

YOU'VE GOT THE WATCHES, WE'VE GOT THE TIME:
THE FAILURE OF US-LED MILITARY INTELLIGENCE,
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Accusations continue to be made about responsibility for the debacle in Afghanistan, largely made by 'yesterdays' men' eager to absolve themselves of any blame. Their behaviour has revealed a withdrawal from the real world to one of their own making and denial. They are also attempting to create a smokescreen and hide highly incriminating information.

Basic studies of the problems which have arisen, nevertheless, reveal an undeniable failure to access accurate intelligence assessments accompanied by little other than imperialist arrogance on the part of the US-led and allied military pantomime.

On 15 August Kabul fell to the Taliban; it was an outcome US-led military planners did not expect. Their planned scenario for Afghanistan included the maintenance of a stooge president, Ashrat Ghani, and his ruling administration continuing to serve 'US interests'. Ghani had been handpicked by the US for the job; a former professor at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore and employee of the World Bank, he knew his paymasters well.

The Afghan national army, likewise, was supposed to provide defence and security over the vast strategic landmass. The cost of the whole US-led counter-insurgency program and nation-building exercise has been estimated at about \$2 trillion, with a further cost of over two thousand lives. (1)

On 20 August President Ghani fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan taking an estimated \$169 million with him. (2) The national army also appeared to collapse, after nearly twenty years of being trained by US-led military forces. It was noted from reliable sources that with the Taliban advancing quickly 'thousands of Afghani soldiers fled across the border into Tajikistan rather than fight insurgents'. (3) It was furthermore noted, for example, 'many major cities fell with little or no resistance'. (4) Terrorist attacks also took place in Kabul killing over two hundred people, including thirteen US military personnel.

News coverage of the final days of August included reference to it was the 'US military's

last phase of its mission in Afghanistan because it involved bringing troops and equipment home'. (5) The fact the US-led military planning had included arming the Afghan army with the latest US equipment has created a dilemma for the Biden administration: do they use the final days of their occupation to airlift thousands more asylum-seekers or use the flight space for sensitive equipment to prevent it being used by the Taliban?

It would appear the Biden administration chose the latter option despite publicising pressing human rights issues and related considerations. (6)

It was also noted even during the final days of the US occupation that the Taliban had already seized more than a hundred surface-to-air missiles. They had also confiscated dozens of missile launchers with a range of five kilometres, raising fears about them being used against planes during the final days of the air-lifts from Kabul. (7)

A chorus of 'yesterday's men', those largely responsible for the initial US-led military occupation, also became vocal. There were numerous examples, although former Australian Prime Minister John Howard was perhaps the most interesting in leading the denial for any responsibility. His comments revealed just how out of contact he was, and remains, with basic facts.

Following the collapse of the Ghani administration in Kabul, Howard issued a formal media release which contained numerous references which included how Australia's alliance with the US was strengthened following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. (8) Curiously he also drew reference to 'our long standing intelligence-sharing agreements, along with our privileged access and contribution to those arrangements'. (9)

In late May, however, official correspondence noted the Morrison coalition government in Canberra 'was barely consulted before the US decided to withdraw troops from Afghanistan last month'. (10) References to intelligence-sharing, likewise, appeared strangely out of line with reality when it was eventually openly acknowledged that 'part of the problem ... is the collapse of the American intelligence-gathering capability in Afghanistan'. (11)

It is not difficult to find further examples of the denial inside the corridors of power in Canberra, which accompany the problem.

On 1 June, Australian Chief of Defence Force Angus Campbell informed a Senate estimates committee, for example, that he 'dismissed suggestions the Taliban would overrun the war-torn country when international troops withdrew. This is very much going to be a negotiated settlement'. (12) One can but question how such people could have been so poorly informed about their main adversary. Whatever happened to their standard military intelligence procedures? Howard, likewise, when asked to explain the collapse of the Ghani administration and implications for Australia, furthermore, declined to comment. (13)

Two further factors to consider when establishing the failure of the US-led intelligence services to correctly assess the problems of the Taliban advances across Afghanistan include the closing of the Bagram airbase and the contents of a secret memo sent from the US embassy in Kabul last month to President Biden in the White House.

On 1 July the US-led military handed over the Bagram airbase to the Ghani administration. The airbase, complete with two large runways and parking facilities for over a hundred planes, also included a hospital, three operating theatres and a dental clinic together with accommodation. (14) What was not so well publicised was the manner of the rapid departure of the US military personnel. They withdrew in the middle of the night and switched off the lights, leaving the massive complex to looters. Their departure was only discovered two hours later, after they had disappeared into the darkness of the night. (15) Liaison was not a strong-point between the US-led forces and the Afghan military.

Following scenes at Kabul's main airport a serious observer might question whether the Bagram airfield facilities, strategically placed outside the main city would have been more useful and convenient for the massive airlifts in the final days of August.

When questioned about the decision to close the Bagram facilities, official correspondence noted the US were faced with either defending the airbase or the US embassy in Kabul, indicating a drastic decline in basic defence and security provision in the face of the Taliban advance. (16) It was not, however, well publicised at the time; diplomatic silence would appear the order of the day, the natural outcome of either acute embarrassment or ineptitude.

Secondly, an intelligence assessment of the Ghani administration in official US diplomatic correspondence had actually drawn attention to a potential collapse of Kabul 'soon after the scheduled 31 August withdrawal deadline'. (17) During the course of developments, the ruling administration in the capital city did not even last until the end of the month. The official diplomatic cable signed by 23 US embassy staffers on 13 July, furthermore, 'warned of rapid territorial gains by the Taliban and the subsequent collapse of Afghan security forces, and offered recommendations on ways to mitigate the crisis and speed up an evacuation'. (18)

While the main contents of the diplomatic cable remain classified, the Biden administration were, therefore, fully aware of the potential problems arising, if they had bothered to even read it. Coverage of the matter also noted 'the existence of the State Department cable adds to an expanding debate over what US officials understood about assessments of the stability of Afghanistan'. (19) The debate, however, has remained strictly censored. Whether there has been any serious official Australian intelligence involvement has yet to be established. The declassification process might, under such sensitive circumstances, take decades.

All references to US-led intelligence assessments also appear to have been subject to higher level scrutiny; it is all too clear, nevertheless, the nature of the main problem in Afghanistan. While the US used the latest electronic warfare equipment and satellite surveillance facilities they lacked 'ground human' agents to accurately clarify intelligence material. A building in the middle of pasture land, for example, might be an animal outhouse. It could, however, be used for storing weapons and bomb-making facilities. Only reliable and trusted local agents would be able to provide the necessary clarification of satellite imagery.

The fact the US were unable to assess the rapid nature of the Taliban advance is evidence, in itself, of the puppet nature of the Ghani administration which had little popular support amongst the peoples of different provinces and ethnic backgrounds. It was in place only to serve 'US interests'. With the planned departure of the US-led military personnel, it

collapsed of its own contradictions into the chaos mid-August.

It is interesting to note reliable media sources acknowledged 'the Taliban controls the routes, the highways and the bridges, that form the choke-points for trade across South Asia'. (20) Despite this readily available low-level intelligence, two official government statements from Britain and Australia, ignored the problem. British Defence Minister, Ben Wallace, 'said Afghans still wishing to flee the country should attempt to escape over Afghanistan's borders, rather than braving the dangers at the capital's airport'. (21)

He was accompanied by a further British government diplomatic statement from Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who 'said he will do his utmost to help any people in Afghanistan who are eligible for resettlement, but who the British armed forces are unable to evacuate from Kabul airport ... we will shift heaven and hell to help them'. (22) No recognition was provided, however, about the different warring ethnic clans and obvious dangers for groups of wandering asylum-seekers in sensitive border areas.

The diplomatic statements were also accompanied by similar ones from Canberra. A statement from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) included reference to 'an ongoing and very high threat of terrorist attack. Do not travel to Kabul airport. If you're in the area of the airport, move to a safe location and await further advice'. (23)

Elsewhere, numerous references were readily available about large numbers of western visa holders denied access to Kabul airport or onto planes leaving on the regular basis. Their fate remains to be established. In fact, the US military had so under-estimated the problems arising the Biden administration were forced to second civilian airlines for the massive airlift from Kabul airport; dozens of C-17 cargo planes were deployed for hundreds of passengers in cramped conditions. (24) While the airlift was taking place it was, however, reported a RAAF C-130 Hercules military plane with a seating capacity of 128, left Kabul carrying only 26 passengers. (25) Hopefully they had enough room to stretch their legs.

In conclusion it would appear blatantly obvious the US-led military had very poor intelligence assessments due to the natural outcome of 'those who pay the piper call the tune'. The Ghani administration were only too pleased to provide the Pentagon with their own assessments, at massive cost. The Pentagon had no means of checking the intelligence. When pressed, President Biden issued a terse statement with passing reference to 'the Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani ... blaming him ... for misleading the US into thinking Afghan security forces ... would be able to resist the Taliban'. (26)

And in a society such as Afghanistan where 'every man is thought to have a hundred brothers', when the game was up, President Ghani quickly fled from the back-door of the national palace with his ill-gotten gains, shortly before the Taliban banged on the front-door to evict him. The fact his emigration from the scene was so efficient would tend to indicate it was well planned beforehand and influences had been brought to bear on border guards and Taliban road-blocks along the way. His entourage had the necessary financial reserves to make such a journey possible.

President Ghani and his administration clearly had watches, the Taliban, however, showed that they had had the time. All they had to do was wait for the US-led initiative to run its full

course. Which it did.

And as for the role of Australia in this whole military debacle: a serious debate about choosing an independent foreign policy might be a very important way of distancing ourselves from problems of a similar magnitude, in the Indo-China.

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