

## How Corruption Aided Taliban's Takeover

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While attempting to defend the haphazard withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which ultimately hastened the chaos in the country, President Joe Biden said that: [‘our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to be nation building.’](#) Biden argued that nation-building never made any sense to him, and the only reason for having US presence in Afghanistan [was to get Bin Laden and eliminate Al-Qaeda](#). His remarks are a stark contradiction of his earlier stance, as he was among the Congressmen who pushed for stronger presence in Afghanistan for nation-building efforts in the early years of the intervention. He had supported what [President George Bush said in April 2002](#), where he claimed that ‘we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall,’ alluding to the Marshall Plan after World War II.

According to [Pei and Kasper](#), ‘regime change or survivability is the core objective of nation-building, because an outside power such as the United States must overthrow a hostile regime or maintain a friendly indigenous regime to be able to implement its plans.’ For 20 years, the US had the opportunity to lead the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but the situation in the country only got worse with the passage of time and there was no replication of the success of the Marshall Plan. According to a [survey](#), the proportion of Afghans living below the national poverty line in 2016-17 was 55 per cent as compared to 34 per cent in 2007-08.

During this period, international aid poured in while significant funds were appropriated by the US and its allies for reconstruction of the country. However, the governance system that was set up after the fall of Taliban regime was neither capable nor interested in [generating public value](#), as Chohan has argued. A United States Institute of Peace [report](#) highlighted that ‘the administration lacks the capacity to absorb and manage large amounts of direct assistance or to coordinate the activities of its own interim ministries.’

In 2016, [Jamil Danish](#), a former government official and UN staff member in Afghanistan, shared his apprehension over promises of further aid by the West as he believed that ‘the money will definitely be wasted unless donor countries encourage the Afghan government to implement a real anti-corruption strategy that is supported by law.’ He added that, ‘the Afghan government should also show the political will to end impunity for corrupt officials.’ The state of public affairs was worrying and frustrating for the international community, especially donors, who did not see the desired results from their contributions. Many [donors](#), therefore, attempted to bypass the Afghan government as much as possible.

Corruption was widespread in Afghanistan during the Karzai and Ghani governments, so much so that public officials were even striking deals with [warlords](#) at the time. This not only weakened public institutions’ capacity to deliver essential public services to the masses, but also economically strengthened their opponents. Unfortunately, there was no desire from the Afghan leadership to switch the system towards serving the citizens.

The pace at which the Taliban gained territory after the US decided to withdraw from the country surprised many observers. Fingers were also raised against the US funded and trained Afghan National Security Forces which the Taliban swept in without much trouble. Once again, corruption compromised another government entity's capacity to deliver. The US government's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) [John F. Sopko](#) revealed that more than \$300 million a year were lost to corrupt officials who inflated the payroll by registering 'ghost soldiers.' Sopko also criticized US officials for their lack of monitoring, and it was pointed out that this was the same case during the US war in Vietnam. Many local leaders who fled the country attributed the failure to ['pervasive corruption, which led to the rise of incompetent leaders, destroyed army morale, and created a vast gulf of social injustice and popular antipathy.'](#) In Vietnam also, the commanders had registered a list of fake soldiers.

Before the war in Afghanistan, the Vietnam War was America's longest war where it also [failed](#) in its nation-building efforts. Once in Afghanistan, the US deviated from the reconstruction promises and was only pursuing its geopolitical interests through the Afghan government whose credibility and functionality were weakened by corrupt practices. The wastage of funds and empowerment of incapable leaders made the takeover for Taliban much easier. For the US, it was not just a military failure but a governance failure as well. The US let billions of dollars of aid paid for by taxpayers back home get wasted in Afghanistan. As it turned out, the funds which were pledged could have not only improved the living conditions in the country but also saved thousands of lives.

A 2007 [Discussion Paper](#) prepared by leading development and international organizations highlighted that, 'corruption comprises one of the main obstacles to state-building and development in Afghanistan and, indeed, threatens the overall success of the ambitious program of political normalization, reconstruction, and development now underway.' Tragically, the warning signs were ignored by those in power and it was only a matter of time before the entire state machinery crumbled.

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