The Washington Post

STRANDED WITHOUT A STRATEGY

Bush and Obama had polar-opposite plans to win the war. Both were destined to fail.

By Craig Whitlock Dec. 9, 2019

n the beginning, the rationale for invading Afghanistan was clear: to destroy al-Qaeda, topple the Taliban and prevent a repeat of the 9/11

I terrorist attacks.

Within six months, the United States had largely accomplished what it set out to do. The leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban were dead, captured or

in hiding.

But then the U.S. government committed a fundamental mistake it would repeat again and again over the next 17 years, according to a cache of government documents obtained by The Washington Post.

In hundreds of confidential interviews that constitute a secret history of the war, U.S. and allied officials admitted they veered off in directions that had little to do with al-Qaeda or 9/11. By expanding the original mission, they said they adopted fatally flawed warfighting strategies based on misguided assumptions about a country they did not understand.

The result: an unwinnable conflict with no easy way out.

Click any underlined text in the story to see the statement in the original document

"If there was ever a notion of mission creep it is Afghanistan," said Richard Boucher, who served as the State Department's top diplomat for South Asia from 2006 to 2009, according to a transcript of what he told government interviewers in 2015. He added: "We have to say good enough is good enough. That is why we are there 15 years later. We are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable."

In unusually candid interviews, officials who served under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama said both leaders failed in their most important task as commanders in chief — to devise a clear strategy with concise, attainable objectives.

Diplomats and military commanders acknowledged they struggled to answer simple questions: Who is the enemy? Whom can we count on as allies? How will we know when we have won?

Left: Northern Alliance fighters in Chaghatay, Afghanistan, in November 2001. (Lois Raimondo/The Washington Post) **Right:** Damulla Mohammad Nazar, 80, describes Taliban atrocities in Dasht-e Qalat, in northeastern Afghanistan, in October 2001. (Lois Raimondo/The Washington Post)

Their strategies differed, but Bush and Obama both committed early blunders that they never recovered from, according to the interviews.

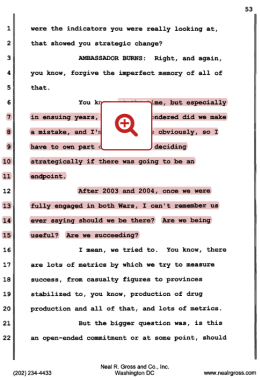
After a succession of quick military victories in 2001 and early 2002, Bush decided to keep a light force of U.S. troops in Afghanistan indefinitely to hunt suspected terrorists. Soon, however, he made plans to invade another nation — Iraq — and Afghanistan quickly became an afterthought.

James Dobbins, a career diplomat who served as a special envoy for Afghanistan under Bush and Obama, told government interviewers it was a

hubristic mistake that should have been obvious from the start.

"First, you know, sort of just invade only one country at a time. I mean that seriously," Dobbins said, according to a transcript of his remarks. "They take a lot of high-level time and attention and we'll overload the system if we do more than one of these at a time."

By the time Obama took office in 2009, al-Qaeda had largely vanished from Afghanistan. But the Taliban had made a comeback.



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were the indicators you were really looking at, that showed you strategic change?

AMBASSADOR BURNS: Right, and again, you know, forgive the imperfect memory of all of that.

You k[illegible]me, but especially in ensuing years, [illegible]ndered did we make a mistake, and I'[illegible], obviously, so I have to own part [illegible] deciding strategically if there was going to be an endpoint.

After 2003 and 2004, once we were fully engaged in both wars, I can't remember us ever saying should we be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?

I mean, we tried to. You know, there are lots of metrics by which we try to measure success, from casualty figures to provinces stabilized to, you know, production of drug production and all of that, and lots of metrics.

But the bigger question was, is this an open-ended commitment or at some point, should

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"After '03-04, once we were fully engaged in both wars, I can't remember us ever saying, 'Should we be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?'"

— Nicholas Burns, a career U.S. diplomat who served as ambassador to NATO under Bush

Listen

Obama tore up Bush's counterterrorism strategy and approved a polar-opposite plan — a massive counterinsurgency campaign, backed by 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops, as well as tons of aid for a weak Afghan government.

In contrast with Bush, Obama imposed strict deadlines and promised to bring home all U.S. troops by the end of his presidency.

But Obama's strategy was also destined to fail. U.S., NATO and Afghan officials told government interviewers that it tried to accomplish too much, too quickly, and depended on an Afghan government that was corrupt and dysfunctional.

Worse, they said, Obama tried to set artificial dates for ending the war before it was over. All the Taliban had to do was wait him out.

"There were a number of faulty assumptions in the strategy: Afghanistan is ready for democracy overnight, the population will support the government in a short time frame, more of everything is better," Bob Crowley, a retired Army colonel who served as a counterinsurgency adviser in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers.

Over the past 18 years, more than 775,000 U.S. troops have deployed to Afghanistan, many repeatedly. Of those, 2,300 died there and 20,589 came home wounded, according to Defense Department figures.

Left: Marine Cpl. Burness Britt is transported after being wounded by an IED in Helmand province in 2011. (Anja Niedringhaus/AP) **Right:** Spec. Robert Lewis Warren, wounded in a Taliban ambush months before, shaves his head in Washington in 2010, days before undergoing surgery to repair his skull. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

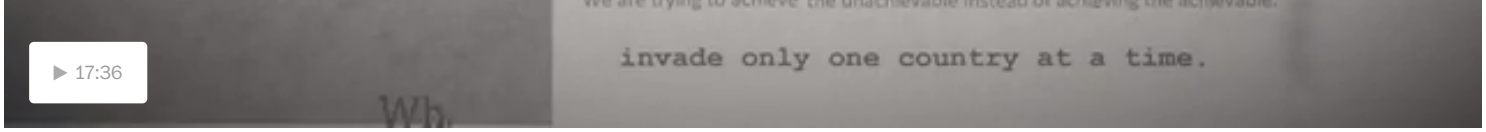
Today, about 13,000 U.S. troops are still in Afghanistan. The U.S. military acknowledges the Taliban is stronger now than at any point since 2001. Yet there has been no comprehensive public reckoning for the strategic failures behind the longest war in American history.

There has been no Afghanistan version of the 9/11 Commission, which held the government to account for the worst terrorist attack on American soil; no Afghanistan version of the Fulbright Hearings, when senators aggressively questioned the war in Vietnam; no Afghanistan version of the Army's official, 1,300-page, introspective history of the war in Iraq.

In 2014, a small federal agency created by Congress decided to try to fill the void.

The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, known as SIGAR, launched an $11 million project — titled "Lessons Learned" — to study the war's core mistakes. After interviewing more than 600 people, agency researchers published seven reports that recommended policy changes.

Exclusive: A secret history of the war in Afghanistan, revealed



(Video by Joyce Lee/The Washington Post)

To avoid controversy, SIGAR sanitized the harshest criticisms from the Lessons Learned interviews and omitted the names of more than 90 percent of the people it spoke with. It also scrapped plans to publish a separate report on deficiencies in the Afghan war strategy.

After a three-year legal battle, The Post obtained notes and transcripts, as well as several audio recordings, from more than 400 of the interviews. In stark language, the documents reveal that people who were directly involved in the war could not shake their doubts about the strategy and mission, even as Bush, Obama and, later, President Trump told the American people it was necessary to keep fighting.

THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS

See the documents More than 2,000 pages of interviews and memos reveal a secret history of the war.

Part 3: Built to fail The United States has wasted billions on nation-building.

Responses to The Post from people named in The Afghanistan Papers

"What were we actually doing in that country?" an unidentified U.S. official who served as a liaison to NATO said in a government interview. "What are our objectives? Nation-building? Women's rights? . . . It was never fully clear in our own minds what the established goals and timelines were."

Jeffrey Eggers, a retired Navy SEAL and White House official under Bush and Obama, said few people paused to question the very premise for keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

"Why did we make the Taliban the enemy when we were attacked by al-Qaeda? Why did we want to defeat the Taliban?" Eggers said in a Lessons Learned interview. "Collectively the system is incapable of taking a step back to question basic assumptions."

Boucher, a career diplomat who also served as chief State Department spokesman under Bush, said U.S. officials did not know what they were doing.

"First, we went in to get al-Qaeda, and to get al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan, and even without killing bin Laden we did that," Boucher told government interviewers. "The Taliban was shooting back at us so we started shooting at them and they became the enemy. Ultimately, we kept expanding the mission."

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC
March 28, 2002

> “The only thing you can do is to bomb them and try to kill them. And that’s what we did, and it worked. They’re gone.”
>
> — Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld on the Taliban and al-Qaeda, MSNBC interview

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Rumsfeld's premature declaration was the first of many times that senior U.S. leaders mistakenly assumed they could end the war on their terms. The Taliban was beaten down but hardly gone.

Lulled into overconfidence by the apparent ease of conquering Afghanistan, the Bush administration refused to sit down with defeated Taliban leaders to negotiate a lasting peace — a decision U.S. officials would later regret.

The Taliban was excluded from international conferences and Afghan gatherings from 2001 to 2003 that drew up a new government, even though some Taliban figures had shown a willingness to join in. Instead, the United States posted bounties for their capture and sent hundreds to the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

“A major mistake we made was treating the Taliban the same as al-Qaeda,” Barnett Rubin, an American academic expert on Afghanistan who served as an adviser to the United Nations at the time, told government interviewers. “Key Taliban leaders were interested in giving the new system a chance, but we didn’t give them a chance.”

The Taliban was not involved in the 9/11 attacks; none of the hijackers or planners were Afghans. But the Bush administration categorized Taliban leaders as terrorists because they had given al-Qaeda sanctuary and refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.

While the Taliban was easy to demonize because of its brutality and religious fanaticism, the movement proved too large and ingrained in Afghan society to eradicate.

Alleged Taliban and al-Qaeda detainees await transfer at the Shiberghan prison, in northwestern Jowzlan province, in 2004. (Emilio Morenatti/AP)

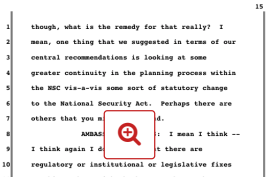
"Everyone wanted the Taliban to disappear," Rubin said in a second Lessons Learned interview. "There was not much appetite for what we called threat reduction, for regional diplomacy and bringing the Taliban into the peace process."

An unnamed U.N. official agreed, telling interviewers that it was the biggest missed opportunity of the war.

"At that moment, most Hizb-i-Islami or Taliban commanders were interested in joining the government," the U.N. official said, referring to another Afghan militia that fought U.S. troops. "Lesson learned: If you get the chance to talk to the Taliban, talk to them," the official said.

Belatedly, U.S. officials came to realize it was impossible to vanquish the group. Today, Pentagon officials say the only way to end the war is with a political settlement in which the Taliban reconciles with the Afghan government.

Last year, the U.S. government opened direct, high-level peace talks with the Taliban for the first time.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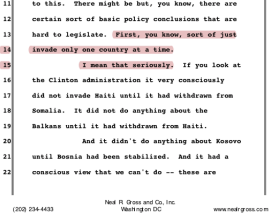
though, what is the remedy for that really? I mean, one thing that we suggested in terms of our central recommendations is looking at some greater continuity in the planning process within the NSC vis-a-vis some sort of statutory change to the National Security Act. Perhaps there are others that you n d.

AMBAS : I mean I think -- I think again I d t there are regulatory or institutional or legislative fixes

"First, you know, sort of just only invade



to this. There might be but, you know, there are
certain sort of basic policy conclusions that are
hard to legislate. First, you know, sort of just
invade only one country at a time.
I mean that seriously. If you look at
the Clinton administration it very consciously
did not invade Haiti until it had withdrawn from
Somalia. It did not do anything about the
Balkans until it had withdrawn from Haiti.
And it didn't do anything about Kosovo
until Bosnia had been stabilized. And it had a
conscious view that we can't do -- these are

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one country at a time."

— James Dobbins, a career diplomat who served as a special envoy for Afghanistan under Bush and Obama

Listen

Five of the Taliban's negotiators are former U.S. prisoners of war who each spent a dozen years in captivity in Guantanamo. The lead U.S. envoy is Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan American diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005 and later as ambassador to Iraq and the United Nations.

In a Lessons Learned interview in December 2016, Khalilzad acknowledged that by refusing to talk to the Taliban, the Bush administration may have blown a chance to end the war shortly after it started.

"Maybe we were not agile or wise enough to reach out to the Taliban early on, that we thought they were defeated and that they needed to be brought to justice, rather than that they should be accommodated or some reconciliation be done," he said.

A year after Khalilzad's Lessons Learned interview, Trump pulled him back into public service by tapping him as the U.S. envoy for negotiations with the Taliban.

Federal officials redacted extensive portions of Khalilzad's interview before releasing a transcript to The Post in June, saying it contained classified information. In a court filing, the Justice Department said disclosure of the classified material "might negatively impact ongoing diplomatic negotiations."

The Post has asked a federal judge to review whether Khalilzad's remarks were properly classified. A decision is pending.

In Lessons Learned interviews, other officials said the Bush administration compounded its early mistake with the Taliban by making another critical error — treating Pakistan as a friend.

An army battalion graduates in Kabul after completing training in 2004. (Dudley M. Brooks/The Washington Post)

Pakistan's military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, had given the Pentagon permission to use Pakistani airspace and let the CIA track al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistani territory. As a result, the Bush White House was slow to recognize that Pakistan was simultaneously giving covert support to the Taliban, according to the interviews.

"Because of people's personal confidence in Musharraf and because of things he was continuing to do in helping police up a bunch of the al-Qaeda in Pakistan. There was a failure to perceive the double game that he starts to play by late 2002, early 2003," Marin Strmecki, a senior adviser to Rumsfeld, told government interviewers.

"I think that the Afghans, and [President Hamid] Karzai himself, are bringing this up constantly even in the earlier parts of 2002," Strmecki added. "They are meeting unsympathetic ears because of the belief that Pakistan was helping us so much on al-Qaeda. . . . There is never a full confronting of Pakistan in its role supporting the Taliban."

WHAT THEY SAID IN PRIVATE
Oct. 21, 2014

"Your job was not to win, it was to not lose."

— A former National Security Council staff member, on how Afghanistan was eclipsed by the war in Iraq, Lessons Learned interview

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By late 2002, Afghanistan had become yesterday's war in the eyes of the Bush administration. It was already preparing for a much bigger invasion, that of Iraq.

On Oct. 21, after spending several hours at the White House in meetings about Iraq, even Rumsfeld seemed taken aback by how much Afghanistan had receded from Bush's mind, according to a previously unpublished memo that the defense secretary wrote later that day.

Just before 3 p.m., Rumsfeld got a few minutes alone with the commander in chief. Rumsfeld asked Bush whether he wanted to arrange a meeting with Army Gen. Tommy Franks, the head of the U.S. Central Command, and Army Lt. Gen. Dan McNeill, who had been serving as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan for the past six months.

Bush was perplexed.

"He said, 'Who is General McNeill?' " Rumsfeld wrote in the memo. "I said he is the general in charge of Afghanistan. He said, 'Well, I don't need to meet with him.' "

The memo was obtained as part of a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit by the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research institute based at George Washington University, which shared it with The Post.

For his part, McNeill told government interviewers that he was given little strategic guidance. He said the Pentagon mainly cared about keeping a lid on the number of U.S. troops.

"There was no campaign plan in [the] early days," he said. "Rumsfeld would get excited if there was any increase in the number of boots on the ground."

At the time, McNeill commanded about 8,000 troops — a tiny fraction of the number that would ultimately go to Afghanistan. A few contrarians in the Bush administration pushed to do more.

Rumsfeld, right, with aides Victoria Clarke and Larry DiRita in September 2002. (David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images)

Richard Haass, a senior diplomat who served as the Bush administration's special coordinator for Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, told government interviewers that he floated a proposal to deploy 20,000 to 25,000 U.S. troops, alongside an equal number of allied forces. But he said his plan was shot down.

"I couldn't sell the idea. There was no enthusiasm. There was a profound sense of a lack of possibility in Afghanistan," Haass said in a Lessons Learned interview. "I was never talking about 100,000-plus people. I was talking about a very narrow mission. A mission not much different than what we have now. Training and arming in a limited role."

He added: "It was seen as too much and that is ironic given where we ended up. In retrospect, it looks like a bargain."

By keeping troops to a minimum in Afghanistan, the Bush administration was looking to claim swift victories on two fronts at the same time.

On May 1, 2003, while standing under a "Mission Accomplished" banner on an aircraft carrier, Bush declared an end to "major combat operations" in Iraq.

On the very same day, Rumsfeld visited Kabul and announced an end to "major combat activity" in Afghanistan.

In 2003, Bush and Rumsfeld make major announcements on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan

Both declarations backfired spectacularly. Iraq descended into civil war. Meanwhile, as the U.S. government fixated on Iraq, the Taliban steadily regrouped.

Nicholas Burns, a career U.S. diplomat who served as ambassador to NATO under Bush, said the administration lost sight of the big picture in Afghanistan at a pivotal time.

"After 2003 and 2004 . . . I can't remember us ever saying, should we still be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?" he told government interviewers.

"I think we would have done better if we had made some more specific, strategic assumptions," Burns said. "Yes, we're here open-ended. We think that might be 10 to 15 to 20 years. Or no, we'd like to bring American engagement, you know, to an end. . . . I don't remember us asking that very tough question."

Of the hundreds of people interviewed by SIGAR, Burns was one of the few who accepted personal responsibility for his role in the war's failures.

"At the time, but especially in ensuing years, I've often wondered did we make a mistake — and I'm part of this obviously, so I have to own part of it — in not deciding strategically if there was going to be an endpoint," he said. "I fault myself, and you know, we probably should have asked those questions more consistently by 2005 and 2006."

By the time British Gen. David Richards took charge of NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2006, the Taliban was giving U.S. and allied troops all they could handle in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

Richards said the alliance failed to adapt.

Left: British marines run toward a Taliban position in Helmand province in 2007. (John Moore/Getty Images) **Right:** A U.S. soldier rests at the Restrepo outpost in the Korengal Valley, in Konar province, in 2007. (Tim A. Hetherington/Magnum Photos)

"We were trying to get a single coherent long-term approach — a proper strategy — but instead we got a lot of tactics," he told government interviewers. "There was no coherent long-term strategy."

In his Lessons Learned interview, Richards recalled having a tense encounter with Rumsfeld in 2006. The Pentagon chief asked the NATO commander why things were deteriorating in the south. Richards replied that it was because he did not have enough resources: "And Rummy said 'General what do you mean?' I said, 'We don't have enough troops and resources and we've raised expectations.' He said 'General, I don't agree. Move on.' "

The next year, NATO forces in Afghanistan got a new commander: McNeill, the general whose name Bush had once forgotten. McNeill was ordered back to Afghanistan to take command a second time as the Taliban launched a wave of suicide attacks and began planting bombs all over the country.

By March 2007, the number of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan had climbed to 50,000. Despite the increase, McNeill said nobody in charge was able to articulate a clear mission and strategy.

"I tried to get someone to define for me what winning meant, even before I went over, and nobody could. Nobody would give me a good definition of what it meant," he told government interviewers. "Some people were thinking in terms of Jeffersonian democracy, but that's just not going to happen in Afghanistan."

"There was no NATO campaign plan — a lot of verbiage and talk, but no plan," McNeill added. "So for better or for worse, a lot of what we did, we did with some forethought, but most of it was reacting to conditions on the ground. . . . We were opportunists."

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC
Dec. 1, 2009

"As your commander in chief, I owe you a mission that is clearly defined."

— Obama in a speech to Army cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., announcing he would send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan

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Even before the new commander in chief moved into the White House, U.S. military leaders recognized they needed a fresh war plan. Years of hunting suspected terrorists was getting them nowhere. The Taliban kept gaining ground.

"At the time, I was looking at Afghanistan and I was thinking that there has to be more to solving this problem than killing people, because that's what we were doing and every time I went back security was worse," Army Maj. Gen. Edward Reeder, a Special Operations commander who deployed to the war zone several times before retiring in 2015, told government interviewers.

U.S. military leaders wanted to double down on a counterinsurgency strategy. The objective was to win the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people by protecting them from the Taliban, limiting civilian casualties and building popular support for the new Afghan government.

The new strategy would require far more troops and far more aid for the Afghan government. A similar approach — dubbed "the surge" — had seemed to work in Iraq.

In August 2009, Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then-commander of U.S. and NATO forces, wrote a classified 66-page assessment of the war that called for a "properly resourced" counterinsurgency campaign and laid out his proposed strategy in meticulous detail.

In the Lessons Learned interviews, however, U.S. and allied officials said McChrystal and the Obama administration glossed over two basic questions: Whom were they fighting? And why?

Left: British and American troops watch pallets of water bottles dropped by NATO at a base in southern Afghanistan in 2008. (David Guttenfelder/AP) **Right:** Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, reviews a map of Helmand province during a visit to Forward Operating Base Delhi in 2009. (Peter van Agtmael/Magnum Photos)

Obama had repeatedly declared the goal of the war was to "disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al-Qaeda." But the first draft of McChrystal's strategic review did not even mention al-Qaeda, because the group had all but disappeared from Afghanistan, according to an unnamed NATO official involved in the review.

"In 2009, the perception was that al-Qaeda was no longer a problem," the NATO official told government interviewers. "But the entire reason for being in Afghanistan was al-Qaeda. So then the second draft included them."

Another jarring disconnect was that the United States and its allies could not agree on whether they were actually fighting a war in Afghanistan or

doing something else, the NATO official said.

"There are big implications with calling this a war," the NATO official added. "Legally under international law that has serious implications. So we checked with the legal team and they agree it's not a war."

To paper over the problem, McChrystal added a line in his report that said the conflict was "not a war in a conventional sense."

Newly installed town leader Hagi Zahir, top left, meets with elders in Marja, in Helmand province, shortly after a U.S.-Afghan offensive to drive out the Taliban. (Moises Saman/Magnum Photos)

The official description of the mission was even more convoluted.

The long definition stated that the objective for U.S. and NATO forces was to "reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development, in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population."

After months of debate at the White House, Obama approved the counterinsurgency strategy.

In his December 2009 speech at the U.S. Military Academy, he announced he would deploy 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, on top of the 70,000 that he and Bush had previously authorized. NATO and other U.S. allies would increase their forces to 50,000.

But Obama added a last-minute wrinkle that caught many of his senior advisers by surprise. He imposed a timeline on the mission and said the extra troops would start to come home in 18 months.

Cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., listen on Dec. 1, 2009, as Obama details his plans for a U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan. (Christopher Morris/VII/Redux)

"The timeline was just sprung on us," Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, head of the U.S. Central Command at the time, said in a Lessons Learned interview. "Two days before the president made the speech, on a Sunday, we all got called and were told to be in the Oval Office that night for the president to lay out what he would announce two evenings later. And he laid it out, there it is."

"None of us had heard that before," Petraeus added. "And we were then asked, are you all okay with that? He went around the room and everyone said yes. And it was take it or leave it."

Barnett Rubin, the Afghan expert, was serving as an adviser to the State Department at the time. He told government interviewers he and other U.S. officials were "stupefied" when they heard Obama reveal the timeline during the West Point speech. All the Taliban had to do was lay low until U.S. and NATO troops left.

He said it was understandable that Obama wanted to put the Afghan government on notice that the Americans wouldn't fight forever.

"But there was a mismatch between deadline and strategy," Rubin added. "With that deadline, you can't use that strategy."

WHAT THEY SAID IN PUBLIC
July 27, 2010

"We're going to have to break them, irreconcilable from reconcilable. If they're irreconcilable, we will neutralize them."

— Then-Marine Gen. Jim Mattis, on the Taliban, during a Senate hearing

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Like the Bush administration, Obama lacked an effective diplomatic strategy for dealing with the Taliban.

In public, the Obama administration called for "reconciliation" between the Afghan government and insurgent leaders. But the Lessons Learned interviews show his advisers disagreed strenuously over what that meant.

Rubin, who favored talking to the Taliban, told interviewers that some hard-liners defined reconciliation as, "We'll be nice to people who surrender."

In particular, he said, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was "very reluctant to move on this," because of her presidential aspirations.

"Women are [a] very important constituency for her and she couldn't sell making a bargain with the Taliban," Rubin said. "If you want to be the first woman president you cannot leave any hint or doubt that you're not the toughest person on national security."

Other diplomats argued that trying to deal with the Taliban was a waste of time.

"I never believed that the negotiations with the Taliban, conducted by whomever, were going to lead anywhere significant," Ryan Crocker, who served as Obama's ambassador to Afghanistan from 2011 to 2012, told government interviewers. "I felt at the most, it might be possible to chip away individual Taliban figures and bring them over to the government side, but that would be an incremental issue. . . . I never thought there was an upside."

Eight years apart, Bush and Obama on the Afghanistan war

In the Lessons Learned interviews, Obama officials acknowledged that they failed to resolve another strategic challenge that had dogged Bush — what to do about Pakistan.

Washington kept giving Pakistan billions of dollars a year to help fight terrorism. Yet Pakistani military and intelligence leaders never stopped supporting the Afghan Taliban and giving sanctuary to its leaders.

"The Obama administration just thought if you just hang in there Pakistan will see the light," a former White House official told government interviewers in 2015.

In a separate interview in 2015, another unnamed official complained that the Obama administration would not let U.S. troops attack Taliban camps on the Pakistani side of the border.

"And still today we wonder what the problem is," the official said. "I talked to General Petraeus and I was saying that if I were a general and a bullet came and hit my men I would follow it. And Petraeus said yeah well go talk to Washington."

Crocker, who also served as U.S. ambassador to Pakistan from 2004 to 2007, told government interviewers that Pakistani leaders did not bother to hide their duplicity.

Gen. David H. Petraeus, then-commander of coalition forces in Iraq, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing 2008. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

He recounted a conversation he had with Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, who was then Pakistan's intelligence chief, in which he "was getting on him again" about the Taliban.

"And he says, 'You know, I know you think we're hedging our bets. You're right, we are, because one day you'll be gone again, it'll be like Afghanistan

the first time, you'll be done with us, but we're still going to be here because we can't actually move the country. And the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so, yes, we're hedging our bets.' "

In his December 2016 Lessons Learned interview, Crocker said the only way to force Pakistan to change would be for Trump to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan indefinitely and give them the green light to hunt the Taliban on Pakistani territory.

"It would allow him to say, 'You worry about our reliability, you worry about our withdrawal from Afghanistan, I'm here to tell you that I'm going to keep troops there as long as I feel we need them, there is no calendar.'

" 'That's the good news. The bad news for you is we're going to kill Taliban leaders wherever we find them: Baluchistan, Punjab, downtown Islamabad. We're going to go find them, so maybe you want to do a strategic recalculation.' "

WHAT THEY SAID IN PRIVATE
Feb. 2, 2015

"Tactics without strategy is a good way to fail."

— Unnamed German official, Lessons Learned interview

At first, hopes were high that Obama's strategy would turn the tide. But military and civilian officials interviewed for the SIGAR project said it soon became clear that lessons learned from one war zone did not necessarily apply to the other.

An unidentified Special Forces officer who deployed to Afghanistan in 2013 said all the conventional forces there thought it would be just like Iraq. "They were constantly referring to it," he said, but "just because [the villagers] are wearing robes and speaking derka derka doesn't mean it's the same country."

The officer told government interviewers the new counterinsurgency strategy was rushed, with the troops receiving scant direction from above: "We were given no documents that instructed us how to do our job. We were given the commander's vague strategic priorities but [that] generally amounted to 'go do good things.' Both at the strategic and operational level, doing it right took a back seat to doing it fast."

Others said the strategy was based on buzzwords and lacked substance. U.S. military leaders adopted an approach they labeled "clear, hold and build," in which troops would clear insurgents from a district and remain

until local government officials and Afghan security forces could stabilize the area with an influx of aid.

U.S. Marines in Helmand province, moments before an IED was triggered, in 2009. (Peter van Agtmael/Magnum Photos)

Because they were operating on a tight timetable, U.S. commanders first tried to clear areas where the Taliban was deeply entrenched, such as Helmand and Kandahar provinces in southern Afghanistan. The approach backfired when U.S. officials lavished aid on districts that remained supportive of the Taliban yet neglected peaceful areas that sided with the government in Kabul.

In a Lessons Learned interview, a senior official with the U.S. Agency for International Development said friendly governors from stable provinces would come to Kabul and ask: "What do I have to do to get love from the Americans, blow some shit up?"

"We needed to go first where the fence-sitters and low-hanging fruit was [and] reward good behavior," the USAID official said, adding that the Americans and their allies needed to "reinforce people who are cooperating with the government, so we can demonstrate success, then create a demand for it in insecure areas. . . . But this takes time, as it should, and we didn't have time or patience."

In 2014, as evidence piled up that Obama's plan was faltering, a senior State Department official told government interviewers that the mission had been unfocused from the start.

"I am sick of Obama saying, 'We're sick of war,' " the senior diplomat said. "Only 5 percent of Americans are involved in the war; it doesn't affect most Americans."

"If I were to write a book, its [cover] would be: 'America goes to war without knowing why it does,' " she added. "We went in reflexively after 9/11 without knowing what we were trying to achieve. I would like to write a book about having a plan and an endgame before you go in."

Left: Afghan soldier Masiullah Hamdard, who lost both legs and his left forearm in an explosion in Kandahar province, takes his first steps using his new prosthetics in Kabul in 2013. (Javier Manzano for The Washington Post) **Right:** Army Lt. Joshua Pitcher, in his living quarters at Camp Spann in northern Afghanistan, after a mission in 2014. He returned to his unit two years after an injury in Kandahar province that cost him his leg. (Lorenzo Tugnoli for The Washington Post)

Dozens of U.S. and Afghan officials told interviewers that the problems reflected a much deeper flaw. Despite years and years of war, the United States still did not understand what was motivating its enemies to fight.

The Taliban's presence "was a symptom, but we rarely tried to understand what the disease was," an unnamed USAID official said in a Lessons Learned interview in 2016.

In a separate interview that year, an Army civil-affairs officer said: "In order to clear, you need to know your enemy. You don't know your enemy — [you're just] tearing things down and pissing people off."

Shahmahmood Miakhel, a senior Afghan official who now serves as governor of Nangahar province, told interviewers there was a simple way to tell whether the U.S. strategy was working.

U.S. soldiers in 2011 at an observation post in Konar province, near the Pakistan border. (John Moore/Getty Images)

"I told Petraeus that in the counterinsurgency in which you don't know your friend, you don't know your enemy and environment, you are going to fail," Miakhel said. "I told him to check your list of people to be killed and captured, and see has this become longer or shorter. If it has increased, that means that your strategy [has] failed."

In March 2011, when he was commander of U.S. and NATO forces, Petraeus estimated there were "somewhere around 25,000 Taliban," according to testimony he gave to Congress.

Today, the U.S. military estimates the number has more than doubled — to about 60,000.

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Craig Whitlock is an investigative reporter who specializes in national security issues. He has covered the Pentagon, served as the Berlin bureau chief and reported from more than 60 countries. He joined The Washington Post in 1998.

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