



Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021).

*Reviewed by Khansa Qureshi
Researcher, Centre for
Aerospace & Security Studies,
Islamabad, Pakistan*

The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War is based on interviews of over a thousand individuals who played a direct role in the United States' Afghan War. The book primarily uses the 'Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) Lessons Learned' project as its source material whose aim was to reflect

on what went wrong in Afghanistan and how it could be avoided in the future. The individuals who SIGAR interviewed included high-ranking officials as well as soldiers on the battlefield, aid workers and Afghan nationals. Three times Pulitzer finalist journalist Craig Whitlock and *The Washington Post* could only obtain these documents after suing SIGAR twice under the Freedom of Information Act, as SIGAR had only published a redacted version. The US Army's 'Leadership Experience Project', Miller Centre's 'George Bush Oral History' project as well as the memos of then-Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are also part of the book.

Craig Whitlock does not attempt to present an account of war history rather attempts to reveal what went wrong in US' Afghan war strategy. It shows how the three concerned US Presidents knew little about what benchmarks would drive the decision to withdraw troops once the actual goal of containing the al-Qaeda threat was achieved. One of the participants in the 'Lessons Learned' interview series, Lieutenant General Dan McNeil who was commander of US forces in Afghanistan twice, said he was shocked to realise that nobody in the military establishment could define the winning objectives upon his inquiry before his deployment (p. 10). Former US representative to NATO Nicholas Burns revealed that from 2003-05, the US lost track of what was going on in Afghanistan. These remarkable admissions by a top diplomat and commander demonstrate that from the very early years, the Afghan war started suffering from mission creep.

The book also shows how US war policies were flawed and led to failure. One interviewee said that in its eagerness to avenge 9/11, the US violated the Afghan way of war, as historically, after defeat, Afghan factions tend to shift their allegiances towards the winning side. However, the US refused to reconcile with the Taliban and decided to hunt them down to the very last member which provoked intense insurgency (p. 38). This was pronounced as 'original sin' by a respondent as all of the actors in Afghanistan were categorised as good guys or bad guys, with al-Qaeda and Taliban forming the latter category while any entity helping to fight these bad guys were labelled as 'good guys.' Rumsfeld famously said that the Taliban had two choices - to either surrender or die. Although, this approach felt acceptable for the public due to 9/11 but in retrospect this was flawed. *The Afghanistan Papers* even reveals that the CIA hired criminals, war lords, and drug traffickers, and former communists to fight the 'bad guys.'

Whitlock also writes about the sprawling supply chain issues which caused rampant corruption. An analysis of 3000 Department of Defence contracts worth over USD 106 billion showed that 18 percent of the war funds went to the Taliban and other insurgent

groups, the enemy that the US was supposed to defeat with those funds, while corrupt Afghan officials received another 15 percent (p. 183). Through the 'Lessons Learned' it was revealed that US officials had complete visibility on the flow of cash but did nothing because the 'political world gets in the way.' Even if one wanted to bring the anti-corruption narrative forward, nobody would own it, so it was never brought up. Meanwhile, the US agencies hesitated to take action because they did not want to antagonise the Afghan contractors who were on their payroll. As various US Presidents (during their tenure) also kept declaring victories at different occasions these proclamations became the reason behind their unwillingness to admit defeat and risk their public image. Therefore, as the Taliban kept regaining ground, and the strategy to fight the war kept getting more confusing, the harder it became for US Presidents inheriting this war to admit that the US was losing in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the US' attempt at nation-building also resulted into a hopeless situation as huge sums of money were spent on projects which Afghans did not want or did not need. The goal to 'create an American-style government,' with all three pillars of power while ensuring women's rights was impossible to achieve. Similarly, the institution-building effort was not successful as well. One of the interviewees in the book recalled that the US built a high-end, fancy police headquarters building but the Police Chief at that station did not even know how to open the door. This particular event summed up the entire US experience in Afghanistan (p. 156).

The book has also been compared with the 'Pentagon Papers' which was about the history of US role in the Vietnam War. It was commissioned by Robert McNamara and was leaked to the press. Although there are a number of similarities between the two, the basic difference is that the 'Pentagon Papers' was a classified study with secrecy level so high that McNamara ordered not to interview anyone and instead just rely on already existing documentation. *The Afghanistan Papers* is based on interviews and was not a confidential study. However, one similarity between the

two is that both reveal high-level systemic concealment of truth by US administrations during the periods of war.

Whitlock's book bears more importance when seen in the backdrop of what transpired in Afghanistan in August when this book was published. The fact that the participants expressed pessimism about Afghanistan's future particularly vis-à-vis the dim prospects of a self-sufficient Afghan Army, corruption, and reinforcing the Taliban, turned out to be true.

The book is an eye-opening read that unravels the machinations of US' longest war in history and what made it so. It sheds light on spectacular failures of the country's foreign policy which is not normally talked about (at least in South Asia, particularly Pakistan), and of its military planning and war execution which stays concealed from the public eye.