

Oral Statement by Earl Anthony Wayne, June 23, 2025

Lessons from my observations and involvement with Afghanistan policies

I was first directly involved with Afghanistan from the fall/winter of 2001 until early 2003 as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs. I helped the lead work of international partners in planning and organizing aid for Afghanistan after the Taliban regime fell and a new government was being established.

I served in person in Kabul, Afghanistan from 2009-11, in two Ambassador-ranked positions which are highlighted in this oral testimony.

Since 2016, I have led informal, private discussions among Afghan experts and officials, and have written and spoken on Afghanistan issues (see www.eawayne.com).

The US made a series of important contributions to Afghanistan as well as mistakes, some strategic, many tactical, throughout last 20 plus years or so of involvement in Afghanistan. Some of the important missteps involved the capacities of our institutions and staff to surge, to communicate, and to deliver and evaluate results on the ground.

Some of these mistakes, we repeated during the years, as lessons were not learned and shared. Very importantly, many of the lessons, “learned” and “internalized” need to be recorded and saved for future access and reference. Your work will address this.

At present, we are still grappling with the many consequences of a poor exit strategy and poor implementation of our departure, which left the US and our Afghan partners with massive humanitarian, human rights and “moral responsibility” challenges.

We were left with a repressive Taliban regime and with very little US leverage available to influence Taliban behavior. The international reputational costs of our poor exit have also been substantial. There is much to learn and apply as we move forward.

Examples of good steps, missteps and miscalculations are included in my full written testimony that has already been submitted in writing. It includes my observations from my involvement helping to organize the US and international efforts from Washington DC as Assistant Secretary of State during 2001-2003. I invite you to read my full testimony to gather take aways from 2001-03, as well as developments in recent years.

Here are my highlights from my 2009-2011 years working on Afghanistan

☐ By the time I returned to work on Afghanistan in 2009, we were able to see and build upon success in education and health investments in Afghanistan, but we did not seem to learn well how to help build stronger Afghan government institutions or to deal effectively with the dynamics of Afghan politics.

Our development and aid programs were not effectively designed or synced with security assistance. Nor were our US government assignment/personnel policies designed to provide for the length of service and expertise needed to maximize positive impact.

On a micro level, our military commanders, their development specialists and US diplomats were far too often relearning the practical lessons about work in Afghanistan that their predecessors had learned on earlier tours.

❑ More broadly, we still poorly understood Afghanistan and the dynamics of its politics and society. We did not understand the Taliban well, its dynamics or its motivations. We did not develop with our Afghan partners an effective plan to sap Taliban morale or its attraction during this period.

In fact, eventually, the Taliban were able to mobilize recruits based on the US image as a foreign invader. Our short-term rotating assignments for US personnel in the country made it harder to learn and adapt to important lessons such as this.

❑ The Taliban were able to regroup and rebuild in Pakistan. Even during the “surge” from 2009-11, we did not develop an effective strategy to get the government of Pakistan to limit the Taliban gains their safe havens in Pakistan. Nor did we develop a military strategy to effectively inhibit the Taliban in Pakistan. Unfortunately, we rather built up anti-American sentiment in parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Taliban “haven” or sanctuary was a significant flaw in US policy.

❑ Three US administrations, (Bush, Obama and Trump) could not forge or maintain a longer-term vision, strategy, or timetable for Afghanistan. Once the US decided that we needed to help build basic institutions in the country to assure US interests, we needed to be willing to plan for the time it takes to create institutions that could last and function well.

This would have meant an additional five, ten, or twenty-year consistent investment. This was particularly clear to me in providing civilian assistance, but I think it also held for military, public security, and intelligence institutions.

Sadly, the Obama civilian surge highlighted these challenges. We did not successfully figure out how to best aid the Afghans to build institutions and capacities that were good enough to produce positive results and that they could run largely by themselves. These challenges were especially clear on the military and public security side.

This was clear in the final years and months of US presence where many of the most effective “Afghan” military tools were dependent on US contractors to operate well.

❑ We did not sufficiently recognize that our own spending was reinforcing corruption and undermining governance, nor did we find effective strategies to hold corruption in check or

reduce it. There was far too rarely a price to pay for corruption, and our efforts to create stronger anti-corruption institutions largely failed.

Also, with all our spending to support the surge, we boosted the Afghan economy in ways that were not sustainable. We warned from the Embassy in 2009-10 that if we abruptly ended our significant spending to support the surge, the Afghan economy (and GDP) would drop significantly. That began to happen in 2013-14, when the US started downsizing.

❑ Overall, we did not develop sufficient strategies for dealing with 1) the weaknesses among our Afghan partners, including ways to overcome their factionalism; and 2) the tensions between a constitution that promoted a strong central government and the strong preferences for decentralization and regional autonomy evident among many Afghans.

These Afghan tensions plagued the US involvement throughout our 20-year presence. The non-Taliban Afghans often relied on the US and other internationals to help them sort through their own weaknesses and division, rather than finding good Afghan solutions.

❑ The same strategic and timeframe problems mentioned earlier apply to making democratic institutions function well – it takes a lot of time and coaxing – more than we were able to invest. It also takes serious local (Afghan) buy-in and leadership over time. I often thought of the time and effort required for South Korea to move from a corrupt, dictatorship to a functioning democratic system.

❑ We educated and supported the development of a very capable generation of young leaders with an international perspective and a desire for a “modern” Afghanistan. However, they were blocked from authority in many cases by corrupt warlords and long-in-the-tooth politicians, who continued to jockey for power right up to the Taliban takeover of Kabul.

The patron-client, and family-clan-tribe-regional-religious ties remained very strong compared to more “modern” political ties. We did not develop a successful approach to deal with this daunting challenge.

❑ The Obama years ended with a military draw down that sapped the Afghan economy and morale but did not “pull the plug,” in part because of arguments that he should not preclude a fresh look by his successor. Thus, the US had a “gap” in strategic direction, which the Trump Administration needed to address.

Some Lessons from the US experience

While there will be many lessons to be recalled, here are a few that stood out to me:

☐ The need to clearly establish a vision of strategic interests, objectives, and mission, including an exit strategy, in any military intervention. Key players need to be transparent and build consensus around this vision and plan.

☐- Remember the so-called “Pottery Barn” rule – if you break it, you own it. That is ok, if the overall strategic interests of the US weigh in favor of action, but one needs to be responsible for anything that breaks.

☐ The need to be clear headed about what is achievable and in what timeframe. This is especially true if trying to build institutions that will function and/or democracy that will work. These actions take a lot of time and effort, and need serious local buy-in.

The need to be realistic about what capacities one possesses to bring about changes – try not to overestimate the ability to deliver or to underestimate difficulties that will be faced.

☐ The need to devise a realistic exit strategy. For example, If trying to end a civil war/internal conflict or a war between states, one will need a set of checks and balances that encourage adherence to an accord.

The need to recognize and plan for the longer timeframes, incentives, leverage, etc. that are needed to build peace and reconciliation.

☐ If a longer-term mission and presence is agreed for achieving US objectives, then that needs to be explained at home and abroad. Specifics can be adjusted, but the vision needs to be clear headed, well communicated and well understood.

☐ In devising strategies and tactics, whether military or civilian, one needs to understand the human terrain of the country (e.g., culture and politics) and of one’s enemy.

One should be explicit, transparent, attentive, and honest about the factors that can undermine one’s efforts, e.g., corruption, safe havens, weak institutions.

One needs to try to be honest about the time needed for progress. We were often over optimistic about the time needed.

☐ One needs to learn and adapt within the strategy, but one also to be patient and committed to a timeframe that is realistic – this is hard.

☐ Need to be humble about our capacities to “win” or to bring about change. We should not be haughty due to our technology and military might. We need to realize that changing people, norms, and practices, and building new institutions takes immense effort and time, and needs dedicated local partners and support.

☐ Recognize that many mistakes are likely – admit them and make sure to learn lessons with regular monitoring and evaluation of results, with the idea of learning and getting better.

☐ Need to know your partners' warts and strengths. At some points, one needs to try to do enough to overcome serious weakness or you will lose. For example, corruption and poor service delivery undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government and the US.

Need to find ways to promote good supporting factors among partners, e.g., roles for younger, educated, forward looking leaders. One needs to be patient at the same time.

☐ Don't try to build processes and practices using US models and US tools, if partners are not capable of learning, making , maintaining them and sustaining them on their own.

☐ Admit when you do not know how to do something – do brutally honest evaluations.

The need to seriously consider possible negative effects of a US departure and how to mitigate them. Get the exit strategy as right as possible – plan and think of consequences. Looking back, the final US draw down years had many shortcomings.

☐ As with a decision to enter or to continue in a conflict, don't base an exit on poor assessment of the situation and wishful thinking. One needs to carefully think through the potential consequences and act accordingly. The costs have been and will remain very high for the Afghan people and for the US' reputation in the world.

☐ Don't magnify costs or chances of failure with poor decisions in implementing an exit decision. For example, near the end, taking out US contractors who worked for the Afghan military with no alternatives developed, when they did not have the skill sets needed to take over, was devastating to the Afghans.

☐ In an exit, as in other stages, be humble, listen and be ready to adjust the initial plans.

☐ Try to deal responsibly with problems that one leaves behind.

To its credit, the Biden administration worked to provide more humanitarian aid than any other country after its departure, but other serious lingering problems remained to be addressed.

Sadly, the situation has not improved for many left behind or caught outside of Afghanistan.