The American War in Afghanistan

What’s in it for me? An in-depth analysis of a costly conflict.

Late August 2021, sorties of C-17 transport planes depart Kabul. Onboard are hundreds of United States soldiers along with diplomatic attachés, civilian workers, and their families – this ends America’s longest armed conflict. So, how did the US military arrive at this humbling exit? These blinks tell the entire story of America’s protracted 20-year invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. This analysis begins with the initial invasion in the aftermath of 9/11, tracks the military's escalating involvement throughout the Bush and Obama years, and culminates in the final, messy days before the country’s final withdrawal. Along the way, it details the innumerable cultural, strategic, and political hurdles which guided the path of the occupation. In these blinks, you’ll learn

what makes Kandahar such a strategic province; why Sufi’s fought the Taliban; and how insurgent fighters outlasted a global empire.

The Afghanistan War is the latest dark chapter in a long, complex history.

Two decades is a long time – and it’s an especially long time for an armed occupation of a foreign land. Yet, from the fall of 2001 to the summer of 2021, the United States military sustained a constant footprint in the nation of Afghanistan. This lengthy occupation endured through four presidential administrations, burnt through 15 US generals, and drew on the labor of hundreds of thousands of American troops. Not only that, it extended Afghanistan’s already drawn-out civil war and disrupted millions of Afghan lives with violence and destruction. Looking back, it’s clear that the war reshaped global politics, American military strategy, and Afghan society. Though today, the true legacy of the conflict remains complex, muddled, and marred by failure and disappointment. The key message here is: The Afghanistan War is the latest dark chapter in a long, complex history. It’s difficult to summarize a country as complex as Afghanistan. The nation stands at a crucial crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Its landscape is rough and beautiful, defined by steep rocky mountains and dry, desolate deserts. Its population of around 33 million people lives mostly rural lives aside from the bustling city of Herat in the east and Kabul, the capital, in the west. The people of Afghanistan are ethnically and culturally diverse. Ethnic Pashtuns from the east and south make up around 40 percent of the population and have traditionally been the dominant group. Tajiks in the north and west constitute the second largest group while Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Nuristanis also have a large presence. The country has a rich and layered history. Since its official foundation in 1747, the state has fended off near-constant foreign invasions. From 1839 to 1919, the British made three failed attempts to colonize the region. Then, after decades of self-rule, the country was besieged again in 1978, this time by the Soviet Union. But, after a destructive and destabilizing decade, this foray also failed. After the Soviet withdrawal, the country was fractured between rival tribal regions. This power vacuum allowed a new political force, the Taliban, to seize control. Beginning in 1994, this militant group of Islamic fundamentalists headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar slowly pacified the region while implementing a series of strict social and economic reforms. While the Taliban created a

unified Afghan polity, it did so with a rigid interpretation of Islamic law – women's rights were severely curtailed and religious extremism flourished.

The US invasion of Afghanistan succeeded quickly then slowly failed.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew hijacked passenger planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On October 7, the United States military launched initial airstrikes on targets in Afghanistan. The weeks between these two events were pivotal. American intelligence quickly identified al-Qa'eda as the perpetrators of the attack. This militant Islamic group was headed by Osama bin Laden and headquartered in Afghanistan. Using intermediates in the Pakistani military, the Bush administration demanded that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and all al-Qa'eda operatives. The Taliban, divided on their support of al-Qa'eda, demurred. Instead, Mullah Omar offered to hand bin Laden to a third-party country. Thus, negotiations broke down and the American military ramped up for invasion. The key message here is: The US invasion of Afghanistan succeeded quickly then slowly failed. It's likely that negotiations were bound to fail. While the Taliban didn't directly dictate al-Qa'eda's actions, bin Laden was nonetheless a popular figure in the party's fundamentalist wings. In addition, the Bush administration loathed to look weak on terrorism and was keen on a strong military response. At the time, polls suggested that 67 percent of Americans favored a ground invasion. And so it was that the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom. The initial aim of this plan was to disrupt al-Qa'eda and unseat the Taliban through a mix of airstrikes and ground operations. To do this, CIA operatives and a few thousand US special forces would collaborate with the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban military organization based in Afghanistan. The Taliban stood little chance against the United States' overwhelming military advantage. Within weeks, the northern provinces fell and by November 13 the Taliban were forced out of Kabul. Mullah Omar made his final stand in the southern region of Kandahar but was eventually overcome by forces led by Hamid Karzai, an American-backed Pashtun leader. In the aftermath of hostilities, the US-installed Karzai as the interim president of the country with the belief that he could best unify Afghanistan's competing factions. Working together, Karzai and the Bush administration attempted to settle on a plan to reconstruct Afghan society to be more stable, democratic, and crucially, aligned with US interests. While the country was in dire shape, Bush was confident that he could prevail with a small US military presence of around 5,000 troops – in the following years, this proved to be wildly optimistic.

A Taliban counter-offensive allowed the party to form a new base of support.

The years 2002 to 2005 were deceptively peaceful. Backed by US power, Karzai's government oversaw the country's post-war reconstruction by carefully balancing ethnic tensions and lending regional governors broad powers to manage their given provinces. Yet, below the surface, tensions rose. Outside Kabul, the Taliban retained widespread popularity and continued to train fighters and receive funding from outposts in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the US military was losing support as botched military operations regularly killed civilians – for instance, in 2002, US forces bombed a wedding party, killing 54 people. Finally, the interim government began losing control in the

southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. Here, Taliban deputy Mullah Dadullah was raising an insurgent militia while Karzai's forces, feeling undermined by government infighting, were deserting in large numbers. The key message here is: A Taliban counter-offensive allowed the party to form a new base of support. In 2006, Mullah Dadullah launched his offensive against the Karzai government. The campaign began in February with skirmishes in the northern regions of Helmand and escalated that summer with extensive battles in Kandahar. While Dadullah only commanded about 7,000 soldiers in the area, the interim government fielded even fewer, just 5,000 military and police, mostly isolated in cities. Dadullah's campaign was a rousing success for the Taliban. Its success was partially due to the government's poor planning. While US commanders in the field were aware of the threat, the Bush administration largely ignored their warnings. Instead of shoring up Afghan forces, it redirected resources and attention to the newly launched war in Iraq. By the end of the year, the Taliban controlled large swaths of Kandahar and Helmand. Not only did this success reinvigorate the Taliban as a political movement, but it also gave the party control over the region's illegal poppy trade, a major economic engine in the Afghan economy. These new Taliban-controlled areas maintained relative political and economic stability compared to the rest of the country. This base of support allowed the Taliban to step up its resistance in the following years. In 2006, it executed around 5,000 attacks on US and government forces. By 2009 it had conducted more than 11,000 operations. By governing these regions, the Taliban proved itself as a real political force. The party could build infrastructure, settle tribal disputes, and even pay salaries to its officials and militias. As time wore on, they seemed to be more effective in meeting local needs than any of the occupying powers.

Drawn out combat in the eastern front further hampered US forces.

In the years following 2006, the southern theater of the Afghan War was in turmoil. The Taliban made steady inroads throughout the region and the American, Afghan, and newly-arrived NATO forces were often undersupplied and outmaneuvered. Yet, despite these dismal conditions, the southern command was at least coherent. Battle lines were relatively distinct and the objectives for both sides were clear. In contrast, the eastern edge of the war was in complete disarray. Here, American and Afghan troops were pitted against a harsher, more mountainous environment and a diverse array of enemy forces beyond the unified front of the Taliban. So, just as government armies ceded ground in the south, they were continually drawn into confusing quagmires in the east. The war was failing on two fronts. The key message here is: Drawn out combat in the eastern front further hampered US forces. The eastern front of the Afghan War was defined by its rugged landscapes and complex social dynamics. The provinces along the Pakistani border, such as Kunar and Nuristan, are dominated by steep, rocky mountains and densely forested valleys. This region is also home to a wide variety of ethnic groups which operated independently of each other and were especially hostile to the Pashto majority in Kabul. In this region, American forces took the lead under the banner of Operation Mountain Lion. In this campaign, US special forces and Afghan troops battled Taliban soldiers as well as additional antagonists such as contingents from the Pakistani Taliban, surviving al-Qa'eda fighters, and Hezb Islami, another militant group. Combat was fierce – coalition forces often had to fight for every hill, valley, and ridge and often couldn't rely on air support for cover and supplies. An emblematic battle of this campaign took place on July 13, 2008. Here, a brigade of 200 local Nuristani resistance

fighters ambushed government forces outside the mountain outpost of Wanat. The assault lasted hours before air support finally drove the assailants back into the mountains – more than 30 soldiers were killed or wounded. In the end, the US military decided to abandon the entire region. These setbacks, combined with NATO's faulting control of the south, were a wake-up call to coalition forces. The US responded by committing more and more troops to the fight – by 2008, the number of soldiers in the country had risen from 20,000 to more than 32,000. Still, these efforts seemed futile. On September 10, 2008, Mike Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, gave a frank assessment to the US Congress. He told it, "I'm not sure we're winning."

The Surge changed the course of the war, but only for a short time.

It's January 2009 and Barack Obama has a decision to make. The newly-elected president has inherited the Afghan War from his predecessor. Now, as commander in chief, it's his duty to chart a course forward. The central question revolves around a plan known as the Surge. This strategy will entail committing an additional 20,000 troops to the battlegrounds of Afghanistan. Military top-brass like General David McKiernan argue that this boost in personnel, along with new techniques in counter-insurgency developed in Iraq, can change the tide of the war. Obama, always seeking level-headed moderation, considers his options. Finally, on February 16, the President makes his call. The Surge will go ahead – an additional 17,000 troops will be deployed. In the following months, that number only grows. The key message here is: The Surge changed the course of the war, but only for a short time. Early on in his administration, President Obama ordered a thorough review of the current state of the Afghan War. The discouraging findings prompted the administration to change the overall strategy. Now, rather than seeking to completely defeat the Taliban, the US military would use a focused surge of troops to disrupt and slow down their advance. The goal was to stabilize the country long enough to turn complete control over the Afghan government within two years. The initial Surge was overseen by General Stanley McChrystal, an experienced commander who'd previously served in Iraq. The campaign began with 12,000 marines entering the southern province of Helmand. These troops were embedded with the local military and police to support counter-insurgency operations. By 2011, these efforts had largely succeeded – the Taliban were losing control of the region. Meanwhile, in Kandahar, the Surge was used to implement Operation Hamkari. This strategy aimed to slowly secure territory around the region's major population center, Kandahar City. Troops would use a clear-hold-build approach to gradually take territory, then use strategic roadblocks and checkpoints to monitor travel and activity. By fall 2012, the province was more secure than it had been in years. So, was the Surge a success? It depends. The strategy did halt the Taliban for the duration of the operation. But, it did so at a high price – thousands of American and Afghan soldiers were killed and wounded and the treasury spent nearly $110 billion per year for what amounted to a temporary reprieve. By the end of 2012, the US was ready to enter peace talks with the Taliban, though the Taliban were determined to simply wait it out.

Local uprisings cooled Taliban support but failed to unify behind the central

government.

April 2012. A cadre of Taliban fighters is locked in a fierce battle in the rural Ghazni Province southwest of Kabul. For hours they exchange fire with their assailants before finally retreating into the countryside. Oddly enough, these Taliban weren't routed by American marines or even Afghan forces sent by the interim government. No, in this skirmish they were trounced by an Andar independent militia – and importantly, this wasn't an isolated incident. You see, while the Taliban did enjoy widespread support in many of the provinces they controlled, their heavy-handed approach to governing also stirred up resentment. By 2012, that resentment was turning into outright armed resistance. The key message here is: Local uprisings cooled Taliban support but failed to unify behind the central government. The Andar people of Ghazni practice a strain of Islam called Sufism. This religious tradition has deep roots and places special emphasis on scholarship, the arts, and especially music. Unsurprisingly, Sufi religious practices were often in direct violation of the Taliban's more austere take on Islamic law. So, when the Taliban attempted to impose restrictions in Sufi communities like the Andar, people fought back. At first, Andar resistance was scattered and intermittent, but it slowly grew into a genuine movement. By late 2012, the government in Kabul took notice and sought to nurture the uprising by sending them arms and backup fighters. The Andar were skeptical of this alliance but eventually accepted coalition assistance. For the next few years, the insurgent movement seriously disrupted Taliban operations throughout central Afghanistan. By 2014, the Karzai government was the strongest it had ever been – it had secured more than 20 provinces and commanded a military and police force more than 300,000 strong. But many internal problems remained. The government still struggled to coordinate the delivery of basic services and logistics and top officers used their positions to enrich themselves and wage petty feuds. Surveys at the time showed that only 10 percent of Afghan forces felt any strong duty or allegiance to the government. The 2014 election further stressed these vulnerabilities. Due to term limits, Karzai couldn't be reelected and there were no frontrunners among the ten official candidates running. The election itself was sullied by Taliban attacks, low turnout, and widespread fraud. After two rounds of voting, there was no winner – US officials had to broker a power-sharing agreement between two rivals, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. The new unity government would have less legitimacy than its predecessor.

Wavering support doomed the already weak Afghan state.

As 2014 rolled into 2015, Afghanistan was again at a turning point – and unfortunately, it wasn't turning in a positive direction. For one, the so-called unity government was actually shaky and divided. Ashraf Ghani served as president while Abdullah Abdullah worked as his chief executive officer. Both men struggled for control and everything from cabinet appointments to economic reforms were hotly contested. The rivalry kept the state in perpetual gridlock. Meanwhile, the Obama administration continued slowly deescalating US military presence and financial assistance. The gradual withdrawal was stifling the country's already weak economy. And, of course, the Taliban remained. Their ceaseless attacks kept the country in a constant state of alert with no end in sight. The key message here is: Wavering support doomed the already weak Afghan state. During the latter half of the Obama years, the US was at a strategic impasse. The generals

knew that defeating the Taliban was nearly impossible. Yet, the White House was reluctant to completely end the occupation. Officials worried a complete withdrawal could make the administration look weak on terrorism. This political consideration was especially sensitive given the recent rise of the Islamic State. This aggressive and media-savvy terrorist network was increasingly dominating the news in the region. So, the president kept around 10,000 troops throughout the country, mostly to keep the unity government from collapsing. Previously, US forces had been more proactive. US special forces executed operations with the Afghan military and generously lent air power whenever requested. Going forward, soldiers would mostly remain on base and the military was told to only conduct airstrikes in extremis, that is, only when absolutely necessary. This milquetoast support seriously undermined the Afghan military's ability to fend off attacks. In summer 2015, the Taliban once again mounted a massive offensive, this time headed by the party's new leader Akhtar Mansour. This campaign directly targeted a number of larger cities and provincial capitals. The party even managed to completely overrun and capture Kunduz City, a strategic metropolis in the northern edge of the country. Many of these victories were hastened by ongoing morale issues in the Afghan army. For many Afghan soldiers, the military was just a paycheck. Since the invasion, the government had failed to materially improve their everyday lives, so they weren't particularly motivated to risk their lives defending it. So, when Taliban attacks escalated, many simply walked off the job. More than 1,000 soldiers deserted in Kunduz alone.

Under Donald Trump, the US agreed to end its presence in Afghanistan.

Donald Trump was never known for his decorum. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, he regularly made headlines for his rants, outbursts, and off-the-cuff remarks. As president, little changed – only now his wild temperament steered the course of a foreign war. After assuming office, Trump convened a series of meetings with Secretary of Defense James Mattis and the generals who were currently overseeing Afghanistan operations. In these high-tension gatherings, the new president raged about the current state of the war. He was mad that the US was losing control and furious that it was making him look bad. But despite his bluster, Trump offered no concrete plan. In the end, he left the generals to sort out the details. The key message here is: Under Donald Trump, the US agreed to end its presence in Afghanistan. Under Trump's unsteady leadership, the military once again shifted strategies in Afghanistan. While the president initially threatened to pull out completely, he eventually acquiesced to committing an additional 4,000 American troops as well as additional special forces and diplomatic advisors. He also put additional pressure on Pakistan – the neighboring country had recently been putting less effort into combating Taliban within its borders. The president took particular interest in crushing Islamic State. The radical network had gained a foothold in Afghanistan and was executing attacks more violent and unpredictable than the more traditionally-minded Talibian. While Islamic State carried out rampant suicide attacks, US forces responded with heavy aerial bombardment – in 2017, the military even dropped an 11-ton, "mother of all bombs" on IS compounds. But the escalated violence had little effect. The Taliban were firm in their commitment: they wouldn't quit until the US withdrew. Finally, the Trump administration relented. In fall 2018, the White House sent ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to begin talks. In negotiations, the Taliban were steadfast. They refused to work with the Afghan government, renounce al-Qa'eda, or even agree to a cease-fire until America left. On

February 29, 2020, the US signed a peace deal known as the Doha Agreement. In it, the Taliban pledged to discourage terror groups from attacking the US. In return, the US agreed to completely withdraw in 14 months. But the Trump administration failed to meet this deadline. In the end, President Biden would oversee the final US retreat in August 2021. As the last US forces left the country, the Taliban marched into Kabul intent on setting up a new Afghan government.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: The United States war in Afghanistan was the longest active military engagement in the country’s history. It began as a retaliatory mission to disrupt and destroy the al-Qa‘eda terror network but quickly spiraled into a two-decade quagmire. Burdened with a muddled mission and unfit to navigate the region's cultural complexity, the US failed to set up or support a thriving centralized state. Meanwhile, the Taliban remained committed to their cause and eventually ousted American forces.