

Why the USA unsuccessfully squandered billions in Afghanistan

by Urs P. Gasche*



Urs P. Gasche
(Picture infosperber)

The war lobby has been faking successes for presidents and congress so that the arms and aid organisations can profit for a long time.

More than 170,000 people lost their lives in NATO's twenty-year war against "terrorists" in Afghanistan.¹ The cost of the war amounted to well over one trillion US dollars.² In addition, at least another trillion US dollars was spent by some seventy states, international organisations and thousands of aid organisations on "development aid" to Afghanistan.

John F. Sopko, the long-standing US special inspector general for reconstruction in Afghanistan, has summarised in the New York Times³ why those in government did not see the disaster coming for so long. It was about money and contracts and more money and contracts.

Sopko intends to publish a final report this year. It should answer the question of why so many high-ranking officials told Congress and the public year after year that success was within reach, even though they knew better. For two decades, officials had claimed that continuing the mission in Afghanistan was crucial to national interests. Only the two presidents, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, have finally concluded that this is not the case.

German soldiers in Afghanistan

Hundreds of German soldiers have also been deployed in Afghanistan as part of NATO since

2001. The then SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder declared:

"Only war will bring peace in Afghanistan closer [...] The pseudo-religiously legitimised and motivated violence must be overridden by democratically legitimised counter-violence."⁴ Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) added: "Now there is a great opportunity to permanently end this war and civil war." One year later, SPD defence minister Peter Struck followed up: "I said that our security is being defended at the Hindu Kush."⁵

"Perverse incentives to spend money"

In his capacity as special inspector general for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, John F. Sopko and his staff have been auditing and investigating US programmes and spending on the reconstruction of Afghanistan on behalf of the US Congress since 2012. Today, Congress and the new Trump administration should learn from the mistakes in Afghanistan so that a similar disaster does not occur in Ukraine, the Gaza Strip or Syria.

Officially, the US wanted to ensure that Afghanistan could no longer become a haven for terrorists, and that the Afghan people would have a better future. The theocratic, tribal-based state was to be transformed into a modern liberal democracy.

But in fact, the "success" during the war was measured by how much money was spent on programmes and projects, Sopko reports. Because of "perverse incentives", military and civilian leaders had to report business trips, *the number of missions, the number of operations, programmes and projects* as successes to receive promotions and higher pay.

The managers had an interest in reporting and emphasising positive information and playing down failures: "After all, failure doesn't lead to promotion."

Private contractors for the military or civilian authorities also had an interest in presenting their activities in as positive a light as possible so as not to lose contracts worth millions. The amount spent had become the measure of success. Sopko cites two examples:

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- “A general told us that he was faced with a challenge: how should he spend the remaining \$1 billion of his annual budget in just over a month? Giving the money back was not an option.”
- “Another official we spoke to did not want to cancel a construction project worth millions even though the field commanders did not want it at all. Because the funds had to be spent. The building was never used.”

Transferring security to the Afghans was an illusion

After thirteen years of war, US forces began deploying the Afghan military, which they had previously trained, to provide security in 2014. American generals and government officials had optimistically spread the word that Afghan forces were now effectively fighting the Taliban, and that corruption and human rights violations had been curbed. The elections in Afghanistan were also reported to have been democratic and fair.

Because of such reports, the US Congress was willing to continue pumping billions into the war and reconstruction.

But in Sopko’s view, all the alarm bells should have been ringing by 2015 at the latest in Kunduz, when the Taliban seized control of a major city for the first time since 2001. But the fiction that the Afghan armed forces could prevail and pave the way for a US withdrawal was maintained.

Sopko describes the reality at the time in the “New York Times” as follows:

“Talban fighters with Cold War-era rifles and off-road motorcycles, often proved more effective than Afghan government troops, who had more modern equipment and support from the U.S. air force. The Taliban were motivated by religion. They wanted to rid the country of foreign invaders and a government that they saw as a Washington-installed puppet regime. By contrast, the members of the Afghan military were often motivated only by their salaries. Morale was low, corruption was rife, and the logistical problems were big.”

Spreading optimism to maintain cash flows

Sopko recalls President *Dwight Eisenhower’s* warning about the influence of the “military-in-

dustrial complex”. In Afghanistan, the complex of NGOs, UN and aid organisations also exerted a great deal of influence. Their goals were undoubtedly noble: fighting corruption, protecting women and marginalised groups, and increasing transparency.

But these organisations contributed to an overly optimistic assessment of the situation: “The aim was to maintain cash flows.”

In Afghanistan, the office of the special inspector general was often the only government agency to provide reliable reports on the situation on the ground: “But we faced strong resistance from officials in the Department of Defense and the State Department, USAID and the aid organisations. We were only able to do our work because Congress gave us the freedom to act independently.” The special inspectorate was able to publish material proving that the Afghan ministries were unable to properly manage direct US financial aid. And that corrupt Afghan officials were listing fictitious soldiers and police officers on their rosters to pocket the salaries paid out.

If the systemic disincentives to raise money are not broken, which stand in the way of establishing the truth, the US will continue to “pursue projects at home and abroad that don’t work, rewarding those who downplay failures by reporting successes while burning as many billions of dollars as they like.”

Source: <https://www.infosperber.ch/politik/welt/warum-die-usa-in-afghanistan-erfolglos-milliarden-verpulverten/>, 16 January 2025

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>

² <https://www.infosperber.ch/politik/welt/nato-krieg-in-afghanistan-forderte-ueber-eine-halbe-million-tote/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/02/opinion/afghanistan-audit-reconstruction-us.html?searchResultPosition=1>

⁴ <https://politische-reden.eu/BR/t/356.html>, 22.12.2001

⁵ <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-des-bundesministers-der-verteidigung-dr-peter-struck--784328>