



Afghanistan: Key Facts Missing from the Media | Part 3/3

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acTVism Munich (acTV): After the terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, the US quickly followed with military action. Later, in the course of the war, the US shifted its fight against the Taliban. Can you assess the US tenure in Afghanistan from the Bush administration to that of Biden?

Peter Kuznick: Many people have commented that the United States did not fight one war in Afghanistan, the United States fought 21-year wars in Afghanistan. The United States did not have a strategy, it basically did not know what the fuck it was doing over there. We wanted to go there initially to get al-Qaeda after 9/11, but most of al-Qaeda escaped very, very quickly. They got out of Tora Bora. Rumsfeld had this high tech approach, he didn't want to put a lot of boots on the ground and they let the al-Qaeda leaders escape. Eventually, there are only going to be a hundred al-Qaeda- some estimates had it down to 30 to 50 al-Qaeda left in the country. One expert at West Point estimated the US was spending 1.5 Billion dollars a year for every member of al-Qaeda still in the country. That was the absurdity of US policy. So if the goal was to get al-Qaeda, if the goal was to get bin Laden- they finally do get bin Laden, but he's not in Afghanistan, he is in Pakistan. So the US didn't know what it was doing there. After eight years of Bush the US was still losing ground to the Taliban, so the US shifted from getting al-Qaeda to getting the Taliban, even though the official 9/11 report indicates that Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, was opposed to the attacks that bin Laden was conducting against the United States. The US still decided it had to then get the Taliban or support the government that we put in place. Now, that's where you get into the problems. Karzai and the people around him created a government that was so inept, so corrupt, so riddled with problems that the Americans could not solve it. You know, the Karzai government would come in second on the corruption index next to Somalia. So Somalia is considered the most corrupt country in the world. The Afghan government under Karzai was considered the second most corrupt country in the world. And look what we were doing. So we decide we've got to recruit an Afghan army. We've got to recruit Afghan local police, Afghan National Army, Afghan local police. And we're dealing with a country in which the

situation was just terrific, terrible to begin with. So they estimate that the desertion rate among the military and the police was 30 percent a year, 30 percent. The people they were recruiting, about 10 percent of them, were illiterate. So we're dealing with an army which 90 percent of the people coming into it are not even literate. Now we're dealing with, I mean, these people were just not very educated, in the barracks where they were living. They would tear the sinks out of the walls and use them to wash their feet before the prayer services. They would put the water in the sink on the floor after they tore it out of the wall, they would make fires on the floors of the barracks. I mean, it was an army in which many of the leaders had young boys as sex slaves. It was a process called Bacha Bazi, I think it was called. And this was common knowledge. So what we're dealing with there and on top of that, the level of corruption was just mind boggling. When the US went in there in 2001, there was almost no opium production. Within a year or a few years there is tens of thousands of tonnes of opium production each year. The opium production accounted for 40 to 50 percent of the economy in Afghanistan. The internal economy generated a gross domestic product of a couple of billion dollars a year at a time when the government was spending 14 to 16 billion dollars a year. So all the money was coming in from the outside, all the control. And Karzai was sitting on top of this nest of corruption. When the former vice president left the country to go to the United Arab Emirates, he was picked up, this man making a few hundred dollars a week, was picked up with 52 million dollars in his possession. Karzai's half brother, right in Kandahar was, I mean the level of corruption there was just stunning. They would do things, for example, the Taliban would alert a local contractor not to build a bridge in that area. And the contractor said to them, well, let me build the bridge and get paid and then you can blow it up. And that's exactly what happened. We were paying the Taliban basically to allow free reign of the trucks, otherwise they would be stopped and blown up. So the level of corruption, the US was funding both sides in this war from the very beginning. And so under Bush, Bush's attention quickly shifted to Iraq, which is where he was interested in all along. But Obama comes in there and Obama is not incompetent ignoramus like Bush. Obama was a competent ignoramus, unfortunately, but he wasn't an ignoramus, he knew what he was getting into. During the campaign he said, I don't oppose wars, I just hate dumb wars. And to him, the dumb war was Iraq. So Obama's strategy was to get out of Iraq so we could focus more on Afghanistan. That was a mistake. Obama at the start of his presidency called nine very, very prominent presidential historians to Washington to give him advice. And they had dinner and they went around advising him and they told him, don't get bogged down in Afghanistan. Don't do what Lyndon Johnson did in Vietnam. But Obama said he wanted to meet with them on a regular basis and he asked them not to go public with this. Finally, Garry Wills from Northwestern went public with what went on at the meeting. He said at the end of the meeting, Obama asked for their final advice. They went around the room and then Garry Wills said, when it came to my turn, he said, I agree with the others. Don't get bogged down in Afghanistan. It will destroy you. And Obama heard it. And what does he do? He goes in there and he immediately increases the troop levels by 40000, for about 34000 to 74000 approximately. And then there's the big debate about what they want to do from there. And so listening to McChrystal, Petraeus, Gates and Hillary Clinton, they're getting this advice, they ask the military and Leon Panetta says to him, you can't ask for advice from the military and then reject their advice. Obama asked for a range of options but they came back to him with that 40000 troop increase. Obama said to them I want more options. He was being pushed by Biden and by Lute and others not to go along with this 40000 troop increase. What that meant and entailed was nation building on top of just the counterinsurgency operation. Biden said let's limit it to 20000 troops and forget the nation building, let's just train the Afghans to take

over and get out as quickly as possible. Obama might have agreed with that privately, but he went along with the hawks who wanted the big troop increase. He finally says, well, the least I can get away with is 30000. And so that's when they had the additional 30000. So Obama effectively triples the number of troops that were there when he took over. He initially started to say, well, hopefully we'll be out by 2011. Then in 2014, he announced, we will be out by 2016, then he backs down again, caves into the military as he does over and over again and says, well, we'll have 5500 when we leave. They almost double that number by the time the US leaves. So it's a disaster. But the situation there, the other part of this policy under McChrystal and Petraeus was to focus more on Pakistan. The idea was that the Taliban had a safe haven in Pakistan, that we can never defeat them in Afghanistan. And what we do is we have a massive increase in drone attacks. So Obama loves drones, that was his signature contribution to American military history, this tremendous increase in drones. So you've got what Bush does in the beginning. From the very beginning, Bush goes in there and he says, round them up. And so he suspends the rules of war. Initially you've got to have battlefield hearings to differentiate between combatants and civilians, which throws that out. He throws out the Geneva Convention. He says that these are not prisoners of war, they're unlawful enemy combatants. And he starts rounding them up, paying people this bounty for rounding people up, so they were turning in anybody to get their hands on, just to get more money from the United States, many of whom were innocent. But they were not being given trials to determine their innocence. And then they were sent to the CIA black site prisons, they were sent to Guantanamo, they were sent to other governments, like in Egypt or even in Syria for additional torture and abuse. It was a horrific policy and the US began the policy of torture. We know about the waterboarding. We know about Abu Ghraib. We know about the horrible things that were going on, which Bush was tolerating, not only tolerating, encouraging. So the US reputation already was down the toilet and the US commitment to human rights or decent treatment of prisoners was out the window. And so we were conducting this terrible policy under Bush, Obama takes over and now our policy is going to continue with the drone attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. You might have seen the recent column by Imran Khan in The Washington Post, The New York Times, just a couple of days ago, talking about the role that Pakistan was forced to play by the US, which threatened them, but also bribe them, was giving them an additional two billion dollars a year to allow us to do these terrible things inside their own country. But inside Afghanistan, the US policy was drones and it was also night raids. And so what we did, especially in the Pashtun areas, the US would go in there and with the Afghan army in the middle of the night, knock down the doors, you know, invade people's privacy, which was the bottom line for the Afghans, they hated this, and the US was creating more and more enemies. And so we would go there, we kill innocent people with these drone attacks- we get that wrong, we kill wedding parties, individuals, families, inadvertently, and we go in there and alienate them with these night raids. It got to the point where Karzai even was saying to the United States that if I have to choose in a war between the US and Pakistan, we're going to support Pakistan. The US has got to stop these night raids. We've got to stop this bombing. You have to stop killing civilians. The other side of it was the corruption was so out of control that, I mean, if you look at the conditions people lived under, for example, even as late as 2009 when the United States had been there for eight years now, in 2009, Afghanistan was still the world's fifth poorest nation. After the US poured all this money in there. The US eventually was spending 110 billion dollars a year. So we're spending enormous amounts of money. The fifth richest [meant: poorest] nation with one of the widest gaps between rich and poor per capita income stood at 426 dollars a year. 68 percent of the population lived on less than a dollar a day. 23 percent had access to

sanitary drinking water. Life expectancy was 43 years. 24 percent of adults could read and write, but only 14 percent of women. Even in 2011, a decade after the US got into the war, only 30 percent of girls attended school. And so the US was spending at that point 110 billion dollars on the military and two billion dollars on development. As some of the leading experts who study this said, this was less than the Soviets had been spending on reconstruction aid. And so Obama is now getting this advice from his generals to double down. And the reality, of course, there were a lot of people who were saying, don't do this. Biden was a midway person, but there were a lot of others like Matthew Hoh, who'd been a Marine officer in Iraq, and a US ambassador, a diplomat in Afghanistan. You've got former US diplomats, former US ambassadors telling them don't get involved. That you're only making the situation worse, get out of Afghanistan, don't spend money on the military, don't support this counterinsurgency. But Obama was too weak. And so the United States gets further involved, more deeply involved. And the condition of the Afghan people was horrible. And then finally we create this paper army and not that they didn't fight, many of them were fighting and quite bravely, but the corruption, for example, there were articles about how much you had to pay to buy votes in the Afghan elections. And we knew exactly how much you had to pay to buy the requisite number of votes. It was that kind of open, flagrant, out of control corruption. And so it got to the point where people who would despise the Taliban now welcome them back because they were less brutal and less corrupt than the Afghans who the US was supporting in the local villages. And so this was the mess that we created there with our so-called nation building in Afghanistan. Trump runs on the idea that the US has got to get out of there immediately. Even earlier, for years, Trump had been criticizing the US involvement. And he ran his campaign, said the US is going to get out of there. Does Trump get us out of there? No, of course not. He again doubled down. He increases the troops from 11000 to 15000 and doesn't have the backbone to stand up to the military leaders either. And so the conditions worsen further when Biden gets in there. They're probably 3500 troops still in there at that point. Trump drops the mother of all bombs, the biggest conventional bomb ever dropped, which is to Trump a great sign of how potent he is and the situation just worsens and worsens there. At that point, millions of Afghans had left the country, a lot of them were in Pakistan, others were displaced internally. And the economy was based on opium and corruption. But they try to keep Trump in there by dangling this idea that there's all this mineral wealth there, the rare earth metals which China already dominated internationally. There was a trillion dollars worth of rare earth metals. There were the pipelines. There was three trillion dollars of oil and gas in Turkmenistan. And that, of course, turned Trump on. But the situation remained a disaster there under Trump as well. This is the fiasco of American involvement there. People who saw it said, you know, let's cut our losses and get out. We're doing nothing for the Afghan people, we are doing nothing for stability in the region. The only thing we're doing is making a lot of contractors and defense builders wealthy, as well as corrupt people inside of Afghanistan. But so far as the Afghan people we are making their lives more miserable. Some women did get educated, some women did serve in government, some women did serve in the parliament, you know, and it's very terrible what they face. But the amount of money the US spent there, the trillions of dollars... The other thing is, the kind of injuries and wounds. The percentage, there were a lot of IEDs, the percentage of American troops who came back with amputations was extraordinarily high. And 30 percent of the amputees were multiple amputees. And what the doctors in Germany reported about the Americans who were wounded was that because they were dealing with these IEDs, many of them were coming back with their genitals blown off. You know, we're dealing with horrific, horrific wounds of the sort that we hadn't seen like this in previous

wars. The percentage of troops who had post-Traumatic stress disorder was very, very high. Brain injuries from the IEDs. It was really a tragic situation all along. Ill conceived from the beginning, didn't have to do it, we shouldn't have gone in there the way we did. We created a mess. We got bogged down. We listened to the military who always wanted more troops, wanted to build up 400 thousand Afghan troops. Corruption. We hope we learned the lesson, but I don't think we've learned the right lesson listening to the hearings now that are going on with the generals testifying. Certainly the Republicans have not learned the right lesson.

acTV: The US completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. Could you give us some background on the withdrawal process and then talk about the reactions that followed? Furthermore, could the withdrawal have been handled better?

PK: We've got to establish the fact that I probably didn't mention yet, that the war was illegal from the beginning. The war did not have the support of the United Nations. Afghanistan was not a threat to the United States. This did not pose a security threat. The United States was not under imminent threat of attack from Afghanistan or even from al-Qaeda. As we've discussed before, it was American incompetence, the incompetence of the Bush administration that made the 9/11 attacks possible. That said, a police action was called for. However, the process of withdrawal, when Biden took over he made very clear that he wanted to withdraw. But it was not Biden who announced the withdrawal. It was Trump. And the Doha agreement that Trump signed called for American troops to be out by May 1st. You have to remember that Trump actually in 2019, dropped more bombs in Afghanistan than the United States had done any time before that throughout the war. Nothing was working. Even Trump understood that. And so they signed the Doha agreement. It was a rotten deal in many ways. Trump cut the Afghan government out of the process. This was negotiated with the Taliban, with the United States. Trump agreed to allow 5000 of the most dangerous prisoners out of prison in Afghanistan. And those were many of the ones who led the insurgency. So a lot of the blame for the chaos. Plus, Trump, who hated immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants, he stopped, basically ended the special immigrant visa application process. So all those SIVs who were stuck there at the end then having all that trouble getting their papers processed, this was largely Trump's doing also. So Trump left Biden with a mess. Biden was able to extend the withdrawal date to the end of August, so he stayed there several months longer. He was getting advised by his military, for the most part, just to not leave entirely to keep about 2500 troops there to continue the training and some counterinsurgency operations and having eyes on the ground. But Biden rejected that advice. Because the military had been wanting to stay and increase troop levels since the start of the war, they never wanted out. The military never wants out of any war situation that it's in. And Biden knew that. And so he rejected their advice. The other thing is that if the US had stayed longer, then the Taliban would start targeting US troops again after September 1st. Biden knew that American troop casualties were going to increase sharply at that point and the United States was already losing ground. By the day almost, the Taliban were taking over more and more of the country. Biden understood that reality and he understood that the US would get bogged down. He understood that if the US wanted to stay longer, if they wanted to retake the Bagram Air Base, if they wanted to keep this troop level there, that he would have to send in more troops to support the 2500 we had there. That was an untenable figure. And so Biden made the

correct decision to withdraw. Could it have been handled better? Probably. But the thing you have to realize is that Biden was taking the advice of the intelligence community and the military, and his advisers were saying that the government in Kabul could probably hang on for two or three years, even after the US withdrew. After the US withdrew from Vietnam, the government there was able to continue fighting for another couple of years. After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, the Soviet backed government was able to continue for another three years or so. So nobody expected the Afghan military to collapse and the Afghan government to flee and totally collapse the way it did. But the level of corruption there was beyond what people understood because the Americans had been fighting the war in the wrong way. Even what the military would try to create was a mirror image of the US military. The Americans did not understand the culture. We did not understand the politics. We didn't understand anything about Afghanistan. And so we try to create something that was untenable from the beginning. And it didn't work and it collapsed. And as soon as Biden pulls out and there's the chaos and some of the chaos was excessive because they didn't expect the rapidity of the collapse, but they did manage to get out an enormous number of people. And people fought them for the fact that there was an ISIS bomb that killed a number of people, a lot more Afghans and Americans, but some Marines were killed. And the fact that the US tried that drone strike that we thought killed these terrorists with ISIS, and in fact it was tragically an Afghan family. So Biden is being condemned by everybody. But you look at the hypocritical statements coming out of the Europeans, you look at Tony Blair, you know, he's so responsible for the invasion of Iraq and was there a big cheerleader and involved in Afghanistan as well. And a lot of the other NATO folks, just hypocrites, really. So Blair says that the end of the war was tragic, dangerous, unnecessary, you know, which really refers to his war in Iraq. You look at the conservative candidate for chancellor in Germany, Laschet said that withdrawal was the biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding. The Economist magazine calls the US withdrawal a fiasco, a grave blow to America's standing, a turning point. I mean, you've got all of these people commenting on what a disaster this was. The reality was it was going to be a disaster no matter what Biden did. That as soon as the Americans withdrew and the Taliban took over, there was going to be chaos. The Taliban are not competent to run things. The economy was collapsing. Even already last year the leaders of Afghanistan said that 90 percent of Afghans were earning less than a dollar a day. That's that. So the economy was in chaos. Unemployment was already very, very high. And the situation there is bad. The problem is, you know, and this is what I've been saying from the beginning, there is no good outcome possible in this situation. It is a choice between bad outcomes and terrible outcomes. The United States is probably going to be six trillion dollars in final debt by the year 2050 over the involvement in Afghanistan. The Americans who were wounded and killed are going to be wounded and killed. The Afghans suffered terribly. The more optimistic estimate is that 71000 Afghan civilians died and a quarter million total. But the numbers are probably much, much higher than that. And the number who are wounded and injured probably is up in the millions. So the cost of this, the human costs, are mind boggling. The cost to America's reputation, yeah, of course, the United States is not going to be the world's policeman anymore. The same thing happened after Vietnam when the conservatives were saying, oh, this is terrible, Americans are not going to want to get involved in wars anymore. You know, the Vietnam Syndrome, well the same thing, I hope there's an Afghan syndrome. I hope the Americans learn some lessons. I hope the Americans don't want to get involved in these wars everywhere. But what the United States is talking about is over the horizon capabilities. Which means drone strikes. Right now we're saying they're going to come from Qatar, they're going to come from Qatar or the United Arab

Emirates or Egypt. And the US is actually trying to negotiate with the Russians to use bases in the area. But the Russians have said that Russia and China does not support or want to allow any US bases in Central Asia. But what Putin floated in his meeting with Biden back in June in Geneva, Putin raised the possibility that Americans could operate from Russian bases in Central America. And that's what the discussion is. So when the meeting last week between Milley and Gerasimov, the top Soviet general, they actually discussed the possibility of Americans using Russian banks. Because nobody wants to see the reemergence of al-Qaeda or ISIS in the area. Also, nobody wants to see a continuation of American troops in the area. What we need are united front operations against terrorism. But the way you defeat terrorism is you improve the life of the people there and the educational levels and just deal with the poverty, the vast poverty there. And so if we can do that through the United Nations, then we can work together to really root out the conditions that create terrorism and allow terrorism to flourish.

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