

How Did the US Become the Latest Victim in the Graveyard of Empires?

The world continues to watch Afghanistan with many still wondering how a 20-year occupation failed so spectacularly. US President Joe Biden's approval rating has hit rock bottom as many watched the bungled response by the US to withdraw its servicemen to its abandonment of those who worked with the US. Just after the US withdrawal on 15th August 2021 an obscure US federal agency, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR published its 13 years' investigation into the lessons that need to be learnt from the Afghan invasion and occupation. The agency interviewed hundreds of participants in the war which was intended to diagnose policy failures in Afghanistan. SIGAR carried out interviews over 13 years with various policy makers, soldiers, politicians and others that participated in the war in Afghanistan. The insights providing a revealing insight to the US occupation of Afghanistan and why it failed.

Many of those interviewed were very frank in their assessments because they assumed their remarks would not ever become public. The SIGAR papers show that the US never quite knew what it was doing in Afghanistan. Were soldiers there to combat Al Qaeda or turn Afghanistan into a modern Western-style democracy? The mission seems to have never been set, allowing US policy to drift for decades, and without a clear goal, the tactics changed as well. Troops were surged into the country and then pulled out. American dollars sloshed through the Afghan economy, earmarked for an almost infinite number of projects without an overarching goal, save to spend every dollar that Congress appropriated.

Regarding the war itself those that participated in it and those that sent the US military to war there was an explicit and sustained effort by the US government to deliberately mislead the public. Officials in Kabul—and at the White House—routinely distorted statistics to make it appear the US was winning the war when that was plainly not the case. All of those who were interviewed for the final report agreed there was no strategy despite the public announcements.

Many are still trying to understand how the Afghan army that the US trained, funded and armed capitulated so rapidly in August 2021. The US attempted to raise an army from the ashes in Afghanistan. Year after year, US officials reassured the American public that the plan was working and gave the Afghan forces rave reviews. But the US tried to create an army in the same manner as the US army, with military bases and infrastructure when the country had little of its own infrastructure. In the end the army only existed on paper as many just wanted to get paid as the economy was in freefall. Many officials also created ghost soldiers in order to pocket the dollars the US was dishing out.

Barack Obama made Afghanistan his main priority in his election campaign. He believed the US had neglected the real war when it invaded Iraq. After conducting his own review, he believed like his predecessor the war could be won and appointed David Petraeus and General Stanley McChrystal to once and for all be victorious in Afghanistan. Both generals developed a counter insurgency strategy that never really dealt with the underlying issues. The counter insurgency strategy was the same strategy attempted in 2004, but this time with a fraction of the troops. The McChrystal-Petraeus plan failed to determine whether they were actually fighting a war in Afghanistan, engaged in a peacekeeping operation, leading a training mission, or doing something else. Despite this glaring omission Obama and the US government put on a united face and kept saying to the public that things were going well.

When Donald Trump took over the White House despite all the fighting talk, his strategy was no different to his predecessors and the only addition was the lies used to justify staying in the country.

The SIGAR report and the subsequent Washington Post serialisation of the original papers that ran into over 2,000 pages of interviews with 428 people who played a direct role in the war provides a deep insight into the US war in Afghanistan and the catalogue of failures as well as arrogance the US prosecuted the war with. Whilst the SIGAR report does not look into the strategic objectives of why the US invaded Afghanistan it provides a revealing insight onto how the US became the latest victim in the graveyard of empires.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Adnan Khan