

Afghanistan War Commission to Examine Roots of Afghanistan War

First Public Hearing

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Past, Present, Future: Why Revisiting the Afghanistan War Matters

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Distinguished Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen,

As an Afghan deeply connected to the history and future of my country, I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts on why a review of the war in Afghanistan is crucial and how the war has affected our national aspirations for a better future.

For two decades, Afghanistan's political, social, and economic lives were closely tied to decisions made by the United States. The war and the partnership left an indelible mark on our country. The tragedy of 9/11 brought to light the long-lasting pain of millions of Afghans who had been neglected for too long. Afghans, the victims of Cold War rivalry and poor national leadership, found relief in the presence of U.S. forces in their country in November 2001. The end of the Taliban's first rule and the subsequent support from the U.S. transformed millions of lives. However, the war also brought pain, despair, and lost opportunities.

Looking back over the past two decades, we see a fascinating story of success and failure, from which we can draw critical lessons. The story of Afghan women reclaiming and expanding their rights, denied by the Taliban, was a highlight of that period. The rapid integration of women's rights and human rights into Afghanistan's social, political, and legislative discourses is an encouraging lesson learned.

Advocates of a democratic system in Afghanistan found allies in the U.S. and international partners. Their tireless advocacy resulted in constitutional guarantees, including freedom of media and speech, and helped develop an active civil society. The rapid expansion of public services, for example from fewer than 30,000 teachers to over 260,000 in 2021, with over 50% female representation, was a testament to institutional building. By 2020, a vibrant, dynamic, and hopeful post-2001 generation, educated both in Afghanistan and abroad, began entering the workforce. Equipped with knowledge and technology and aware of global happenings, they aspired to a better future for their country.

However, the war also brought significant pain. The quest for revenge post-9/11 and the counter-terrorism strategy that relaxed rules of engagement caused unnecessary suffering among Afghan civilians, especially in rural areas. Homes and villages were destroyed, and many civilians lost their lives. The U.S. and its allies, held to higher standards by Afghans, at times fell short in their conduct. The strategy of arrests and indefinite detentions, often without due process, undermined the goals of establishing the rule of law and access to justice. Misunderstandings, such as the case of a 68-year-old detained for a long time in Bagram because of a translator's misinterpretation, highlight the profound consequences of rushed actions.

Prioritizing short-term, fighting season-bound military objectives over long-term governance and development led to missed opportunities. The failure to adopt lessons from past experiences like the Vietnam War resulted in twenty times-over yearly strategies that diverted attention from sustainable development.

Additionally, the policy of pushing against demands for justice and accountability for past crimes empowered bad actors and gave rise to corruption, disillusioning many Afghans. This approach, based on flawed assumptions about the benefits of empowering "bad actors," undermined long-term goals of strengthening state institutions.

There are many questions about the impact of negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, particularly the absence of the Afghan government and the public messaging that elevated the Taliban to the status of a credible actor, contributing to the collapse of the Afghan republic. Transparency is owed to Afghans regarding the decisions and actions taken during that process. Understanding the root causes of this monumental failure by Afghan and U.S. leaders is essential for Afghans, both in the country and in the diaspora, to heal and move forward.

The Taliban's campaign of fear, violence, and disregard for the lives of Afghans is well documented. This, combined with the proxy wars conducted by regional actors like Pakistan and others, must be an inseparable part of the assessment of the context in which Afghans and our allies were operating at the time. The failure to prevent or mitigate their double standards and deception was likely one of the most significant diplomatic failures of the last two decades, warranting further study.

The commission's work can help families of war victims and those who paid the ultimate sacrifices, to understand what happened and why, that after two decades and despite all the sacrifices, they ended up under the same brutal regime. The collapse of the republic generated shock and grief within the Afghan populace, leaving them traumatized and angry at their own political leaders for their profound failure. They also embraced the view that their lives and fate once again did not matter while decisions were made in Washington. Afghans will eagerly look for an objective, fair and transparent examination of this endgame.

I urge the commission to also review two additional areas:

1. Examine the role of diplomats in managing complex relations. Both President Karzai and President Ghani began as close allies of the United States, but within a term in office, the divide and distrust between them and the U.S. grew. How key diplomats managed the relationship that led to this distrust may educate future similar situations.
2. Explore whether there was only one path to withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, which involved negotiating with the Taliban through the controversial Doha deal. Or, could the U.S. have withdrawn its forces securely without undermining the partner it supported for two decades through significant investments of blood and resources?

In conclusion, I believe this commission's work is the least we can do to honor the sacrifices of over 100,000 Afghan men and women in uniform, thousands of U.S. and coalition partners, and the dreams of millions of Afghan women who are now living under a brutal apartheid regime. I wish you patience and foresightedness as you compile this painful but necessary story.