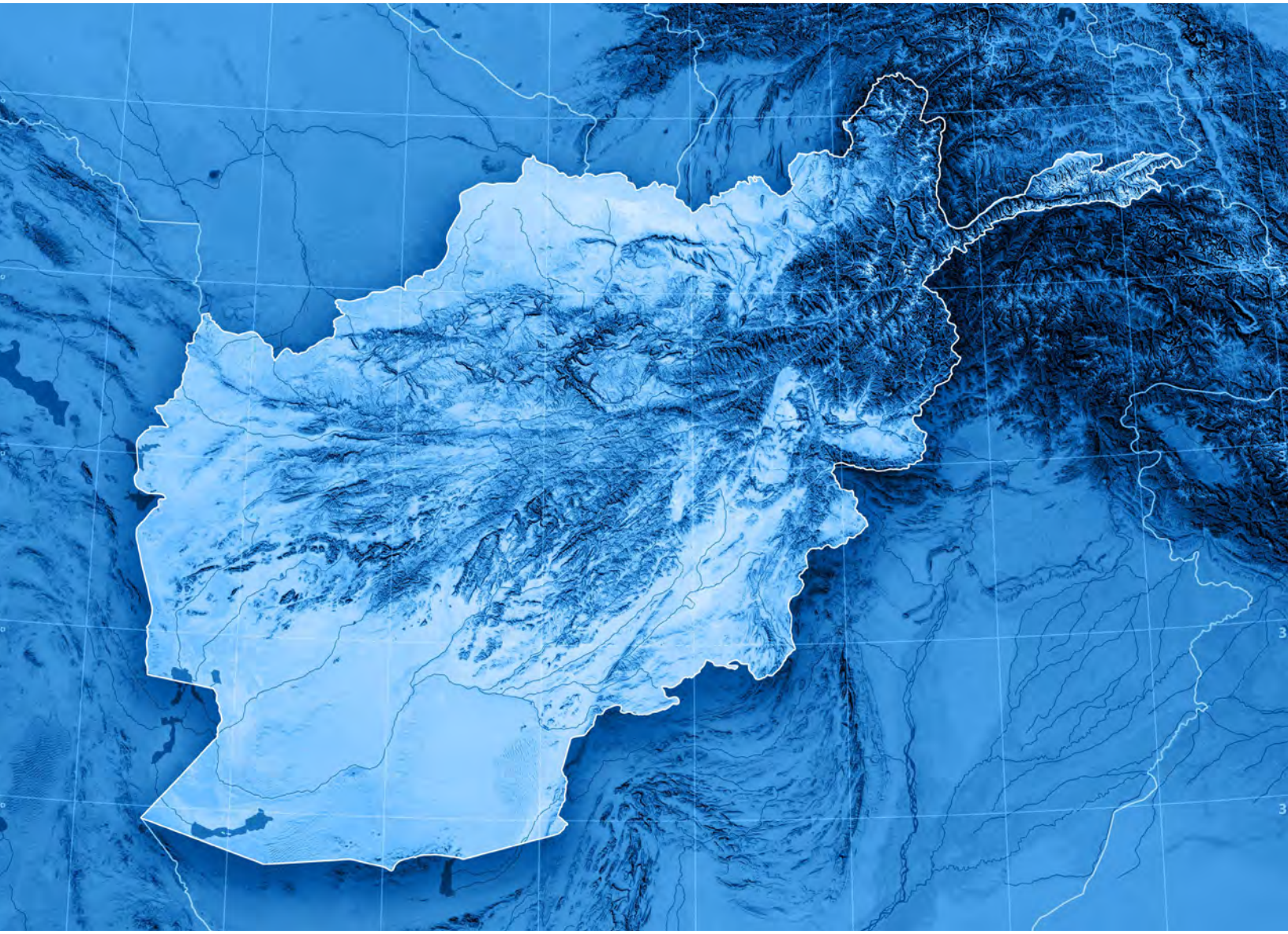
SECOND INTERIM REPORT

AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION

August 2025



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WAR COMMISSION

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SECOND INTERIM REPORT

to the Congress of the United States

August 2025

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Shamila N. Chaudhary, left, and Colin Jackson, Co-Chairs of the Afghanistan War Commission, during the third public hearing, June 2025.

PREFACE

Message from the Co-Chairs

At the midpoint of our mandate, the Afghanistan War Commission has made substantial progress—securing critical records, conducting hundreds of interviews, and expanding the scope and depth of our inquiry. This report captures the work of the past year: public hearings, fact-finding missions, and emerging themes that will shape our final report in August 2026.

We have benefited from strong engagement by parts of the Executive Branch. The Departments of State and Defense, along with the U.S. Agency for International Development, have provided timely briefings, documents, and operational support—often under demanding circumstances. Their cooperation reflects the highest standards of public service. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence and Central Intelligence Agency have provided thousands of finished intelligence assessments that inform our understanding of the war and the intelligence available to policymakers at pivotal moments.

But in vital areas, progress is slower. The Biden administration denied the commission's requests for White House materials on its implementation of the Doha Agreement and handling of the withdrawal, depriving the commission of timely insight into decision-making during this pivotal period. The presidential transition brought delays and complications with critical intelligence access that the White House has recently restored.

Of the commission's 25 information requests—15 before the transition and 10 after—five have been fully met. Twelve others have been partially fulfilled, with additional materials still pending. Without accelerated and forward-leaning cooperation from the Executive Branch, the commission cannot fulfill its congressional mandate. To omit a full accounting of central aspects of the war would fail to honor the intent of Congress and the trust of those who served and sacrificed.

We are deeply grateful to the officials, veterans, Afghan partners, and allies who have shared their experiences. It is the commission's hope and intent that all of the key officials that served during the war engage us on this important effort. We also thank our dedicated staff whose work makes this inquiry possible. As we enter our final year, we remain committed to delivering a clear-eyed, nonpartisan account of the Afghanistan War—one that honors sacrifice, confronts hard truths, and strengthens the nation for the challenges ahead.

Shamila N. Chaudhary

Co-Chair
Afghanistan War Commission

Dr. Colin F. Jackson

Co-Chair
Afghanistan War Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Congress established the Afghanistan War Commission in 2021 as an independent body to review U.S. decisions pertaining to the war in Afghanistan from June 2001 to August 2021.

The Afghanistan War Commission's 2025 Interim Report responds to a congressional requirement to report on progress annually, as mandated in the Afghanistan War Commission Act of 2021, Section 1094 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (Pub. L. No. 117-81, 135 Stat. 1935 (2021)). This report distills the past year's achievements and outstanding requests as the commission works toward its final report due next summer.

Progress Over the Past Year

In the past year, the commission has made substantial headway toward fulfilling its congressional mandate:

Document Collection & Analysis: We have submitted 25 formal requests for information (RFIs) to executive branch entities, securing tens of thousands of pages of records from the Department of State, Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and intelligence agencies. We also reviewed key North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) archive materials in Brussels.

Interviews: The commission has completed more than 160 on-the-record interviews in 2025—including with cabinet-level officials, military commanders, diplomats, USAID staff, National Security Council (NSC) personnel, Afghan and Pakistani leaders, and international partners. Two veteran roundtables captured on-the-ground perspectives, and hundreds of written submissions via our veteran and civilian portals have enriched our primary source record.

Public Hearings & Outreach: The commission convened three public hearings—in July 2024, April 2025, and June 2025—probing the war's origins, early decisions (2001–2009), and the 2009–2011 surge. Future hearings scheduled for 2026 will explore the transition years and final withdrawal.

Fact-Finding Missions: Commissioners and staff traveled to U.S. Central Command, allied capitals, NATO headquarters, Qatar, and Pakistan to meet with stakeholders, access archives, and gather regional context.

Executive Branch Engagement

The commission has made progress in some areas of executive branch engagement in 2025 but also faces critical challenges in gaining both access to sensitive information and documents. Sustained cooperation from the White House and from departments and agencies remains critical to completing the work on time.

The commission work period since the delivery of its first interim report on August 22, 2024, spans the last five months of the Biden administration and the first six months of the Trump administration. The commission extensively engaged both administration teams to solicit specific action on document requests.

The Biden administration, through a process led by the White House Counsel's Office, negotiated interagency agreements on document access and interview protocols. The NSC staff arranged classified read-ins for select commissioners and staff and expressed support for DoD-provided classified access. The administration concurred in the State Department's release to the commission of the full Doha Agreement text. It did not, however, fulfill other document requests made to the Executive Office of the President (EOP) for NSC and EOP materials, stating in a letter to the commission that such information would implicate executive branch confidentiality

Each section of the report will trace key decisions, assess alternatives considered, and evaluate implementation, outcomes, and unintended consequences.

interests. On January 6, 2025, the Biden administration sent the commission's request for access to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). This was too late for NARA to respond before the administration left office.

Executive Branch staff turnover and lags in engagement during the 2024 election cycle and the 2025 presidential transition left significant information inaccessible and threatened the commission's ability to fulfill its congressional mandate.

Through the EOP, the Trump administration's early engagement with the commission included meetings to clarify research needs, an endorsement of interviews with former officials, clearance of State and Defense Department records requested but not released under the prior administration, and the timely submission of a NARA request for documents of the four administrations spanning the war, opening a pathway for the commission to access thousands of documents covering all phases of the 20-year conflict. On August 14, the EOP authorized reactivation of the commission's read-ins to compartmental intelligence programs, which had been suspended during the transition.

The following items remain pending:

- **Department of Defense:** The commission seeks expedited provision of "Alternative Compensatory Control Measures" access to enable its review of critical counterterrorism efforts—a request made in December 2024. Recent command direction by the leadership of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command to respond to pending document and briefing requests is encouraging, but documents in critical categories have not yet been identified and released. Liaison support has been reduced from three full-time personnel—one at the senior executive service level—to one individual. Despite best efforts that have continued to yield results on the commission's behalf, many requests may go unanswered owing to a lack of manpower at the combatant commands.
- **Office of the Director of National Intelligence:** The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) fully satisfied the commission's first RFI, but it has delivered only one of nine requested briefings and no documents from a second RFI issued in October 2024.
- **State Department:** The department is working to process a high volume of requested documents on topics including negotiation and implementation of the Doha Agreement and the 2021 withdrawal. Many of these concern high-level policy deliberations and will require White House coordination. The department has assured the commission that, despite attrition across administrative functions, it has shifted work responsibilities in an effort to ensure it can continue to respond to commission requests as expeditiously as possible. With little time remaining to complete their research, commission staff continue to work with department liaisons daily to maintain progress. The department's continued prioritization of this effort will be particularly critical during the next six months as the commission works to complete evidentiary review.

Interviews and Stakeholder Engagement

With more than 170 interviews and 300 informal meetings conducted in the past 12 months, the commission's structured interview program balances testimony from decision-makers, views of leaders responsible for implementation, and Afghan leaders' perspectives.

The commission is interviewing senior U.S. officials—cabinet members and alumni of the State Department, DoD, Central Intelligence Agency, and the NSC—from four administrations to trace high-level decision-making. It is gathering testimony from individuals who were present in Afghanistan, including U.S. and Afghan

military commanders, Afghan ministers, provincial governors, tribal leaders, aid workers, journalists, and Afghan women's and human rights advocates, to capture on-the-ground perspectives. Through its veteran and civilian portals (with over 300 submissions) and roundtables convened with Afghan scholars and civil society representatives and diplomats, the commission is aggregating firsthand accounts of the war's human impact. The commission is conducting targeted outreach to former Afghan officials, civil society leaders, and regional experts to integrate Afghans' assessments alongside U.S. analyses. It also is reviewing NATO archives and consulting European and Pakistani interlocutors, as well as multilateral partners such as the United Nations and European Union, to incorporate allied and regional insights.

Final Report Framework

The commission has made significant progress on developing the analytical framework for the Final Report. Organized chronologically across eight phases—from the pre-9/11 era (1989–2001) through the 2021 withdrawal—the final report will analyze:

1. **The Roots of the War: The United States, al-Qaeda, and Afghanistan in the Pre-9/11 Era** (1989–2001)
2. **The Response to 9/11 and Global War on Terror** (September–December 2001)
3. **From Light Footprint to State-Building** (2002–2005)
4. **The Taliban Resurgence** (2006–2009)
5. **The Surge of Troops and Its Effects** (2009–2011)
6. **Transition Amid Uncertainty** (2011–2017)
7. **Fighting While Talking, Talking While Fighting: From South Asia Strategy to the Doha Talks** (2017–2021)
8. **Final Withdrawal and Collapse** (2021)

Each section will trace key decisions, assess alternatives considered (and not considered), and evaluate implementation, outcomes, and unintended consequences. Public hearings and interviews will anchor narrative chapters, providing texture and candid reflections.

Operational Support

The commission has met two essential operational needs—opening a DoD-leased sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF) in September 2024 and working with DoD and ODNI to install fully operational classified IT systems by summer 2025—thanks to prioritized support from the DoD Washington Headquarters Service and the Office of Senate Security.

Next Steps

With a final report due August 22, 2026, the commission enters its third year focused on the following:

- Completing evidentiary review of documents, including executive branch material;
- Completing at least two additional public hearings and roundtables;
- Conducting further interviews with senior Afghan, Pakistani, and U.S. leaders;
- Finalizing draft chapters and coordinating an interagency review of the report; and
- Securing declassification decisions for the Final Report.

Only with full executive branch engagement—prompt EOP direction, prioritized agency responses, and clear declassification pathways—can the Afghanistan War Commission deliver the comprehensive, objective, and nonpartisan accountability that Congress and the American people demand.

Afghanistan War Commission meets in a plenary session in the commission's conference room, November 2025.

EMERGING THEMES AND OBSERVATIONS

The following represent themes and puzzles emerging from the commission's research. They draw from testimony, interviews, document review, and other research conducted to date.

These are not final judgments or conclusions. Rather, they identify areas where continued study, investigation, and evaluation of information will inform the commission's ongoing analysis and ultimately its final conclusions and recommendations.

1. One Purpose, Multiple Objectives, and Myriad Ways

The overarching objective of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan was the prevention of future attacks on the American homeland. The commission is examining how this strategic aim was operationalized across a range of efforts—notably counterterrorism, state-building, and the development of Afghan security forces—and how two of these lines of effort ended suddenly and tragically with the collapse of the Afghan government. Achievements such as the disruption of al-Qaeda, the killing of Osama bin Laden, and the prevention of another 9/11-style attack on U.S. soil through homeland security and counterterrorism measures invite deeper inquiry into how success was defined and measured. These gains stand in contrast to the collapse of the Afghan Republic—raising questions about whether the metrics of counterterrorism aligned with the goal of building an Afghan state for the purpose of preventing safe havens. As these priorities evolved, so too did the organizational approaches of U.S. departments and agencies, many of which pursued distinct lines of effort—counterinsurgency, development assistance, reconciliation, and kinetic counterterrorism. The commission is reviewing whether the existing mechanisms for interagency planning and execution were as consequential to underperformance as the merits or shortcomings of any single institutional approach. Despite sustained U.S. operational pressure on al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the Taliban insurgency adapted, regenerated, and ultimately returned to power. Understanding the strategic disconnects that enabled this outcome is central to the commission's inquiry.

2. Two Conjoined Wars: The War Inside Afghanistan and the Counterterrorism Campaign Beyond

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001, the U.S. campaign developed into distinct but interrelated lines of effort:

- The first, targeting Taliban and al-Qaeda elements within Afghanistan;
- The second, building Afghan security forces and state to prevent the reemergence of militant safe havens; and

- The final line of effort, targeting al-Qaeda through distinct mandates, timelines, and authorities, which began within Afghanistan and extended beyond its borders into Pakistan and other regions.

The commission is examining how these lines of effort interacted over time and whether their objectives and implementation converged or diverged. After 10 years of war, the counterterrorism campaign had significantly degraded al-Qaeda's leadership and infrastructure. Meanwhile, efforts to counter the Taliban insurgency and develop durable Afghan state institutions were encountering significant challenges. The relationship between these differing trajectories, and their influence on broader outcomes, is a primary area of inquiry. The commission is also assessing the implications of cross-border dynamics, including the presence of al-Qaeda networks in Pakistan; reported affiliations between al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other regional militant groups; and the ability of the Taliban to access logistical and operational support inside Pakistan. These conditions raise questions about the role of external sanctuary in shaping the conflict, and the extent to which U.S. and coalition strategies responded to them. Finally, the commission is analyzing the logistical and strategic interdependence between the United States and Pakistan. U.S. operations in Afghanistan required access through Pakistani territory, a factor that shaped the conduct of military and diplomatic efforts throughout the war. Understanding how this interdependence influenced policy decisions in Washington, Kabul, and Islamabad is central to the commission's review.

Afghanistan War Commission staff, from left to right, Mariam Jalalzada, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Natalie Hall at the Herat Security Dialogue in Madrid, Spain, February 2025.

3. Strategic Drift: Expanding and Contracting Resources and Ambitions

What began as a narrowly scoped counterterrorism mission—to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power—soon evolved into a far more expansive undertaking centered on building a viable Afghan state. This evolution, and the subsequent cycles of expanding and contracting U.S. ambition and resources, unfolded across successive administrations. As the United States and its allies encountered a developing insurgency, they took on a broader counterinsurgency role while continuing to pursue transnational extremist threats beyond Afghanistan's borders. This accumulation of missions raises important questions about how and to what extent the United States and its coalition partners were able to align its efforts on the ground with coherent political goals. The commission is examining whether the resulting strategic tensions reflected overly ambitious and perhaps incompatible aims, mismatches between objectives and resources, misaligned timelines between military action and political development, or some combination of these dynamics. The commission also is asking whether these challenges were foreseeable and, if so, how they were understood and addressed by policymakers at the time.

4. Interagency Incoherence and Competition

The 2001 invasion mobilized a wide spectrum of U.S. departments and agencies, many engaging with Afghanistan for the first time and collaborating across institutional boundaries in unprecedented ways. The commission's research is examining how different U.S. government entities developed strategies that may have been internally coherent yet proved misaligned when considered collectively. Because of overlapping mandates, differing institutional priorities, and

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asynchronous timelines, the U.S. government often seemed to function along parallel tracks, with limited mechanisms to coordinate or reconcile divergent approaches. In particular, the commission is exploring how disagreements between civilian and military actors—over resource allocation, timelines, and sequencing of goals—shaped the implementation of U.S. strategy. These patterns prompt questions about the nature and effectiveness of interagency coordination during wartime, both in Washington and in the field. How were competing priorities negotiated or enforced across institutional lines? To what extent did personalities, institutional cultures, or bureaucratic incentives shape decision-making and implementation? How did civil–military frictions affect U.S. leverage with Afghan partners or influence the coherence of the broader international coalition? The commission is investigating whether a more coordinated political, military, and counterterrorism approach could have meaningfully influenced the course of the war—or whether deeper structural constraints, within both the U.S. system and the Afghan environment, may have limited what even a well-integrated strategy could achieve. These questions are central to the commission's broader effort to understand not only what occurred, but also what alternate paths might have been possible.

5. Relations with the Afghan Government and Elites

The commission's research is identifying instances in which U.S. strategies conflicted with Afghan priorities. The commission is examining how the Afghan government's interests converged—or not—with those of its international partners, and how those alignments shifted over time in response to changing conditions and external pressures. The commission is asking whether these divergences stemmed from miscommunication, conflicting incentives, fundamentally different political visions and timelines, or missed opportunities to find common ground. The commission is also investigating the multifaceted relationships between Afghan communities and the state, the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghan state, and how these evolving relationships intersected with international military and civilian interventions. These dynamics raise important questions about how the structure and legitimacy of the Afghan state affected the trajectory of the insurgency, and whether international efforts reinforced or undermined those relationships over time.

6. Top-Down Strategy and Ground-Level Realities

The commission is analyzing how strategic planning conducted in Washington often did not match conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, and how field-driven initiatives at times bypassed or conflicted with higher-level guidance. This analysis includes reviewing whether the U.S. government effectively incorporated diverse operational perspectives, allowed for midcourse corrections, and sustained the feedback loops necessary for adaptive strategy. The commission is also examining how these dynamics manifested within Afghanistan across different provinces, where U.S. policy implementation varied significantly with different Afghan and international partners. Finally, the commission is exploring how differences in the interpretation of policy—particularly between U.S. officials in Kabul and their counterparts in Islamabad—shaped coordination and operational coherence across geographic and bureaucratic lines.

A carpet cut-and-wash facility is doing business in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province, Afghanistan, in April 2016 with support from the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations. (Photo courtesy of Paul Fishstein, Afghanistan War Commission senior advisor)

7. Fighting While Talking: Tensions Between Military Operations and Political Settlement

An important area of inquiry in the commission's work is how, in the early years of the war, U.S. policy treated the Taliban and al-Qaeda as a unified threat, thereby prioritizing military operations over other means. This raises questions about whether a coherent plan to integrate the use of force with a political approach aimed at eventual negotiations was considered. Talks with the Taliban began much later and peaked after the United States had drawn down forces and military leverage had declined. The commission is examining whether the sequencing and structure of these efforts reflected White House and policymaker preferences, the domestic politics of Taliban engagements, differences of opinion that prevented the emergence of a consistent strategy, or other factors.

8. State-Building, Dependency, and Corruption

The commission is examining the extent to which U.S. financial, technical, and security sector assistance was delivered through mechanisms that, intentionally or not, generated dependency within Afghan institutions. While U.S. policy framed Afghan government self-reliance as a critical condition for ending the war, the methods employed to build capacity—often involving parallel delivery systems led by contractors, U.S. agencies, and military units—frequently circumvented Afghan authorities. This approach may have undermined Afghan sovereignty and contributed to enduring institutional fragility. The commission is examining how, as the United States moved toward withdrawal, these institutional dependencies may have shaped outcomes. In particular, Afghanistan's military, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), were left reliant on external support systems that they could not independently replicate or sustain. The commission is also evaluating how these structural dependencies affected the development of Afghan institutional capacity, influenced perceptions of government legitimacy, and incentivized various forms of corruption, including both Afghan and U.S. waste, fraud, and abuse. In addition, the commission is assessing how systemic corruption—at once enabled and exacerbated by external funding flows—contributed to the erosion of public trust, weakened state authority, and complicated the broader war effort.

9. Testing Alliances: NATO and Coalition Cohesion

The war in Afghanistan was conducted—though not uniformly—under a broad coalition framework led by the United States and operating in part through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Coalition participation brought political legitimacy, additional capabilities, and greater international engagement. At the same time, it introduced divergent national priorities, operational caveats, and coordination complexities. Participating states joined for varied reasons, including alliance commitments, solidarity with the United States, and national strategic interests. Differences emerged in rules of engagement, risk tolerance, and expectations for consultation between the United Nations–created International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the troop-granting countries. While U.S. leaders at times expressed frustration over partner restrictions and uneven burden-sharing, allied governments often sought clearer strategic direction and greater influence over decision-making. The commission is examining the tension between the U.S. aim to internationalize the war effort and its simultaneous imperative to remain the lead actor, to preserve operational control and strategic coherence. The commission is exploring how these dynamics shaped operational effectiveness and outcomes; it is also considering what they reveal about the advantages and limitations of burden-sharing in conflicts and what lessons they may offer regarding the design, governance, and strategic coherence of future multinational interventions.

10. Pakistan's Pivotal Role: Leverage and Constraints

Pakistan played a significant role in supporting early U.S. counterterrorism operations by facilitating efforts to disrupt al-Qaeda networks within its territory. It also provided—and leveraged—critical supply routes for coalition forces in Afghanistan. Over the course of the war, however, Pakistan's cooperation was offset by its unwillingness to align with U.S. policy toward the Taliban. These dynamics presented persistent challenges to U.S. counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. While Pakistan's support contributed to the degradation of al-Qaeda's leadership and operational capacity, its unwillingness to deny the Taliban sanctuary became a source of tension in U.S.–Pakistan relations and, ultimately, enabled the insurgency in meaningful ways. A sustained debate emerged over what effective modes of leverage the United States had to address this dynamic, including U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic tools. The commission is exploring the deliberations and debates that surrounded this relationship, including how U.S. policymakers understood and responded to Pakistan's ties with and support to the Afghan Taliban over time, and what this case may reveal about the limits of external leverage when partner governments maintain interests that are not fully aligned with those of the United States.

11. Managing Time and Expectations: The Exit Paradox

Across four presidential administrations, U.S. policymakers appeared to grapple with a persistent tension between the desire for a swift, decisive resolution to the war and the realities of an open-ended mission. The commission is exploring how some officials saw sustained investment in Afghan security, governance, and stability as necessary to achieving long-term objectives, while others—both in Washington and in the field—questioned whether such ambitions were viable or worthwhile, given the political, financial, and human costs involved. Even those implementing projects and programs appeared to lack a shared understanding of what "sustained investment" entailed or whether the underlying strategy was realistic. The commission is examining how skepticism about the mission's trajectory—often reflecting concerns about the clarity of objectives and the scope of U.S. engagement—influenced internal deliberations on timelines, risk tolerance, and definitions of success. These competing perspectives may have contributed to a pattern of policy recalibration visible in shifting benchmarks, evolving withdrawal plans, episodic troop surges, and intermittent reconciliation efforts, all while military operations continued. The commission is investigating how these unresolved questions—what constituted "success," how much progress was "enough," and whether the strategy was achievable under prevailing conditions—shaped the direction and outcome of the war.

12. The Evolution and Durability of U.S. Strategic Aims in Afghanistan

The United States waged war in Afghanistan to prevent its territory from being used to launch attacks against the United States. This goal linked Afghan internal stability to U.S. security and guided strategy across four U.S. presidential administrations. The 2021 collapse of the Afghan Republic following the U.S. withdrawal raises tough questions about the failure to produce a durable Afghan state. After the 2021 collapse of the Afghan Republic, the Biden administration asserted that U.S. security could still be protected through "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism capabilities, even in the absence of a physical U.S. presence. If U.S. national security interests could be preserved through remote means, why did the United States and its allies invest so much in the Afghan state? For years, U.S. officials debated how long the Afghan government could survive without direct support, expressing concerns about Afghan institutional fragility, ANDSF dependence on U.S. enablers, and the legitimacy of the political order. The collapse surprised many, but the underlying vulnerabilities were long recognized. The commission is exploring this collapse not as a singular failure of execution but as the culmination of unresolved tensions embedded throughout the 20-year war. Was internal Afghan stability ever a feasible, sufficient, or necessary means to achieve U.S. counterterrorism goals? Did strategy evolve in response to shifting conditions, or did it drift in the absence of clarity and consensus? What does the shift to a post-withdrawal posture—centered on remote operations and limited engagement—suggest about how strategic success came to be redefined? By examining how the collapse was both anticipated and miscalculated, and how strategic aims were pursued, reinterpreted, or abandoned over time, the commission seeks to better understand the alignment—or misalignment—between U.S. means and ends in Afghanistan.

Members of the Afghanistan War Commission after a commission hearing at the U.S. Senate Dirksen Office Building on Capitol Hill in June 2025.

FINAL REPORT FRAMEWORK

Charged with analyzing key policy and strategic decisions over the 20-year Afghanistan War, the commission has organized its analysis into a chronological framework that focuses on eight specific periods across four U.S. presidential administrations.

This framework is the result of several meetings, information-gathering efforts, and consultations among commissioners and staff and with non-commission experts. Commissioners agreed to the framework after a series of plenaries on the subject in 2024 and 2025.

Although these periods are presented in chronological order, they are not simply a timeline. Each represents a shift in American policy, strategy, and underlying assumptions. These shifts were the result of decisions made by U.S. officials of evolving conditions on the ground in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The commission continues to examine these phases, which overlap in places, to understand how decisions were made, how strategic judgments evolved, and how both intended and unintended consequences influenced outcomes.

Section 1: The Roots of the War: The United States, al-Qaeda, and Afghanistan in the Pre-9/11 Era (1989–2001)

Having engaged in a sustained campaign of unconventional warfare during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the United States focused its attention elsewhere after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Afghanistan—first mired in civil war, then under Taliban rule—became peripheral to U.S. interests during the 1990s. As Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda established safe haven there, U.S. policy toward Afghanistan remained narrowly focused on counterterrorism and, to a lesser extent, women's rights. Limited engagement and reduced ground intelligence left the United States poorly positioned to detect or counter the emerging extremist threat.

This neglect coincided with the United States' making a broader post–Cold War shift marked by global engagement, democracy promotion, and economic cooperation. Policymakers balanced selective multilateralism with the need to sustain military preeminence. Successes in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans bolstered confidence in swift, expeditionary military operations, but reduced appetites for the long tail of the associated nation-building. U.S. military doctrine shifted toward rapid, precise campaigns with minimal ground presence. By the eve of 9/11, al-Qaeda was operating freely in Afghanistan, and U.S. visibility into the country's internal dynamics was almost nonexistent.

SCOPE

This section serves as a critical prologue to understanding the war. It will explore the central challenges the United States faced when it entered Afghanistan in 2001 by asking questions such as the following:

1. How did U.S. leaders assess the risks and benefits of military, diplomatic, and aid interventions abroad, and how did past interventions influence America's readiness and inclination to address the threat in Afghanistan?
2. How did the U.S. government monitor and respond to homeland threats posed by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda during this period?
3. What relationships did the United States maintain with the Taliban, other Afghan leaders, and regional states that would shape the post-9/11 war effort?

PROGRESS TO DATE

The commission's inquiry into the pre-9/11 period has proceeded on the premise that the war's conclusion cannot be understood apart from its origins. In its inaugural public hearing on July 14, 2024, at the Washington office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on Capitol Hill, the commission heard from former diplomats, national security officials, historians, and scholars who traced the conflict's roots in the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban's rise, and al-Qaeda's evolving terrorist campaign culminating on September 11, 2001. As Commissioner Ryan Crocker observed, "Our ends can be found in our beginnings."

These public testimonies have been complemented by engagements with members of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission)—including Philip Zelikow, Christopher Kojm, and Alexis Albion—and by classified briefings from the Intelligence Community, all of which have deepened the commission's understanding of the U.S. counterterrorism posture, pre-9/11 threat assessments of al-Qaeda, and the early operational responses immediately following the attacks. Interviews with numerous experts with deep experience in Afghanistan and U.S. policy have proven invaluable in shaping the commission's focus and understanding of the issues during this period.

Section 2: The Response to 9/11 and the Global War on Terror (September–December 2001)

The 9/11 attacks triggered an immediate and forceful U.S. response. President George W. Bush declared a "war on terror," seeking to destroy terrorist groups threatening the United States and to punish any regimes that harbored them. The Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, and, in October 2001, the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan commenced. The early campaign succeeded in toppling the Taliban regime through a combination of air power and special operations forces partnering with Afghan militias. The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 laid the groundwork for a post-Taliban political order.

These initial decisions embedded a number of long-term contradictions. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were treated as indistinguishable enemies, complicating Afghan and international efforts to build a stable Afghanistan. A broad coalition was formed, but strategic questions—about the endgame, the nature of the enemy, and the scope of the mission—remained unresolved. After the initial campaign, the U.S. involvement unfolded along different trajectories, including an international mission focused on stability operations and a U.S. military campaign oriented toward both counterterrorism and nation-building. Meanwhile, the president and U.S. Central Command began to turn their attention to Iraq.

SCOPE

In this section the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Designing the military response in Afghanistan:** The decisions about scope, scale, and approach in using military force to eliminate al-Qaeda's safe haven and remove the Taliban government that harbored them, establishing the strategic foundation for America's longest war
- **Launching Operation Enduring Freedom:** The initiation of combat operations combining airstrikes, special forces, and support for the Northern Alliance to rapidly overthrow the Taliban regime
- **Building a coalition:** The early effort to assemble international partners and formalize support for the intervention through invocation of NATO's Article 5 and through United Nations resolutions
- **Choosing a small footprint approach:** The strategy of relying on allies, limited U.S. ground forces, and airpower rather than large-scale ground operations
- **Convening the Bonn Process and endorsing the Bonn Agreement:** Facilitating the political process and subsequent international agreement that established Afghanistan's interim government structure and democratic transition timeline without Taliban participation

- **Backing Hamid Karzai as interim leader:** The choice to support Karzai, leader of the Pashtun tribes that drove the Taliban from their Kandahar stronghold, over other potential candidates and power brokers as Afghanistan's transitional leader

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- What options did the United States consider as potential responses to the 9/11 attacks? What options were rejected and why? What was the nature of the debate?
- How did the United States approach the facilitation of a new Afghan political order?
- How did early decisions on alliances and military operations open up and also constrain options available to policymakers later in the war? For example, how did the Pentagon's view of coalition warfare differ from that of NATO?

PROGRESS TO DATE

The commission's review of U.S. operations in Afghanistan from September through December 2001 remains in progress, but several themes are emerging from preliminary observations drawn from the initial public hearing. Witnesses described how rapid tactical gains—achieved in partnership with Northern Alliance anti-Taliban militia forces—did not automatically yield enduring strategic progress. They noted the Taliban's adaptive resilience and the constraints of U.S. coordination, evident in the missed opportunity to apprehend Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora and in the resiliency of the al-Qaeda sanctuary in Pakistan. Testimony also underscored how the mission's mandate expanded almost immediately—from a narrowly defined counterterrorism objective to ambitious state-building and reconstruction goals—and how contemporaneous planning for Iraq, described by one commissioner as the "enormous elephant in the room," influenced early force-structure deliberations.

Interviews with U.S. Central Command leadership and senior civilian officials have similarly informed the commission's evolving understanding. These discussions show that, as of September 11, 2001, strategic planning for both Afghanistan and Iraq was proceeding in parallel, and that concerns over the latter shaped the size and composition of the initial Afghanistan deployment. Decision-makers deliberately adopted a partnership model—avoiding a Soviet-style occupation and seeking to present U.S. forces as liberators—and leveraged allied and partner contributions to sustain a lean footprint. Yet, as revealed in documents and after-action interviews, overlapping command arrangements and competing agency priorities complicated coherent execution, most notably in the circumstances surrounding bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora. These preliminary findings will inform further inquiry as the commission continues its work.

Section 3: From Light Footprint to State-Building (2002–2005)

U.S. engagement in Afghanistan from January 2002 to December 2005 can be defined by an initial "light footprint" counterterrorism and state-building mission that gradually expanded into a broader effort. The political transition process agreed on at Bonn was a significant focus. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of State, and other agencies became more involved in social and economic development, capacity building within Afghan government institutions, and the development of the Afghan National Army and police forces. Early Taliban attempts to reconcile with the Afghan government were rebuffed. U.S. military operations and the actions of Afghan partners led to civilian harm and deaths, alienating many communities. By 2005, the Taliban had reemerged as an insurgent force, and security was eroding.

Major milestones during this period include the 2003 Emergency *Loya Jirga*, the 2004 constitution, and Afghanistan's first direct presidential elections in 2004. Throughout, the commission notes enduring challenges in interagency coordination, the influence of regional actors, and the competing demands of planning for Iraq. By late 2005, the United States had shifted from a "light footprint" to an "accelerating success" strategy, prioritizing rapid security-sector expansion to consolidate early gains and lay the groundwork for eventual withdrawal.

SCOPE

For this section, the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Relying on strongmen:** The decision to work with regional warlords and militia commanders to fight the Taliban
- **Combining counterterrorism and state-building:** The sustained focus on hunting al-Qaeda and Taliban

A shop in Herat, Afghanistan, displays candidate posters ahead of the September 2005 national parliamentary and provincial council elections. (Photo courtesy of Commissioner Andrew Wilder, Afghanistan War Commission)

remnants while pursuing state-building inside Afghanistan

- **Rejecting repeated Taliban attempts to reconcile:** The denial of any political role or amnesty for members of the Taliban, despite Kabul's interest in reconciliation
- **Launching the Iraq War:** The decision to begin a second war that shifted military assets, intelligence resources, and senior leadership attention
- **Endorsing a centralized government:** The support for a new government with power highly centralized in Kabul and in the role of the president

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- How did the United States conceive of its role in a post-Taliban Afghanistan?
- Did the United States recognize Afghan agency in the U.S. governance and state-building objectives? What were the unintended consequences of those empowered and disempowered by the U.S. approach?
- Was the exclusion of the Taliban from the new political order a significant missed opportunity for political stability, and did it contribute to the emergence of the insurgency?
- What effects did ongoing U.S. counterterrorism operations, U.S. assistance practices, and the Afghan government's deep reliance on donor funding have on Afghanistan's ability to create an autonomous, independent government?

PROGRESS TO DATE

The commission's preliminary review of the post-Bonn period indicates that although the United States and its international partners endorsed Hamid Karzai as interim leader and secured broad commitments to Afghanistan's reconstruction, the resulting political settlement marginalized key constituencies—most notably former Taliban affiliates. In interviews and hearings, former U.S., Afghan, and United Nations officials have made compelling arguments for and against inviting the Taliban to Bonn. Another important issue has repeatedly surfaced: did the Bonn Process appropriately balance power between the central Afghanistan government and regional stakeholders? Even as Afghanistan had a history of centralized governments, some former officials have questioned whether those arrangements were appropriate after 2001.

During this time period, the United States—in pursuit of its counterterrorism goals—also depended heavily on regional power brokers whose legitimacy was questioned by different Afghan communities. These arrangements reflected a persistent tension between the kinetic campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda and the objective of building a modern, democratic state, a tension that shaped early U.S. policy debates and decision-making. The United States was also heavily dependent on Pakistan for its operations against al-Qaeda during this time frame. Commission interviews and hearings on that subject have introduced a persistent conundrum: how to manage the U.S. relationship with Pakistan vis-à-vis its presence in Afghanistan despite Pakistan's ongoing ties to the Taliban.

The commission also observed that as U.S. forces remained in Afghanistan to support the interim administration, the mission became divided into two concurrent priorities: counterterrorism and state-building. An initial "light footprint" approach gave way to progressively larger roles for USAID, DoD, and the State Department in building institutions and

developing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Combined with other foreign donors, the United States oversaw a dramatic influx of personnel and resources. Interviews indicate that this shift fed corruption on both the Afghan and U.S. sides among contractors and, critically, within the Afghan government. Source material—including the USAID Afghanistan Recovery and Reconstruction Strategy of 2002, records of strategic reviews, and records of the stand-up of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—provides foundational insights into aid and security aims during this period.

Dramatic changes to Afghanistan's governance, development, and economic systems occurred against a backdrop of growing demands on U.S. resources driven by planning for operations in Iraq. During the commission's second public hearing on April 11, 2025, several witnesses described how the clarity, discipline, and security objectives of the first 90 days of the war had shifted by 2003 as the "Iraq War had drained significant resources, military headquarters, and attention away from Afghanistan."

Coalition forces prepare to board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter in Afghanistan, 2007. (U.S. Army Center of Military History photo)

Section 4: The Taliban Resurgence (2006–2009)

By 2005, the Taliban had regrouped, aided by their sanctuary in Pakistan and by rising disaffection among many Afghans. As U.S. and NATO forces were constrained by limited resources and a fragmented mission, and as they also failed to anticipate the depth of local grievances, the insurgency grew in strength and ambition. While both the Taliban and al-Qaeda were operating from the region of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, the United States began weighing unilateral actions. During this period, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) legislation was passed, focused primarily on Iraq.

SCOPE

In this section the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Response (or lack thereof) to Pakistan's Taliban ties:** The decision to maintain an alliance with Pakistan despite intelligence suggesting its continued support for insurgents
- **Creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and post-9/11 intelligence sharing:** The establishment of a new domestic security architecture that reorganized government priorities and resources around protecting the homeland
- **Continued strategic focus still on Iraq:** The continued prioritizing of operations in Iraq over development initiatives in Afghanistan, limiting the diplomatic attention available for Afghan reconstruction and security force development, as well as the military footprint to combat the insurgency

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- What drove and enabled the Taliban's resurgence after its crushing defeat in 2001? What role did the violence inflicted on Afghan civilians (casualties, detentions, house searches, property destruction) from U.S. military operations play in creating conditions favorable to the insurgency?
- Did the U.S. Intelligence Community have an accurate understanding of the strength and trajectory of the insurgency and terrorism threat at this time? How did analytic disagreements within the Intelligence Community affect U.S. policymakers' understanding of the war?

An Afghan farmer tends to a demonstration farm in Badham Bagh near Kabul 2007. (Photo courtesy of Neilesh Shelat, Afghanistan War Commission Development Team Chief)

- What interests are essential to understanding the U.S.–Pakistan relationship, and how did the relationship shift during this period?
- How did the revamped U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine impact the U.S. military in Afghanistan?
- To what extent did the continued policy focus on Iraq influence U.S. conduct of the intervention in Afghanistan?

PROGRESS TO DATE

To better understand U.S. decisions during this period, the commission has received several pertinent briefings and broad access to finished intelligence assessments from executive branch entities, including the National Intelligence Council, Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

In commission interviews, several former Afghan government officials and U.S. cabinet-level administrators have argued that the Taliban insurgency did not arise from inattention. They point out that, although the coalition devoted substantial resources to development, aid often arrived too slowly in the provinces. At the same time, several officials recognized missed opportunities to reconcile with the Taliban. "We needed to bring them inside the tent," one senior U.S. policymaker reflected. The coalition's focus had also shifted beyond Afghanistan: al-Qaeda's network had grown globally, with its primary sanctuary now in Pakistan, and the United States remained at war in Iraq.

Section 5: The Surge and Its Effects (2009–2011)

Upon assuming office in 2009, President Barack Obama commissioned an Afghanistan-Pakistan policy review to realign U.S. objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This led to a military surge of tens of thousands of additional troops and civilians to Afghanistan. The objectives were to intensify counterterrorism operations, stabilize the Afghan government, and reverse Taliban momentum, weakening them sufficiently to open other strategic options, such as political reconciliation.

The strategy emphasized cultivating a deeper partnership with Pakistan—leveraging substantial U.S. assistance and diplomatic influence—in the hope of recalibrating its strategic incentives and persuading it to withdraw support for the Taliban. The new strategy also advocated a "whole-of-government" framework and a shift from narrow counterterrorism operations to counterterrorism and population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN). The strategy was bound by a phased drawdown timeline that was announced at the same time as the surge.

SCOPE

In this section, the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Approval of troop and civilian surge:** Obama's decision to deploy additional troops alongside expanded civilian capacity to reverse deteriorating security conditions and accelerate the transition to Afghan forces taking the lead
- **Announcement of the phased drawdown:** The simultaneous commitment to surge forces and to publicize the timeline for their withdrawal
- **Implementation of a population-centric COIN strategy:** The adoption of COIN tactics focused on "winning the hearts and minds" of Afghan civilians rather than simply targeting insurgents with military force, a shift that required extensive resources and time
- **Start of the U.S.–Taliban talks:** Obama's greenlighting backchannel talks after the Taliban reached out to the United States

U.S. soldiers on patrol in Baraki Barak District, Logar Province, Afghanistan, March 2013. (Photo courtesy of John Alulis, Afghanistan War Commission senior analyst)

- **Bin Laden raid in Pakistan:** The unilateral operation that eliminated al-Qaeda's leader and achieved a central component of the war's original objective while straining the U.S.–Pakistan relationship

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- Why did the Obama administration choose to invest massive resources in the war, and what did it hope to achieve?
- How did debates over counterinsurgency and counterterrorism options shape the surge and its objectives?
- How did U.S. state-building efforts help and hinder governance?
- What impact did setting a withdrawal timeline have on the effectiveness of the surge and negotiations? What was the relationship between the military campaign and diplomatic efforts?
- Why, despite significant outreach by U.S. leadership and billions of dollars in military and economic support, was the United States unable to change Pakistan's strategic calculus?

PROGRESS TO DATE

The commission continues to review extensive source material on surge planning, execution, and post-surge assessments, and it devoted its June 23, 2025, public hearing to examining those decisions and their effects. Although the surge delivered notable tactical gains, its impact on long-term strategic dynamics remains unclear. Witnesses and document reviews have linked the rapid expansion of U.S. forces and aid to rising corruption and patronage. This research has also raised questions about whether launching large-scale military operations before formal outreach to the Taliban constrained U.S. leverage in later reconciliation efforts. Interviews with former military and civilian officials also underscore how competing Afghanistan–Iraq priorities shaped resource allocations and policy debates during this period.

At the hearing, commissioners explored how President Obama's 18-month timetable—announced with the surge in December 2009—sent mixed signals to different audiences and may have complicated the surge's implementation. Several witnesses pointed to a persistent disconnect between strategic decision-making in Washington and execution on the ground, arguing that insufficient attention to field realities undermined the policy's effectiveness.

While the May 2011 operation against Osama bin Laden achieved a significant national objective, it was at best a symbolic victory, accelerated a marked decline in trust between the United States and Pakistan, and did not shorten the war. The commission has advanced its tactical and strategic understanding of the raid through numerous Intelligence Community briefings and interviews.

Section 6: Transition Amid Uncertainty (2011–2017)

Between 2012 and 2017, the United States sought to transfer responsibilities for security to the Afghan government while maintaining advisory and counterterrorism roles, using negotiations over a bilateral security agreement as the lead mechanism to shift the U.S. role. At the same time, with battlefield momentum bolstering the Taliban, the United States pursued negotiations for a political settlement. These talks with the Taliban collapsed before crucial terms of government structure could be addressed. The United States also took a lead role brokering a political deal in Afghanistan on the heels of a disputed national election. Following the troubled formation of the subsequent National Unity Government, Afghanistan's political future remained uncertain.

The Afghan government remained heavily reliant on external aid and security support. Gains from the surge proved difficult to sustain, and the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops and of the funds they spent in the country had grave economic impacts. International interest waned, and U.S. strategic attention pivoted to other global concerns, including the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Inside Afghanistan, the nation's divisive and inconclusive 2014 elections required significant U.S. diplomatic intervention and created uncertainty over the legitimacy and strength of the incoming Afghan government.

SCOPE

In this section the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Transition of combat roles to Afghan security forces:** The shift from U.S.-led operations to advisory and support functions, testing Afghan military capabilities
- **Contours of U.S.–Taliban talks:** Diplomatic engagements exploring possibilities for a political settlement
- **Continued U.S. counterterrorism operations:** The continuation of air strikes and special operations to prevent terrorist resurgence while the combat mission was being officially ended
- **Reduction in force levels:** The drawdown of the U.S. military presence to minimize costs and domestic political exposure while preserving core capabilities

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- Did U.S. efforts to expand the Afghanistan security forces improve security on the ground?
- Was the United States engaging in a transition toward stability, or was it in a slow-motion retreat? Had U.S. objectives fundamentally changed?
- What did the United States and Taliban aim to achieve through bilateral talks? What was the objective of U.S. outreach to the Taliban? What was accomplished? In what ways did the talks fail and why?
- How did U.S. transition planning account for the Afghan government and security forces' interests and capacities?
- What role did intelligence have in assessing both the security of Afghanistan and the capacity of the Afghan military?
- What role did the United States expect to play in a post-transition environment?

PROGRESS TO DATE

In the commission's evaluation of the post-surge years, as the U.S. government looked to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan, two themes have emerged in many of the interviews with both U.S. officials and international observers in Afghanistan: corruption challenges and ambiguity around the long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan. Many of these interviews describe the pervasive nature of corruption among the Afghan political elite and point to the U.S. role in perpetuating and facilitating that corruption. Interviewees also spoke to the paradox of U.S. engagement in this period: the U.S. military and civilian presence was steadily declining, signaling that Afghanistan was becoming less of a priority for the U.S. government. At the same time, the United States professed its long-term commitment to partnering with the Afghan government, seemingly indicating that Afghanistan could count on U.S. support for years to come. Afghans, from government officials to ordinary citizens interviewed by the commission, as well as Pakistan and the Taliban were trying to gauge what these two disparate signals meant. According to some civilian officials and many servicemembers, in the United States the mission in Afghanistan either was not fully understood or was generally forgotten.

The commission received the classified annexes of DoD reports to Congress mandated in Section 1225 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015. They have provided critical insight into efforts to enhance security and stability in Afghanistan during this period, as have intelligence assessments authored by several Intelligence Community elements.

The commission's next hearing scheduled for 2026 will focus on the 2011–2017 period's questions and decisions.

Section 7: Fighting While Talking, Talking While Fighting: From South Asia Strategy to the Doha Talks (2017–2021)

The commission's study of the Trump administration's Afghanistan policy indicates that President Donald Trump, initially skeptical of continued U.S. engagement, was persuaded by his national security team to endorse

a regionally focused South Asia Strategy. This strategy aimed to integrate Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian republics in a concerted effort to check the Taliban's resurgence and bolster the Afghan Republic while averting a "hasty exit." In his August 21, 2017, speech at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, President Trump stressed that he was shifting the U.S. approach in Afghanistan from a time-based to a conditions-based military strategy, declaring that "conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on." The strategy included a small increase in troops and expanded military authorities for counterterrorism operations. By 2018, however, there is evidence that presidential confidence in this plan had diminished, giving rise to publicly acknowledged direct negotiations with Taliban representatives in Doha—conducted without formal Afghan government involvement—with the objective of a U.S. withdrawal, counterterrorism assurances, and follow-on intra-Afghan negotiations.

U.S. soldiers train Afghan soldiers at a shooting range in 2007. (U.S. Army Center of Military History photo)

The February 2020 Doha Agreement established a timeline for full U.S. and allied withdrawal in exchange for Taliban counterterrorism assurances, while deferring more concrete commitments on intra-Afghan reconciliation. The commission continues to assess how escalating violence during the talks and Kabul's exclusion from negotiations affected both the Afghan government's leverage vis-à-vis the Taliban and the larger prospect for a sustainable political settlement.

SCOPE

In this section the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **Launching and abandoning the South Asia Strategy and the subsequent pivot:** Trump's brief attempt at a regional approach linking Afghanistan and Pakistan policies before reverting to bilateral negotiations and withdrawal planning
- **Initiating formal bilateral negotiations with the Taliban and excluding the Afghan government:** The strategic decision to pursue direct talks with the Taliban rather than Afghan-led reconciliation, prioritizing the U.S. exit over partner legitimacy
- **Signing of the Doha Agreement:** The formal compact establishing conditions and timeline for U.S. withdrawal in exchange for Taliban commitments to counterterrorism and intra-Afghan negotiations
- **Moving toward full withdrawal:** The policy shift from conditional presence to unconditional departure, prioritizing ending U.S. involvement ahead of achieving strategic objectives

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- What was the operational vision under the South Asia Strategy? What were the effects and outcomes of the South Asia Strategy? What were the areas of interagency disagreement?
- Why did the Trump administration shift from the South Asia Strategy to direct talks with the Taliban?
- What conditions and consequences did the United States consider in deciding to engage in bilateral negotiations with the Taliban for the withdrawal of U.S. forces?

An AH-64 Apache helicopter lands at Forward Operating Base Fenty near Jalalabad Airport. (U.S. Army Center of Military History photo)

- How did the Afghan government and the Taliban perceive the shifting U.S. posture?
- Did the Doha Agreement open the door for potential peace, or did it speed the collapse of the state?

PROGRESS TO DATE

As U.S. policymakers resolved to conclude military operations in Afghanistan, they initiated formal negotiations with the Taliban, marking a departure from earlier policy that precluded direct talks without Afghan government participation. Although intermittent U.S.–Taliban contacts had occurred for several years, these discussions represented the first publicly acknowledged dialogue. Commission interviews with former senior U.S. and Afghan officials continue to explore the political dynamics surrounding the talks, including the possibility that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's 2019 reelection influenced Taliban engagement. Concurrently, the commission is examining the phased transfer of security responsibilities from coalition to Afghan forces and reviewing interagency records to understand the negotiating strategy and defined parameters. Staff are also analyzing primary source materials related to the February 2020 Doha Agreement to clarify how the withdrawal timeline and Taliban counterterrorism commitments were shaped.

The commission's next hearing will delve into the political reconciliation approaches of both the Obama and Trump administrations.

Section 8: Final Withdrawal and Collapse (2021)

President Joe Biden's April 2021 decision to complete the military withdrawal from Afghanistan was a choice to abide by the U.S. commitment in the Doha Agreement with a modified timeline. It was also the product of deliberations within the Biden administration concerning the trade-offs of adhering to the agreement versus departing from it. The withdrawal announcement crystallized and quickened trends that had been under way for years: the ANDSF's inability to fight without significant U.S. assistance; fears, uncertainty, and disunity among Afghan political elites regarding the government's stability; and an apparent growing expectation on the part of the Taliban that military victory was within reach. With most U.S. forces out of the country by July, the Taliban advanced faster than expected and began to take provincial capitals. While the ANDSF put up stiff resistance in some areas, most of its units fled or surrendered to Taliban commanders. President Ashraf Ghani also fled, unexpectedly leaving the country by helicopter. The Taliban entered Kabul without firing a shot.

The massive U.S.-led evacuation effort that followed, though successful in extracting more than 120,000 individuals, was chaotic and tragic. The scenes of desperation at Kabul airport and the August 26 suicide attack that killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and more than 170 Afghan civilians marked a harrowing end to the war. The collapse of the Afghan state triggered a national and international reckoning. It raised questions about the viability of U.S. intervention models, the reliability of U.S. commitments, and the strategic utility of protracted military engagement. It left the United States with a debt toward Afghan partners and an urgent effort by U.S. advocates to resolve the long backlog of Afghan SIVs. The commission is conducting a thorough examination of both the withdrawal and evacuation—the planning decisions, intelligence assessments, and operational execution that shaped those final months and weeks.

An international advisor demonstrates new irrigation technology to Afghan farmers in Khulm District, Balkh Province, in March 2010. (Photo courtesy of Paul Fishstein, Afghanistan War Commission senior advisor)

SCOPE

In this section the commission is assessing these significant U.S. policy decisions:

- **President Biden's decision to withdraw all 2,500 military troops:** The commitment to complete military withdrawal by September 2021, accepting risks to the Afghan Republic as the price of ending America's longest war
- **The decision to completely remove U.S. assets from Afghanistan:** In addition to withdrawing all U.S. combat forces, the commitment to closing U.S. bases including Bagram, abandoning and destroying equipment, and shuttering the U.S. Embassy
- **The evacuation of noncombatants, including U.S. dual citizens and Afghan partners:** The emergency airlift operation from Kabul airport following the Taliban's rapid takeover

Within this set of decisions, the commission is evaluating the following:

- When Biden entered office, what options did he face for determining the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan?
- Why did the Biden administration choose to execute the withdrawal as laid out in the Doha Agreement?
- What impact did intelligence assessments have on decisions pertaining to the withdrawal and its execution?
- What did assessments say about the risks of withdrawing versus keeping troops in the country?
- What did assessments say about whether the Taliban would uphold its commitments to the Doha Agreement?
- Did the relevant U.S. agencies and departments differ or align on the potential causes of the collapse of the government of Afghanistan and its security forces?
- How did interagency coordination unfold as both the withdrawal and evacuation efforts were implemented? Could additional steps have been taken to make the final weeks less chaotic?
- How did the Biden administration weigh the implications of the withdrawal for U.S. interests, for Afghan partners, and for the citizens of Afghanistan?

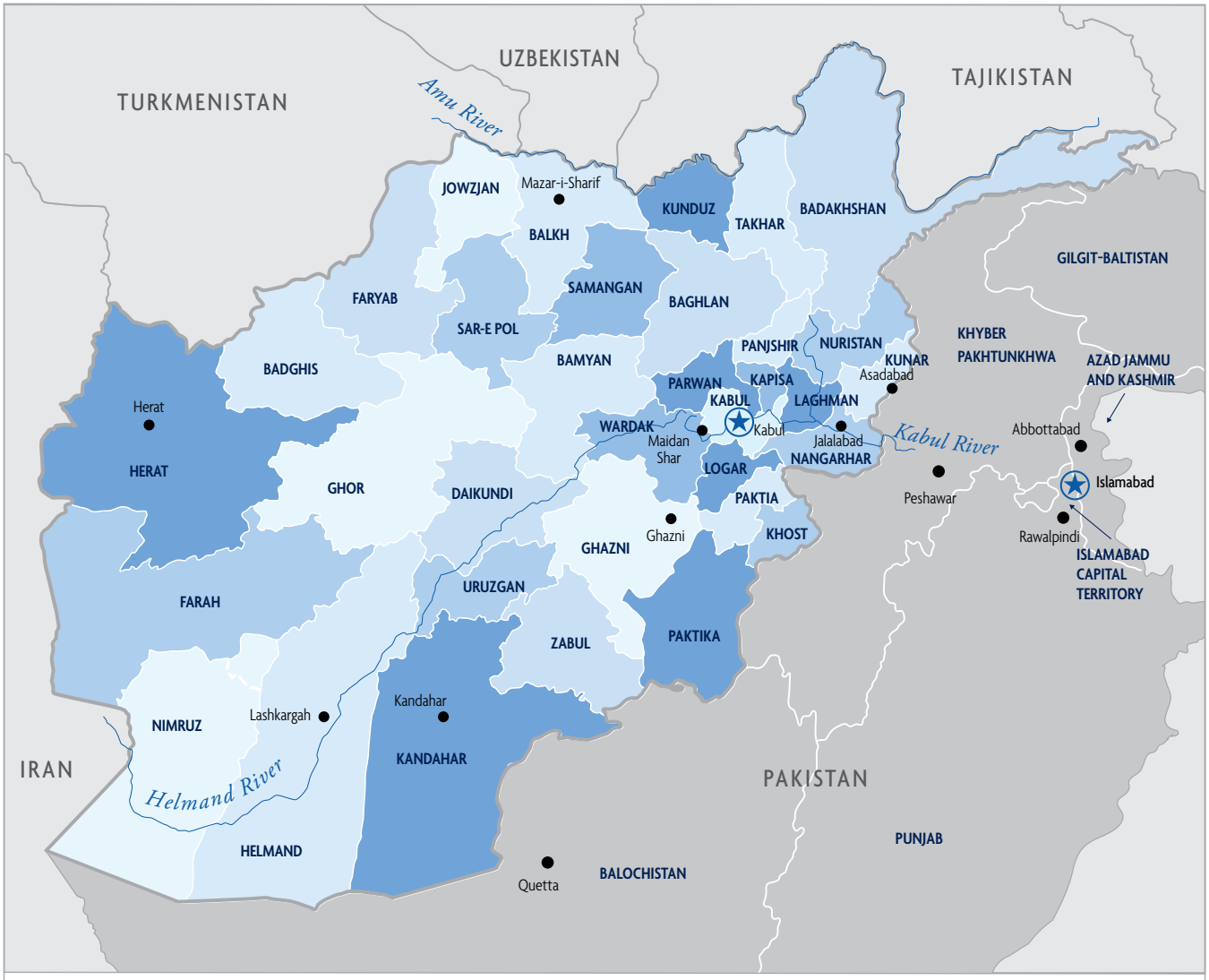
PROGRESS TO DATE

Though much has been studied and written about the withdrawal of civilians from Kabul, commission interviews are providing perspectives from inside the chaotic scenes broadcast internationally from Hamid Karzai International Airport. The commission is also poring over primary source materials related to the withdrawal and evacuation, including the after-action reports commissioned by the Secretaries of State and Defense and Director of National Intelligence.

The commission also has broad access to Intelligence Community assessments of the potential effects of the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan. These will aid analysis of the warnings provided by the Intelligence Community and what policymakers reviewed to inform their decisions. In addition, former military leaders and U.S. government officials from several agencies have directly discussed with the commission the timeline, intelligence analysis, and interagency communication and coordination issues. Servicemembers, civilians, and Afghans who were part of the noncombatant evacuation operation have described to the commission their training for the mission, their sense of what was achieved, and the experience of operating under such unprecedented and harrowing conditions.

A commission hearing in 2026 will cover the key questions and decisions leading up to the withdrawal.

Map of Afghanistan



Commissioners Bob Taft and Chris Molino, right, listen to witnesses during the Afghanistan War Commission's June 2025 hearing.

EXECUTIVE BRANCH ENGAGEMENT

Congress charged the commission with a comprehensive review of U.S. policy, counterterrorism, and intelligence decisions over two decades of the Afghanistan War, including the range of options presented to policymakers and the effectiveness of their implementation.

Completing this task requires examination of presidential communications, interagency deliberations, and classified programs essential to understanding U.S. efforts against al-Qaeda and related terrorist threats. These sources of information are some of the most sensitive and closely guarded in the executive branch: many of them implicate the deliberative process and presidential communication privileges. Without strong executive branch support, the commission cannot fully execute its mandate to develop informed, actionable recommendations for future national security decision-makers.

Since March 7, 2024, Co-Chairs Jackson and Chaudhary have issued 25 formal letter requests for information (RFIs) to executive branch entities. Each request cites both specific and general subject parameters for briefings and documents. The commission works closely with each executive branch entity on each request to develop methods and accommodations that address both staffing realities and the commission's time constraints.

Fifteen requests for information were issued to the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and departments and agencies under the Biden administration. By the end of the Biden administration, two of these 15 RFIs had been fully satisfied. Three RFIs issued under the Biden administration have been fully satisfied under the Trump administration. The remaining nine RFIs from the Biden administration continue to be open and are in the Trump administration's hands.

Between January 29, 2025, and July 31, 2025, the Commission issued 10 additional RFIs to departments and agencies, including one to the EOP. All remain pending. The commission makes the following observations on the quality of information received to date from RFIs:

- High-value material from the Department of State has clarified policy positions and forecasts of security, political, and economic dynamics on Afghan, Pakistani, and U.S. interests throughout the course of the war
- Briefings and assessments from the Intelligence Community have been responsive to the commission's inquiries into the utility and scope of intelligence tools in the war; they also offer critical context on sensitive issues related to U.S. counterterrorism policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Without strong executive branch support, the commission cannot fully execute its mandate to develop informed, actionable recommendations for future national security decision-makers.

- Extensive source material from the Department of Defense has been responsive to commission requests concerning—among several other categories—surge planning, execution, and post-surge assessments, providing unique insights into this pivotal phase of the war.

Many executive branch officials made steady progress on some commission requirements, but other areas of research suffered delays due to turnover of key officials.

Consequently, critical information remains inaccessible, owing to inconsistent engagement during the 2024 election cycle and the 2025 presidential transition, combined with post-transition reductions in staffing and policy reprioritization. The commission urgently needs sustained executive branch cooperation to fulfill its congressional mandate.

The commission is acutely aware of its outstanding needs in the short time remaining to finalize the research. Notably, with compartmental access recently restored, the counterterrorism team will redouble its efforts to make up for lost time. As described below in the status reports, the commission's most urgent outstanding requirements are the following:

1. Department of Defense (DoD) provision of read-ins to access sensitive information
2. Expedited and prioritized efforts by the State Department, DoD, and the Intelligence Community (IC) to respond to document requests

Status Reports

THE WHITE HOUSE

Biden Administration

The Biden administration coordinated executive branch responses to commission requests through the National Security Council (NSC) staff, primarily through the NSC Legal Advisor. Beginning in early 2024, commission senior staff engaged often with the NSC Legal Advisor personally and understood that an NSC-led lawyers group regularly discussed and coordinated responses to commission requests.

The Biden administration assisted the commission in three foundational ways:

1. With support from White House lawyers, the commission negotiated and concluded memoranda of agreement with several executive branch departments and agencies to govern provision of documents and support for interviews.
2. The NSC worked closely with the Intelligence Community to provide a small subset of commissioners and professional staff with the read-ins necessary to access classified and compartmented information about sensitive intelligence programs critical to the commission's mandate.
3. The NSC confirmed to DoD the commission's needs for DoD-provided classified information technology, which still needs to be configured and then installed in both commission spaces.

While the Biden administration took steps to establish the substantive and technical infrastructure that supports the commission's research and encouraged departments and agencies to be responsive to commission requests, it did not grant commission requests for EOP and NSC information pertaining to the implementation of the Doha Agreement and withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the exception of agreeing to the State Department's provision of one item (see below). In a letter to the commission dated January 13, 2025, it stated that providing such information would infringe on significant executive branch confidentiality interests and raise substantial separation-of-powers concerns.

The commission had more than a dozen meetings and calls with NSC officials throughout the fall and winter of 2024 to emphasize the importance of the requested material and to negotiate parameters of its

request for access to Biden White House records. The Biden administration ultimately declined the entirety of the commission's request for EOP materials with the exception of one item: the classified addenda to the Doha Agreement, which it authorized the State Department to provide. The request was administratively closed on January 20, 2025, when the Biden administration left office.

The Biden administration also did not respond in time to a commission request under the Presidential Records Act for indexes identifying prior presidential administration records. The commission submitted this request to the Biden administration on September 23, 2024. After the commission's extensive follow-up and expressions of urgency, the EOP finally submitted this request to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) on the commission's behalf on January 6, 2025. Ultimately, this was too late. NARA was not able to respond in the two weeks before the end of the Biden administration, when the EOP request expired. This meant that almost a year and half into its mandate, the commission had yet to receive an index of records that could yield primary source materials—20 years' worth of U.S. decision-making across four presidential administrations—required to fulfill its congressional mandate.

Trump Administration

In the early days of the Trump administration, senior EOP staff met with commissioners and professional staff to learn about the commission's research priorities and requirements. In response, the Trump administration has assisted the commission in the following significant ways:

1. The EOP expressed support for interviews with former officials.
2. The EOP conveyed to departments and agencies that it supports providing the commission with requested materials, and it cleared for release State and Defense Department documents that had been pending review under the prior administration.
3. On the commission's behalf, the EOP submitted a request to NARA for critical documents across the four presidential administrations that carried out the war.

The commission now has access to thousands of documents from every period of the war. The availability of these documents significantly enhances the commission's ability to produce an objective, fact-based, and comprehensive report on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

While the Biden administration took steps to establish the substantive and technical infrastructure that supports the commission's research and encouraged departments and agencies to be responsive to commission requests, it did not grant commission requests for EOP and NSC information pertaining to the implementation of the Doha Agreement and withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the exception of agreeing to the State Department's provision of one item. In a letter to the commission dated January 13, 2025, it stated that providing such information would infringe on significant executive branch confidentiality interests and raise substantial separation-of-powers concerns.

The recent restoration of access to compartmented information on sensitive intelligence programs relevant to the commission's mandate is critical to a full understanding of the war. Information provided through this access will help ensure that the commission's analysis, findings, and recommendations are fully informed. As the commission works toward its final report, it will rely on the Trump administration's continued engagement regarding classification review and release of the final report in 2026.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The State Department has provided expeditious support for commission briefings and interviews of former and current personnel. It has also responded to the commission's RFIs by providing access to documents, often under tight personnel or time constraints. The department has facilitated commission engagements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations and has supported the commission's requests for records of both organizations.

The State Department has assured the commission that despite attrition across administrative functions, the department has shifted work responsibilities to continue to respond to commission requests as expeditiously as possible. Making these responses high priority will be particularly critical during the next six months as the commission works to complete evidentiary review. Any delays could significantly impede the commission's ability to receive necessary information in the final stretch of research.

As the commission pushes to finalize outstanding items in its requests, it will depend on the State Department's continued staffing and support, guided by clear policy direction to provide the deliberative and other sensitive material necessary to its mandate.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

In February and June, the Co-Chairs met with Andrew Byers, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia, who oversees Afghanistan policy and directs the department's support for the commission's work. Requests to DoD are extensive and cross-cutting, necessitating engagement across the DoD enterprise. The department's task in responding to commission requests is formidable. While the department has made progress on requests that can be processed within the Pentagon, the majority of requested material held by Central Command (CENTCOM), Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and Joint Task Force remains outstanding. The commission is encouraged by the recent surge at CENTCOM and SOCOM to identify and process responsive records and remains in close coordination to secure the materials' timely release.

The commission also has not yet received access to counterterrorism information held under Alternative Compensatory Control Measures that will provide a more complete and detailed picture of the warfighting effort. This delay continues even though the commission submitted an official letter request on December 6, 2024, and continues to press within and across the department.

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) has provided essential support for the commission's access to sensitive compartmented intelligence. The National Intelligence Council has conducted detailed briefings for commission staff, and ODNI liaisons have facilitated commission interviews. ODNI fully satisfied the commission's first request for documents on January 27, 2025, which was a significant undertaking given the breadth of the request. However, the commission's second request—issued in October with a December response date for receipt of materials—remains largely unanswered despite consistent engagement between commission staff and ODNI liaisons. ODNI has conducted only one of the nine request briefings, and produced none of the documents the commission requested. Satisfaction of this request is essential to the commission's understanding of ODNI's functions during the war, including those of the National Counterterrorism Center.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

In the past year, the CIA delivered several detailed and relevant briefings for Co-Chairs and commission staff. It produced a vast amount of finished intelligence analysis in response to commission requests for information. Still outstanding are commission requests for material other than finished intelligence analysis. In several engagements in the past year, the commission has expressed willingness to explore alternate means of access to this information, including via briefings or in camera review. The requested

information is critical to fulfill the commission's mandate to understand and assess whether intelligence assessments reflected the diversity of views within IC elements and across the IC.

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) liaisons responded to the commission's requests by delivering relevant briefings and providing access to documents. As USAID staff prepared to close offices and transfer functions to the State Department, they continued to process outstanding commission requests. The records provide detailed information about the design, implementation, and review of U.S. development programs in Afghanistan. USAID satisfied all commission requests.

Looking Ahead

Given the remaining requirements and waning time, the executive branch's sustained support in the coming months will be critical to the commission's ongoing research. The commission will need strong support from leadership at the White House and will need departments and agencies to make reasonable and timely accommodations on outstanding requests and allocate staff necessary to execute them.

To begin these closing conversations in earnest, the commission Co-Chairs have requested meetings with Secretary of State Marco A. Rubio, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, and CIA Director John Ratcliffe or their delegated representatives. The commission looks forward to those engagements.

In the next calendar year, one of the commission's most pressing needs will be the support of senior administration leadership for an efficient interagency review of the draft final report, which should be staffed by officers with decision-making authority and clear instructions that information should be released consistent with the need to protect ongoing national security imperatives. When such release requires that information be declassified, the commission will depend on the administration's further support to deliver the full and informed public accounting of the war that Congress mandated and the American people deserve.

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INTERVIEWS

So far in 2025, the commission has conducted more than 170 on-the-record interviews.

Those interviewed include former government officials from the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, NATO, and other partner-nations; current and former United Nations officials; and experts from academia, civil society, think tanks, and the media.

Given that thousands of Americans and foreigners have served in Afghanistan, the interview pool is varied and diverse. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the commission, which is forced by time constraints to be selective. At the same time, a wealth of knowledge and insights is available, and many individuals are eager to speak with the commission. To manage this array of inputs and to supplement interviews, the commission has created several additional mechanisms: online portals, roundtables, trips, and informal engagements. Those are described later in this report.

The Interview Pool

The commission aims for a representative balance of individuals across the diplomacy, development, security and military affairs, and intelligence sectors. Understanding institutional positions and perspectives is also a key component of the commission's analysis. Thus, seeking out those directly involved in the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community remains paramount. The commission prioritizes those individuals involved in decision-making and those who executed and implemented policies.

Among the Americans who served, the perspectives of those in Washington, D.C., or Kabul, Afghanistan, are vastly different from those who went to places like Kunar or Paktia provinces. The commission's interviews therefore also reflect the range of experiences across capital cities and field assignments. In the past year, the commission interviewed cabinet-level officials from across multiple administrations, former ambassadors and military commanders, diplomats and aid workers who served in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams across Afghanistan, servicemembers deployed to facilitate the evacuation from Kabul in 2021, and many others.

A Broad Constituency

The commission's interview pool is not limited to U.S. perspectives on the war; it includes members of Afghanistan's government, military, civil society, and diaspora; Pakistani officials; and servicemembers and officials from other nations. This year, the commission's hearings and interviews featured individuals who served in cabinet-level positions in the government of Afghanistan. The interviews enable the commission to draw connections between U.S. decisions and the actions of other governments involved in the war. Engaging with a broad constituency will also build a more complete understanding of the impact of U.S. decisions on ordinary people, an insight sought in the commission's interviews with Afghan civil society leaders.

The impact of U.S. policies in Afghanistan manifested elsewhere in the region, particularly in Pakistan, and the commission has a congressional mandate to study the role of Afghanistan's neighbors in the war. To that end, it has interviewed several former Pakistani officials (as described later in this report). These interviews enhance the commission's understanding of Pakistan's wartime relationship with Afghanistan, explore Pakistan's role in fighting al-Qaeda, and address the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan during the war.

Approach to Questions

The commission's approach to interviews has been two-pronged. First, it asks questions that aim to elicit insights from decision-makers and implementers that are not captured in official records. In this way, interviews help corroborate, triangulate, or verify details on specific issues or decisions that have been obtained through documents

U.S. ambassadors to Pakistan from 2001–2021 gather at the Afghanistan War Commission office in March for a roundtable discussion on their tenure in Islamabad during the Afghanistan War.

and open-source materials: For example, "What intelligence was received prior to the battle of Tora Bora, and from whom?"

Second, the commission asks broad and open-ended questions about the war as a whole, encouraging individuals to consider it outside of the decision-making context. This approach also meets many of the interviewees where they currently are as they think about the war. Many are in a reflective mindset, seeing patterns, drawing comparisons, and observing trend lines across different time periods and administrations: For example, we ask, "What do you see as the most significant U.S. policy successes and failures, or missed opportunities, over the 20 years? Do you think back on any 'paths not taken'?"

In 2024, the commission engaged in about 300 off-the-record informal conversations with individuals drawn from the broad and deep interview pool. Many of them were subsequently formally interviewed or have been scheduled to be interviewed this summer and autumn.

Roundtables

In addition to individual interviews, the commission also has been conducting on-the-record roundtable interviews. These events bring together individuals with shared or overlapping experiences during the war to speak not only with the commission but also with one another. Roundtables create space for more candid conversations that have the potential to elicit new insights through interactions.

In March the commission convened the 2001–2021 class of U.S. ambassadors to Pakistan to reflect on their tenure in Islamabad during the Afghanistan War. The conversation covered a variety of topics, such as diplomatic engagement, military and counterterrorism support, management of successful and challenging episodes in the U.S.–Pakistan relationship, and broader questions about the compatibility of the two nations' goals. The ambassadors provided critical insights into the Pakistan–Afghanistan and U.S.–Pakistan dynamics that affected the Afghanistan War effort and regional politics more generally. One such topic: how the Osama bin Laden raid shifted the nature of the U.S.–Pakistan partnership.

In November, the commission collaborated with the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa for the "Rethinking Afghanistan: Strategic Competition in the Heart of Asia" policy dialogue. As part of the conference, the commission conducted a roundtable with veterans of the Afghanistan War enrolled at USF. The engaging and, at times, emotional discussion served as a vivid reminder for commissioners of how the war influenced many younger Americans' level of trust in government decision-making and influenced whether they would support potential future military interventions.

In preparation for its third public hearing in June, the commission convened a virtual roundtable of veterans who served during the 2009–2012 time frame. Participants, drawn from the veterans feedback page on the commission's website, covered the range of services and ranks and provided valuable insights from the tactical and operational levels regarding the surge's impact on military and civilian personnel. Participant comments, critiques, and analyses reflected pride in their personal service along with commonly shared frustrations regarding lack of unity of command, a disconnect between Washington, Kabul, and districts, and competing interests among U.S. agencies.

In the next year, the commission plans to conduct more roundtable interviews with other important groups whose collective experiences can shed light on aspects of the war that individual interviews might not fully capture.

INTEGRATING AFGHAN PERSPECTIVES

The commission recognizes that the views, inputs, and agency of Afghans were often sidelined or overlooked in U.S. policy discussions and decision-making throughout the Afghanistan War.

To avoid repeating this pattern, the commission has made a deliberate effort to capture and integrate Afghan inputs in its study by speaking with former Afghan government officials, members of civil society and the diaspora, and experts whose lived experiences and institutional memory are critical to understanding the conflict and its aftermath. The commission gathered these inputs, which will inform its final analyses and findings, through one-on-one interviews, public hearings, group discussions, and participation in panel discussions.

Interviews with Former Government Officials

The commission has conducted interviews with a wide range of former Afghan government officials, including cabinet ministers, presidential advisors, ambassadors, members of parliament, and members of Afghanistan's military forces. These inputs offer valuable insights into how U.S. decisions were interpreted and implemented by Afghan counterparts.

Several themes have emerged across these interviews. Many officials described the early post-2001 years as a time of genuine optimism. They talked of broad enthusiasm for education, development, and long-term partnerships with the international community. That optimism gradually gave way to frustration, driven by the empowerment of strongmen, the exclusion of key political actors, and repeated failures to build accountable institutions.

Corruption, impunity, and patronage came to define the post-Taliban state, fueling widespread public resentment. According to these officials, civilian casualties from U.S. night raids and air strikes intensified this anger, placing mounting pressure on Afghan leaders to assert themselves. Despite that pressure, they were largely unable to influence U.S. operations, further exposing the limits of Afghan sovereignty. Meanwhile, U.S. reluctance to confront Pakistan's support for the Taliban added to Afghan officials' frustration. In their view, the Taliban were a proxy force backed by Pakistan's military and intelligence services, an external threat that the United States downplayed for too long.

Another recurring theme in these discussions was the dependency built into Afghan institutions. From the security forces to local governance, systems heavily shaped by the United States and other foreign donors became unsustainable without continued external financing. U.S. efforts to support governance were often defined by conflicting visions. Agencies frequently bypassed the government in Kabul and funded provincial and district officials directly, weakening the central government's legitimacy and reinforcing the perception that real authority lay with foreign actors. In contested areas, the United States prioritized empowering strongmen over inclusive governance, further entrenching informal networks. In many cases, these local actors became more responsive to foreign donors than to the Afghan state itself.

The commission will continue to explore these themes by conducting more interviews and engagements with Afghans.

Other Research Engagements

AFGHAN SCHOLARS ROUNDTABLE

November 7, 2024, Virtual

- As part of its outreach to the Afghan diaspora, the Afghanistan War Commission convened a virtual roundtable with a group of Afghan scholars and practitioners based in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Commissioner Dipali Mukhopadhyay moderated the discussion, which focused on early U.S. state-building and counterterrorism efforts.

- Participants echoed themes that the commission has encountered in its research and interviews, particularly the disconnect between local needs and international agendas. For example, they noted that after 9/11, U.S. policy viewed Afghanistan as an "ungoverned space" and thus overlooked existing local governance like shuras in favor of a centralized model. Initial Afghan optimism faded as the war increasingly felt like "America's war," and the government became dependent on foreign support. Scholars emphasized that deeper issues, such as national identity, political Islam, and governance models, were never meaningfully addressed. Reforms often catered to international optics rather than Afghan needs, and local experiences were frequently instrumentalized, especially around women's rights.
- These reflections help the commission understand how short-term stabilization efforts often overlooked deeper, long-term challenges, especially those pertaining to legitimacy, governance, identity, and religion. They shed light on early assumptions in the U.S. approach and highlight missed opportunities to build a more inclusive and durable political foundation in Afghanistan.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF AFGHANISTAN

December 5–10, 2024, Doha, Qatar

- In December 2024, a delegation from the commission visited Qatar to attend the Doha Forum as well as to network and undertake research. It also met with Afghanistan watchers based in Doha and representatives of the U.S. government in Qatar. During this trip, the delegation spoke with five Afghan students at the American University of Afghanistan, which has been operating from Qatar since the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021. The discussion covered a variety of topics, including their perceptions of the war and of international forces in Afghanistan as well as their postgraduate aspirations.
- These perspectives add an important generational layer to the commission's research by highlighting how the war shaped not just institutions but also the outlook and aspirations of young people who lived through it. These kinds of conversations contribute to the commission's understanding of long-term impacts, particularly in assessing how the war shaped the next generation's relationship to statehood, reform, and trust in institutions.

GLOBAL AND NATIONAL SECURITY INSTITUTE POLICY DIALOGUE ON AFGHANISTAN

November 13, 2024, Tampa, Florida

- In collaboration with the University of South Florida's Global and National Security Institute, the Afghanistan War Commission convened senior U.S. and former Afghan officials and civil society leaders for a conference in Tampa. The conference provided a valuable opportunity for commissioners and staff to engage with several former Afghan government officials, including ambassadors, a minister and deputy minister, a provincial governor, and members of the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command.
- Many speakers reinforced themes the commission has also been exploring in its interviews: that international goals often clashed with local realities, that political reconciliation was sidelined, and that missed opportunities added to mistrust. The discussion also added useful reflections on how U.S. military strategy shaped public perception and state legitimacy in Afghanistan. For example, panelists pointed to an erosion of trust driven by civilian casualties, governance failures, and unmet expectations. They highlighted how pursuing a militarized approach over political reconciliation shaped the conflict's trajectory.

12TH HERAT SECURITY DIALOGUE

February 28, 2025, Madrid, Spain

- Afghanistan War Commission staff attended this conference hosted by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies. The conference brought together members of the Afghan diaspora, international experts, diplomats, and human rights advocates to exchange views on Afghanistan. While there, the team engaged with an international scholar, a former U.S. official, and Afghans, including two senior officials from Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, two researchers, a journalist, and several women's rights activists.
- Participants shared insights into Afghanistan's political, economic, and social present, as well as the diaspora's hopes and visions for the future. These perspectives add important context to the commission's analysis of how the war's consequences extend beyond Afghanistan's borders and continue to shape regional dynamics and diaspora engagement. Their reflections on missed opportunities for pluralism, civic engagement, and postwar accountability resonate with what the commission also heard in its interviews.

INTERNATIONAL AND ALLIED INPUT

From its earliest days, the Afghanistan campaign involved a broad coalition.

Although U.S. forces led the military effort, NATO and non-NATO allies, the United Nations, regional partners, and independent organizations influenced U.S. strategy and operations.

The commission is examining how international actors understood, supported, and shaped those decisions. To that end, staff have conducted structured, in-depth interviews with former senior officials, diplomats, military officers, development professionals, and civilian experts who served in or alongside the coalition.

These interlocutors offer institutional memory and personal insight into moments of both alignment with and divergence from U.S. policy. Early on, many partners contributed crucial support for counterterrorism and stabilization efforts. Over time, however, several raised concerns about strategic drift, civilian harm, and the lack of coherence among security, governance, and development initiatives. Across interviews, a recurrent theme has emerged: allies felt that when their assessments conflicted with U.S. assumptions or timelines, Washington solicited their views in form but often neglected them in substance.

The commission has supplemented formal interviews with informal discussions involving international scholars, policy advisors, and practitioners. Those dialogues supply essential regional and institutional context for assessing coalition decision-making. The commission continues to seek testimony, analysis, and candid reflection from all who bore responsibility during the war, aiming to capture the conflict's transnational character and to understand the implications of U.S. leadership in a coalition in which burdens often exceeded shared authority.

What emerges is not a single international viewpoint but a constellation of informed perspectives that illuminate partnership complexities and the war's political, economic, and strategic costs for every participant. These insights are vital for fully understanding the war and for guiding future U.S. decisions on alliance management, military intervention, and post-conflict priorities.

NATO AND EUROPEAN PARTNERS

February, March, and June 2025

Staff members of the Afghanistan War Commission traveled to Brussels, Belgium, to review documents at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Headquarters Archives. Focusing on strategic-level military and political NATO materials, the team reviewed approximately 3,500 documents over five days and identified about 1,300 as relevant. These documents provide highly valuable information useful to keystone topics of the commission's mandate, including development efforts, counterterrorism, and intelligence analysis.

Commission staff used London as a base for interviewing European sources of information. Among these were former ambassadors to Afghanistan and NATO officials; a former National Security Advisor; a former senior Ministry of Defense official; U.K. military members, including former International Security Assistance Force commanders; former high-level U.N. officials; a former Afghan Deputy Minister; a former Afghan ambassador to a European country; and preeminent Afghan civil society activists. Commission staff also met with U.K. officials in the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office.

In Berlin, commission staff interviewed a former National Security Advisor and two former Special Representatives for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The team also met with German officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

ISLAMABAD AND LAHORE, PAKISTAN

April 2025

Commissioners and staff members traveled to Pakistan, where they interviewed 12 former civilian, military, and intelligence officials in the Pakistan government. The Afghanistan War Commission delegation also met with staff at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad.

Ryan M. Gallucci, Executive Director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Washington Office, introduces the Afghanistan War Commission panel during the 126th VFW National Convention in Columbus, Ohio, in August 2025. The panel heard first-hand accounts from VFW members who served in Afghanistan.

ONLINE PORTALS FOR VETERAN AND CIVIL SERVICE PERSPECTIVES

Seeking firsthand accounts from those who served in Afghanistan, in April 2024 the Afghanistan War Commission launched the veterans portal that has collected detailed submissions from more than 300 veterans.

Building on that momentum, in July 2025 the commission launched a foreign policy and national security professionals portal devoted to inputs from the thousands who served during the 20-year war as foreign service officers, foreign affairs officers, development professionals, intelligence officers, contractors, and other U.S. government public servants in Afghanistan or in Afghanistan-related roles elsewhere.

These portals both inform the commission's research with on-the-ground perspectives and serve as a reservoir of experiences spanning the war's two decades.

Progress to Date

The veterans portal, in addition to identifying military branch and component, rank, and years deployed in Afghanistan, gives veterans the opportunity to answer the following questions:

- What did you view as your mission during the war (unclassified only)?
- To what extent do you believe that mission was accomplished?
- To what extent do you believe strategic or operational decisions made during the war positively or negatively affected your mission?
- What strategic or operational lessons should we learn from the war?
- Please share your story about your service in the Afghanistan War for future generations.
- What questions do you have about key decisions during the war that you would like the commission to research?

Responses came from across the services (Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy), components (active, reserve, and National Guard), and ranks (from E-3 to O-8).

While the portal is not a scientifically rigorous survey and is a self-selecting sample, it represents a useful snapshot of the range of views and opinions of U.S. veterans of the Afghanistan War. Submissions showcase the full spectrum of emotions, from barely contained anger at the war to pride of having accomplished the mission. In a dominant

refrain, the majority of entries focus on why the United States was in Afghanistan, questioning what the U.S. goals were and whether U.S. efforts accomplished them.

From the diverse feedback, several overlapping themes emerged:

- Respondents pointed to a persistent disconnect between tactical and operational units and the broader strategic objectives—a gap that pervaded not only Department of Defense (DoD) operations but the entire U.S. government. Military priorities frequently clashed with the mandates of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department, undermining coherent whole-of-government action.
- Within DoD and among allied forces, the absence of a unified command structure produced unclear end states and conflicting missions—ranging from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism—and allowed regional commanders' personalities to have more influence than a consistent, top-down strategy in shaping priorities.
- Despite facing these challenges and often lacking appropriate training or equipment for their assigned tasks, veterans have expressed pride in accomplishing virtually every mission, even as many observed that winning tactical battles on the ground did not translate into strategic victory. This gap testifies to the disconnect between decisions made in Washington and their implementation in the field, as well as the lack of coherence and communication in U.S. war aims.
- Respondents have expressed an eagerness and desire to see lessons learned from the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

The commission will continue to receive inputs via the online portals for veterans and civilians and aims to consolidate the inputs for use in future hearings and the final report.

Accessing the Afghanistan War Commission Survey Portals

Military operations, diplomacy, development, policy, intelligence, and other topic areas of interest to the broader foreign policy and national security community are integral to the Afghanistan War Commission's research mandated by Congress. If you served in one of these military or civilian capacities and have insights to share that can inform the commission's independent, in-depth, and unflinching assessment of the Afghanistan War, please log on and complete this survey.

For civilian service, go to:
https://www.afghanistanwarcommission.senate.gov/foreign-policy-and-national-security-professionals/

For military service, go to:
https://www.afghanistanwarcommission.senate.gov/veterans/

All submissions are held in confidence, and full identifying information is not required. For those who do volunteer contact information, we may be interested in engaging you further, as we have engaged others who have already responded to our portal.

We value the views of all who served and sacrificed in support of the U.S. effort in the Afghanistan War.

Commissioners hear testimony from witnesses during the Afghanistan War Commission's third public hearing at the U.S. Senate Dirksen Office Building on Capitol Hill in June 2025.

PUBLIC HEARINGS: FRAMING THE INQUIRY

Since the commission's inception in 2023, Co-Chairs Shamila N. Chaudhary and Colin Jackson have prioritized public engagement, addressing both U.S. citizens and international partners to frame the commission's work. Outreach to veterans, foreign governments, and civilians affected by the conflict has revealed a widespread demand for accountability, closure, and collective reckoning. In response, the commission convenes public hearings that align with its core questions on U.S. decision-making, inviting witnesses whose firsthand insights sharpen and challenge the staff's behind-the-scenes document reviews and interviews. By featuring participants deeply involved in pivotal choices, each hearing fosters a nuanced, informed dialogue on the war's most complex issues.

Hearing 1: Examining the Origins of the War in Afghanistan

At its inaugural hearing on July 14, 2024, the commission established the value of an independent, forward-looking examination of the Afghanistan War's origins. Diplomats, military leaders, and scholars traced the conflict from the Soviet withdrawal through the Taliban's rise and al-Qaeda's transnational threat, underscoring that sound strategic judgment depends on rigorous historical grounding. Witnesses connected the 9/11 Commission's findings to the early days of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and reinforced the maxim "Our ends can be found in our beginnings."

Hearing 2: Early U.S. Decisions in The Afghanistan War (2001–2009)

At the commission's second hearing on April 11, 2025, testimony focused on the George W. Bush administration's pivotal first phase: transitioning from swift counterterrorism victories in the wake of 9/11 to ambitious state-building and eventual counterinsurgency. "It's a period often described with confidence: the fall of the Taliban, the pursuit of al-Qaeda, the ambition of rebuilding a nation," said Commission Co-Chair Chaudhary in her opening remarks. "But that confidence masks something more complicated. The shift from counterterrorism to state-building to counterinsurgency wasn't preordained. It was the product of choices."

The hearing's lead witness was Ambassador Henry "Hank" Crumpton, who led counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan during this early period. He testified, "In the first 90 days after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Central Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Central Command, and the U.S. Special Operations Command, all acting in concert with Afghan tribal allies, overwhelmed the enemy." He attributed this rapid success to "an ethos of victory, clarity, and discipline in mission, empowered leadership, a field bias, superb intelligence, and trusted partnerships."

By 2003, however, the "Iraq War had drained significant resources, military headquarters, and attention away from Afghanistan," said Lieutenant General David Barno, U.S. Army (retired), commander of U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan from October 2003 to May 2005. He also connected the downward trajectory in Afghanistan to a "failure to achieve unity of effort," "lack of leadership continuity," and the existence of a sanctuary for the Taliban in Pakistan.

In her testimony, former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Nancy Jo Powell argued, "In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan found itself in a bind created by their recognition and support of the Taliban regime in Kabul and U.S. decisions to eliminate the threat posed by al-Qaeda and those who harbored them." Pakistani leaders were distrustful of the United States, she said.

Ambassador Mohammad Umer Daud Zai, former Afghan Minister of Interior and Chief of Staff to Afghan

President Hamid Karzai, focused on the decision to establish a presidential system through the Bonn Conference of December 2001. He noted that this choice concentrated power in the president, which was not suitable for Afghanistan's political context, and led to future governance challenges.

Topics explored by commissioners were the rapid evolution from a narrow U.S. counterterrorism mission to a broader state-building and reconstruction set of war aims in Afghanistan, the missed opportunity to capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora, and the frustrations in U.S. efforts to deny the Taliban and al-Qaeda sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan.

Hearing 3: Debates, Decisions, and Implementation of the Surge (2009–2012)

At the June 23, 2025, hearing, the commission probed the Obama administration's decision to surge military and civilian personnel. "Today's hearing examines the U.S. decision to initiate a major military and civilian surge in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012 under President Barack Obama—a period that marked the largest deployment of American personnel, military and civilian, in the entire war," said Co-Chair Chaudhary in her opening statement. "This moment demands close scrutiny—not just as a shift in U.S. strategy, but as a deeply consequential human commitment."

Afghanistan War Commissioners Laurel E. Miller and Luke Hartig participate in a commission hearing at the U.S. Senate Dirksen Office Building on Capitol Hill in June 2025.

"Our hearing today focuses on the zenith of the American war effort," added Co-Chair Jackson in his opening statement. "At the time and in retrospect, the surge debates raise an array of first-order questions. Why was the surge necessary? How had the Taliban rebound and the survival of core al-Qaeda forced a reevaluation of U.S. policy and strategy? What combination of 'ways'—counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, state-building, economic development, or negotiations—was most appropriate to the problems of fixing the Afghan state, rolling back the Taliban, and defeating core al-Qaeda? And how much was enough in terms of troops, money, and time?"

Ambassador Douglas Lute, Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan at the White House from 2007 to 2013, opened the first panel of the hearing focused on surge debates and decisions. "I believe the roots of our failure in Afghanistan lay at the strategic level, not at the tactical level where our troops, intelligence officers, diplomats, and development officers on the ground sacrificed in the toughest conditions," Lute said. "Enormous energy and debate went into crafting and making policy decisions, but too little attention was paid to how those decisions were being executed in Afghanistan."

Mr. David Sedney, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia from 2009 to 2013, analyzed the surge's shortcomings in his prepared statement. "We sought an Afghanistan that would not be a home for terror, one where Americans and our allies would be safer, and in which the Afghan people would have the future they deserved," he said. "For why we failed there is no simple, easily identifiable answer. There is no single villain. There is no one policy error, which, if gotten right, would have led to success. Rather there are many factors at play, interacting in ways sometimes obvious, sometimes not."

Ambassador Jawed Ludin, Chief of Staff to Afghan President Hamid Karzai prior to the surge (2005–2007) and Afghanistan's ambassador to Norway and Canada during the surge, as well Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, provided a critical Afghan perspective on the period. "By 2009, when President Obama announced

a course correction, the contours of the unwinnable war were already in place, and the surge did little except to intensify the *status quo ante*. Despite the stated goal of the surge, and the hugely unhelpful introduction of meaningless timelines, the U.S. never actually transitioned the ownership or execution of the war to Afghans."

Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who served as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2009 to 2011, discussed the surge of civilians paralleling the military escalation. "In some ways the civilian surge from 2009 to 2011 achieved impressive results," he testified. "It was marked by reasonably good, combined planning, implementation, and unity of effort." Eikenberry warned, however, that "the use of military force will take on a logic of its own, the aim being winning the war as opposed to winning a sustainable peace."

Lieutenant General Michael Nagata, U.S. Army (retired), Deputy Chief in the Office of the Defense Representative at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan (2009–2011), focused on the evolution of U.S.–Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation at the time. He discussed how the U.S. announcement of the Afghan Surge in 2009 included an 18-month time limit, after which U.S. forces would begin returning home. "Whatever the merits of this were, it injected an element of doubt among Pakistani leaders about U.S. seriousness that we could never completely shake," Nagata said.

In the hearing's second panel on the implementation of the surge, Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, U.S. Army (retired), Commander of NATO's Training Mission in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2013, focused on efforts to strengthen Afghan security forces against the Taliban insurgency. "In building Afghanistan's security forces, we made some fundamental mistakes," he said, including trying to "do too much ourselves," substituting money and people for a "real commitment," and forgetting "what we already understood about combat advising."

General Sher Mohammad Karimi, who served as the Afghan National Army's Chief of Operations and later Chief of Army Staff during the surge period, said, "It was encouraging to have 30,000 extra international troops. I thought it would make a positive change and boost Afghan security forces' morale. Unfortunately, with troop withdrawal in 2011 and 2012, the morale of Afghan forces dropped. Coalition troops were disappointed. The enemy became bolder."

Ambassador Dawn Liberi, Coordinator for the Interagency Provincial Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul from 2009 to 2011, focused on the "civilian uplift" she helped implement during the surge, which sought "to triple the number of civilians in the field from 320 in 2009 to 1,261 by 2011," she said. "The consequences of not achieving the desired outcome has less to do with whether or not the civilian surge was a success or failure, but rather the impact of U.S. government engagement on the Afghan population," she testified.

Ambassador Earl Anthony "Tony" Wayne, who served as Coordinating Director for Development and Economic Affairs from 2009 to 2010 and as Deputy U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2011, spoke in his opening remarks about the need for humility. "We need to be humble about our capacities to 'win' or to bring about change," he said. "We should not be haughty given our technology and military might. We need to realize that changing people, norms, and practices, and building new institutions take immense effort and time and needs dedicated local partners and support."

In his opening remarks, Brigadier General Michael Meese, U.S. Army (retired), Assistant Chief of Staff for International Security Assistant Force in Kabul (2010–2011), said, "The Afghanistan War Commission is vital because America will be attacked again. We must distill lessons from 20 years of war in Afghanistan to develop well-informed leaders who can prepare the next generation of warriors, diplomats, and public servants to effectively advance American national security interests."

Insights and Next Steps

Across all hearings, recurring themes emerge, including the critical importance of unity of effort, the perils of strategic overreach, and the need to synchronize military, political, and development aims. These insights will guide the commission's final report, ensuring that future leaders inherit not only the history of America's longest war but also clear, actionable lessons for forging coherent, sustainable strategies in complex, coalition-based operations.

The commission plans to host additional hearings in 2025 and 2026 on other major decisions made during the war.

Complete video and full transcripts of each hearing are available on the commission's website at www.afghanistanwarcommission.senate.gov.

See Appendix IV for a full listing of hearing details and witnesses.

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

The Afghanistan War Commission's first interim report identified three essential operational needs: sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF) workspace, classified information technology (IT) support, and continued appropriations sufficient to execute the commission's workplan.

The commission opened its Department of Defense–leased SCIF in September 2024. The commission appreciates the efforts of the Department of Defense (DoD) Washington Headquarters Service to prioritize its SCIF request notwithstanding many competing demands for classified space in the Washington area.

A U.S. soldier takes cover during a patrol and watches an AH-64 Apache above the Tangi Valley, Baraki Barak District, Logar Province, Afghanistan, October 2012. (Photo courtesy of John Alulis, Afghanistan War Commission senior analyst)

Since February 2024, when the commission formally engaged DoD on its classified IT, the professional staff have worked diligently with offices across DoD and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to procure necessary systems and equipment. While this was an extremely lengthy and complicated effort, the commission recognizes DoD's and ODNI's efforts to arrive at solutions that meet its requirements. These systems are projected to be fully operational this summer, but that outcome requires sustained prioritization by DoD stakeholders.

The commission is working with the Office of Senate Security to transfer all but the most sensitive aspects of previous work to the commission's SCIF. The commission recognizes the Office of Senate Security for its continued hospitality and support, without which the professional staff could not have pursued some of the most sensitive aspects of their work.

In March 2025, the commission received a $4.1 million anomaly within the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Continuing Resolution (Public Law 119-4). Additionally, in July 2025, the commission secured a $12 million allocation within the Senate Appropriations Committee–passed FY2026 Defense Appropriations Act. This support is essential to maintaining the commission's operations entering its final year of service. The commission thanks the Senate Appropriations Committee for this support, as well as individual members in both chambers who championed our FY2025 and FY2026 funding requests.

U.S. soldiers spread out across pastures in Baraki Barak District, Logar Province, Afghanistan, March 2013. (Photo courtesy of John Alulis, Afghanistan War Commission senior analyst)

YEAR THREE GOALS

In its third year, the Afghanistan War Commission will focus on finishing and delivering its final report and pushing to close research gaps in interviews, government access, and analysis.

Year three activities will include the following:

- Undertaking substantial reviews of incoming U.S. government documents (e.g. policy, operational, intelligence) which the commission has requested from executive branch agencies at various levels of classification along with materials obtained from other governments and organizations, such as NATO;
- Completing formal interviews of current and former government officials from the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and allied/partner governments, as well as other subject matter experts;
- Building on the three hearings held to date with two additional hearings in 2026 that will address the transition to Afghanistan's taking the lead in its own security, the Doha talks and political reconciliation, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces and Afghan government collapse;
- Writing the final report, due to Congress in August 2026, with a focus on the commission's key analytic lines;
- Developing findings and recommendations through the commission's research, analysis, and extensive stakeholder engagement;
- Submitting the commission's final report for interagency classification downgrades and review; and,
- Finally, delivering the report to Congress and the public.

Year three activities will include developing findings and recommendations through the commission's research, analysis, and extensive stakeholder engagement

APPENDIX I

AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION ACT

SEC. 1094. AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION ACT OF 2021.

National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 (Pub. L. No. 117-81, 135 Stat. 1935 (2021)).

(a) SHORT TITLE.—This section may be cited as the "Afghanistan War Commission Act of 2021".

(b) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

(1) The term "applicable period" means the period beginning June 1, 2001, and ending August 30, 2021.

(2) The term "appropriate congressional committees" means—

(A) the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate;

(B) the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(C) the Select Committee on Intelligence of the Senate;

(D) the Committee on Appropriations of the Senate;

(E) the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives;

(F) the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(G) the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence of the House of Representatives; and

(H) the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives.

(3) The term "intelligence community" has the meaning given that term in section 3(4) of the National Security Act of 1947 (50 U.S.C. 3003(4)).

(c) ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMISSION.—

(1) ESTABLISHMENT.—There is established in the legislative branch an independent commission to be known as the Afghanistan War Commission (in this section referred to as the "Commission").

(2) MEMBERSHIP.—

(A) COMPOSITION.—The Commission shall be composed of 16 members of whom—

(i) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate;

(ii) 1 shall be appointed by the ranking member of the Committee on Armed Services of the Senate;

(iii) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives;

(iv) 1 shall be appointed by the ranking member of the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives;

(v) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(vi) 1 shall be appointed by the ranking member of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate;

(vii) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(viii) 1 shall be appointed by the ranking member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives;

(ix) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence of the Senate;

(x) 1 shall be appointed by the Vice Chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence of the Senate;

(xi) 1 shall be appointed by the Chairman of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence of the House of Representatives;

(xii) 1 shall be appointed by the ranking member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence of the House of Representatives;

(xiii) 1 shall be appointed by the Majority leader of the Senate;

(xiv) 1 shall be appointed by the Minority leader of the Senate;

(xv) 1 shall be appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives; and

(xvi) 1 shall be appointed by the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives.

(B) QUALIFICATIONS.—It is the sense of Congress that each member of the Commission appointed under subparagraph (A) should—

(i) have significant professional experience in national security, such as a position in—

(I) the Department of Defense;

(II) the Department of State;

(III) the intelligence community;

(IV) the United States Agency for International Development; or

(V) an academic or scholarly institution; and

(ii) be eligible to receive the appropriate security clearance to effectively execute their duties.

(C) PROHIBITIONS.—A member of the Commission appointed under subparagraph (A) may not—

(i) be a current member of Congress;

(ii) be a former member of Congress who served in Congress after January 3, 2001;

(iii) be a current or former registrant under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 (22 U.S.C. 611 et seq.);

(iv) have previously investigated Afghanistan policy or the war in Afghanistan through employment in the office of a relevant inspector general;

(v) have been the sole owner or had a majority stake in a company that held any United States or coalition defense contract providing goods or services to activities by the United States Government or coalition in Afghanistan during the applicable period; or

(vi) have served, with direct involvement in actions by the United States Government in Afghanistan during the time the relevant official served, as—

(I) a cabinet secretary or national security adviser to the President; or

(II) a four-star flag officer, Under Secretary, or more senior official in the Department of Defense or the Department of State.

(D) DATE.—

(i) IN GENERAL.—The appointments of the members of the Commission shall be made not later than 60 days after the date of enactment of this Act.

(ii) FAILURE TO MAKE APPOINTMENT.—If an appointment under subparagraph (A) is not made by the appointment date specified in clause (i)—

(I) the authority to make such appointment shall expire; and

(II) the number of members of the Commission shall be reduced by the number equal to the number of appointments not made.

(3) PERIOD OF APPOINTMENT; VACANCIES.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—A member of the Commission shall be appointed for the life of the Commission.

(B) VACANCIES.—A vacancy in the Commission—

(i) shall not affect the powers of the Commission; and

(ii) shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment.

(4) MEETINGS.—

(A) INITIAL MEETING.—Not later than 30 days after the date on which all members of the Commission have been appointed, the Commission shall hold the first meeting of the Commission.

(B) FREQUENCY.—The Commission shall meet at the call of the Co-Chairpersons.

(C) QUORUM.—A majority of the members of the Commission shall constitute a quorum, but a lesser number of members may hold hearings.

(5) CO-CHAIRPERSONS.—Co-Chairpersons of the Commission shall be selected by the Leadership of the Senate and the House of Representatives as follows:

(A) 1 Co-Chairperson selected by the Majority Leader of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives from the members of the Commission appointed by chairpersons of the appropriate congressional committees, the Majority Leader of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives; and

(B) 1 Co-Chairperson selected by the Minority Leader of the Senate and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives from the members of the Commission appointed by the ranking members of the appropriate congressional committees, the Minority Leader of the Senate, and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives.

(d) PURPOSE OF COMMISSION.— The purpose of the Commission is—

(1) to examine the key strategic, diplomatic, and operational decisions that pertain to the war in Afghanistan during the relevant period, including decisions, assessments, and events that preceded the war in Afghanistan; and

(2) to develop a series of lessons learned and recommendations for the way forward that will inform future decisions by Congress and policymakers throughout the United States Government.

(e) DUTIES OF COMMISSION.—

(1) STUDY.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The Commission shall conduct a thorough study of all matters relating to combat operations, reconstruction and security force assistance activities, intelligence activities, and diplomatic activities of the United States pertaining to Afghanistan during the period beginning June 1, 2001, and ending August 30, 2021.

(B) MATTERS STUDIED.—The matters studied by the Commission shall include—

(i) for the time period specified under subparagraph (A)—

(I) the policy objectives of the United States Government, including—

(aa) military objectives;

(bb) diplomatic objectives; and

(cc) development objectives;

(II) significant decisions made by the United States, including the development of options presented to policymakers;

(III) the efficacy of efforts by the United States Government in meeting the objectives described in clause (i), including an analysis of—

(aa) military efforts;

(bb) diplomatic efforts;

(cc) development efforts; and

(dd) intelligence efforts; and

(IV) the efficacy of counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, and other foreign terrorist organizations in degrading the will and capabilities of such organizations—

(aa) to mount external attacks against the United States or its allies and partners; or

(bb) to threaten stability in Afghanistan, neighboring countries, and the region;

(ii) the efficacy of metrics, measures of effectiveness, and milestones used to assess progress of diplomatic, military, and intelligence efforts;

(iii) the efficacy of interagency planning and execution process by the United States Government;

(iv) factors that led to the collapse of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces in 2021, including—

(I) training and mentoring from the institutional to the tactical levels within the Afghan National Defense Security Forces;

(II) assessment methodologies, including any transition from different methodologies and the consistency of implementation and reporting;

(III) the determination of how to establish and develop the Afghan National Defense Security Forces, including the Afghan Air Force, and what determined the security cooperation model used to build such force;

(IV) reliance on technology and logistics support;

(V) corruption; and

(VI) reliance on warfighting enablers provided by the United States;

(v) the challenges of corruption across the entire spectrum of the Afghan Government and efficacy of counter corruption efforts to include linkages to diplomatic lines of effort, linkages to foreign and security assistance, and assessment methodologies;

(vi) the efficacy of counter-narcotic efforts to include alternative livelihoods, eradication, interdiction, and education efforts;

(vii) the role of countries neighboring Afghanistan in contributing to the stability or instability of Afghanistan;

(viii) varying diplomatic approaches between Presidential administrations;

(ix) the extent to which the intelligence community did or did not fail to provide sufficient warning about the probable outcomes of a withdrawal of coalition military personnel from Afghanistan, including as it relates to—

(I) the capability and sustainability of the Afghanistan National Defense Security Forces;

(II) the sustainability of the Afghan central government, absent coalition support;

(III) the extent of Taliban control over Afghanistan over time with respect to geographic territory, population centers, governance, and influence; and

(IV) the likelihood of the Taliban regaining control of Afghanistan at various levels of United States and coalition support, including the withdrawal of most or all United States or coalition support;

(x) the extent to which intelligence products related to the state of the conflict in Afghanistan and the effectiveness of the Afghanistan National Defense Security Forces complied with intelligence community-wide analytic tradecraft standards and fully reflected the divergence of analytic views across the intelligence community;

(xi) an evaluation of whether any element of the United States Government inappropriately restricted access to data from elements of the intelligence community, Congress, or the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) or any other oversight body such as other inspectors general or the Government Accountability Office, including through the use of overclassification; and

(xii) the extent to which public representations of the situation in Afghanistan before Congress by United States Government officials differed from the most recent formal assessment of the intelligence community at the time those representations were made.

(2) REPORT REQUIRED.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—

(i) ANNUAL REPORT.—

(I) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 1 year after the date of the initial meeting of the Commission, and annually thereafter, the Commission shall submit to the appropriate congressional committees a report describing the progress of the activities of the Commission as of the date of such report, including any findings, recommendations, or lessons learned endorsed by the Commission.

(II) ADDENDA.—Any member of the Commission may submit an addendum to a report required under subclause (I) setting forth the separate views of such member with respect to any matter considered by the Commission.

(III) BRIEFING.—On the date of the submission of each report, the Commission shall brief Congress.

(ii) FINAL REPORT.—

(I) SUBMISSION.—Not later than 3 years after the date of the initial meeting of the Commission, the Commission shall submit to Congress a report that contains a detailed statement of the findings, recommendations, and lessons learned endorsed by the Commission.

(II) ADDENDA.—Any member of the Commission may submit an addendum to the report required under subclause (I) setting forth the separate views of such member with respect to any matter considered by the Commission.

(III) EXTENSION.—The Commission may submit the report required under subclause (I) at a date that is not more than 1 year later than the date specified in such clause if agreed to by the chairperson and ranking member of each of the appropriate congressional committees.

(B) FORM.—The report required by paragraph (1)(B) shall be submitted and publicly released on a Government website in unclassified form but may contain a classified annex.

(C) SUBSEQUENT REPORTS ON DECLASSIFICATION.—

(i) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 4 years after the date that the report required by subparagraph (A)(ii) is submitted, each relevant agency of jurisdiction shall submit to the committee of jurisdiction a report on the efforts of such agency to declassify such annex.

(ii) CONTENTS.—Each report required by clause (i) shall include—

(I) a list of the items in the classified annex that the agency is working to declassify at the time of the report and an estimate of the timeline for declassification of such items;

(II) a broad description of items in the annex that the agency is declining to declassify at the time of the report; and

(III) any justification for withholding declassification of certain items in the annex and an estimate of the timeline for declassification of such items.

(f) POWERS OF COMMISSION.—

(1) HEARINGS.—The Commission may hold such hearings, take such testimony, and receive such evidence as the Commission considers necessary to carry out its purpose and functions under this section.

(2) ASSISTANCE FROM FEDERAL AGENCIES.—

(A) INFORMATION.—

(i) IN GENERAL.—The Commission may secure directly from a Federal department or agency such information as the Commission considers necessary to carry out this section.

(ii) FURNISHING INFORMATION.—Upon receipt of a written request by the Co-Chairpersons of the Commission, the head of the department or agency shall expeditiously furnish the information to the Commission.

(B) SPACE FOR COMMISSION.—

(i) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Architect of the Capitol, in consultation with the Commission, shall identify suitable space to house the operations of the Commission, which shall include—

(I) a dedicated sensitive compartmented information facility or access to a sensitive compartmented information facility; and

(II) the ability to store classified documents.

(ii) AUTHORITY TO LEASE.—If the Architect of the Capitol is not able to identify space in accordance with clause (i) within the 30-day period specified in clause (i), the Commission may lease space to the extent that funds are available for such purpose.

(C) COMPLIANCE BY INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY.—Elements of the intelligence community shall respond to requests submitted pursuant to paragraph (2) in a manner consistent with the protection of intelligence sources and methods.

(3) POSTAL SERVICES.—The Commission may use the United States mails in the same manner and under the same conditions as other departments and agencies of the Federal Government.

(4) GIFTS.—The Commission may accept, use, and dispose of gifts or donations of services, goods, and property from non-Federal entities for the purposes of aiding and facilitating the work of the Commission. The authority in this subsection does not extend to gifts of money. Gifts accepted under this authority shall be documented, and conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest shall be avoided. Subject to the authority in this section, commissioners shall otherwise comply with rules set forth by the Select Committee on Ethics of the Senate.

(5) ETHICS.—

(A) IN GENERAL.—The members and employees of the Commission shall be subject to the ethical rules and guidelines of the Senate.

(B) REPORTING.—For purposes of title I of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 (5 U.S.C. App.), each member and employee of the Commission—

(i) shall be deemed to be an officer or employee of the Congress (as defined in section 109(13) of such title); and

(ii) shall file any report required to be filed by such member or such employee (including by virtue of the application of subsection (g)(1)) under title I of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 (5 U.S.C. App.) with the Secretary of the Senate.

(g) COMMISSION PERSONNEL MATTERS.—

(1) COMPENSATION OF MEMBERS.—A member of the Commission who is not an officer or employee of the Federal Government shall be compensated at a rate equal to the daily equivalent of the annual rate of basic pay prescribed for level IV of the Executive Schedule under section 5315 of title 5, United States Code, for each day (including travel time) during which the member is engaged in the performance of the duties of the Commission.

(2) TRAVEL EXPENSES.—A member of the Commission shall be allowed travel expenses, including per diem in lieu of subsistence, at rates authorized for employees of agencies under subchapter I of chapter 57 of title 5, United States Code, while away from their homes or regular places of business in the performance of services for the Commission.

(3) STAFF.—

(A) STATUS AS FEDERAL EMPLOYEES.—Notwithstanding the requirements of section 2105 of title 5, United States Code, including the required supervision under subsection (a)(3) of such section, the members of the commission shall be deemed to be Federal employees.

(B) EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.—The Co-Chairpersons of the Commission shall appoint and fix the rate of basic pay for an Executive Director in accordance with section 3161(d) of title 5, United States Code.

(C) PAY.—The Executive Director, with the approval of the Co-Chairpersons of the Commission, may appoint and fix the rate of basic pay for additional personnel as staff of the Commission in accordance with section 3161(d) of title 5, United States Code.

(D) SECURITY CLEARANCES.—All staff must have or be eligible to receive the appropriate security clearance to conduct their duties.

(4) DETAIL OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES.—A Federal Government employee, with the appropriate security clearance to conduct their duties, may be detailed to the Commission without reimbursement, and such detail shall be without interruption or loss of civil service status or privilege.

(5) PROCUREMENT OF TEMPORARY AND INTERMITTENT SERVICES.—The Co-Chairpersons of the Commission may procure temporary and intermittent services under section 3109(b) of title 5, United States Code, at rates for individuals that do not exceed the daily equivalent of the annual rate of basic pay prescribed for level V of the Executive Schedule under section 5316 of that title.

(6) PAY.—The pay of each employee of the Commission and any member of the Commission who receives pay in accordance with paragraph (1) shall be disbursed by the Secretary of the Senate.

(h) TERMINATION OF COMMISSION.—The Commission shall terminate 90 days after the date on which the Commission submits the report required under subsection (e)(2)(A)(ii).

APPENDIX II

COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES

Shamila N. Chaudhary

CO-CHAIR OF THE AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION

Shamila N. Chaudhary served in senior roles in the U.S. government for more than a decade, including as Director for Pakistan and Afghanistan on the National Security Council from 2010 to 2011. She also served on the U.S. Department of State's policy planning staff as South Asia Advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke from 2009 to 2010. Since leaving public service in 2011, Ms. Chaudhary has assumed a variety of leadership roles in higher education, think tank, nonprofit, and private sectors, including at the political risk consultancy Eurasia Group, the American Pakistan Foundation, and the Atlantic Council. At Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, she served as senior advisor to Dean Vali Nasr from 2013 to 2019. Ms. Chaudhary earned an MA in international affairs from the American University's School of International Service and a BA in English literature and women's studies from the University of Toledo.

Dr. Colin F. Jackson

CO-CHAIR OF THE AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION

Colin F. Jackson serves as the Chair of the Strategic and Operational Research Department at the U.S. Naval War College. Previously, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia from 2017 to 2019. He also served as the senior Department of Defense representative to the U.S.–Taliban peace talks. From 2006 to 2017, he served at the Naval War College as a professor in the Strategy Department and later as Director of the Advanced Strategist Program. Dr. Jackson also taught strategy and counterinsurgency at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at Columbia University. His career serving in the U.S. Army and U.S. Army Reserve included a deployment to Afghanistan in 2011 as Executive Officer for Policy Planning for the Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, and as a senior civilian advisor to Task Force Mountain Warrior. Before entering academia, he worked in private sector financial trading and power development. He holds degrees from MIT, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Princeton University. He is a recipient of both the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service and the Bronze Star Medal.

Michael Allen

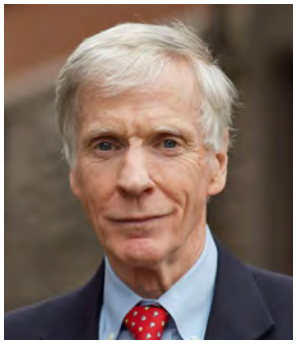
Michael Allen served in the George W. Bush White House in a variety of national security policy and legislative roles, including Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterproliferation Strategy on the National Security Council from June 2007 to January 2009. From 2011 to 2013, Mr. Allen served as the Majority Staff Director of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Prior to joining the select committee, Mr. Allen was Director for the Bipartisan Policy Center's successor to the 9/11 Commission, the National Security Preparedness Group, which was co-chaired by former Congressman Lee Hamilton and former Governor Tom Kean. Mr. Allen is managing director of Beacon Global Strategies, which advises clients on the intersection of business and national security. He received his LLM with distinction in international law from the Georgetown University Law Center; his JD from the University of Alabama, cum laude; and his BA from Vanderbilt University.

Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley Jr., U.S. Army (retired)

LTG Robert P. Ashley Jr. served in the U.S. Army for more than 36 years and was the 21st Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency from 2017 to 2020. Previously, he served as the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-2, where he was a senior advisor to the Secretary of the Army and Army Chief of Staff for all aspects of intelligence, counterintelligence, and security. A career military intelligence officer, he commanded at the company, battalion, squadron, and brigade levels with six tours in Iraq and Afghanistan: as a squadron commander, brigade commander, and Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence (J-2). Other key assignments include Director of Intelligence, U.S. Joint Special Operations Command; Director of Intelligence, U.S. Central Command; Deputy Chief of Staff, Intelligence, International Security Assistance Force and Director of Intelligence, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan; and Commanding General, U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. He has a BA in political science from Appalachian State University, an MA in strategic intelligence from the National Intelligence University, and and an MA in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College.

Jeremy Bash

Jeremy Bash served as Chief of Staff to the Director of the CIA (2009–2011) and Chief of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (2011–2013). From 2004 to 2009, he served on Capitol Hill, including as Chief Counsel of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. From August 2010 to May 2011, he was a member of the CIA's senior management team overseeing the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. He served as a member of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board from 2022 to 2025. Currently, Mr. Bash is a managing director at Beacon Global Strategies and is a board member of the International Spy Museum. Mr. Bash is a recipient of the Department of Defense Distinguished Public Service Medal, the CIA Director's Award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, and the Donovan Award from the National Clandestine Service. He graduated from Georgetown University, magna cum laude, and earned his law degree from Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.



Ryan Crocker

Former Ambassador Ryan Crocker was a career foreign service officer who served as a U.S. Ambassador to six countries: Afghanistan (2011–2012), Iraq (2007–2009), Pakistan (2004–2007), Syria (1998–2001), Kuwait (1994–1997), and Lebanon (1990–1993). He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, in 2009. He currently is a nonresident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and was previously a diplomat in residence at Princeton University. Other recent awards include the inaugural Bancroft Award presented by the Naval Academy in 2016; the annual James Joyce Award bestowed by the University College, Dublin, in 2016; and the West Point's Thayer Award in 2020. He is an Honorary Marine.

Jeffrey Dressler

Jeffrey Dressler is Managing Partner and Head of Global Government Affairs at SoftBank in Washington, D.C. Previously, he served as the National Security Advisor to Speakers of the House Paul Ryan and Kevin McCarthy. Prior to working with leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives, Mr. Dressler was a professional staff member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee responsible for terrorism, trade, and nonproliferation. Mr. Dressler began his career as an expert on Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Institute for the Study of War, in which capacity he served as a terrorism and counterinsurgency advisor to senior commanders in Afghanistan. Mr. Dressler has appeared on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, and in leading publications as a subject matter expert on foreign policy and national security issues.

Daniel Fata

Daniel Fata, President of Fata Advisory, LLC, is a public policy expert, national security consultant, and strategic advisor focused on helping companies and organizations enhance their product and program offerings through the development of comprehensive government affairs strategies, risk assessments, strategic planning, and advocacy initiatives. For seven years, Mr. Fata served in various capacities at Lockheed Martin. Prior to joining Lockheed Martin, he spent six years as the vice president of The Cohen Group, a global strategic advisory firm. From 2005 to 2008, he served as the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO Policy. Mr. Fata graduated with honors from the University of Connecticut with a BA in political science. He earned his MA in international relations from Boston University.

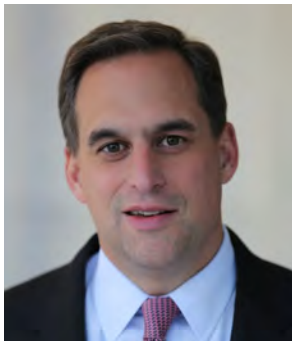
Dr. Anand Gopal

Dr. Anand Gopal is the author of *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* (Metropolitan Books, 2014), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and winner of the Ridenhour Prize for Journalism. As an award-winning journalist, he has been published in *The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine, The Atlantic*, and *Harper's Magazine*. He has extensively covered conflict in Afghanistan and Syria, including embedding with the Taliban, which led to his writing *No Good Men Among the Living*. He received his PhD from Columbia University and is an assistant research professor at the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University.

Luke Hartig

Luke Hartig is a fellow at New America's International Security program and the President of Gravity Research. Previously, he served as Senior Director for Counterterrorism at the National Security Council. Mr. Hartig has also served in various national security positions within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, State Department, Office of Management and Budget, Government Accountability Office, and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. He is an Executive Editor at *Just Security* and a member of the advisory boards of Hostage US and the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation. He began his career as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala. Mr. Hartig holds an MPP from the Harvard Kennedy School and a BA in international relations from Boston University.

Dr. Seth G. Jones



Dr. Seth G. Jones is President of the Defense and Security Department and Harold Brown Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He also teaches at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security. He previously was Director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation and served in several positions in U.S. Special Operations Command and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, including as a plans officer and advisor to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan. He served on a 2014 congressional panel that reviewed the FBI's implementation of the 9/11 Commission's counterterrorism recommendations. Among the books he's authored is *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W. W. Norton, 2010). A graduate of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, Dr. Jones received his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago.

Laurel E. Miller

Laurel E. Miller is President and CEO of the Asia Foundation. Her previous nonprofit work includes being Director of the Asia Program for the International Crisis Group and senior foreign policy expert for the RAND Corporation on an array of topics including peace processes, institution building, economic and security assistance, and governance. At the State Department, Ms. Miller was Deputy and Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and also served as Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, Senior Advisor to the U.S. Special Envoy for the Balkans, and Deputy to the Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues. She was directly involved in peace negotiations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. In addition, Ms. Miller served as Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council. She is a graduate of Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs and the University of Chicago Law School.

Lieutenant Colonel Chris Molino, U.S. Army (retired)

LTC Chris Molino served in the U.S. Army for 20 years. His career included operational and senior staff assignments focused on counterterrorism and U.S. policymaking, including roles in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Special Operations Command, and Army Special Operations Command. He also served as the Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council from 2017 to 2019. In addition to conventional assignments in the infantry, LTC Molino served in Army and Joint Special Operations commands at every rank from second lieutenant to lieutenant colonel with combat experience in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. He is the Chief Operating Officer of the consulting firm Gossamer Insights and Director of Defense Programs for Foundation Stack AI. He also is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and Missouri State University. LTC Molino received BAs in government and history from William & Mary and an MPM from Georgetown University.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay is Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and is the author of *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and, with Kimberly Howe, *Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). She is a co-editor (with Anna Larson and Omar Sharifi) of *Power and Authority in Afghanistan: Rethinking Politics, Intervention and Rule* (Bloomsbury, 2025), and her research has also been featured in peer-reviewed journals, policy publications, and major media outlets. She has previously held academic appointments at Columbia University, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of Minnesota. She is Vice President of the American Institute of Afghan Studies and has served as a Senior Expert on Afghanistan with the U.S. Institute of Peace and as a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. She earned her doctorate from the Fletcher School at Tufts University and her bachelor's in political science, magna cum laude, from Yale University.

Governor Robert "Bob" Taft

Governor Robert "Bob" Taft served as Governor of Ohio for two terms from 1999 to 2007. During his time in office, Governor Taft championed the state's high-technology sector and worked to improve Ohio's education system. Programs he implemented continue to produce rewards for the Buckeye State long after he left office; these include his 12-year, $10 billion school construction and renovation agenda and his Ohio Reads initiative that has delivered more than 45,000 volunteers to help elementary school children achieve grade-level reading standards by the end of the fourth grade. Before his election as governor, he served as a member of Ohio's House of Representatives, as Commissioner of Hamilton County, and as Secretary of State of Ohio. Governor Taft served as Assistant Program Officer with the USAID Mission in South Vietnam (1967–1969) and as a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania (1963–1965). Currently, he is a Distinguished Research Associate at the University of Dayton. Governor Taft's father and grandfather both served in the U.S. Senate, and his great-grandfather, William Howard Taft, was the 27th U.S. President and served as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dr. Andrew Wilder

Dr. Andrew Wilder is Vice President of Asia Programs at the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP). He has worked there since 2010, including from 2010 to 2013 as director of Afghanistan and Pakistan programs. Prior to his USIP service, Dr. Wilder was research director for politics and policy at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. Previously, he founded and directed Afghanistan's first independent research institution, the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, following more than 10 years managing humanitarian and development programs in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He served as country director of Save the Children's Afghanistan and Pakistan programs from 1996 to 2001. Dr. Wilder has conducted research on topics related to state-building, electoral politics, and development and stabilization efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He holds a BS in foreign service from Georgetown University, and an MA and PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

APPENDIX III

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APPENDIX IV

AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION PUBLIC HEARINGS

Beginning in July 2024, the Afghanistan War Commission launched a series of hearings to contribute to the national conversation on the war. To date, the commission has held three hearings, with at least two more planned. The series is designed to systematically examine the different eras of the 20-year war in chronological order, paralleling the planned structure of the commission's final report. Through the course of this series, the U.S. public is invited to follow the narrative arc of the war and engage the lessons it holds.

Complete video and full transcripts of each hearing are available on the commission's website at www.afghanistanwarcommission.senate.gov.

Hearing 1: Examining the Origins of the War in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, D.C., OFFICES OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

July 14, 2024

Two panels focused on the importance for future generations of revisiting the Afghanistan War and the roots of the war. On these subjects, commissioners heard testimony from the following panelists:

- Ambassador Ronald Neumann, President of the American Academy of Diplomacy
- Dr. Alexis Albion
- Dr. Halima Kazem, Oral Historian and Project Manager with Stanford University's Hoover Institute
- Nader Nadery, Senior Fellow with the Wilson Center
- Dr. Michael Vickers, former Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence
- Dr. Noah Coburn, Provost and Vice President for Academics at the Evergreen State College

Hearing 2: Early U.S. Decisions in The Afghanistan War (2001–2009)

U.S. SENATE DIRKSEN OFFICE BUILDING ROOM G50, CAPITOL HILL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

April 11, 2025

The commission's second hearing focused on years coinciding with the Bush administration. Three panels covered topics concerning U.S. policy and strategy, interagency decision-making, state-building and reconciliation attempts with the Taliban, military operations, and counterterrorism. On these subjects, commissioners heard testimony from the following panelists:

- Ambassador Henry "Hank" Crumpton, Coordinator for Counterterrorism (2005–2007) at the U.S. Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency officer who led Counterterrorism Center Special Operations paramilitary forces in pursuit of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11
- Ambassador Nancy Jo Powell, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan (2002–2004); National Intelligence Officer for South Asia, National Intelligence Council (2006–2007); Director General of the U.S. Foreign

Service (2009–2012); U.S Ambassador to India (2012–2014)

- Colonel Anthony (Tony) Harriman, U.S. Army (retired), National Security Council Director for Afghanistan (2003–2005); NSC Senior Director for Afghanistan (2005–2007); NSC Special Advisor for Policy Implementation (2007–2009)
- Ambassador Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs (2000–2005); Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia (2006–2009)
- Ambassador Mohammad Umer Daud Zai, Chief of Staff to Afghan President Hamid Karzai (2003–2005 and 2007–2011); Afghan Ambassador to Iran (2005–2007) and Pakistan (2011–2013)
- The Honorable Andrew Natsios, U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator (2001–2006)
- Younus Qanooni, Afghan Minister of Interior Affairs (2001–2002); Speaker of the House of the People (2005–2010); First Vice President of Afghanistan (2014)
- Lieutenant General Dave Barno, U.S. Army (retired), Commander of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (2003–2005)
- Lieutenant General Keith Stalder, U.S. Marine Corps (retired), Deputy J-5 for U.S. Central Command (2000–2002)

Hearing 3: Debates, Decisions, and Implementation of the Surge (2009–2012)

U.S. SENATE DIRKSEN OFFICE BUILDING ROOM G50, CAPITOL HILL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

June 23, 2025

The commission's third hearing focused on the first term of the Barack Obama administration as the United States surged military forces to counter the Taliban insurgency while also fueling development efforts to build institutions and both commercial and cultural infrastructure in Afghanistan. In addition, the two panels discussed civil–military coordination; the civilian, military, and Afghan perspectives on the surge; Pakistan's role during this time period; and the impact of President Obama's announcing a military forces drawdown in tandem with announcing the surge. On these subjects, commissioners heard testimony from the following panelists:

- Ambassador Douglas Lute, Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan (2007–2013); U.S. Ambassador to NATO (2013–2017)
- David Sedney, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia (2009–2013)
- Ambassador Jawed Ludin, Chief of Staff for President Hamid Karzai (2005–2007); Afghanistan's Ambassador to Canada (2009–2012); Deputy Foreign Minister on Political Affairs (2011)
- Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant general who served two tours in Afghanistan including as Commander, Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (2005–2007); U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (2009–2011)
- Lieutenant General Michael Nagata, U.S. Army (retired), Deputy Chief in the Office of the Defense Representative at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan (2009–2011)
- Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, U.S. Army (retired), Commander of NATO's Training Mission in Afghanistan (2011–2013)
- General Sher Mohammad Karimi, Chief of Operations of the Afghan National Army (2003–2010); Chief of the General Staff (2010–2015)
- Ambassador Dawn Liberi, Coordinator for the Interagency Provincial Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul (2009–2011)
- Ambassador Tony Wayne, Coordinating Director for Development and Economic Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul (2009–2010); Deputy U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (2010–2011)
- Brigadier General Michael Meese, U.S. Army (retired), Assistant Chief of Staff for the International Security Assistance Force (2010–2011)

AFGHANISTAN

WAR COMMISSION