

Statement of Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, USA, Ret.
“The Afghanistan Papers – Costs and Benefits of America’s Longest War”
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I want to begin my testimony with an overview of how I see the situation in Afghanistan, before turning to the personal experiences in the Army that led me to my dire assessment.

Following 9/11, the United States was right to target and destroy Al-Qaeda and the Taliban government which harbored those radical terrorists. After a decisive victory over Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, however, policymakers should have ended the U.S. military mission and brought the troops home. The terrorist organization had been rendered operationally ineffective and the Taliban utterly destroyed as a fighting force. There was no viable enemy left to fight at that point and by all rights we should have withdrawn our military at that time.

Instead, Washington pursued a social engineering, nation building effort in Afghanistan that was unnecessary for America’s security and doomed to strategic failure. We confused our security needs with ambitious hopes for the Afghan state.¹ After nearly two decades of trying and failing to build a viable central government in Afghanistan, it is well past time to withdraw U.S. forces and focus on higher defense priorities.

Afghanistan's internal political order is a separate matter unrelated to U.S. security; a pro-U.S. government there would be a nice thing to have but not something worth fighting an “endless war” to preserve. Spending \$20 to \$45 billion annually on Afghanistan undermines U.S. prosperity and security—and it adds to our \$23 trillion national debt.

Countering terrorist threats in Afghanistan does not require permanent U.S. ground forces. America’s global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and strike (ISR-Strike) capabilities are more sophisticated today than ever before; terrorist communications and training facilities are more easily detected and monitored. The U.S. military can identify, target, and eliminate direct threats anywhere around the globe, even in Afghanistan.

Prior to 9/11, Washington lacked the political will to approve missions to kill terrorists who were actively plotting attacks against the United States—that is no longer the case today. Terrorist recruitment, training, and direction in cyberspace is a different challenge and is at best tangentially related to military ground operations.

Ending the war best serves U.S. interests. Far from creating a vacuum, our departure would put more burden and responsibility on regional neighbors. Afghanistan is no prize to be won for other powers. Withdrawal would encourage regional powers, like India, Pakistan, Iran, or even Russia and China—with their own divergent interests—to expend resources to manage Afghanistan’s problems rather than U.S. taxpayers and soldiers.

¹ Benjamin H. Friedman, “Exiting Afghanistan,” Defense Priorities (August 2019), <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/exiting-afghanistan>.

We must acknowledge that America long ago achieved all it can in Afghanistan. Continued military intervention there drains U.S. power, expending resources better invested in modernizing the military and preparing for potential great power competition. The most prudent course of action is to draw down all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan. We should of course maintain diplomatic relations and other forms of productive engagement with Kabul, but ground combat operations should come to an end.

What I Saw in 2010 and 2011

In November 2010, I deployed to Afghanistan at the height of President Obama's famous surge when more than 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops were deployed in combat operations. Prior to my arrival, numerous U.S. generals and senior Administration officials testified before Congress, and gave interviews to media, declaring the United States was winning the war, that we were "on the right azimuth," and that although the fight was difficult, we would prevail.

My duties with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force took me on operations into every significant area of the country where our soldiers engaged the enemy. Over the course of 12 months, I traversed more than 9,000 miles and talked, traveled, and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, and many other key provinces.

What I personally saw on the ground bore no resemblance to the rosy official statements made by so many of those leaders. To the contrary, it was obvious—painfully so—that we were not winning, we were not making progress, and no matter how many troops we sent, the war could never be won. The eight years since I made those observations have only reinforced that conclusion. Unless we end this war on our own terms and withdraw our troops, we'll continue paying a high price for certain failure.

The exhaustive work of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) over the past decade has graphically detailed how the war has failed, and many military and foreign policy experts have explained why—after an initial military victory over Al-Qaeda and the Taliban—the war was lost at the strategic level. I would like to provide additional, on-the-ground context about why the war failed, was always going to fail, and regardless of how many more decades of troops we sacrifice or dollars we spend, can never be won.

I will reference examples from operations I conducted over the course of 2010-11 and in key parts of the east, southeast, and south of the country, which will paint a comprehensive picture of why military force cannot secure victory in Afghanistan as we define it—a self-sufficient, democratic state that respects human rights.

I will also share excerpts from a letter I wrote to a friend while I was in the heat of the Afghan summer in 2011. These data points should clarify why there is a fatal mismatch between the political ends Washington is pursuing in Afghanistan and the means used to accomplish them.

The bottom line is a counterinsurgency campaign of the type we are conducting in Afghanistan will not result in the defeat of a political ideology—which the Taliban are. No matter how long

we tried, how badly we wanted to succeed, or how righteous the cause, we will never win this kind of unconventional war in a nation for which democracy and a strong central government are foreign concepts.

In January 2011, I made my first trip into the mountains of Kunar province near the Pakistan border to visit the troops of 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry. On a patrol to the northernmost U.S. position in eastern Afghanistan, we arrived at an Afghan National Police (ANP) station that had reported being attacked by the Taliban two and a half hours earlier.

Through the interpreter, I asked the police captain where the attack originated, and he pointed to the side of a nearby mountain.

“What are your normal procedures in situations like these?” I asked. “Do you form up a squad and go after them? Do you periodically send out harassing patrols? What do you do?”

As the interpreter conveyed my questions, the captain turned to me with an incredulous expression and laughed out loud.

“No! We don’t go after them,” he said. “That would be dangerous!”

According to the cavalry troopers, the Afghan policemen rarely left the cover of the checkpoints. In that part of the province, the Taliban ran free. Though we had 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops in the country, there were vast swaths of the country, even then, in which we had not the slightest influence, much less control.

In June, I was in the Zharay district of Kandahar province. While returning to base from a dismounted patrol and just as I was about to enter the gate to our base, I heard gunshots ring out across the meadow—the Taliban had attacked a U.S. checkpoint about one mile away.

As I entered the company’s headquarters, the commander and his staff were watching a live video feed of the battle on cameras mounted on poles far above the camp. Two Afghan National Police vehicles were blocking the main road leading to the site of the attack. The fire was coming from behind a haystack, and we watched as two Afghan men emerged from it, mounted a motorcycle and began moving toward the Afghan policemen in their vehicles.

The U.S. commander turned around and told the Afghan radio operator to make sure the policemen realized Taliban were headed their way and to be ready to capture or kill them. The radio operator shouted into the radio repeatedly, but got no answer.

On the screen, we watched as the two men slowly motored past the ANP vehicles. The policemen neither got out to stop the two men nor answered the radio—until the motorcycle was out of sight.

To a man, the U.S. officers in that unit told me that such incidents were common-place and that they had nothing but contempt for the Afghan troops in their area.

In August 2011, I went on a dismounted patrol with our troops in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province. Several troops from the unit had recently been killed in action, one of whom was a very popular and experienced soldier. One of the unit's senior officers rhetorically asked me, "How do I look these men in the eye and ask them to go out day after day on these missions? What's harder: How do I look [my soldier's] wife in the eye when I get back and tell her that her husband died for something meaningful? How do I do that?"²

One of the senior enlisted leaders added, "Guys are saying, 'I hope I live so I can at least get home to R&R leave before I get it,' or 'I hope I only lose a foot.' Sometimes they even say which limb it might be: 'Maybe it'll only be my left foot.' They don't have a lot of confidence that the leadership two levels up really understands what they're living here, what the situation really is."

On the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the U.S., I visited another unit in Kunar province, this one near the town of Asmar. I talked with the local official who served as the cultural adviser to the U.S. commander (and later became my friend). Here's how the conversation went:

Davis: "Here you have many units of the Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF]. Will they be able to hold out against the Taliban when U.S. troops leave this area?"

Adviser: "No. They are definitely not capable. Already all across this region [many elements of] the security forces have made deals with the Taliban. [The ANSF] won't shoot at the Taliban, and the Taliban won't shoot them.

"Also, when a Taliban member is arrested, he is soon released with no action taken against him.

"Recently, I got a cellphone call from a Talib who had captured a friend of mine. While I could hear, he began to beat him, telling me I'd better quit working for the Americans. I could hear my friend crying out in pain. [The Talib] said the next time they would kidnap my sons and do the same to them. Because of the direct threats, I've had to take my children out of school just to keep them safe.

"And last night, right on that mountain there [he pointed to a ridge overlooking the U.S. base, about 700 meters distant], a member of the ANP was murdered. The Taliban came and called him out, kidnapped him in front of his parents, and took him away and murdered him. He was a member of the ANP from another province and had come back to visit his parents. He was only 27 years old. The people are not safe anywhere."

That murder took place within view of the U.S. base, a post nominally responsible for the security of an area of hundreds of square kilometers. Imagine how insecure the population is beyond visual range. And yet that conversation was representative of what I saw in many regions of Afghanistan.

² These are not precise quotations that I recorded at the time, but rather my recollection of conversations.

In all of the places I visited, the tactical situation was bad to abysmal. If the events I have described—and many, many more I could mention—had been in the first year of war, or even the third or fourth, one might be willing to believe that Afghanistan was just a hard fight, and we should stick it out. Yet these incidents all happened in the tenth year of war.

These anecdotes were representative of what I saw throughout my time in Afghanistan. If I had seen mixed results—some good and some bad, there might have been room for cautious optimism. But I didn't. The stories I heard and the operations I observed consistently revealed a war that couldn't be won, an Afghan force that was never up to the task, and an enemy that was committed to pay whatever price necessary to bleed us dry.

My View of the War in 2012

In February 2012, upon returning from the deployment, I published an assessment³ of the Afghan war in the *Armed Forces Journal*. In it, I exposed the truth of what I have described above, that America's senior uniformed and government leaders had been systematically deceiving the American public and U.S. Congress, claiming success and progress where there was only regression and failure.

In language strikingly similar to that used by *The Washington Post* in its [Afghanistan Papers](#) eight years later, I asked

“How many more men must die in support of a mission that is not succeeding and behind an array of more than seven years of optimistic statements by U.S. senior leaders in Afghanistan? No one expects our leaders to always have a successful plan. But we do expect—and the men who do the living, fighting and dying deserve—to have our leaders tell us the truth about what's going on.”

Barely two days after my work went public, the commanding general of all U.S. ground troops in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, held a press conference at the Pentagon in which he was asked about my pessimistic assessment.⁴ Dismissing my assessment as being “one person's view of this,” he offered his own appraisal:

“I have seen steady progress across the country,” he said. “The Afghanistan government and partnership with the coalition has taken significant steps forward... We have the right plan. We have the momentum.”

Every year since the general's press conference, the truth has been very nearly the opposite:

- The Afghan government continues to rank as nearly the most corrupt government globally.

³ Daniel L. Davis, “Truth, Lies and Afghanistan,” *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2012),

⁴ Department of Defense, Press Briefing of Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, February 8, 2019, <https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4973>.

- Afghan leaders have steadily lost control of regions of their country since 2012 to insurgents.
- Afghanistan’s armed forces continue suffering unsustainable casualties. The Afghan Security Forces have suffered more than 28,000 casualties since 2015.⁵
- The Taliban have grown in strength to their greatest level since 2001, currently [estimated by CRS](#) at 60,000.⁶

Then there are the egregious costs to the United States.

Every day we delay in bringing this war to an end adds to the rolls of U.S. service members needlessly sacrificed, and we continue to pour scores \$20 to \$45 billion annually with no chance of reaping a positive return. If we do truly value the lives of our service personnel, if we genuinely do “support the troops,” we should demonstrate it with firm, resolute, and wise action—that means bringing an overdue end to this war on our terms. That requires no agreement from the Taliban or anyone else.

Conclusion

When I went public with my report in 2012, I did so expecting it would anger many senior leaders in the Army. I knew I was risking my career, which would affect both me and my family. I closed out my assessment by explaining I took the risk because the stakes were so high for both the military and our country. Most of what I warned against has come to pass in the intervening eight years, but sadly, the core of the risk remains as relevant today as it was in 2012:

“When it comes to deciding what matters are worth plunging our nation into war and which are not, our senior leaders owe it to the nation and to the uniformed members to be candid—graphically, if necessary—in telling them what’s at stake and how expensive potential success is likely to be. U.S. citizens and their elected representatives can decide if the risk to blood and treasure is worth it.”

“That is the very essence of civilian control of the military. The American people deserve better than what they’ve gotten from their senior uniformed leaders over the last number of years. Simply telling the truth would be a good start.”

In closing, I would like to share a segment of an email I wrote, as I reflected on the war while out on a mission in the summer of 2011. I sent it to a friend in Colorado I felt could understand my experience, as he was a Vietnam veteran.

Steve,

This morning on my way to chow the Taliban launched a mortar at the base which blew

⁵ Susannah George, “Casualties Increase among Afghan Security Forces as War Intensifies,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-security-forces-casualties-increase-as-war-intensifies/2019/10/30/8254e442-fb52-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html.

⁶ Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief,” Congressional Research Service, January 31, 2020, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45122.html>, p. 7.

up about 125m away from me. Not enough to physically harm me, but did lv my ears ringing for hrs. While waiting on a helo flight to the next unit HQ, I was reading the tales of heroism on my BlackBerry re the 30 killed last wknd in that helicopter crash.

A common theme among the quotes family and friends of the fallen had shared was the patriotism and love of country each had. It made for tragic but a heartwarming story for the readers. But to what end? For what purpose? For what 'greater good' did the 30 die for?

Even me; with just a difference of a few millimeters at the launch site of that mortar tube and I'm joining the 30 in a coffin of my own. While I frankly don't give a crap if I go out that way (part of the job, as u know so well yourself), the thot grieves me deeply when I think of how it would affect my sons.

What would they tell my sons their dad died for? What are any of those who survive told? Or even worse: what about those who get arms and/or legs blown off but aren't lucky enough to die and become a burden on their families? So what is all this remarkable sacrifice for?

Nothing.

We are here to keep fighting and dying so the clock can run out in 2014. That is the part that's so maddening.

Everyone knows we're in the fourth quarter and the clock is running out. Its sort of like 1952/3 in Korea. While the politicians bickered about how the armistice would b worked out in the halls of power, the troops on both sides just kept killing ea other ,conducting ops' for the sake of it. But this case is even more egregious because the politicians have already determined the outcome, but still we'll keep spilling their blood n they'll keep spilling ours.

this whole thing could b wrapped up now, in the next few months, we could end this war now. We don't have to go 2 1/2 more years of killing and being killed.

But we will...

--danny

Sent via BlackBerry from T-Mobile

All these things I've conveyed today took place more than eight years ago. What is most painful to me, though, is the reality that it is almost indistinguishable from events, operations, and anecdotes that any trooper could have conveyed within the past six months. It is past time to end this unwinnable war and withdraw our combat troops.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.