

*The Afghanistan Papers:
A Secret History of the War*

Craig Whitlock

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The reporting across the British media on both the collapse of the Afghan regime and the defeat of the U.S. and its allies has been a total disgrace. Where was the discussion of the wholesale corruption that precipitated the collapse and enabled the Taliban victory? The British media pretty much ignored allegations that President Ashraf Ghani had fled the country with \$169 million in cash, stashed in his getaway helicopter. Millions had to be left on the tarmac because it could not all be packed into the aircraft. He was soon followed by Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who was alleged to have escaped with a mere \$51 million in cash. And the Taliban claim to have found \$6 million in cash, and a stash of gold bricks, in his abandoned palace in the Panjshir Valley. Both men fled to that well-known refuge for freedom fighters, Dubai. What is absolutely clear is that both the British and American governments knew all about the enormous scale of this corruption and, over a period of twenty years, condoned, facilitated and fuelled it. Why has this not figured in a media indictment of the twenty year war?

There are a number of reasons for this. One is certainly that the City of London was one of the beneficiaries of Afghan corruption, with billions of dollars being smuggled out of the country and hidden away in New York, London and the Gulf states. It is unlikely that we shall ever know the scale of British complicity in this crime. There is also the determination of retired generals and politicians from both the Conservative and Labour parties to cover up the reality of the war in Afghanistan. Without any shame whatsoever, the war was portrayed as being about the protection and extension of women's rights – a cause worth fighting for – rather than keeping a wholly corrupt kleptocracy in power. A kleptocracy, moreover, that had bled both the Afghan army and police dry so that their collapse once the U.S. withdrew was wholly inevitable. How many people in Britain know, for example, that in the Dawood National Military Hospital, supposedly a symbol of the new

modern Afghanistan, seriously wounded soldiers and police were left untreated and starving while the Afghan Surgeon General Ahmed Zia Yaftali was accused of selling off medical supplies worth over \$150 million?

Concern with women's rights has never been a serious factor in British foreign policy. One only has to think of Britain's long-standing support for the Saudi regime and the various Gulf states. Indeed, a cynic might really believe that there is not much the Taliban need to do for this (phony) concern with women's rights to be conveniently forgotten. Possible suggestions are that they pay for a holiday for our Prime Minister, make a generous donation to the Conservative Party, give the Queen a few race horses and allow access for British and American companies to their country's lithium deposits.

It is worth remembering that the Foreign Secretary at the time of the fall of Kabul was Dominic Raab; he has since been demoted for gross incompetence and dereliction of duty, so that he now merely holds the posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary – such is the nature of the Johnson government! That this concern for women's rights in Afghanistan (or anywhere else for that matter) is a lie is further proven by the fact that Raab has described some feminists as 'obnoxious bigots',¹ insisted that it was men who got a 'raw deal' in modern Britain and more recently showed that he did not know the meaning of the word misogyny. And Prime Minister Boris Johnson is notoriously a rampant sexist and casual homophobe. The idea that these people would prioritise concern for women's rights over economic and strategic concerns is truly ludicrous.

While the Taliban do embrace a school of Islam that oppresses women, it is important to also recognise that they have considerable popular support, especially in the countryside. Their support derives in good part from popular hatred of the corrupt oppressive regime that America and her allies sustained in power, killing many Afghan civilians in the process – indeed continuing to kill them even while the evacuation of Kabul was underway.

This pretence of concern for women's rights is a propaganda distraction intended to cover up both the scale of the defeat suffered by America and its allies. They also want to conceal the fact that all the blood and treasure that has been expended over the last twenty years

¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/32nmcfbd>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/26/dominic-raab-defends-calling-feminists-obnoxious-bigots>>

was to keep in power one of the most corrupt governments in the world. Both Boris Johnson and Labour leader, Keir Starmer, have inevitably declared that Britain can be 'proud' of its role in Afghanistan; while Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, a one-time admirer of Donald Trump, has blamed the fiasco entirely on the Americans and their decision to pull-out of the country. Wallace has even declared that Britain can no longer rely on the U.S. as an ally and has to be prepared to fight wars on its own! What exactly the Defence Chiefs make of having a particularly stupid former Army captain as their governmental commander can only be imagined.

But while debate and discussion over the causes of the Afghan disaster has been pretty much closed down in Britain, this is not the case in the U.S.. Evidence of this is provided by Craig Whitlock, a journalist with the *Washington Post*. His book, *The Afghanistan Papers*, is derived from a mass of documents from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. These documents were the records of hundreds of interviews that had been conducted with veterans of the Twenty Year War. It took three years of legal battles to finally secure access to the material, which then led Whitlock to other interview collections. The result is a book that's based on over a thousand interviews with 'people who played a direct part in the war' (p. xx) Let us quote from his Foreword:

' . . . the interviews showed that many senior U.S. officials privately viewed the war as an unmitigated disaster, contradicting a chorus of rosy public statements from officials at the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department, who assured Americans year after year that they were making progress in Afghanistan.'

The various war plans 'had fatal flaws' and the U.S. had 'wasted billions of dollars'. He goes on:

'The interviews also exposed the U.S. government's botched attempts to curtail runaway corruption, build a competent Afghan army and police force, and put a dent in Afghanistan's thriving opium trade'. (pp. xiv-xv)

What has Whitlock got to say about corruption in Afghanistan? The rot was present from the start when the warlords were embraced as allies:

' . . . by welcoming them into the government, the Americans made the warlords a permanent fixture of the new political system Many warlords generated huge streams of revenue by illicit means,

such as drug trafficking and collecting bribes . . . corruption soon became a defining feature of the government’.

As early as September 2005, Ronald Neumann, the then U.S. Ambassador, sent a classified cable to Washington, warning of a ‘corruption crisis’ that was ‘a major threat to the country’s future’. He wanted President Hamid Karzai to remove some of the most corrupt ministers, officials and governors, among them his own half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai. (pp. 122/3) Nothing was done. Whitlock writes of one particular warlord, an indispensable U.S. ally, Mohammed Qasim Fahim Khan, who was installed as Karzai’s Vice-President and Defence Minister. He had been feted in Washington, welcomed ‘to the Pentagon with an honor cordon’, even though his corruption was well-known and it was even feared he might stage a coup to seize power for himself. He ‘did little to hide his involvement in drug trafficking’ and, according to an interview with Col. Russell Thaden, the NATO intelligence chief, on one occasion he ‘blew his stack upon learning U.S. and British forces had jointly bombed a large drug lab in northern Afghanistan’. He calmed down once he realised it ‘wasn’t one of his, so he was okay with it’. (pp. 125/6) Even more astonishing, he was known to have had a rival minister in Karzai’s government assassinated!

The rigged Presidential election in 2009, which saw Karzai returned after ‘his supporters had committed fraud on an epic scale by stuffing ballot boxes and fixing vote totals’, was a crucial moment. According to the UN, a million votes, one in four of those cast, were fraudulent, keeping him in office. (p. 170) This cleared the way for ‘a deluge of corruption that engulfed Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010. Dark money cascaded over the country’. What fuelled this was not only the drugs trade but also the development funds that the Obama administration poured into the country, in an attempt to win the war. There was a lot of talk of rooting out corruption, but it was all empty rhetoric. Ryan Crocker, the U.S. Ambassador in 2011-2011, actually said that ‘corruption became so widespread that it presented a bigger threat to the U.S. mission than the Taliban’. The development of mass corruption was ‘the ultimate point of failure for our efforts’. (p. 185) As Whitlock puts it, by allowing this scale of corruption,

‘ . . . the United States helped destroy the legitimacy of the wobbly Afghan government they were fighting to prop up. With judges and police chiefs and bureaucrats extorting bribes, many Afghans soured on democracy and turned to the Taliban . . . ’ (p. 186)

Of course, describing Afghanistan under Karzai as a being in any meaningful way a democracy is stretching the meaning of the word. As far as Obama's special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, was concerned, Karzai was 'corrupt as hell'. (p. 170). The country was a fully-fledged kleptocracy.

Between 2001 and 2020, the U.S. allocated \$143 billion 'for reconstruction, aid programs and Afghan security forces'. Adjusted for inflation, this exceeds the funds allocated to the post WW2 Marshall Plan for the whole of Western Europe. (p. 30) Much of this money was supposedly to improve the lives of the Afghan people as a way of winning hearts and minds through the building of roads, schools and clinics. Most of it, however, disappeared into the pockets of the Afghan ministers, officials and the like, or those of Western contractors. The promised schools, roads and clinics were shoddily built and quickly fell into disrepair – when they were built at all. Schools that were supposedly educating girls often existed only on paper. They had never been built, there were no students and no teachers, and all the money spent was pilfered by corrupt officials. Whitlock recounts the experience of one U.S. official trying in vain to locate the site of an industrial estate that had supposedly been built at a cost of \$8 million: 'It was impossible to get info on it, even where it was located'. (p. 161) This was far from untypical.

Much the same was true of the money invested in building an Afghan army and police force that could maintain order and keep the country secure, once the U.S. and its allies pulled out. Of the recruits, 'an estimated 80 to 90 percent could not read or write. Some could not count or did not know their colors'. (p. 57) They knew the names of their brothers and sisters but not the number for how many of them there were. This was despite a supposedly successful mass education effort. Under Obama it was decided to establish Afghan army and police strength at 352,000, but this number only ever existed on paper. Even among those who actually went through training, the desertion rate was unsustainably high: in 2013 one in every six Afghan soldiers deserted, often taking their weapons and equipment with them. And many soldiers and policemen never existed at all. The figures 'looked robust on paper. But a large percentage materialised as ghost billets, or no-show jobs. Afghan commanders inflated the numbers so they could pocket millions of dollars in salaries'. (p. 218) As for the police, overwhelmingly illiterate remember, their 'training', outsourced to private contractors by the U.S., lasted 'often just two to three weeks – and their pay was abysmal [. . . .] many police officers morphed into shakedown artists who extorted bribes

from the people they were supposed to protect'. (p. 65) In 2017, some 30,000 police were found to only exist on paper. That anyone could be seriously surprised at the collapse of the Afghan military and police really defies belief.

One forensic accountant, Gert Berthold, who served in Afghanistan, was involved with a task force analysing 3,000 Defence Department contracts worth \$106 billion. The conclusion they came to was that 'about 18 percent of the money went to the Taliban and other insurgent groups'. This was in bribes and protection money. Billions of dollars were being paid to the Taliban! And, according to Berthold, they were told by Afghan officials that this was a serious underestimate. Another 15 per cent was 'skimmed off' by 'corrupt Afghan officials and criminal syndicates'. But no one wanted to know about it. In his interview, Berthold 'said the evidence was so damning that few U.S. officials wanted to hear about it. "No one wanted accountability", he said. "If you're going to do anti-corruption, someone has to own it . . . No one is willing to own it.'" Another forensic accountant, Thomas Creal, actually took specific cases to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, 'but rarely got anywhere'. As he put it: 'The political world gets in the way'. (pp. 187-188)

Why was nothing done to deal with the corruption scandal over a twenty year period? One reason is certainly that the U.S. was trapped by its initial reliance on the warlords to overthrow the Taliban at the end of 2001. Effectively, they handed the country over to these people and it remained with them until the fall of Kabul. But another factor is certainly that the CIA had a preference for dealing with these people anyway. Bribery and corruption was very much part of the CIA's *modus operandi*; the Agency has helped keep in power many corrupt and oppressive regimes. That Ahmed Wali Karzai was not removed from power wasn't just because he was the President's half-brother, but also because he was a valued CIA asset. He was not just accumulating wealth by drug trafficking, corruption, theft and intimidation, but was also being paid millions of dollars by the CIA. The CIA has never had a problem working with drug traffickers.

One gap in the testimony that Whitlock reports, is the role that military contractors played in Afghanistan. He examines their role in fuelling corruption, but not their exacerbation of the security situation. The part that private contractors – or rather mercenaries – played in worsening the security situation in Iraq is relatively well-known, particularly the exploits of gunmen in the employ of Erik Prince's Blackwater outfit. Other testimony certainly points towards their playing a

similar role in Afghanistan. According to Ben Barry, for example, in his invaluable book, *Blood, Metal and Dust*, 'many contractors often displayed highly aggressive behaviour. Their lethal use of force often seemed unconstrained by any rules of engagement [. . .] This greatly damaged the legitimacy of international forces'.² While there seems to have been nothing comparable to the Nisour Square massacre of September 2007 – in which seventeen defenceless Iraqi men, women and children were gunned down – it seems safe to assume that there were many smaller scale incidents. After all, in 2011 there were some 110,000 military contractors in Afghanistan working for the U.S. government. Four Blackwater mercenaries were to be later imprisoned for their part in the Nisour Square massacre. Interestingly, Erik Prince (a staunch member of the U.S. Christian Right, whose sister, Betsy DeVos, was Trump's Education Secretary, and who was an unofficial adviser to the President) at one point urged that the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan should actually be handed over to private military contractors. This was a step too far – at least at this time. Trump, of course, pardoned the four Blackwater gunmen.

Whitlock does not have a lot to say about the British role in Afghanistan. It is worth remembering that the British military suffered a humiliating defeat in the conflict, although this has been successfully covered up. It is something that the generals, the politicians and the media are all determined to keep out of the public eye. While in Iraq, the British had been driven out of Basra by Shia insurgents. When British Foreign Secretary David Miliband visited Afghanistan, he informally asked for British troops to be pulled out of the firing line in Helmand. One U.S. official actually argued that the situation was even worse than Basra, because 'Helmand was much more important in terms of British self-respect and the US-UK partnership'. The then U.S. Ambassador, Bill Wood, sent a top secret memo back to Washington, it argued that the United States needed to ease its closest ally out of the toughest parts of Helmand . . . ' because, as he somewhat bluntly put it, 'the British are not up to the task of securing Helmand'.³ This is not what the British people were told.

² Ben Barry, *Blood, Metal and Dust: How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq* (London: Osprey 2020), p. 424

³ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within The War For Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) p. 214; Andrew Mumford, *Counterinsurgency Wars and the Anglo-American Alliance: The Special Relationship on the Rocks* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017) p. 187.

Whitlock's book is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand the causes of the U.S. defeat in Afghanistan. There is much more of interest than can be discussed in a review, particularly with regard to the Obama administration's performance. This book simply could not have been written in Britain.

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His latest book is

Chosen by God:

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>