

## Lessons Learned from the U.S. Stabilization Effort in Afghanistan

Attached below is the official finding of the organization that the Congress established to monitor the American intervention and occupation of Afghanistan. It is the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR. First let me set it in context:

For those who remember Vietnam, the report sounds familiar. Our policy has been tragic for the Afghans and costly in terms of casualties, treasure and divisiveness for Americans. It is a chapter I wish we could close, but I see that we are planning more of the same. We cannot seem to hark back to the wise advice: “if you are in a hole, stop digging.” Neither Democrats nor Republicans, neither Clinton nor Bush, neither Obama nor Trump heeded that wise advice. So we all, Afghans and Americans, are paying for their failures.

The costs have been horrific, no matter what scale is used to measure them. They have already virtually destroyed Afghanistan and are undermining the American civic order. And they appear to be getting worse.

So far the war has cost the Afghans a generation of children, large numbers of whom are now *stunted* — that is, deprived of their full physical and mental growth. Casualties are really only guesses but they certainly run into numbers that, if compared by population size to America, would have wiped out the New England states. Displaced from their homes or even driven out of the country are numbers that, again proportionally, amount to something like the population of Texas. Bad as these are, they are made far worse by the destruction of civic life. That has amounted to something never experienced in America. It can be thought of if we imagine that all the schools, hospitals, courts, police departments, social services, local, state and federal governments in America ceased to function. In Afghanistan, they did.

It has not been so bad for us: Just a few thousand killed but hundreds of thousands wounded either physically or mentally. About \$3,000 to \$4,000 wasted for each of us. That adds up to upwards of \$4 *trillion*. As President Eisenhower would have put it, the \$3 to \$4 trillion should be thought of in terms of bridges not repaired, schools not built, hospitals not created, cities not refurbished. America could truly have been made “great again” with what was there simply wasted.

And, like Vietnam, policies pursued have brought about and fueled bitter divisions in our society and cheapened our very means of discussing with one another.

And to what avail?

After 17 years are we safer? Have we “won?” Is Afghanistan now “secure for democracy?”

The very questions seem insulting to our good sense.

I first travelled around Afghanistan as a US official in 1962. Everywhere I went, I was welcomed. Never was I in danger. The Afghans were poor, but they lived together in reasonable security and in their own homes.

In analyzing American policy, my then assignment, I concluded (my report is still available) that we had little direct national interest there, that the important thing was that the Afghans work out their own destiny with occasional and limited assistance (such as small, cheap and marginal assistance in such things as farm-to-market roads). Instead, we had gone for showy, expensive and impractical projects which, worse, appeared to have been aimed at the Soviet Union. That is, we were trying to use Afghanistan as a base for the Cold War.

Predictably, if stupidly or at least unnecessarily, the Communists, both Afghans and Soviets, reacted. The Afghans were an incompetent bunch and, to save them and ward off what they viewed as the American threat, the Russians invaded. In ten years of occupation, they began the wreck of the country and did wreck their own state. That is more or less where we jumped in.

Now, the only sensible course of action is to jump out.

Getting out will not be easy. We have literally built ourselves into the landscape. We have destroyed much. And we have, as the only independent but official US government organization, the Inspectorate General for Afghan Relief, points out, we have apparently virtually totally corrupted those on “our” side. They will flee the country at the first sign we might cut back. Most have already amassed great fortunes (stealing our aid money) and are literally “foot loose and fancy free.” They not only will not stand and fight, but we will hardly catch a glimpse of their backsides as they hightail it for Dubai and other safe havens. Vietnam redux!

Permit me a Vietnam comparison: in the continuing argument I had with my then boss, Walt Rostow (who arguably was the architect of our policy in Vietnam), I challenged him, saying that the only hope we had in “winning” was to prevent the corrupt South Vietnam leadership from smuggling (our) money out to “black” bank accounts. He replied that such a move was impossible. So I put it to him in front of the Policy Planning Council that he – and of course we -- had lost. He could not – never could – admit that. But, our defeat was the obvious part of the Vietnam story.

What was not obvious was what happened next: Having got rid of the corruption of the south, the “north” mellowed. So today, Vietnam is a relatively secure, prosperous and even friendly state.

Is this a reasonable comparison to Afghanistan? Not precise, certainly, but suggestive. If the thugs, warlords and corrupt politicians of the South are replaced by almost anyone, the chances for a Vietnam outcome improve. Without that change, there is no hope. And “no hope” will translate into endless war, endless misery, endless cost.

Which do we want? I know about me. What about you?

May 24, 2018

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Summary of Report of SIGAR, the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, a Congressional investigatory organization, dated May 2018:

Today, SIGAR released its fourth lessons learned report, entitled "Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," examining the U.S. government's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan between 2002 and 2017. At 9:30am EST, Inspector General John F. Sopko spoke at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. to mark the report's launch. Following the address, General John R. Allen will facilitate a discussion. Watch the webcast live: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/stabilization-lessons-from-the-u-s-experience-in-afghanistan/>

To view the report in an abbreviated, interactive, and web-based version:  
<https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/stabilization/index.html>

Key points:

- Between 2001 and 2017, U.S. government efforts to stabilize insecure and contested areas in Afghanistan mostly failed.
- The U.S. government overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions as part of the stabilization strategy. They focused on troop numbers and their geographic priorities and mostly omitted concerns about the Afghan government’s capacity and performance.
- Under immense pressure to quickly stabilize insecure districts, U.S. government agencies spent far too much money, far too quickly, in a country woefully unprepared to absorb it. Opportunities for corruption and elite capture abounded, making many of those projects far more harmful than helpful.

-- On the ground in Afghanistan, DOD, State, and USAID implemented programs without sufficient knowledge of the local institutions, sociopolitical dynamics, and government structures.

-- Powerbrokers and predatory government officials with access to coalition projects became kings with patronage to sell, fueling conflicts between and among communities. Afghans who were marginalized through this competition found natural allies in the Taliban, who used that support to divide and conquer communities the coalition was keen to win over.

-- During the 2009 Afghanistan strategy reviews, President Obama and his civilian and military advisors set in motion a series of events that fostered unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved. They also ensured the U.S. government's stabilization strategy would not succeed, first with the rapid surge and then the rapid transition.

-- By prioritizing the country's most dangerous districts, the coalition was generally unable to properly clear, secure, and stabilize those targeted areas. As a result, the coalition couldn't make sufficient progress to convince Afghans in those or other districts that the government could protect them if they openly turned against the insurgents.

-- Civilian agencies were compelled to establish stabilization programs in fiercely contested areas that were not ready for them.

-- Once DOD deemed money a "weapon system" in 2009, commanders were often judged on the amount of money they disbursed. With insufficient attention to impact and a frequent assumption that more money spent would translate into more progress, these projects sometimes exacerbated the very problems commanders hoped to address.

-- According to a senior USAID official, spending continued even as stabilization had become a "dirty word" at the agency, associated with excessive and ineffective spending at the military's behest.

-- Afghan forces and civil servants were generally unwilling, unprepared, or unable to carry forward the momentum created by coalition forces and civilians, particularly on the unrealistic timeline defined by the coalition.

-- When the promise of improved services raised expectations and failed to materialize, Afghans who saw more of their government through stabilization projects actually developed less favorable impressions of it, perhaps a worse outcome than if the government had not reached into their lives at all.

-- The effort to legitimize the government was undermined when the very Afghans brought in to lead the efforts themselves became sources of instability as repellent as (if not more repellent than) the Taliban.

-- By the time all prioritized districts had transitioned from coalition to Afghan control in 2014, the services and protection Afghans were in a position to provide often could not compete with a resurgent Taliban as it filled the void in newly vacated territory.

-- Most practitioners we spoke to believed that stabilization rarely brought communities closer to stability than merely providing reliable and non-predatory security would have.

Full Report: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf>