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# Long-harbored doubts borne out by collapse of Western-trained forces

## Government interviews reveal fears rarely voiced publicly by U.S. military

In the summer of 2011, Army Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV made a round of public appearances to boast that he had finally solved a problem that had kept U.S. troops bogged down in Afghanistan for a decade. Under his watch, he asserted, U.S. military advisers and trainers had transformed the ragtag Afghan army and police into a professional fighting force that could defend the country and keep the Taliban at bay.

"We've made tremendous strides, incredible progress," Caldwell, the head of the U.S. and NATO training command in Afghanistan, told the Council on Foreign Relations in June 2011. "They're probably the besttrained, the best-equipped and the best-led of any forces we've developed yet inside of Afghanistan. They only continue to get better with time."

Three months later, in a news briefing at the Pentagon, Caldwell said the Afghan soldiers and police previously had been in terrible shape: poorly led, uninspired and more than 90 percent of them illiterate. But he said the Obama administration's decision to spend \$6 billion a year to train and equip the Afghan security forces had produced a remarkable turnaround. He predicted that the Taliban-led insurgency would subside and that the Afghans would take over responsibility for securing their country by the end of 2014, enabling U.S. combat troops to leave.

"It really does give you a lot of hope for the future of what this country may have ahead of itself," he said.

In fact, according to documents obtained for the forthcoming Washington Post book "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," U.S. military officials privately harbored fundamental doubts for the duration of the war that the Afghan security forces could ever become competent or shed their dependency on U.S. money and firepower. "Thinking we could build the military that fast and that well was insane," an unnamed former U.S. official told government interviewers in 2016.

Those fears, rarely expressed in public, were ultimately borne out by the sudden collapse this month of the Afghan security forces, whose wholesale and unconditional surrender to the Taliban will go down as perhaps the worst debacle in the history of proxy warfare.

The capitulation was sped up by a series of secret deals that the Taliban brokered with many Afghan government officials. In recent days and weeks, Taliban leaders used a combination of cash, threats and promises of leniency to persuade government forces to lay down their arms.

Although U.S. intelligence officials had recently forecast the possible demise of the Afghan government over the next three to six months, the Biden administration was caught unprepared by the velocity of the Taliban takeover. Afghan forces "proved incapable of defending the country. And that did happen more rapidly than we anticipated," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Sunday on the ABC News program "This Week."

Over two decades, the U.S. government invested more than \$85 billion to train and equip the Afghans and pay their salaries. Today, all that's left is arsenals of weapons, ammunition and supplies that have fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Senior U.S. officials said the Pentagon fell victim to the conceit that it could build from scratch an enormous Afghan army and police force with 350,000 personnel that was modeled on the centralized command structures and complex bureaucracy of the Defense Department. Though it was obvious from the beginning that the Afghans were struggling to make the U.S.-designed system work, the Pentagon kept throwing money at the problem and assigning new generals to find a solution.

"We kept changing guys who were in charge of training the Afghan forces, and every time a new guy came in, he changed the way that they were being trained," Robert Gates, who served as defense secretary during the Bush and Obama administrations, said in an oral-history interview with scholars at the University of Virginia. "The one thing they all had in common was they were all trying to train a Western army instead of figuring out the strengths of the Afghans as a fighting people and then building on that."

In government interviews, U.S. military trainers who worked directly with recruits said the Afghans suffered from other insoluble problems, including a lack of motivation and a corrupt chain of command that preyed upon its own soldiers and police.

Maj. Greg Escobar, a U.S. Army infantry officer, spent 2011 trying to straighten out a dysfunctional Afghan army unit in Paktika province near the border with Pakistan. The first Afghan battalion commander whom Escobar

mentored lost his job after he was charged with raping one of his male soldiers. The commander's replacement, in turn, was killed by his own men.

Escobar said he came to realize that the whole exercise was futile because the U.S. military was pushing too fast and the Afghans were not responding to what was, in the end, a foreign experiment. "Nothing we do is going to help," he recalled in an Army oral-history interview. "Until the Afghan government can positively affect the people there, we're wasting our time."

Other Army officers who trained the Afghans recounted scenes of mayhem that boded poorly for how they would perform on the battlefield. Maj. Mark Glaspell, an Army engineer with the 101st Airborne Division who served as a mentor to Afghan forces from 2010 to 2011, said even simple exercises went haywire.

Glaspell recalled trying to teach an Afghan platoon in the eastern city of Gardez how to exit a CH-47 Chinook, a heavy-lift helicopter used to transport troops and supplies. They lacked an actual Chinook to practice on, so he lined up rows of folding chairs instead and instructed the Afghans how to safely disembark.

"We were working on that and it was going pretty good and all of a sudden this Afghan soldier walks up and he and one of the guys in the class started to get into an argument," Glaspell said in an Army oral-history interview. A third Afghan soldier then picked up a folding chair and pounded the first guy over the head, he said.

"Well, then it was a brawl; it was on," Glaspell added. He let the Afghans duke it out until they got tired. "My interpreter actually looked at me, shook his head and said, 'This is why we'll never be successful,' and he walked away."

Jack Kem, a retired Army officer who served as Gen. Caldwell's deputy from 2009 to 2011, said the training command struggled to overcome a host of challenges. Recruiting was hard enough, but was compounded by startling rates of desertion and attrition. And trying to maintain an ethnic balance in the force among Afghanistan's fractious tribes was another "enormous problem," he said.

But perhaps the biggest hardship was having to teach virtually every recruit how to read. Kem estimated that only 2 to 5 percent of Afghan recruits could read at a third-grade level despite efforts by the United States to enroll millions of Afghan children in school over the previous decade.

"The literacy was just insurmountable," he said in an Army oral-history interview. Some Afghans also had to learn their colors, or had to be taught how to count. "I mean, you'd ask an Afghan soldier how many brothers and sisters they had and they couldn't tell you it was four. They could tell you their names, but they couldn't go 'one, two, three, four.' "

Making everything harder was the Obama administration's decision to rapidly expand the size of the Afghan security forces from 200,000 soldiers and police officers to 350,000. With recruits at a premium, Afghans were rushed through boot camp, even if they couldn't shoot or perform other basic tasks.

In Washington, some skeptics warned Obama administration officials that they were sacrificing quality for quantity. But leaders at the Pentagon dismissed the concerns and insisted they could have both.

"There was a big debate that said, 'Either you can have a small Afghan army and police that is trained to a high quality or you can have a lot of them but they won't meet the quality standards. They'll just be poorly equipped and poorly trained,' " Brig. Gen. John Ferrari, who also served under Caldwell at the training command, said in an Army oral-history interview.

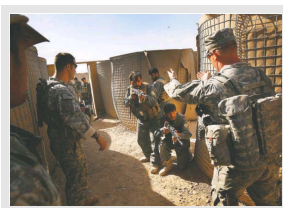
Caldwell, who retired from the Army in 2013, did not respond to a request to comment for this article.

As the years passed, it became apparent that the strategy was failing. Yet U.S. military commanders kept insisting in public that everything was going according to plan.

In November 2012, Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr. told lawmakers that he had grown "optimistic" about the war because the Afghan army and police had improved so much. "When I look at the Afghan national security forces and where they were in 2008, when I first observed them, and where they are today in 2012, it's a dramatic improvement."

In September 2013, Mark A. Milley, then an Army lieutenant general and deputy commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, gave reporters another upbeat assessment. "I am much more optimistic about the outcome here, as long as the Afghan security forces continue to do what they've been doing," he said.

"If they continue to do that next year and the year after and so on, then I think things will turn out okay in Afghanistan," he added. Today, Milley is a four-star general and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and serves as the chief military adviser to President Biden.



The book "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," by Craig Whitlock, is based on interviews with more than 1,000 people who played direct roles in the war as well as thousands of pages of documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. Whitlock will discuss the book during a Washington Post Live event on Aug. 31.

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