

RealClear Defense

Self-Delusion and Forgetting History in Afghanistan

By Paul Behringer & Nathaniel Moir December 17, 2019

AP Photo/Rahmat Gul

On December 9, the *Washington Post* released a six-part investigative report dubbed the “[The Afghanistan Papers](#).” The articles were meant to evoke the infamous [Pentagon Papers](#), which showed that the U.S. government, across multiple administrations, lied to the American people about progress in Vietnam. Once again, the American people were informed of progress even as U.S. officials voiced doubts behind closed doors. Even worse, the American public was informed there were [no other options](#) but to stay the course.

The fact that the war in Afghanistan has not been going well, despite assurances by military and civilian officials over a decade, is [not new information](#). “The Afghanistan Papers” detail the ways in which U.S. leaders failed to learn important lessons from Vietnam. To paraphrase Karl Marx, we might be tempted to view repeating Vietnam’s tragic mistakes as a farce—if it weren’t so infuriating.

The *Post*’s investigation reveals two substantive problems: (1) progress in counterinsurgency operations cannot be quantified, and (2) money and military power cannot compensate for lack of cultural intelligence or ill-considered foreign policy formation. Throughout the report, officials anguish over their inability to measure progress that never existed. Readers learn that the United States sunk more cash into Afghanistan than allocated for Western Europe’s reconstruction under the Marshall Plan.

Yet, problems with massive aid and state building programs have long been known. Debates over the viability of the “state-in-a-box” concept, which the *Post* report suggests was lied about, were [publicly reported in 2010](#). The real problem is that this aid, modern

weaponry and air superiority failed to defeat insurgents motivated by a powerful ideology. The Taliban know the social and geographical terrain better than us. Education and a serious dose of humility that recognizes limits to American power can fix this. Money and technology cannot.

“The Afghanistan Papers” do raise important second-level questions about the ways in which top U.S. officials screwed up, from constantly changing **definitions of victory** to how they **doled out money** to the botched **battle against opium**. But the biggest questions are left for the reader to answer: Was this a war that could ever have been won? And what was this war really about?

Setting aside for a moment the differences between Vietnam and Afghanistan, which make historical analogies problematic, the *Washington Post's* report is correct that U.S. officials botched policy in Afghanistan. But the report should have stressed a different point more clearly: Fighting insecurity, corruption, and criminal activity are akin to treating the symptoms rather than the disease. The Vietnam-War era journalist and scholar, Bernard Fall, diagnosed the real type of war in Southeast Asia as a "revolutionary war." He wrote, "The most essential requirement of winning a revolutionary war, is the courage to face the truth that the problem exists at all." In Afghanistan, U.S. officials consistently dismissed the Taliban as terrorists, criminals, and drug-traffickers and, to be sure, the Taliban play all of those roles. But focusing on rule-of-law issues masked the deeper political and social agenda that motivated the Taliban, and this ultimately made the war in Afghanistan unwinnable **through** military means. Military intervention requires in-depth knowledge about the history and culture of the enemy *before* the United States decides to send in the troops.

To quote Fall again: "There is always a tendency to camouflage the problem as 'banditry' or 'mob-action' – until one awakens one morning to find that the 'chief bandit' now sits in the President's chair in the capital and that the 'Mob' is defeating one's finest regular troops on a battle-field not exactly suited to their heavy equipment." U.S. officials would do well to ponder this message as they negotiate with their Taliban counterparts in Qatar.

“The Afghanistan Papers” are important, but they are only alarming to the extent that they demonstrate how often American leaders deceive themselves. Fall observed Vietnam War decision-makers' inability to understand the Viet-Minh's way of warfare in Vietnam: "To lie to others (and be found out) may simply be embarrassing. To lie to oneself about the terrifying possibilities of Revolutionary Warfare may well be fatal." The consequences of self-delusion in Afghanistan have been deadly for too many Americans and **far too many Afghans**. The “Afghanistan Papers” purpose will only have value if Americans demand greater wisdom from their leaders, and decision-makers generate greater wisdom within themselves.

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