

**Statement of Dr. Alexis Albion to the Afghanistan War Commission
July 19, 2024**

Chairpersons Chaudhary and Jackson, Members of the Commission –

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you regarding your review of key decisions related to the war in Afghanistan. You have taken on an immense and important task.

I am an historian. For almost 30 years I have researched and written about intelligence history, as a scholar and as a museum curator. But I've also had the opportunity to play my own modest role in intelligence history.

I was a staff member of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, better known as the 9/11 Commission. In that capacity I was part of a small team tasked with looking at US counterterrorism policy leading up to and following the terror attacks. My portfolio focused on the CIA. After the Commission delivered its report, I continued to work with the Commissioners to ensure the implementation of the recommendations in the 9/11 Report, most importantly through the passage of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. I also served as a Strategist in the Office of Counterterrorism at the US State Department, helping to advance US counterterrorism policy; and as an assistant to the President of the World Bank where, among many other things, I worked on bringing security and development to fragile states.

My career as a historian, then, has bridged both academic and policy worlds. And if there is a common theme running across both those worlds, it is the challenge of telling an accurate and compelling story to audiences, inside and outside government, about something incredibly complicated.

You have this same challenge. A comprehensive review of key decisions involved in this nation's longest war is a formidable task. I believe, however, that is also a necessary and important one. I'd like to briefly explain why, and offer some words of advice and encouragement.

This Commission has a unique opportunity to provide a holistic perspective of US involvement in the war in Afghanistan. It is an opportunity to tell an authoritative history. A foundational history.

There have been many books already written about the war. There will be many more. They will draw on your report, come to different conclusions, provide a variety of interpretations of decisions and events. No doubt, there will also be more facts that emerge after you deliver your report, more documents and more voices providing additional information and new perspectives.

This Commission's report will not be the last word on US involvement in Afghanistan. But it can serve an extremely important role as the first word: a reliable and authoritative account that is the starting point for readers of all kinds—students, scholars, journalists, and the public in general—who want to understand this critical part of our nation's history.

I still remember clearly my first staff meeting at the 9/11 Commission, when our Executive Director described the Commissioners' vision for a report that would be in every school and library in the country. A report used in classrooms and sold in paperback at bookstores. I must admit, I thought this was, in a word, crazy. Up to that point, government reports usually sat on shelves, gathering dust, and I don't mean the shelves at Barnes & Noble.

I was wrong, of course, and the Commissioners were right. They succeeded in producing a foundational narrative which, I think it is fair to say, is still the starting point for anyone who wants to understand what happened and why on September 11, 2001.

There are significant differences between this Commission and the 9/11 Commission, in particular how this Commission was created, the scope of your work, and the context in which you are carrying it out.

But important similarities give you the opportunity to write a report that can provide a foundational history for the US war in Afghanistan.

This Commission is independent and bipartisan—essential factors if the American people are to accept your findings as authoritative. The 9/11 Commission's greatest success was, perhaps, the unanimity of the Commissioners around the report and its findings.

And this Commission has strong authorities to access the necessary documents and people across the government—essential if the American people are to accept your findings as fact-based. Because to write a foundational history, that foundation must be rock solid. It must be supported by rigorous historical research and analysis based on the available facts. You must get the story right.

Some of the most important areas of inquiry will involve looking at how decisions get made in government. As a scholar and a practitioner, I have found that this can be an exceptionally difficult question to answer. You will need to look across and within departments and agencies to understand the range of perspectives at different levels of the decision-making process,

Let me give you an example from my own investigation of the CIA and 9/11. A key question I needed to answer was: Did the US government ever have the opportunity and the authority to kill Osama bin Ladin before 9/11? I found entirely different answers to that question from people in different parts of government—whether the CIA, the White House, or on the ground in Afghanistan—and even from people within the same agency. The question of authorities was particularly tricky, because, as I discovered, the same words can mean different things to different people. To get to the bottom of it all involved first hunting down some of the most sensitive documents in the government, and then finding out what they meant to people all along the decision-making chain—from the lawyers who drafted the authorities, to the President who signed them, to the people tasked with carrying them out.

I would suggest that your investigation will, similarly, be less a linear process and more an iterative one: recreating what happened based on documents, using interviews to fill in the gaps, returning to the archives to verify witness statements, and then sometimes going back to witnesses again.

Getting the story right is only one of the tasks in front of you. You will then need to relate it as clearly and comprehensively as possible, draw lessons learned, and make recommendations based upon your fact-finding. The 9/11 Commissioners strongly believed that if they were going to write a foundational historical account, every fact and conclusion had to be easily referenced to its source. It is the reason why their report has over 100 pages of endnotes.

They also knew that the weight of their conclusions and recommendations would be measured by how directly they emerged from the facts of the 9/11 story itself.

One of the most impactful recommendations of the Commission was the creation of a Director of National Intelligence or DNI. That was not a new idea. But the 9/11 story provided a clear argument for stronger leadership at the top of the intelligence community—an argument that, the Commissioners believed, could overcome resistance to change and challenges to authority and budgets. They were right.

It's worth noting that not all the 9/11 Commission's conclusions point toward changes in government processes or structures that required rethinking or legislation. Some were aimed at helping readers understand the nature of the terrorist threat and counterterrorism strategy. One recommendation, for example, put forward the need to identify actual and potential sanctuaries where terrorist groups could set up training camps, organize, and plan attacks. That "recommendation" reinforced what the US government was already thinking. But it came right out of the 9/11 story, and tried to help readers connect history with the government's current global counterterrorism strategy.

Your own recommendations will have the greater impact if they flow directly from the facts of the story that you tell about the war in Afghanistan. But I urge you to not just look at the past—a past that will not be replicated—but to think about how the story you tell can help readers better understand the present, and, of course, be applied in the future.

I hope these remarks have been interesting and useful to you, and can help provide some framework for the investigation you are undertaking.

Your Commission's work is important. As with the 9/11 Commission, you are telling the history of an event that has touched many lives. That gives you a great responsibility to ensure that you get the story right. But it also provides an opportunity for you to reach many people by writing an authoritative history that can serve as a foundation for people's understanding of the war in Afghanistan, and for the books and studies that are still to come.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today. And I am happy to answer any questions that you might have. Thank you.