



# WHY WE FAILED IN AFGHANISTAN

BY LT COL THOMAS "TOM" W. WILLIAMS, USMC (RET)

**In 2006, when I arrived in Afghanistan as a contract trainer for the Afghan National Army (ANA) 207TH Corps G-3 Operations in Herat, Afghanistan, it soon became obvious to me that we were making the same ill-fated mistake in Afghanistan that we had made in Vietnam years earlier. We were wrongly empowering a corrupt Afghan government and their National Security Forces.**

Therefore, on 25 August 2006, I submitted my first information paper titled, Systemic Problems Hampering Efforts To Train And Modernize The 207th Corps. This paper was addressed to the active-duty commander via my defense contract Team Leader

In my paper, I noted that there were some systemic problems which needed to be addressed across the full spectrum of the Corps if we were to collectively be successful in training and modernizing the Corps as part of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF). This also included all the various elements of the Afghan National Police (ANP) Forces, which I was also integrating into the ANA training program.

In essence, I highlighted how we were failing in our mission to modernize the ANSF. Furthermore, I provided solutions to those systemic problems, emphasizing that unless the ANA 207th Corps employed drastic measures to remedy these systemic problems, there would be no ANA to defend the nation. America's national treasure would have been poured down a black hole, and we would have failed in our mission to build a viable Afghan Army that could protect its citizens and eliminate the terrorist threat.

My insight into and prediction came to fruition on 31 August 2021, "a date which will long live in infamy" and will long be remembered as a national disgrace of enormous magnitude! This was the date of the botched Non-Combat Evacuation Operation (NEO) of American citizens from Afghanistan. Furthermore, I predict that the unintended consequences of this blunder will haunt American foreign policy into eternity

In 2010, I took a year break from contractor work to be with my family in Australia, but in 2011 I received an unsolicited request from another defense contracting company offering me the opportunity to mentor an ANA general in Kabul.

At a staff conference, which I attended upon returning, the Commander of International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF) and U.S Forces Afghanistan, made the following statement, "I don't want a brief that admires the problem; I want to see what we are doing operationally for a desired outcome." On my personal initiative, I sent an assessment paper, to COMISAF. As you can see below, COMISAF acknowledged receipt of that paper by message:

Tom ... thanks. I have your note and am digesting it.

I really appreciate your taking the time to write.

-----Original Message-----

From: Williams, Thomas W G3 MENTOR  
Sent: Wednesday, October 26, 2011, 5:15 PM  
To: COMISAF  
Subject: A personal letter

But, once again I saw no course correction.

The title of my assessment paper was, *Enemy on the Inside*. It contained the following assessment of what I saw occurring as a trainer and mentor serving in Afghanistan, (2006-12). This time I doubled down on what I had previously presented in my 25 August 2006 Systemic Problems Paper.

From my personal perspective, at the time, corruption had a death grip on meaningful progress in Afghanistan. Senior Afghan Officers who issued convincingly sincere rhetorical orders and guidance, when addressing their subordinates, were merely placating the advisors who were the target audience.

The words were nice for the advisors to hear but the absence of 'real action' and follow-through was blatantly obvious. Benefactor protectionism and nepotism permeated and undermined every aspect of what we, the Coalition, were attempting to accomplish.

What we had was an "Enemy on the inside" far worse than either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. This "Enemy on the inside" masterfully manipulated a well-organized pyramid of profit-sharing corruption behind an elaborately calculated smoke screen of ambiguity and chaos. All of the maladies which we had so astutely identified were merely symptoms of the "Enemy on the inside." This was nothing more than what COMISAF had previously exclaimed; "I don't want a brief that admires the problem; I want to see what we are doing operationally for a desired outcome."

The high Absent Without Leave (AWOL) rate, poor leadership, malingering, poor quality food, theft of resources, soldier's pay problems, failure of accountability for personnel and resources, inability to establish a training cycle, 'Green on Blue killings,' (Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) soldiers killing Coalition soldiers), and the inaccurate Readiness Reporting System (RRS) were the consistent hallmarks of the "Enemy on the inside."

Senior officers within the Afghan system could not make a difference without suffering the gravest of penalties. They were all prisoners of the monstrous corrupt system that they had created. It was the equivalent of the Afghan MAFIA. Corrupt officials acted with impunity. There were no consequences, there was no incentive to 'Do the Right Thing' and there was no leverage available that would make a change possible; our best efforts were hamstrung.

After eight months in this second job in Afghanistan and fifty-seven months in Afghanistan, all I heard and saw during lengthy and laborious meetings was more of the same, "admir-ing the problem," but no action to resolve the systemic problems I identified in both papers. We had empowered bad behavior; consequently, what we then had was an in-extremist situation of the gravest proportions!!

By the time I finally left Afghanistan for the last time in 2012, the Afghan people vacillated between fear, uncertainty, and distrust of the Coalition. We were viewed by many as having installed the corruption and in their view, we should eliminate it. The American people, the Afghan people, the Coalition families and loved ones of those who have died fighting this insurgency deserve better than just rhetoric.

When I wrote my two separate papers, I emphasized that the writing was on the wall, we would have failed in our mission to build a viable Afghan Army that could protect its citizens and eliminate terrorists, if we failed to address these specific issues.

Furthermore, when I said earlier in this article that this "Enemy on the inside" masterfully manipulated a well-organized pyramid of profit-sharing corruption behind an elaborately calculated smoke screen of ambiguity and chaos, what I was alluding to was that when the Coalition leaves, these corrupt officials, at all levels, would also leave to live elsewhere in homes that they purchased with their ill-gotten gains. This is exactly what happened on 31 August 2021. By turning a blind eye to these systemic problems, we facilitated enrichment of a few at the expense of the Afghan people. In my humble opinion this supports the principle, "evil thrives when good men do nothing." Unfortunately, once again the military won all the battles in Afghanistan, yet the politicians squandered victory.

The excruciating detail provided in this paper, is an attempt to hammer home the point that after over forty years of active-duty and defense contractor work, I clearly see that our politicians are great cheerleaders when it comes to involving our nation in wars. More importantly, what I have described is about blatantly squandering 20 years of our national treasure, and the lives of our war fighters.

That brings me to the August 2021 Non-Combat Evacuation (NEO) of Afghanistan by President Biden which is a clear example of a political decision rendering success unattainable and ensuring a return to the status quo once the U.S departed.

Having participated in the NEO of Beirut, Operation Fluid Drive, in July 1976 during their civil war and having assisted in planning the NEO for the evacuation of French citizens from Algeria in 1995, while assigned as the first Marine Operations Officer to Marine Forces Europe (MarForEur) in Stuttgart, Germany, I know what a successful NEO looks like. There is a well-established base of knowledge as to how a proper NEO should be conducted; Afghanistan was not a textbook case-it was the most unmitigated disaster I have ever witnessed!

The date 31 August 2021 will long be remembered as a national disgrace of enormous magnitude! The consequences of this blunder will haunt America foreign policy into eternity! In my view, the 2022 war between Russia and Ukraine is a direct result of that misstep. Likewise, I will not be surprised to see China take advantage of our perceived weakness, and invade Taiwan, in the not-too-distant future.