

Exploring the Contrasting Narratives of the US Officials: An Analysis of the Afghanistan Papers

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Abstract

The abrupt withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan rendered a spectacle for the entire world which gave rise to a severe critique of the US policies and decisions. Throughout the war in Afghanistan, the US State Department painted a rosy picture of progress and achievements, creating a robust official narrative. However, there were other competing narratives that continued to shed light on the circumstances prevailing in Afghanistan. The Lessons Learned Program (LLP) of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) was tasked to identify the factors that contributed to a decline in the social, development, and security situation in Afghanistan. SIGAR carried out interviews of officials who served in Afghanistan to explore the shortcomings of the US efforts in Afghanistan. These interviews were initially classified but were later published by *The Washington Post* after a court ruled for their declassification under Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). A close inspection of these interviews reveals a narrative prevailing among the US officials who served in Afghanistan, which runs counter to the official US narrative.

Keywords: US, Narrative Theory, Afghanistan, SIGAR, War on Terror, Contrasting Narrative, The Afghanistan Papers

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“The Universe is made of stories, not of Atoms”
---*Speed of Darkness*, Muriel Rukeyser

Over the last two decades, most of our understanding and perceptions regarding the US ‘War on Terror’ in Afghanistan had been predominantly constructed by the discursive practices of the US government, the US media, and the academic community. More often, numerous narratives had been conjoined under the umbrella term of ‘the US narrative’ that overlooked the contrasting perspectives prevailing within. The US officials who were present in Afghanistan and privy to the situation on ground presented a different narrative that was in stark contrast to the official version. While the US has been blowing its own trumpet of achievements in Afghanistan, the other side of the story was documented in SIGAR interviews of people who themselves experienced serving in Afghanistan.¹

This article explores one such narrative prevalent among the US practitioners who served in Afghanistan in various capacities. These people were responsible for the implementation of the US policies in Afghanistan and yet they maintained a separate narrative, which could only be recorded in furtive whispers and off-the-record confessions. These murmurs were indirectly pointed out by Richard Haass, a former State Department Official who served in Afghanistan, during his LLP interview with the SIGAR team, when he mentioned that there was a widespread reluctance to get involved and get ambitious in Afghanistan (Hass, 2015). When this narrative finally seemed to emerge in the SIGAR fact-finding study, attempts were made by the US authorities to shroud these interviews in secrecy.

A judgment of a US court under Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) made it possible to make public The Afghanistan Papers. The investigative journalist of *The Washington Post* behind this exposé was Craig Whitlock who covered Afghanistan for eight years. Later, he compiled these interviews into a critically acclaimed book named *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* published in August 2021. This collection that comprised interviews of the US officials, the Allied countries, and Afghanistan reveals a latent narrative prevalent among officials who had been present on ground.

This study will first establish what ‘Narrative’ is and then chalk out a framework on how to identify a narrative within discourses. The sample selected for this purpose is “The Afghanistan Papers” that includes the SIGAR interviews of the US government officials who served in Afghanistan. Purposive sampling technique has been employed to extract only those interviews that fulfilled the requirements. The Afghanistan Papers include interviews of officials of some of the allied countries like Britain, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Germany. However, only the interviews of the US officials who served in Afghanistan and articulated the required themes in their discourse have been selected.

A contrasting narrative prevalent among the US officials deployed in Afghanistan will be identified in their discourse using the theoretical framework established herein. This study will adopt an experience-centered approach where subjects’ perception of events are accounted for, and it will explore how the post-9/11 Afghanistan has been lived in and narrated by the US officials. This research will study the narrative in its socio-political context and will distinguish salient themes in the narrative which will enable a keen insight in the perceptions of the people on-ground in

Afghanistan. The research aims to shed light on the perceptions of US officials regarding the policies and directives of their government that indicate lacunas in the official US narrative of War on Terror. Following research questions will be addressed in this article:

- How does the prevalent narrative among US officials in Afghanistan run counter to the official US narrative?
- What are the salient themes of this alternative narrative of US officials in Afghanistan?

Narrative in Theory

The importance of narratives in political, social, and psychological fields has been reiterated in the academic realm. Numerous studies across various disciplines have been focused on narrative research (Mishler, 1986; Plummer, 2001; Patterson, 2002; Emerson and Frosh, 2004; Freeman, 2009; Bold, 2012), reflecting its growing popularity and acceptability. A psychological study conducted to explain human decisions has aptly explained that narratives play a vital role in the perceptions and imaginations of people subsequently affecting the decisions made by them (Sarbin, 1986). It also stands true while considering the role of narratives in the collective lives of people through the construction of ideology and political identity (Cornog, 2004). The problem arises when a literary term like 'narrative' is employed in social sciences and its definition becomes a point of contention (Shenhav, 2006).

Fisher in his narrative paradigm refers to human beings via the metaphor of *homo narrans* instead of *homo sapiens*, depicting human beings as storytellers who posit symbolic compositions. These symbols become stories that give order to human experience and prompt others to join these in establishing common ways of

life. Following are the assumptions of the narrative paradigm given by Walter Fisher: first, human beings are essentially story tellers; second, 'good reasons' not rationality is the paradigmatic mode of communication and decision making; third, rationality of the person is determined by their nature as narrative beings; and lastly, practice and production of 'good reasons' are ruled by master metaphors (Fisher, 1987).

Fisher has provided a conception of rationality based on narration as opposed to the traditional view because any conception that does not allow for reasoned inducement is too narrow (Fisher, 1987). It means people make sense of their world in the form of narratives and even their rational judgement pertaining to certain events is formed by narrative rationality. Similarly, the excerpts from interviews of the respondents depict their narrative rationality and how they make sense of the situation on ground. One of the three propositions Fisher made after emphasizing 'sequence' and 'context' is that a narrative will derive its meaning and value by how it stands in relation to other stories and narratives (Fisher, 1987). For this reason, the accounts of the US officials in Afghanistan are considered in relation to the official US narrative which is considered a broadly recognized and familiar narrative. Fisher purports that generally a text can be characterized as exuding one or more of the four motives. These motives within discourse, according to Fisher, can be identified as affirmation, reaffirmation, purification, and subversion (Fisher, 1987). In this study, the discourse in the interviews mainly considered is focused on purification and subversion motives thereby constructing a contrasting narrative against the official US narrative.

What is Narrative?

It is generally agreed upon that narratives construct the context in order to justify the intended course of action. Narrative is a deliberate sequencing of selective information so that the structure for desired reality is constructed. Narratives are also constructed to provide contextual understating and justification of actions or future course of actions. However, a workable definition of narrative can be found in the structuralist approach that defines narrative as “the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other” (Prince, 1982). This presents a broad understanding of the term ‘narrative’ that needs to be further specified for its application to political phenomena. A narrative may be qualified as a ‘political narrative’ if it emanates from a forum which is political in nature like a political party, the parliament, politicians, government officials, or political demonstrations (Shenhav, 2006).

Approaches to narrative research can be theoretically divided into three main categories: event-centered approach, experience-centered approach, and co-constructed narratives approach (Andrew, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). The event-centered approach chiefly focuses on spoken recounting of events whereas experience-centered approach focuses on exploring subjects’ experience of events. The co-constructed approach is focused on narratives developing in mutual interactions and conversations. This study will adopt the experienced-centered approach where subjects’ perceptions of events are accounted for in order to

explore how the post-9/11 Afghan scenario has been experienced and narrated by the US officials who served in Afghanistan.

Elements of Narrative

A narrative can be identified through its distinctive components present throughout a discourse that can be broken down into three (Shenhav, 2006). The first element is ‘events, characters and background’ that includes the events that occurred, main actors who are involved in it, and the social and geographical setting of the narrative. The second element is the ‘events in sequence’ referring to the temporal relativity of the events under consideration. It refers to how the events in focus are related to each other with respect to time. The third element is ‘causality’ which means attribution of causal relationship among the events. These elements of narrative, if recurring in a certain context, enable us to identify the presence of a certain narrative. The study will extract instances from the Afghan Papers where these elements of narrative are found.

The elements of narrative as deemed imperative by Shenhav can be identified in the SIGAR interviews later dubbed as ‘The Afghanistan Papers’. The first element which is described by Shenhav as “**events, characters and background**”, can be observed in the context of the series of LLP interviews. The **events** discussed are all the circumstances that led to the post-‘War on Terror’ peace and stability efforts of the US in Afghanistan. In its broader sense it, includes US invasion of Afghanistan, ousting of the Taliban regime, instating a local Afghan government, and training the Afghan people. The **characters** are broadly familiar in the context of the war-torn Afghanistan including but not limited to

US troops, the Afghan people, Taliban insurgents, the Afghan government, Allied Forces, and US departments and agencies. The **background** is the US invasion of Afghanistan to hunt Al-Qaeda in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Subsequently, American objective expanded into regime change which eventually turned into a decade-long, multi-billion-dollar effort for Afghan reconstruction. The stymied progress necessitated the US administration to send a fact-finding team of SIGAR to interview people responsible on the ground.

The second element of the narrative is the “**sequence of events**” that is not contentious. There is no major contradiction between the official US narrative and the alternate narrative of the officials on ground in Afghanistan. The only element that distinguishes the two narratives i.e., “**causality**” will be addressed in detail in this study. The discord is in the perceptions of the US officials in Afghanistan against those of the official US narrative.

Narratives in Practice

The distinctions manifesting in the causal element of narrative are organized in themes that permeate throughout the narrative of the US officials stationed in Afghanistan. In their interviews to the SIGAR representatives, these officials express their own views as well as of those working beside them in Afghanistan. The fact-finding mission of SIGAR sets the critical tone of the interview. The respondents subsequently express their views on the subject and presumably there is no coordination among them as the interview dates are different. The line of questions taken by the interviewers also varies in all the interviews. The time during which these respondents served in Afghanistan is also varying. Their portfolio, mandate, and responsibilities are all different yet

we can identify a narrative that seems to be prevalent among those who were present there.

ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE			
Events, Characters and Background		Sequence of Events	Causality
Events	US invasion of Afghanistan	9/11 Terrorist attacks	A prevalent perception that the US did not have a clear vision
	Ousting of Taliban Regime	US invasion of Afghanistan	
	Instating a local Afghan government		Victory of Northern Alliance
	Training of Afghan people		
Characters	US troops	Establishment of Afghan government	
	Taliban the Afghan people		
	the Afghan government	Reconstruction of Afghanistan	A perception that mistrust prevailed among US and its allies in Afghanistan
	Allied Forces & civilians		
	US agencies		
Backgrounds	9/11 Terrorist Attacks	Rise of Taliban Insurgency	
	War on Terror		
	Afghan		

	Reconstruction		
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The War on Terror was claimed to be vital for global peace though it has met widespread criticism since its inception both from academic and nonacademic quarters. Arjun Mody in his article pointed out that the narrative of War on Terror was forged on vengeful public sentiments, innovative legal jargon, moral absolutes, and religious invocations (Mody, 2011). The moral absolutes did not leave any room for flexibility or understanding of the rival's perspective constructing an unforgiving War narrative where either you are with the US or against the US. The Afghanistan Papers, brought to light by Whitlock, is another scathing critique of the US intervention in Afghanistan that was later rendered in the book *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* in which he exposed how the US government manipulated the entire narrative of the War on Terror to meet its objectives, while brushing its limitations and inadequacies under the carpet. The book emphasized on proving that the US officials lied to the public about the development of war in Afghanistan and underplayed the deplorable state of reconstruction in Afghanistan. Although factually accurate and well written yet the book has a paucity of academic refinement and does not comment on the discursive aspects of the interviews, thus falling short of a consolidated and consistent narrative.

This study, on the contrary, endeavors to develop a narrative out of these interviews, which provide an alternative perspective. During the interview of Michael Callen who had served as an Afghan Public Sector Specialist, one of the interviewers Dr. Candace Rondeaux explained that the goal of the interviews is to deliver a narrative of what exactly happened in Afghanistan so that some

recommendations can be devised for such future ventures (Callen, 2015). It depicts that the US administration had an inkling of being disconnected with the objective reality in Afghanistan which is why the effort to conduct a large-scale investigation, inspection, and interviews was initiated under the LLP. It is worth noting that despite such concerted efforts, the US government was not able to learn a vital lesson and rectify the situation timely to bridge the discord between the decision makers in the US and the officials responsible for the actual application of those directives in Afghanistan.

LLP provided a comprehensive commentary on the challenges and shortcomings of the US efforts in Afghanistan through an empirical research analysis. In their report titled *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, a lack of coherent strategy is documented as the first lesson to be learned from the US venture in Afghanistan. It is further elaborated in the report as every expanding strategy while the division of responsibilities among the US agencies did not account for the strengths and shortcomings (SIGAR, 2021). However, the findings mostly comprise a positivist analysis of data without realizing the constructivist potential of the interviews that present a narrative based on their on-ground experience and perceptions.

Moreover, the shortcomings in the interagency coordination of the civilians and the military are also explained in the SIGAR report with a special emphasis on resources and capabilities. It is mentioned that clashes between the agencies were rampant, often due to personnel issues. Most of the resources and staff were held by the Department of Defense. Therefore, often military objectives were prioritized over civilian ones. The civilian officials were

reluctant or unable to keep up with the fast military pace having arbitrary timelines.

Lessons mentioned in the SIGAR reports are quite accurate and well researched; however, these are carried out as per the official requirements of being based on the available data. The qualitative aspect of the research is lacking as it could not delve deeper into an analysis of the interviews from a narrative aspect. Although the empiricist approach makes it authentic and credible within the realist and rationalist realms, it certainly leaves room for constructivists to conduct their own analysis.

The Official US Narrative on War on Terror: A Utopian Vista

Since the onset of the Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 in Afghanistan, the US government has had an optimistic view about the developing scenario presenting an encouragingly rosy picture of the situation in Afghanistan. The official US narrative on Afghanistan had been a carefully tailored discourse, meticulously crafted to exude a sense of achievement and progress even in the face of ineffaceable adversities. It articulated only those indicators that served their purpose by presenting a convincing picture of the Afghan scenario. The facts that they carefully selected to flaunt were always meant to convey a sense of deep assurance that progress is being made in the right direction and the strategic goals are being achieved. The official narrative of the US seemed resolute and determined despite challenging on-ground developments in Afghanistan. US officials kept emphasizing that Afghanistan is on the path to progress and liberation due to the untiring military and civilian efforts. The fidelity of the official US narrative was frequently contested but such instances were often brushed away as insignificant exceptions.

In an official address at the United States Institute of Peace to ponder over the success and challenges in Afghanistan, Dan Feldman, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan declared that the list of US achievements in Afghanistan were obviously momentous. The achievements that he counted included infrastructure, access to education, independent media, role of women, GDP growth, and health facilities, claiming thereby that the US and its allies should be proud of these (Feldman, 2015). Although it is a fact that there were improvements as compared to the erstwhile Taliban regime yet it did not in a true sense reflect the objective picture of the affairs in Afghanistan.

In his opening remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, James Dobbins said that the pursuit of terrorists in Afghanistan by the US forces expanded into a NATO-led coalition of forty-nine countries. This military campaign was accompanied by a truly extraordinary international civilian campaign to assist in healing from the scars of war and the tyranny of the former regime. James Dobbins commended the role of the international military coalition forces as well as their civilian counterparts for remarkable feats in Afghanistan. He also put forth figures depicting the economic and social development of the Afghan people lauding the development efforts of the US and its allies (Dobbins, 2013). He attempted to portray an impressive image of the cooperation among allied forces despite their stark differences on the ground.

Jacob Lew, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources presented his statement before the House Armed Services Committee in which he emphasized that the US and its allies had an enduring commitment to Afghanistan. He added that the civilian effort was already bearing fruit while serving in development assistance and policy crafting roles. He noted that the President's

strategy was to provide more civilian expertise to ensure that they had both the right people to achieve their objectives and a sound strategy (Lew, 2009). A strong official narrative was crafted through this assertive pronouncement exuding clarity of strategy and the means to achieve it. It also praised the civilian cadre of US officials who were brought into Afghanistan for non-military expertise. Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State during Press Availability after NATO meeting in Brussels expressed a unity of purpose with respect to Afghanistan where the US faced a common challenge with the NATO (Clinton, 2009). Through these statements, Hillary gave an impression that the US enjoyed full support of all the important members of the alliance for their new strategy in the region, thus constructing a dominant official narrative.

During a teleconference on US Assistance to Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2011 said that the US was proud of the civilian surge as the number of US civilians serving in Afghanistan had increased from 320 in 2009 to 1131 while 408 of them were in the most difficult circumstances in the field alongside military forces: “I say we are proud of them and their work which is representing 10 agencies of the US and we are proud of that too” (Grossman, 2011). In this address, the US official narrative attempts to dispel any rumors regarding the civil-military discord in the field and reiterates the importance of civilian contribution in Afghanistan.

Philip Gordon, Assistant Secretary Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, gave a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in which he claimed that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition had made significant progress to secure the country from the terrorists and to ensure that

Afghans were capable of maintaining their own security, thus meeting the President's goal (Gordon, 2012). The ISAF coalition comprised 90,000 US troops; 36,000 NATO troops; and 5,300 from partner countries. These statements by Gordon reflected a confident US official presenting the state narrative that boasted the success and effectiveness of the ISAF coalition forces.

The discursive power of US officials has largely been successful in forging a reassuringly credible US narrative regarding their venture in Afghanistan. The official US narrative was also endorsed both by the US media via favorable reporting and the intelligentsia through supporting research and literature. It is no wonder then that a swift takeover of Kabul by Taliban had been shocking for most people due to the consistent reassurance by the US officials. It had constructed such a rosy picture of the achievements by the US and its allies that it took a while to digest the events that unfolded leading to the fall of the local Afghan government.

The Oppositional Narrative of the US Officials in Afghanistan: A Far Cry

The discourse in The Afghanistan Papers was understandably critical. Most of the interviewees criticized the strategies and complained that the latter did not lead to expected developments. It is worth noting that a coherent thematic narrative emerged in the response of most of the interviewees that can be classified as per the following themes for a better comprehension.

No Clear Vision

The invasion of Afghanistan was an impulsive response by the US instead of a well-thought out and thoroughly planned initiative. US officials in Afghanistan were often confused by the sketchy

directives emanating from the White House due to a lack of clarity in the objectives set for Afghanistan. Ryan Crocker who served as the US Ambassador in Afghanistan reflected upon his tenure during an interview with SIGAR noting that the US officials in Afghanistan did not have a clear idea of the actual US objectives in Afghanistan (Crocker, 2016). A venerated four-star General who served as the Commander of Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, Dan McNeill also expressed his dismay at the fact that there was no campaign plan when going into Afghanistan (McNeil, date redacted). He added that most of their measures were reactionary due to a lack of guidance, rendering them opportunists.

Richard Boucher, a US diplomat who served in Afghanistan shared his perception in his own words: “The first question is did we know what we were doing? I think the answer is NO” (Boucher, 2015). Micheal Callen, a specialist on Afghan Public Sector, deduced during his tenure in Afghanistan that there was not much thought given to serious political economy or investment in various development projects (Callen, 2015). Such confessions by the US officials not only highlight apparent gaps in strategic planning but also present a bleak view of the attempt to implement a plan that did not exist.

Former Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan Douglas Lute exclaimed during the interview with the SIGAR panel that they did not have the foggiest notion of what they were undertaking (Lute, 2015). It shows that people who were vital to the execution of the US strategy in Afghanistan were not aware of the actual goals of the strategy at all. Nicholas Burns, a prominent US diplomat who also served as Ambassador to NATO during the War on Terror, pointed out strategic shortcomings with respect to Afghanistan during his

interview, lamenting that it would have been better had they been aware of some specific strategic assumptions like the timeframe (Burns, 2016). These admissions of high-ranking officials indicate a common narrative that they were not clear what the US authorities had planned for Afghanistan.

Moreover, the US government was not only ignorant of the fact that there was no clear strategy but also discouraged and ignored any such concerns raised by the officials who were present in Afghanistan. A US Army Colonel Bob Crowley who served in Afghanistan noted that larger strategic concerns were not welcomed by higher authorities (Crowley, 2016). Another renowned diplomat James Dobbins who served as US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan revealed that the administration had flawed ideas and there was very little high-level attention (Dobbins, 2016). Richard Hass, a former US State department official expressed his helplessness regarding the mindset of officials pertaining to the dire situation in Afghanistan. Hass said that he could not sell the idea because there was no enthusiasm. There was a profound sense of a lack of possibility in Afghanistan (R. Hass, SIGAR interview, October 23, 2015).

Thomas Johnson, a specialist officer on Afghanistan, inferred from his experience in Afghanistan that the Taliban wanted them to make mistakes in an honor-based society and they did so many culturally braindead things early on, things that were not thought out systematically, which doomed their mission in Afghanistan (Johnson, 2016). Former US State department official, Barnet Rubin recollected his dilemma that a short deadline was given by the President, which was inconsistent with the strategy. It was not possible to implement that strategy within that deadline; in fact, that strategy was not going to work in any case (Rubin, 2015).

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There was a concerning lack of vision and understanding of the complex strategic matters even at the highest echelons of policy making institutions of the US.

These are the views and perceptions of individuals in key positions who were responsible for the implementation of policy decisions. All these individual views consistently show that there was a clear lack of strategy as well as vision at the official level. As such, these views form a contrasting narrative to the official US narrative. The important point here is that these discursive instances during their SIGAR interviews were entirely unsolicited. It means that they were not asked a specific question nor required to comment about the perceived strategy of their government. However, responding to the LLP interview provided them with the context to point out the challenges they had faced despite the fact that there were no leading statements or queries by the interviewers. Therefore, considering their deliberate articulation of these views reflects their persistence in the interviewees' cognition.

Interagency Discord

The takeover of Kabul by the Taliban is generally deemed to be a failure of the US despite immense resources at its disposal. Looking at the situation closely reveals a different aspect where several US agencies had been working towards their own goals and objectives that were not necessarily in tandem with one another. These objectives, when unaligned to meet the requirement of the ever-changing US strategic goals, which were also not clear as discussed earlier, resulted in redundant efforts carried out in varying directions. The US officials stationed in Afghanistan were the ones who had a first-hand experience of this inter-agency

schism. Some of the officials pronounced them explicitly whereas a few shared an inkling of the unwelcoming air prevalent among US agencies in Afghanistan. Most of these mentions of interagency discord by the interviewees were unsolicited, and their responses were uninfluenced by their interviewers.

Richard Boucher complained in his interview about the militarization of foreign policy. This statement indicates that being a civilian official of US State department, he had gone weary of military's intervention in their domain (Boucher, 2015). Richard Hass recalled his days in Afghanistan where the relationship among agencies was less than stellar across the board. This was his way of conveying the interagency scenario mildly by carefully choosing his words (Hass, 2015).

Brian Copes, former Brigadier General in the US Army, expressed his surprise in a SIGAR interview that he was expecting to be given a tough time by the Afghans but he was not prepared to be frustrated by the US agencies. These were his remarks about working with other agencies apart from the military, of which he was himself a part. He also mentions in his interview that it was an uncomfortable balance of who was in charge (Copes, 2016). This clearly indicates that there had been strong interagency friction at the senior level. The coordination among the agencies seemed to be lacking and most of the officials stationed in Afghanistan considered it a major factor affecting the Afghanistan cause. Moreover, throughout his interview he emphasized that the government's approach works best when senior agency officials treat each other equally which was not the case in Afghanistan as per his experience.

Another US Army officer Eric Wahner who served on a Civil Affairs Team in Afghanistan noted that there was no consolidated effort and little communication witnessed among the Military, Department of State, and the USAID. He further shared the discriminatory attitude of civilian departments against the military by saying that although they worked with the UNHCR about the refugee issue but the other NGOs did not want to work with the military (Wahner, 2015). This led to inefficiency and redundancy in the field, and the officers suffered from lack of support due to this interagency conundrum. Bob Crowley, former US Army Colonel who served as counterinsurgency adviser in Afghanistan, also noted that there were a lot of turf wars at the operational level between the USAID and the Department of Defense. The USAID officials would often refuse to take commands from the Military officers and the Army officers would often ignore the US State Department officials and the USAID officials as irrelevant contributors (Crowley, 2016).

A retired US Army colonel, James Bullion, commented during his interview that there was a real lack of coordination in programs and unwillingness to listen to new ideas. The USAID was not willing to collaborate with the Task Force for Business Stability Operations (lead by James Bullion). The contract structure of the USAID was part of the problem, and they thought TFBSO was taking money from them (Bullion, 2015). An American Expert on Afghanistan's Agriculture Sector, Anthony Fitzherbert pointed out in his SIGAR interview that the USAID was causing a lot of trouble as they were not cooperating and coordinating. In fact, things had been going well before the USAID came in, in 2005. They were like torpedo having very strong views on how they were going to manage the effort and not being able to develop consensus with the rest (Fitzherbert, 2016).

A USAID official named Elisabeth Kvitashvili noted that what was needed between the agencies was convergence, not competition, but with money grew dysfunction and thus they were at odds with each other. An unnamed former senior USAID official mentioned in his interview that in the battle between the State and the Defense departments, there were disputes of personalities. There were numerous actors who had contrasting worldviews (Kvitashvili, 2016). A former unnamed US Ambassador explained during the interview that his greatest challenge in Afghanistan was to integrate the USAID in the overall mission, which he could not claim to have done successfully due to complex organizing and contracting procedures within the USAID.

It seems that all these agencies agreed in their opposition of the White House. Dobbins revealed that progress in Afghanistan lagged largely due to interagency bureaucracies as no one was in a hurry to sort out cost allocation and responsibilities among the US State Department, the USAID and the US Department of Defense. He further said that there were strong differences among agencies and there was weak White House leadership. In a rather dismal tone, he added that during the Obama administration all the agencies were aligned against the White House. While the State Department should have assumed the responsibility for interagency coordination but the pool of resources were held at the department of Defense which created friction (Dobbins, 2016).

A complex scenario where the US governmental agencies were at loggerheads with each other instead of being focused on mutually aligned objectives forged an environment that was not conducive to desired outcomes. This absence of cooperation among different US departments in a hostile country was indeed a bane in itself, but the narrative of uncongenial dynamics permeating among US

officials was indeed a tell-tale sign. Once again, the phenomenon of inter-agency discord had to be so consistent, visible, and unavoidable for the interviewees as to be mentioned by most of them without being directly asked about it.

Disagreement with Allies

The US rallied support of 41 countries including 30 NATO members to contribute militarily to the invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Although it was a welcomed participation and relieved much of the responsibility yet there had been instances where it was revealed by the interviewees that working with allied countries was not much of a treat after all. Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Nicholas Burns, opined that some NATO countries were good and some were bad but you could not shut them out. He further added that the US, the UK, Canada, and the Netherlands were bitter about the rest of the countries for not doing enough. He said that while Americans thought they were fighting a war, Europeans believed it was a peacekeeping effort. Spanish and Italians were sensitive about fighting a war. Germans would only patrol 2-3km outside garrison whereas the US troops were being deployed tens of miles outside garrisons (Burns, 2016). This reflects how disagreements in understanding and response to the security situation differed among Allies operating in Afghanistan.

Dan McNeill, a retired US Army General who also served in Afghanistan summed up his experiences in an unequivocal statement during his SIGAR interview stating that there were NATO coalition issues in Afghanistan. He further expounded on the weaknesses of the allied forces; for instance, even though many allies supported COIN, but their efforts were not coordinated

(McNeil, date redacted). Thomas Johnson who served as an Afghan Specialist expressed his critical views of the coalition forces noting that every country had their own rules of engagement. As per him, however, most of the coalition forces were in fact pacifists because they never left their Forward Operating Base (Johnson, 2016). The impression can be derived from these views that a narrative prevailed among the US officials in Afghanistan that officials from other allied countries were not putting in as much effort as their American counterparts.

Richard Boucher, who is a retired US diplomat elaborated on another mistake of the State Department officials who started out in Afghanistan with the attitude that the Americans will cover the military; Germans will take care of the policing; and Italians will manage the justice system. Nobody had the capacity, the resources, and the determination in the other sectors or at least not as per the requirement. He noted that the reality was that the Americans trained people to be Americans; Germans trained people to be Germans; and Italians trained people to be Italians. However, some of the Afghans remained Afghans (R. Boucher, 2015). Thus, these experiences were narrated by not only military officials but also civilian officials who concluded in their interviews that it was not the correct approach to divide tasks among allied countries as every country had their own understanding and modus operandi which did not concur with the US goals.

Conclusion

The US invasion of Afghanistan was the most 'popular' invasion of a country that was backed unanimously by all the countries in the United Nations. The success of the rallying support for the War on Terror was partly due to the series of terrorist attacks especially

on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001. However, the US media and the US official narrative maneuvered the optics around 9/11 to construct it as an attack on liberty and democracy. The entire world, even the adversaries of the US rallied in to support their cause one way or another. But the world soon got weary of the ever-expanding US objectives, and the popular war was not so popular anymore. The US official narrative continued to paint a rosy picture of the situation in Afghanistan, portraying it as progressing by leaps and bounds, which was soon contested by the debilitating security situation and the resurgence of the Taliban.

Craig Whitlock who had been covering the War on Terror since the start discovered some startling revelations in the SIGAR interviews regarding the war. He filed a FOIA suit to receive public access to those transcripts and later compiled them in a book form. The book was focused on incriminating the US government for spinning lies and ignoring apparent signs of US failure in Afghanistan. This research, however, took a different approach to *The Afghanistan Papers*. A close inspection of the interviews revealed a pattern which on further analysis depicted a latent narrative that had been prevalent among the US officials who had served in Afghanistan.

The study has highlighted three main themes of the oppositional narrative of the US officials which had never been publicly revealed. The article has explained that the US officials in Afghanistan were not receiving clear, logical, and coherent directives regarding the strategic objectives of the US. Whenever these objections were communicated to higher authorities, they were shunned and ignored as if these are not points of immediate concern. This shows that officials on ground were aware of the

problems and tried to bring them into the knowledge of their seniors but in vain. This observation by the US officials came up quite frequently and mostly was not even solicited by interviewers.

Another important issue that became known was the ever-present discord among the US agencies, especially the civil and military divide. The agencies did not cooperate or coordinate with each other to the point that disdain for each other was apparent in their disposition. This caused huge hurdles as the resources and responsibilities did not correspond with the tasks at hand and lack of inter-agency harmony eventually resulted in limited outcomes. The SIGAR report attributed this factor to a skewed distribution of resources between the Department of Defense and other civilian agencies, but it failed to provide the extent of discord.

The last theme highlighted in this study was the disagreement among officials of allied countries. Interviewees expressed sentiments of disdain for the mindset of the officials of some of the countries. In some instances, it was mentioned that their understanding of the whole purpose of being in Afghanistan as well as their rules of engagement were at odds with those of the US officials, which caused issue in the operational domain. Lastly, this study provided a deep analysis of the interviews that significantly played a vital role in understanding the prevailing environment of contemporary Afghanistan. This study also shed light on the perceptions of the US officials regarding the policies and directives of their own government which sometimes, according to them, were not aligned with the strategic goals.

Despite incessant criticism, the US continued to manifest its commitment to the Afghan cause and its support for a democratically elected Afghan government. However, a

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contrasting narrative emerged in the media, research circles, and the academia regarding the deplorable state of security and development in Afghanistan, indicating depreciating efforts of the US and its allies. Simultaneously, the US government also carried out investigations, audits, and interviews under SIGAR's LLP to identify the causes that had not only stalled but also reversed the initial progress attained in Afghanistan. The SIGAR team conducted interviews of officials who served in Afghanistan to understand the factors that hindered progress despite the utilization of immense resources at their disposal. There is immense research potential in the realm of narrative from a socio-political perspective in conflict ridden societies. Exploring hidden and marginalized narratives will open further possibilities to better understand latent discursive forces that are subtly at play. Such narrative studies will put together a mosaic of different voices and perspectives that provide a new perspective on a situation that is closer to reality in its entirety.

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End Note

ⁱ SIGAR refers to chief oversight authority of the US government pertaining to the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. It was constituted by the US Congress in 2008 to carry out investigations, inspections, and audit of Afghanistan Reconstruction Funds to bring effectiveness and efficiency. LLP was initiated by SIGAR to enhance sustainability, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Afghan reconstruction through an analysis of the American engagement since 2001. LLP has issued a total of 13 reports after conducting hundreds of interviews and reviewing thousands of documents.