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## Admitting Defeat in Afghanistan: American “State-Building” Fails Again



Photograph Source: The U.S. Army – Public Domain

So Rudyard Kipling’s arithmetic came to pass after all. ‘Strike hard who cares—shoot straight who can/ The odds are on the cheaper man.’ The U.S. has thrown in the towel. Another ‘superpower’ is set to depart Afghanistan. The symbolic date of September 11 is meant to have a ring of finality to it. It should: a trillion dollars later, the United States has failed in all its war aims.

Eschewing historical and scholarly knowledge, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was their first mistake. However impelled you feel to invade the fulcrum state, you should always

count to ten. Some units entering the country will have passed Gandamak, where a British army was massacred in 1842. Few American soldiers will have noted the landmark.

U.S. withdrawals tend to be attended by even worse conditions than those they found on invading. In Afghanistan, almost 40 million people survive, and manage to navigate through the carnage. They live today as they did in 2001 and 1981, in a state shorn of security, pulverized and cratered.

George W. Bush's stated aims were the destruction of al-Qaeda and the removal of the Taliban from power. That was in 2001, two decades ago. Today, the situation is arguably worse. The Taliban have control of, or are contesting, the majority of the country. al-Qaeda affiliated personnel are still embedded in their ranks. The Kabul government controls perhaps a third of the country's 407 municipal districts.

Then, in 2002, the war aims were updated. The new goals were to defeat the Taliban's military forces, and to build robust state institutions that would ensure Afghanistan's future peace and prosperity. Yet the Taliban have not been defeated. They remain to this day the real power in Afghanistan, a fact belatedly acknowledged by Washington. The ersatz institutions created were flat-pack, off-the-shelf, standard State Department fare with a nod to the traditional deliberative *jirgas*. These new institutions, such as the Afghan supreme court, were simulacra, often peopled by incompetents who'd called in a favour, and as often inquorate or packed with 'acting' placeholder members. Most of all, they were and are vectors for graft on a mind-boggling scale. At state level, the ghost battalions, the gasoline and arms and ammunition skimming, the engorged construction invoices, were and are normative. Drug abuse within the national army remains prevalent, and the average monthly death toll in the army and police force over the years has been more than 800. Both army and police units are riddled with Taliban infiltrators, who sometimes kill effective officers, and desertion is common if not rampant.

Surely Barack Obama would end the conflict? No. The war aims morphed once more in 2008, to straight-up 'counterinsurgency' and protecting the population from the Taliban, targets self-evidently missed. For 'counterinsurgency' read 'we don't control the countryside'. while Taliban attacks have continued, with varying levels of ferocity. Much of NATO's 10,000-odd contingent remain in their barracks as they have done since 2014, which is one way of avoiding the bad PR of casualties.

*John Clamp writes for [Maqshosh](#).*

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