

Lost and Forgotten: How American Foreign Policy Lost its Way in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The United States invaded Afghanistan over a decade ago but despite direct US military intervention Afghanistan remains fragile and unstable. The United States committed a strategic blunder by not pursuing nation building or creating enduring commitments to Afghanistan. While many today recognize the strategic errors of the Bush administration's early Afghanistan policy, explanations of the reasons behind these errors remain inconclusive and incomplete. Based on analysis of primary documents and speeches, existing academic literature and journalist accounts, this paper argues that an opportunity was missed as a result of the Bush administration's mentality towards Afghanistan. The belief that Afghanistan does not warrant sustained American attention led the Bush administration to neglect Afghanistan, just as the same mentality led previous American administrations to miss opportunities to stabilize Afghanistan in 1978 and 1992. The environment that developed as a result of these American departures was one of conflict, poverty and insecurity. Afghanistan became the very image of a failed state. In this chaotic environment the Taliban rose to power and Osama bin Laden planned terrorist attacks beyond the vision or attention of the West. A failure to nation build in Afghanistan enabled a brutal theocracy to develop and the most potent terrorist organization in recent history to operate in relative secrecy. Today, the United States' failure to nation build risks leaving Afghanistan in a similar position.

Introduction

The region of the world composed of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan has become synonymous with terror, conflict and violence in the minds of many Americans. Between nuclear weapons, volatile politics, religious and ethnic rivalry and Muslim extremism, this region may face more serious challenges to stability than any other in world today. Although the region has always faced some ethnic and religious conflict, the scale at which it threatens to erupt is unprecedented. Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and regional expert summarizes the stakes thusly: “The consequences of state failure are unimaginable... At stake are the futures of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, and of course America’s own power and prestige.”¹ With so much at stake in the future of this region, it is no surprise that the United States concerns itself with these nations. From pursuing non-proliferation to combating terrorism, as a world leader, the United States has a vested interest in the stability of the region. Given the gravity of the situation in Afghanistan, it is surprising to some Americans that progress in Afghanistan has been so slow and limited. Despite U.S. efforts to scratch Afghanistan off the list of the world’s failed nations, security in Afghanistan remains fragile, poverty ubiquitous and the future uncertain.

According to a recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report, the cost of the war in Afghanistan to the United States from FY2001 through FY2013 will amount to \$641.7 billion.² Furthermore, taking into account non-combat expenditures such as medical bills, a 2013 Harvard study found the Iraq and Afghan wars to be the most expensive conflicts in U.S. history.³ Despite the immense expenditures and over a decade of sustained, though perhaps

¹ Rashid, Ahmed. 2009. *Descent into chaos : the U.S. and the disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. New York: Penguin Books, XXXIX

² Cordesman, Anthony. 2012. “THE U.S. COST OF THE AFGHAN WAR: FY2002-FY2013.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. http://csis.org/files/publication/120515_U.S._Spending_Afghan_War_SIGAR.pdf.

³ Bilmes, Linda. 2013. “The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets.” *Harvard University*. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper (March).

insufficient, military presence, Afghanistan's future remains uncertain at best. With the expected 2014 drawdown looming on the horizon, scholars, Americans and Afghans have been left to question the results of America's most recent venture into Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the continued insurgency in Afghanistan is not the only issue that continues to plague the country. Corruption within the Afghan government causes disillusionment for many citizens, a frightening number of Afghans remain in abject poverty, the drug trade has rebounded and now provides the Taliban with a steady source of income and an uncooperative Pakistan continues to obstruct efforts to improve security and refuses to address Taliban safe-havens within their borders. Each of these factors gives reason to doubt the nation's future.

So how is it that with the largest military in the world and virtually unlimited economic resources, the United States has failed to bring about meaningful change in a country with a per capita GDP of just \$1,000?⁴ Given Afghanistan's population, the U.S. government's expenditures in Afghanistan will amount to more than \$21,000 per Afghan after 2013. So why is it that despite these incredible expenditures, one in five Afghans overall—and three of five in the South—still feels that the Taliban provide better opportunities for food and security than the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) or the Afghan government?⁵

The narrative underlying the long and convoluted history between America in Afghanistan can be summarized in a variety of ways. Journalist Ahmed Rashid contends that Afghanistan is the victim of tradeoffs that occurred when the United States went to war in Iraq.⁶ For RAND academic and counterinsurgency expert Seth Jones, it is a tale of the latest blunder in

⁴ "Afghanistan - The CIA World Factbook." 2012. *The Central Intelligence Agency*.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

⁵ Nicole Naurath. 2006. "In Afghanistan, Views of Security Differ Starkly by Region." *Gallup*. October 26.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/25138/Afghanistan-Views-Security-Differ-Starkly-Region.aspx>.

⁶ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. XLII.

a series of underestimations of the Afghan people dating back to Alexander the Great.⁷ For journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Afghanistan represents the unfinished product of America's post-war modernization efforts.⁸ While each of these interpretations captures some aspect of the conflict in Afghanistan, none successfully captures the essence of the United States' relationship with Afghanistan. The story of the United States and Afghanistan is a saga of missed opportunities not limited to one era or one administration. Examining the history of U.S.-Afghan relations, one finds that time and time again the United States appears to be well-situated to enact meaningful, lasting change in Afghanistan, yet passes on its opportunity to do so, failing to make an adequate commitment to Afghan security and stability. The United States' early failures to stabilize and secure Afghanistan created an environment that spawned the Taliban and provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden. Rather than learning from the mistakes of the past, the United States missed an opportunity to correct this in 2001. Since then, Afghanistan has suffered a renewed Taliban insurgency and the United States is poised, once again, to leave Afghanistan in a state similar to that which allowed bin Laden to operate from Afghanistan in the first place. The danger is clear; if a weak, poor and violence-riddled Afghanistan once provided haven to international terrorists, then left in the same condition it might well provide haven to such actors in the future.

The narrative of missed opportunities to alter this condition stretches back prior to the Cold War to U.S. state building projects in the 1950's. Yet, no period represents a better opportunity or a more disappointing shortfall than the United States' most recent involvement in Afghanistan. When the conflict began, as the undisputed world military leader, the United States

⁷ Jones, Seth G. 2010. *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. Reprint. W. W. Norton & Company.

⁸ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. 2012. *Little America: the war within the war for Afghanistan*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

enjoyed strong support from the American public and the backing of its allies around the world.⁹ This paper began as an attempt to assess the extent to which certain foreign actors influence Afghan stability or the lack thereof. In exploring this topic, I found a U.S. foreign policy that lacked direction and focus. I found dozens of different answers to the question of Afghan instability and dozens of policy recommendations for how the U.S. could turn the situation around. The more information one consumes on the topic, the more it becomes apparent that no single event, policy or project was responsible for U.S. failure.

Rather, foreign policy in Afghanistan in the period following 9/11 reflects a syndrome of systemic inconsistency in U.S. policy and a persistent neglect of Afghanistan. Such inconsistency and neglect is not limited to the politics of and security situation in Afghanistan. It also extends to a neglect of the Afghan people and an ignorance of the country's overall importance to global security. These trends of inconsistency and neglect did not originate with the post-9/11 invasion and subsequent occupation; they are merely the most recent iteration in a long pattern dating back to the United States' first involvement in the region. This paper attempts to reveal how these elements have manifested over the course of recent U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Every time Afghanistan appears on the United States agenda, it is tabled in favor of more pressing issues and ultimately abandoned by U.S. policy makers, despite previous commitments. Following WWII the United States established a number of agricultural projects in Afghanistan. These projects were subsequently abandoned when the Communists rose to power in 1978.¹⁰ During the Cold War, the United States left Afghanistan when American opposition to Communism conflicted with obligations in Afghanistan. In the 1980's, the United States'

⁹ "Attack on America: Key Trends and Indicators." 2013. *Gallup*. Accessed February 17.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/5011/Attack-America-Key-Trends-Indicators.aspx>.

¹⁰ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*. Pg. 33.

involvement in Afghanistan was a response to the Soviet Union and focused on primarily on punishing the Soviets rather than the freedom or prosperity of the Afghan people. Shortly after the 2001 invasion, the war in Iraq diverted attention from the conflict in Afghanistan. Today, Pakistan has been moved to the forefront of the foreign policy agenda. Across these cases, Afghanistan is never seen as the America's top priority and U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan has largely failed as a result.

This paper begins with a literature review, first examining historical U.S. relations with Afghanistan following World War II and then U.S.-Afghan relations in the contemporary period following 9/11. It then briefly examines several theories relevant to this paper and reviews the research methodology. This paper then examines the effects and shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan since the 2001 launch of Operation Enduring Freedom. I attempt to streamline this analysis by focusing on three distinct periods of U.S. foreign policy: the period following the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the resurgence of the Taliban and the decline of Afghan stability circa 2006 and finally, the renewed approach of the Obama administration. While the boundaries between these eras are undoubtedly fluid, in each period, distinct trends in policy, rhetoric and the situation in Afghanistan serve to distinguish one from the other. Each of these periods provides a wealth of scholarly works, journalism and primary source documents, some of which are introduced below. Given the chronological approach of this paper, it seems appropriate to begin, however, long before the recent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, with a brief exploration of the United States' modern history with "the graveyard of empires."

Literature Review: Historical Context

While the Western world has had a long and complex history with the people that inhabit today's Afghanistan, prior to World War II the British were the primary source of western influence in the area. While this period is primarily tangential to the discussion of U.S.-Afghan relations, it warrants mention, as a number of scholars point to the period of British rule in Afghanistan as both a poignant example of the challenges of state building in Afghanistan and also a significant source of future conflict. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield, considered by many to be a leading expert on Afghanistan, writes extensively about this time period in his 2010 book *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History*. According to Barfield, many of the problems that the U.S. is now encountering in Afghanistan were also extant during the British experience in Afghanistan. Like the Americans, the British faced considerable resistance from Afghan leaders who supplemented their incomes through corruption.¹¹

More broadly, Barfield links the establishment of the "modern Afghan state" to this period. The strength of Islam, ethnic rivalries, economic stagnation and the centralization of power in Kabul all have roots in the rule of Abdur Rahman. The wars from this period were instrumental in the construction of the modern Afghan state. He writes, "These wars centralized political and economic power in Kabul, and made Abdur Rahman the undisputed leader of Afghanistan."¹² Whereas before power in Afghanistan was decentralized, with the help of the British, Abdur Rahman consolidated power despite the strong sense of autonomy that can still be observed in Afghanistan today. Installed by the British as the Amir of Northern Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman used his series of brutal internal wars to destroy sources of opposition within Afghanistan and create a more centralized state.¹³ In this case, perhaps the example of Abdur Rahman can prove instructive for the United States and the Karzai government, which has

¹¹ Barfield, Thomas J. 2010. *Afghanistan : a cultural and political history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pg. 131.

¹² Ibid. pg. 151.

¹³ Ibid. Pg. 147.

struggled with wrangling corrupt regional leaders outside the influence of Kabul. In order to solidify his power, Rahman replaced entrenched regional governors with those whom he could easily remove if needed. Abdur Rahman's legacy is not overwhelmingly positive. On the contrary: Barfield attributes the economic decline of Afghanistan to this period and Abdur Rahman's rule.¹⁴ Through his conquest, Abdur Rahman fundamentally changed the character of the Afghan state to one that is deeply Islamic and distrusting of centralized authority. Unfortunately for the Afghans, this would not be the last conflict-driven intervention by Western powers.

World War II also significantly impacted Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan itself remained nominally neutral during the conflict, it likely would have turned against its historic British enemies had the opportunity presented.¹⁵ While an alliance of convenience with Germany to oust the British never came to fruition during WWII, the war itself had major impacts for the colonies of West Asia. Barfield notes, "The Second World War initiated the process of dissolving the West's Asian colonial empires."¹⁶ With British authority in Asia on the decline, new powers, in the form of the United States and Soviet Union, would begin to take an interest in Afghanistan. Additionally, British withdrawal from India following World War II resulted in the formation of Pakistan, a state that soon became closely intertwined with conversations concerning Afghanistan.

Following the British departure in the early 20th century, the United States would take on the role of Afghanistan's primary western influence and would maintain this role through the height of the Cold War. This marked the origin of America's tumultuous and varied relationship with Afghanistan beginning in the 1950's. While a number of scholars write extensively

¹⁴ Ibid. pg 153.

¹⁵ Ibid. Pg. 208.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg 208.

concerning the U.S.'s Cold War involvement, there is comparatively less interest in the period preceding the rise of Communism in Afghanistan. Rajiv Chandrasekaran is one scholar who offers analysis of this initial period of U.S. involvement. It is also in this period that the proverbial seeds of U.S. neglect were planted. In 2001, during America's latest state building adventure in Afghanistan, U.S. troops would rediscover the abandoned projects of the United States' first state building efforts such as the Kajaki dam.

In his 2012 study, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*, Chandrasekaran begins his analysis of U.S.-Afghan relations with the involvement of USAID and private firms such as Morrison-Knudsen in Afghanistan in the 1950's. According to Chandrasekaran, while initial American efforts in Afghanistan were relatively successful—especially in the realm of agriculture—American agencies left the job unfinished.¹⁷

One example of such a project was the Kajaki dam. Finished in southern Afghanistan in the early 1953, this dam provided the first source of reliable electricity to residents of Kandahar and the surrounding areas.¹⁸ And while the dam itself was completed and several generators were installed in the United States' initial efforts in Afghanistan, the project remained incomplete. Before the plans to install additional generators and raise the dam came to fruition, USAID left Afghanistan following the Communist takeover.¹⁹ The United States pulled funding for the dam and similar projects, as a continuation of the standard Cold War procedure of hostility towards Communist regimes. Despite the fact that some progress and modernization was being made in Afghanistan through projects such as the Kajaki dam, the U.S. pulled out of Afghanistan as soon as the situation no longer fit its Cold War interests.

¹⁷ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*. pg. 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pg 302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 302.

The Kajaki dam was just one instance of such U.S. aid. In his article, “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State”, historian Nick Cullather, explains the U.S. preference for the construction of dams during this period. In the 1950’s and 1960’s the United States poured millions into programs designed to dam Afghanistan’s rivers and modernize agriculture. This resulted in the formation of an Afghan agency modeled after the famous Tennessee Valley Authority for the areas surrounding the Helmand River.²⁰ The agenda was ambitious and, in Cullather’s view, far from perfect; yet, as the example of Kajaki demonstrates, such projects positively affected some Afghans. The potential benefits such programs might have held remains unknown as the U.S. government and the companies it funded pulled out of Afghanistan before the projects were completed or their boons realized.

The Helmand Valley provides additional examples of abandoned projects. Chandrasekaran recounts how the once ambitious initiative to create large flat farming plots in the valley consumed massive amounts of U.S. aid but was eventually scaled back after encountering difficulties with local Afghans.²¹ At one point, Afghan Prime Minister Daoud summarized the American efforts to modernize agriculture in the Helmand as an “unfinished symphony.”²² This was another example of a project that never reached its final vision as a result of the Communist takeover. While Daoud referred specifically to the Helmand Valley project, his terminology embodies the broader U.S. mission in Afghanistan in the 1950’s with unsettling accuracy. Despite initial successes in difficult conditions, the United States demonstrated a lack of serious commitment to the Afghan people. Where USAID had the potential to improve the lives of many in southern Afghanistan, it was all too willing to abandon its efforts there when

²⁰ Nick Cullather. “Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State.” *The Journal of American History* 89 (Sep. 2002): 512–537.

²¹ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*. pg 31-32.

²² *Ibid.* pg 32.

progress conflicted with Cold War grand-strategy. In this way, future security and progress in Afghanistan can easily be seen as a mere sideshow rather than a specific goal in and of itself. While American engineers would not return to Afghanistan in force until the 2001 invasion, Afghanistan would appear on the agenda for U.S. policymakers far sooner.

The Afghan people did not universally accept Communism or Afghanistan's indigenous Communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Former U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan Peter Tomsen's, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* underscores the differences between Russian and Afghan societies that impeded the transfer of Soviet style Communism to Afghanistan. He notes, "Afghanistan's proletariat amounted to fewer than 20,000 workers."²³ In fact, the centralized authority and secularism demanded by Soviet style Communism ran contrary to the autonomy and religiosity of many Afghans.²⁴ As a result of these underlying differences, problems for the Afghan Communist party began almost immediately. Less than a year after the revolution, the declining status of the PDPA forced its leaders to ask the Soviets for assistance.²⁵ As the Communist regime was forced to rely increasingly on Soviet aid, and eventually direct intervention, the United States saw an opportunity to punish their Cold War adversary: "A sustained rebellion in Afghanistan might constrain the Soviets' ability to project power into Middle Eastern oil fields. It also might embarrass and tie down Afghan and perhaps Soviet forces as they attempted to quell the uprising."²⁶ By aiding the Afghan mujahedeen the United States had a golden opportunity to undermine Soviet interests.

²³ Tomsen, Peter. 2011. *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*. 1st ed. New York: PublicAffairs.

²⁴ Ibid. Pg. 130, 133.

²⁵ Barfield, Thomas. *A cultural and political history*, pg. 233.

²⁶ Coll, Steve. 2004. *Ghost wars : the secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Press. Pg. 42.

In order to accomplish its geopolitical aims, America turned to the CIA. A detailed account of the United States' covert dealings in Afghanistan comes from journalist Steve Coll's 2004 book, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA in Afghanistan*.²⁷ Coll's narrative of U.S.-Afghan relations in the Cold War portrays Afghanistan as a pawn in a game between superpowers, with the CIA's only interest being the removal of the Communists, no matter which unsavory characters they embraced in the process. Coll also describes a U.S. foreign policy that was frighteningly deferential to the Pakistanis despite strong historical indicators that Pakistan may not have had Afghanistan's best interests in mind. According to Barfield, "Afghans always perceived the most dangerous threats to their sovereignty as coming from contiguous...because these states had viewed Afghanistan as a territory that could be annexed to those they already ruled."²⁸ Coupled with Pakistani apprehension concerning trans-border Pashtun nationalism or a pro-India regime in Kabul, a clear conflict of interests develops. By excessively relying on Pakistan in the creation of Afghanistan policy, the U.S. inadvertently pursued Pakistani government's best interests rather than the interests of the Afghan people. The single-minded focus on Communism and deference to Pakistani interests are indicative of U.S. foreign policy perspective that views Afghanistan as a means to an end and sees no long-term value in establishing a stable regime within the state's borders—a perspective that would be continued in the next major involvement in Afghanistan.

There is also an immense amount of scholarly literature related to the United States' policies in Afghanistan during the Cold War, such as historian and academic, Andrew Hartman's 2002 article, "The Red Template". Hartman's article summarizes a number of facets of American Cold War era policy in Afghanistan. He examines the policy to arm mujahedeen to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Barfield, Thomas. *A cultural and political history*, pg. 275.

oppose the Soviets in Afghanistan and the resulting “blowback.” He concludes that U.S. Cold War policy “has done more than risk the security of the American people; it has endangered the safety of people all over the world, particularly the citizens of Afghanistan.”²⁹ Hartman’s analysis captures several key failures of U.S. policy that the U.S. would repeat in 2001. First, it notes that short-term American calculations of Afghan policy, notably the arms sales to anti-Western mujahideen leaders negatively impacted the American people. Second, it notes that regardless of the effects of such CIA programs their use was unconscionable given the United States’ subsequent withdrawal and abandonment. While the CIA policies during this period have been well documented, scholars continue to discuss the morality and justifications of this policy.

Regardless of one’s personal opinions concerning the efficacy or morality of such CIA policies, it is clear that they were not designed with any long-term concern for Afghanistan or its people. On the contrary, the sale of weapons was confined almost exclusively to an anti-Soviet regiment. Coll writes, “But the aid stopped in December 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved. The United States government decided it had no further interests in Afghanistan.”³⁰ While the United States assumed it could simply walk away from Afghanistan, factions fighting in the power vacuum left by collapse of the Communist regime would not go quietly into the night. Such infighting not only destroyed the lives of many Afghans but also left an environment in which organizations like al-Qaeda could flourish and years later take American lives on 9/11.

With the Soviets gone, the fragile mujahedeen alliances broke down without a common enemy.³¹ With the Soviet Union dissolved and the United States withdrawn, Afghanistan soon fell into disorder. As the factions feuded, the Afghan people grew disillusioned. With no central

²⁹ Hartman, Andrew. 2002. “‘The Red Template’: Us Policy in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan.” *Third World Quarterly* 23 (3) (June): 467–489. doi:10.1080/01436590220138439.

³⁰ Coll, Steve. *Ghost wars*. Pg. 4.

³¹ Barfield, Thomas. *A cultural and political history*, pg. 249.

authority and a population longing for order, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. Barfield writes, “The Taliban drew on the discontent of the population living in areas where chaos prevailed. For them, any ideology or regime that could bring about stability was preferable to the status quo.”³² The Taliban rose to power in a vacuum of security, where chaos reigned. In the end, Afghans desired security above electricity, dams or democracy. A similar situation would develop following the U.S. invasion, where the local population invariably seems to favor the faction best able to provide security.

That is not to say that the Taliban were loved. Quite to the contrary, the harshness of Taliban rule was abhorred by at least some Afghans. Tomsen summarizes the tragedy of the civil war:

During [the 1990’s] the country that had been a key Cold War battleground, where a valiant people had helped bring down the last great political totalitarian state of the twentieth century, became a major post-Cold War battleground, forced to suffer the messianic fanaticism of the first religious totalitarian movement of the twenty-first century.³³

In place of the Soviets, a new brand of totalitarians rose in their place, this time with no “great power” particularly interested in their future. This changed in 2001, when following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the United States invaded Afghanistan and launched a new wave of policies, plans and scholarship concerning this precariously positioned nation.

Literature Review: Post 9/11

If Afghanistan’s rich and complicated history has captured the minds of many historians, so too had the recent American involvement spawned a wealth of information from think-tanks, political scientists, politicians and journalists. This paper examines events from three distinct periods of U.S. foreign policy: the initial invasion in 2001, the Taliban resurgence in 2006 and

³² Ibid. Pg. 257.

³³ Tomsen, Peter. *The Wars of Afghanistan*. Pg. 513.

finally the reevaluation of Afghanistan under Barack Obama. This literature review attempts to mirror this chronological progression, however, it also reveals a flaw in such an approach. Although this paper attempts to organize foreign policy into periods for simplicity in analysis, it is important to note that foreign policy is fluid and divisions can be seen as arbitrary. I will argue that the three periods mentioned above have distinct characteristics; however, many of the sources listed below do not necessarily conform to the periods previously identified.

While many, such as scholar Terry Anderson, identify the initial invasion of Afghanistan as a military success,³⁴ some experts such as journalist Ahmed Rashid have consistently expressed criticism for U.S. state building efforts—or lack thereof—following the initial invasion. Long an advocate for aid to Afghanistan, Rashid’s first major work on the region, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, predates the U.S. led invasion of Afghanistan—it was originally published in March of 2000.³⁵ He offers a detailed account of the events responsible for forging modern-day Afghanistan in *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*.³⁶ In *Descent into Chaos*, Rashid briefly examines the history leading up to 9/11 before launching into a stern critique of U.S. policy and most notably the failure of the United States to engage in successful nation building in Afghanistan. He argues, “This book is about American failure to secure the region after 9/11, to carry out nation building on a scale that could have reversed the appeal of terrorism and Islamic extremism and averted state collapse on a more calamitous scale than could ever have happened

³⁴ Anderson, Terry H. 2011. *Bush’s Wars*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Rashid, Ahmed. 2000. *Taliban : militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

³⁶ Dalrymple, William. 2009. “Pakistan in Peril.” *The New York Review of Books*, February 12. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/feb/12/pakistan-in-peril/>.

before 9/11.”³⁷ Rashid analyzes a sort of “golden window” in which the United States could have decisively engaged Afghanistan, rebuilt the nation, and secured the region.

This “golden hour” is also referenced in the RAND Corporation’s “A Beginners Guide to Nation Building” as the critical period immediately following the end of major combat operations.³⁸ Regardless of the terminology employed, scholars from multiple disciplines and organizations agree on the existence of a time frame in which state building is most effective. According to RAND, this time frame requires the occupier to provide soldiers, police, humanitarian aid and rule of law in order to secure the state before an insurgency can develop and while the local population remains optimistic. Published in 2007, in the wake of state building missteps in Iraq, RAND sought to create a template to prevent such mistakes in the future. Yet, for the United States’ other ongoing state building projects in Afghanistan, the “golden window” had already elapsed; as a result of the distractions that surfaced in Washington during the invasion—notably the distraction of Iraq—the U.S. was unable to capitalize on this opportunity.

Soldier turned academic Craig Mullaney, offers the perspective of a soldier on the ground in Afghanistan in his 2010 book *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education*. While Rashid applies his regional expertise to the situation in Afghanistan, Mullaney offers the perspective of a soldier on the ground following the 2001 invasion. Despite their differing experiences and approaches to the Afghan conflict, they come to shockingly similar conclusions in some areas. Like Rashid, Mullaney recalls how the Afghanistan conflict was severely under resourced. From troop levels to parts for maintenance Mullaney describes a force in Afghanistan that was

³⁷ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*.

³⁸ Dobbins, James, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane, and Beth Cole DeGrasse. 2007. “The Beginner’s Guide to Nation-Building”. Product Page. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG557.html>.

unequipped to deal with the challenges of nation building in Afghanistan.³⁹ Beyond the material shortcomings of the United States' state building effort in Afghanistan, Mullaney also draws attention to a deficiency in training and expertise that hampered the Afghan state building effort. He writes, "At Fort Benning I had devised elaborate defensive perimeters with trip wire triggers, booby traps, and planned artillery targets. But I had never, not once, practiced a humanitarian mission like this."⁴⁰ Mullaney's account reveals a problem in America's early Afghanistan strategy deeper than a simple material shortage. American troops not only lacked physical equipment; they also found themselves mentally and psychologically unprepared. While this "under-resourcing" identified by both Rashid and Mullaney no doubt hindered early U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, perhaps the creation of a model Afghan state was unrealistic until the United States changed not only the political priority of the war, but its mental attitude towards Afghanistan as well. This larger mentality of neglect, spanning back to the United States' WWII era policies, is also key to understanding the failure of nation building in Afghanistan.

In recent years several compelling documentaries have also attempted to capture the efforts of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. The 2010 HBO documentary *The Battle of Marjah* relays the story of the soldiers involved in one of the largest U.S. offensives since the 2001 invasion.⁴¹ While other sources, such as General Stanley McChrystal's memoir,⁴² paint this offensive in a very positive light and turning point under McChrystal, this documentary highlights the problems U.S. forces face in terms of interacting with the local population and coordinating with Afghan national forces.⁴³

³⁹ Mullaney, Craig M. 2010. *The Unforgiving Minute: a Soldier's Education*. New York: Penguin Books. Pg. 228.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pg. 251.

⁴¹ Wonke, Anthony. N/A. *The Battle for Marjah*. Documentary.

⁴² McChrystal, Stanley *My Share of the Task: a Memoir*. New York: Portfolio. Pg. 375.

⁴³ Broadwell, Paula, and Vernon Loeb. 2012. *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*. Penguin.

The 2010 award-winning documentary *Restrepo* delves into the psychological toll that counterinsurgency operations take on young soldiers. This documentary follows a group of soldiers deployed to one of the most dangerous assignments in Afghanistan, where they faced almost daily attacks and stiff resistance from local tribal elders. While the documentary focuses on the effects of the war on U.S. soldiers, this documentary also illustrates the futility and aimlessness of some operations in Afghanistan from the perspective of a common soldier.⁴⁴ These documentaries forcefully deliver a message of U.S. inconsistencies within Afghanistan. While the rhetoric and grand-strategy of policymakers seem to form a coherent way forward, for soldiers on the ground, state building in Afghanistan is little more than a way to pass the time until the plane ride home. This discrepancy highlights the disconnect between policy makers and the situation on the ground and provides a window to the underlying mentality of some American policy makers that led to ineffectual policies. Rather than developing a comprehensive strategy to reconstruct and develop Afghanistan, too many politicians were content to expend U.S. time, money and lives on strategically unimportant assignments.

Seth Jones also believes the United States missed an incredible opportunity to build a stable and prosperous Afghan state. Like Rashid and Mullaney, Jones targets the war in Iraq as a major obstacle to the success of Afghan state building.⁴⁵ His 2010 book, *In the Graveyard of Empire: America's War in Afghanistan* discusses not only the missed opportunities after the initial invasion but also how these opportunities slipped away in the face of a renewed Taliban insurgency.

The Taliban resurgence in 2006 forced the United States to reevaluate its approach to Afghanistan. New ideas concerning the future of Afghanistan often came in the form of

⁴⁴ Hetherington, Tim, and Sebastian Junger. 2011. *Restrepo*. Documentary, War.

⁴⁵ Jones, Seth G. *Graveyard of Empires. location 300?*

appointees. The work of individuals such as Robert Gates, David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal reenergized the U.S. campaigns and would ultimately lead to major changes in the U.S. approach to Afghanistan. One example of this reevaluation was the rise of counterinsurgency theory in the U.S. military.

In his most recent work, *Pakistan on the Brink*, Ahmed Rashid devotes a chapter to the United States strategy of counterinsurgency.⁴⁶ Among his analysis and policy recommendations he hails the campaign in Swat as an example of American and Pakistani cooperation in counterinsurgency. While Rashid might believe that counterinsurgency can be successfully implemented in Afghanistan, other authors such as Chandrasekaran disagree. Throughout *Little America*, Chandrasekaran offers critiques of many American military leaders that pushed for the adoption of COIN in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ His account of state building in Afghanistan looks beyond the U.S. military and the period after 9/11. He also examines the effects of policies from USAID and other organizations associated with development under the Obama administration. While many accounts of nation building in Afghanistan attribute failures to a lack of resources and understanding, Chandrasekaran's account implies an unwillingness of U.S. officials to commit not just the proper resources to rebuilding Afghanistan but adequate time as well. For scholars such as Chandrasekaran and Rashid, nation building is seen as a long-term commitment. American attempts to leave Afghanistan as-soon-as-possible fly in the face of such long-term planning. The refusal to make a strong long-term commitment to state building—and by extension security and prosperity—in Afghanistan is a reflection of the Obama administration's unwillingness to take on the mantle of responsibility for rebuilding Afghanistan; unwillingness

⁴⁶ Rashid, Ahmed. 2012. *Pakistan on the Brink; The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*. Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated.

⁴⁷ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*.

that Chandrasekaran associates not only with the Obama administration but with USAID in the 1950's as well.

While Chandrasekaran observes the effects of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, others provide insight through a focus on the policymakers themselves. The works of journalists are also invaluable to understanding the thoughts and processes of key policymakers in regards to the war in Afghanistan. While press briefings, political speeches and U.S. policy documents are all essential to understanding U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan, the access of some journalists into the minds of U.S. policy makers reveals elements of foreign policy that never make it into such official statements. In his 2010 book, *Obama's Wars* journalist Bob Woodward utilizes his access to officials in Washington to create a portrait of the Obama administration struggling to right the rapidly sinking ship that was Afghanistan in 2009.⁴⁸ Woodward's account of Afghanistan reveals a dysfunctional relationship between the White House and the Pentagon as well as an Afghan government paralyzed by corruption and at times bordering on incompetence. These flaws result in equally dysfunctional and fragmented policy that fails to adequately address the problems being faced in Afghanistan.

As Woodward delves into the Obama administration's decision-making process concerning Afghanistan, others have attempted to get inside the minds of the generals responsible for the U.S. military forces. Now famous for her controversy with General Petraeus, writer and academic Paula Broadwell devotes a substantial portion of her biography on General Petraeus to the challenges the Iraq War hero faced in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ While Woodward provides great insight to White House debates on Afghanistan, Broadwell's account of the situation comes from the perspective of an individual heavily embedded within the Pentagon establishment. The

⁴⁸ Woodward, Bob. 2010. *Obama's wars*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁴⁹ Broadwell, Paula, *All In*.

dichotomy between these accounts is striking and reveals the tension Woodward alludes to in his book. Journalist accounts provide valuable insights into the complex internal processes and debates that are often absent from official documents released by Washington.

Obama's Wars also recounts the role of scholars such as Bruce Riedel in the Obama administration's decision-making process. Riedel, a former CIA analyst and leading expert in counter-terrorism, was quickly tapped by Obama to conduct a policy review of Afghanistan and outline the future of U.S. policy in the region. Riedel is considered an expert on South Asian issues and has served in a variety of functions within the upper echelons of the security policy apparatus. By tapping Riedel, the Obama administration brought the regional expertise of a well-known and seemingly non-partisan advisor to Afghanistan policy, a component sorely missed in the early Bush years. Woodward provides insights into his attempt to salvage the situation in Afghanistan only to face hurdles from infighting and domestic constraints.⁵⁰ Accounts such as those of Woodward and Broadwell reveal devastating inconsistency within the U.S. policy establishment, an inconsistency, which I later argue, has greatly hampered reform efforts throughout the Obama administration's tenure.

While the policies and debates about Afghanistan have undoubtedly changed since 2001, it remains unclear whether Obama's renewed approach to Afghanistan is making meaningful progress in the country. While the military, aid agencies and policy makers alike have endeavored to reverse course in Afghanistan—at least at first—the situation on the ground is suspiciously absent from a number of sources—even ones cited within this paper—that deal with this topic. For example, *Obama's Wars* delivers an unparalleled account of the internal dialogue of the Obama White House, but the same detail is not afforded to conversations involving Afghans. One journalist that strives to provide a ground level understanding of the people of

⁵⁰ Woodward, Bob. *Obama's wars*.

Afghanistan is Anna Badkhen. Having now published several short accounts of her experiences in Afghanistan, Badkhen, more so than some scholars, depicts life in Afghanistan through the eyes of those who actually live there. She attempts to share with the reader the ground level stories of the common Afghan as well as her own deep attachment to the country.⁵¹ In her 2010 book, Badkhen revisits Afghanistan after several years of absence and to her horror finds little in the way of progress and in some instances finds the Taliban have in fact extended their reach. To readers interested in the region, Badkhen gives a heartbreaking message of failure. Where high-level policymakers see monumental changes in Afghan policy, the Afghans themselves see little improvement from the neglect they have experienced since the invasion in 2001.

Many of the scholarly works previously mentioned also look to the future and provide policy recommendations. Ahmed Rashid warns against withdrawing from Afghanistan before the proper time and believes that a premature withdrawal could be disastrous for the nation.⁵² Thomas Barfield also offers some advice to American policy makers, suggesting that the United States place a strong emphasis on the provision of basic services to Afghans and that the United States reevaluate its approach to drug policy in the region.⁵³

The sources of instability in Afghanistan are myriad and diverse and many scholars tend to focus on an explanation aligning with their specialization. Historians such as Andrew Hartman are more prone to focus on the role of the British or the Cold War. Political Scientists, in turn, may point to fractionalization. Authors of state building literature may focus on Afghanistan's historically weak institutions. By focusing on the United States' role in Afghan instability, this paper inherently fails to capture all aspects of a very complex topic. Even within

⁵¹ Badkhen, Anna. 2010. *Waiting for the Taliban: A Journey Through Northern Afghanistan*. Las Vegas, NV: AmazonEncore.

⁵² Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*.

⁵³ Barfield, T. 2008. "The Roots of Failure in Afghanistan." *Current History* (107).
http://www.relooney.info/00_New_3092.pdf.

the context of the role of international actors the focus on the United States is limiting. Since 2001, the United States has undoubtedly been the most influential outside actor in Afghanistan, yet a number of other neighboring countries remain significant. Perhaps most important is Pakistan, which is intimately tied with Afghanistan in a number of works within this literature review such as *Pakistan on the Brink* or *Ghost Wars*.

While substantial literature exists concerning the history of Afghanistan and the U.S. relationship with Afghanistan, these accounts fall short of identifying the deeper problem concerning U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid identifies a missed opportunity when the United States first invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Chandrasekaran identifies missed opportunities in the 1950's and under President Obama. While these scholars and others repeatedly point to missed opportunities for the United States to help Afghanistan, they fail to capture the underlying inconsistencies in U.S. policy or the underlying neglect for Afghanistan.

The Theory to be Tested:

While this paper draws on a number of theoretical arguments concerning nation building, counterinsurgency and state stability, to situate it within one theoretical framework would ignore key elements of the situation in Afghanistan. As such, I do not attempt to generalize the findings of this paper to a broader theory of state building, for two principle reasons. First, this paper does include recommendations for the future of Afghanistan, as that is not its primary aim. The primary goal is instead to examine the failures of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and attempt to show that these individual failures are the result of a continuing condition of neglect and inconsistency within the U.S. foreign policy establishment dating back to the Cold War. This historical

analysis is highly specific and does not easily lend itself to a normative claim about state building theory.

The second reason for avoiding drawing conclusions about state building theory at large stems from nation building theory itself. In reference to state building efforts, renowned international relations theorist, Francis Fukuyama questions, “We know what ‘Denmark’ looks like, and something about how the actual Denmark came to be historically. But to what extent is that knowledge transferable to countries as far away historically and culturally from Denmark as Somalia or Moldova?”⁵⁴ The question Fukuyama poses is a poignant one for state building theorists. For all the efforts to understand how today’s successful states came to be successful, what is to say that the road will be the same for the states that still need improvement? One need only take a look at the histories of states like United States, Afghanistan and Denmark to see that there is no universal path to statehood and stability.

Scholars Paris and Sisk summarize this tension as “incongruities between the universal values sponsored by international organizations and donor governments on one hand and the values, social practices, political traditions and cultural expectations of the host society on the other.”⁵⁵ With such division among scholars *within the state building literature itself*, skepticism towards generalizations concerning the “road to good governance” seems warranted. As such, I try to avoid deriving larger claims concerning statehood, governance and institutions from the unique situation in Afghanistan.

This is not to say that theoretical arguments do not have a place in this paper. Quite the opposite: this paper heavily draws on a number of state building theorists and represents a

⁵⁴ Fukuyama, Francis. 2004. “The Imperative of State-Building.” *Journal of Democracy* 15 (2): 17–31. doi:10.1353/jod.2004.0026.

⁵⁵ Paris, Roland, and Timothy D Sisk. 2009. *The dilemmas of statebuilding : confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations*. London; New York: Routledge.

significant portion of the research conducted. For example, the state building theories of several authors previously mentioned, Fukuyama and others such as Acemoglu and Robinson, could be useful in examining the problem of corruption in Afghanistan. These scholars all point to institutions as a key factor in determining the capabilities of a state to govern. In Afghanistan, they might argue, the United States should place a greater emphasis on institution building as opposed to combat operations or the disruption of al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Given the United States' recent efforts to reshape portions of the Middle East and Central Asia as "beacons of democracy", academic literature related to state building and nation building has been published in abundance. A number of prominent scholars contributed to the RAND Corporation's *A Beginner's Guide to Nationbuilding*.⁵⁶ This volume, intended to outline a series of strategies for nation building around the world, has become something of a handbook for American statesmen and politicians which, seemingly, coincides with much of the nation building scholarship that exists today. In the context of Afghanistan, *A Beginner's Guide's* idea of a "golden hour" for state building is especially relevant. The United States' failure to capitalize on this first, best chance at state building in Afghanistan in 2001 undermined the occupation under Bush and haunted the Obama administration's attempt to rectify the situation. This 'guide' also suffers from a fatal flaw of trying to turn an incredibly complex and delicate process such as nation building into a simple recipe.

Rather than attempting to provide a template for would-be nation builders, Acemoglu and Robinson offer an account of the circumstances that can lead to state failure in their immense volume *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. These scholars examine a number of explanations of state failure, such as diversity, poverty, poor governance,

⁵⁶ Dobbins, James, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane, and Beth Cole DeGrasse. 2007. "The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building". Product Page. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG557.html>.

external influences and even geography. They reject these explanations to varying degrees in favor of an explanation based on institutions. They write, “The most common reason why nations fail today is because they have extractive institutions.”⁵⁷ By this they mean institutions based on the extraction of valuable resources. These institutions are frequently attributed to imperialist policies established by colonial powers in developing countries. This conclusion may be particularly relevant to the situation in Afghanistan given that Andrew Hartman argues that American Cold War era policy was based on protecting American regional interests, and in particular access to oil.⁵⁸ Coupled with the failure of the United States to build proper institutions following the 2001 invasion—to the disappointment of authors such as Rashid—a saga of missed opportunities takes shape.

Counter-insurgency theory is another theory featured heavily in this paper. Pioneered by General David Petraeus in Iraq, and implemented—at least in part—by Stanley McChrystal in Special Operations this paper examines attempts to institute this strategy in Afghanistan. By integrating a wide variety of agencies and bureaucracies with Special Operations, McChrystal laid the basis for the organization that would one day kill Osama bin Laden.⁵⁹ Counter-insurgency also informed many of the goals and strategies pursued by U.S. military leaders in Afghanistan such as McChrystal and Petraeus. The ability to coordinate a wide variety of resources with a unified mission is a major component of counterinsurgency, one that was, in the early Bush years, impossible given the overall lack of resources being devoted to Afghanistan.

⁵⁷ Acemoglu, Daron, and James A Robinson. 2012. *Why nations fail : the origins of power, prosperity and poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers.

⁵⁸ Hartman, Andrew. “The Red Template”

⁵⁹ Ackerman, Spencer. 2011. “How Special Ops Copied al-Qaida to Kill It.” *Danger Room*. September 9. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/09/mcchrystal-network/>.

As Commander of the ISAF, Petraeus outlined the basis of counterinsurgency strategy.⁶⁰ While the guidance is fairly detailed, the concepts are clearly related to the ideas of “winning the hearts and minds”. It includes cooperation with locals, a focus on good governance, the pursuit of enemies—a la JSOC—integration of forces and the value of information and honesty.

Counterinsurgency is also commonly associated with the strategy of “clear, hold, build”. The premise is far from earth shattering. The military should only clear areas that it can hold for a sustained period of time. In these areas, with security established, proponents of counterinsurgency—or so-called COINistas—can build infrastructure and institutions to help the locals. While such a strategy may seem to be common sense, it was not put into practice immediately after the invasion. As the Taliban resurgence would come to demonstrate, while the U.S. did a fine job clearing, with so few troops on the ground, the United States was unable to hold key areas of the country, and sufficient building was never attempted.

Theories of international relations can also provide important counterarguments to the perspectives presented within this paper. One such theory is realism. While this paper takes the view that the United States ought to have a vested interest in the long-term stability of Afghanistan, many a realist would fiercely disagree with this assessment. For realists, Afghanistan has never—and likely will not for the foreseeable future—posed a legitimate geopolitical threat to the United States. Afghanistan’s government and military are relatively weak and—at least partially—rely on outside assistance for their existence. For realists, international relations is a game played among “great powers” and given Afghanistan’s formal military and economic weakness, it fails to reach such a benchmark. Thus for realists, it makes

⁶⁰ Broadwell, Paula, and Vernon Loeb. 2012. *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*. Penguin.

perfect sense that Afghanistan is often treated as a side show in the minds of American policy makers, in fact, that is where it belongs.

The dependent variable being measured is instability in Afghanistan. This can be measured in variety of ways, such as the violence that occurs in Afghanistan, the strength of the insurgency and the effectiveness of the Karzai government. There are a vast number of potential independent variables for Afghan instability. Some factors often associated with instability are ethnic diversity, colonial legacies, poverty, Islam, drugs and the availability of weapons. All of these factors present themselves in some way in Afghanistan. The British have a long complicated history with Afghanistan, including several wars. As statistics cited here previously indicate, poverty is also a common problem in Afghanistan. The now infamous sale of arms by the CIA to Afghans during the Cold War has also increased arms availability in Afghanistan, and ethnic tensions continue to be a major obstacle for the Karzai government. Other scholars argue that factors as innocuous as heat and precipitation can be major factors in determining the stability of a nation. While instability in Afghanistan likely stems from a number of these factors, this paper does not attempt to definitively identify sources of Afghan stability. Instead I attempt to work backwards, by examining the specific explanatory variable of current U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan and then attempting to identify the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Afghanistan's instability. U.S. foreign policy can be observed in a variety of primary source documents as well as through the accounts of journalists and members of the foreign policy establishment.

Methodology:

While there may be room to conduct some sort of quantitative analysis concerning Afghan instability, this paper does not endeavor to create such a data set or perform such an analysis. Instead, this paper conducts a qualitative examination of the issue. This paper examines the trends and defining characteristics of several key periods since the 2001 invasion. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate that the inconsistency and neglect revealed in these periods is not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation of a long historical trend in U.S.-Afghan relations.

This paper relies primarily on a combination scholarly research, journalist accounts, and primary source documents for U.S. foreign policy. Such an approach offers a wide variety of perspectives ranging from journalists to policy makers to historians to anthropologists and speaks to the true interdisciplinary nature of the study of international affairs. I attempt to synthesize these primary and secondary sources to reconstruct and analyze the dynamic foreign policy context that has developed over the course of U.S. involvement.

Each of these mediums reveals something about the situation in Afghanistan but also contains its own drawbacks. The wide availability of primary sources on U.S.-Afghan relations is a great asset to this paper. Primary sources such as speeches, press releases and official documents and reports contain the most direct and representative statements concerning official U.S. foreign policy. While implementation of such policies can be uneven, documents such as the quadrennial National Security Strategy provide guidance for the U.S. military and foreign policy establishment while conveying to the administrations goals to the public.

While primary source documents are incredibly useful they do not adequately capture the discussion that occurs between experts and policymakers before arriving at a unified policy stance. Journalist accounts of these discussions can be far more revealing of the deeper

reasoning for U.S. policy decisions. These sources too have some drawbacks. Some of these sources have a tendency to focus on a few individuals and the events in Washington and thus miss important information on the periphery. Journalistic accounts might also rely heavily on description of events at the expense of analysis of their implications. Scholarly sources provide a wealth of analysis. I have found that while they readily address the failures of individual policies in Afghanistan, they are often too narrow in scope and fail to identify the broader psychology that leads U.S. policy makers to error.

Before beginning this paper, my hypothesis was that U.S. foreign policy would play a major role in determining stability—or the lack thereof—in Afghanistan. While I still believe that the U.S. bears some responsibility for the state of Afghanistan today, to identify the United States as an independent *source* of instability mischaracterizes the relationship and narrative that has developed between the U.S. and Afghanistan. Instead, I view the past decade as a series of missed opportunities by the United States. In each of the periods examined herein, there were major shifts in U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Oftentimes, policy makers cast aside sound policy in favor of other objectives or never even attempted sound policy in the first place due to lack of interest or a flawed understanding of Afghanistan. In the few cases sound policies were pursued—primarily under Obama’s reevaluation—I argue that these actions failed due to inconsistencies within the policies and their implementation.

In examining each of these periods, I aim to do several things. I attempt to examine key events and trends from each period. Using such trends, I attempt to differentiate between the various policy approaches the United States has adopted. For example, the decline of stability in 2006 is characterized by escalating violence in Afghanistan. I also attempt to analyze the rhetoric and political discussions from each period. This section relies heavily on primary source

documents and journalist accounts from inside Washington to show the mindset of U.S. policymakers. By analyzing these sources, one can more easily identify elements of a specific period that have varied manifestations on the ground. For example, the Obama period, I argue, is characterized to some degree by conflicting visions of the White House and Pentagon. While these conflicting visions can be seen in some fashion in the situation in Afghanistan, they are clearer in terms of political rhetoric. Finally, I attempt to attach the trends of policies of each period to the broader notions of neglect and inconsistency that the U.S. has demonstrated in Afghanistan since the 1950's. Placing post-9/11 policies in this broader framework enhances understanding of U.S. failures in Afghanistan and also targets the underlying issues responsible for these failures.

Cases and Findings:

This paper traces U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan in the period following 9/11. Over the course of two Presidents, three Secretaries of Defense and fifteen—and counting—controversial commanding generals it is unsurprising that the United States' presentation and policy regarding Afghanistan has changed over time. In order to show these shifts in political thought and policy this paper critically examines changes in U.S. foreign policy over three periods of foreign affairs in Afghanistan: after the initial invasion, following the Taliban resurgence, and during the Obama administration. While the transitions between these periods are fluid, each is characterized by a distinct set of policies and differing rhetoric that is unmistakable on close examination. Unfortunately, while the policies and rhetoric towards Afghanistan shift during these periods, the United States' fundamental approach to Afghanistan does not. In a continuation of a longer trend, U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan since 9/11 has

been formulated based on geopolitics, America's global ambitions and domestic political priorities that emphasize military speed and short-term results over comprehensive, long-term reforms. Despite the shifts in policy throughout these three periods, Afghanistan rarely came to the top of the agenda as a major priority and in the few instances policy was enacted it was done so inconsistently and Afghanistan invariably fell again to the periphery of U.S. interests.

Post-Invasion

The first period of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan can be thought of as the “post-invasion” period. After 9/11 the United States moved quickly and lightly into Afghanistan with the first Americans entering Afghanistan on the 27th of September.⁶¹ The U.S. invasion began not with U.S. combat troops but with special operations forces and CIA paramilitaries.⁶² Key members of Bush's war cabinet, such as Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld and other neoconservatives were skeptical of a large U.S.-ground presence.⁶³ Aware of the failures of the British and the Soviets—although in the case of the latter the failure was propelled by CIA arms sales—the idea of a formal invasion was rejected and the United States was forced to consider alternative approaches. Rather than getting drawn into a land-war, the United States sought to launch a rapid and agile response to Afghanistan. Eager to compensate for the intelligence failure preceding 9/11, George Tenet and the CIA offered a solution that seemingly minimized American risk while still meeting the administration's objectives. Once again, the President passed responsibility for American policy in Afghanistan to the United States' premier intelligence agency.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Anderson, Terry H. 2011. *Bush's Wars*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press. Pg. 82.

⁶² Bergen, Peter L.. *The longest war*. Pg. 56.

⁶³ Jones, Seth G. *Graveyard of Empires. location 2057?*

⁶⁴ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 61-62.

The CIA's plan to minimize America's footprint in Afghanistan was to use cash and special operations soldiers to fight the war in Afghanistan. Rather than relying on U.S. combat troops, the plan was to utilize the Northern Alliance—the primary source of Taliban opposition in Afghanistan at the time—in combination with U.S. air power to topple the Taliban. By using local Afghans on the ground and U.S. air superiority the risk to American lives was minimized without completely sacrificing a ground presence. According to historian Terry Anderson, in late September of 2001, “CIA teams met with tribal leaders and promised these impoverished people immediate aid for those who joined the Northern Alliance.”⁶⁵ At the beginning of U.S. involvement, the war was fought using primarily indigenous Afghans. Parallels to the Cold War era proxy wars are difficult to avoid. Similar to the CIA Cold War policy of arming Afghan fighters from afar, in 2001 the CIA again sought to keep America's direct involvement to a minimum. By using Afghans rather than Marines, the United States hoped to avoid a Vietnam-like quagmire in Afghanistan. With this so-called “light footprint,” the United States would, theoretically, be able to avoid an extended military involvement in Afghanistan and aimed to dodge native Afghan's suspicion of foreign intervention and occupation. Although this approach failed in practice, the strong desire to maintain a light footprint in Afghanistan represents one of the defining characteristics of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan at this point in the war.

As the well-funded Northern Alliance carried out the mission on the ground and the U.S. utilized its air superiority, the initial campaign to topple the Taliban earned praise from a variety of sources. The Kerry Commission's report, “Tora Bora Revisited...” hails the effort, “A unique combination of airpower, Central Intelligence Agency and special operations teams and indigenous allies had swept the Taliban from power and ousted al Qaeda while keeping

⁶⁵ Anderson, Terry H. *Bush's Wars*. Pg. 82.

American deaths to a minimum.”⁶⁶ Even stern critics of the United States’ overarching strategy in Afghanistan acknowledge the success of the military campaign. Andersen points out, “What remained of Taliban militia surrendered on December 6, 2001...and two weeks later the allies celebrated the inauguration of the Afghan interim government—just 78 days after the beginning of combat operations.”⁶⁷ The regime that had finally emerged from decades of Civil War in Afghanistan was toppled and replaced in a matter of months. Ahmed Rashid also acknowledges how the campaign was remarkably inexpensive.⁶⁸ Given the administration’s relative unpreparedness,⁶⁹ one must indeed show some degree of satisfaction at the results of the initial campaign, which even Bush’s critics describe as “laser fast with few allied casualties.”⁷⁰ American lives were largely spared and the Bush administration had accomplished many of its stated goals: “To disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.”⁷¹

Despite the initial success of the invasion and the enthusiasm ushered in by the seemingly swift defeat of the Taliban, a number of problems with the U.S. strategy began to emerge after the end of initial combat operations and became clearer over the coming years. While the decision to empower the Northern Alliance warlords enabled a swift victory in Afghanistan with few U.S. casualties, the warlords themselves proved problematic later. Ahmed Rashid describes the follow up to the initial success of the invasion, “For the next two years the agency was to run Afghanistan not by democratization or nation-building but by paying off warlords to keep the

⁶⁶ John F. Kerry. 2009. *TORA BORA REVISITED: HOW WE FAILED TO GET BIN LADEN AND WHY IT MATTERS TODAY*. United States Senate Commission on Foreign Relations.
http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Tora_Bora_Report.pdf.

⁶⁷ Anderson, Terry. *Bush’s Wars*. Pg 84.

⁶⁸ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 63.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 62.

⁷⁰ Anderson, Terry. *Bush’s Wars*. Pg 84.

⁷¹ Bush, George W. 2001. “Presidential Address to the Nation.” <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>.

peace.”⁷² Such an approach minimized the exposure of U.S. troops in the short term, but did little to create lasting freedom or prosperity in Afghanistan. The United States avoided the more complex tasks of establishing good governance and stamping out corruption in favor of temporary payoffs that failed to address Afghanistan’s more deeply rooted problems. Even after the success of the initial campaign the CIA maintained its support of local Afghan warlords. Funds that could have been used for economic development or stabilization went directly into the coffers of warlords who, in the coming years, would use these CIA funds to establish themselves as some of the wealthiest—and by extension—most powerful players in Afghanistan. These warlords later posed great challenges to U.S. policy makers seeking to root out the drug trade and corruption in Afghanistan. Although the manpower provided by Afghan warlords proved useful in dislodging the Taliban and minimizing American risk, it was less useful in building security and prosperity for the Afghan people. In the end, the short-term usefulness of the strategy would be matched and exceeded by its long-term failures. The same mentality that led the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan in previous decades precluded policies that might have addressed Afghanistan’s underlying issues of underdevelopment and insecurity. The United States pursued the easiest path to its short-term geopolitical goals, rather than the best path for Afghanistan.

Another symptom resulting from the “light footprint” strategy and the utilization of warlords is highlighted in the Kerry Commission’s report: “Tora Bora Revisited”. According to the commission’s findings, the wanted al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, fled to his mountain stronghold in Tora Bora sometime after 9/11. While the exact dates of his residence there are uncertain, the commission concluded that he remained within reach until mid-December.⁷³ He was able to slip away across the border into Pakistan and survive until 2011. The Kerry

⁷² Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 63

⁷³ John F. Kerry. *TORA BORA REVISITED*. Pg. 10.

Commission argues that the United States' approach to Afghanistan at this time was at least partially responsible. Despite numerous proposals for the capture of bin Laden by American operators near Tora Bora, the United States continued to rely on the forces of two local Afghan warlords to prevent bin Laden from leaving for Pakistan. In the end it was not enough. The Commission reports:

Our allies did not have the same incentives to stop bin Laden and his associates as American troops. Nor did they have the technology and training to carry out such a difficult mission. The responsibility for allowing the most wanted man in the world to virtually disappear into thin air lies with the American commanders who refused to commit the necessary U.S. soldiers and Marines to finish the job.⁷⁴

The commitment of the Bush administration and senior Pentagon leaders to the "light footprint" approach to Afghanistan may well have been responsible for the failure to capture the man responsible for the tragedy that launched the war. While success was far from certain in the suggested operations, the unwillingness of the Bush administration to make a serious commitment of ground troops guaranteed their failure.

Looking back, the Bush administration's reluctance to put troops on the ground carries a certain sense of irony after over a decade of sustained U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. Without the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan secure, bin Laden was able to slip away and become a rallying figure for Islamic extremists. The Kerry Commission ominously concludes, "So far, about 950 U.S. troops and nearly 600 allied soldiers have lost their lives in Operation Enduring Freedom, a conflict in which the outcome remains in grave doubt in large part because the extremists behind the violence were not eliminated in 2001."⁷⁵ In the eyes of the Commission, as bin Laden slipped away, so did an opportunity to score a decisive knockout blow to al Qaeda and Islamic extremists. Instead, bin Laden would remain the leader of al

⁷⁴ Ibid. Pg. 13.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pg. 20.

Qaeda and an idol for radicals across the Middle East and North Africa. Osama bin Laden was responsible for over 3,000 American deaths on 9/11 and the United States' failure to commit the proper resources to his capture may have enabled an emboldened Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan to claim hundreds more American lives and cost the government billions of dollars.

Osama bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora represents a very specific example of failure brought about by the United States' unwillingness to commit the necessary number of troops to securing the border and rooting out the al Qaeda fighters. However, this failure is also representative of the larger problems facing the U.S. mission in Afghanistan as a result of insufficient resources on the ground. While the flight of Osama bin Laden was doubtless a great loss, his escape was merely symptomatic of a broader flaw within U.S.-Afghan policy at the time. The Bush administration was unable to see Afghanistan as a priority and was unwilling to accept responsibility for stabilizing the state after the fall of the Taliban. Instead of focusing on Afghanistan, the Bush administration concentrated on their broader ideological conflict and other political aspirations.

Nowhere is the administration's view of Afghanistan as a miniscule piece in a larger ideological war clearer than in the National Security Strategy of 2002. In the 2002 NSS, the term "Afghanistan" is only mentioned a handful of times, despite the troop and financial commitments of the United States and despite the nation's connections to the man responsible for 9/11. When Afghanistan does appear it is nearly always placed into some broader conflict.

The document reads:

Afghanistan has been liberated; coalition forces continue to hunt down the Taliban and al-Qaida. But it is not only this battlefield on which we will engage terrorists. Thousands of trained terrorists remain at large with cells in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and across Asia.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Bush, G. W. 2002. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. DTIC Document. <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA407178>.

Afghanistan here is not thought of as a goal or responsibility of the administration. Rather it is just one front of what became known as the “War on Terror”, no different from any number of other countries scattered around the world where the United States was pursuing counterterrorism. Not only does this fail to view Afghanistan as a unique case of U.S. intervention but it also appears to view it in primarily a counterterrorism context. To view Afghanistan as merely the failed state where bin Laden happened to be hiding leaves the conditions that allowed bin Laden to base his terrorist network there in the first place, unchanged. If the United States were truly to prevent the growth of terrorism in Afghanistan again, a more costly and time-consuming project would be required. Rather than approaching Afghanistan with a goal of limiting U.S. exposure, the United States would be required to make firm commitments to security and development in order to pull Afghanistan out of chaos and poverty.

Today, the extreme costs—financially, materially, and morally—of the Afghan war are clearly visible to scholars and the general public alike. However, in the period after 9/11 Afghanistan was seen quite differently, not as a war to liberate and build a free Afghanistan but merely as a theatre in President Bush’s “War on Terror.” This perception of Afghanistan is evident in the Bush administration’s early rhetoric. In his May 2003 speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, Bush remarked, “In the battle of Afghanistan, we destroyed the Taliban, many terrorists and the camps where they trained. We continue to help the Afghan people lay roads, restore hospitals and educate all of their children.”⁷⁷ The reference to the “battle of Afghanistan” alongside the objectives of building infrastructure and creating an education

⁷⁷ George W. Bush. 2003. “Bush Makes Historic Speech Aboard Warship.” <http://www.cnn.com/2003/U.S./05/01/bush.transcript/>.

system reflects the Bush administration's failure to understand the magnitude of their involvement in Afghanistan.

It is also worth noting that Bush's desires here to reconstruct Afghanistan contrast sharply with his previous statements of nation building. In the 2000 presidential debates, the future President argued, "I don't think we can be all things to all people in the world. I think we've got to be very careful when we commit our troops...I would be very careful about using our troops as nation builders."⁷⁸ Such statements on nation building throw into sharp relief the early inconsistencies that developed within the Bush administration. Before 9/11, the President opposed nation building, yet afterwards President Bush seemed to endorse it, at least to some extent. In 2002, at the VMI, President Bush compares the United States' undertaking in Afghanistan to the Marshall Plan in Europe after World War II.⁷⁹ While an approach styled after the Marshall Plan may have been successful in establishing security in Afghanistan, it would soon become clear that despite the administration's grand statements, no such strategy was planned or implemented.

As the administration failed to conduct any such Marshall Plan, some watched in horror as the United States squandered its first and best opportunity to engage in nation building in Afghanistan. Unlike many critics of the invasion however, Ahmed Rashid takes issue with the execution of the war rather than the invasion itself.⁸⁰ In fact, Rashid saw a great opportunity for the United States to create stability in Central Asia through the war in Afghanistan. He is not alone. Scholars such as Thomas Barfield join Rashid in identifying the type of previously described "golden hour" in Afghanistan after the invasion. Barfield writes:

⁷⁸ George W. Bush, and Al Gore. 2000. "First Debate Transcript."
<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=122828&page=1>.

⁷⁹ Bush, G. W. 2002. "President Bush Speaks at VMI, Addresses Middle East Conflict."
<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0204/17/se.02.html>.

⁸⁰ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. XLIII.

Foreign troops were welcomed, against all expectations, because the Afghans saw them as a bulwark of protection against the very Afghan forces that had driven the country into ruin. More pragmatically it was equally clear that the Afghan government and economy could not be revived without massive infusions of foreign aid.⁸¹

Barfield's analysis is a clear refutation of the U.S. military's fear that a large foreign military presence would provoke violent backlash from the local population. Rather, the U.S. had an opportunity to "win the hearts and minds" of the local population with the distribution of aid, the development of agriculture and the provision of security. Ironically, this early window of local cooperation was accompanied by some of the lowest troop levels of the war.⁸² For scholars such as Rashid and Barfield, that such a golden opportunity was squandered is needlessly tragic.

Rashid closely identifies the failure to capitalize on this early opportunity with the lack of resources given to the Afghan conflict in the early years. For Rashid it was essential that the United States engage in nation building in Afghanistan, yet it failed to do so, and missed an opportunity to increase stability in the region. Concerning the tragedy of the resource shortfall he argues:

In those critical days in the autumn of 2003, a few thousand more U.S. troops on the ground, more money for reconstruction, and a speedier rebuilding of the Afghan army and police could easily have turned the tide against the Taliban and enhanced support of the population for the government. It was a moment when even a little could have gone a long way.⁸³

Rashid argues that during this golden window, even a minimal increase in troops would have made a difference in the overall effectiveness of the Afghanistan campaign. At this point, the Taliban were scattered, the people supportive and the government pliable. All of these factors made Afghanistan a strong candidate for state building. Yet this opportunity was missed.

⁸¹ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 7.

⁸² "U.S. Troop Levels over the Years." 2012. *CNN*. <http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/22/chart-u-s-troop-levels-over-the-years/>.

⁸³ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 248.

Afghanistan ceased to be a priority for the White House or the Pentagon; and as Washington's gaze turned to Iraq the potential for success in Afghanistan began to decrease.

According to Rashid and others, this is because the Pentagon had already set its sights on Iraq: "The distraction of Iraq, which materialized just hours after the 9/11 attacks and continued indefinitely, was first to undermine and then defeat both U.S. policy in Afghanistan and the struggle to capture al Qaeda leaders."⁸⁴ As the War on Terror expanded, attention to Afghanistan waned. The United States instead shipped resources that Rashid argues could have had tremendous impact in Afghanistan to Iraq instead. Afghanistan was relegated to the forgotten war, overtaken by Iraq in the minds of policymakers, in terms of resources, and in the minds of the media. And thus, while Afghans eagerly waited for the United States to make good on its promises of roads and schools, the under-resourced and over-extended forces in Afghanistan would slowly struggle to provide even basic security to the Afghan people.

Craig Mullaney was on the ground as a U.S. officer at this time. Around the time Rashid and Barfield identify as a "golden window", Mullaney recalls having just one troop for every 3,000 Afghans under his responsibility.⁸⁵ With such a ratio, one can understand how security could become an impossible task, with state building efforts such as the construction of roads and schools becoming nothing more than abstract goals. These trade offs were not confined to high-level grand strategy; the trade offs with Iraq were clear to soldiers on the ground. As he arrived, he recalls being told, " 'The backlog for parts is a mile long, and we're in line behind every broken Humvee in Iraq. We've been cannibalizing this Humvee to fix the other three when they break down. Better still, you have only one mechanic.' "⁸⁶ With Iraq taking up the bulk of the United States' attention and equipment, the soldiers in Afghanistan were forced to make due

⁸⁴ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 64.

⁸⁵ Mullaney, Craig M. 2010. *The Unforgiving Minute: a Soldier's Education*. Pg. 226.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* pg 228.

to the detriment of the reconstruction effort and the Afghan people. As the United States failed to provide the security or prosperity needed to rescue Afghanistan, the initial enthusiasm surrounding the fall of the Taliban began to fade and the population slowly began to turn more skeptical towards the Americans and the promises on which they had failed to deliver.

In retrospect it seems obvious that fighting another war—especially one as costly as the war in Iraq—would cripple, or eliminate entirely—the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. Yet this trade off apparently did not occur to policy makers around 2002. In reference to bin Laden’s escape the Kerry Commission reports:

The shift in focus just as Franks and his senior aides were literally working on plans for the attacks on Tora Bora represents a dramatic turning point that allowed a sustained victory in Afghanistan to slip through our fingers. Almost immediately, intelligence and military planning resources were transferred to begin planning on the next war in Iraq.⁸⁷

As early as December of 2001, while bin Laden was still within reach in Afghanistan, the United States began to pull its resources away from Afghanistan and the War on Terror’s most wanted man and towards the invasion of Iraq, an invasion which, it would later come to light, was based on faulty intelligence and imperial ambitions rather than any material threat to United States security.

Rashid lays much of the blame at the hands of “neocons” within the Bush administration.⁸⁸ If creating long-term solutions for Afghanistan was an American priority, key materials and personnel would not have been prematurely transferred to Iraq. Despite Bush’s grand statements calling for America to build a free and prosperous Afghanistan, his advisors had developed a plan to continue the retribution for 9/11 thousands of miles away against an uninvolved regime. Instead of developing a comprehensive strategy to pull Afghans out of

⁸⁷ John F. Kerry. *TORA BORA REVISITED*. Pg. 13.

⁸⁸ Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into chaos*. pg. 64.

poverty and forever eliminate Afghanistan as a potential base for terrorists and extremism, the Bush administration's effort in Afghanistan was crippled by a lack of resources and attention. Supplies, troops, aid and expertise were exhausted on another conflict and the promises of roads and schools were never realized. The administration articulated one vision for Afghanistan but pursued another. They spoke of an Afghanistan supported by U.S. soldiers and civilians, a functioning democracy, security, prosperity, cooperation and partnership. Instead, in the years following 2001, it became difficult to see Afghanistan as little more than an opening act for the War on Terror.

The Taliban Resurgence

By 2006, the situation in Afghanistan had changed dramatically from the positive impressions of 2001 and the errors in the U.S. strategy were beginning to have major consequences for Afghan stability. This section examines the results of these errors; how the United States' failure to commit adequate resources and establish lasting security in 2001 led to dire consequences in later years. Following the initial invasion, violence in Afghanistan steadily increased and by 2006 the problems of Afghanistan demanded international attention.⁸⁹ While the problems discussed herein are diverse, ranging from drugs, to corruption, to the safe-havens of Pakistan, many could have been prevented if the United States had seized the "golden hour" in 2001 to build security in Afghanistan.

According to the previously discussed Kerry commission, the lack of ground-forces in 2001 prevented the United States from securing the Af-Pak border. The Kerry Commission argues that the failure to stop bin Laden and al Qaeda fighters from escaping into Pakistan had

⁸⁹ Cordesman, Anthony. 2008. "U.S. Casualties: The Trends in Iraq and Afghanistan". Center for Strategic and International Studies.

severe consequences for the United States security interests.⁹⁰ As a Taliban extremist movement developed in neighboring Pakistan and al Qaeda conducted deadly terrorist attacks across the Western world, the problem that the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border created became clear.

Bin Laden was not the only Islamic fundamentalist to escape across this border following the United States invasion. The Taliban, of course, were also on the run: “The Taliban did not just slip back across the border in the winter of 2001/2002; they arrived in droves, by bus, taxi, and tractor, on camels and horses and on foot.”⁹¹ So while the Taliban were ousted from Afghanistan they were not destroyed. The fighters and many of their leaders simply retreated across the border into Pakistan’s ungoverned border regions, which would act as a sort of Taliban safe-haven throughout the war. From there the Taliban were able to reorganize, regroup and prepare. According to Rashid, the Taliban resurgence began as early as 2003.⁹² Taliban fighters crossed back into Afghanistan just as easily as they had left, and began to harass U.S. troops, local Afghans and NGO’s assisting the rebuilding effort.

While these safe-havens had existed for some time—as evidenced by the escape of bin Laden and other fighters—they received increased attention in the minds of U.S. policy-makers as violence escalated. In late 2006, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan acknowledged the problem presented by these safe-havens:

The [Taliban] leadership relies heavily on cross border fighters, many of whom are Afghans drawn from nearby refugee camps and radical seminaries in Pakistan. The fighters are typically indoctrinated, unemployed young men whose sense of identity has been blurred by years in exile. They are trained and paid to serve as medium- level commanders, leading operations inside Afghanistan, and they are able to retreat back to safe havens outside the country.⁹³

⁹⁰ John F. Kerry. *TORA BORA REVISITED*. Pg. 19.

⁹¹ Rashid, Ahmed. 2009. *Descent into chaos*. Pg. 240.

⁹² Ibid. Pg. 145.

⁹³ “The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General.” 2006. A/61/326-S/2006/727. United Nations. <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/SG%20Reports/11%20September%202006.pdf>.

The ungoverned regions straddling the Af-Pak border thus provided not only a refuge and sanctuary for insurgency leaders, but also a prime recruiting ground for the Taliban and like-minded groups. Due to security issues and their relative remoteness these borderlands never saw the benefits of government service, a fact on which the Taliban were easily able to capitalize. With the reach of U.S. military forces severely curtailed on Pakistani soil and Pakistan's general ineffectiveness in dealing with Islamic fundamentalists, the Taliban were able to—and continue to—use the Af-Pak border as a staging ground for attacks and a prime recruitment pipeline with little opposition.

Even as concern over the role of Pakistani safe-havens mounted, the Bush administration responded slowly. Under the Bush administration, Rashid notes, the ambassador to Pakistan never received guidance from the administration to broach the subject of the safe-havens with his Pakistani counterparts, let alone find a solution.⁹⁴ Rather than picking up an existing dialogue, Obama would be forced to start one anew with the reluctant Pakistanis. The Bush administration's failure to address the borderlands had severe consequences for security in Afghanistan. Even in 2006, the administration remained reluctant to become too involved in Afghan or regional issues in South Asia.

Indeed, the Af-Pak border has continued to be problematic to coalition troops. Because of strong ethnic ties on both sides of the border, the insurgency was able to flourish in Southern Afghanistan. As Thomas Barfield explains, however: "This was not a new insurgency...but a continuation of the older one that had begun against the Soviets and had fragmented during the Afghan civil war."⁹⁵ The Taliban resurgence in Southern Afghanistan that American politicians and military leader failed to anticipate, was, at its roots, the same insurgency the CIA had funded

⁹⁴ Rashid, Ahmed. *Pakistan on the Brink*. Pg. 47.

⁹⁵ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 325.

decades earlier to oust the Soviets. The dynamics of the Pashtun ethnic group did not drastically change and many Afghans who had fought the Soviets decades earlier resumed their roles as insurgent leaders. Only this time, instead of being funded by the Americans and the CIA they were at odds with them. The fact that many of the weapons and techniques now being used by the Taliban insurgency against Americans were born of Cold War era U.S. support epitomizes the term “blowback”. The current insurgency strengthened as an unfortunate side effect of the United States’ decision to fund an unsavory group of Islamic extremists in the Cold War and its failure to stabilize the nation afterwards. The same mentality of short-term, low-risk, solutions that gave rise to the Cold War arms sales had subsequently given rise to critical under resourcing in the Bush era.

After several years of inadequate U.S. occupation and assistance, the Taliban re-emerged and posed major problems, for U.S. troops and Afghan civilians alike. Seth Jones writes, “By 2006, tensions had escalated dramatically and Afghanistan was leveled by a perfect storm of political upheaval in which several crises came together.”⁹⁶ Among these crises Jones includes the lack of international security forces, the corruption of the Afghan government and safe-havens in Pakistan. After having neglected Afghanistan in favor of the Iraq War for several years the situation had deteriorated on a massive scale. The “golden hour” that Rashid, Barfield and others had identified following the initial invasion had passed and the factors that might have enabled effective state building were no longer present.

Al Qaeda and the Taliban had regrouped in their safe-havens in Pakistan and violence in Afghanistan had increased substantially. Thomas Barfield summarizes the increase in violence:

Between 2005 and 2006, suicide bombings increased by more than 400 percent (from 27 to 139), the use of improvised explosive devices more than doubled (from 783 to 1,677), and armed attacks nearly tripled (from 1,558 to 4,542).

⁹⁶ Jones, Seth G. *In the Graveyard of Empires*.

America's "good war" was now badly off track, and the seemingly discredited Taliban were back in the south and attempting to spread outward.⁹⁷

While the Taliban had been increasing in strength for the last several years, 2006 was truly a watershed year in terms of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. The increase in violence had implications for the U.S. mission beyond increased casualties and risk. One key implication was the declining support of the local population. Afghans aware of the declining security situation would naturally question the strength of international security forces and the viability of the Afghan government. The hearts and minds that counterinsurgency argues were crucial to victory were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the U.S. intervention.

While scholars such as Barfield and Rashid argue that signs of trouble in Afghanistan had been brewing for years, by 2006 the world was waking-up to frightening realities of the insurgency in Afghanistan. In September of 2006, the United Nations reported, "The most significant development in Afghanistan has been the upsurge in violence, particularly in the south, south-east and east of the country. Security has, once again, become the paramount concern of a majority of Afghans."⁹⁸ Reporting not only confirms international awareness of the situation in Afghanistan but also provides insight into the loss of the "golden hour" which, theoretically, "produces a combination of shock and relief in the local population."⁹⁹ This initial relief of the local population, when nation building has the greatest chance of success, had clearly elapsed. Hopes of democracy and development were replaced by a longing for security, which the ISAF was increasingly unable to provide.

⁹⁷ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 319.

⁹⁸ "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General." 2006. A/61/326-S/2006/727. United Nations.
<http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/SG%20Reports/11%20September%202006.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Dobbins, James, 2007. "The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building."

The distraction of Iraq and resulting neglect of Afghanistan also aided the Taliban insurgency. As the war in Iraq diverted resources from the Afghan campaign, fighting the insurgency became a difficult task for coalition troops. The Iraq war diverted supplies and troops and divided the attention of policymakers; in addition, Rashid argues it sidetracked key intelligence resources from the conflict in Afghanistan. He writes, “When the first NATO troops deployed in the south in 2005, they discovered that the Americans had not monitored Taliban activity in four southern provinces—Helmand, Khandahar, Uruzgan and Nimroz—or across the border in Quetta.”¹⁰⁰ According to Rashid, because U.S. intelligence assets, such as satellite imagery and communications monitoring, were diverted from Afghanistan the Taliban were able to operate with relative impunity across much of Southern Afghanistan. This allowed them to gain a crucial foothold in some of the areas where the Taliban’s local ethnic support was strongest. As the insurgency spread and became more deadly, these footholds in Southern Afghanistan posed major challenges for U.S. policymakers.

The government that was beginning to take shape in 2002 had now become entrenched and steeped in corruption. The situation in Afghanistan gradually caused the population that had at first embraced the Americans as liberators to turn against them. Barfield writes, “Universal complaints of insecurity, governmental malfeasance, corruption, and abuses of power steadily reduced domestic confidence in the Karzai administration in the absence of any serious steps to curb them.”¹⁰¹ Many of these issues could have been avoided through a concerted effort of state building. Rather than viewing state building as a sort of quagmire, a more appropriate analogy would have been an investment. By investing in the creation of strong public institutions and the

¹⁰⁰ Rashid, Ahmed. 2009. *Descent into chaos*. Pg 223.

¹⁰¹ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 318.

revitalization the Afghan economy the U.S. may have been able to take away the Taliban's appeal in Afghanistan.

United Nations reports from this period also links failures in governance to Taliban sympathy: "Corruption, the menace of a criminalized economy, dominated by drug and other organized criminal networks, and the presence of illegally armed groups have continued to undermine the authority of the legitimately elected government."¹⁰² A number of factors that lie distinctly outside the scope of the U.S.'s light-footprint approach were by 2006 crippling the ability of the new Afghan government to assume ownership of its state. The U.S. was rather naïve when they assumed that the Afghan people would continue to back a government that was unable to provide even the most basic services and security. In one example, Seth Jones notes that, "By 2005, only 6 percent of the Afghan population had access to power from the electricity grid."¹⁰³, by this time, the security situation in Afghanistan was such that providing these services years after the invasion was much more difficult.¹⁰⁴ Without electricity or other modern benefits, the common Afghan seemed little better off under Karzai than under the Taliban. Jones explains the process by which native Afghans began to support the insurgency:

The Taliban was quick to use U.S. and Afghan failures in its recruitment propaganda, which created a band of 'swing villages' in eastern, southern, and western Afghanistan, an area dominated by Pashtuns. Given sustained security and assistance, villages across this swath of territory might have sided with the Afghan government, but without that help, it moved toward the insurgents.¹⁰⁵

With villages in key areas of Afghanistan assisting the insurgents, Taliban fighters were able to employ insurgent techniques which had become all too familiar to U.S. commanders in Iraq. Insurgents could launch strikes against coalition troops and, with the help of the local villages,

¹⁰² *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security*. 2006. United Nations General Assembly. <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/260/77/PDF/N0626077.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹⁰³ Jones, Seth G. *In the Graveyard of Empires*. Location 3635.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Location 3701.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* Location 3739.

simply slip away into the local population. More interesting is Jones' prescription. Had the United States made a sustained commitment to Afghanistan rather than cutting-and-running to Iraq perhaps Afghanistan today would look quite different.

Drugs also posed a major challenge for Afghanistan by 2006. For years scholars and politicians have drawn links between the Taliban and opium production in Afghanistan. As Bergen muses, "It is no coincidence that opium and heroin production...spiked at the same time the Taliban staged a comeback."¹⁰⁶ Using the profits from opium and heroin sales, the Taliban were able to pay their fighters more than the Afghan police. Coupled with the general lack of job opportunities in opium producing regions of Afghanistan, fighting for the Taliban carried powerful economic incentives.

As Bergen indicates, the Taliban and opium production returned to Afghanistan hand-in-hand. UN Reporting confirms the expansion of poppy cultivation in the years following the 2001 invasion.¹⁰⁷ While 2001 showed an incredible drop off in the cultivation of opium by 2005 and 2006 opium cultivation had returned to and exceeded pre-war levels. The distribution of opium production is also enlightening. While many provinces near Kabul showed reductions in poppy cultivation, southern Afghanistan, beyond the reach of the Kabul government and a Taliban stronghold, was experiencing an opium boom.

U.S. foreign policy, once again did little to solve the problem. In fact, scholars such as Bergen and Barfield point to U.S. policy as a reason for the *expansion* of opium production and the strengthening of the Taliban. For Bergen, the U.S. response to opium production undermined some of the major tenets of counterinsurgency: " 'First, do no harm' is a sensible injunction in combating any insurgency, but the United States adopted a counterproductive poppy eradication

¹⁰⁶ Bergen, Peter L. *The longest war*. Pg. 190.

¹⁰⁷ "Afghan Opium Survey 2010." 2010. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg_opium_survey_2010_exsum_web.pdf.

strategy in Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁸ By choosing to eradicate poppies in Southern Afghanistan the American forces destroyed the livelihoods of many an Afghan farmer. With their crops ruined and many Afghans unable to provide for their families, rural farmers in southern Afghanistan increasingly opted for a Taliban paycheck. This U.S. policy forced Afghans into the arms of America’s enemy. The problem was exacerbated by the general underdevelopment of the region.¹⁰⁹ If international assistance or the Afghan government had been able to provide alternative sources of employment for these farmers, they might have deprived the Taliban of a key source of revenue and support but once again the opportunity was lost. In the years following the 2001 U.S. intervention, southern rural Afghanistan saw few benefits in terms of prosperity or government services and initial enthusiasm towards liberation turned to skepticism and distrust.¹¹⁰ Once again, the “golden hour” had come and gone.

To recap, by 2006 it was readily apparent that the “light-footprint” strategy, so effectively deployed by the United States in 2001, was a long-term failure. The same Taliban the United States had overrun in just several months were now entrenched in villages across Afghanistan and gaining ground. The Afghan government was steeped in corruption and incompetence and completely unable to provide security or stability to its citizens. The drug trade was booming and lining the pockets of insurgents.¹¹¹ Perhaps most alarming was the relationship between these factors. The Taliban were back and feeding on local poverty, poverty that the Afghan government was now powerless to alleviate as a result of the burgeoning insurgency. Drugs, corruption, ineffective

¹⁰⁸ Bergen, Peter L. *The longest war*. Pg. 190.

¹⁰⁹ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 327.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 318.

governance, poverty and the Taliban insurgency formed a web of reinforcing factors all pushing the Afghan mission towards failure.

As a result of the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, the United States would be forced to reevaluate its approach to Afghanistan. Around this time, Robert Gates assumed the role of Secretary of Defense. Despite the change in leadership, the Department of Defense did not immediately shift its policy and instead continued to neglect Afghanistan. In 2007, even after the critical situation of Afghanistan was clear, Gates opposed moving Marines from Iraq to Afghanistan.¹¹² Contradictorily, Gates also criticized NATO allies for failing to increase their forces and their failure to implement counterinsurgency tactics.¹¹³ Gates' criticism here is inconsistent if not hypocritical. Still focused on Iraq, Gates and the Bush administration refused to take responsibility for the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and instead attempted to pawn the issue to NATO and the international community. Far from an enduring commitment to Afghan security and prosperity the U.S. did everything it could to pass the buck.

As Gates gradually began to shift U.S. policy towards Afghanistan, another key figure was reforming the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC): Stanley McChrystal. Perhaps more famous for his role as ISAF Commander later, McChrystal's contributions to the War in Afghanistan began during this period. Stanley McChrystal is largely credited with reforming JSOC into the entity it is today. He expanded the organization's intelligence assets and pushed for the increased use of the organization in hunting terrorist targets.¹¹⁴ Now famous for conducting the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, JSOC would become a major component of the United States' new approach to Afghanistan—though it would take several years to fully

¹¹² Jones, Seth G. *In the Graveyard of Empires*. Location 4272.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* Location 4787.

¹¹⁴ Ackerman, Spencer. 2011. "How Special Ops Copied al-Qaida to Kill It." *Danger Room*.
<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/09/mcchrystal-network/>.

implement. McChrystal describes the reforms he implemented in his memoir, *My Share of the Task*, “The network I sought to build needed not just physical breadth but also functional diversity. This required the participation of the U.S. government departments and agencies that were involved in counterterrorism, like State, Treasury, the CIA, and the FBI.”¹¹⁵ By leveraging the assets of so many different military and civilian organizations JSOC was able to become one of America’s most powerful and deadly tools for combating terrorism. Yet even McChrystal concedes that it embraced a problematic “Get in quickly; get out just as fast” mentality.¹¹⁶ JSOC embraced a similar mentality to the one that led to so many problems in the first place. Just as in the early days of the war key U.S. leaders prioritized killing and capturing key terrorist leaders rather than attacking the root causes of the insurgency. JSOC’s efficiency and contributions are difficult to ignore, yet despite the organization’s high profile successes (i.e. the bin Laden raid) one must question the impact it has had on the larger effort in Afghanistan. JSOC’s rise reveals another inconsistency within U.S. policy. While some politicians such as Gates began to embrace a long-term approach of “Clear, Hold, Build”, JSOC adopted a policy of hit and run.

Despite these changes the United States would not fully embrace a new approach for Afghanistan for several more years. Once again the National Security Strategy proves instructive. While Afghanistan receives far more attention in the 2006 NSS than it did in 2002, it is still not elevated to an appropriate level of importance in the document.¹¹⁷ While Afghanistan is mentioned a number of times, it is often coupled with Iraq and the two wars are often talked about as if they are one. After four years and deadly insurgencies in both of the Bush administration’s wars the administration remained committed to the broader ideological concept

¹¹⁵ McChrystal, Stanley. *My Share of the Task*. Location 3293.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Location 3305

¹¹⁷ Bush, G. W. 2006. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.
<http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/nss2006.pdf>.

of the “War on Terror”. The NSS also reveals the supreme status of Iraq within the Bush administration. While Afghanistan’s importance is increased in the 2006 NSS, it continues to be overshadowed by Iraq, which is a major focus of the document.

Afghanistan is also seen as a means to an end rather than as a priority itself. Throughout the 2006 NSS Afghanistan is often portrayed as a mere theatre of the War on Terror.¹¹⁸ It was as if the United States only retains a presence in Afghanistan because it is the same location in which elements of al Qaeda happened to be active. Such an approach discounts the importance of Afghanistan as a major source of instability and ignores any responsibility for the well being of the Afghan people. It also reveals a core contradiction within the U.S. mentality towards Afghanistan at this time. Despite recognition of need for renewed attention in Afghanistan, it continues to play second fiddle to Iraq. Even as individuals like Gates and McChrystal advocated for a more holistic approach to Afghanistan it would take a new President for Afghanistan to receive the attention it required.

In his 2006 State of the Union Address, President Bush mentioned Afghanistan only twice and never in the context of a sustained rebuilding effort despite speaking about rebuilding in Iraq moments later.¹¹⁹ It not only shows the continued preeminence of Iraq in the mind of Bush and senior White House Officials but also shows that as late as 2006 the administration had not significantly reevaluated its approach to Afghanistan. As the Civil War consuming Iraq occupied the bulk of the attention of American military and political leaders, little attention was devoted to the concurrent Taliban resurgence. Afghanistan was still seen as “the other war”.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “President Bush’s State of the Union Address.” 2006. *The Washington Post*, February 1, sec. Politics.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/31/AR2006013101468.html>.

The period surrounding 2006 is not so much about new examples of neglect and inconsistencies—though some doubtless exist—it is more revealing as a window into the consequences of the neglect Afghanistan experienced for the first critical years of the conflict, the result of a war that rapidly descended from “almost won” to “nearly lost”.

Obama’s Reevaluation

After more than seven years of neglect, when Obama took the White House in 2009, Afghanistan would finally be thoroughly reevaluated. Where the Bush administration fixated on the war in Iraq, Barak Obama shifted the United States’ focus back towards Afghanistan. This section examines the Obama administration’s attempt to correct course in Afghanistan. With a web of reinforcing factors undermining security, the new President faced a seemingly impossible task in attempting to craft a strong and stable Afghanistan. While the early Bush administration was dominated by powerful neocons, the Obama administration recognized figures with a variety of perspectives. Ideological diversity was embraced to the point that inconsistency and misinterpretation would become a major issue within the administration. As much as Obama may have wanted to nation build in Afghanistan, the opportunity to do so effectively had passed. Forced to confront the political realities of his administration, Obama was forced to pursue “Afghanistan good-enough”.

After Obama’s election, a shift in the rhetoric coming from the White House was immediately apparent. Rather than embracing the idyllic and grandiose rhetoric developed and implemented during the Bush administration, Obama preferred to speak in more concrete and precise terminology. In an interview about a month after Obama’s inauguration, he explained his reluctance to use the terminology “War on Terror”:

I think it is very important for us to recognize that we have a battle or a war against some terrorist organizations. But that those organizations aren't representative of a broader Arab community, Muslim community. I think we have to -- you know, words matter in this situation because one of the ways we're going to win this struggle is through the battle of hearts and minds.¹²⁰

Obama's rhetoric provides not only a strong rejection of the previous language of the "War of Terror" but also provides evidence of the Obama administration's embrace of elements of counterinsurgency doctrine. While counterinsurgency theory came to prominence in Iraq during the Bush era, the conflict in Afghanistan would not receive the resources required for its proper implementation until much later after Obama took office.

In December 2009 Obama eloquently laid out his administration's renewed approach to Afghanistan. In his speech Obama acknowledged the drain of resources the war in Iraq had caused.¹²¹ In a crucial departure from the consistent prioritization of Iraq during the Bush administration, Obama embraced the conclusion many scholars had reached: Iraq was part of the problem. Having drained American resources and alienated potential allies, to scholars and the Obama administration, the war in Iraq represented a strategic blunder. Obama also demonstrates a far deeper understanding of the situation in Afghanistan than was conveyed during the Bush years. He explains:

After escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002, al Qaeda's leadership established a safe haven there. Although a legitimate government was elected by the Afghan people, it's been hampered by corruption, the drug trade, an under-developed economy, and insufficient security forces.¹²²

Obama identifies a number of factors affecting policy in Afghanistan, many of which are cited here as failures during the Bush administration. The recognition of poverty, Pakistani-safe

¹²⁰ Obama, Barack, and Cooper, Anderson. 2009. "Obama Discusses Daschle, the Economy." *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/03/obama.qanda/index.html>.

¹²¹ Obama, Barack. 2009. "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *The White House*. December 1. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

havens, and government corruption indicate that the Obama was taking the situation in Afghanistan more seriously than his predecessor and that he—or at least his team—had a better grasp of the situation. While Obama seemed quick to recognize the negligence of Afghanistan and the complex set of destabilizing factors afflicting the country, recognizing the problem is not the same as solving it.

Proper implementation would be required as well. Counterinsurgency had been quite successful in Iraq while Afghanistan slowly slipped into violence and chaos. Bush and the Pentagon wanted to embrace the “Clear, Hold, Build” strategy in Afghanistan as well. Unfortunately, the ability to implement such a strategy was crippled by a lack of troops. As Obama began to draw down U.S. troops in Iraq and try to correct the U.S. course in Afghanistan an opportunity to implement this strategy arose. Writer and journalist Peter Bergen explains, “Classic counterinsurgency doctrine indicated that to stabilize Afghanistan you needed a ratio of one member of the security forces to every twenty of the population, and that would dictate you needed some 600,000 soldiers and policemen.”¹²³ As Obama took office, the Afghan forces numbered around 150,000 with around 62,000 ISAF forces as supplements.¹²⁴ During the Bush administration these numbers were even lower. While proponents of counterinsurgency suggest that 600,000 troops was a high estimate, Obama would need more boots on the ground to accomplish his goals. In his 2009 West Point address, Obama approved 30,000 additional U.S. troops for Afghanistan.¹²⁵

The lead up to Obama’s troop expansion was not without dissent, and some questioned the lengthy commitments COIN seemed to mandate. Michael Hastings, a Rolling Stone journalist who followed COIN pioneer Stanley McChrystal, summarizes these obligations,

¹²³ Bergen, Peter L.. *The longest war*. Pg. 312.

¹²⁴ Ibid. Pg. 313.

¹²⁵ Obama, Barack. “The Way Forward in Afghanistan.”

“[Troops] live among the civilian population and slowly rebuild, or build from scratch, another nation's government – a process that even its staunchest advocates admit requires years, if not decades, to achieve.”¹²⁶ With the war in Afghanistan already eight years old, public opinion towards the war continued to wane. Even as General Stanley McChrystal conducted a strategic review of Afghanistan—eventually leading him to request more troops—The Washington Post reported that 45% of Americans favored troop *reductions* in Afghanistan.¹²⁷ The support for extended and far-off military interventions no longer existed within the American public. As a result, Obama never had the real opportunity to implement an array of strategies as Bush had.

Many of the more politically savvy members of Obama’s team expressed skepticism over counterinsurgency and in particular, the long-term commitments it seemed to require. U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, expressed the need to adapt counterinsurgency to the political realities facing the United States: “We talk about clear, hold and build, but we actually must include transfer into this.”¹²⁸ This emphasis on “transfer” reflected the growing feelings within the Obama administration that they would be forced to compromise regarding their ideal vision of Afghanistan. Regardless of what counterinsurgency advocates wanted to accomplish in the long-term, sustained nation building was no longer politically feasible given the attitudes of the American public. The question of how to fix the situation in Afghanistan became a question of attempting to find the United States’ best options for an exit strategy.

This shift in thinking, however, met serious opposition from the Pentagon and military leaders. General McChrystal, noted earlier for his renovation of Special Operations as a key component of the U.S. counterterrorism arsenal, took over command of the international security

¹²⁶ Hastings, Michael. 2010. “The Runaway General.” *Rolling Stone*. June 22.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>.

¹²⁷ “Public Opinion in U.S. Turns Against Afghan War.” 2013. *Washington Post*. Accessed March 5.
http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2009-08-20/news/36800119_1_troop-levels-afghanistan-request-more-troops.

¹²⁸ Woodward, Bob. *Obama’s wars*. Pg. 218.

forces in 2009. Like Obama, McChrystal took a broad view of the problems plaguing Afghanistan, citing corruption, narcotics, and foreign meddling as risks to Afghanistan's future.¹²⁹ For McChrystal, the road to reaching Obama's goals in Afghanistan seemed clear: "We would prevent the resurgence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and, through a counterinsurgency strategy, defeat the Taliban's effort to topple the government of Afghanistan and retake the country."¹³⁰ McChrystal's understanding of the Afghan strategy is revealing in two ways. Once again, it focuses the war in Afghanistan—perhaps ruinously—on al Qaeda. It also embraces counterinsurgency as the primary tool for achieving the United States' goals in Afghanistan. By focusing on the disruption of al Qaeda, the United States outlined a very narrow goal for the war in Afghanistan. Against the backdrop of this narrow goal, the championing of the broad and diverse tactics of counterinsurgency seems inconsistent. As a die-hard proponent of counterinsurgency, McChrystal was uncompromising in terms of what was needed to remedy Afghanistan. In a series of presentations, interviews and discussions with White House Officials McChrystal made his agenda clear, "Conditions inside Afghanistan were much worse than [McChrystal] had anticipated and only a fully resourced counterinsurgency would remedy things."¹³¹ The dichotomy between the political realism expressed by State officials such as Eikenberry and the single-minded pursuit of counterinsurgency by military leaders like McChrystal created contradictions and inconsistencies within the U.S. foreign policy apparatus. The ideological debate concerning the scope of the United States' goals and strategy in Afghanistan would go on to become one the administration's greatest failures.

¹²⁹ McChrystal, Stanley A. 2012. *My Share of the Task: a Memoir*. New York: Portfolio. Pg. 289.

¹³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 286.

¹³¹ Woodward, Bob. *Obama's wars*. Pg. 212.

McChrystal's leading role in Afghanistan was not to last. In the most public example of the continuing subterranean clash between the military leaders and the White House, McChrystal was forced into early retirement as a result of his comments about White House officials. Michael Hastings' expose on the General reveals the dysfunction that ultimately led to McChrystal's resignation. He summarizes, "Team McChrystal likes to talk shit about many of Obama's top people on the diplomatic side."¹³² Coupled with McChrystal's attempts to expand military authority into the diplomatic realm—such as his close relationship with Hamid Karzai—tensions between State and Defense grew worse. When McChrystal's comments were made public he was forced to resign and the mantel of responsibility for Afghanistan passed to another COIN advocate.

General David Petraeus made a name for himself during his involvement in the Iraq war. Often credited as the general responsible for turning the deteriorating situation in Iraq around in 2006, General Petraeus was perhaps the foremost advocate of counterinsurgency in the U.S. military. He quite literally wrote the book on counterinsurgency in the form of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*.¹³³ Far from a departure from the internal clashes between the White House and Pentagon, General Petraeus had been a part of these clashes for some time as the commander of CentCom.

In the lead up to Obama's decision to add more troops in 2009, Petraeus made several statements and interviews which upset Obama administration officials. Bob Woodward recalls one such interview, "In no uncertain terms, Petraeus was saying the war would be unsuccessful if the president held back on troops. Obama and several of his staffers were furious."¹³⁴ Petraeus, McChrystal and their COINistas single-mindedly pushed the mantra of "more troops" in

¹³² Hastings, Michael. "The Runaway General."

¹³³ Woodward, Bob. *Obama's wars*. Pg. 212.

¹³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 157.

Afghanistan. For McChrystal this created a great deal of friction with the administration. For Petraeus it was no different. In her biography of Petraeus, Paula Broadwell describes the consequences of his mindset, “The [Obama Administration] had come to see Petraeus as an inflexible commander who wanted as many troops as possible for Afghanistan and was never interested in giving the president options for fewer troops, despite clear requests for this during the 2009 Afghanistan policy review.” Rather than working with Obama and senior cabinet officials the advocates of counterinsurgency were increasingly seen as obstructionist and out of touch. The very cooperation that COIN demanded was being destroyed by the unrelenting push and adversarial nature of its advocates.

Despite renewed commitments by the Pentagon and White House to security in Afghanistan major inconsistencies developed not only within the foreign policy establishment but also the implementation of the U.S. policies. One area where the miscommunication—intentional or otherwise—became clear was in the execution of the “Clear, hold, build, transfer” strategy. Obama clearly believed, “We’re not trying to achieve a perfect nation-state here. We don’t have the resources to do that.”¹³⁵ In this statement Obama acknowledges the limitations of his administration as well as the resulting curtails on his vision for Afghanistan. Obama attempted to craft a viable exit strategy, the Pentagon continued to violate the Obama’s vision. As Obama strove to make the best of a dire situation, the Pentagon and military seemed to push on with a strategy that was clearly too-little, too-late.

The battle of Marjah is one event that captures this dynamic. In HBO’s 2011 documentary, *The Battle of Marjah*, issues with the new U.S. policy in Afghanistan under president Obama become clear. For one, it reveals a great deal of dysfunction between the U.S.

¹³⁵ Ibid. Pg. 271.

forces in Afghanistan and Afghan national forces.¹³⁶ U.S. forces are shown repeatedly to be at odds with the Afghan forces, often giving them menial tasks and treating them poorly. Rather than integrating and cooperating with Afghans, Americans appeared to be at odds with them, a clear contradiction of COIN. This was not the only violation of counterinsurgency on display in Marjah. While Obama insisted on a “Clear, Hold, Build, Transfer” strategy, the Pentagon and COINistas proved unable to execute. In his biography, McChrystal hails the battle of Marjah as vindication of counterinsurgency, “The fight for Marjah, never in doubt militarily, became a litmus test for the validity of our strategy in Afghanistan. On display was our ability to conduct effective counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.”¹³⁷ For McChrystal, Marjah was supposed to be a crowning achievement of counterinsurgency. He only oversaw the clear and hold phases during his tenure. In Marjah and other areas of southern Afghanistan, these were the only phases that ever occurred, “The model had become clear, hold, hold, hold, hold and hold. Hold for years. There was no build, no transfer.”¹³⁸ While Marjah may have been an initial success for McChrystal, for the Obama team it was a failure and another example of the Pentagon’s defiance and ineffectiveness. As the Obama administration embraced the pragmatism of “Afghanistan good-enough” the Pentagon continued to pursue policies which no longer aligned with the political realities of the United States’ position.

Today, residents of Marjah tell a different story from the success imagined by McChrystal. A 2012 Associated Press article reports, “Despite military claims of gains across the province and an overall drop in violence, Marjah residents told The Associated Press that

¹³⁶ Wonke, Anthony. *The Battle for Marjah*.

¹³⁷ McChrystal, Stanley A. 2012. *My Share of the Task: a Memoir*. New York: Portfolio. Pg. 375.

¹³⁸ Woodward, Bob. *Obama’s wars*. Pg. 348.

NATO's counterinsurgency experiment has failed.”¹³⁹ They report that conditions in Marjah are now worse than under the Taliban and that some residents long for the fundamentalist group return. If Marjah truly is the litmus test for counterinsurgency, it has failed spectacularly due to a failure in governance. Rather than a vindication of counterinsurgency it appears to be a vindication of the Obama administration's skepticism. The U.S. will not leave Afghanistan a perfect state and pursuing unsustainable projects such as reform in Marjah, simply drains U.S. resources. Although COIN seems to be exactly what Afghanistan needed in 2001, by 2010 counterinsurgency was failing as a viable exit strategy.

The many changes in thinking about Afghanistan can also be summarized in the 2010 National Security Strategy where Afghanistan plays a prominent role.¹⁴⁰ Unlike the NSS of 2002 and 2006—in which Afghanistan is rarely mentioned—the 2010 document elevates Afghanistan to the top of the policy agenda. While Afghanistan is featured heavily throughout the 2010 NSS, the document also reveals the need of the Obama administration to compromise on their goals in Afghanistan. For example, Obama continues to view Afghanistan as largely a base for al Qaeda. While Obama lays out an objective to “Disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa’ida and its violent extremist affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the World” he fails to include the rebuilding of Afghanistan as an integral part of this goal.¹⁴¹ While the document outlines the need to pursue multilateralism and fortify the Afghan security forces, it fails to devote the same attention to detail to the issues of economic development or infrastructure reconstruction. The Obama administration's reluctance to focus on nation building reflects the administration's acceptance of the political realities of the situation. Declining public

¹³⁹ Gannon, Kathy. 2013. “Taliban Popular Where U.S. Fought Biggest Battle”. Text. *Associated Press*. Accessed March 6. <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2012/12/11/taliban-popular-where-us-fought-biggest-battle.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Obama, Barak. 2012. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. Pg. 19.

opinion, departmental infighting and the set of problems that had developed in the 2006 period now prevented the Obama administration from realizing a “perfect state” in Afghanistan.

While the Obama administration finally escaped the distraction of Iraq, Pakistan seems to have taken its place in attention within the document. Throughout the document Afghanistan and Pakistan are often coupled together;¹⁴² and while Pakistan and Afghanistan are undoubtedly linked they should not be confused with a single entity. It is true that the Pashtun ethnic group straddles the Af-Pak border and that many Pashtuns largely ignore the border.¹⁴³ However the problems and politics of the two states are not coterminous. While a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan must take Pakistan into account, the United States cannot rely on its policy towards Pakistan to change the course of Afghanistan.

The Obama administration took a more complete view of Afghanistan than the Bush administration or its Cold War predecessors. Rather than focusing almost exclusively on hunting down al Qaeda and the Taliban as the Bush administration had done, they assessed the myriad problems facing the troubled nation. While the Obama administration has made huge strides towards understanding the problems in Afghanistan, thus far the administration’s ability to correct these problems has been crippled by departmental infighting, domestic political constraints and inconsistent implementation. According to the champions of counterinsurgency such as McChrystal and Petraeus, for such a strategy to work, all arms of the United States’ massive foreign policy apparatus must work in tandem.¹⁴⁴ When they do, results can be achieved, as evidenced by McChrystal’s success in reforming special operations or the relative success of the surge in Iraq. Unfortunately, this atmosphere of cooperation and unity was absent from the Obama administration, and the tensions between the White House and Pentagon have

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Barfield, Thomas J. *A cultural and political history*. Pg. 326.

¹⁴⁴ Woodward, Bob. *Obama’s wars*. Pg. 262.

harmed U.S. chances of achieving a long-term stable solution in Afghanistan. Even under Obama, Afghanistan was sometimes pushed aside in favor of the administration's focus on Pakistan. While it may be true that the problems of Pakistan pose problems for Afghanistan as well, to ignore Afghanistan while waiting for Pakistan to change its ways would be reckless, naïve and ill advised.

Conclusion

The tragedy of 9/11 represented a shock to America. It woke many Americans, politicians and voters alike, to the threats America faced in a globalized world. It also provided a sharp and painful reminder of the United States' unfinished mission in Afghanistan and the consequences of failed state building. For many Americans, Afghanistan was an unknown, most famous for its status as "the Soviet's Vietnam". Yet even leading U.S. generals now concede that this understanding of Afghanistan was not sufficient for the war that lay ahead. In 2011, General McChrystal admitted, "Most of us, me included, had a very superficial understanding of the situation and history, and we had a frighteningly simplistic view of recent history, the last 50 years—the personalities, the actions that occurred."¹⁴⁵

Perhaps America should not have had such a simplistic view. After all, many of the scholars cited within this paper have written extremely detailed accounts of this period. Rajiv Chandrasekaran recounts America's first attempt at nation building in Afghanistan;¹⁴⁶ and Steve Coll examines CIA's role in Afghanistan in the Cold War in detail.¹⁴⁷ So it seems scholars at least are well aware of the history of U.S.-Afghan relations dating back to their origins in the

¹⁴⁵ Brokaw, Tom, and Stanley A. McChrystal. 2011. "HBO History Makers Series with Stanley McChrystal." *Council on Foreign Relations*. October 6. <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/hbo-history-makers-series-stanley-mcchrystal/p26157>.

¹⁴⁶ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*.

¹⁴⁷ Coll, Steve. *Ghost wars*.

1950's. Yet according to McChrystal, the age of our closest contact with Afghanistan—the last 50 years—is also a period of frightening oversimplification and misunderstanding.

While the U.S. has had periods of intense interaction with Afghanistan, these are punctuated with periods of near-complete withdrawal. After the rise of the Communist regime in Afghanistan, the United States abandoned their development projects and attention to Afghanistan quickly waned until the Soviets arrived.¹⁴⁸ In 1992, after the fall of the Communist regime, “Washington... just announced a new policy: hands off.”¹⁴⁹

Viewed in this historical context of neglect, the ignorance of many Americans with regards to Afghanistan is more understandable. Little, if anything, has been done to alter this mentality, which led the United States to give up on Afghanistan in the 1978 and in 1992. The fact remains, that if policy serves as any guide, Afghanistan is simply ‘not worth the effort’ to Americans or their elected officials.

Nation building has never been seen as a fast or cheap process. In the RAND Corporation’s nation building handbook they clearly address this concern, “In countries where democratic institutions are weak and few, building a representative system of government is a long, difficult process.”¹⁵⁰ Yet Afghanistan, where democratic institutions were essentially non-existent, could not merit any sort of sustained attention from U.S. policy makers after 9/11. At best, Afghanistan enjoyed less than two years of military priority before the invasion of Iraq. At worst, it was granted the full attention of senior policy makers for a few weeks before their attention shifted.

¹⁴⁸ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Little America*. Pg. 33.

¹⁴⁹ Coll, Steve. *Ghost wars*. Pg. 235.

¹⁵⁰ Dobbins, James. “The Beginner’s Guide”

In retrospect, there can be little doubt that the war in Iraq crippled the ability of the United States to build Afghanistan into a free and prosperous nation. With so many resources being diverted to Iraq, the “long and difficult” process of building Afghan institutions was cut brutally short. And while at first, it seemed as though the United States had managed to free Afghanistan while avoiding the quagmire the Soviet’s had faced, it soon became clear, that though the Taliban no longer controlled the Afghan government, their footholds in the country remained intact. In the three years following the invasion and subsequent civil war in Iraq, Afghanistan remained on the periphery of the minds of U.S. policymakers. In Iraq, politicians and soldiers struggled to fight an insurgency. In Afghanistan, rather than capitalizing on the inertia of the initial invasion and the enthusiasm surround the ouster of the Taliban, the situation began to fall into disrepair. By 2006, Afghanistan too was facing a full-blown insurgency. The Taliban had regrouped and the pockets of Islamic extremism had metastasized. The opium trade boomed and the brutality of the Taliban regime crept though the south while the government in Kabul, stifled by corruption and ineptitude, was largely powerless to stop it. The enthusiasm surrounding the defeat of the Taliban was now little more than a memory for most Afghans and the future was at best uncertain.

In 2006 the Bush administration could no longer ignore the worsening situation in Afghanistan. As the violence in Afghanistan increased, Americans began to take notice that perhaps the war the United States had won in Afghanistan wasn’t as “won” as originally depicted. On September 8, 2006 the New York Times reported, “The Kabul bombing came amid a sharp escalation of violence in Afghanistan, where NATO and American military commanders are waging an offensive to crush a Taliban insurgency that has revived with unexpected strength

this year.”¹⁵¹ As reports of violence coming out of Afghanistan grew, the consequences of the United States’ premature and overconfident shift away from Afghanistan became increasingly clear.

The lack of a strong military presence in Afghanistan had allowed the Taliban back into Afghanistan where they once again threatened U.S. interests and Afghan security. By 2006, the United States had lost much of its local support in Afghanistan, especially in key regions in the south. By October of 2006, the majority of southern Afghans felt security had deteriorated below pre-war levels and that they had been better off under the Taliban.¹⁵² With the news media exposing major issues in Afghanistan and the disillusionment of the Afghan people growing, the United States’ golden hour in Afghanistan had closed. Nation building efforts that would have once been met with enthusiasm and support from Afghans would now face skepticism and critique. When such efforts had a chance at success, they were neglected. The Bush administration was forced to alter their strategic calculations of Afghanistan. At this time, the U.S. and the Bush administration attempted to right the ship.

While the Bush administration did make some changes in leadership around 2006, they failed to realize the root problem of under-resourcing. Intelligence assets, military equipment, and troops were all needed in greater numbers to establish security in Afghanistan. Without security, the other projects of state building such as infrastructure improvements, agricultural assistance and the rise of strong and stable institutions were impossible. And while the Bush administration had come to realize more resources were needed in Afghanistan, it was too little, too late. Even in 2006, as Afghanistan’s problems were laid bare, the United States failed to

¹⁵¹ Gall, Carlotta, and Abdul Waheed Wafa. 2006. “Suicide Bomber Kills 16 in Kabul Near Embassy.” *The New York Times*, September 9, sec. International / Asia Pacific.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/09/world/asia/09afghan.html>.

¹⁵² Nicole Naurath. 2006. “In Afghanistan, Views of Security Differ Starkly by Region.” *Gallup*. October 26.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/25138/Afghanistan-Views-Security-Differ-Starkly-Region.aspx>.

commit more than about 20,000 troops to the country. It was not until Obama took office that this number would rise above 40,000.¹⁵³

When Obama took office in 2009, the war in Afghanistan was already eight years old. The changes made in the later years of the Bush administration had slowed Afghanistan's decline but not arrested it. The Obama administration's first task was to evaluate the situation in Afghanistan. Between the Riedel review and the subsequent Pentagon assessments, the Obama administration was forced to devise an executable plan for Afghanistan. For some, especially within the Pentagon, this meant a "fully-resourced counterinsurgency strategy" involving more troops and a flexible timeframe.¹⁵⁴ For others, such as Vice President Joseph Biden, it meant "counterterrorism plus" which minimized U.S. risk and allowed for a more rapid withdrawal.¹⁵⁵ While the scope and requirements of these different options varied widely, the Obama administration necessarily reevaluated the country's goals in Afghanistan as well as its strategy.

After eight years of very little meaningful progress in Afghanistan, the state building that was possible in 2001 increasingly fell out of reach. Faced with increased Afghan opposition, entrenched corruption in the Afghan government, a growing Taliban insurgency and declining domestic support for the war, the Obama administration's options were greatly limited. Obama had no choice but to confront the unfortunate realities of the situation. The creation of a free and prosperous Afghanistan resembling that envisioned in 2001 was no longer politically feasible. Had the United States made strong, enduring commitments in 2001, the situation would have been much different. But as it became clear that Afghanistan would soon become the United States' longest war, the Obama administration was forced to come to terms with the political

¹⁵³ "U.S. Troop Levels over the Years."

¹⁵⁴ Woodward, Bob. *Obama's wars*. Pg. 203

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 159.

realities of U.S. support. The U.S. public simply would not accept another 10 years of proper state building in Afghanistan. They had had enough.

After 9/11 the vast majority of Americans understood that the “War on Terror” would be long and difficult.¹⁵⁶ Few Americans, policy makers or the public, recognized that the “battle” for Afghanistan would become the hallmark of the Bush foreign policy vision. Although the majority of Americans still believe that the United States should have gone to war in Afghanistan, half now believe that even the 2014 drawdown date, considered by some in the Pentagon to be premature, is too long to wait.¹⁵⁷ Confronted with this reality Obama was forced to measure his goals in Afghanistan. Pulling Afghans out of poverty and the building of stable institutions took a back seat to the more realistic goals, of “disrupting the Taliban.”¹⁵⁸ No longer would the U.S. strive to create a “beacon of democracy” in Afghanistan, but rather to give the Afghan government a fighting chance.

The United States has made mistakes repeatedly in Afghanistan as a result of a mentality that Afghanistan does not really warrant the United States’ undivided attention. This mentality began long before 9/11 and persists now over a decade later. While this mentality led to mistakes at several points since 2001, under both Obama and Bush, the feasibility of successful state building has followed a downward track since the United States first failed to make an enduring commitment in 2001. Many scholars mentioned in this paper such as Rashid, Chandrasekaran and Riedel argue for strong commitments to stability in Afghanistan, but faced with the realities of today, such commitments are unrealistic.

¹⁵⁶ “Attack on America: Key Trends and Indicators.” *Gallup*.

¹⁵⁷ Jones, Jeffrey. 2012. “In U.S., Half Say U.S. Should Speed Up Afghanistan Withdrawal.” *Gallup*. March 15. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153260/half-say-speed-afghanistan-withdrawal.aspx>.

¹⁵⁸ Woodward, Bob. *Obama’s wars*. Pg. 203.

Yet this mentality towards Afghanistan has served American interests poorly in the past. While Afghanistan may not be a geopolitical superpower, the September 11th attacks that were planned within its borders proved that Afghanistan—and failed states more generally—can still pose a potent threat to American lives. In 1978 and 1992 the United States had opportunities to stabilize and secure Afghanistan, but the mentality of American policy makers meant that they failed to do so. As a result, Afghanistan became a failed state and provided a perfect environment for Osama bin Laden and like-minded Islamic extremists to target Americans without fear. Today, the United States stands in danger of repeating this mistake. The same neglect that resulted in the missed opportunities of 1978 and 1992 pervaded the Bush administration and another opportunity was missed in 2001. By the time Obama came to office, political realities in both the United States and Afghanistan precluded the type of full-scale nation building that should have been attempted years earlier. As things stand, the United States risks leaving Afghanistan as a state likely to collapse and creating an environment nearly identical to the one that gave rise to the Taliban and bin Laden. In a situation that echoes of the trope “those who forget history are doomed to repeat it,” the U.S. stands to lose a great deal should such an environment arise.

The way forward remains unclear and this paper does not attempt to offer a solution that both creates a stable and secure Afghanistan that also conforms with today’s political realities. If the Obama administration’s approach serves as any guide, such a solution may not exist. Nor does this paper seek to answer the question of “Why is Afghanistan a failed state?” The answers to such a question are as diverse as the scholars and politicians that seek to answer it. The application and scope of my argument is limited in these respects. This paper is also limited by its theoretical framework. By arguing that state building is possible or advisable this paper

ignores some amount of scholarship that would reject such a claim. Realism provides another such limit. While I argue that Afghanistan has proved to be a significant security in the past and may be in the future, one cannot deny that Afghanistan does not poses the type of geopolitical parity with which realists concern themselves. For realists, preference to Pakistan—a nuclear power—seems a far more reasonable foreign policy approach than Afghan state building. This paper crafts an argument that America’s treatment of Afghanistan is not the result of a series of independent political calculations but rather part of a more systemic mentality of neglect and inconsistency, a pervasive view that Afghanistan is not important enough to warrant sustained American attention or resources, a notion that Afghanistan does not deserve the commitments required for nation building.

The consequences of Afghanistan’s failure became clear on 9/11. To the joy of hawks and some development theorists—and to the chagrin of many post-colonialists—the United States has chosen to exercise its military might to pursue terrorists in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, oftentimes using drones to anonymously kill suspected terrorists without endangering American lives. The use of these drones provides an important parallel of the United States’ attitude towards state failure—an attitude also on display in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Addressing the underlying causes of extremism is too costly an endeavor, in terms of money, time and American lives. As much controversy as the drone program has created in the United States, these aerial attacks appear to sit better with the American public than the loss of thousands of American lives in far away places. Treating the symptoms of state failure has been deemed more desirable than treating the underlying causes. The United States has given up on state building in Afghanistan. Much like the events of Black Hawk Down made it impossible

for American politicians to attempt nation building in Somalia, for decades to come Afghanistan too will be “off-limits”. It seems as though, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld were right: The United States doesn’t do nation building.

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