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Time for Peace in Afghanistan and an End to the Lies



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

It has been more than nine years since I resigned in protest over the escalation of the Afghan War from my position as a Political Officer with the US State Department in Afghanistan. It had been my third time to war, along with several years of working in positions effecting war policy in Washington, DC with the Department of Defense (DOD) and the State Department. My resignation in 2009 was not taken lightly by my superiors and my reasons for opposing President Obama's "surge" in Afghanistan found support

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amongst both military officers and civilian officials at senior levels in Kabul and Washington.

I was repeatedly asked not to resign and was offered a more senior position within the State Department. Richard Holbrooke, then the President's appointed representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan told me he agreed with 95% of what I had written and asked me to join his staff, while the US ambassador, Karl Eikenberry, told me my analysis was one of the best he had encountered and stated he would write an introduction endorsing my resignation letter if I remained with the US Embassy in Afghanistan for the remainder of my tour. In conversation with the US deputy ambassador to Afghanistan he agreed the war was not just unwinnable, but also corrupt, and stated he would not let his children serve in such a war. Further support for my views was provided by my counterparts who were serving as political officers in the most violent parts of Afghanistan: Kandahar, Helmand, Kunar, Nuristan and Oruzgan Provinces. These men and women made clear their agreement with my assessment and my resignation. The support from the military was equally effusive and genuine, often such support included apologies along the lines of "I'd like to resign too, but I've got kids heading to college in a few years..." (the golden handcuffs are an incredibly instrumental and integral aspect of the US Empire's infrastructure). When I asked Karen DeYoung, the *Washington Post* correspondent who wrote the front page, above the fold [story on my resignation for the Post](#), why she wrote such a piece about me, she replied she could not find anyone at the Pentagon, State Department or White House who disagreed with me.

I relate the above not to cheerlead for myself, although the sadness and despondency from witnessing the wars up close and from afar and their cruel constant murder, does, at times, necessitate such crutches for me, but to relay my own personal observation of the great lie of war in action; the ability of the machine of war to propel itself forward even when those most intimate with the war, those most responsible for it and without whose support and effort the war could not continue, carry on the war whilst knowing and living the lie full well.

Nearly almost a decade after my resignation, there are reports of a [possible peace deal](#) in the making for Afghanistan. What I recognize, so clearly and sickeningly, just as my mind, and my soul, can recall the bright scarlet red of fresh arterial blood that dulls in contact with dust and cloth, or the clay-like frozen set jaw of a dead young man, whether he have been called an Afghan, American or Iraqi, are the same lies of the war that were

so skillfully and effectively utilized by politicians, generals and the media to escalate the war in 2009 now being recirculated to defeat any current attempts for peace.

Sacrifice does not confer sanctity

When President Obama entered office in 2009 less than 30,000 US troops were in Afghanistan. Within a year and a half that number would reach 100,000 US military personnel along with 30,000 NATO soldiers from Europe and over 100,000 private contractors. Since 2001, more than 2400 US service members have been killed in Afghanistan, nearly 1800 of them since 2009. European armies have had more than 1100 soldiers killed and more than 1700 contractors have been killed while performing jobs that in previous wars would have been done by US soldiers. Tens of thousands have been physically wounded while hundreds of thousands suffer from traumatic brain injuries, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), moral injury, depression, substance abuse and other “hidden” wounds of war. These hidden wounds have very real consequences: the US Department of Veterans Affairs reports young men and women who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq (a great many of them have served multiple deployments to both wars) have suicide rates six times higher than their civilian peers, while infantry units, those that have performed the most killing and dying, have been seen to have suicide rates fourteen times higher than young civilian men their own age. In real numbers that means, since 2001, likely more than 9,000 US veterans who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq have been lost to suicide after returning home.

The numbers of Afghans who have been killed are truly unknown. The United Nations reporting on civilian casualties, which only began in 2009, reports tens of thousands killed, with nearly each year since 2009 showing an increase in civilian dead and wounded; a monstrous and grievous accomplishment of annual record upon record. UNAMA itself cautions its numbers should be understood to be a minimum or base level due to UNAMA’s methodology. Assessments of the total dead in Afghanistan over the last seventeen years put total dead at more than 100,000 civilians, although most who are familiar with war, including myself, are quick to say that is a conservative or low-end estimate. For example, Jonathan Steele has estimated more than 20,000 Afghans died as a result of the US bombings in the first four months of US military action following 9/11.

At least one million Afghans are internally displaced, while Afghans make up the second largest nationality of the largest refugee population the world has known since World War Two, with millions living in camps in Iran and Pakistan or claiming asylum in Europe. Of course the Afghan War did not begin in 2001, but began more than forty years ago and not

with the Soviet Union's invasion, but with an internal civil war that saw maybe as many 100,000 dead before the Soviets invaded; US support to Afghanistan's mujaheddin, the grandfathers of the young men we are fighting today in Afghanistan, began six months prior to the Soviet invasion. Over forty years of war have completely devastated the people and land of Afghanistan. As a consequence of the violence, Afghan society is devastated by PTSD and drug use, the countryside has been denuded and deforested, resulting in agricultural troubles and water shortages, and no industry exists, besides the illicit drug trade which despite billions of US dollars spent yields record poppy crops and illicit narcotics exports nearly every year (2018 was an exception due to drought).

There is a desperate sunk cost argument that haunts all wars that are lost and unworthy. As it is, more often than not, it is those who have not experienced the pain and the destruction of the war who demand more blood and more sacrifice, turn on Fox News or open the *Washington Post* and this will be apparent. What makes such an argument even more mean and craven is these deaths, ones that *need not be lost in vain* as it is typically phrased, are forever tied and bound by the lies of the war, making these deaths eternally ignoble and worthless, the dead never to be heroes, despite the exaggerations of eulogies, bordering often on hagiography, but only to be future-less victims of the greed and egos that advance and maintain the war.

Even a losing war makes money

The total financial costs to the US in direct spending on the war in Afghanistan are approaching one trillion dollars. Peak spending of the war reached more than \$100 billion a year and currently runs between \$40 and \$50 billion a year. Total costs of all the wars the US has been sending its young men and women to kill and be killed in since 2001 are said to be \$6 trillion, and this is just for the wars, that \$6 trillion figure does not include the regular or usual costs of running the military, which is now over \$600 billion a year, or the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on veterans, the intelligence agencies, nuclear weapons, the State Department or Homeland Security. This staggering amount may perhaps best be understood by knowing that in interest and debt payments alone the US has spent more than \$700 billion on the wars in 17 years (regarding overall national security spending this year the US will spend *hundreds of billions of dollars*, as it does each year, on debt payments due to past spending on wars, the military, intelligence, veterans, etc).

If you compare Washington, DC and its suburbs to how they psychically existed prior to 9/11, you will most assuredly note the physical impact the wars and the benefitting

military industrial complex has had on the city and its suburbs. The Pentagon is not confined to that five sided building alongside Interstate 395, but rather stretches for miles along the Potomac River; from the Key Bridge in Rosslyn, south through Arlington, and extending past Ronald Reagan National Airport into Alexandria, in office building after office building, are tens and tens of thousands of men and women working for war. Likewise in [the suburbs](#), particularly west along Interstate 66 or north along the Baltimore-Washington Highway, hundreds of buildings exist to serve the war machine. It's not just the defense industry or the contracting firms, but also the banks, hotels, restaurants, apartment complexes, high rise condominiums and near-million dollar McMansions that have risen to serve and support the Pentagon and its wars.

Within these buildings are hundreds of thousands of men and women, the majority not wearing a uniform but working for a contracting firm or defense corporation, who often make salaries in the high five or six figures. When I did such work in 2008, as a single 35 year old who's seemingly only qualification was that I had been a captain in the Marines, my salary and benefits came close to \$120,000 (when I joined the State Department in 2009 I didn't take a pay cut), while an entry level position with that same DOD contracting company, the requirements of which were to simply possess a secret level security clearance and to know Microsoft Office, was more than \$80,000. As you can see it is very easy to slip into those golden handcuffs...

What this calculates to, and remember aside from national and homeland security the federal government has [decreased non-defense discretionary spending](#) in real terms since 2001, is that the Washington, DC metro area is the [wealthiest part of the country](#), and has been for a number of years, beginning after these unending wars and their mass profits began. While you can argue correlation is not causation, the symbiotic nature cannot be denied between the unending nature of the wars and the massive increase in wealth for Washington, DC and its people and organs. Observe the [loud protestation by the US Senate](#) towards the idea of the US wars in Afghanistan and Syria ending to get a glimpse of the fear that exists in Washington and within the war machine towards just the idea or concept of peace. If you want to understand why these wars continue and why these lies persist, then you must understand the money that sustains and underlies both the war and its lies.

There have not been "hard won gains" by the US military in Afghanistan

For all these costs, particularly the bloody expenditure of lives, the [war remains the same](#) as it was in [2009](#): neither side can win and neither side will surrender. US [proclamations](#)

[of military success](#) and “hard won gains” are specious and are just one of the ever present lies of war. Reviewing Department of Defense [data on the war since 2009](#) shows the Taliban never weakened in strength at any time. As US and NATO and then Afghan forces increased in number Taliban strength and attacks increased commensurately. Roadside bombs, mortar and rocket attacks, assassinations, etc, by nearly [every metric](#) the Taliban gained in strength and capability [every year](#) since President Obama’s “surge”. [Recall in 2013 the US military was [caught lying](#) about its data on the war and subsequently limited the information available about the war, a practice of limiting transparency that has grown to include not just the war in [Afghanistan](#), but all the [wars](#).] At some point if the US had achieved military success over the Taliban the Taliban’s ability to operate on the battlefield should have been impacted and their ability to launch attacks limited, but the true impact of the presence of increased US, NATO and [Afghan](#) government forces was to add purpose and motivation to a predominately anti-occupation rural Pashtun insurgency.

If one looks at [US casualty data](#), US casualties [increased](#) as more US troops arrived, which is what one would expect, as more troops go into combat more will be killed and wounded. However, against the assurances of the military and civilian experts in Washington, DC [who promoted the counter insurgency doctrine](#) (whose adherents in many ways, honestly, [resemble cult members](#)) casualties never decreased due to battlefield success, casualties only decreased as a result of a decrease in US presence. So, as US troops went into a valley or village they met resistance and took casualties, and that combat and those casualties never stopped, the Taliban and its supporters were never defeated. No area was ever truly pacified, subdued or came over to the side of the US and Afghan government. In a memorable passage of Bob Woodward’s book [Obama’s Wars](#) a skeptical President Obama noted this reality and pushed back on his generals and advisors. Wherever US troops arrived in Afghanistan they were met with a resistance that was never fully defeated; quieted possibly for a limited amount of time, but never defeated.

As I visited small and large bases in 2009 US Army officers told me, in both eastern and southern Afghanistan, the only land they held was the land that was covered by their machine guns and mortars, the insurgency controlled the land and the population. In many places it was relayed to me that the Taliban welcomed the presence of US troops, because with the presence of the US troops came millions of dollars in US military and USAID spending, spending that went right into the pockets of the Taliban. This lack of control of the land and population remained true for the duration of US and NATO forces in their

positions as an occupation force and remains true for the Afghan government forces, which continue to be nearly in total non-Pashtun and serve as occupation force of outsiders themselves.

One example of many I can give of how the Afghan security forces are seen as outsiders and occupiers in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and other Pashtun parts of the country, is of the seven senior Afghan Army officers in Zabul province only 2 spoke Pashto and could communicate with the near 100% Pashtun population. ANA did not stand for the Afghan National Army, but rather for the Army of the Northern Alliance, the force the Taliban was fighting in 2001 and who the US put into power after overthrowing the Taliban. While it was repeated year after year, authoritatively, to Congress that the ANA was ethnically and regionally representative of Afghanistan's population the truth is only about 4% of the Afghan national army and police forces were composed of southern Pashtuns – the people from whom the Taliban received the base of their support and the part of Afghanistan where the fighting has been the worst. I know of no evidence that shows the Afghan Army is any more representative of the Pashtun population now as it has been over the last seventeen years.

As US and NATO forces withdrew from the fighting in 2013 and 2014 the Taliban turned their focus on the Afghan security forces. More than 45,000 Afghan soldiers and police have been killed since 2014, while last Fall it was reported fighting has intensified so that nearly 60 Afghan soldiers and police are killed each day. These deaths primarily come not against an outside enemy or groups of revolutionary religious fanatics, but mainly against a Taliban that is composed of locally organized and recruited insurgent forces who are fighting against foreign occupation and a corrupt, predatory and non-representative government. That US, European and Afghan troops have died and been wounded in the hundreds of thousands in a civil war has been well understood by the US military and intelligence agencies, even if it has been ignored by the US politicians and media. The same was true of Iraq of course, as well as nearly any of the fourteen countries the US has sent its young men and women to kill and be killed in – the people we are fighting are fighting us because we are occupying their countries and supporting violent, repressive and corrupt governments.

When I was in Kabul members of the US Embassy, located in the center of Kabul, behind ring after ring of checkpoints and concrete walls, were not allowed to cross the street to the USAID compound on the other side of the road because it was not safe enough, we had to walk beneath the street through a tunnel. Now, members of the US Embassy can

not even travel via armored vehicles to the airport, just a couple of miles away, but must travel by helicopter, naturally via a privately contracted helicopter force. And this is in Kabul, not in the rural provinces where the Taliban have their base of support.

The only success achieved by the US military since the Obama Surge has been the expansion of the war itself and the accompanying logistical accomplishment of moving so many people, machines and stuff into and out of a mountainous and rural landlocked nation with a demolished infrastructure (a result of the decades of fighting supported or taken part in by the US for nearly all of the four decades of war and, again, instigated by the US before the Soviet Union invaded). The idea of military success and hard won gains has been nothing but craven and homicidal war propaganda trumpeted by US generals and the world's largest public relations operation, and bleated obediently by politicians and, shamefully, journalists (the Pentagon spends almost \$5 billion a year on recruiting, public relations and psychological operations, by comparison the largest public relations company in the world had annual fees for all of its clients of less than \$900 million).

The US has not brought progress to Afghanistan

Like a diseased onion, claims the US has brought progress to Afghanistan constitute another layer of the great lie of war. As the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has shown in report after report the more than \$130 billion spent on reconstruction in Afghanistan, more than what the US spent on the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War Two in inflation adjusted dollars, has been a huge bust. Billions of dollars in cash have been overtly stolen by Afghan government officials and cronies. In 2012 more than \$4.5 billion in cash was taken directly out of the airport in Kabul, while, famously, in 2009, shortly after I resigned from my position in Afghanistan, Afghanistan's Vice President landed in Dubai with more than \$50 million in cash in his luggage-74 US and NATO troops died that month. The claims of millions of school children now attending school, including millions of girls, have been exposed to just be made up numbers. The great majority of schools and healthcare centers that were supposedly built, as much as maybe 80% of them, don't exist, can't be found or are empty, while the triumphant claim that life expectancy for Afghans increased by twenty years has shown to be, in the words of the SIGAR director, John Sopko, "baloney".

Similarly the idea Afghan women are better off now than under the Taliban exists more in public relations statements than it does in reality for many Afghan women. While the lives of women under Taliban rule was horrific, and in some places in Afghanistan, such as parts of Kabul, women have experienced much better lives, the truth is the attitudes and

actions towards women of many of the men the US put and kept in power after 2001 were and are not much different than the Taliban. Many of the rules the Taliban enforced against women, such as the requirement to wear a head to toe burqa, had been put in place by the misogynist leaders of the groups the Taliban were fighting in the 1990s, again, the people the US put into power after 2001. Under the Karzai and Ghani administrations women have committed mass numbers of suicides, including through self-immolation, in areas controlled by the Afghan government due to laws put in place by the government, including laws allowing men to legally rape their wives, and by a society were nearly 90% of Afghan women experience domestic violence.

Ultimately it is women who suffer the most in war and all the slogans put forth by the war's apologists about how much they care about women can not overcome the truth that millions of Afghan women must deal with the consequences, actual or potential, of the hot iron, lead and metal that tears apart the flesh and lives of their children. If the generals, spokespeople and think-tank experts, almost all of whom are funded, directly or indirectly, by the defense industry, were so interested in the welfare of women in Afghanistan they would be working to end the violence that terrorizes, ruins and ends the lives of those women and their children and prohibits any development or progress, including advancements in women's rights, from occurring.

Those we have put and kept in power in Afghanistan constitute a brutal kleptocracy

Besides the Pentagon and the defense companies, and al-Qaeda and ISIS, the only other people who have benefited from the wars since 2001 have been the corrupt leaders we have put and kept in power in places like Afghanistan. Every Afghan election has been thoroughly fraudulent and riddled with vote rigging and ballot theft on a mass scale. The last presidential election in 2014 was so crooked that an extra-constitutional position of co-president was created to prevent a civil war erupting amongst the Afghan constituencies that support the government, while in the most recent parliamentary elections, more than three months ago now, the "irregularities" were so blatant results still have not been released.

I personally witnessed the 2009 Afghan presidential election. Tens of thousands of US and NATO troops were rushed to Afghanistan prior to the election to ensure a "free and fair" contest. In the late spring and summer prior to those elections hundreds of them died and thousands more were wounded, many of them permanently. How many thousands of Afghans died we will never know. The Pashtun people in southern and eastern Afghanistan, just as the Sunni Iraqis did in 2004 (another electoral charade I was present

for) boycotted the election, although US officials would say they did not vote because of “security concerns”. I ended up that day at an Afghan Army base where an unauthorized polling location had been opened at the last minute, just one of many “irregularities” that day. The boxes were stuffed by obedient soldiers. My report of this back to the Embassy in Kabul was disregarded because this was not an official voting location so such ballot stuffing did not count – the logic that supports many of the lies of the war would be impossible to make up if such logic and its realizations did not actually exist. Later that day I would overhear, through my translator, the Afghan brigade commander for the province telephone a subordinate and order his soldiers to conduct the same ballot stuffing. The vote theft was brazen, and the dead numbered in the thousands, and the same has occurred for every [election](#) and every year of our occupation in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the Afghan government and military have been the key figures in the Afghan drug trade, not just the Taliban. Indeed much of the fighting over the last many years in places like Helmand Province can be attributed [to a battle for control](#) over the vast tracts of poppy fields. The drug trade is [not confined to low or local levels of the military and the police](#), but has extended and continues to extend to the [most senior men in government](#), and this has been evident [throughout the duration](#) of our occupation of Afghanistan. When I was in Afghanistan the biggest drug baron in southern Afghanistan was President Karzai’s brother [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#) (AWK), the biggest in eastern Afghanistan was the governor of Nangahar Province, [Gul Agha Sherzai](#), in the north various warlords the US worked with ran the drug trade including the Governor of Balkh Province [Atta Mohammad Noor](#), and in Kabul, [Mohammed Qasim “Marshall” Fahim](#), for whom the Afghan military officers training academy is now named and who was the Afghan Vice President, was famous for using Afghan military aircraft to transport drugs out of Afghanistan. Sherzai, now the Minister of Border and Tribal Affairs, and Noor still control their drug fiefdoms, while AWK and Fahim are dead but have been replaced by drug syndicates within the Afghan government. The detailing of the criminality and gangsterism of the Afghan Government is endless, maybe best described by the [General Rashid Dostum](#), President Ghani’s vice president, who is accused of massive war crimes in the years following 9/11 and who was forced to flee Afghanistan in 2017 after [kidnapping and raping a political opponent](#).

Sherzai serves as a good case study for the insanity of the US war in Afghanistan. In the early 1990s Sherzai ruled as a warlord/governor in Kandahar. His barbaric rule can be counted as one of the defining factors in the [rise of the Taliban](#) after 1994 (the Taliban

received a great deal of popular support as an antidote to the murder, rape and banditry of the warlords). In 2001, after the US ousted the Taliban, the US put Sherzai back in power in Kandahar – the very man who’s brutality helped create the Taliban we placed back in power. Sherzai’s rule was again murderous, and was now supplemented by American soldiers and money. Sarah Chayes, the former NPR correspondent, gives a heartbreaking detailing of Sherzai’s rule in her masterful *[The Punishment of Virtue](#)*. Sherzai would follow on his rule in Kandahar with time in Kabul as the Minister of Housing and Minister of Public Works before becoming governor of economically important Nangahar Province on the Pakistan border. Nangahar, along with Kandahar, had traditionally been a large source of poppy production for the narcotics trade. At this time, when I met him, Sherzai’s corruption and use of torture and violence, as well as his keeping of [dancing boys](#), young slaves used for sexual pleasure and dominance, was well known by the US government. This however was shrugged off in Kabul and Washington with cavalier and smug excuses that war is a dirty business. Sherzai, who was invited and attended Barack Obama’s inauguration in 2009 as an official guest, cultivated a romanticized following among officials within the State Department and US Embassy who adoringly and reverentially viewed him as a Tony Soprano like figure – he was the very embodiment of the [Dark Side](#) Dick Cheney had advocating embracing.

Sherzai, who resided in the former Summer Palace of the Afghan Kings in Jalalabad, was indeed charming and gracious, I met him twice, but he knew full well the manipulation and control he had over the US government. There was a [poppy eradication program](#) in place in 2009, one of many programs that have constituted the nearly \$10 billion spent on drug eradication efforts in Afghanistan (the cost has been more than just financial, one of my friends, a fellow company commander in the Marine Corps, [Michael Weston](#), was killed in Afghanistan while posted there as a DEA agent). This program in particular offered \$10 million in cash to governors who succeeded in eradicating a certain level of poppy crop. Sherzai through his family and due to his lingering power in Kandahar had significant poppy field holdings and drug trade involvement in southern Afghanistan. Now with the backing of the Afghan and US governments and the DEA Sherzai was able to muscle his competition in eastern Afghanistan. Those who wanted to cooperate with him in their poppy production and drug trafficking could survive, those who did not want to pay him had their fields eradicated. Utilizing Afghan and US resources Sherzai could co-opt or destroy his competition and was rewarded for doing so with \$10 million courtesy of US taxpayers (I am quite certain this happened multiple years).

To make the claim that we are supporting the guys in the white hats in Afghanistan even more criminally ludicrous, the Afghan security forces, be it the army, the police, or the intelligence services [consistently torture prisoners](#) as a matter of routine practice in addition to being themselves involved in the drug trade. This has, unsurprisingly, received not very much attention from the US Congress and press. What has received attention, but for which little has been done, except for the US issuing actual and de facto waivers to the government of Afghanistan and its security forces for the [Leahy Amendment](#) and [Child Soldiers Prevention Act](#), has been the widespread keeping of [child sex slaves](#) by Afghan military and police officers. Some US military personnel, so disgusted by the overt keeping of child sex slaves, took [matters into their own hands](#), only to be relieved of command and forced out of the military. For US generals and the Congress, Afghan military and police officers keeping child sex slaves is entirely worth the end purposes of “The Good War”, whatever end purposes those may be. As Vonnegut said: *So it goes...*

Afghanistan as a necessary safe haven for another 9/11 is a myth

The most fervent argument against peace, the one that has carried forth the US war in Afghanistan from its start in 2001, has been that a military presence, and the requisite massive land war, is necessary to prevent another 9/11. How quick are the facts of 9/11 and al-Qaeda forgotten and how easily jettisoned is critical thought when this argument is offered and accepted.

First, none of the hijackers involved in the September 11 attacks were Afghans, nor was anyone involved in the planning or logistics. More so the attacks were [led](#) and [planned](#) primarily in Pakistan and Germany. Training and planning did occur in camps in Afghanistan, but Khaled Sheik Mohammad (KSM), the mastermind of the attacks, was based in Pakistan and that is where he did the majority of his planning and training, while the leadership of the hijackers lived and planned in Hamburg, Germany in what was known as the “[kitchen of the September 11 operation](#)”. KSM was [captured](#) in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, the same town as the Pakistani military headquarters (Osama bin Laden was of course killed in Abbottabad, the same town as the Pakistani military academy). The man responsible for the logistics of the 9/11 operation [never left Germany](#) until a few days before the attacks. Additional planning and preparations took place in [Malaysia](#), [Spain](#) and possibly [Dubai](#). Of course, the most important “safe havens” for the hijackers were the [US flight schools](#) and [martial arts gyms](#) they attended while in the US. It’s important to remember that some of the attackers were in the US for more than 18 months before the

9/11 attacks and that it seems all of the attackers spent more time in the US than they did in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Not that it matters much where the attackers planned and trained as planning and training for these types of attacks requires nothing more than an apartment, hotel room or basement. Understanding these attacks and what actually goes into them exposes the idea of the necessity of safe havens as nothing more than a necessary myth to propagate *the global war on terror* or as the Pentagon likes to call it: [The Long War](#) (which along with the Greater Middle East also now includes Russia and China in US war plans). None of the arguments for war in Afghanistan to prevent another 9/11 speak of the [well defined role of Saudi Arabia](#), and possibly [Dubai](#), in financing and facilitating the attacks. Without the Saudi involvement in particular the attacks would have been impossible.

Those who utilize 9/11 to fear monger in an attempt to silence critics of the war or proponents of peace brazenly neglect the failure the wars have been. On and after 9/11 al-Qaeda was between [200](#) and [400](#) people strong world-wide. [For reading on the strained relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda in 2001 I strongly recommend Felix Kuehn and Alex Strick van Linschoten's [An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan](#)] Over the last seventeen years al-Qaeda and its successor, ISIS, has grown to number in the tens of thousands with branches and affiliates across the globe. Today the US is in combat operations in [fourteen](#) countries while conducting counter-terrorism operations in sixty-five countries to ostensibly defeat al-Qaeda and ISIS. Bombing that kills, maims and make homeless tens of thousands each year from US aircraft and drones is daily in not just Afghanistan and Iraq, but in Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. Countries across the Middle East and Africa, most especially Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, have been torn apart by civil wars and fighting that have at least some, if not all, of their genesis in US military and CIA activities since 2001. At times al-Qaeda, ISIS and their allies have controlled and commanded large swathes of land, including major cities, threatened to overthrow governments in nations both aligned and unaligned to the US, and committed mass-scale atrocities and genocide. How can any person with any degree of intellectual honesty look at the US strategy and operations against al-Qaeda and "terrorism" over the last decade and a half and argue that more of the same is what is required?

Peace has been possible in Afghanistan

What has been said repeatedly since 2001 regarding the Taliban is that they have been uninterested in peace talks or negotiations. This is untrue.

Yes, there are some elements of the Taliban which have been against peace talks and negotiation, but there have been many members and parts of the Taliban that have been interested in talking. However, this goes against the profit benefits of an unending war, as well as the political need for President Obama to be not just a war time president but a victorious war time president, something the George W. Bush and the Republicans could not claim (see Bob Woodward's [Obama Wars](#) and refer to Hilary Clinton and her [hawkish role](#) as Secretary of State, as a necessary part of her [pre-campaign](#) for president, pushing for war in not just [Afghanistan](#), but in [Libya](#) as well).

In the immediate aftermath of the US invasion major figures and parts of the Taliban sought to surrender. They were rebuffed as it was victory that was being sought by the US and their Afghan warlord allies, not reconciliation and peace. In the years following 2001, members of the Taliban who sought to surrender and reconcile were instead hunted down and killed. Those who were not killed were forced across the border into Pakistan or Iran. [Anand Gopal's reporting](#) on this is excellent and necessary for understanding how the Afghan War came to be unending post-2001.

In the final years of the Bush presidency and in the first year or two of Obama's presidency the Taliban made overtures to peace and negotiations. Middle Eastern and Central and South Asian media reported the Taliban interest in talks, but these reports were rarely, if ever, picked up by Western media. The Taliban suggested negotiations via social media, including Facebook posts, and Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, in his annual Eid messages would include comments about beginning a process of talks to lead to peace and reconciliation, these overtures, accompanied with the demand for foreign forces to leave, an understandable call by an insurgency, continued even after the US escalation of the war in 2009. None of this was even acknowledged, let alone considered, by the US government. In 2016 the *New York Times*, whose editorial page has been a continual supporter of the war over the last seventeen years [until](#) just this month, [reported](#) that in 2007 and 2008 Norwegian negotiators had been meeting directly with Mullah Omar (until this reporting it had been believed Mullah Omar had never met with any Westerner) and that a framework for peace was being advanced. This opportunity was scuttled in 2009 by the Obama Administration's escalation of the war, an escalation that was justified by President Obama because according to him and the US government the Taliban were not interested in peace. [Sherard Cowper-Coles](#), Britain's ambassador and special representative to Afghanistan from 2007 to 2010, whom I met in Richard Holbrooke's suite at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City in 2009 and who praised me for my

resignation letter, described the main impediment to negotiations during his many year tenure in Afghanistan as the American military and the “reality of the American Republic”. Cowper-Coles, after leaving Afghanistan, experienced: *an appalling sense of sadness and tragedy and, above all, the sense that otherwise intelligent people were living one big, bright shining lie.*

During my time in Afghanistan I first hand saw a willingness to negotiate by elements of the Taliban. While in Nangahar Province in the spring of 2009 we were approached by representatives of Hezbi Islami Gulbuddin, one of three principal blocks of the Taliban (the Taliban is not monolithic and is composed of dozens if not hundreds of locally organized insurgencies that fall under the umbrella of larger, regional insurgencies whose leadership is based in Pakistan, which are then included under the overall broader designation that we call the Taliban). My instruction from the Embassy was clear: disregard, we do not negotiate or are involved with reconciliation. Reconciliation, according to the US government, was only to be conducted by the Afghan Government, a government that only existed and remained in power due to the backing of the US and NATO: so, because of this backing from the world’s lone superpower, it was a government that was never going to willingly negotiate on its own, why would it? – again the logic that sustains the lies of the war is brilliant in its speciousness. On multiple occasions interlocutors from the insurgency were rebuffed and when US army commanders asked about how the war ends without negotiation they received no answer.

Later in my time in Afghanistan I moved to the southern province of Zabul. Here too I met with Taliban interlocutors, and more than likely some Taliban themselves. My instructions were the same: do nothing. Throughout the war the US has insisted on three preconditions for the Taliban prior to talks: 1. Lay down their weapons, 2. Renounce links to al-Qaeda, and 3. Embrace the Afghan Constitution. Renouncing their links to al-Qaeda the Taliban have done, in one form or another, since 2001. Just as the Taliban put out feelers for talks in the Middle Eastern and Central/South Asian press that were never acknowledged by the US government, so has their renunciation of ties to al-Qaeda been ignored. The remaining two preconditions, if followed by the Taliban, would, in effect, have meant their surrender. As I was told several times in Zabul when discussing with interlocutors, and again maybe the Taliban themselves, and has been repeated to me by men in the US with ties to the Taliban: “we are tired of fighting, my father fought and now my sons are fighting; I do not want my grandsons to fight, but we are not going to surrender”. Couple this with the fact that it was not until eleven years after the US invasion that Taliban were allowed safe

passage to negotiate (meaning that if they identified themselves they would find their vehicle the target of a drone and its Hellfire missiles – and even in the last few years they have been consistently targeted) and it is clear that US protestations for a willingness and a desire for peace may well have been the grandest and bloodiest lie of them all.

Peace. Cut through all the lies, and there it is right in front of you.

It is true that there are hundreds of thousands of well paid men and women in the US because of this war, many of whom can now afford beach homes and BMWs, and, yes, it is true there are hundreds of politicians who subsist on the unholy campaign contributions that come from the war machine. Aside from these mercenary beneficiaries can someone point to any thing worthwhile from these wars?

What should be apparent to observers of the war in Afghanistan is that the willingness for peace from the US and its allies has not existed. The reasons are multiple: there is too much money being made; the political advantages of a victory presidency are too great; the vainglorious egos of the generals and those in think tanks, backed financially by the defense industry, are too strong; there may be a great deal of money in minerals to be made in Afghanistan; while the yearly record amounts of drugs grown and exported are enriching the Afghan government and security forces, as well as local, regional and international banks; and if you are the corrupt, decadent Afghan government, with the US as your benefactor, why seek peace? What should also be clear, and damning, is how quickly and easily the recent peace talks have moved forward. With seemingly minimal effort over the span of a few meetings a framework for peace appears possible. All that, tragically, seems to have been required was the willingness of the US government to talk.

What a waste

The saddest epilogue to this essay and to this war is that none of this was necessary. It has all has been a waste.

Blood, flesh, bone, sinew, organs...ground up and thrown, as if by some spectral ghastly hand and shovel, into a furnace of oblivion and nothingness. EB Sledge, a US Marine who fought in the 20th Century's Good War, wrote about his experiences as an infantryman amidst all the killing and dying. In *With the Old Breed*, over and over again, haunted by the dead and the loss of their futures, Sledge summarizes what he saw with the words: *what a waste*.

Yes, what a waste indeed.

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