AFGHANISTAN: A TRILLION DOLLARS' WORTH OF LIES

Jim here.

This morning, the Washington Post published The Afghanistan Papers, so-named as a tribute to Daniel Ellsberg's Pentagon Papers. It's hardly surprising that what we learn from the collection of documents is that the US has been lying about Afghanistan since the very earliest days of the war:

> A confidential trove of government documents obtained by The Washington Post reveals that senior U.S. officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.

Sadly, the war has come at an unfathomable cost:

> Since 2001, more than 775,000 U.S. troops have deployed to Afghanistan, many repeatedly. Of those, 2,300 died there and 20,589 were wounded in action, according to Defense Department figures.
>
> /snip/
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> Since 2001, the Defense Department, State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development have spent or appropriated between $934 billion and $978 billion, according to an inflation-adjusted estimate calculated by Neta Crawford, a political science professor and co-director of the Costs of War Project at Brown University.
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> Those figures do not include money spent by other agencies such as the CIA and

> the Department of Veterans Affairs,
> which is responsible for medical care
> for wounded veterans.

Left out of these numbers are the lives lost by
Afghan civilians and the lives disrupted by
those families displaced by 18 years of
hostilities.

John Sopko

These documents were obtained by the Post
through a three year FOIA effort aimed at
getting the raw materials generated by Inspector
General John Sopko's office, the Special
Investigator General for Afghanistan
Reconstruction. Sopko came into this oversight
job in 2012 and he has done incredible work in
trying to hold the military and the politicians
directing military policy to account for what
has been going on in Afghanistan.

Much of my early blogging was centered on
Afghanistan, and this false narrative from the
military that we were "making progress" despite
being in a situation that was clearly unwinnable
(and that any check of a history book would have
confirmed as an impossible task) was a frequent
target. The persistence with which Sopko's team
documented and evaluated material coming from
the military was impressive, especially as the
military continually developed "new" tools for
assessing progress on security and on training
of Afghan troops, primarily so that they could

make comparisons to previous data irrelevant. Eventually, the military essentially gave up on this approach and decided simply to classify the bulk of this sort of data so that their lack of progress would not be noted every six months as SIGAR came out with their Congressionally-mandated reports.

Around the time of this development, Sopko and his team embarked on a new strategy, interviewing various key figures in the military and in related efforts in Afghanistan to develop a series of "Lessons Learned" reports. The documents being released today are the raw materials from many of these interviews.

Finally, as a result of these materials, we now have extensive documentation that much of what we have been told by officials about Afghanistan is a lie:

> Several of those interviewed described explicit and sustained efforts by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public. They said it was common at military headquarters in Kabul — and at the White House — to distort statistics to make it appear the United States was winning the war when that was not the case.

But then, some of us have known that for a long time. Back in 2010, I came across this interesting graphic on how the military engages in military deception. It turns out there's a well-described process for it:

Figure V-1. Deception Execution Cycle
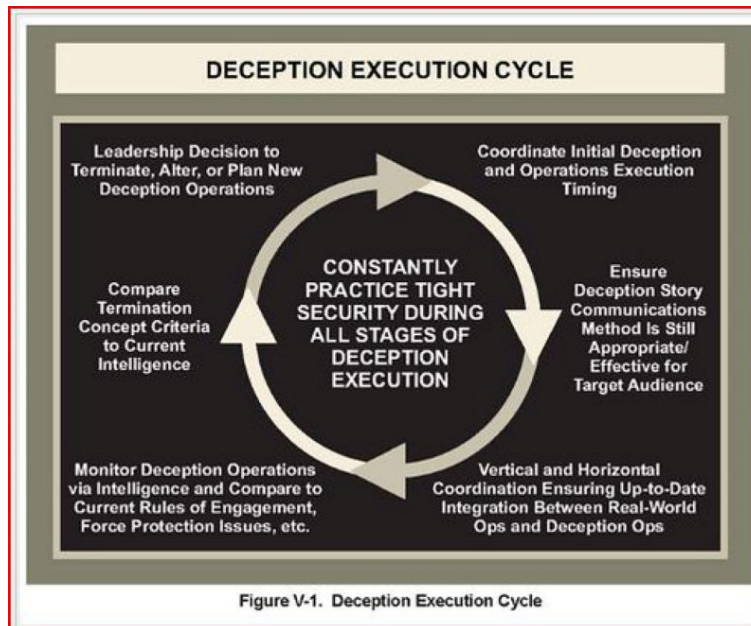
In the Post article, we learn that, of course, there was no lesson learned from Vietnam:

> The specter of Vietnam has hovered over Afghanistan from the start.
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> On Oct. 11, 2001, a few days after the United States started bombing the Taliban, a reporter asked Bush: "Can you avoid being drawn into a Vietnam-like quagmire in Afghanistan?"
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> "We learned some very important lessons in Vietnam," Bush replied confidently. "People often ask me, 'How long will this last?' This particular battlefront will last as long as it takes to bring al-Qaeda to justice. It may happen tomorrow, it may happen a month from now, it may take a year or two. But we will prevail."
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> In those early days, other U.S. leaders mocked the notion that the nightmare of Vietnam might repeat itself in Afghanistan.
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> "All together now — quagmire!" Rumsfeld joked at a news conference on Nov. 27, 2001.
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> But throughout the Afghan war, documents show that U.S. military officials have

> resorted to an old tactic from Vietnam —
> manipulating public opinion.
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> In news conferences and other public
> appearances, those in charge of the war
> have followed the same talking points
> for 18 years. No matter how the war is
> going — and especially when it is going
> badly — they emphasize how they are
> making progress.

And yes, I was seeing that this "We're making
progress" claim was bullshit long ago. Here are
posts from 2010, 2013 and 2016 on the futility
of our efforts there. But there's one more side
of this that we need to bring front and center
to get a feel for one of the primary driving
forces for why we would flush a trillion dollars
and so many lives down the toilet. Back in 2008,
the New York Times documented how the military
carried out an "information operation" (which
would rely on military deception) on the status
of the war in Iraq. A bevy of "military
analysts" was rolled out to make pronouncements
in the media about how well things were going
(despite the reality that they weren't) and they
were described primarily as "retired military".
What wasn't disclosed in most cases was that
these same "analysts" were also lucratively
employed by defense contractors.

This report from the Washington Post on lies
from the military closes the loop with the
report from the Times on lies from analysts in
the media. Senior military figures lie about how
wars are going. They eventually retire and then
get lucrative jobs with defense contractors.
From these positions, they sometimes pose as
"analysts" to spout similar falsehoods in the
media, prolonging futile wars but enriching the
contractors. I wonder if the magnitude of the
lies told while in the military determines the
size of the salary once they are hired by the
contractors. The net result, though, is futile
wars that can't be won, but with endless
spending on them anyway.