



AFGHANISTAN — WAR —

A HISTORY FROM BEGINNING TO END



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Introduction

The nation now known as Afghanistan has occupied a strategic and vital position for most of the history of the modern world. The Silk Road, the ancient trading route that connected Europe with India and Asia, passes through Afghanistan. This country is also at the heart of a number of other important trade and migration routes, including those to and from the Middle East and the steppes of Eurasia. Little wonder then that this area fell under the control of a number of empires that emerged and then fell into decline. The first was the Achaemenid Empire which took control of the region in around 500 BCE and was followed by the empires of Alexander the Great, the Greco-Bactrians, the Indo-Sassanids, the Saffarids, the Timurids, and many others. Because of the position it occupies, Afghanistan has always been a strategically important area and, consequently, often a warzone.

During the eighteenth century, the area became the center of the Durrani Empire which established control not just in present-day Afghanistan but also ruled over parts of India, Pakistan, and Iran. However, by the nineteenth century, that empire had declined, and a new nation was created in 1823, the Emirate of Afghanistan. This was the predecessor of modern Afghanistan, and from almost the moment it was created, it found itself caught in the political and military maneuvering of two competing empires: the British and Russian.

The British Empire was near the height of its power, and many British people were suspicious and concerned about the expansion of Russian power and prestige in Asia. The Emirate of Afghanistan lay directly between India (Britain's most important territory) and Russia. The machinations of Britain and Russia became known as the "Great Game" as both sought control over Afghanistan. In three separate wars between 1839 and 1919, Britain attempted to impose military control over Afghanistan. Although it won notable victories in each war, it was never able to exert control over the whole nation and particularly in the mountainous regions to the north.

Finally, in 1919, the British were forced to sign the Treaty of Rawalpindi, under which they formally withdrew all territorial ambitions in

Afghanistan. Now truly independent for the first time, Afghanistan was ruled by a series of kings until 1973 when a former prime minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan, seized power in a coup and declared the creation of the Republic of Afghanistan.

Less than five years later, Afghanistan was invaded once again, this time by the forces of the Soviet Union. However, while the Soviets sent large numbers of troops to Afghanistan and were able to take control of the capital city of Kabul, they discovered, just as the British had before them, how difficult it was to defeat determined Afghan fighters—the *Mujahideen*—in remote and mountainous regions. In 1989, all Soviet forces were withdrawn, and the country descended into a period of civil war and chaos.

The single most powerful group to emerge from this period was the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a largely Sunni Islamic fundamentalist and Pashtun nationalist movement that became generally known as the *Taliban* (meaning “seekers”). By 1996, the Taliban controlled most of central and southern Afghanistan, including the capital city of Kabul. However, because of alleged human rights abuses and in particular the treatment of women, few governments around the world formally recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Taliban control in Afghanistan also did not include the remote northeastern provinces where a rival Muslim group, the Northern Alliance, occupied large areas of land that included around 30% of the total population of the country. Between 1996 and 2001, the Northern Alliance, despite backing from India, Iran, Russia, and the United States, was gradually driven back by the Taliban (backed by neighboring Pakistan) until they occupied only a part of Badakhshan province in northeastern Afghanistan. It seemed to be only a matter of time before the Taliban extended their control to cover all of Afghanistan. Then, on September 11, 2001, everything changed.

Chapter One

Bush's War on Terror

“The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows.”

—George W. Bush

Al-Qaeda was a Sunni pan-Islamist militant organization which claimed to be leading an armed movement that would culminate in the creation of a world Islamic state known as the Caliphate. Al-Qaeda was founded during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and by 2001, it had become one of the largest and best-funded Islamist militant organizations in the world. The movement was led by Saudi-Arabian Osama bin Laden and, following bombings around the world that left over 200 people dead, had been classed by both the United Nations and NATO as a terrorist organization.

After the ejection of Russian forces from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda had become increasingly focused on the United States, and Americans and American troops had become the targets of numerous deadly attacks. Al-

Qaeda had links with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the organization was believed to be based there, though no Afghans were directly involved in the group that mounted what would become the deadliest terrorist attack in the world.

On September 11, 2001, nineteen young men, all members of al-Qaeda, hijacked four commercial airliners in the United States. Two of the aircraft were crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, one was crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the fourth crashed prematurely into a field in Pennsylvania. Almost three thousand people died in these attacks. The response of the administration of President George W. Bush was immediate. On September 18, one week after the attacks, the US government signed into law a joint resolution authorizing the use of force against those responsible for these attacks. On September 20, in a televised address to Congress, President Bush explained precisely who he believed these people to be. He identified al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden as directly responsible for the attacks on the United States but went on to claim that these terrorists were being supported and protected by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

America was about to embark on what President Bush defined as a “War on Terror.” The principal targets of this war were to be al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, but President Bush also made it clear that this war would, if necessary, also include Afghanistan. He made a number of demands on the Taliban, including that they must hand over every member of al-Qaeda based in that country and shut down every training camp used by that organization. He concluded, “The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.”

The Taliban showed no signs of complying with these demands, and on October 7, 2001, President Bush announced the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. He told the nation in a televised address that the purpose of this operation, which would also include support pledged by Britain, Australia, Canada, France, and Germany, was to destroy terrorist training camps within Afghanistan and capture al-Qaeda leaders and members in that country. Although it wasn’t explicitly stated, this operation was also intended to end Taliban control over Afghanistan to prevent the establishment of new terrorist camps. Later the same day, airstrikes by US land and carrier-based aircraft and cruise missiles launched from American

and British warships and submarines hit suspected al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

America also pledged support for the Northern Alliance, the principal opposition to the Taliban. By that time, the Northern Alliance had been forced back into a small area of northeastern Afghanistan that accounted for less than 10% of the population. The first US ground troops were sent in October to create Joint Special Operations Groups that included members of the Northern Alliance plus US Special Forces units including Green Berets and a Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

At this point, it seems that most US planners anticipated a short conflict in Afghanistan. With the support of the military forces of America and other nations, it was believed that the Northern Alliance could win a quick victory over the Taliban. A new regime would then be established in Kabul that would be more sympathetic toward the west and that would not permit the training of al-Qaeda terrorists within Afghanistan. What no one could have envisaged in the fall of 2001 was that this was only the beginning of a campaign that would last for almost 20 years, cost hundreds of thousands of casualties, and, when it was finally over, would leave Afghanistan with an economy in ruins and once again under the control of the Taliban.

Chapter Two

The Taliban Collapse

*“We love death. The US loves life.
That is the difference between us
two.”*

—Osama bin Laden

The initial campaign against the Taliban, led by Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban Pashtun forces and supported by US Special Operations troops, went precisely as US and UN planners had hoped. On November 9, 2001, the Northern Alliance captured the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a former Taliban stronghold and Afghanistan’s fourth-largest city. The Northern Alliance also made significant territorial gains in the north of Afghanistan and then, just four days later, made a stunning gain when they took the city of Kabul on November 13 following an unexpected Taliban withdrawal. The advance of the Northern Alliance was so rapid that, on November 14, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution calling for the UN to play a role in helping to establish a new transitional administration in Afghanistan.

On November 26, the last Taliban-controlled city in the north, Kunduz, fell to the Northern Alliance. The Taliban were forced to withdraw back to

the southern province of Kandahar. While there, the situation for the Taliban was so serious that they attempted to open negotiations with the United States and the Northern Alliance to discuss a possible surrender. This was vetoed by US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld because of concerns that such an agreement might provide amnesty for Taliban leaders. Besides, given how rapidly the Taliban were being driven back, it seemed to most people that it was only a matter of time before they were completely defeated whether or not they chose to surrender.

In early December, leaders of the Northern Alliance and members of other anti-Taliban factions attended a conference in the city of Bonn in Germany. The outcome was the Bonn Agreement, which installed Hamid Karzai, who had led Pashtun tribes in and around Kandahar against the Taliban, as the interim leader of Afghanistan. A few weeks later, the UN passed a new resolution that enabled the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a multi-national force that would assist the interim government in maintaining order in and around Kabul. In addition to ISAF units, in which US troops participated, there were also large independent US forces in Afghanistan.

By this time, US military forces had already established their first permanent base in Afghanistan, called Camp Rhino, southwest of Kandahar. Almost all Taliban forces had fled from Kandahar, including their leader Mullah Omar. Still, the Taliban was far from finished. Many Taliban fighters had fled to neighboring Pakistan, while others had taken refuge in caves and other fortified positions in the mountains. In one such cave complex, the Tora Bora caves southeast of Kabul, a number of Taliban fighters, in addition to al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, took refuge. These caves were attacked in late December by Northern Alliance forces, but bin Laden and a number of the Taliban fighters were able to escape and make their way over the border and into Pakistan.

In early March 2002, US and Afghan forces mounted a large military operation called Operation Anaconda against suspected al-Qaeda troops in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, south of the city of Gardez in Paktia province. Although this operation did lead to the death or capture of many Taliban and al-Qaeda troops, it would not mark the end of fighting in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the attention of US planners had shifted to a new theater of the war on terror: Iraq.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, US attention had been focused on Afghanistan because it was known that al-Qaeda had a fraternal relationship with the Taliban and had established training camps in that country. However, even while US forces were arriving in Afghanistan toward the end of 2001, the Bush administration was already beginning to consider the possibility of a full-scale attack on Iraq with the objective of removing its president, Saddam Hussein. There was no known link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, but the Bush administration claimed that Saddam Hussein had (or was working on) weapons of mass destruction that might pose a direct threat to the west.

This would eventually culminate in an invasion of Iraq that began in mid-March 2003, and from the beginning of 2002, the possibility of an invasion of Iraq, a much larger military operation than that seen in Afghanistan, began to absorb more and more intelligence and planning time in the US. This was probably understandable—even by the end of 2001, it seemed that the Taliban had been defeated in Afghanistan. It seemed that all that was needed was the provision of a small security force to allow the creation of a permanent new government.

But in truth, the Taliban had not been defeated. Many of its fighters had withdrawn to Pakistan or were in hiding in remote areas of the country. The deflection of US attention and resources toward Iraq instead of remaining focused on the final eradication of the Taliban in Afghanistan was to become a significant factor that would prolong the war in Afghanistan for far longer than anyone had anticipated.

Chapter Three

Mission Accomplished?

“Afghanistan is at the crossroads; it’s either we go the right direction or we turn the wrong direction.”

—Hamid Karzai

During 2002, the principal US and NATO effort in Afghanistan was directed toward reconstruction. Hamid Karzai was appointed to lead the new transitional government. This move wasn’t entirely welcomed by members of the Northern Alliance, with some claiming that Karzai and the new government were corrupt. In particular, there were accusations that billions of dollars provided by the US for humanitarian aid and reconstruction were being misused.

With the assistance of the UN and nongovernmental organizations, there was a determined effort to extend the influence of the new government beyond the city of Kabul and out into Afghanistan’s 364 districts. Provincial Reconstruction Teams were created in a number of cities, which were tasked with both improving infrastructure and ensuring the safety of aid workers. Although these teams were overseen by members of NATO, there

was growing criticism that these groups were corrupt and that spending was focused on protecting foreign workers rather than improving the lot of ordinary Afghans.

By May 2003, there were just 8,000 US troops in Afghanistan, and the Bush administration and the government of Hamid Karzai concluded that the combat phase of operations in Afghanistan was over. This coincided with rapid progress in Iraq. After just 20 days of combat, Saddam Hussein had been removed from power, and all major cities in Iraq had been taken by coalition forces. This led President Bush to announce the “end of major combat operations” in both Iraq and Afghanistan and to claim that the war on terror had accomplished its mission. In retrospect, this would come to be seen as completely untrue or, at the very least, unduly optimistic.

In August, NATO took over control of the ISAF and assumed responsibility for security within Afghanistan. US troops still constituted the largest single force, but the ISAF would come to include troops from all NATO countries in what was the first time that NATO had deployed troops outside Europe. However, as the ISAF attempted to extend the area under the control of the new government beyond the city of Kabul to more remote areas of Afghanistan, the difficulty it faced increased. From an initial force of just 5,000 troops, the ISAF would rapidly expand until it had more than 65,000 troops in Afghanistan, whose role was to maintain security and prevent a resurgence of the Taliban.

One of the first missions for the ISAF was protecting Afghanistan’s first democratic election, held in October 2004. Despite accusations of fraud and the kidnapping of three UN election workers by a pro-Taliban group, the outcome was the election of Hamid Karzai as the first democratically elected head of state in Afghanistan. In May 2005, Karzai and Bush issued a declaration that Afghanistan and the United States were henceforth to become “strategic partners” and would work together to eliminate terrorism and violent extremism. This declaration also gave US forces access to Afghan military facilities in return for a pledge to train and arm Afghan forces loyal to the new government.

In September of the same year, elections were held in Afghanistan for the two assemblies of the national government, the *Wolesi Jirga* (Council of People), the *Meshrano Jirga* (Council of Elders) as well as for local elected councils. One of the most striking elements in this election was the fact that women were permitted to stand for the first time as candidates for all these

bodies and that, out of an estimated six million votes cast, around half were placed by women. This was a notable change in a country where women traditionally played a subservient role and were generally excluded from all forms of government. To many outsiders, it seemed that Afghanistan was moving toward becoming a genuine and representative democracy. However, to many people within the country, it seemed that the Karzai government was rushing to adopt western values and institutions while undermining traditional Afghan culture and society.

These elections might have heralded a new period of democratic stability in Afghanistan, but instead, they revealed just how fragile the control of the new government was, eventually forcing the ISAF to change its role and begin large-scale military operations.

Chapter Four

NATO Operations

“Perhaps we underestimated the challenges in Afghanistan in the past.”

—Anders Fogh Rasmussen

Despite the aid that poured into Afghanistan from the United States and other countries, the situation for many ordinary Afghans remained dire. There were shortages of essential foods, poverty was increasing, even basic healthcare was unavailable to the bulk of the population, and efforts to reconstruct the country’s crumbling infrastructure barely extended beyond the city of Kabul. Combined with unease at the rapid changes brought on by the elections, perhaps it is unsurprising that during the summer of 2006, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated more rapidly than anyone had anticipated.

In 2005, there had been 27 bomb attacks against the security forces of the new government and members of the ISAF. In 2006, there were almost 150 suicide bombings, and over 1,500 Improvised Explosive Devices were detonated. As attacks on members of the ISAF and US troops increased,

more troops were called in from NATO nations. However, some of those nations had begun to question the effectiveness and role of the ISAF.

All member nations were suffering casualties, and in the summer of 2006, Afghanistan looked even less stable than it had in the previous year. In some remote areas, the Taliban began to re-emerge and find popular support. This support was increased in the face of some well-publicized operations that led to the deaths of Afghan civilians at the hands of US forces. In August 2008, for example, an American gunship accidentally fired on Afghan civilians, killing dozens of men, women, and children in Herat province. This was followed by a misdirected US airstrike in Farah province that led to the deaths of an estimated 140 civilians.

Even President Karzai was moved to condemn these killings, though, in truth, the task facing US forces and the ISAF was extremely difficult. The Taliban fighters were not regular, uniformed troops but irregular guerrillas, attacking isolated US, ISAF, and Afghan police units and then disappearing back into the local community. This made it very difficult for NATO and US forces to use their superior airpower and heavy weapons without the risk of accidentally targeting civilians. This was precisely the same situation that had faced the Soviet Union during its attempt to pacify Afghanistan in the 1980s.

While the administration of President Bush remained absolutely committed to the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, some NATO member nations were becoming uneasy, alarmed both by adverse publicity caused by the deaths of civilians and by the fact that the Taliban seemed to be growing more, not less powerful. Nevertheless, there were some successes. In May 2007, a senior Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, and a number of Taliban fighters were killed during a major operation in Helmand province. Yet while this certainly removed a capable and effective Taliban leader, the scale of the operation also underlined just how far the security situation had deteriorated in Afghanistan and exposed President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" statement as clearly false.

At a NATO conference in November 2006, Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had set 2008 as the deadline for the removal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and their replacement by Afghan security forces. To most people, especially those in the US administration, this seemed entirely unrealistic and appeared to be a prelude to unilateral NATO withdrawal

from Afghanistan, no matter whether the country had achieved internal security and stability or not.

In the meantime, Taliban attacks on aid workers, US and ISAF troops, and Afghan security forces increased. In early 2007, US General Dan K. McNeill was appointed as commander of the ISAF. He made it clear that he saw his prime objective not as reconstruction but as fighting the resurgent Taliban. Later the same year, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates openly criticized NATO nations for not being willing to send even more troops to Afghanistan. Unless additional troops were provided, he said, “we risk allowing what has been achieved in Afghanistan to slip away.”

In truth, it was becoming apparent that what had been achieved in Afghanistan was far more limited than most politicians would admit. The situation in parts of Afghanistan in 2008 was approaching anarchy. The government of Hamid Karzai controlled the city of Kabul and little else. Meanwhile, the number of US and NATO casualties kept increasing every year.

Then, in November 2008, Barack Obama won the US presidential election. Obama was America’s first black president, a Democrat, and a man who had been critical of the foreign policies of President Bush. Would this new US president bring a new approach to the situation in Afghanistan?

Chapter Five

Surge: Obama's War

“The lessons of the Afghan War are very clear . . . It’s easier to get into wars than it is to get out of them.”

—Barack Obama

Soon after becoming America’s 44th president, Barack Obama announced a “New Beginning” in relations between the US and the Muslim world. However, President Obama also made it clear that he regarded Afghanistan as America’s most important foreign policy destination and a nation where, if the Taliban were allowed to regain power, new terrorist attacks might be mounted against the United States.

When he was inaugurated, there were around 37,000 US troops in Afghanistan, divided between ISAF and independent US commands. In February 2009, President Obama announced that an additional 17,000 troops would be sent to Afghanistan, though he also mentioned that he hoped that most US combat troops could be withdrawn by the end of 2011, by which time he hoped that the resurgent Taliban would have been

defeated. Four thousand US troops were also sent to Afghanistan to help train soldiers of the Afghan army and police forces.

In May, a new commander of US forces in Afghanistan was appointed, former Special Forces commander Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal. President Obama noted that he believed that McChrystal's special forces background would help him to develop effective counter-insurgency tactics to oppose the Taliban. Before the year was out, it was announced that an additional 30,000 US troops were being sent to Afghanistan, though it was again noted that the intention was to remove all US combat troops "within 18 months." This would bring the total number of US troops in Afghanistan to more than 100,000 in 2010.

It was clear that the new president was just as committed to fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban as his predecessor. In July 2009, over 4,000 US Marines launched an assault on areas of Helmand province that had fallen under Taliban control. This high-profile operation was a success in that, where large Taliban forces were encountered, they were generally defeated. But as in previous engagements, many Taliban fighters simply faded into the local community when US troops. The ISAF and US were able to gain a measure of control in Helmand, but only at the expense of keeping large numbers of troops permanently stationed there. Most ISAF and US commanders were aware that, if and when these troops were withdrawn, the Taliban would simply emerge from hiding and continue their growing insurgency.

The situation was made more fragile by the presidential elections in Afghanistan in August 2009. Hamid Karzai won another term, but there were widespread allegations of corruption and vote rigging. A UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission found that Karzai had actually attained less than 50% of the vote, meaning that a run-off election had to be held in November. One week before this vote, Karzai's only rival, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew, and Karzai was announced as the winner.

Even as President Obama was announcing that even more US troops would be sent to Afghanistan, there was growing concern in America and amongst the NATO nations about the legitimacy of the new government. In December, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that all future aid to the country would be directly linked to increasing efforts by the Karzai administration to fight corruption.

The provision of additional US troops was expected to produce a “surge” in 2010 that would see the final defeat of the Taliban. However, that year also saw the removal of McChrystal as commander in Afghanistan in controversial circumstances. *Rolling Stone* magazine had published an interview with McChrystal in which he was openly critical of the Obama administration and US policy in Afghanistan. Thus, in June, McChrystal was replaced by General David Petraeus. Under the new command, the “surge” continued, with large-scale assaults on the Taliban being mounted in several areas of Afghanistan. While these certainly led to the deaths of a number of Taliban fighters, US casualties also increased, with almost 500 troops being killed during 2010.

In the US, there was growing unease about the war in Afghanistan. While large-scale attacks and the use of airpower and heavy weapons produced local victories, these did not seem to lead to fundamental and lasting change. Instead, when troops were withdrawn, the Taliban re-emerged and, in some cases, re-established control in areas that had been cleared. Some people began to compare the war in Afghanistan to the American involvement in Vietnam where, despite the presence of large numbers of troops and a number of battlefield victories, the United States was unable to defeat the insurgency by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong guerrillas. This comparison was made stronger by the fact that, in Vietnam, America had found itself supporting a corrupt and unpopular government in South Vietnam. No matter how many enemy troops were killed, popular support for North Vietnam was not reduced.

In Afghanistan, US troops seemed to be facing a similar situation where bravery and sacrifice led to tactical victories but seemed unable to effect grass-roots changes in a people who were generally suspicious and distrustful of the Karzai regime and the continuing US occupation of their country.

Chapter Six

A Timetable for Transition

“It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan.”

—Barack Obama

In America, polls showed clearly that there was little popular support for the war in Afghanistan. Rising US casualties seemed to achieve little, and after nearly ten years of war, there was little sign of a stable, Taliban-free Afghanistan. In November 2010, at a summit in Lisbon, Portugal, NATO member countries, including the US, agreed to a final timetable for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. All NATO and US combat troops were to be withdrawn by 2014, and a reduction of forces was to begin in the summer of 2011, with control in stable areas being handed over to Afghan security forces.

Although that sounded plausible, the reality was that there were few stable areas in Afghanistan. Stability was achieved only through the presence of foreign troops, and there were concerns in Afghanistan and in NATO member countries that the Afghan forces would not be able to exert sufficient control to maintain stability. Nonetheless, the war was becoming increasingly unpopular in the United States and elsewhere, and there was a clear political imperative to reduce the size of forces in Afghanistan as well as the growing number of casualties.

In May 2011, US Special Forces troops killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda and the man behind the planning for the 9/11 attacks. This was a major achievement for the Obama administration—bin Laden had been hunted since the beginning of the conflict in Afghanistan, and when he was finally located in a safe house in Pakistan, President Obama gave the order for the mission to proceed even though he was aware that this might provoke a negative response in Pakistan.

Many Americans welcomed the news of bin Laden's death, but in terms of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, it made little difference. Constant American pressure meant that bin Laden and al-Qaeda had become much less relevant in Afghanistan even before his death. It also led to some people in the United States questioning the necessity for the continuation of the war. Many had seen bin Laden's elimination as a prime reason for the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, and with his death, people began to wonder just what was the justification for continuing the war.

Within the US government, there were two opposing views. Some defense analysts called for even larger number of troops in Afghanistan as the only way to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban. However, the public and some members of the government, particularly Democrats, were beginning to see the conflict as an unwinnable war. In June, President Obama announced that the 30,000 additional troops that had been sent to Afghanistan in 2009 were to be withdrawn. The first 10,000 troops were to be withdrawn by the end of 2011, and the remaining 20,000 by the summer of 2012. There was an attempt to claim that this was because the military situation in Afghanistan had stabilized, but in truth, the situation in the country was heading toward chaos.

The withdrawal was ordered not because of any success in crushing the Taliban but because an international economic crisis was affecting America.

Unemployment was rising, and the national deficit reached record levels. Set against this, the total of over \$400 billion already spent on military action and reconstruction in Afghanistan seemed to have achieved very little in concrete terms. In December 2011, an international conference in Bonn, Germany, attempted to find a way forward, though it was notable that Pakistan, backers of the Taliban and blamed by the Karzai government for continuing militant violence in some provinces, refused to attend. President Karzai told the conference that Afghanistan would require funding of at least \$10 billion per year for ten years in order to assure the stability of his government. Given that this government had so far failed to bring any level of security to most areas of Afghanistan, many delegates were understandably skeptical.

The conference broke up without any agreement on what should happen next. What was clear was that many NATO delegates were unwilling to provide the required funding or to continue sending troops to Afghanistan. It seemed increasingly apparent to many people that the future of Afghanistan could only be achieved through something that would have previously been unthinkable: a negotiated peace settlement that involved the Taliban.

Chapter Seven

Peace Talks: Outrage and Anger

“Despite all odds, despite all difficulties, despite all challenges, Afghanistan stands; Afghanistan fights on.”

—Ashraf Ghani

In January 2013, the Taliban did something that seemed to suggest that they might be willing to enter negotiations—they opened an office in Qatar. This was a very significant move. Previously, the Taliban had operated as a guerilla organization, with no accepted overall commander and local groups operating virtually independently. This made it almost impossible to have discussions with the organization as a whole, and agreements with local units offered little in terms of overall progress.

Soon, Taliban leaders in Qatar entered initial discussions with officials from the United States, but these broke up in acrimony after less than two months. Part of the issue was the refusal of the Americans to discuss the

possibility of prisoner exchanges without the assurance of some concrete progress in talks. However, there were other problems involved.

In 2012, US troops stationed at Bagram Air Base in Parwan province in Afghanistan were accused of burning copies of the Quran. This appeared to be true; copies of the Quran had been given to prisoners, but the commander of the air base claimed that some had added “extremist inscriptions” to their books, and the affected pages were ordered to be destroyed by burning. This was certainly insensitive; the deliberate destruction of a copy of the Quran is regarded by many Muslims as an act of extreme sacrilege. In five days of rioting at Bagram, 30 people were killed and more than 200 injured. Rioting also spread to other parts of Afghanistan, including, most worryingly for the US, not just Taliban-controlled areas but also to Kabul.

The situation was further inflamed when a video was posted online which showed US Marines urinating on the bodies of dead Taliban fighters. Shortly afterward, news spread that a US soldier had gone on a killing spree in Kandahar province, murdering sixteen civilians (including nine children) before setting their bodies on fire. Talks between the Taliban and the United States foundered in a growing sense of hysteria and outrage. President Karzai called for all US troops to be withdrawn from village outposts and instead to be housed only in recognized military bases.

It was not until June 2013 that the US resumed talks with the Taliban through their office in Qatar. This angered President Karzai, who maintained that the Taliban was a terrorist organization and that conducting talks simply gave it legitimacy. He then broke off all talks with the United States. That was short-lived, and with their UN mandate expiring in December 2013, the US government was forced to negotiate a bilateral agreement with President Karzai to allow their troops to remain in Afghanistan after that time.

This agreement would leave just 10,000 US troops in Afghanistan after the end of 2014, who would primarily be involved in training the Afghan army and police forces. There would be no more “surges” by US troops in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, though it may have had far fewer troops on the ground, the US would continue military operations in Afghanistan, mainly through the increasing use of drones and air strikes. The NATO ISAF mandate also ended in 2014, and there were no plans by member countries to retain large numbers of troops in Afghanistan after that. It was clear that

responsibility for security in Afghanistan would soon be transferred to the Afghan security forces, though few people believed that these had the power or will to effectively resist the Taliban.

In September, meanwhile, new presidential elections in Afghanistan saw the end of Hamid Karzai's period of rule. The winner in the elections was Ashraf Ghani, though the results were disputed by his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, whose supporters took to the streets in Kabul to protest. The ensuing chaos was mediated by the United States to create a new "Unity Government" where Ghani took the role of president while Abdullah took on a new role as chief executive, with power shared between the two. Although this provided a temporary end to civil unrest, it left a deeply divided government with supporters of Ghani and Abdullah squabbling over appointments to senior posts.

Barack Obama served two terms as president, from 2009 to 2017. During his period in office, the number of US combat troops in Afghanistan reached record levels, supported by soldiers of the ISAF from other NATO member countries. At one time, there were over 100,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, and there were a number of large-scale military operations intended to crush the Taliban. None achieved this objective. The simple truth was that neither the US nor NATO member countries had the will or the resources to permanently station large military forces in Afghanistan.

Then, in November 2016, there was a presidential election in the United States which saw a new president being elected. Donald Trump was, to many people, a surprise winner in the election, and no one was quite sure how he would deal with the continuing and costly conflict in Afghanistan.

Chapter Eight

Trump's War

*“We are not nation-building again.
We are killing terrorists.”*

—Donald Trump

Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States on January 20, 2017. From the beginning, it became clear that his policy toward Afghanistan was different from that of the Obama administration. President Trump delegated decision-making to military commanders and refused to adhere to arbitrary withdrawal schedules, instead taking advice from military chiefs on what needed to be done. The situation that he inherited was grave.

By early 2017, the Taliban effectively controlled around one-third of the total territory of Afghanistan and had a presence virtually everywhere else. Even in Kabul, bombings and terrorist attacks had reached unprecedented levels. Hundreds of people had been killed in the city in a series of attacks, and on January 10, just ten days before the inauguration of the new president, a bomb placed in front of the National Assembly of Afghanistan building in Kabul killed 46 people and injured many more.

By this time, the Taliban weren't the only organization opposing the US presence in Afghanistan. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was a

new militant Islamist group that claimed dominion over what it called Khorasan (parts of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran, and India). ISIS began to emerge in 2014, and by 2017, it had established a notable presence in Afghanistan. The relationship between the Taliban and ISIS had initially been neutral, but in 2015, members of ISIS assassinated Abdul Ghani, a senior Taliban commander in Logar province. This led to armed clashes between ISIS and Taliban fighters, most notably in eastern Afghanistan in territory nominally under the control of the Taliban. The one thing that both groups were in agreement over was that they wanted to see American troops removed from Afghanistan and the Unity Government replaced with a fundamentalist Islamic regime.

In April 2017, US forces dropped a single GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb on a suspected ISIS cave complex in Nangarhar province. This was the most powerful non-nuclear weapon ever used by US forces, and it is believed to have killed up to 90 ISIS fighters. Although President Trump had left it up to military commanders to decide whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, they chose increasingly to use air and drone strikes to target Taliban and ISIS enclaves.

It wasn't until August 2017 that President Trump provided details of his policy in Afghanistan. He admitted that his initial attitude had been to order the withdrawal of all US troops in the country but that he had been persuaded by military chiefs that this would allow the Taliban and ISIS to grow and create terrorist groups that might be used to attack the United States. He refused to give any timetable for withdrawal, announced looser controls on military action (despite an increase in the numbers of civilians killed during airstrikes), and said that there seemed to be no prospect of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

During 2017, an additional 5,000 troops were sent to Afghanistan, including the deployment of US Marines in Helmand. Nevertheless, the security situation continued to deteriorate throughout 2018, with Taliban attacks increasing across the country and bombings and terror attacks in Kabul reaching a new peak. President Trump also cut off billions of dollars of aid to neighboring Pakistan due to claims that Taliban fighters were being allowed to enter Afghanistan via the Pakistan border and that arms and supplies were being sent to Taliban forces via the same route. Within Afghanistan, the Unity Government was coming under increasing criticism for its inability to provide peace and stability across much of the country.

By the end of 2018, it was becoming clear that the provision of additional US troops and an increasing level of US air and drone strikes was making little practical difference. The Taliban continued to threaten in almost every province, and ISIS was growing in power in some regions. Faced with the reality of the situation, President Trump made clear his desire to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan from around 15,000 to under 7,000. Concurrently, negotiations between the Taliban and the United States in Qatar were resumed and, during 2019, seemed to make concrete progress for the first time. President Trump appointed a special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, who engaged in detailed talks with the leadership of the Taliban, including Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Many US officials had come to regard the growing power of ISIS as a potentially greater threat than the Taliban, and thus, the basis of these talks was that the United States was prepared to consider the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan in exchange for assurances from the Taliban that they would not allow terrorist groups to operate within the country. Throughout 2019, these talks seemed to be on track.

In early September, Zalmay Khalilzad announced that the Taliban and the United States were close to reaching an agreement “in principle.” It was later revealed that President Trump had agreed to a secret meeting at Camp David, the secure country retreat in Maryland, with leaders of the Taliban and the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani. However, on September 7, Trump abruptly issued a tweet noting that all negotiations between the US and the Taliban had been called off following an increase in Taliban attacks across Afghanistan, including one that had resulted in the death of an American soldier.

The Taliban announced that they remained committed to continuing dialogue with the United States but also warned that this abrupt cancellation of peace talks would lead to increased violence. The reality of this threat soon became apparent. Taliban attacks intensified across the country, with violence erupting in provinces such as Bamiyan that had previously been relatively peaceful. These attacks were generally directed toward Afghan army and police units and bases, but increasing numbers of civilians were also killed as the scale and ferocity of these attacks intensified. In parts of Afghanistan, the security situation deteriorated into anarchy and chaos.

In early 2020, Ashraf Ghani was re-elected as president; still, it was becoming increasingly clear that he lacked a real mandate and that the

security forces he commanded were unable to quell the tidal wave of violence from the Taliban and, in some areas, ISIS.

Chapter Nine

US Withdrawal and Taliban Victory

“We went to Afghanistan because of a horrific attack that happened 20 years ago. That cannot explain why we should remain there in 2021.”

—Joe Biden

Faced with an impossible situation within Afghanistan, the United States resumed talks with the Taliban in early 2020. On February 29, special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar finally signed an agreement in Qatar. This included a pledge for a significant reduction of US troops stationed in Afghanistan in return for an agreement that the Taliban would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for terrorist operations.

However, the negotiations that led to this agreement had not involved President Ashraf Ghani, who immediately announced that his government

would not take part in any negotiations with the Taliban until certain pre-conditions had been met. The agreement also did not involve a cease-fire, which allowed Taliban attacks to continue across Afghanistan. US forces in the area responded by ordering a new round of airstrikes, including a large-scale mission against Taliban forces in Helmand that killed dozens of fighters. Nevertheless, as agreed, around half of the US troops stationed in Afghanistan were withdrawn, leaving only about 5,000 in the country. None of these troops were being used in front-line operations, so this reduction in numbers had little direct effect on the security situation in Afghanistan, though it did lead to an immediate reduction in US air and drone strikes.

It would not be until September 2020 that representatives of the Taliban and the government of President Ghani met in Qatar to begin detailed negotiations aimed at finally bringing the war in Afghanistan to an end. One of the issues that had led to delays was a prisoner swap agreed upon during previous talks. In the summer of 2020, the Afghan government released around 5,000 Taliban prisoners, and it was this move that allowed the talks to continue. Both sides expressed a desire to find a way out of the conflict in Afghanistan, though the Taliban representatives made it clear that they would accept nothing less than a regime based on Islamic principles and law. Although these talks appeared to make progress, they still failed to lead to a cease-fire, and violence continued across Afghanistan.

While the negotiations were in progress, there was another change of leadership in the United States. In November, President Trump was defeated by Joe Biden, who had served as vice president in the Obama administration. Once again, there was a measure of uncertainty—what would be the new president's attitude toward Afghanistan? That became clear within days of the election when the acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller announced that almost half the remaining US troops in Afghanistan would be withdrawn in January, even before the new president had officially taken charge.

In April 2021, Biden announced that it would not be possible to withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan by the end of May, which had been part of the initial agreement between the Taliban and the United States. However, he did promise that by September 11, 2021—the 20th anniversary of the terror attacks that had begun US involvement in Afghanistan—no US troops would remain in that country. The few NATO advisors still remaining in Afghanistan would also be withdrawn by the

same date. He also gave assurances that this was an absolute deadline and not subject to any changes in the security situation in Afghanistan or progress in talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Before that deadline arrived, President Ghani fled Afghanistan as many Afghan security forces surrendered to the Taliban, and within a stunningly short space of time, the Taliban were in control of most of Afghanistan, including Kabul. Taliban leaders announced their intention to create a new and open Islamic government in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of remaining US troops was abruptly accelerated, resulting in scenes of chaos in and around Kabul.

Around 5,000 additional US troops were temporarily deployed to Afghanistan in order to secure Kabul International Airport to allow for the evacuation of US personnel. On August 26, ISIS militants launched a deadly attack on a US checkpoint near the airport, killing 13 US troops and over 150 Afghans. The US responded with an airstrike targeting a suspected ISIS enclave. It was later admitted that this was based on faulty intelligence and killed Afghan civilians, including a number of children.

On August 30, 2021, the last US troops left Afghanistan. In a period of two weeks, over 100,000 people had been evacuated from Afghanistan, though up to 200 US citizens remained in the country, which by that time was almost wholly under the rule of the Taliban. Also left behind were large numbers of Afghans who had supported the US and NATO war effort and who were certain to become targets for Taliban reprisals. America's longest war was finally over, but the repercussions for the people of Afghanistan continue to the present day.

Chapter Ten

Aftermath

“I am ready to sacrifice everything in completing the unfinished agenda of our noble jihad.”

—Mohammed Omar

Following the final US withdrawal, most western nations suspended humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. In America, \$9 billion in assets belonging to Afghan central banks were immediately frozen, preventing the Taliban regime from accessing funds held in US banks. Before the end of 2021, the United Nations released a report noting that anything up to half the population of Afghanistan (around 20 million people) was facing acute food shortages and the possibility of famine. Thousands of Afghan civilians were injured during the war, and few had access to adequate treatment. Many of these civilian deaths had been caused by US airstrikes. During the last year of the Obama administration and throughout the Trump administration, rules of engagement had been changed for US airstrikes, which led to an increase of over 300% in the number of civilians killed and injured.

According to a report issued by the Watson Institute at Brown University in Rhode Island, a substantial proportion of the Afghan population faced poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, increased levels of disease, and, in some areas, an almost complete lack of healthcare. Unexploded ordnance, particularly landmines, continued to take a toll on the ordinary people of Afghanistan as they went about their daily lives. Most analysts agreed that the 20-year war had produced an economic, social, and environmental catastrophe in Afghanistan.

In December 2021, the United States passed a resolution calling for the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, but this included a proviso that this aid must not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Taliban government, severely reducing the ability of most organizations to deliver aid where it was most needed.

The new Taliban rulers of Afghanistan meanwhile found themselves embroiled in a new internal conflict almost as soon as they assumed power. Members of ISIS denounced the Taliban government when it was created, and since August 2021, the Taliban and ISIS fighters have engaged in widespread combat. ISIS has also carried out a number of bombings and terror attacks targeting Taliban security forces and leaders. In some provinces of Afghanistan, the situation has deteriorated to the point that Taliban forces are unable to leave fortified compounds during the hours of darkness. As recently as March 2023, the Taliban governor of Balkh province, Mohammad Dawood Muzamil, was killed when an explosive device planted by ISIS exploded in his office.

Although precise numbers are difficult to find, in 2021 alone, ISIS killed over 2,000 people in Afghanistan, more than in any other country in the world. As in previous conflicts, it is the civilians of Afghanistan who suffer most in these continuing clashes. In addition to the direct impact of this brutal war, the imposition of Taliban rule brought immediate and fundamental changes for ordinary people.

As of this writing, girls are no longer permitted to attend secondary school, all women have to cover their heads and faces in public, and women are not allowed to travel other than for short distances unless accompanied by a male relative. The voting rights provided to women during the Karzai administration have been wholly withdrawn, and women are no longer permitted to hold public office or take part in any form of political discussion. New laws impose brutal punishments, including flogging and

amputation, on transgressors. Public executions have become almost routine, and large numbers of those associated with the previous regime and its security forces have been executed or have been made to disappear. Because of this, no nation has formally recognized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The ongoing conflict between the Taliban and ISIS has made the food shortages that followed the US withdrawal even worse. By the end of 2022, it was estimated that 95% of households in Afghanistan did not have enough to eat and that more than three million children were suffering from the effects of malnutrition. The security situation in the country is so dire that few aid organizations are willing to risk sending workers to Afghanistan.

Although no US forces are now present in Afghanistan, US attacks have not entirely ended. As recently as September 2022, two American Hellfire missiles were fired at a house in Kabul. These killed several people, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the planners of the 9/11 attacks, and, since the death of Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda. The US government claimed that the presence of al-Zawahiri was known to the Taliban and that this was a direct contravention of the terms agreed for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

For Americans, the war in Afghanistan may be over, but for the ordinary people of that country, its impact and long-term effects continue to affect their daily lives.

Conclusion

The financial costs of the war in Afghanistan were staggering. A report released by the Watson Institute at Brown University in early 2023 estimated that the direct costs of the war exceeded \$2.3 trillion in the United States alone, and that number does not include the continuing expenditure to support veterans injured in the war. This expenditure, coming during a period of economic recession, has had a lasting and negative impact on the US economy.

The human cost of the war is even more difficult to comprehend. In terms of deaths, over 2,400 US troops, 1,100 British and NATO troops, and 4,000 US contractors died between 2001 and 2021. In addition, more than 500 humanitarian aid workers were killed, as were 150 journalists. Almost 70,000 members of the Afghan security services died, as well as an estimated 85,000 Taliban and ISIS fighters and 70,000 civilians. In all, it is believed that this conflict may have directly caused close to a quarter of a million deaths.

That is only the tip of the iceberg. It doesn't take into account the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of people forced to live with the effects of life-changing injuries or millions in Afghanistan today faced with poverty, hunger, or disease as an indirect effect of the war. Few wars in the twenty-first century have caused a similar level of death and suffering.

It is difficult not to compare these human and financial costs with what the war achieved. When President Bush ordered US troops into Afghanistan in 2001, most people assumed that America's military might would soon prevail and lead to the emergence of a new, stable Afghanistan. That objective was never achieved. During the Obama administration, more US troops were sent to Afghanistan in the hope of bringing the conflict to a peaceful and positive resolution. Despite the presence at one point of over 100,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan, supported by troops from Britain and other NATO countries, it was never possible to completely defeat the Taliban. Just as the Soviet Union discovered during its disastrous invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, these Islamic fighters can be driven underground or take shelter in remote mountain regions, but they are virtually impossible to eradicate completely using conventional warfare.

The conflict in Afghanistan was staggeringly costly in every respect, and it completely failed to achieve its prime objective: to end the use of Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations. The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022 graphically demonstrated that al-Qaeda is still tolerated there, and ISIS continues to export its particular brand of militant violence to other areas of the world. Surely, few wars in recent history have cost so much and caused such a level of death and misery to effect so little lasting change. Perhaps it is still too soon and the wounds too raw to look at this conflict objectively, but when the history of the twenty-first century comes to be written, it seems likely that this conflict will be seen as both one of the costliest and one of the most futile.

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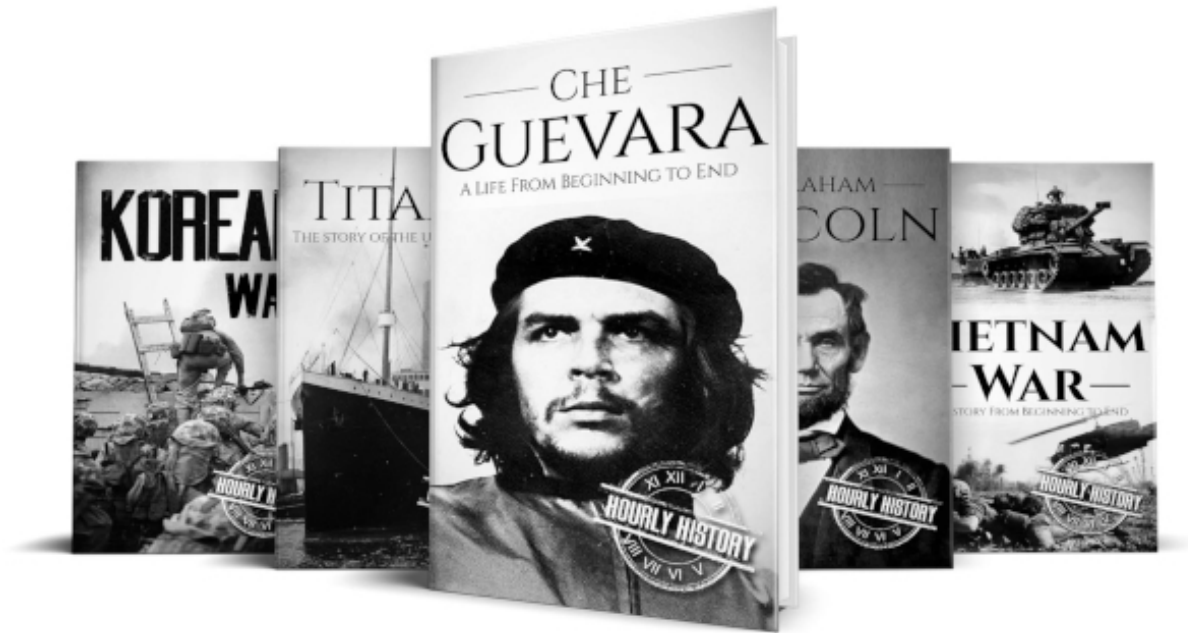
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