



Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*

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Quassim Cassam¹

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Watching news coverage of scores of Afghan civilians running alongside an American C-17 transport aircraft as it rolled down the runway of Kabul Airport in August 2021, it was hard not to think that one was watching a remake of an old movie. The previous version, set in Saigon in 1975, showed images of similarly desperate people trying to cling on to a helicopter as it rose from the roof of the American embassy, while North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops marched into the South Vietnamese capital. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan represent an unenviable hat-trick of military and strategic disasters for the USA. Much has already been written about Vietnam and Iraq, and now it's the turn of Afghanistan.

America's failure in Afghanistan was both predicted and predictable. Writing in 2004, Michael Scheuer, who had been head of the CIA's bin Laden unit, commented that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were waging an insurgency that would force the USA either to escalate its military presence in Afghanistan massively or evacuate. Neither the USA nor its local allies had built "anything political or economic that would outlast the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces" (2004: xvi). Scheuer was proved right but even he might have found it hard to believe how badly things would turn out. The publication of Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers* provides insights into the Afghanistan fiasco from which future historians will profit, even if future American presidents continue to make the same mistakes.

Whitlock quotes a Navy SEAL who asks a fundamental question which could also have been asked about his country's involvement in Vietnam and Iraq: why does the USA undertake actions that are beyond its abilities? This question, the SEAL noted, "gets at strategy and human psychology, and it is a hard question to answer." (p. 163)

Whitlock's gripping tale does not offer a definitive answer either, but it does offer a superb account of the many things that went wrong for America in Afghanistan.

It started well. Once it was known that the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington were the work of al-Qaeda, the decision to attack its bases in Afghanistan came as no surprise. Within weeks, al-Qaeda was in retreat and the Taliban regime which had hosted the terrorist group had been toppled. Mission accomplished, one might have thought. Osama bin Laden was still alive but a spent force. Yet American soldiers remained in Afghanistan for another twenty years, until their ignominious departure in 2021 and the Taliban's dramatic return to power. How did this happen?

In 2016, Whitlock received a tip that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) had conducted hundreds of interviews with soldiers, diplomats, and policymakers as part of a project called "Lessons Learned". The breakthrough came when, after a prolonged legal battle, Whitlock obtained notes of the interviews on which SIGAR had based its reports. They showed that many senior officials and commanders privately viewed the war as an unmitigated disaster. The notes, together with a blizzard of previously classified memos dictated by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, constitute what Whitlock aptly labels as a "secret history of the war" (p. xvii). They do not make for comfortable reading.

Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. America "jumped into the war with only a hazy idea of whom it was fighting" (p. 19) and relied on the support of "war criminals, drug traffickers, drug smugglers and ex-communists." (p. 21) President Karzai was incompetent and corrupt, and vast sums of money were pocketed by him and his allies. There was talk in the Lessons Learned interviews of mission creep and the absence of a coherent long-term strategy. These criticisms are not confined to President Bush. When faced with hard choices, President Obama failed to see that wavering between two options is not a workable third option. Trump talked tough but was no more effective than his predecessors.

✉ Quassim Cassam
q.cassam@warwick.ac.uk

¹ University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Whitlock is better at describing than analyzing America's Afghan predicament. He cites a range of different diagnoses from the Lessons Learned interviews, but the most compelling diagnosis attributes the failure of US policy to a decision to engage in nation-building, despite President Bush's previous and explicit assurances that American soldiers would not be used for this purpose in Afghanistan or anywhere else. The new Afghanistan Bush wanted to build was a US style constitutional democracy under a president elected by popular vote. The view of many on the ground was that this could not be done, not least because it took no account of the country's history and culture. Yet Bush and his closest advisors convinced themselves that they had no alternative but to try.

Bush's thinking is set out in his memoir *Decision Points*. What started as a mission to destroy al-Qaeda quickly morphed into one to "help the Afghan people to liberate themselves." (Bush 2010: 187) There is little doubt that Bush was motivated in large part by genuine moral outrage about the Taliban's brutality, including its treatment of women. In his mind, however, it was not enough to destroy the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Afghanistan became the "ultimate nation building mission" because, having destroyed those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, America "had a moral obligation to leave behind something better." (Bush 2010: p. 205).

Whitlock concedes that "no nation needed more building than Afghanistan in 2001." (p. 31) It is less clear whether he thinks that nation-building in Afghanistan failed because it could not be done or only because it was done so badly. The latter view is suggested by his comment that the nation-building endeavor was "hobbled by hubris, incompetence, bureaucratic infighting and haphazard planning" (p. 30) and that "the nation-building campaign suffered from a lack of clear goals and benchmarks." (p. 31) He quotes one senior Bush administration official as saying, "We need a theory [of reconstruction], instead of just sending someone like me and saying, go help President Karzai."

One might conclude from such remarks that nation-building in Afghanistan might have succeeded with clearer goals and benchmarks and less hubris, incompetence, and bureaucratic infighting. However, theoretical and historical reflection on nation-building suggests, in line with the views of some Lessons Learned interviewees, that the problems with the project had much deeper roots. As one prominent scholar of nation-building remarks, "nation building is a generational project because the facilitating conditions take time to emerge" and "one cannot fix failed states or build nations within the time span of an American presidency or two" (Wimmer 2018: p. 264).

According to this "tectonic" theory of nation-building, the facilitating conditions for nation-building are complex and numerous. For example, nation-building is more likely to succeed where there is a common language, a tradition of bureaucratic centralization, and of governments providing public

goods. None of these conditions was fulfilled by Afghanistan, with its mix of decentralized authority and tribal customs. The American model of nation-building focuses on building a centralized government, but one battalion commander quoted by Whitlock observed that many Afghans failed to see the point of having a central government: "I've raised my sheep and goats and vegetables on this land for hundreds of years and not had a central government. Why do I need one now?" (p. 38). This was not a question to which the venal and dysfunctional Karzai government was able to provide a compelling answer.

As mentioned above, much of the confused thinking described by Whitlock and many Lessons Learned interviewees was not confined to the Bush administration. The chapters on the failings of the Obama administration are devastating. Obama's approach to Afghanistan was essentially the same as Bush's. When a senior American military commander called for 60,000 additional troops to be sent to Afghanistan, Obama encountered resistance from senior diplomats who thought that a troop surge would only lead to more violence. Typically, he split the difference and sent an additional 30,000 troops.

To make things worse, Obama imposed a strict 18-month deadline on the deployment. The folly of this approach was all too apparent to Lessons Learned interviewees who knew that the deadline would be seen by the Taliban as a clear signal that all they had to do was wait out the Americans. In 2014, he announced that the war in Afghanistan was over, a claim that Whitlock describes as "among the most egregious deceptions and lies that U.S. leaders spread during two decades of warfare." (p. 228).

One thing that Obama did differently from Bush was to pump eye-watering quantities of financial aid into the Afghan economy. Whitlock reports that "in retrospect, aid workers and military officials said it was a colossal misjudgment. In its rush to spend, the U.S. government drenched Afghanistan with far more money than it could absorb." (p. 158) The predictable result was rampant corruption and a series of breathtakingly idiotic construction projects that took no account of what the Afghans wanted or could use and maintain. In one remote province, US army engineers built a police headquarters which featured a glass façade and an atrium. It quickly became apparent that "the Americans hadn't bothered to ask the Afghans what they thought of the design." (p. 160).

In May 2011, Obama authorized the raid in which Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden. It is a sobering thought that, by then, bin Laden had already achieved his strategic objective of luring the USA into an unwinnable war in which it would be forced to expend vast quantities of blood and treasure. If America's Afghan project was doomed from the outset, why did successive presidents allow themselves to become embroiled in trying to do something that could not be

done? Why, to return to the Navy SEAL's question, does the USA undertake actions that are beyond its abilities?

A comparison with Vietnam is instructive. That war was built on the assumption that the fall of South Vietnam to the communists could not be allowed to happen for geopolitical reasons. This was the notorious "domino theory", according to which the fall of one domino in south-east Asia would be succeeded by the fall of others. In the case of Afghanistan, the theory was that unless the USA remained in the country and engaged in its nation-building project, al-Qaeda would return to America and attack it again. Both theories were deeply flawed but Whitlock demonstrates that neither one was subjected to the kind of critical scrutiny that would have uncovered its flaws. Documents recovered from bin Laden's study after his killing confirm that by the end of 2001 al-Qaeda in Afghanistan had already been routed by relentless bombing from the air.¹

Hubris was another key factor. Scheuer argued in 2004 that the war in Afghanistan was being lost because of what he described as America's imperial hubris. This was exemplified by a statement attributed to Karl Rove, a senior Bush advisor. He declared that America was an empire which created its own reality. The lunacy of this remark was exposed by the fate of America's failed attempts to create its own reality in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is not surprising that hubris should have resulted in a tendency to undertake actions — like nation-building in Afghanistan — that were beyond the abilities of the USA. Overreach is an almost inevitable consequence of hubris, imperial or otherwise.

In a landmark study of America's failed war in Vietnam, H.R. McMaster insisted that while President Lyndon Johnson was influenced in his decision-making by impersonal factors, such as the supposed imperative of containing communism, his decisions "depended primarily on his character, his motivations, and his relationships with his principal advisors" (1997: 324). This bolsters the idea of a characterological explanation of Bush's decision-making in relation to Afghanistan. Apart from hubris, the key character trait was a tendency to see foreign policy in moral terms. This moralizing tendency was both a part of Bush's character and, arguably, that of the nation he led.

It is not difficult to fathom why Bush came to see nation-building in Afghanistan as a moral obligation. He took it as completely obvious that the Afghan people, especially its female population, would be better off without the Taliban. It is difficult to disagree with him about this, despite criticisms from the left-wing critics who derided his "military humanism".² The intention to help the Afghan people to liberate themselves is an admirable one, but only if the Afghans understood liberation in the same way as Bush. One does not have to be a crude

relativist to see that there are different visions of the good life, and that what seemed obviously desirable to most Americans might have looked far less desirable to the many Afghans who continued to support the Taliban. Furthermore, as David Runciman points out, good intentions are never enough in politics. Outcomes are what count. The new world order which Bush and others tried to build was "awash with good intentions" (2006: p. 33) but these good intentions, combined with a crude "us and them" view of the world, led to political and humanitarian disasters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The full extent of the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan is incalculable. Whitlock notes that it was several years into the war before anybody bothered to track Afghan casualties. It will never be known how many Afghan civilians died violent deaths in the period from 2001 to 2021, but it is safe to say that it is a very large number. American deaths, in contrast, were carefully recorded. As with many books about the numerous countries in which the America has "intervened", Whitlock's story is very much one that is told from an American point of view. This does not make it any less important or compelling, but one looks forward to a similarly detailed account of the war from an Afghan perspective.

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Reviewer: Quassim Cassam FBA, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, UK, and a member of Society's editorial board. His most recent book is *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (2021).

¹ Lahoud (2022).

² Chomsky (1999).