 2011](#)

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15 Bandeira, The Second Cold War, p. 125

*Featured image is from The Last Refuge*

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## [America’s “War on Terrorism”](#)

by Michel Chossudovsky

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September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington’s agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State.

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