



2023

Talking Foreign Policy Transcripts February 21, 2023 broadcast: What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

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Recommended Citation

Scharf, Michael and French, Shannon E. (2023) "Talking Foreign Policy Transcripts February 21, 2023 broadcast: What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 10, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol10/iss1/10>

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Talking Foreign Policy Transcript

Launched in 2012, *Talking Foreign Policy* is a one-hour radio program, hosted by CWRU School of Law Co-Dean Michael Scharf, in which experts discuss the salient foreign policy issues of the day. It airs quarterly on WKSU 89.7 FM in Cleveland and is webcast live for worldwide listening at Ideastream. Archived broadcasts can be accessed anytime through the School of Law YouTube page. Starting in September 2021, *Talking Foreign Policy* is also available as a podcast.¹

February 21, 2023, broadcast. What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

Participants

Shannon E. French

Gregory P. Noone

John Sopko

Paul Williams

SCHARF: Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the situation has gone from bad to worse. Today, twenty million Afghans are starving, and millions are internally displaced.² The Taliban is back in power. They are once again providing sanctuary to terrorist groups.³ They have decreed that Afghan girls shall not have access to education above the sixth grade.⁴ And they have prohibited Afghan women from driving, taking public transport, and holding jobs.⁵ In a recent report to Congress, John

1. This transcript was created, and footnotes added, by Grotian Scholars Anna Buczek and Jack Sartee.

2. “Afghanistan: Nearly 20 million going hungry,” *UN News* (May 9, 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117812>.

3. See generally Seth G. Jones, “Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (April 14, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>.

4. Daa Hadid, Taliban begins to enforce education ban, leaving Afghan women with tears and anger, *NPR* (December 21, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsand-soda/2022/12/21/1144703393/taliban-begins-to-enforce-education-ban-leaving-afghan-women-with-tears-and-ange>.

5. “Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to stay home; cover up in public,” *UN News* (May

Sopko, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan, wrote: “Unless the US government understands and accounts for what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how it went wrong, it will likely repeat the same mistakes in the next conflict.”⁶ I’m Michael Scharf, Dean of Case Western Reserve University School of Law.⁷ In this broadcast of *Talking Foreign Policy*,⁸ our expert panelists, including Sopko, will seek to answer those questions . . . right after the news.

[STATION BREAK]

SCHARF: Welcome to *Talking Foreign Policy*. I’m your host, Michael Scharf, Dean of Case Western Reserve University School of Law. In this broadcast, our expert panelists will be discussing the Afghanistan debacle. In our first segment we will discuss the goals, strategies, and tactics of the longest war in US history. In the second segment, we will examine what went right and what went wrong. And in the final segment, we’ll discuss the lessons learned and apply them to other current conflicts in which the US is engaged. Headlining our panel of experts is Cleveland native and Case Western Reserve Law alum John Sopko,⁹ who was sworn in as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction on July 2, 2012. He was appointed by President Obama, served under President Trump, and continues to serve under President Biden. For the last ten years, Sopko and his staff have raised concerns about waste, fraud, and abuse of US assistance funds for Afghanistan, as well as the sustainability and viability of the Afghan government and military ahead of the US withdrawal in 2021. John, thank you for joining us today.

SOPKO: Pleasure to be here.

7, 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117762>.

6. Oren Lieberman, Natasha Bertrand, and Jeremy Herb, “Watchdog report says Trump and Biden administration decisions drove collapse of Afghan security forces,” *CNN* (May 18, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/18/politics/afghanistan-watchdog-report/index.html>.

7. Michael Scharf is a co-dean of Case Western Reserve University School of Law and the Joseph C. Hostetler—BakerHostetler Professor of Law. He has written and published extensively in the area of international law. Michael P. Scharf, Case W. Reserve Univ. Sch. of Law, <https://case.edu/law/our-school/faculty-directory/michael-p-scharf> [<https://perma.cc/DX5Q-MRPH>].

8. *Talking Foreign Policy*, Case W. Reserve Univ. Sch. of Law, <https://case.edu/law/centers-institutes/cox-international-law-center/talking-foreign-policy>.

9. John Sopko is the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, appointed by President Obama on July 2, 2012. His experience includes more than thirty years in oversight and investigations, and more than twenty years on Capitol Hill. *John F. Sopko*, SIGAR, <https://www.sigar.mil/about/leadership/leadership.aspx?SSR=1&SubSSR=2&Sub2SSR=1&WP=IG%20SIGAR>.

SCHARF: And we are also joined by Dr. Shannon French,¹⁰ the Director of the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence at Case Western Reserve University. She was previously a professor at the US Naval Academy and was recently named the General Hugh Shelton Distinguished Chair in Ethics by the US Army Command and General Staff College Foundation. She is the author of the acclaimed book, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values, Past and Present*. It is great to have you back on *Talking Foreign Policy*, Shannon.

FRENCH: Great to be back, Michael.

SCHARF: And we are also happy to welcome back Dr. Paul Williams,¹¹ the president of the Public International Law & Policy Group, a Nobel Peace Prize-nominated NGO.¹² Paul has served as legal adviser in twenty peace negotiations and is the author of the recently published book, *Lawyering Peace*. Welcome back to *Talking Foreign Policy*, and this time Paul is actually in our studio in Cleveland.

WILLIAMS: Thank you, Michael. It's a pleasure to be back.

SCHARF: And finally, we are joined from West Virginia by Dr. Greg Noone.¹³ He's the director of Fairmont State University's National Security and Intelligence Program. Greg is a retired captain in the US Navy and has served as head of the International Law Branch in the Pentagon. Welcome to our show, Greg.

NOONE: Thank you for having me, Michael.

10. Shannon French is Case Western Reserve University's director of the Inamori Center for Ethics and Excellence. She is also a Professor in CWRU's Philosophy department. *Shannon French*, Case W. Reserve Univ. Sch. of Law, <https://philosophy.case.edu/faculty/shannon-french/>.

11. Paul Williams is a professor at American University Washington College of Law. He is also the president of PILPG, a Nobel Peace Prize nominated NGO that has provided legal counsel in a dozen peace negotiations over the past twenty-two years. *Paul Williams*, Am. Univ. Wash. College of Law, <https://www.wcl.american.edu/community/faculty/profile/pwilliams/bio> [https://perma.cc/ME9B-SEK9].

12. The Public International Law and Policy Group is a global pro bono law firm that provides free legal services for peace negotiations and post-conflict, war-crimes prosecution, and transitional justice issues. *Public International Law & Policy Group*, <https://www.publicinternationalallawandpolicygroup.org>.

13. Greg Noone is the director of the Fairmont State University National Security and Intelligence Program and an assistant professor of political science and law. Previously, he received a Special Act Award for his work in Afghanistan with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). *Dr. Gregory Noone*, Fairmont State Univ., <https://www.fairmontstate.edu/collegeofliberalarts/dr-gregory-noone>.

SCHARF: Let's start things off with Inspector General Sopko. This month, you filed a report to Congress about the current state of affairs in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Can you provide a summary of some of the highlights from your report?

SOPKO: Certainly, Mike. And to say things aren't great in Afghanistan would be an understatement. The situation was grim before the Taliban returned to power and has only gotten worse. So Afghans now face the highest levels of hunger in the world, and two-thirds are dependent on food aid.¹⁵ So, life is worse for Afghans right now, and particularly, in the midst of this humanitarian crisis, the Taliban have increased oppression of women and girls.¹⁶

SCHARF: So, let's provide some context to this, and I will ask retired Captain Greg Noone to take us back twenty years. Greg, why did the US invade Afghanistan in 2001? Who were we fighting? And who were our allies?

NOONE: Well, and of course all of our listeners know that it was a result of 9/11, but even before 9/11, one of our key allies in the region, the Northern Alliance—their leader, Massoud, was assassinated two days prior to 9/11.¹⁷ We were struck on two days later, and as a result of our ability to project self-defense through the UN charter¹⁸ and our NATO agreement,¹⁹ we then went to Afghanistan shortly thereafter and proceeded to “prosecute the war,” as we say in the military. Now, one of the things that we demanded right away from the Taliban was to turn over Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda members, destroy terrorist camps, and return any hostages they may have had. The Taliban started this kind of negotiation where they wanted proof that Osama bin Laden actually was behind 9/11, and then they offered to turn him over to a third party for trial. So, as a result, that

14. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction” (2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

15. *World Bank Survey: Living Conditions Remain Dire for the Afghan People*, World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/11/22/world-bank-survey-living-conditions-remain-dire-for-the-afghan-people>.

16. “Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to stay home; cover up in public,” UN News (May 7, 2022).

17. See generally Catherine Putz, “Ahmad Shah Massoud: An Afghan Napoleon,” *The Diplomat*, (Sept. 29, 2021) <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/ahmad-shah-massoud-an-afghan-napoleon/>.

18. U.N. Charter art. 51.

19. North Atlantic Treaty art. 5, Apr. 4, 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 U.N.T.S. 243.

ended up being a full-scale invasion with the US leading, and its NATO allies in support, along with the Northern Alliance.²⁰

SCHARF: And then let me bring Paul Williams into this. Paul, what was the endgame, the strategic goals? In other words: what was our twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan all about?

WILLIAMS: I think we're still trying to figure that out, Michael. We went in, as Greg noted, in order to hunt down Osama bin Laden, to destroy al Qaeda. For the first two years that was our goal, and then for the next eighteen, we drifted. I'll tell you a quick little story: I was down at the Air War College²¹ for a round table "Have a Think" about our Afghanistan policy in the early years of the Obama administration. There was a marine officer who very clearly explained his tactic of how he was going to go to the Helmand province.²² He was going to clear, and he was going to hold. And then I looked at the foreign policy official, and I said, "Great. And why is he clearing and holding?" No kidding, the answer was "President Obama's very smart. I'm sure he has a plan."

SCHARF: And Paul, just to follow up, what does clear and hold mean actually?

WILLIAMS: Well, essentially it was—and Greg can correct me if I'm wrong on this—a military tactic for the armed forces to go into an area, clear it of hostile forces, clear it of Taliban, hold it (at great risk) for something to then happen—for reconstruction, for democracy-building, for rule of law.²³ But what was shocking was that it wasn't clear why they were clearing and holding, what was our overall strategic objective. And it drifted for eighteen more years.

SCHARF: So then after these eighteen years, why did the US abruptly pull out of Afghanistan?

WILLIAMS: Because we lost.

SCHARF: And, abruptly, that's the way to go with these things?

20. See generally "The U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

21. "About Air War College," Air Univ., <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AWC/>.

22. "Factbox: Five facts about Afghanistan's Helmand province," *Reuters* (July 2, 2009), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-helmand-sb/factbox-five-facts-about-afghanistans-helmand-province-idUSTRE5611CW20090702>.

23. Michael O'Hanlon, "America's History of Counterinsurgency," Brookings Counter Insurgency and Pakistan Paper Series (No. 4), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/06_counterinsurgency_ohanlon.pdf.

WILLIAMS: Well, we can have a conversation about whether that's the way to go or not. But, we would have continued to drag on and on and on. We could've done it better, and we can talk about how we could've negotiated our surrender, how we could've negotiated our loss. Instead, we pretended that it was some sort of victory. We pretended we were holding over to the Afghans, and in fact we weren't prepared to do it the proper way.

SCHARF: Ok, so, a moment ago, John Sopko, the Inspector General, told us about the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. To summarize from his recent report: the Taliban are back in power. Nearly twenty million people in Afghanistan—almost half the population—are facing acute hunger. There are 3.5 million internally displaced Afghans, while 2.7 million Afghans are refugees outside the country. And meanwhile, the Taliban has ordered that all women must cover their faces in public and should only leave their homes in cases of necessity. They have even decreed that girls shall not have access to education above the sixth grade. Women are prohibited to drive, take public transport, or to hold jobs.²⁴ So, I'm going to turn to Shannon. Shannon, you're a military ethicist, you've worked at the Naval Academy. What must it be like for US and coalition troops who fought in Afghanistan to see the current state of the country, post-withdrawal?

FRENCH: Well, Michael, the word is, "traumatic." That's what it's like. It is very traumatic for those who fought there and for those who were involved in diplomatic roles and various NGO's and others as well.²⁵ And this has many layers to it. What we're seeing is a lot of what we call "moral injury,"²⁶ and *moral injury*, in broadest terms, comes from the sense of having betrayed your own values, often against your will in following authority. It also can come concurrently with feeling that leadership has betrayed you, if you think of how we look at the way that we withdrew and the people who are left behind. Also, those who were lost over the twenty years, and those who are left questioning, "What did they die for?," and was anything achieved. All of that leads to an absolute tsunami of moral injury and psychological trauma.

24. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

25. See generally William A. Galston, "Anger, betrayal, and humiliation: how veterans feel about the withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Brookings* (Nov. 12, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/11/12/anger-betrayal-and-humiliation-how-veterans-feel-about-the-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

26. Sonya B. Norman and Shira Maguen, *Moral Injury*, US Dept. of Veterans Affairs, https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp.

SCHARF: Wow. And Colin Powell used to talk about the “Pottery Barn Rule.”²⁷ I think he said, “You break it, you own it.” So, Shannon, as an ethicist, would you say the United States is morally responsible for the dismal state of affairs in Afghanistan?

FRENCH: Yes, we are, but of course there’s more to it than that. And the reason there’s more to it than that, as my colleagues already noted, is it isn’t as though Afghanistan wasn’t unbroken before 2001. When the Taliban took power in 1996, this was already an awful situation. You mentioned the plight of women and girls in particular. Under the Taliban, that has been a nightmare. Arguably, one of the painful aspects of this entire experience is that we brought hope. We brought the suggestion of a different future. We brought twenty years of saying, “We’re going to help you!” and in some cases actually succeeding in helping children and women and girls get different kinds of education and different kinds of experiences. We rebuilt some things and so forth. And then we left. And so, in some ways, hope is the cruelest gift of all.

SCHARF: Well Greg, besides our moral responsibility, from a national security perspective, why should we, as Americans, care about the situation Afghanistan today?

NOONE: Michael, that’s a great question, and allow me a moment to follow up on Shannon’s point. I was in Afghanistan in early 2003 as the US started talking about invading Iraq, and the Afghans I was working with all said to me, “Please, don’t invade Iraq, you’ll forget about us.” And the only thing I could do was look them in the eye and tell them, “You’re absolutely right.” Because the resources are going to go to Iraq, and they’re not going to stay here. And remember at that time, we were promising a Marshall Plan²⁸ for Afghanistan. So that idea of hope, from the national perspective, from a national security perspective, the United States values order in the international sphere, as opposed to Putin’s Russia that values chaos²⁹ and the communist Chinese government that pretends to follow

27. See generally Robert Siegel, “Powell’s Cautions on Iraq,” *NPR* (Apr. 20, 2004) <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1844476>.

28. “Marshall Plan, 1948,” US Dept of State Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/marshall-plan>.

29. See generally Arkady Ostrovsky, “Russia risks becoming ungovernable and descending into chaos,” *The Economist* (Nov. 18, 2022), <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2022/11/18/russia-risks-becoming-ungovernable-and-descending-into-chaos>.

rules but cheats on the rules.³⁰ So, order is in our national interest. That's why Americans should support international law and what happens out there around the world. And so having a country that's unstable, that has internal strife, that could be a place that could harbor terrorists, a place that could cause a flow of refugees. Those are destabilizing events. And eventually that will push into an area that causes problems for the US national security interest.

SCHARF: All right, so Greg has made the case on why we should continue to care about Afghanistan, maybe why we should continue to be involved in Afghanistan. Paul, do you agree with that?

WILLIAMS: Well I think we need to learn the lessons of what happened in Afghanistan, because we can care about it, we can feel the sense of moral responsibility, but, quite frankly, Michael, there's very little we can do about it. We gave the Afghans two million dollars, twenty years of an American security umbrella, and there was no measurable change in the outcome of the democratic, anti-corrupt, rule-of-law based society.³¹ So, yeah sure, we can care about it, but we have no ability to impact it anymore. We should, however, learn the lessons when we think about what comes next in Syria, what comes next in Sudan, what comes next in Ukraine, because we cannot make the same fatal mistakes in those territories and countries that we made in Afghanistan.

SCHARF: Well, that's a great time for us to take a short break. When we return, we'll talk about what went right and what went wrong in Afghanistan. . . . So stay with us.

[STATION BREAK]

SCHARF: Welcome back to *Talking Foreign Policy*, brought to you by Case Western Reserve University and Ideastream Public Media. I'm Michael Scharf, Dean of Case Western Reserve University School of Law. I'm joined today by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan—John Sopko; the president of the Public International Law and Policy Group—that's Paul Williams; the director of the Inamori International Center for Ethics—that's

30. See generally "China is becoming more assertive in international legal disputes, *The Economist* (Sept. 18, 2021), <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/09/18/china-is-becoming-more-assertive-in-international-legal-disputes>.

31. See generally Carter Malkasian, "What America Didn't Understand About Its Longest War," *Politico* (July 6, 2021) <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/06/afghanistan-war-malkasian-book-excerpt-497843>.

Shannon French; and the former head of the Pentagon's International Law Branch—retired Navy Captain Greg Noone. We're talking today about the Afghanistan mess. There's not other way to say it. And in this segment of our show, I'd like to focus the discussion on what went right and what went wrong for the United States in Afghanistan. So, let me begin with Inspector General Sopko. You have submitted at least a dozen "Lessons Learned Reports" to Congress. Can you provide us a summary of the top three lessons from your most recent reports?

SOPKO: I'll try to, Mike. It's ironic, a week before the Afghan government collapsed, we issued a report entitled "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction" because that was close to the twentieth anniversary.³² And what we highlighted—major problems or lessons you could say—were that we had an inability on the US government's side to develop a coherent twenty-year strategy. We also had an inability to understand, and to be honest about, how long that mission would take. I think we said we were turning the corner so many times, we turned around like a top. The third issue was that we failed to insure that the things we were spending tens of billions of dollars on, like the Afghan military, would be sustainable when we departed, which they were not. And lastly, we could not and did not account for the impact of the ongoing violence and its impact. And I shouldn't say the last, but really the biggest issue, I think, was the fact that we totally ignored the corruption in Afghanistan and how that impacted our ability to convince the average Afghan that we were actually doing something good for them. And that's helped the Taliban to recruit when they saw all of the corruption.

SCHARF: I think it's really helpful the way you packaged that in a way that was so economical and easy to understand. And it's tempting to just dismiss Afghanistan as a total policy failure. But it's not that simple, I think. So John, can you tell us about some of the successes in the US involvement in Afghanistan?

SOPKO: I mean, there were a number of successes, and I'm glad you're highlighting that. But, I think, at some point you should expect some successes because we were throwing so much money at the problem. Remember, we spent more money in Afghanistan on reconstruction than we did on the entire Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe.

SCHARF: And how much would that have been?

32. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

SOPKO: 146 billion, I think the Marshall Plan was way less than that in Europe. So, obviously some of that stuck—it's like throwing spaghetti on a wall; some of it stuck. Our help for women and girls was an improvement. That was a success. The civil society development was a success. The development of a free and independent press was a success. We increased the literacy rates.³³ We decreased the child mortality rates. We increased the per capita GDP in Afghanistan. But the problem is, basically, all of those successes have disappeared.

SCHARF: So Paul, Afghanistan has been called a bipartisan debacle. What do you consider were the major mistakes of each the administrations, from Bush to Biden?

WILLIAMS: Well, Michael, I think that there were two consistent mistakes all the way through. President Bush had it right, initially—antiterrorism, hunting down al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. Then he drifted into believing his own propaganda. We were democratizing Afghanistan, we were making strides, we were having success with the rule of law. We weren't. It was propaganda. And that got picked up by Obama and then Trump, and then Biden, I think, saw it for what it was and pulled the plug. The other failure is that I think we wanted more than the Afghan people. We did what we always do. We found the 5% or the 10% of the population that was like-minded with us and our allies, and we created an echo chamber, and amplified it. And we weren't in touch with the other 90% of the population, which apparently weren't that committed to these democratic and rule-of-law successes, or, at least, our version of how one might have rule of law.³⁴ So, I'm not surprised that it collapsed. We threw a lot of spaghetti at the wall; I don't think any of it stuck.

SCHARF: And I guess some of the things that we did were really making the matter worse. And I have in mind during the Bush Administration, when we instituted the practice of waterboarding Afghan detainees in order to try and find information to prevent the next 9/11.³⁵ So, let me ask Greg, our military expert, and Shannon, our ethicist. How did that

33. "Literacy rate in Afghanistan increased to 43 per cent," *UNESCO* (March 15, 2020) <https://uil.unesco.org/interview-literacy-rate-afghanistan-increased-43-cent>.

34. Shadi Hamid, "Americans never understood Afghanistan like the Taliban did," *Brookings* (Aug. 23, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/americans-never-understood-afghanistan-like-the-taliban-did/>.

35. Eric Weiner, "Waterboarding: A Tortured History," *NPR* (Nov. 3, 2007) <https://www.npr.org/2007/11/03/15886834/waterboarding-a-tortured-history>.

policy of waterboarding affect our mission in Afghanistan? Greg, do you want to start?

NOONE: Yeah, sure. I look forward to Shannon's answer on this as well, but I think she'll agree with me. Not only is torture immoral, illegal, unethical . . . it doesn't work. So from a pragmatic standpoint, you're applying pressure to people to try to derive certain information, and you're not going to get that information. What you're going to get back is information that people think you want to hear so you'll stop putting them in a painful situation. And really, what it ends up doing, aside from the horrors of that, it then pushes the fence-sitters. Paul just gave percentages of where the Afghan population may or may not have been, but the fact of the matter is there always a significant number of fence-sitters, and they're looking at both sides, and they're trying to figure out which way they should go. So, you torture my uncle, and he comes home and tells the family about it. Well, guess which side we're going to pick after that. The side that tortured him? Or the side that's saying we need to get rid of these people and get our country back. So, it doesn't work is the bottom line, and from a pragmatic standpoint. Shannon?

FRENCH: Well, Greg, I agree with you 100%. It is indeed not just illegal but unethical. And the other point, which you made, is that it's a propaganda boon for our enemies. And not only the enemies that we're fighting in whichever conflict in which we do the act, but obviously this spreads around the world, and it damages our moral authority. It damages trust, not only, again, with enemies, but also amongst allies. And just overall erodes our legitimacy.

SCHARF: So Greg, let me turn and ask you about the role of Pakistan in the Afghan conflict? So, ultimately, was Pakistan an ally or a foe?

NOONE: Well, we like to say Pakistan is a "frenemy." They're both a friend and an enemy. Pakistan is supposedly a major non-NATO ally, but the reality of it is that Pakistan created the Taliban.³⁶ The Pakistani intelligence services are what actually makes the Taliban go. And part of this is the neighborhood they live in. Pakistan wakes up every day thinking they're going to go to war with India,³⁷ so they want their back door, being

36. See generally Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "Pakistan's Support for the Taliban: What to Know," *Council on Foreign Relations* (Aug. 21, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/article/pakistans-support-taliban-what-know>.

37. "Conflict Between India and Pakistan," *Council on Foreign Relations* (Updated May 12,

Afghanistan, run by people that they trust, that they're funding, that they're on the same page with. So, the fact of the matter is, they nurtured the Taliban, they've supported them, they've provided them sanctuary. This really impacted our ability to have any type of effective counter insurgency when people could bounce back and forth over the border. And at the end of the day, where was Osama bin Laden living for years? He was living just down the street from Pakistan's version of West Point.³⁸ So, there's a reason why we couldn't tell Pakistan when we were conducting the mission to go get bin Laden, because we really cannot trust them in this area.

SCHARF: Shannon, as a military expert about ethics and morality, let me ask you about complaints of US Soldiers that they were trained to fight and then ordered to nation-build—something that was outside their expertise. Is that a fair criticism?

FRENCH: I'm a bit on the fence on this one, because, in reality our troops, across the various branches, are really quite flexible—there is a fair amount of agility and ability to learn different skills even on the fly. And we've shown that historically. So, I'm not overly sympathetic to the argument that they can't switch roles back and forth, because they have, and they do. The bigger problem for me, and I've heard this certainly amongst my friends in the military, is that, as was mentioned earlier, the resources and the focus shifted to Iraq. And when that happened, this sense that you're supposed to be doing nation-building, but you're not our priority anymore, and you can't count from one moment to the next on that support coming back at any point—and we know it didn't—that was what caused more frustration.

SCHARF: And then, John, you mentioned how much we spent. You said it was more than the Marshall Plan, and that was the plan that rebuilt Europe after World War II, so we're talking billion and billions of dollars.³⁹ Your office was created to combat the waste and fraud in the administration of the US-funded programs in Afghanistan. How much waste and fraud did you uncover?

2022), <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>.

38. Tara Kibler, "Secrets of the Serial Set: The Killing of Osama bin Laden," *Heinonline Blog* (May 20, 2020) <https://home.heinonline.org/blog/2020/05/secrets-of-the-serial-set-the-killing-of-osama-bin-laden/>.

39. Peter Coy, "Afghanistan Has Cost the U.S. More Than the Marshall Plan," *Bloomberg* (July 31, 2014), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-31/afghanistan-has-cost-the-u-dot-s-dot-more-than-the-marshall-plan>.

SOPKO: Well, we uncovered quite a bit, Mike. And we did a rather intensive look at every report we issued, every indictment we issued, in a timeframe of 2008 to I believe it was 2019. And after this analysis, we determined about thirty percent, and at that time and that period that was only \$63 billion, but that's what we determined was subject to waste, fraud, or abuse.⁴⁰ We can extrapolate from there, but probably about thirty percent of the money we spent on reconstruction was wasted.

SCHARF: And I've read in your reports the theory of the absorption principle. Can you tell us about that?

SOPKO: The *absorption rate* is a term used in development circles, and it talks about how much money you can give to a country to assist it in comparison to the GDP before that money is probably wasted. Depending on the development of the individual country, it goes anywhere from fifteen to thirty percent. We discovered that when we looked at that and talked to development experts that most of the time we were in Afghanistan, the United States alone was giving more than 100% of the GDP of Afghanistan.⁴¹ What that basically means is the money probably was wasted. And again, regarding absorption rate, the best way—as some scholar described it to me—was to picture a sponge in your kitchen sink. You pour water into it, and it holds the water but all of a sudden it hits a certain point where the water just flows out and that flowing out of the water is basically money that could be wasted in Afghanistan.

SCHARF: So just to give some context to that, how does the thirty percent rate of fraud and abuse compare with the US involvement in other conflicts where we spent a lot of aid money like World War II, Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq?

SOPKO: I would like to answer that question, but I don't think anybody has ever studied that. I know we were asked to do it for Congress, and it was very labor intensive. I know congressmen asked the DoD, State, and AIGs to do it, and as far as I know they never even did it for Afghanistan. I don't think anybody has ever done it for World War II, Korea, Iraq, or Vietnam, so we don't have an answer. But I don't think Afghanistan is an outlier, and probably you have similar rates in those other countries also.

SCHARF: And then John, from your perspective as special inspector general, how badly would you say corruption in the Afghan government undermined the US mission in Afghanistan?

40. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

41. *Id.*

SOPKO: Mike, that's a good question, and I alluded to it before. We have a tendency to view corruption as just a criminal justice or law enforcement issue. It is not. It is a national security issue, and what we had in Afghanistan was that we created so many corrupt players who were more than just corrupt players. They became the government. They became the oligarchs and the warlords who were abusing the system.⁴² The average Afghan basically preferred the Taliban to the corrupt judges, police, and whatever. We sent out there, and so we lost the support and the Afghan government, the central government, lost support to the Taliban. The corruption and the human rights abuses that these oligarchs and warlords in Afghanistan committed basically were used by the Taliban as a recruiting tool, and it was very successful. So at the end you didn't have people who wanted to fight for the Afghan government because it was so bad.⁴³

SCHARF: Wow. I hear a theme really emerging here. Instead of winning over hearts and minds, we seem to have done everything possible to lose hearts and minds. Paul, let me then switch over to the issue of the peace negotiations. You have been counsel in over twenty peace negotiations. From your perspective, what was wrong with the Doha agreement and the negotiations?⁴⁴ That's the agreement that was signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban in February 2020.

WILLIAMS: Well Michael, I think the fundamental flaws of both the negotiations and the agreement were that they were token. We pretended to have negotiations about a future sustainable Afghanistan where the Taliban would play a role, and we reached an agreement that provided for the Taliban to make a number of commitments that they were never going to abide by. We had an agreement for an intra-Afghan dialogue that the Taliban were never going to consent to and we did not actually really care about. We had lost the war, we wanted to get out, but we pretended that there was somehow an equilibrium, if not a success, and that we had built a nation and we were going to make some room for the Taliban to join into

42. JoAnne Allen, "U.S. Indirectly Funding Afghan Warlords: House Report," *Reuters* (June 22, 2010), <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-afghanistan-contract-warlords-idCATRE65L0SK20100622>.

43. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

44. Julian Borger, Emma Graham-Harrison, Akhtar Mohammad Makoi, and Dan Sabbagh, "U.S. and Taliban Sign Deal to Withdraw American Troops from Afghanistan," *The Guardian* (Feb. 29, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/29/us-taliban-sign-peace-agreement-afghanistan-war>.

that national project while we eased our way out. The Taliban saw right through this. I'm not sure we saw right through it. I'm not sure that the military fully grasped the dire straits of the failed nation that we attempted to build or of the military circumstances on the ground and certainly the Trump administration and the State Department didn't grasp that and so when it came time to implement it, the security infrastructure collapsed, and we saw what happened with the Taliban filling that immediate vacuum.⁴⁵

SCHARF: And then John, I know that you issued reports before our withdrawal warning about some of the mistakes you could make in pulling out too quickly. What mistakes ultimately were made in the US withdrawal? Was it inevitable that the government would fall and that the Taliban would take over? What could we have done differently? And we only have a minute for you before the next break.

SOPKO: Well, I would quickly say it became almost inevitable. The warning was that the military was basically hollow. The government was not supported by the people, and we go in great depth in some of our reports, but basically once the troops left, they needed close air support.⁴⁶ The Afghan government was the only one that could provide that, and we took the contractors with it. And we predicted and the Air Force predicted that within a matter of months, the Afghan Air Force would collapse. And once that happened, it was over.

SCHARF: And it wasn't even a matter of months, was it?

WILLIAMS: Well, our prediction came in January and so in August by the time the contractors left, it was over.

SCHARF: Well, it's time for another short break. When we return, we'll talk about the lessons learned from the Afghanistan experience. We'll be back in a moment.

[STATION BREAK]

SCHARF: This is Michael Scharf, and we're back with *Talking Foreign Policy*. I am joined today by experts in the continuing crisis in Afghanistan. In this

45. Lolita Baldor, "Watchdog: U.S. Troop Pullout was Key Factor in Taliban Success" *Associated Press* (May 21, 2022, 11:14 PM), <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-biden-government-and-politics-donald-trump-7cef514c6cc96848f61a9e8b7fcdf263>.

46. Lynne O'Donnel, "Afghan Air Force Could be Grounded After U.S. Pullout," *Foreign Policy* (June 14, 2021, 2:05 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/14/afghan-air-force-us-withdrawal-taliban/>.

final segment, we're going to be discussing the lessons learned and their application to US involvement in other conflicts in the future. Paul Williams, let's begin with you. After nearly two decades of fighting and more than two trillion in US taxpayer funds, after the death of more than 6,000 Americans and 100,000 Afghans, what did we gain from our war in Afghanistan?

WILLIAMS: Michael, we gained an understanding that the United States no longer knows how to do nation-building and maybe should no longer attempt to do nation-building. I know that is not actually your question, but it is something I wanted to say, so I'm going to use that question for it. We spend trillions of dollars on nation-building on a system that simply does not work. We need to get out of that business or develop a new paradigm for what we are going to do in Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine. We cannot use the Iraq or the Afghanistan model. It does not work.

SCHARF: Well, let me just follow up, and maybe I'll turn to Greg Noone about this. We did kill Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda. And I think it seems to me that we knocked al Qaeda on its butt. Greg, are we stronger today versus al Qaeda than we were twenty years ago?

NOONE: The greatest legal answer ever is "it depends," right? The fact of the matter is al Qaeda is dispersed, but you have other groups that are taking its place either in the kind of remnants of al Qaeda or new organizations.⁴⁷ So there's always going to be organizations out there like that. You mentioned killing bin Laden. I want to go back to something that Shannon and I talked about. We found bin Laden through good old interrogation techniques. We did not find him through the use of torture.⁴⁸ The fact of the matter is we kept interviewing people and interrogating people and there was one individual's name that kept coming up. And everybody got really squirrely around and that name came up and that was the courier and the courier was the connection to where bin Laden was in an isolated location without even internet and any phone service. So I do want to tie that in there that despite some of the things that were done over the course of the war, at the end of the day it was good old-fashioned interrogation that we used to be able to catch the guy that we wanted to catch the most.

47. Brian Jenkins, "Five Years After the Death of Osama bin Laden, Is the World Safer?," *RAND* (May 2, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/05/five-years-after-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden-is-the.html>.

48. Zack Beauchamp, "The Senate Report Proves Once and For All that Torture Didn't Lead Us to Osama bin Laden," *Vox*, (Dec. 9, 2014, 3:10 PM), <https://www.vox.com/2014/12/9/7361091/cia-torture-bin-laden>.

SCHARF: And I guess what you're saying, Greg, is that we are no better off versus al Qaeda than we would have been had we not invaded Afghanistan.

NOONE: I think there are different ways that we could have undertaken this, and I think Iraq is the real mistake, because that took our eye off the ball. If we were honest about this Marshall Plan idea for Afghanistan, I think we could be in a different place. But once you inserted a full-scale invasion for Iraq for a guy who lives in palaces—guys who live in palaces are always easier to catch than guys who live in caves—and the fact of the matter is we should have engaged in more small-scale operations like we did in in the Philippines down in Jolo⁴⁹ that were much more effective against terrorist organizations than a full-scale standing army clear and hold operations type event.

SCHARF: All right, so everybody's heard that we've pulled out. However, the international community is continuing to provide humanitarian aid to people in Afghanistan to meet their shelter, sanitation, their nutritional, and medical needs. But I assume we're not giving any more money now that we pulled out. Is that right, Inspector General Sopko?

SOPKO: You're wrong. We are giving money. We have provided close to eight billion since the Taliban took over. Now, some of it, about two billion, is humanitarian. Some is this \$3.5 billion that the Afghan government had at the Federal Reserve, which has now been put into a fund to recapitalize the central bank without giving any assistance to the Taliban, which sounds kind of difficult to do since the Taliban control the Central Bank.⁵⁰ And then other money to assist the Afghans who fled. But the important thing is—you talked about the international community. You have to remember we provide most of the funding to the international community, which is kind of ironic. So there is a lot of money being spent by the US government to assist the Afghans, not the Afghan government. You have to be careful about that. We are not supposed to be giving any money to the Taliban but we assume some of it is probably sneaking through.

SCHARF: But we have heard today that the Taliban has totally failed to live up to any of its promises on human rights and counterterrorism back in those

49. Patrick Johnson, Gillian Oak, and Linda Robinson, U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines: 2001–2014, RAND (2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1236.html.

50. Jeff Stein, "Biden Aides Seek to Unlock Afghan Reserves Without Enriching Taliban," *Washington Post* (June 28, 2022, 10:27 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2022/06/28/taliban-afghanistan-white-house-money/>.

Doha Agreements. So in light of that, John, do you think we should just cut off our assistance and completely disengage from Afghanistan altogether?

SOPKO: That's a very good question but unfortunately—and I don't mean to dodge it, Mike—but we, as IGs, don't do policy. We do process because if we promote a policy, we can't then later go in and assess it or audit it or something. So historically, no IG can do policy. We raised that question in our last quarterly report because we are shipping money in there, and we do know that some of it is going to the Taliban, and we do know that the Taliban is utilizing it both domestically and internationally—the humanitarian assistance—to get better approval ratings among their people. I don't know the answer to that, and that is a big question. That is something the president and Congress really need to look at.

SCHARF: So, I have to say, John, you are about the most candid official I have ever had on this show or met publicly. But let me turn to Paul because your NGO has the word *policy*, in it so you are not afraid to talk policy. What would your answer be? Should we cut off the aid?

WILLIAMS: Michael, we have to be very concerned about continuing the failures of our earlier engagement for the last two decades, and we may be doing that by continuing the assistance. Are we funding a Taliban success story? We funded it, in an odd way, by supporting Kabul over the local governors and local agencies and entities and that, as John noted, pushed people towards the Taliban. Now, the Taliban basically walked into Kabul. They are doing these outrageous actions vis-à-vis the women and the girls, and no one really seems to care except for the women and the girls.⁵¹ And if we are going to fund six billion—if that was what it was—for the Taliban, they are going to be successful. That will undermine our effort to promote democracy and values that we care about in the neighborhood and around the globe.

SCHARF: I see Shannon does care, so I am going to ask you this question. Shannon, the world has rallied to support the Ukrainian people in their struggle against Russia's illegal invasion and occupation. Supporting the Afghan people's current struggle against the Taliban is obviously more complicated. What kinds of support, Shannon, do you think could make a difference?

51. "Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity," *Human Rights Watch* (Jan. 18, 2022, 12:01 AM), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity>.

FRENCH: The key word that Paul used a minute ago is *local*. One of the many ways to describe the mistakes that we have made is by focusing on anything central because anything central is tied up with the Taliban. It is tied up with corruption. The only kind of help that is going to do any good, and the only kind of engagement that is going to be ethical at this stage is at the very local level where we are helping groups that are still trying to build on the small gains that remain.

SCHARF: All right, so Greg, let me turn to you. Are the women in Afghanistan protesting the draconian restrictions of their rights that have been imposed by the Taliban government? I haven't seen anything on the news, but it could be that the Taliban is just blocking us from seeing it. What is your take on that?

NOONE: Protests are becoming rarer and rarer since the Taliban returned to power, highlighted by violence, highlighted by torture and abuse.⁵² When people are in custody, and particularly for women, a social stigma comes with doing something like that. I will say this, going back to the last two answers, I think if the American people knew that eight billion dollars was going to the Taliban, they would lose their minds.

SCHARF: Well, Greg, they are hearing it now on *Talking Foreign Policy*, so the cat's out of the bag.

NOONE: Yeah, and I hope the wider listening audience hears that because the fact of the matter is that Shannon's points are excellent ones about working locally but that's not how the Taliban works. I mean the Taliban is going to have their fingers in every pot. Unfortunately, in an environment like that, there's a lot of grease payments that go around extending the culture of corruption, which has such a pernicious and negative effect on any development. And we would be just pouring in good money after bad money after good or however the phrase goes. And to Paul's point, we are just continuing this failure.

SCHARF: What I suppose what you are saying also is that the situation in Afghanistan is qualitatively different than the situation, for example, in Iran. We are seeing in Iran and Saudi Arabia and in other countries throughout the Middle East this wave of women rising up and standing up against this

52. Washida Amiri, "Women, Protest and Power—Confronting the Taliban," *Amnesty International* (Mar. 7, 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2023/03/women-protest-and-power-confronting-the-taliban/>.

anti-woman type of draconian measures that these countries have. So let me turn to Shannon. Do you think that we are seeing something larger here that might actually bleed over to Afghanistan? Are we on the cusp of a global rejection of extreme interpretations of Islam that deny women autonomy? Could this be sort of like the Arab Spring?

FRENCH: Well, I brought up hope in a negative way previously. Here, I am going to have a bit of hope. I would love to see that be the case, obviously, and I do think that to the degree that the word gets out from country to country, it certainly does strengthen these movements to know that they are not alone and that this is happening in countries around the world. One of the biggest challenges, though, and this is something that we have to confront, is that those of us in the West who would love to be very supportive of the idea of this kind of change for women's rights cannot do so in a way that makes it look as though the West is the driving force. That only undermines these women who are working so hard in their countries for this kind of change and puts them at greater risk and greater danger. We cannot in any way be seen to be instigating any of it or pushing it from behind. All we can do is try to lift their voices.

SCHARF: I think the most distressing thing about this conversation is that I am left with the view that there really is not much we can do to help right the situation in Afghanistan and that it continues to get worse and worse. So, I suppose the lessons learned are best used for other situations around the world. And in the last few minutes, what I would like to do is have each of the panelists tell us what you think the lessons are from Afghanistan for US involvement and other current conflicts such as Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar. And I am going to start out with Inspector General Sopko. Do you think that we should be creating a special Inspector General for Ukraine?

SOPKO: I personally think we should, because we have had a success, I think, with Iraq, with the SIGIR, the Special IG for Iraq Reconstruction, and I think without tooting my own horn, with Afghanistan.⁵³ It is set up to focus on a lot of money being spent in a country in a war zone and you need to have support and oversight there immediately. And, being a special IG, you go out of business at some point, but you are mainly focused on

53. Stuart Bowen et al., "Learning From Iraq: A Final Report From the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction," Defense Tactical Information Center (Mar 2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA587236.pdf>.

that one country. And I think that is helpful, and I know there's a lot of similarities between Ukraine and Afghanistan. There's a lot of dissimilarities. and I do not want to say Afghanistan and Ukraine are the same, but we are pouring a tremendous amount of money very quickly into Ukraine. I think we have poured in about \$113 billion to Ukraine in one year, and at that pace I think after eighteen months we will spend more money in Ukraine than we did in all of Afghanistan for twenty years.⁵⁴ So you've gotta focus on it and the problem of spending too much too quickly with too little oversight is something that should be sending red or orange lights blinking somewhere in the Pentagon and in Congress.

SCHARF: I am actually really surprised to hear that we do not have an Inspector General for Ukraine given how much money that we are spending there. Let me turn it to Greg Noone. What is the lesson learned in your mind?

NOONE: I think the lesson is that we cannot abandon our allies in the field. And if you do, the next time you need allies, you may not have any. And what I am specifically talking about with respect to Afghanistan is the debt that we owe to the interpreters and the fixers and people that stepped up and joined us when we asked people to step up and join us.⁵⁵ It does not mean blindly, mindlessly continuing failed policy but you have to make sure that you are taking care of the people that that have stepped in and agreed to be on your side.

SCHARF: Shannon French, what is your lesson learned?

FRENCH: Well, this won't shock you coming from an ethicist, Michael, but we need to be consistent in making our actions match our values, and that means don't keep making deals with devils. We don't want to continuously undermine our own policies and our own goals by compromises that compromise us and what we are supposed to stand for. So that would be a core point. I would also just want to echo something that my colleagues have all said in one way or another and that this point about focus. I too keep coming back to 2003 and the invasion of Iraq and wonder what the storyline would have been with Afghanistan if the invasion in 2003 had

54. Louis Jacobson, "One Year into Russia's War in Ukraine: A Look at U.S. Aid, and Why the U.S. is Involved," *Politifact* (Feb. 23, 2023), <https://www.politifact.com/article/2023/feb/23/one-year-into-russias-war-in-ukraine-a-look-at-us/>.

55. Jessica Donati, "Majority of Interpreters, Other U.S. Visa Applicants Were Left Behind in Afghanistan," *Washington Post* (Sept. 1, 2021, 4:07 PM), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/majority-of-interpreters-other-u-s-visa-applicants-were-left-behind-in-afghanistan-official-says-11630513321>.

not happened. And as I look at that, I think again with Ukraine, with all these other conflicts that we have referenced, if we take our eye off the ball, if we allow our focus to shift as too often we do, then I think we are going to reap some more bad news.

SCHARF: And Paul Williams, I am going to give you the last word.

WILLIAMS: Well, Michael, we have to return to American foreign policy driven by our own strategic interests. What we learned from Afghanistan is that we asked men and women to risk their lives. Thousands died, tens of thousands were injured for things that were not necessarily in our strategic interest.⁵⁶ We had lost the focus. Sure, rule of law, economic growth, education are all very important in Afghanistan. Why was that an American strategic interest? So when we look at Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, and we start to develop these additional Marshall Plans or deploying American troops, we need to do it only for things that are in America's strategic interest. I am not sure we know what is in our strategic interest in these countries. We have more clarity in Ukraine which, I think, is one reason why there is such an investment of time, energy, weapons, and resources.⁵⁷ But until we can have a clear-eyed assessment of why we are putting these human and financial resources on the ground and risking the lives of our soldiers like we did in Afghanistan, we are going to continue to fail and not succeed where we must if we want to be able to provide a world that we dream of and hope for.

SCHARF: All right, well, it is time to bring our program to a close, and I would like to thank our experts for being with us today and helping us make sense of the crisis in Afghanistan and the implications for the future. It is pretty bleak, I have to tell you. And I think things are just going to get worse and it is going to tug at our heartstrings, but this panel of experts does not think that there is all that much more the United States can be doing. And in fact maybe there is less. We should not be pouring in financial aid continuously to a situation where the Taliban controls the purse strings. So Mr. John Sopko, Dr. Shannon French, Dr. Paul Williams, and Dr. Greg Noone, thank you all for providing your insights about this important topic. I am Michael Scharf, and you have been listening to *Talking Foreign Policy*.

56. Ellen Knickmeyer, "Costs of the Afghanistan War, in Lives and Dollars," *Associated Press* (Aug. 17, 2021, 4:12 AM), <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>.

57. Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, "How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent to Ukraine? Here are Six Charts," *Council on Foreign Relations* (Feb. 22, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts>.