

THE REASON WHY

US INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM & FUTURE WARS

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the Valley of Death
rode the six hundred.*

— *“The Charge of the Light Brigade”*
by *Alfred Lord Tennyson*

My beliefs regarding why we became involved in the Vietnam War have evolved over the years, as have my thoughts about America’s more recent wars and broader involvement in world affairs. Many of these events are directly related to my story. I proudly served as a Marine for nearly three decades and became involved in the “military-industrial complex” after my career as an officer ended. And I now hold a dim view of the politicians, defense contractors, Pentagon brass, and other political ‘bobbling heads’ who supported corrupt foreign administrations while lacking reasonable strategic aims.

To quote the legendary Marine Major General Smedley Butler, USMC (Ret), 1881-1940 (twice recipient of the Medal of Honor), “War is a racket. It always has been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious. It is the only one international in scope. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives.”¹

It is easy for everyone to view history in the rearview mirror and explain why things happened the way they did. However, seeing history unfold or, even better, being an active participant creates insights that help provide a clearer understanding of the big picture. I don’t presume to know all the answers to why America was involved in the Vietnam War and other conflicts. But having lived to the ripe old age of eighty, I’ve seen or participated in war much of my life, and I certainly have something to say about the topic.

My first exposure to war was as a military-dependent youth witnessing the Arab revolt in Colonial French Morocco from 1950–53 when the Arabs were determined to win their independence from the French and Spanish colonial powers. At times, the fighting became so vicious and

threatening to military dependents that armed US soldiers guarded our school buses. It was not unusual for fights to occur around our school bus traveling to and from school in Rabat. On one occasion, a Frenchman was killed and mutilated just outside our bus. Administrators eventually closed our Department of Defense (DOD) school out of concern for students’ safety.

After relocating to Travis Air Force Base in California in 1953, I remember listening to reports of the Korean War near that conflict’s end. However, the most profound early influence on my life regarding the nature of war came from listening to my father’s stories about his service in World War II. He frequently imparted lessons from his time embedded as a linguist with Chinese guerrillas fighting against the Japanese in the China, Burma, and India (CBI) Theater.

These early experiences compelled me to personally see my share of history and play a small role in several events along the way. My first taste of war as a participant was during my initial tour of Vietnam in 1969–70, serving as a second lieutenant infantry platoon commander and then as a first lieutenant reconnaissance platoon commander. As detailed in this book, I returned to Vietnam during the 1972 Easter Offensive as an aerial observer and a Vietnamese linguist on two-days’ notice. I was blessed not to be seriously wounded during either tour.

My next exposure to war was as a communications officer with the 32nd Marine Amphibious Unit (32nd MAU), during the 1976 Non-Combat Evacuation Operation (NEO) of over 500 American citizens from Beirut, Lebanon, which was a result of their civil war.

My last participation in war as a Marine happened in 1990-91, during the First Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. I was fully engaged in the conflict as a lieutenant colonel staff officer with the 1st

Marine Expeditionary Force (I-MEF) Headquarters.

As if all that wasn't enough excitement, I continued my career in the Middle East after retiring from the Marine Corps with nearly twenty-nine years of active-duty service. I spent 1998 to 2006 as a mentor and trainer for the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. On May 12, 2003, my residential compound at Camp Vinnell was attacked by al Qaeda terrorists driving a 750-pound truck bomb that killed ten of my fellow trainers and wounded many others. Interestingly, our compound was built by the bin Laden Construction Company, which was owned by the father of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

In 2006, I took a job with another defense contracting company to train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in Herat, Afghanistan. I spent the next four years near the Iranian border, training Afghans in ground operations to counter the Taliban. During my fifth and final year in that country, I mentored the Afghan National Army's current operations officer in Kabul. With all this fighting behind me, I think it is reasonable to claim the title, "action junkie."

Camp Stone, my security compound near Herat, came under rocket attack by the Taliban. By the grace of God ("Inshallah"), I was again spared serious injury, but shrapnel riddled my living quarters and destroyed or damaged many of my belongings. My only injury was a blister on the bottom of my foot from stepping on hot shrapnel. My fugitive status from "the law of averages" in war had stayed intact.

All these experiences don't make me a master strategist or a professional historian, nor am I a hero. As the oft repeated and true saying goes, most of the heroes are dead, and the ones who lived are special people who did very special things. However, my experiences have given me an unusually in-depth look at how some conflicts played out, including whether they were the correct decisions and 'winnable,' the merits and defects of strategies and goals, and how well the US and other military powers executed on a chosen strategy—to the extent one existed. Combined with my lifelong interest in history, I believe that I have a relevant perspective on why the US fought in Vietnam and some later conflicts that resembled it and why America sometimes failed to achieve its objectives.

An arguable starting point for understanding Vietnam is World War II. After the immense brutality and carnage of this conflict, I have come to believe that the peace and prosperity of the world were too important to be left up to the traditional European powers. Thus, I understand why the United States stationed significant military forces in Western Europe to maintain regional stability. I believe that the relative peace in Europe since WWII is the longest in the history of that continent.

Interestingly, the US developed the Lend-Lease policy

in 1941 to ensure we won WWII. It provided the Soviet Union and China with the necessary materiel resources to defend themselves and ultimately to do their part in defeating the Germans and Japanese. It's also significant that the communists and nationalist Chinese called a truce in their civil conflict just long enough to beat the Japanese during WWII.

After WWII, it rapidly became apparent that China and the Soviet Union were intent on expanding their influence in both hemispheres. This festering conflict between communist regimes and democracies soon degenerated into the "Cold War," accompanied by the "Domino Theory:" a belief that if we let a country fall to communism, nearby nations would, too.

Following WWII, the Soviet Union subjugated the satellite countries it had subsumed at the end of that war, creating the Warsaw Pact. Near simultaneously in 1945, the Chinese Civil War resumed, and the communist belligerents forced the nationalists to escape to Taiwan, an island 100 miles off the coast of mainland China. Many people don't know much about this part of history, especially in the US, including the fact that about seven million Chinese died in this conflict between 1945 and 1949.²

And so it came to pass that a "Bamboo Curtain" descended over Asia, and an "Iron Curtain" fell over Europe. The people caught behind both barriers were subjected to authoritarian communist rule. In roughly the same period, President Dwight D. Eisenhower coined the term "military-industrial complex" during his farewell address on January 17, 1961. Eisenhower described and warned us about "the relationship between a country's military and the defense industry that supplies it, seen together as a vested interest which influences public policy."³

When World War II ended, Vietnam was part of the French Southeast Asian empire known as "French Indochina," consisting of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. During WWII, it had been occupied by Japanese forces that surrendered to the Allies on August 15, 1945. The Japanese relinquished control of Vietnam and surrendered their weapons to Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Viet Minh, a communist organization formed in 1941 to fight for Vietnam's independence from France. The communist Ho Chi Minh became president of the somewhat ironically named "Democratic Republic of Vietnam," better known as North Vietnam, in 1945. This marked the beginning of the First Indochina War between the French colonial forces and the communist Viet Minh, with General Võ Nguyên Giáp leading the People's Army of Vietnam. Ultimately, Giáp masterminded the two-month siege at Dien Bien Phu, which led to the French Union's Far East Expeditionary Corps defeat on May 7, 1954.^{4 5}

The war ended shortly afterward, and the 1954 Geneva Accords were signed. France agreed to withdraw its forces from all its colonies in French Indochina while stipulating

Vietnam would be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel. Control of the north was given to the Viet Minh as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, and the south became the Republic of Vietnam.⁶

The United States' involvement, known as the Vietnam War, is better described by another name: "the Second Indochina War." The North Vietnamese dubbed it the "Resistance War Against America." Whatever the chosen name, it became the latest 'hot' proxy conflict in the Cold War. On one side was North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Viet Cong rebel group it formed in 1960, chiefly supported by North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union. On the other side was South Vietnam, allied with the USA, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Much has been written about the Vietnam War, and many have expressed their reasoning for why we were there. As a young, inexperienced company-grade officer at the time, I simply did as I was ordered: I went to war. "An order isn't an invitation to debate." However, one advantage of getting old is being able to see the course of history more clearly and better understand why some things happened or failed to happen.

So, why did many of us Marines of that era volunteer to serve in Vietnam? The draft was in effect, requiring each US male citizen between eighteen and twenty-six years old to register for national service and possibly be conscripted into the military. However, many Marines at the time volunteered and held a similar view to something former Marine and Senator Jim Webb expressed years later:

Few who served during Vietnam ever complained of a generation gap. The men who fought World War II were their heroes and role models. They honored their father's service by emulating it, and largely agreed with their father's wisdom in attempting to stop Communism's reach in Southeast Asia.⁷

* * *

We looked up to the "Greatest Generation" that preceded us and were convinced that the Domino Theory was a clear and present danger to all of Southeast Asia.

Soon after my commissioning and Basic School training at Quantico, Virginia, in 1969, I found myself at the doorstep of my war in Vietnam. It would be many years later before I would fully appreciate 'the reason why' we were there and why we walked away after more than 58,000 American service members were killed in action.⁸ Eventually, the Domino Theory proved a fallacy, at least where Vietnam was concerned. No other nations in Southeast Asia ever fell to the communists. Therefore, those service members, dead and wounded, suffered as a result of a failed

policy. Nevertheless, I have no regrets about my service in the Vietnam War, only the realization and regret that politicians failed us.

After WWII, America wrongly supported the First French Indochina War in Vietnam as the French attempted to rebuild their colonial empire. Following the Viet Minh's defeat of the French, America then backed a corrupt South Vietnamese regime against the communists. This Second Indochina War was our Vietnam War. It was also a conflict during which America failed to bring our enemy to its knees, lost the support of the American people, and was finally forced by public opinion to withdraw. Although I'd read all about many of these issues in Bernard Fall's books and the news media at the time, I wasn't yet wise enough to distinguish many of these political and economic factors.

During his administration, President Richard M. Nixon was finally determined to bring about North Vietnam's capitulation through intense "Operation Linebacker" aerial bombing. Unfortunately, his direct involvement in the Watergate scandal caused irreparable damage to his credibility and political power base. Therefore, we simply abandoned South Vietnam and walked away, just as we recently did in Afghanistan.

In my view, there was no sincere consideration given to destroying the will and capacity of the enemy to fight in Vietnam as we later did in the First Gulf War. The "body count" measurement of success was neither valid nor a winning strategy, especially when the enemy was so resilient and simply willing to throw more human resources into the conflict. It is estimated that North Vietnam and the VC lost around one million combatants, while civilian losses from both North and South Vietnam may have been as high as two million.⁹ Nevertheless, North Vietnam persisted. To paraphrase and flip the perspective of an Afghan saying, "We may have had all the watches, but they had all the time." The North Vietnamese were willing to wait us out.

During my first tour, I personally saw South Vietnamese corruption in action. Local policemen in the rice paddy villages near An Hua required protection money from villagers or demanded a percentage of the proceeds from rice crops and goods sold in local shops. It always helps to speak some of the language, and my Vietnamese and French skills often made me a confidante to some local farmers and shop owners. However, as only a second lieutenant platoon commander, I didn't have much clout with my senior officers. And they were not interested in getting embroiled in local Vietnamese politics.

Vietnam was my first exposure to the dirty world of corruption, politics, and the military-industrial complex. But it wasn't my last. For example, I became the infantry weapons acquisition sponsor project officer (ASPO) at Headquarters Marine Corps in Washington, DC, from 1983 to 1986. This role made it abundantly clear just how influential the military-industrial complex was and how financially

lucrative it was to be involved in that business.

I won't argue that the military-industrial complex is entirely corrupt—it often serves a necessary purpose. The private sector provides needed weapons and supplies to the military, which must upgrade its tool of war periodically to maintain its edge against potential adversaries. I eagerly participated in a vital aspect of this relationship as an acquisition sponsor project officer, helping to legitimately improve our infantry weapons.

Given my proclivity for maintaining copious notes—a contemporaneous daily record of my service—Brigadier General Carl Mundy, my boss at Headquarters Marine Corps, insisted that I publish my observations in the Marine Corps Gazette at the time. After reading my continuity file for that job, he sent me a personal note: “Tom, everything contained in your continuity file needs to be known by every Marine regarding the new and improved tools of our trade. Please write an article for the Gazette.” General Mundy later became the 30th Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC).

So, I described the many weapons I was responsible for helping develop during my ASPO tenure, and the Corps finally fielded, in a January 1987 Marine Corps Gazette article, “Infantry Weapons, the Tools of Our Trade.” So, the second stage of my association with the military-industrial complex was well established.

I'm proud of my work upgrading the Corps' weapons, but I witnessed many aspects of the military, political, and private sectors in that job that I did not appreciate. At the conclusion of that three-year tour at Headquarters Marine Corps, I couldn't wait to get back into the Fleet Marine Forces and away from the asphalt jungle of Washington, DC. One of the happiest days of my career was seeing DC disappear in my rearview mirror. I cannot deny that there were many personal and professional benefits gained by exposure to the highest level of Marine Corps operations. Likewise, the knowledge gained by being introduced to the hallowed halls of government was a worthwhile professional experience. Nevertheless, I came away from that assignment with four very distinct impressions, most of them negative.

First, the military-industrial complex constantly sought an opportunity to sell the Marine Corps new weapons systems. Vendors relentlessly requested appointments to provide briefings on how a new weapon would be “beneficial to winning the battles and the wars of the future.”

Second, I discovered the real meaning of the term “careerists.” Many Marine officers who went to Washington fell in love with the glamor of being a part of the military-industrial complex or involved in the political arena. Many of these officers found a niche for themselves in that environment and actively sought follow-on assignments in DC throughout their careers. A number of the more successful officers would depart the nation's capital for short

tours in other assignments. Yet, they would always return, often residing in the same home, to pursue positions of greater authority and develop their military-political contacts within the Corps.

Third, my experience at HQ also opened my eyes to the fact that the DC environment, while exciting and challenging, fostered a kind of officer who was more of a political animal than a leader. Consequently, I have come to believe that those politically motivated officers were more comfortable in DC than in the Fleet Marine Forces (FMF) for personal reasons. Simply put, they didn't want to spend time in a fighting hole alongside Marines.

My assessment of these kinds of officers is vividly portrayed in the 1976 TV miniseries *Once an Eagle*, which is based on a 1968 novel. In the show, Sam Damon, played by Sam Elliot, “is a virile and praiseworthy warrior,” while Courtney Massengale, played by Cliff Potts, “is the opposite—an impotent, self-aggrandizing conniver.”¹⁰ I knew officers like Massengale who had an inflated sense of self-worth, often at the expense of others. And I despised them as imposters masquerading as Marines. They wouldn't know what to do in a firefight if their lives depended on it. Worse, the lives of their Marines would be in jeopardy because of their lack of experience. I refer to these kinds of Marines as “MINOs,” Marines in name only.

Numerous officers were so successful at political endeavors that, almost immediately upon retirement, they were employed by the larger and more influential military-industrial corporations. One three-year tour at Headquarters Marine Corps in that environment was sufficient for me to know that I was more suited for assignments in the Fleet Marine Forces with like-minded practitioners of our profession: “grunt” Marines. After all, it was the reason I joined the Marine Corps—to serve with and lead Marines.

My fourth and final impression of being assigned at the seat of government was very heady stuff, including briefing the leadership of the Marine Corps, meeting with politicians, and participating in high-level discussions with focus groups composed of retired general officers. I loved this part of the job, as I had the opportunity to address decision-makers and use my field experience to tell them which weapons needed to be replaced or improved. It was a rare chance to make a difference at that level. Additionally, from a personal interest perspective, there were always diplomatic parties to attend and numerous American historic sites and national museums to visit in DC and in neighboring states after working hours and on weekends.

That tour would be my second exposure to the military-industrial complex and the close links among defense contractors, the Pentagon, and the politicians who make this highly lucrative business work. The future employment possibilities and financial security after retirement were irresistible for many Marines who worked there! It's no wonder that so many officers, politicians, and contractor

companies were attracted to working “inside the Beltway” and that many individuals and the companies they worked for were known as “Beltway Bandits.” They were all making fortunes as many officers simultaneously advanced their aspirations for promotion and future careers.

While I was exposed to the military-industrial complex and DC politicians in the 1980s, it wasn't until I retired that I became intimately associated with the defense contractor side of the equation. Eleven years of working for defense contractors in the Middle East gave me a third dose of the military-industrial complex and showed me how corrupt it could really be. However, first, I experienced the best of what the US military can do, which was a stark contrast to Vietnam: a conflict America definitively won, backed by a clear and practical strategy.

On or about September 30, 1990, I was on leave in Spain and Morocco after an assignment with NATO in Naples, Italy, when I found myself called into my next war. I was in Morocco reminiscing about my youth living on a French citrus farm my father had rented in the early 1950s. Regardless of being on vacation, the sensitivity of my high-level NATO security clearance came with a strict requirement that I report my itinerary to the US Embassy in Rabat. When I visited the embassy on August 3, 1990, I learned that Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army had invaded and seized Kuwait the day before.

I also learned from the embassy's Marine security personnel that the unit I would join after leave, the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I-MEF), was scheduled to deploy to Saudi Arabia to defend oil fields against a possible attack south by the Iraqi Army.

I immediately called the I-MEF Headquarters at Camp Pendleton, California, and was directed to proceed from Rabat to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. After explaining that I first needed to relocate my new wife, Tricia, into quarters at Camp Pendleton, I was permitted to head to the States first. I settled Tricia, my second wife, and proceeded to Riyadh ten days later, where I assumed my duties as the I-MEF liaison officer to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA).

In the First Gulf War, the community of nations recognized a credible threat to world peace when Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. This invasion gave all peace-loving nations a unifying purpose that glued the coalition together. There was near-universal agreement that Kuwait must be liberated from five hundred thousand ruthless Iraqi forces. Nevertheless, it was also true that maintaining unrestricted world access to purchasing Middle Eastern oil was a serious consideration.

A significant lesson from the First Gulf War was the value and necessity of getting national, international, and regional support. If it had not been for Watergate, Nixon might have obtained more of this support to achieve his aim of defeating North Vietnam. Nevertheless, Vietnam was a stark

contrast to the First Gulf War, where the United Nations (UN) made its voice heard unequivocally and backed those words with action, as the organization's founders originally intended.

The United Nations Security Council issued resolution 660 on August 2, 1990, “condemning the invasion and demanding Iraq's immediate and unconditional withdrawal of its forces to the positions they had occupied the previous day.”¹¹ Every opportunity was offered to resolve the crisis politically through eleven more UN resolutions that year as a build-up of Coalition forces continued. The Iraqis failed to comply, so the decision was made to engage with military force.

As a precursor to military intervention, friendly forces needed real estate near Kuwait to assemble, militarily known as an Intermediate Staging Base (ISB). Since Saudi Arabian leaders were genuinely concerned that Iraq would continue south from Kuwait and occupy the country's oil industry on the east coast, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud asked the United States to help protect the Kingdom. Therefore, Saudi Arabia became the ISB for an offensive action to liberate Kuwait.

As an aside, King Fahd's request for US assistance was a direct insult to Osama bin Laden after the terrorist's offer to bring his al Qaeda organization from Afghanistan to protect Saudi oil interests. Bin Laden felt that since he'd driven the Russians out of Afghanistan, he could do the same against Saddam Hussein in Kuwait. The al Qaeda terrorist attack on my Saudi compound about a decade after the First Gulf War directly resulted from that perceived insult.

During the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was America's ISB. However, for political reasons, our enemy was allowed to operate with near impunity from sanctuaries throughout Cambodia, North Vietnam, China, and Laos. Effectively, American forces never isolated the battlefield or fully took the war into North Vietnam until it was too late. We had dominating air power, but it wasn't focused on eliminating the North Vietnamese will to fight, nor was it employed to eliminate essential support facilities as we did in the First Gulf War. Preparation of the battlefield in the First Gulf War, as evidenced by the thirty-day aerial bombing campaign, was masterfully designed to debilitate the enemy. Therefore, the ground campaign lasted only about 100 hours before Iraqi forces totally capitulated.

The US and Coalition's victory over Saddam Hussein's forces was fast, effective, and accomplished the chosen strategic aims, unlike what happened in Vietnam. I view this overwhelming success with great pride as a campaign planned by a generation of warriors who witnessed failure in Southeast Asia. This experience led these men to an unrelenting resolve and refusal to be similarly humiliated on their watch, unlike previous leaders during Vietnam. Crucially, our national political leaders gave the warfighters

the latitude to properly plan and execute the First Gulf War.

Participating in this conflict allowed me to experience strategy, planning, and execution done right, and I hoped the US would continue this practical and effective approach to war. Unfortunately, within a decade of the First Gulf War's conclusion, we would start repeating many of the same mis- takes from Vietnam.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, taking the fight to Afghan- istan to eliminate al Qaeda's base of operations was a righteous and correct decision. However, by the time I arrived in Afghanistan as a contract trainer for the 207th Corps in Herat in 2006, it soon became ap- parent that we were making the same ill-fated mistakes we had made in Vietnam decades earlier. Our strategy was again unfocused, the enemy again benefited from having unmolested staging areas across the border in Pakistan, and we were again wrongly empowering a corrupt local government and its security forces. And once again, our politicians squandered victory in Afghanistan as they had in Vietnam because of available resources and a govern- ment policy of restrained retaliation limited what military planners could do.

On August 25, 2006, I submitted my first information paper titled "Systemic Problems Hampering Efforts to Train and Modernize The 207th Corps." Since contract trainers in Afghanistan worked hand-in-glove with our joint and combined active-duty military counterparts, this paper was addressed to the active-duty commander via my defense contract team leader. Unfortunately, I immediately found myself in serious conflict with my team leader. He screamed and cursed me out, threatening me because he'd been painting a 'rose-colored' picture of the effort to our active-duty counterparts. Ultimately, this situation was re- solved by his forced transfer, but only after I placed him and the senior corporate leadership in Kabul on report to the corporate office in Washington, DC, for ethics violations.

In my paper, I highlighted the massive, systemic prob- lems that made it difficult to impossible to get the Afghan National Army's (ANA) 207th Corps up to speed while providing numerous recommended solutions. I also empha- sized that in the five months I worked as the G-3 operations mentor for the 207th Corps, I had established an excellent rapport with my G-3 counterpart, Colonel Ascar, his staff, and the unit's chief of staff, Brigadier General Fazil Ahmad Sayar.

I had managed to achieve some significant improve- ments in the corps' operations branch, and I was attempt- ing to do the same in its planning and training branches. However, my paper explained that some systemic problems across the 207th Corps needed to be addressed if the coali- tion was to be successful in training and modernizing this element of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This effort also included trying to improve various elements of the Afghan National Police (ANP), which I was integrating into

the ANA training program. In my mind, it was essential that these two forces work in concert to eliminate the ter- rorist threat in western Afghanistan.

In addition to highlighting how we were failing our mod- ernization mission, I provided solutions. I emphasized that unless the ANA employed drastic measures to remedy these systemic problems, there would be no local, long- term se- curity forces to defend Afghanistan. America's national treasure would be poured down a black hole, and we would have failed to build a viable Afghan National Army that could protect its citizens and eliminate the terrorist threat.

Perhaps the most pressing problems were force readi- ness and turnover. The number of 207th Corps personnel present each day was estimated to be only 36% of what it was supposed to be. By any standard, this made the unit "combat ineffective." One symptom and unaccept- able workaround was the fact the 207th Corps constantly formed composite units just to field enough soldiers for routine combat operations.

My closing comments in this information paper em- phasized that I could have remained silent on these issues but would not have been doing my duty as a professional training mentor—nor did I want to compromise my integ- rity. Therefore, I could not, in good conscience, stay quiet. If I had, I would have been part of the problem and not part of the solution.

While I stated that these problems might have only ex- isted in the 207th Corps, I was firmly convinced that they were indicative of issues with all ANA units. If that were the case, resolving these problems would require a much higher level of interest than just the joint and combined mentors at the 207th Corps level.

After submitting this paper, all hell broke loose. My local team leader and the corporate leadership in Kabul took punitive steps against me, warning me that I could not paint a negative picture of the situation. But eventually, corporate headquarters in DC sent an investigating offi- cer out to interview me, and the man thankfully told me that the individuals seeking to punish me couldn't do it for simply telling the truth and doing my job. The company then moved and replaced my team leader, though it's im- portant to note he was *promoted* out of his position, *not fired*.

This experience gave me greater insights into the prob- lems with the military-industrial complex, the strategic ef- forts in Afghanistan, and how one influenced the other. The management of this particular defense contracting company was perfectly satisfied to *acknowledge* the systemic corruption problems within the Afghan National Security Forces but *not willing to bring them to the attention* of active-duty service members. Their view was, "It isn't our job." Their primary interest was the bottom line: making money. Nevertheless, the company was paid with taxpayer dollars. And if we didn't resolve these systemic issues, the Afghan Army and police would never be capable of maintaining

security once international forces left their country.

Unfortunately, my worries came to fruition on August 31, 2021, another “day which will live in infamy” within US history. It was the date of the botched Non-Combat Evacuation Operation (NEO) of American citizens and some allies from Afghanistan.

* * *

In 2010, I took a year’s break from contractor work to be with my family in Australia. In 2012, I received an unsolicited request from another defense contracting company offering me the opportunity to mentor an ANA brigadier general who was the current operations officer at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) in Kabul. I accepted the offer and returned to Afghanistan.

At a conference I attended upon returning, the commander of the International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF) and US 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.” So, I took the initiative and sent a personal letter—an assessment paper—to COMISAF. He acknowledged receipt of the paper with this 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

Nevertheless, once again, I saw no course correction.

The title of my assessment paper was “Enemy on the Inside.” It contained an evaluation of what I saw as a trainer and mentor serving in Afghanistan from 2006–12. This time, I doubled down on what I’d previously presented in my 2006 “Systemic Problems” paper. I asked the following questions:

1. What leverage is available to the advisor for ensuring corrective action?
2. What incentive can be used to improve performance?
3. What are the consequences of no change?
4. What about being more forceful to ensure corrective action is taken?

I also wrote that forty-three years ago, I’d fought against an insurgency in a narrow geographic location identified

as Vietnam. Similarities in Afghanistan were extraordinarily familiar. We were enriching a few Afghans at the expense of many others. This was causing many Afghans to view us, “The BIG US,” as part of the problem, not part of the solution. Unfortunately, this perception supported claims made by the Taliban insurgents, just as it previously helped the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War.

From my perspective, corruption had a death grip on meaningful progress in Afghanistan. Senior Afghan officers issued convincingly sincere yet rhetorical orders and guidance when addressing their subordinates. They were merely placating the ISAF advisors who were their 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 the coalition was attempting to accomplish in training and modernizing the Afghan forces.

What we had was an “enemy on the inside” who was far worse than the Taliban or al Qaeda. This internal enemy masterfully manipulated a well-organized pyramid of profit-sharing corruption behind an elaborately calculated smokescreen of ambiguity and chaos. All of the maladies we identified were merely symptoms of this internal rot. The high absent without leave (AWOL) rate, poor leadership, malingering, substandard food, theft of resources, soldiers’ pay problems, failure of accountability for personnel and resources, inability to establish a training cycle, “Green-on-Blue killings” (ANSF personnel killing ISAF soldiers), and the inaccurate Readiness Reporting System (RRS) were the consistent hallmarks of this “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 helped create. It was like the Mafia. Corrupt officials acted with impunity. There were no consequences, there was no incentive to do the right thing, and there was no leverage that would make a change possible; our best efforts were hamstrung.

I clearly saw a failure to achieve our objectives because we were ineffective at implementing the reforms necessary to eliminate a profit-sharing business that Afghan leaders would not abandon. Don’t misunderstand me; I had a great rapport with the Afghans, but I had been there long enough to know they saw us as a soft touch for whatever they wanted. My analogy for this phenomenon is, “The honey is too sweet despite the bee stings.”

After eight months in this second job in Afghanistan and fifty-seven months in the country overall, all I heard and saw during lengthy and laborious meetings was more of the same. Everyone was “admiring the problem” but taking no action to resolve the systemic issues I identified in both papers. We had empowered bad behavior, and the situation

had achieved enormous and grave proportions. I again made recommendations to COMISAF:

1. Increased oversight (take back direct control) of fiscal matters, ensuring proper delivery of both quantity and quality of goods and services purchased.
2. Relief for cause of incompetent or corrupt officers/officials should not be as difficult as it was when corruption and misconduct were flagrant and obvious. Talking about the problem doesn't resolve the problem. A joint Coalition-ANSF board should decide the issue for each offender.
3. There must be a shared responsibility at the tactical unit level; advisors must supervise daily accountability of soldiers/policemen present for duty (morning, noon, and night) or pay for the salaries of "phantom soldiers and policemen" who were AWOL. Otherwise, these salaries would be skimmed by corruption.
4. In my view, we needed to politically close the opportunity for exit/entry visas to all those involved in corruption. As an incentive for corrective action, it needed to be done immediately, not later. Additionally, any nation issuing a visa in violation of this policy should be punished with sanctions.
5. Most importantly, we collectively needed to tighten the screws by ensuring that business was conducted in a more honest and transparent way. In the Middle East, the failure to be forceful and pay scrupulous attention to business details is viewed as a weakness that encourages corruption. However, many individuals in this culture respect those who obviously value any services and goods provided when they see them protected with an iron fist.

At the end of World War II, the Allies assumed responsibility for managing the affairs of the vanquished Axis powers until the latter demonstrated they were capable of running their own affairs. Many of my most trusted Afghan friends told me in confidence that we initially had it right in 2001 and 2002 when we maintained similar control.

Many Afghan citizens knew what happened after WWII and hoped for a peaceful and prosperous future similar to what the former Axis powers achieved. However, by the time I finally left Afghanistan, the Afghan people vacillated between fear, uncertainty, and distrust of the coalition. Many viewed us as having installed corruption—and in their view, we should eliminate it. The American people, the Afghan people, and the loved ones of all those who died fighting the insurgency deserved better than just rhetoric.

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

Almost as bad, the corrupt officials we'd leave behind when US forces exited the country would also leave to live

elsewhere in homes that they purchased with their ill-gotten gains. This was exactly what happened during and before the US withdrawal in August 2021. By turning a blind eye to these systemic problems, we facilitated the enrichment of a few at the expense of the Afghan people.

While serving as a mentor at the Ministry of Defense in Kabul, I once again found myself at odds with the leadership of my defense contractor company. However, this time, active-duty coalition service members came to my rescue, threatening the company's leadership to leave me alone. "We like the job Tom Williams is doing. And if you persist, you will be the ones fired," a Canadian colonel named Bouchard told them. So, I served the rest of my six-month contract.

At my farewell luncheon in Kabul, I expressed my appreciation and gratitude to Colonel Bouchard for saving my job. He interrupted me mid-sentence.

"Tom, we didn't save you; we saved them from you!" he said.

It seemed that the leadership of my defense contractor companies expected me to remain silent or get fired. However, I was determined to do what was right. So, in every case, I had a face-to-face showdown emphasizing the consequences of not correctly training the Afghan Security Forces. Unfortunately, it was all for naught. Once again, the US military may have won all the battles in Afghanistan, but the politicians and bureaucrats squandered victory, with the military-industrial complex taking its profits along the way.

* * *

So, what does all this mean? And how do my experiences help answer why we were in Vietnam and Afghanistan and why those efforts turned out poorly?

Well, after over forty years of active-duty military service and including defense contractor work, I clearly see that our politicians are great cheerleaders when it comes to involving our nation in wars. However, they often fail to consider what the end state of a conflict should look like and don't develop a reasonable exit strategy. Returning Vietnam to stability and normalcy at the conclusion of our war there would have always been a challenge, and Afghanistan was a more difficult task. For many, many years, "normalcy" in Afghanistan had been chaos, at best. Long before the US became involved after 9/11, the Afghans were at war with themselves, fighting among regional warlords and everyone in their neighborhood. And failed US efforts and the lack of a reasonable exit strategy blatantly squandered 20 years of our national treasure—most importantly, the lives and limbs of our warfighters.

Many defense contractors were only interested in their bottom lines. No substantive changes were made to correct

fatal flaws in a policy to train the ANSF in Afghanistan or to win the war in Vietnam decades before. In each case, the corruption I saw in South Vietnam, Herat, and Kabul was there on day one when America arrived and was still there—likely worse with our injection of money—when we left. No action was taken to correct it, and I can only assume the topic was considered a political hot potato. While active-duty service members may have reported these problems up the chain of command, as I did as a contractor to COMISAF, no one seemed to make a course correction at the contractor, senior active duty, or political levels.

That brings me to the August 2021 Non-Combat Evacuation (NEO) of Afghanistan ordered by President Joe Biden. It echoed memories of helicopters evacuating personnel from the rooftop of the US Embassy in Saigon in April 1975, which I watched on TV as a captain attending Communications Electronics School in Quantico, Virginia. Both events were embarrassing, demoralizing spectacles. Biden's order was a particularly compelling example of a political decision rendering success unattainable while ensuring a return to the status quo once the US departed.

Having conducted a NEO of Beirut in July 1976 during Lebanon's civil war and having assisted in planning the NEO of French citizens from Algeria in 1995, I know what a successful operation of that nature looks like. There is a well-established base of knowledge governing how a proper NEO should be conducted; Afghanistan wasn't only not a textbook case—it was the most unmitigated disaster I have ever witnessed!

I knew a NEO was never going to be easy in a country as fractured, rugged, and undeveloped as Afghanistan. It was also no surprise that the ANSF crumbled so rapidly in the face of the Taliban's widespread offensive once Americans drew back. Was the NEO just another in a long list of classic cases where senior US military leaders ignored facts and accepted political leaders' knee-jerk decisions, or did our civilian leaders not listen to what the military was telling them about withdrawal from Afghanistan? I believe our political leaders, like during Vietnam, were impatient to extract themselves from what they recognized was a mess and failed to heed solid military recommendations that the withdrawal had to be done at a more controlled rate.

Never have I seen such a poorly organized, amateurish attempt at an orderly evacuation from a war zone. The day the last US aircraft left Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, along with the preventable deadly suicide bombing of the Kabul Airport that preceded it on the 26th, will long be remembered as an enormous national disgrace. The consequences of this blunder will haunt American foreign policy for generations. For example, I suspect that Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a direct result of our perceived political weakness in Afghanistan. And

only time will tell if the Chinese attack Taiwan using the same assumptions.

In Vietnam and Afghanistan, the politicians couldn't resolve problems by political means. Therefore, those of us in the military were pushed into the breach and won all the battles—while politicians lost the wars. The enormous expense of loyal service members' lives and health and eighty-nine billion dollars' worth of military equipment abandoned in Afghanistan should spur some intense national self-reflection. Our elected representatives in Congress must carefully scrutinize America's decision-making processes whenever there is a serious consideration of US forces going to war in the future. More importantly, I believe it has to be more than scrutinized (micro-managed)—we need to all agree on our aims and objectives and what we need to do to achieve them.

Many of us who served in support of our national policies in Afghanistan or Vietnam were participating in an unnecessary war. We were also unwittingly supporting some of the unsavory aspects of the military-industrial complex. I am not implying that defense contractors are all bad, unnecessary, or guilty of subversion for profit alone; hell, I was one. I also still have some very close friends involved in the weapons technology sector. The people I know who perform these jobs are doing the right things for the right reasons. Most importantly, future officers should avoid the politicization of the military and to understand that their actions can risk American lives. As professionals, we must demand that our civilian leaders be unified in their objectives for the use of the military and that they understand and will follow the military recommendations.

We have some of the best weapons, war materials, and military trainers on the face of the earth. However, some work remains to be done to eliminate the mindset among some defense contractors that the bottom line is more important than eliminating the enormous amounts of fraud, waste, and abuse in the system. The mission must always come first. My most appalling revelation as a contract trainer and mentor was that most of the culprits who I worked with were retired US military field-grade officers.

For better or worse, I've been able to connect the dots of failure over the course of my extensive military service during war and peace. In some cases, these threads led to the Pentagon. In others, the military-industrial complex and defense contractors played a role. And ultimately, our political 'bobbling heads' who insist on supporting corrupt foreign administrations shoulder most of the blame.

So, now you know 'the reason why' I believe we were in Vietnam and Afghanistan and why we walked away, failed our strategic missions, and abandoned the Vietnamese and Afghan people. In both cases, many of the

ordinary people of these countries placed their trust and confidence in America. Theirs was the hope for a better life and success against an evil enemy. America had proven it had the resources and capability to accomplish these aims, as evidenced by our overwhelming victory in WWII and other conflicts. Given smarter and more practical approaches, goals, and exit strategies, we could have achieved something not as grand but positive—certainly without wasting as many lives and resources. Regardless, in both Vietnam and Afghanistan, it was our politicians who squandered victory, not our military.

Knowing what I know now, with the experience, wisdom, and rational cynicism acquired over the years, would I volunteer for Vietnam again? Many young Marines and other servicemembers may wind up asking themselves a similar question. The answer, despite any misgivings about that war and others, would be “yes.” It’s because I am and will forever be a Marine—and that’s what we do. It is the core beliefs of our Corps that attracted me to service.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Although I felt that being assigned to attend Communications Officers Courses would be the kiss of death, I soon learned that this knowledge was invaluable.

Without communications, there is no command and control on the battlefield, and knowing the operational intricacies of communications proved to be an excellent addition to my warfighting skills.

Young Marines won’t always get the assignments they want, but they should always embrace them.

You never know where the twists and turns of a career will take you and how much you’ll benefit from the journey.