

AFGHANISTAN: THE ENDLESS WAR? – “OPERATION ENDURING
FREEDOM” AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN EXAMINED THROUGH
THE NEW YORK TIMES

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Maisterintutkielmani käsittelee Afganistanin sotaa vuosien 2001 ja 2014 välillä yhdysvaltalaisen johtavan sanomalehden <i>The New York Timesin</i> kautta tarkasteltuna. Lähestyn tutkimusaiheeni eli Afganistanin sotaa sen kiihkeimpinä vuosina Yhdysvaltojen osalta hyödyntäen <i>The New York Timesissa</i> edellä mainittujen vuosien aikana kirjoitettuja lehtiartikkeleita pääasiallisena tutkimuslähteenä. <i>The New York Times</i> on erittäin arvostettu ja pitkään toiminut sanomalehti, joka on muun muassa voittanut lukuisia Pulitzerin-palkintoja Yhdysvalloissa, joita myönnetään journalistisista ansioista.</p> <p>Afganistanin sodan syttyminen vuosituhaten alussa linkittyi vahvasti globaalin radikaali-islamistisen terrorismin nousuun. Syyskuun 11. päivän terroriteot oli keskeinen tapahtuma, joka aiheutti Afganistanin ja Terrorisminvastaisen sotien syttymisen. Kyseiset sodat määrittivät ja ovat määritelleet Yhdysvaltojen harjoittamaa ulkopoliitiikkaa Lähi-idässä sekä Keski-Aasiassa yli kahden vuosikymmenen ajan.</p> <p>Afganistanin sodan ja sen tapahtumien tutkiminen on tärkeää, sillä aihetta tutkimalla voidaan paremmin selvittää joitakin juurisyytä, jotka selittävät muun muassa radikaali-islamististen liikkeiden, kuten Talibanin nousua sekä Yhdysvaltojen tavoitteita Terrorisminvastaisessa sodassa. Afganistanin sodan päättyminen kesällä 2021 Talibanin paluulla valtaan Afganistanissa ja Yhdysvaltojen vetäytymisellä maasta oli keskeinen tapahtuma, josta ei ole vielä juurikaan tehty laajaa ja tapahtumaa selittävää tutkimusta. Maisterintutkielmani, joka yhdistelee kriisi- ja lehdistötutkimusta omalta osaltaan, esittelee joitakin syitä, miksi Afganistanin sota päättyi lopulta Talibanin voittoon ja miten länsimainen media käsitteli kyseistä sotaa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessani lähestyn Afganistanin sotaa seuraavilla tutkimuskysymyksillä: miten <i>The New York Times</i> käsitteli Afganistanin sodan alkuvaihetta ennen ja jälkeen syyskuun 11. päivän terroritekoja? Miten <i>The New York Times</i> käsitteli Afganistanin sotaa ”Operation Enduring Freedomin” eli vuosien 2001 ja 2014 välillä? Vastaamalla näihin tutkimuskysymyksiin tutkielmassani selviää, että sanomalehti kirjoitti Afganistanin sodan eri tapahtumista ja aihealueista, kuten Yhdysvaltojen asevoimien tekemistä ilmaiskuksista ja Afganistanin hallinnon sisäisestä korruptiosta, hyvin vaihtelevasti. Sodan ensimmäisinä vuosina sanomalehti oli myönteisesti sodan kannalla ja keskittyi pitkälti uutisoimaan Afganistanissa tapahtuvia jälleenrakennusprosesseja. Tämä uutisoiminen ja sen sävy kuitenkin muuttui, mitä pidemmälle sota Yhdysvaltojen osalta kesti.</p>	
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Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Primary source and previous research	3
1.3 Methodology and research questions	7
2 AFGHANISTAN	10
2.1 Brief history of Afghanistan	10
2.2 Population and religion in Afghanistan	12
2.3 Taliban	14
3. THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN	17
3.1 9/11 and the background for the War in Afghanistan	17
3.2 “Operation Enduring Freedom” and the start of the War in Afghanistan	24
3.3 Formative years of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	34
3.4 End of “Operation Enduring Freedom” and withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan	45
4. CONCLUSIONS.....	56
5. SOURCES.....	59

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In this master's thesis my aim is to examine articles such as news reports, editorials and columns that were written in *The New York Times* during the 21st century conflict known as the War in Afghanistan. The specific phases of the war under analysis will be the prelude for the United States invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11 the terrorist attacks (2001) and the War in Afghanistan during "Operation Enduring Freedom" (2001-2014).

The Primary source for my study will be *The New York Times* which is an American newspaper that has readers around the globe. I chose *The New York Times* as my primary source because it is a well-established and renowned newspaper that has won numerous accolades such as the Pulitzer Prize repeatedly and continues to be a driving force in the field of journalism even globally. The newspaper will provide me with many insights into the conflicts in Afghanistan through the eyes of the United States in the most recent decades. As my primary source will be The New York Times, I have decided to focus my research mostly on the years when the United States' involvement in Afghanistan was at its peak.

My primary objective is to present and analyse events and aspects of the War in Afghanistan and how they laid the foundation for the Taliban's eventual second rise to power by toppling the Afghan government in the summer of 2021. By analysing *The New York Times*, I will also showcase some parts of the daily lives of the Afghan people during the war and how the U.S. led multinational coalition made efforts to democratise and rebuild Afghanistan as presented in the newspaper.

The almost continuous period of conflicts in Afghanistan during the 20th and 21st centuries are a separate display of all-encompassing turmoil in most recent history. The conflicts, especially the War in Afghanistan, also mark the longest military and even "nation-building" involvement of the United States since the Vietnam War which also has to be taken into account in why the conflict in Afghanistan should be under further and extensive research now and in the future.

Afghanistan as a country has had a long history of being a battle ground for political, diplomatic, and military confrontations between external actors, such as foreign powers, as well as internal ones, including the monarchy, ruling regimes, political parties, and religious movements. The country is quite a rare display of how a somewhat geographically isolated region with a long history of major religious, cultural, and military hardships and changes has created a structure of life for its inhabitants that still continues to exist despite occasional setbacks and hindrances created by different factors.

I chose Afghanistan and the War in Afghanistan as my research topic because I feel that to better understand the events of summer 2021 and the Taliban's, an Islamic fundamentalist movements second rise to power, there should be an overview which would, in part, explain why the efforts of the United States and its allies to rebuild and democratise Afghanistan turned out to be unsuccessful. At the present day as the Taliban has taken back control of the country after almost twenty years of struggle, it is evident that the fundamentalist and religiously motivated regime has been carrying out its plans of reshaping Afghanistan as an Islamic theocracy. For Afghans, this has meant an almost total shutdown of rights and freedoms that would be more guaranteed if the Taliban had never regained control.

Other reasons why I took up the task of writing my master's thesis on Afghanistan include the notion that studying the 20th and 21st century conflicts in Afghanistan will help to better understand the causality of some recent and perhaps upcoming events in global politics. My thesis will hopefully also produce some insight into the growth and spread of radical Islamism and why the United States' foreign policy goals in the Middle East and in the global War on Terror to counter it largely failed around the turn of the millennia.

The role of the media during modern conflicts cannot be understated, and this is very much the case with Afghanistan as well the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-Hamas war. To study or showcase how the news media can address, influence and present war has been a growing phenomenon in the last few decades, thanks to many technological advances which have revolutionised the boundary between the private and public walks of life¹. The

¹Fairclough, 1997, 52-54

importance of keeping track with the changing landscape of media to better understand its role and function on how people perceive wars and conflicts has become more clear than ever.

During this master's thesis my primary aim is to focus on the years when the United States and its allies were most involved in Afghanistan during the early 21st century. I have made this conscious decision based on two factors: 1) The United States was the only state that was at times heavily involved in the Afghan conflicts beginning with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and ending in the fall of the Afghan government in 2021 2) *The New York Times* as a primary source mainly approaches the subject through the eyes of the United States, which itself already ties my research with sentiments as well as observations made in the form of journalistic writings by U.S. journalists, politicians and government officials.

1.2 Primary source and previous research

Primary source

As I have already established in the introduction, the primary source from which I will be drawing my conclusions and analysis is *The New York Times*. Through the newspaper I will examine different forms of journalistic writings, such as editorials, news articles and letters to the editor. At this point it should be noted that the time period under analysis ranges roughly from 2001 to 2014.

The New York Times became the main source for my study mainly because of its renown and well-established position in the field of journalism. *The New York Times* has won countless awards in the field of journalism, the most notable of which is the Pulitzer Prize, which the newspaper has won close to 150 times². This amount is higher than any other newspaper³.

Despite the newspaper's relatively humble beginnings in the year 1851 as a penny paper⁴, it has grown considerably in its size and reach over the years. Today it has subscribers in 235 countries and over 9 million subscribers worldwide⁵. The newspaper's almost continuous

²<https://www.nytc.com/award-collection/2019-pulitzer-prize-winners/> (cited 26.03.2024)

³Usher, 7, 2014

⁴Penny paper means the same as Penny press, which were cheap, tabloid-style newspapers mass-produced in the United States during the 1800s. Other notable newspapers which started as penny papers include *The Sun* and *The New York Tribune*, both of which later became full-fledged and renowned newspapers just like *The New York Times*.

⁵<https://www.nytc.com/company/> (cited 26.03.2024)

growth in size, readership, reputation, and prestige, indicated, for example, by the Pulitzer Prizes along with its relative accessibility, are all signs of its legitimacy and on-going legacy in the field of journalism.

By the 20th century however, after the Second World War, *The New York Times* started to slowly shift from its liberal conservative roots to a more politically neutral stance. Between the years 1969-1986 and during the tenure of managing editor A.M. Rosenthal the newspaper covered various political upheavals in the U.S. such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and many others. Under Rosenthal the newspaper also started covering everyday news subjects which had been deemed inappropriate for news coverage by conservative standards of the immediate era following the Second World War, including gruesome crimes, sexual behaviour, and drug use⁶.

During the course of going through *The New York Times* articles for my thesis, I noticed that the writers of the articles used as source material remained most often the same. Without having a better understanding of the newspaper's practices one can only assume that it was a way for *The New York Times* to rely on established journalists or experts. Even though the main point of my study is not to take into account the writers or their possible influence per se, I find it important at least to give a brief background information about some of the writers of the articles being used as source material.

One writer which I must briefly mention is John F. Burns, who started to write noticeably about Afghanistan starting from the Taliban's rise to power and who was a key journalist at the newspaper as he worked as a correspondent for 40 years. Burns stands out from many of the other writers due to his long resume and the fact that during his career at *The New York Times* he reported from 10 foreign bureaus of the newspaper. Burns was assigned to cover news relating to Iraq from 1990 to summer 2002 where he also subsequently covered the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Moreover, Burns was among the first to cover the rise of militant Islamism by writing about the bombing of USS Cole by Al-Qaeda in 2000 and by serving as the newspaper's bureau chief in Kabul and Islamabad, where he covered the War in Afghanistan and

⁶Schwarz, 2014, 59-62

the aftermath of 9/11. Burns was awarded the Pulitzer Prize twice during his long career at the newspaper. He retired in 2015⁷.

Other notable editors and reporters for *The New York Times* regarding the news coverage of Afghanistan include Carlotta Gall, Eric Schmitt, and Rod Norland. Carlotta Gall is a British journalist and author who joined *The New York Times* in 1999 and who is currently covering the War in Ukraine as a senior correspondent. In previous years Gall wrote extensively about Afghanistan, as she worked as a correspondent based in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2001 and 2013, during the most intense years of U.S. involvement in the country. More notably, she was also part of a team which won the Pulitzer Prize for covering Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2009⁸. In 2014 Gall published a book entitled *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* in which she argued that the United States should have focused its efforts to fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda on Pakistan rather than Afghanistan.

Eric Schmitt has worked as a reporter for the newspaper for 40 years and has covered every conflict in the Middle East since 1991. Schmitt's main area of expertise is U.S. national security, such as military affairs and counterterrorism. Currently Schmitt works as a national correspondent based in Washington⁹. Rod Norland has been most recently serving as the newspaper's bureau chief in Kabul. During his career at *The New York Times* Norland has worked as a foreign correspondent in over 150 countries¹⁰.

These writers, editors and correspondents are only a few examples of the cadre of journalists who have been tirelessly covering news concerning Afghanistan during these last two decades for *The New York Times*. The sheer range and scope of the newspaper's coverage of Afghanistan by its experienced and well-educated editors speaks loudly for the newspaper's agenda of accurate on-the-ground reporting and independent journalism¹¹.

Previous research

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/by/john-f-burns>, (cited 22.11.2023)

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/by/carlotta-gall>, (cited 22.11.2023)

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/by/eric-schmitt>, (cited 22.11.2023)

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/by/rod-nordland>, (cited 22.11.2023)

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/company/>, (cited 22.11.2023)

There has been a quite good amount of research on the description and showcasing of war such as the War in Afghanistan through media, especially in the field of communication studies. Good examples include *The Pen and the Sword: Press, War, and Terror in the 21st century* (2010) by Calvin Exoo and Kuyper's *Bush's War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age* (2006). The viewpoint of media is prevalent throughout my research and as such I feel that some efforts to connect my study with research based on media and journalism are more than justified.

Some works which study how the media influenced American public opinion regarding the War in Afghanistan especially during its start include Jill Edy's and Patrick Meirick's article *Wanted, Dead or Alive: Media Frames, Frame Adoption, and Support for the War in Afghanistan* (2007) and *U.S. and the Others Global Media Images on "The War on Terror"* (2004) edited by Stig Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen. In their article Edy and Meirick address how media frames¹² influenced the U.S. public's opinion after the September 11 attacks, which in turn resulted in support for the War in Afghanistan. The work edited by Nohrstedt and Ottosen includes takes of how the discourse in mainstream media regarding global terrorism and Afghanistan presented itself shortly after 9/11.

One scholarly work which gives an alternative consideration of the portrayal of Afghanistan in western media is the article "US Mass Media and Image of Afghanistan: Portrayal of Afghanistan by Newsweek and Time (2011)" by Ghulam Shabir, Shahzad Ali, and Zafar Iqbal. The article, much like this thesis, uses articles written in two major U.S. magazines, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, as its basis for research. The article concludes that the news coverage concerning Afghanistan between the years 1991-2001 was mostly negative and goes so far to say that the magazines under examination deliberately painted a hostile picture of Islam and Afghanistan as a Muslim country¹³.

The discourse surrounding militant Islamic terrorism must also be considered during my thesis. Taking note of such works as *Discourse, war and terrorism* (2007) by Adam Hodges and Chad Nilep will help me with understanding the concept of terrorism and how it fits in the grey area

¹²Media frames refer to the way messages are interpreted in the context of mass-media communication. The idea of frames or framing can be linked to Erving Goffman's research method *framing analysis*.

¹³Ali, Iqbal, Shabir, 98-99, 2011

between politics and civilian life. One major and more historical work which examines the early stages of the War in Afghanistan by the U.S. includes *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom (2005)* by Ben Lambeth. This framework of previous research concerning the War in Afghanistan will help me with situating my study somewhere between the fields of conflict and media studies.

1.3 Methodology and research questions

Research questions

With *The New York Times* and other sources related to the topic of my thesis, I intend to answer the following research questions:

1. *How did The New York Times cover Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, did its coverage change and why?*
2. *How did The New York Times cover Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-2014), did its coverage change and why?*

The first research question will help me to analyse and deconstruct two distinct periods: 1) Afghanistan before 9/11 and 2) Afghanistan after 9/11. Showcasing the period of the United States' arguably diminishing interest towards Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the almost immediate power struggle between different Mujahideen and other Islamist factions in the following chapter will give some context for the eventual change in the political climate in the U.S. regarding Afghanistan. In terms of the time period covered, the second question will be the more extensive one. The struggle to strengthen the Afghan government in its mission to provide change towards peace, democracy, and security domestically as well as fighting the Taliban insurgency will be at the core of the second question.

Methodology

As my primary research method, I will make use of *narrative analysis*, which is widely used in different fields of scientific research. As using narrative or narratives in any form of written text can be seen as a form of storytelling, narrative analysis as a research method delves into the story itself and helps a researcher to examine how us humans use narratives to create order,

construct texts, make sense of experiences and represent the surrounding world¹⁴. Narrative or narratives can also be understood as stories of past events and stories with either chronological or consequential sequences. The starting point or end of a narrative can thoroughly influence its understanding by its reader¹⁵.

As my study relies heavily on sources that are mainly drawn from the U.S. news media, narrative and narratives could be understood as certain topics presented by the news media regarding the conflicts in Afghanistan. Some topics that could be viewed as a part of a continuous chronological sequence of narratives could include key events and aspects, such as 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and how Afghan women were portrayed in the media. By using such topics or events as their narratives, the news media was most likely able to shape distinct perceptions among their daily readers (mostly to the U.S. public or the newspaper's subscribers) concerning the events in Afghanistan during The United States' involvement. This was noticeable especially right before or during the U.S.-led invasion, as the U.S. media presented practically continuous news concerning the then U.S. president George W. Bush and his justifications for the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan¹⁶.

The news media in particular have had a prominent role in how in recent decades many previously more private events, such as declarations of war or speeches by the U.S. presidents, have come to be considered public and even global events. The news media have also had a growing influence on how the greater public perceives wars. Such was the case during the Vietnam War, as the news media had a direct effect on how the general opinion of the war in the U.S. slowly turned against it¹⁷. Similar examples can be found more recently from Ukraine and again in the Gaza Strip, as the relentless news coverage of death and violence by the media has greatly influenced the greater public's reaction toward these conflicts.

It is also notable that in most news media outlets the presentation of news events is most often based on some politician's, expert's or government official's interview or remarks on a certain subject. This means that often journalists, such as those at *The New York Times*, form

¹⁴Riessman, 1993, 1-4

¹⁵Riessman, 1993, 17-18

¹⁶Hodges, Nilep, 2007, 51

¹⁷Fairclough, 1997, 58, 65

representations of events by combining different discourses or narratives made by one or more interviewed speakers into one singular understanding of reality via written text¹⁸. This has to be considered when conducting research using media and newspapers as a primary source, as is evident in this thesis as well.

While *narrative analysis* will be the main methodological approach utilised for analysing the narratives, presentations and portrayals found in the primary source material of my thesis, I will also make use of *close reading* as a secondary tool for analysis. *Close reading* is a research method which has its roots in literary studies but can be applied to decode any form of written text¹⁹. *Close reading* helps the researcher to break down the text, to better interpret and examine it at both word and sentence levels, as well as to understand its overall structure²⁰. The combination of these two methodological approaches will help me to examine and pinpoint the most important findings in *The New York Times* articles.

The structure of my thesis will from now on be as follows; the second chapter will briefly introduce the history of Afghanistan during the modern era, present the demographic structure of the country and showcase the background of the Taliban. The third chapter will analyse the background and the start of the War in Afghanistan, its events and how the United States slowly began to withdraw from Afghanistan. Finally, my thesis will conclude with the most important findings and conclusions drawn from *The New York Times* articles under analysis.

¹⁸Fairclough, 1997, 104-111

¹⁹Järviluoma, Pöysä, Vakimo, 2010, 331

²⁰Järviluoma, Pöysä, Vakimo, 2010, 338-343

2 AFGHANISTAN

2.1 Brief history of Afghanistan

Afghanistan stands out as a country in many ways. The country's rather divergent geography has for centuries been a major factor which has affected the way the country's population and its geopolitical and historical status have changed over the years. As the country lacks natural geographical borders, the only distinguishable borderlines are the rivers, such as Helmand and Amu Darya, which, together with the formidable Hindu Kush Mountain range, form a geographic template for the country²¹.

As a country, Afghanistan has had a long history of being in the centre of geopolitical struggles between many empires and so-called great powers of modern times. One major turning point for the country which set the framework for its modernisation process and its inclusion in present-day international politics began in the 19th century due to the conflict known as the "Great Game"²² between the growing Russian and British Empires. This conflict was an attempt by both great powers to halt each other's growing influence in Asia, especially in the regions surrounding Afghanistan. The conflict began in the 1830s when the internal power struggle inside Afghanistan prompted the British to support their choice of ruler for the country so that a Russian invasion would not take place.

The British attempt to influence and capitalise on the power struggle eventually came with a heavy cost in January 1842 when the British garrison in Kabul retreated from the city and was ambushed while marching in the unforgiving environment of Afghanistan. This disastrous defeat and other subsequent setbacks prompted the British to increase their political focus in India, and in 1893 an official treaty was signed which set up the borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan²³. The border, which later would be known as the *Durand Line*²⁴, gave the British reassurances that their interests in India and Asia would be secured at least for the time being. The *Durand Line* forms the internationally recognized borders for Afghanistan even today.

²¹Youngerman, Wahab, 2007

²²The term was coined by the British diplomat Arthur Connolly and later popularised by the famous author Rudyard Kipling in his novel *Kim* (1901)

²³Youngerman, Wahab, 96, 2007

²⁴Named after the then Indian foreign secretary Mortimer Durand. The border remains highly disputed between Afghanistan and Pakistan even today as it lacks any ethnic or topographic base.

The 20th century saw Afghanistan's inclusion into the League of Nations in 1934 and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States for the first time. One thing of note was that although the groundwork for interaction between the two countries was finally official, the U.S. did not assign a permanent envoy to the country until 1942²⁵. Afghanistan was not exempted from the waves of radicalisation and political turmoil of the century. The 1960s saw the rise of several political parties and movements founded on the main principles of the communist and Islamist ideologies. The subtle organisation of both of these political actors would have profound effects on the country's history. The last straw which would set the stage for the upcoming conflicts and turmoil in Afghanistan was the abolishment of the monarchy in 1973. After this it is safe to argue that the power vacuum left inside the country would enable the rise of communist ideology and, after this, Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan.

The United States' growing political interest in Afghanistan as a country in the 20th century can be traced back to the Cold War right before and during the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union²⁶. The growing presence of Soviet troops alerted the U.S. government to the Soviet Union's possible intentions in the region²⁷. The initial response of the United States concerning the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the subsequent occupation was to cut back shipments of grain to the Soviet Union and prepare for a possible military confrontation in the Persian Gulf²⁸. As the Soviets continued to increase their influence in Afghanistan in the form of a military presence and with the installation of a communist Afghan government, the struggle by the Afghans to rid themselves of the invaders became rapidly apparent. The emergence of an Afghan coalition which opposed both the Soviet occupiers and the new communist government came to fruition as the loosely aligned Afghan opposition groups took up arms in a fight against the unwelcomed occupant. This coalition, which was mostly made up of Afghan males who received the call for *jihad*,²⁹ were called the Mujahideen, meaning "those who wage *jihad*"³⁰.

²⁵Youngerman, Wahab, 106, 114, 2007

²⁶Cooley, Said, 5, 10, 2002

²⁷United States Department of State, 1980

²⁸The New York Times, 27.12.1979

²⁹An Arabic word that can be translated as (to) struggle or effort. The term is nowadays largely understood as a word for waging a "holy war" against non-Muslims. In its original context, however, it can be attributed to mean an internal religious or ethical struggle for improving oneself.

³⁰ Youngerman, Wahab, 2007, 171

The Mujahideen fought a desperate guerilla war against Soviet troops by using the country's mountainous terrain to their advantage. Although the Mujahideen were lacking in modern weaponry from the onset of the war compared with their Soviet adversary, the continuing armament support of the United States³¹ helped the Afghans to keep the Soviets on their toes for much of the latter part of the war. During the fighting, which is known as the Soviet-Afghan War, the United States also took the role of an active bystander, which was very evident through the news coverage of *The New York Times*. The war was even presented to the U.S. public as the USSR's own Vietnam War³².

After the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan in 1989 the fighting between the communist government and the Mujahideen carried on virtually without a break. The expected and relatively rapid collapse of the government left by the Soviets began immediately, as the struggle for key cities and areas in the country such as Jalalabad took place. The eventual downfall of the communist government came in 1992 when Mujahideen fighters finally closed in on the capital city of Kabul and slowly took control of it from the communist government. After the capture of the city the former rebel factions and leaders which formed the loose coalition of Mujahideen decided on forming an Islamic republic³³.

As the Cold War ended and the internal fighting in the form of civil war between different factions who once formed the loose coalition known as Mujahideen began, the United States's interest towards Afghanistan, this landlocked and distant country, started to slightly diminish. This shift of U. S's foreign policy's focus away from the Middle East was slowly taking place until the rise of such a radical Islamist group as Taliban and its co-operation with radical Islamic militants such as Al-Qaeda³⁴ gained the attention of the United States government and forced it to take action.

2.2 Population and religion in Afghanistan

Besides the at times unforgiving and rough geography of the country, one major factor which sets Afghanistan apart from many countries around the world is its population. Afghanistan's population is made up of several different ethnic groups which only quite recently have started to share a sense of national unity with representatives of other ethnicities inside the country.

³¹The New York Times, 28.3.1981, 13.12.1986

³²The New York Times, 2.11.1981, 14.2.1988

³³The New York Times, 25.4.1992, 29.4.1992

³⁴Goodson, 2001, 79-80

Before this, confrontations and animosities between the different ethnic groups were commonplace until intermittent threats of foreign powers and war helped to put the differences aside and unite the ethnicities against a common enemy³⁵. In addition to the united front provided by an incursion of foreign empires or great powers, the single biggest unifying factor in the country is the religion of Islam. Today the population of Afghanistan consists virtually entirely of Muslims. 99% of the population in the country practises Islam as their main religion, and the only differing factor is that approximately 80% of Muslims in the country belongs to the Sunni branch of the religion while the rest 19% are Shiites³⁶.

The population distribution inside the country's official national borders has for decades remained largely the same. The rough percentage of different ethnic groups goes as follows: Pashtuns (42%), Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), Uzbek (9%), Aimak (4%), Turkmen (3%), Baluchi (2%) and other (4%). However, this distribution of population has for a while now been a rough estimation of the demographic structure in the country as the absence of an official population census makes it difficult to verify³⁷.

Due to their strong representation in the population of the country, the Pashtuns have been the most politically dominant group in the country since the 18th century³⁸. One aspect which sets the Pashtun apart from the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan is the *Pashtunwali*³⁹, which is a code of honour shared by all the Pashtun tribes and in some sense possibly even by some of the other ethnic groups. In addition to *Pashtunwali*, the Pashtun are known for their harsh separation of gender roles, which for Pashtun women means that their lives are mostly centred within the boundaries of their home⁴⁰.

The next largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Tajiks, are mostly known for their tendency to be the most urbanised and business-minded of all the ethnic groups. As the name implies, Tajiks can also be found in the neighbouring country of Tajikistan, which explains the fact that up until recently they have shared their language, culture, and history with their fellow ethnic

³⁵Youngerman, Wahab, 13, 2007

³⁶Youngerman, Wahab, 18, 2007

³⁷Youngerman, Wahab, 13-14, 2007

³⁸Youngerman, Wahab, 14-15, 2007

³⁹*Pashtunwali* includes the main principles of hospitality and offering asylum to all those seeking help, revenge for misdeeds or insults, defense of women, family, property, and the homeland.

⁴⁰Youngerman, Wahab, 15, 2007

representatives in Tajikistan⁴¹. After the Pashtuns and Tajiks in the demography of the country come the Hazara. The Hazara are distinctive from their compatriots in the sense that they are mostly Shiite Muslims whereas other Afghans are mainly Sunni Muslims. Due to their differing views on Islam and more Asian appearance, the Hazara have often been victims of discrimination⁴².



Source: UN Cartographic Centre, NY

2.3 Taliban

Taliban is a plural *Pashto* word which means lower-level students of Islam. The name is a good indicator of the movement's rather humble beginnings since initially it gathered male members mainly among the Pashtuns from poor and rural backgrounds⁴³. The movement's leaders originated from *Madrasas*, or religious schools, in Pakistan, and many of the Taliban's founding members volunteered to fight against the troops of the Soviet Union during the Soviet-Afghan war. As the withdrawal of the Soviets subsequently left the Taliban in a fight against former

⁴¹Youngerman, Wahab, 15-16, 2007

⁴²Youngerman, Wahab, 16, 2007

⁴³ Rashid, 1-2, 2001, Youngerman, Wahab, 205, 2007

Afghan brothers-in-arms, a shift of focus had to be made. To make Afghanistan a “truly” Islamic state and to restore peace to the country became the new goal⁴⁴. Taliban’s ideological mixture of the *Pashtunwali* code and Salafism⁴⁵ gave a different understanding of how religion should play a part in the country, and in hindsight maybe this should have been a warning of what was to come⁴⁶.

Despite small initial attention from the rest of the world, Taliban started to get recognition when it rapidly took control of Kabul and large parts of Afghanistan in 1996 following years of fighting between former Mujahideen factions. The Taliban takeover was at first welcomed, as it brought about some stability and peace inside the country. Taliban’s insinuations of not carrying out acts of revenge against former enemies was probably also a thing which spoke positively for it⁴⁷. This response, however, turned around quickly when the movement started to apply strict social and religious policies which were based on *Sharia*⁴⁸ law and which fully banned such things as music and entertainment or education for women and imposed a strict law of veiling⁴⁹.

Nevertheless, as the world watched in astonishment, the Taliban did not hesitate with extending the reach of laws decreed in *Sharia* in the country and suppressing everything which in their eyes was against it⁵⁰. Possibly the most pivotal act which resulted in shock all around the world was the Taliban’s introduction of the death penalty, stoning, amputation of hands and other types of corporal punishment⁵¹. This imposition of the *sharia* resulted in growing concerns about the path the country would take under the movement's rule.

After it took control of most of the country, the Taliban was able to have formal diplomatic relations with only three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. As the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan started to deteriorate, the United Nations stepped in

⁴⁴Rashid, 21-22, 2001

⁴⁵Salafiyya in Arabic refers to advocacy of a return to the traditions of the "pious predecessors" (*salaf*), the first three generations of Muslims. Salafi jihadism is the more radical Sunni Islamic form of Salafiyya which promotes the idea of forming a global Islamic caliphate by waging a *jihad* against non-Muslims.

⁴⁶Barfield, 255-256, 261, 2010

⁴⁷Edwards, 235-236, 2002

⁴⁸*Sharia* is an Islamic code of law based on the religious texts of the Quran which includes guidance for religion and secular duties. The application of the law has been variable as most Islamic countries have tried to distance themselves from most outdated aspects of the law (such as stoning) in favour of a more modern and moderate take on Islamic law.

⁴⁹Barfield, 261, 2010

⁵⁰The New York Times, 26.5.1997

⁵¹Barfield, 261, 2010, The New York Times, 01.10.1996

and started to provide much needed help to the Afghan civilians, such as food aid. This action by the UN was seen as a conflict of its principles, as the human rights situation under the Taliban was far from ideal⁵².

Taliban's decline started almost as quickly as its rise to power, as its former allies slowly started to turn their backs to the movement. Some actions which made the situation even more precarious for Taliban were the movement's involvement in providing a safe haven for members of their ideological brothers in arms Al-Qaeda, including its leader Osama bin Laden, and providing shelter to other Islamic fighters, mostly from around Central Asia, whose goal was to destabilise and possibly topple the governments of the area⁵³. This, combined with the shock caused by 9/11, prompted the U.S. and its allies to make use of military force against the Taliban.

⁵²Barfield, 264, 2010

⁵³Rashid, 128-140, 2001, Youngerman, Wahab, 220, 2007

3. THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

In this chapter I will analyse the events that led up to the start of The War in Afghanistan, how the U.S. and its allies helped the Afghan government to stabilise Afghanistan roughly between the years 2001 and 2014, and some of the factors that contributed to the rise of the Taliban insurgency. By using *The New York Times* as my primary source for analysis, I will answer my research questions by thematically approaching different events and aspects of the War in Afghanistan, and how they were covered by the newspaper. From now on, I will mainly refer to *The New York Times* by using the abbreviation *NYT* to better save some space for the actual analysis and avoid any confusion.

At the start of this chapter the focus will be on how 9/11 was used as a justification for the U.S. government to launch a war in Afghanistan. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into some of the more multifactorial events and aspects of the war and highlight some of the reasons why the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, which eventually resulted in the War in Afghanistan ending in the re-establishment of Taliban rule in Afghanistan after almost two decades of war.

3.1 9/11 and the background for the War in Afghanistan

The initial reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, or -- as they would later be better known -- 9/11, was globally that of shock. It had been decades since an attack of such a magnitude had taken place against the United States and the shock became even greater when the mystery of who or what were behind these attacks started to become clear. But was there any evidence prior to 9/11 of how *The New York Times* would change its coverage of Afghanistan?

In January 2001 *NYT* had published an extensive news article which was part of a series entitled "One Man and a Global Web of Violence: How One Man Linked Far-Flung Islamic Armies In Global Web of Violence". This article, which was based on the reportage of three *NYT* journalists, highlighted the actions of one Osama bin Laden. Born into a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden would become famous as a militant leader and Islamic dissident who would in 1988, during and after his participation in the Soviet-Afghan War, create his own militant Islamist organisation called Al-Qaeda or "the base"⁵⁴. Most often seen as the person

⁵⁴Scheuer, 21, 71-75, 2011

responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, bin Laden would eventually be killed by U.S. special forces in 2011, after nearly a decade of being hunted by The United States government.

As the leader of Al-Qaeda, bin Laden had started to build up a worldwide organisation for exercising terror and waging a *jihad* against all secular governments of the Middle East and the Western powers which supported them⁵⁵. Through this article it was evident that bin Laden's plan for a worldwide *jihad* was well known at the time, and even *NYT* could trace back some of the history and activities of Al-Qaeda and its leader. Among other things, the backgrounds of Al-Qaeda and bin Laden were presented to the reader in the form of a timeline of pivotal years. These included the years 1984, when bin Laden moved from his native country Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to help establish training camps for Muslim fighters, and 1988, when bin Laden established Al-Qaeda. One key quote considering the organisation's actions in Afghanistan during the late 1990s in the article went as follows:

*According to a recent Central Intelligence Agency analysis, Al Qaeda operates about a dozen Afghan camps that have trained as many as 5,000 militants, who in turn have created cells in 50 countries. Intelligence officials say the group is experimenting with chemical weapons, including nerve gas, at one of its camps*⁵⁶.

This sample of text is a good example of how *NYT* was able to gather information about this terrorist organisation and make it more known to the newspaper's readers. What is more, *NYT* could contextualise and present Al-Qaeda's known actions thus far and give first-hand accounts of the organisation and its leader by interviewing Abdullah Anas, a former comrade-in-arms of bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghan war.

The awareness of a joint *fatwa*⁵⁷ issued by Al-Qaeda and other militant Muslim organisations which was quoted in the article, and which decreed: "To kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this possible" did not seemingly raise any concerns in *NYT* of possible terrorist attack against the U.S. in near future. This was evident in the said article and in the other three articles in the series despite accurate information on the Al-Qaeda training camps pictured in an article by

⁵⁵The New York Times, 14.01.2001

⁵⁶The New York Times, 14.01.2001

⁵⁷A formal ruling or an interpretation of Islamic law issued by a legal scholar.

editor Judith Miller⁵⁸. Additionally, the warnings of an experienced *NYT* columnist, Thomas Friedman, who in multiple columns prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks warned of the existing threats posed by Al-Qaeda and other militant terrorists passed surprisingly unnoticed at the time⁵⁹.

As the reliability of even first-hand sources used in these above-mentioned articles could most likely not be fully confirmed at the time, it is more than possible that *NYT* did not want to make any unfounded claims of Al-Qaeda's plausible plans in the near future and focused mainly on covering the rise of the organisation as well as its activities. The hatred carried by many militant Islamists against the United States, however, was at least publicly known thanks in part to the news coverage provided by *NYT* during this time period.

The grim activities of Al-Qaeda were also not unknown to the U.S. authorities, such as the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA. The organisation had been under investigation by U.S. officials after it was uncovered that it had only recently been behind other notable acts of terrorism, such as the bombings of two American embassies and of the U.S. navy ship USS Cole⁶⁰. More notably, Al-Qaeda had already been identified as the main perpetrator of a previous bomb attack at the World Trade Center in 1993. This bomb attack succeeded in raising questions and criticism of the U.S. foreign policies during the Cold War concerning the armament of the Mujahideen and other militant Islamist fighters in the Middle East who had started to turn their backs to the U. S⁶¹. The blame for the rise of militant Islamism was not to be one-sided, but it was clear that in the U.S. some were beginning to feel that the actions of the U.S. government, especially the CIA, were to blame for the deteriorating situation⁶² which would eventually lead to the events of 9/11.

9/11 and The New York Times

On the day of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the then U.S. president George Bush gave a speech to U.S. citizens where he addressed the situation in an understandably tense tone.

⁵⁸The New York Times, 16.01.2001

⁵⁹Allan, Zelizer, 201, 2002

⁶⁰The New York Times, 14.01.2001

⁶¹The New York Times, 11.04.1993

⁶²The New York Times, 9.01.2000

*“Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. The victims were in airplanes, or in their offices; secretaries, businessmen and women, military, and federal workers; moms and dads, friends and neighbours. Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.”*⁶³

This speech set the stage for what was to come, and it showed that the United States could no longer watch idly as terrorism against the country and its citizens had become a reality rather than a possibility. President Bush himself claimed that after the information of the terrorist attacks had reached him, his precise thought at the time had been: “they have declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war.”⁶⁴

The actual preparations for the United States’ following Global War on Terrorism began only days after 9/11 as Bush and his aides proclaimed a new policy of going after the perpetrators of the attacks. The next step would be a military campaign which would end the terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and the governments which harboured them⁶⁵. It soon became clear that the military campaign would target the Taliban in Afghanistan, who were already seen as co-perpetrators because of their continuing support for Al-Qaeda despite their claims of bin Laden’s innocence and that of the Taliban itself⁶⁶.

NYT’s coverage of the subsequent speeches made by the now “wartime” President Bush and his administration following 9/11 were quite extensive and accurate, as the newspaper quoted the president frequently. Due to the catastrophic nature of 9/11, the newspaper had a crucial role in relaying a strong picture of the U.S. and the Bush administration to help relieve the U.S. public's concerns about national safety and its need for information as well as answers from the authorities. In a *NYT* article titled “Many Listeners Are Reassured By Tough Talk: THE REACTION Bush's Speech Both Reassures and Frustrates Americans” by Robert D. McFadden, U.S. citizens from all walks of life were interviewed by and asked about their reactions to Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress and the American people held on 20th of September 2001. Throughout this article it was evident that President Bush’s speech gathered both

⁶³Kyupers, 1, 2006

⁶⁴Lambeth, 9, 2005, Woodward, 15, 2002

⁶⁵The New York Times, 14.09.2001

⁶⁶The New York Times, 12.09.2001, 17.09.2001

praise and criticism from the US public. Many interviewees viewed the speech as reassuring along with unifying, and one interviewee went as far to say that the speech was “the best thing he had ever heard”. At the same time, however, some saw Bush’s rhetoric as arrogant and claimed that it offered an “overly simplistic characterization of the struggle to come.”⁶⁷

President Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress and the American people on 20th of September 2001 had extensive coverage on the pages of *NYT*, as the whole address was transcribed in its entirety in the newspaper the following day. What is more, the address was analysed even further in the forms of an editorial and a news analysis. In the *NYT* editorial Bush’s speech was quite copiously praised as a “firm and forceful address” and Bush’s leadership was described “as strong and forthright as the nation could have wished”. The newspaper offered little or no criticism regarding Bush and the lacking concrete details of his plan for the upcoming campaign to destroy terrorism. The editorial only briefly mentioned Afghanistan and the fact that Bush’s demands to the Taliban government for the country to turn over bin Laden and to shut down all the terrorist camps would most likely be rejected outright⁶⁸. The news analysis on Bush’s address written by editor R.W. Apple Jr. offered some insight into the matter that some officials in the Bush administration wanted to focus on bin Laden rather than go after every suspect with links to terrorism, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan⁶⁹.

As more and more evidence of the Taliban's co-operation with Al Qaeda and of the fact that Bin Laden had taken refuge in Afghanistan started to emerge, there were still some remaining questions regarding international law and how the actions by the U.S. government would play out in this field. For example, the UN Security Council’s Resolutions 1368 and 1373 unequivocally condemned the 9/11 terrorist attacks but did not authorise any country to use military force to suppress terrorism⁷⁰. Some narrative elements of eventual “frontier justice” or acting above international law by the Bush administration were visible during the immediate aftermath of 9/11, as President Bush's speeches heavily implied. The Bush administration's reaction towards the Taliban government was subsequently swift and profound but resulted in some questions about whether the U.S. was operating in keeping with the principles of international

⁶⁷The New York Times, 21.09.2001

⁶⁸The New York Times 21.09.2001

⁶⁹The New York Times 21.09.2001

⁷⁰United Nations Security Council, 2001

law or just exacting punishment on the Taliban as an accomplice for Al-Qaeda's terrorist attack without self-sufficient proof⁷¹.

These questions did not manifest themselves in the pages of *NYT*, however, as the newspaper continued to independently cover how the Bush administration would handle Al-Qaeda and its ally in Afghanistan, the Taliban. A military analysis written on September 17th, 2001, less than a week after the terrorist attack, by correspondent Michael R. Gordon covered the prospect of an upcoming military strike against the Taliban and the occupation of the country by U.S. armed forces⁷². Inside Gordon's article the notion of at least a longer military campaign against the Taliban was indeed seen as the most likely route the Bush administration would take despite the risk of angering other Islamic countries. However, the eventual scale of the military campaign at this point was largely unknown and was just seen as a retaliatory strike against the ringleaders of the Taliban rather than as a long-term effort to restore peace, stability, and a democracy inside Afghanistan.

Judging by only this one article and the lack of an initial plan by the Bush administration, it could be argued that even before the invasion of Afghanistan there were some decision-makers at the top levels of the U.S. government who were concerned about the prospect of a possible and long occupation of Afghanistan. Moreover, some feared that a military strike by the U.S. against the Taliban would only worsen the conditions of the Afghan people and result in more animosity inside the Islamic world towards the U. S⁷³.

Reciprocally, however, the insistence on a military strike against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban among the U.S. public was at the time almost unanimous. A jointly conducted opinion poll by influential media actors *USA Today* and *CNN* immediately after 9/11 indicated that the support for a retaliation in the form of military action in Afghanistan was favoured by 88 percent of Americans⁷⁴. This startling support for a military action in Afghanistan by the U.S. public has later been examined, and it has been implied that it was in part influenced by the differing

⁷¹Hodges, Nilep, 2007, 54-55

⁷²The New York Times, 17.9.2001

⁷³Exoo, 40, 2010

⁷⁴Lambeth, 16, 2005

understandings of 9/11 as, for example, a crime or war event and how the media's influence resulted in intricate and overlapping reasonings for the war in Afghanistan⁷⁵.

9/11 can be seen as a turning point in how the United States regarded theocratic and authoritarian Islamic regimes throughout the world. This was evident on the pages of *NYT*, as there was a clear change in tone in the news articles concerning countries such as Afghanistan. By covering President Bush's speeches which helped in painting a hostile picture of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban, *NYT*, along with other U.S. media actors, had a significant role in how the 9/11 terrorist attacks would shape the opinion of the U.S. public in favour of an invasion of Afghanistan as well as a war against terrorism. In this regard, the U.S. press, including *NYT*, initially rallied around President Bush and by covering his speeches helped to form a mental image to the US public of Bush as a strong leader during a time of crisis⁷⁶.

NYT stood out from many of its journalistic counterparts during the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the sense that the newspaper quickly took up the task of covering the effects of the terrorist attacks as extensively as possible. This the newspaper achieved in part by establishing a separate section called "A Nation Challenged" in which the newspaper covered the terrorist attacks, the consequences they caused in Afghanistan and even published obituaries of the persons killed in the attacks. The section would continue to be published for three months after 9/11⁷⁷. As *NYT* has always had strong ties to the city of New York, it is safe to argue that the terrorist attacks had an acute impact on the journalists of the newspaper, even on a personal level. This, in turn, resulted in some form of self-censorship by the newspaper and its journalists especially during the onset of the War in Afghanistan, as the following section will showcase.

The subsequent and almost instantaneous invasion of Afghanistan showed that both the political and social atmosphere in the U.S towards the said Central Asian country changed quite rapidly due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Afghanistan, which up to this point had been mostly seen by *NYT* as a victim of its own turbulent history⁷⁸ and "forgotten by the world"⁷⁹, was now

⁷⁵Edy, Meirick, 2007

⁷⁶Kyupers, 18, 22-24, 2006

⁷⁷Allan, Zelizer, 75, 2002, *The New York Times* 31.12.2001

⁷⁸*The New York Times* 14.10.1992, 17.01.1993

⁷⁹*The New York Times* 11.08.1994

quickly portrayed as a co-culprit for an event which resulted in thousands of dead U.S. civilians. *NYT* followed this change of tone by continuing to cover events which were taking and going to take place in Afghanistan. The next step for the newspaper was to cover the upcoming invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban regime.

3.2 “Operation Enduring Freedom” and the start of the War in Afghanistan

“First of all, you've got to know that we're fighting against Taliban determined group of killers. These are people who would rather die than surrender. These are people who hate America. They hate our freedom. They hate our freedom to worship. They hate our freedom to vote. They hate our freedom of the press. They hate our freedom to say what you want to say. They can't stand what we stand for“ – George W. Bush at the Missouri Republican Party – Victory 2002 and Talent for Senate Dinner, March 19th 2002⁸⁰

The buildup of U.S. military troops for the invasion of Afghanistan began quickly in countries and areas surrounding Afghanistan. The first stage for the War in Afghanistan was codenamed “Operation Enduring Freedom”, which was a military operation launched by the United States on 7th October 2001 to destroy Al-Qaeda, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and to end global terrorism. The operation would be ended by President Obama on 28th December 2014, which marked the end of large-scale U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan⁸¹.

By 20th September 2001 parts of the U.S. armed forces were already within striking distance of the country. In the following days President Bush would lay out his aims for a “Global War on Terrorism”, as he called it. Even though the broader plans for this war against terrorism were at this point under preparation, it was clear that the initial phase of a military strike by the U.S would be concentrated on Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network in Afghanistan. How did *The New York Times* cover the start of the War in Afghanistan via “Operation Enduring Freedom” and the first steps taken for forming a new Afghan government after toppling the Taliban rule in Afghanistan? Did the overall atmosphere in the U.S. immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks influence *NYT*'s coverage of the war?

⁸⁰Bush, 2001

⁸¹U.S. Department of Defense, 2014 (cited 05.03.2024)

In the *NYT* speculations about the imminent military strike by the U.S. against the Taliban were extensively analysed. In one *NYT* article published on September 29th, 2001, by John Kifner titled “Forget the Past: It's A War Unlike Any Other”, the readers of the newspaper were reminded of the dangers that faced anyone who dared invade Afghanistan. This invader in question would be met by “a nation of warriors” which had throughout history resisted the conquering efforts of Alexander the Great and the Russians, just to name a few⁸². In this said article the prospect of a lightning-fast military strike conducted by the U.S. special forces and the Afghans fighting against the Taliban such as the Northern Alliance⁸³ were at this point seen as a more plausible medium for the Bush administration for striking against the Taliban. The actions of the U.S government during the Soviet-Afghan war were also recounted in the article, as the U.S. had previously offered military training either directly or indirectly to many of the Islamic militants, such as Bin Laden, that they were now facing in Afghanistan.

Even though the Taliban tried to engage in negotiations concerning the turning over of Osama bin Laden to the U.S authorities, at this point it had become very clear that the Bush administration, according to its own words, would not negotiate with terrorists or countries which were harbouring them. The narrative surrounding these negotiations was presented in the *NYT* as a way for the Taliban to try to delay the inevitable military strike by the U.S. As this would eventually turn out to be the case, one notable warning about the probable course the U.S. would take in forming a substitutive government in Afghanistan after the Taliban would be ousted was made by the founder of the Taliban, Mullah Omar. In his remark Omar warned that the U.S. would find itself supporting “an unpopular, corrupt government”⁸⁴. This remark was quite surprisingly left on its own by the *NYT* for a while in its coverage of Afghanistan.

On 7th October 2001, the day the first U.S. military attacks against the Taliban took place, *NYT* published an article in which French political scientist Olivier Roy wrote about an “Afghanistan after the Taliban”⁸⁵. As this article was a quite bold and in retrospect a rather misplaced

⁸²The New York Times, 23.09.2001

⁸³The Northern Alliance was a loose coalition of armed Afghan fighters which resisted the Taliban rule in the northern parts of Afghanistan hence its name. The fighters and their leaders were in large part made up of former Mujahideen who were of other ethnic backgrounds than the Pashtun majority in the Taliban and the country.

⁸⁴The New York Times, 03.10.2001

⁸⁵The New York Times, 07.10.2001

analysis concerning the details of the likely downfall of the Taliban, it has to be given a closer look.

In the article the Taliban is painted as a rigid and oppressive entity which is primarily held together by its Pashtun majority and supported by that majority only until a better alternative would show itself. One alternative, according to the writer, was the former exiled king of Afghanistan, Muhammad Zahir Shah, who, with proper support from all the ethnic groups inside the country, including the Pashtun, could possibly be a symbol for the “Afghan continuity”. Roy made some good analytical points on the need for national unity among the Afghan people and that the support from Pakistan to the Taliban should be minimised. However, bringing back the former king and relying on the continuing co-operation of the factions which opposed the Taliban was a somewhat simplistic solution to a complicated situation. This was confirmed by even Roy himself, as he noted that the self-centred aspirations of the local warlords would prove to be a difficulty in uniting an already fragmented country.

“Operation Enduring Freedom” and the fall of Taliban

On 7th October 2001 the United States launched “Operation Enduring Freedom”, the first aim of which was to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. The U.S. military, along with the Northern Alliance forces led by for example Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammad Qasim Fahim, started a military offensive which would in several months topple the Taliban regime and force the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to relocate into Pakistan⁸⁶. Both Dostum and Fahim would eventually have a central role in the subsequent Afghan government following the fall of the Taliban.

In *NYT* the beginning of the military attack was covered in an editorial entitled “The American Offensive Begins”, which described the airstrikes conducted by the U.S. and the United Kingdom against Al-Qaeda’s and the Taliban’s infrastructure in Afghanistan. The editorial examined the airstrikes as a prelude to a military campaign which would take part in Afghanistan and that the upcoming war could result in “significant American casualties”. One thing to note in this editorial was that rather than criticising the existing risks the airstrikes posed towards the Afghan civilian population, for example, *NYT* offered its verbal support for the U.S.

⁸⁶Jones, 29, 2008

military operation and even stated that “the nation will be supportive, as long as it believes the troops are being led well, and are being directed at the right targets”⁸⁷. This was a clear sign that the newspaper was initially willing to form a supporting narrative for the upcoming war in Afghanistan and against terrorism. In the following days the newspaper continued to publish articles which centred especially around the unrelenting and deadly firepower that the U.S. armed forces used to break the backbone of Taliban opposition in Afghanistan⁸⁸.

At the same time as the imminent success of the first stages of Operation Enduring Freedom slowly started to become clear, some criticism was eventually made concerning the choice of bombing as a tactic to win over the Taliban. In his *NYT* article published in November 2001 political scientist John Mearsheimer, who is most known for his expertise on international relations and the theory of Offensive realism introduced in his 2001 work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, offered some early critical insights on the military campaign. In his article, Mearsheimer’s main criticism centred around the possible shortcomings of the U.S. government’s decision to rely on firepower and military might rather than ground-level diplomacy and even bribery. Like Olivier Roy, Mearsheimer also advocated for the U.S. to either strengthen its ties with Pakistan or to undermine Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban. Moreover, Mearsheimer’s realistic school of thought was evident in the article as he warned that “Americans must face a hard reality that military force is not a winning weapon against these enemies” and that “international politics is often about choosing among lousy alternatives”. The prospect of having the rather unpopular alternative the Northern Alliance take power in the country was also brought up in the article as well as the notion that the imminent guerilla war following the displacing of Taliban would be a war the U.S. could never win⁸⁹.

It should be noted that some of the articles which analysed the military and political tactics the Bush administration was employing at the time in Afghanistan were at times written by outside experts rather than *NYT*’s own editors or journalists. By doing this the newspaper could better present the sociopolitical atmosphere and the ongoing military operation in the country to its

⁸⁷The New York Times, 8.10.2001

⁸⁸The New York Times, 17.10.2001

⁸⁹The New York Times, 4.11.2001

readers as well as at times offer alternative insights into the war in Afghanistan and how it should be fought.

The capture of Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul by the Northern Alliance with the help of U.S. special forces took place on 13th November 2001. Fighting for the city was less fierce than expected, as the occupying Taliban left the city in a hurry which allowed the opposing Afghan forces to capture the city without opposition worth mentioning⁹⁰. As the Northern Alliance forces entered the city it became clear that the period of Taliban power in Afghanistan was over for the time being. However, the U.S. plan of fully subduing the Taliban remained unsuccessful, as the remaining Taliban fighters retreated to the mountainous and remote areas surrounding different provinces of Afghanistan and to the neighbouring country of Pakistan. These areas would subsequently serve as the areas of operation for the Taliban from which they would mount their guerilla warfare against the Afghan government as well as the U.S. and UN sanctioned forces of multiple countries⁹¹.

The Bonn Conference

First steps towards the re-shaping and democratisation of Afghanistan after years of Taliban rule were taken in November 2001, right after the capture of Kabul. A delegation which consisted of Afghan leaders and some key military commanders of the Northern Alliance arrived at Bonn, Germany on 26th November 2001 to begin negotiations about an interim government for Afghanistan after which an emergency *loya jirga* or a “great council” would be called to confirm the arrangement. The Bonn Conference ended with agreements on establishing a temporary administration for Afghanistan in the form of the Afghan Interim Authority headed by Hamid Karzai and later a democratically elected as well as fully representative government⁹². Karzai as an experienced Afghan politician and leader of the Pashtun Popalzai tribe would eventually have a significant role in securing the support of the Pashtun, especially of those living in the Kandahar province, for the new Afghan government.

NYT reported about the Bonn Conference and in one article by Steven Erlanger disclosed some of the issues which arose during the negotiations over the possible overrepresentation of the

⁹⁰Lambeth, 72, 131-133, 2005

⁹¹Jones, 30-31, 2008

⁹²Jones, 29, 2008

Uzbek, Hazara and Tajiks minorities in the upcoming interim government and that former Taliban leaders could possibly still play a part in the upcoming government⁹³. This was a good example of the internal tensions between the different Afghan ethnicities. Surprisingly though, in this article *NYT* did not make any further analysis of these tensions or of the possible consequences if the interim government of Afghanistan would decide to overlook the Pashtun majority of its country. By also mentioning the former president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and describing his presidency as “marked by civil war and abuses of human rights”, *NYT* showcased at least the controversial past of some of the Afghan leaders opposing the Taliban. Yet this did not prompt *NYT* to criticise or question the Bush administration’s and UN diplomats' decision of co-operating with them during this time period of the war.

Just before the negotiations in Bonn, *NYT* analysed some of the possible steps which should be taken in order to rebuild Afghanistan. In her article titled “How To Put a Nation Back Together Again”, journalist and then the UN bureau chief for *NYT* Barbara Crossette addressed the need of the continuing effort by the UN to reintroduce stability both economically and militarily, “to leave some of the dialogue between Afghans themselves” and to make sure that the dialogue would remain all-inclusive by including all of the Afghan demographic groups⁹⁴.

Crossette based much emphasis on the role of the UN in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and it seems that the article's viewpoint deliberately left out the Bush administration's responsibility in Afghanistan even though U.S. armed forces had and would have a crucial presence in the country for many years to come. This lack of Bush administration’s agency in her article was probably influenced by Crossette’s ties to the UN as bureau chief and her experience as a writer focused on international relations. Consequently, one notable aspect which Crossette presented by quoting David Malone, the then president of International Peace Academy⁹⁵, was the idea that “the UN or any other country could not enforce ideal social engineering projects on populations”. This meant that to bring peace and stability to such a war-torn and fractured country as Afghanistan would require bringing all Afghans to the negotiation table to form an all-inclusive government which with international help could hopefully turn around the course of

⁹³Dobbins, 3, 2008, The New York Times, 27.11.2001

⁹⁴The New York Times, 25.11.2001

⁹⁵Currently known as International Peace Institute is an independent and international non-profit think tank founded in 1970 which publishes articles relating to peacekeeping and humanitarian responses to crises.

almost continuous strife in the country. While the article could be seen as a separate take on the responsibilities of the UN in Afghanistan, it could also be seen as an indication of initial hopes that the UN rather than the United States would take up the main role in the future rebuilding of the country.

Nevertheless, gradual rebuilding of Afghanistan started on March 28th, 2002, when the United Nations Security Council signed Resolution 1401 which formally acknowledged the transition of power in Afghanistan and made the Afghan Interim Authority established at the Bonn Conference a legitimate one⁹⁶. In addition, the UN resolution established the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, or UNAMA, which stressed that humanitarian assistance should be provided. Countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan offered their support in re-establishing the country's vital functions of governance, such as the army and the police⁹⁷. This rebuilding process would eventually be a long one, and despite the UN's heavy involvement the United States would take on a bigger role than might have been initially anticipated.

At the start of the year 2002, *NYT* covered the upcoming processes towards peace and stability in Afghanistan in an editorial titled "The Challenge in Afghanistan". In this editorial *NYT* praised Karzai's political skills in uniting the quarrelsome factions which formed his interim government and stressed that the Bush administration should maximise its support for Karzai to better stabilise the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. *NYT* also acknowledged the conflicting fact that the U.S. armed forces' hunt for bin Laden and aim of destroying the remaining Taliban only made matters more complex for the rebuilding processes in Afghanistan to begin in earnest⁹⁸. This can be seen as a subtle message from the newspaper to its readers that, while the Taliban had been at this point ousted from power, the armed conflict in Afghanistan remained as fervent as ever.

NYT followed its editorial by giving the then head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joe Biden, some exposure on its pages, as Biden was one of the first U.S. government officials

⁹⁶United Nations Security Council, 2002

⁹⁷Jones, 30, 2008

⁹⁸The New York Times, 05.01.2002

who had visited Afghanistan since the Taliban's ousting. During his visit on 12th January 2002, Biden witnessed the destruction in the country and gave personal first-hand accounts of the Karzai administration's lack of funds while visiting the country. One key thing worth of note in the article was that Biden, who would eventually oversee the complete withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan as the 46th President of the United States, was at the time eager to advocate that U.S. troops stay in the country and was initially sceptical of the Karzai administration's ability to maintain control. What is more, Biden was quite outspoken by stating that he believed that without a multinational military force to keep order "he would not see any hope for the country"⁹⁹. Biden's advocacy for military force would, however, later change during his service as the 47th Vice President of the United States under President Barack Obama, as the following section will showcase.

Start of the Taliban insurgency

March 2002 saw the U.S. gradually increase its military presence in Afghanistan, and the country prepared for a long-term commitment by building military bases in Afghanistan and surrounding areas¹⁰⁰. The ongoing struggle against Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces during the first years of the War in Afghanistan erupted fiercely when US armed forces conducted a military operation called "Operation Anaconda"¹⁰¹.

The operation was reported by *NYT* in an article titled: "THE RATTLE: With Relief and Sarcasm, Soldiers Recall Whizzing Bullets Fired by 'Wimps'" in which foreign correspondent Barry Bearak interviewed U.S. soldiers who had taken part in the operation. Bearak would subsequently win the Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting for his coverage of Afghanistan in 2002¹⁰². What was most notable in this article were the remarks made by US soldiers regarding Afghanistan and both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters they were facing. Most of the soldiers interviewed had little or no understanding of Afghanistan, its population or the country's recent history, which was noticeable through quotes such as "These people here sure must like fighting for fighting's sake because there sure isn't anything here worth fighting for". One

⁹⁹The New York Times 13.01.2002

¹⁰⁰The New York Times 09.01.2002

¹⁰¹Lambeth, 163-200, 2005

¹⁰²The Pulitzer Prizes, 2002 (cited 06.03.2024)

soldier interviewed even admitted that he was happy to exact vengeance for the 9/11 terrorist attacks¹⁰³.

Although one of the probable aims of the article was to offer hands-on information on the ongoing military situation in Afghanistan through the eyes of U.S. soldiers, the article was an interesting sidestep from the newspaper, which up to this point had covered the war in Afghanistan quite cautiously and in a more general fashion. Additionally, Bearak himself had only recently, in one of his Pulitzer Prize winning articles, presented the Taliban as skillful fighters¹⁰⁴. The rather dismissive tone regarding Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters which comes up in Bearak's article was a good indication of both how the national trauma caused by 9/11 to Americans was nowhere near being healed and how *NYT* could write about the Taliban in a more hostile narrative when it wanted to.

While the Taliban was at this point of the war more than likely to be the target of a negative portrayal by *NYT*, the same could even be said about the U.S. military's Afghan allies. In late 2001 reports of Taliban fighters taken prisoner by U.S. and Northern Alliance forces and being transported to prison in metal shipping containers were first reported by a *NYT* foreign correspondent in Afghanistan, Carlotta Gall. Due to Gall's reportage *NYT*, was among the first western newspapers to allege that Afghan forces fighting under the Northern Alliance commander Abdul Rashim Dostum were responsible for possibly hundreds of Taliban prisoners of war dying from suffocation¹⁰⁵. Gall's article "Witnesses Say Many Taliban Died in Custody" vividly portrayed the poor conditions in which the prisoners were transported to the prison of the northern Afghan city of Sheberghan, which showed that the Afghan allies of the U.S. did not shy away from using harsh methods towards the Taliban. This incident would later be called the Dasht-i-Leili massacre and would resurface on the pages of *NYT* during the later years of the war when *NYT*'s Pulitzer-winning journalist James Risen would report that officials of the Bush administration had repeatedly tried to undermine the investigation of the incident¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰³The New York Times 12.03.2002

¹⁰⁴The New York Times 22.11.2001

¹⁰⁵The New York Times 11.12.2001

¹⁰⁶The New York Times 11.07.2009

Although *NYT* as a non-governmental actor could offer more neutral and self-sufficient information of the military operations in Afghanistan, the questionable actions and methods used by the allied Afghan forces were mostly left unreported for a while by the newspaper. As the practice of “embedded journalism” would fully come into being during the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S., it is probable that *NYT* could not make full use of its foreign correspondents in Afghanistan at this point of the war. This was especially due to Operation Enduring Freedom’s initial covert and rapid nature, which made covering the military operation and both the U.S. and Afghan military forces’ conduct challenging for the press¹⁰⁷.

Operation Enduring Freedom and the first steps towards forming a new Afghan government were extensively covered by *NYT* during the start of the War in Afghanistan. The newspaper had a key role in providing information of the events taking place in Afghanistan, especially to its U.S. audience, which was understandably keen to read about the struggle against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban ally. While *NYT*’s coverage of the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban as well as the effort to build up a democratic and western-backed Afghan government was mostly supported by the newspaper, based on the articles analysed in this chapter, *NYT* would also at times offer some alternative insights on the war which was only getting started.

The somewhat jingoistic atmosphere in the U.S. media which immediately followed 9/11¹⁰⁸ manifested even on the pages of *NYT*, which did not exempt itself from at least a dismissive portrayal of the Taliban, as evidenced by Barry Bearak’s article, for example. This might have been influenced by the newspaper’s initial support for the invasion of Afghanistan. Although some of the actions of the Afghan allies of the U.S. were showcased in a less flattering way, at this point of the war there was little to no criticism by *NYT* and other U.S. media in general of the U.S. military and its favoured tactic of bombing suspected Al-Qaeda or Taliban targets in Afghanistan which would often result in civilian casualties¹⁰⁹. Moreover, the humanitarian aspect of the War in Afghanistan was largely overlooked by the newspaper in favour of covering the military progress¹¹⁰.

¹⁰⁷Kim, Paul, 50-57, 2004

¹⁰⁸Allan, Zelizer, 206-209, 2002

¹⁰⁹Exoo, 54-56, 2009

¹¹⁰DiMaggio, 21-22, 2015

The criticism concerning the U.S. bombing campaign was only made more visible in the U.S. media in general when the anti-Taliban Afghan leaders would vehemently call for it to end¹¹¹. During the first years of the War in Afghanistan the quite limited coverage of the side effects of the U.S. airstrikes might have been due to a mixture of great public support for the war among the U.S. public despite Afghan civilian casualties, the “patriotic journalism” conducted by the U.S. media in the wake of 9/11, and the Taliban’s possible tampering with the official death toll caused by the U.S. airstrikes¹¹².

The changing dynamic between war and media in which reports of innocent civilians killed rather than fallen soldiers on one's own side were to be avoided was most likely a factor which contributed to the lack of criticism as well. This practice at the time was usually done to uphold public support for war¹¹³. *NYT*, however, would start to concentrate more of its attention on this deadly aspect of the war and its harrowing effects on Afghan civilians during the following years, as the next section will demonstrate.

NYT was in addition to covering the initial events of Operation Enduring Freedom also able to provide some analytical thoughts about the formation, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the future Afghan government. As the newspaper presented some of the challenges that were going to lie ahead in Afghanistan, it can be argued that it could offer a varying view of the country and its events thanks to the sheer number of experts, editors, and correspondents it could utilise. By covering the start of the War in Afghanistan, *NYT* set the stage for an extensive and thematically highly varied coverage of the continuing war which would eventually last for nearly two decades.

3.3 Formative years of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

As the fight against the Taliban raged on, the short-lived Afghan Interim Authority would be replaced by the temporary Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, which came to power in July 2002 when an emergency *loya jirga* was called to select the representatives of the new Afghan government. Hamid Karzai, who had previously been the head of the Afghan Interim

¹¹¹Ottosen, Nohrstedt, 44-45, 2004,

¹¹²Larson, Savyc, 125-140, 2007

¹¹³Ottosen, Nohrstedt, 15, 2004

Authority, mostly due to his linguistic skills and political expertise especially with dealing with the outside world, was almost unanimously selected as the new president of Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan¹¹⁴.

While the newly formed government was eventually recognised both internationally and by the Afghans themselves, the beginning of the Karzai administration was marked by the ongoing Taliban insurgency as well as issues regarding the efficiency of Afghanistan's new governance. The Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan would subsequently be followed by the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004, which would last until its collapse in 2021. How did *NYT* cover the first years of the Karzai administration and the Taliban insurgency? Was there any change in tone regarding Afghanistan in the pages of the newspaper during this time period and why did this occur?

One of the first setbacks regarding the Karzai administration's assumed drive towards peace, stability and democracy by its U.S. ally became public in early January 2003 when journalist Carlotta Gall, who at the time worked as a *NYT* correspondent based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, reported of an incident in which an Afghan editor was jailed for publishing a cartoon which allegedly mocked President Hamid Karzai¹¹⁵. According to Gall's article, the order of the arrest came from the then defence minister and vice president of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, Mohammad Fahim. Although the editor was eventually freed after two days of custody, there was no mention of a separate *habeas corpus* taking place after the incident. The way Karzai treated the incident lightly was also quite noteworthy as he allegedly joked to the editor that he had "made some of his friends unhappy". This was a clear sign that many in the Karzai administration were still unaccustomed to the idea that the press could criticise those in power.

Gall's article was an early indication of the divisiveness and corruption inside the Karzai administration of which vice president Fahim's action was only one warning example. By quoting another Afghan editor who made fun of the newly formed Afghan National Army or ANA¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Barfield, 219-222, 225, 2010.

¹¹⁵The New York Times, 12.01.2003

¹¹⁶Afghan National Army or ANA was the land force of the Afghan Armed Forces under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. During its existence ANA was plagued by corruption, desertion, drug and sexual abuse, lack of training and human rights abuses.

as “an international army paid by foreign dollars”, Gall also presented the inevitable problem at the time, the fact that without the existence of an efficient Afghan army to fight against the ongoing Taliban insurgency, the Karzai administration would soon face even more difficulties.

The Afghan National Army

Gall continued her reportage from Afghanistan by, among other things, summarising the first steps of the newly formed Afghan National Army and its mission to enforce peace and stability. In a *NYT* article titled “In a Remote Corner, an Afghan Army Evolves From Fantasy to Slightly Ragged Reality”, Gall reported of an operation conducted by a newly trained battalion of ANA soldiers against the Taliban insurgents in the village of Orgun, near the Pakistani border in the southeastern part of Afghanistan. What was notable in Gall’s article was that it included information from multiple different sources such as the mayor of the village, officers of the ANA battalion and its U.S. Special Forces trainers, which previously had been quite lacking from the *NYT*’s coverage of Afghanistan. This utilisation of many sources would be made more challenging due to the restrictions posed by the now emerging “embedded journalism”¹¹⁷ in which correspondents would be attached to U.S military units operating in conflict areas, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

Both the ANA officers and the mayor of Orgun interviewed in the article were glaringly positive of the presence of ANA soldiers in the village and asserted that they would be more trusted than any foreign soldiers would. Even though the existence and goal of building up an army consisting of Afghans from different ethnicities was praised, Gall brought up the difficulties regarding the forming of ANA, as low-pay, low-motivation and poor living conditions resulted in a 40 percent dropout rate among new recruits. This, in turn, bode ill for the goal of building up an army of 70 000 Afghan soldiers in just few years¹¹⁸. The noticeably optimistic narrative surrounding the ANA and its welcoming by the Afghan populace was even more enhanced by the then commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Dan K. McNeill, who was quoted by Gall as saying that “the Elysian Fields will be if the Afghan National Army takes over. That has to happen one day”¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁷McLaughlin, 142-149, 2016

¹¹⁸Peabody, 5, 2009

¹¹⁹The New York Times, 25.01.2003

While Gall's article highlighted the efforts made to build up the ANA as an efficient fighting force, it still left an impression that Gall, like many other western journalists at the time, were very reliant on the information given by U.S military sources. This resulted in a one-sided picture given of ANA and its efficiency. Moreover, the contradiction between the portrayal of eager Afghan men wanting to join ANA in the article versus the high dropout rate of Afghan soldiers at the time was a sign that something was missing in *NYT's* coverage of ANA. This was the differing viewpoints from the ANA dropouts and Afghans themselves which were completely omitted from the U.S. military sources¹²⁰. As war reporting is usually carried out from the perspective of the country where the newspaper originates, Gall's article is an example of how *NYT*, like many other western media outlets, practised its coverage of the war in Afghanistan from a western point of view¹²¹.

Gall continued writing about the performance of the ANA in June 2003 by reporting on fire-fights which had occurred between suspected Taliban fighters and ANA soldiers at Afghanistan's southern border. One reported instance of a firefight had, according to one Gall's article, resulted in nearly 40 Taliban fighters killed, compared with only 7 government soldiers. As this figure was given by a general of the ANA, it is possible that the number of Taliban fighters killed was purposely increased to improve the image of ANA's effectiveness. This was perhaps even slightly implied in Gall's article, in which the news agency Reuters was quoted as having reported seeing only 21 bodies of suspected Taliban fighters laid out in the area where the firefight had taken place¹²².

At this point in the war, based on Gall's reportage from Afghanistan, it can be argued that *NYT* offered a more positive picture of ANA as a fighting force capable of handling the threat posed by the Taliban insurgency. As there would be contemporary reviews of how ANA would suffer from problems such as low morale and cohesion as well as a temporary disbandment due to it being dwarfed in size by the still existing Afghan warlord militias¹²³, it is at least worth noticing that *NYT* practised surprisingly little source criticism regarding ANA at the time. However, war and foreign correspondents during the first years of the Global War on Terror could not

¹²⁰McLaughlin, 148-149, 2016

¹²¹Allan, Zelizer, 29-30, 2004

¹²²The New York Times, 06.06.2003

¹²³Farrell, Osinga, Russell, 265-266, 2013

often risk deviating from the generally imposed “embedded journalism” system, which made the correspondents dependent on the limited and “safe” availability of U.S administration sources¹²⁴. This, in turn, resulted in an even greater presence of a western perspective concerning the news coverage of military efforts in Afghanistan.

One key aspect which Gall continuously brought up in her articles was the role of Pakistan as a safe haven for the Taliban. As later years would prove that the Pakistani government and more precisely the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence had a central role in supporting the Taliban and other militant Islamist groups in the area¹²⁵, it is notable that any presentation of this factor was largely absent from *NYT* coverage of the War in Afghanistan at the time. The most notable exception to this was Gall who would eventually publish a book based on her experiences working in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, titled *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*¹²⁶. In her book Gall would showcase the complex role of the Pakistan government in keeping the Taliban insurgency alive, especially by providing a safe haven for its key leaders and simultaneously preventing them from negotiating with the Karzai administration¹²⁷.

Criticism of the U.S. airstrikes and the Bush administration

While the narrative surrounding the performance of the ANA was initially a more positive one and the new Afghan government was relatively spared from criticism by *NYT*, the same could not be said about the Bush administration. *NYT* offered some critique of the Bush administration’s lack of effort in Afghanistan in the form of an editorial titled “A Job Half-Done in Afghanistan“. As the editorial was published on 15th of June 2003, only two months after the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq, it included understandable comparisons between the US’s “nation-building” efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the editorial the still rather fragmented security situation in Afghanistan was mostly blamed on the Bush administration, as its economic support of 1 billion dollars a year to Afghanistan was not “enough to overcome the devastation inflicted by more than two decades of conflict”.

¹²⁴Allan, Zelizer, 30-31, 2004

¹²⁵Jones, 54-60, 2008, Chalk, Hanauer, 44, 49, 2012

¹²⁶Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2014

¹²⁷Jones, 39-40, 2008, Malik, 168, 2014

Moreover, the talk of possibly withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan before the ANA had reached its planned strength was criticised by *NYT*. The newspaper was also loudly critical of the Bush administration's decision to focus solely on the Taliban and to leave the opportunity for the local warlords to continue their internal fight for money and political influence¹²⁸. This showed that despite being initially supportive of the Bush administration's war effort in Afghanistan, *NYT* was now slowly becoming more concerned and critical of the path the U.S. would be taking under Bush and hoped that the simultaneous war in Iraq would not result in the same problems which were apparent in Afghanistan.

Like the actions of the Bush administration, the airstrikes conducted by the U.S. military were slowly coming to the forefront of the less flattering portrayal of the war in Afghanistan by *NYT*. While the newspaper had not always neglected to write on the deadly airstrikes previously¹²⁹, the tone regarding them had at times been quite dismissive of the distress the airstrikes caused to Afghan civilians, as one editorial published on 13th February 2002 entitled "Afghanistan's Civilian Casualties" showcased. By stating, for example, that "To a greater extent than ever before, American operations in Afghanistan have been marked by precision targeting", *NYT* during the first year of the war quite strikingly stuck to the Bush administration's and U.S. military's narrative that the war was being fought more accurately than ever before¹³⁰.

On 10th April 2003, Carlotta Gall reported an incident regarding the U.S. military's use of airstrikes in Afghanistan against supposed Taliban targets. This airstrike, however, mistakenly killed 11 Afghan civilians in the eastern Afghan province of Paktika and resulted in backlash from the then governor of the province, Muhammad Ali Jalali. The avidly used tactic of using airstrikes against even small groups of Taliban fighters was in Gall's article presented as a way for the U.S. military to remind the militants of its presence, even if it was currently fighting in Iraq as well¹³¹. Gall's article can be seen as a prime example of a contradiction between the narrative presented in *NYT's* previous editorials and the ongoing situation in Afghanistan, which continued to result in more and more notable cases of Afghan civilians being killed by the U.S. airstrikes.

¹²⁸The New York Times, 15.05.2003

¹²⁹The New York Times, 02.07.2002

¹³⁰Larson, Savych, 128, 2007, The New York Times 13.02.2002

¹³¹The New York Times, 10.04.2003

As Gall's article was a departure from *NYT's* preceding way of reporting of the U.S. military's airstrikes in Afghanistan, it can be argued that *NYT* slowly began to present a less favourable view of the U.S. military actions in the country. This was a sign that the more jingoistic undertone which had been visible even on the pages of *NYT* was slowly starting to change and the opportunity to use the experienced and British-born Gall as the newspaper's foreign correspondent in Afghanistan probably enhanced the newspaper's more neutral approach towards the airstrikes.

NYT achieved this change in tone in part by showcasing the harrowing side-effects of the airstrikes on Afghan civilians, particularly women and children, to its readers and slowly distancing itself from the "unfortunate stray bomb"-narrative employed by the U.S military officials at the time. Although the amount of Afghan civilian deaths caused by airstrikes would steadily grow during the following years of Operation Enduring Freedom and reach its peak in 2008¹³², the effects of the airstrikes on Afghan civilians at the start of the War in Afghanistan were somewhat overlooked in *NYT*. This would start to change when the airstrikes began to result in even some more high-profile incidents, such as the "Wech Baghtu wedding party airstrike" which the newspaper could not ignore¹³³. The "Wech Baghtu wedding party airstrike" took place on November the 3rd 2008 in the Kandahar Province and would gain particular notoriety, as it led to nearly 40 Afghan civilians, mainly women and children, being killed.

2004 Constitution of Afghanistan and the status of Afghan women

On 13th December 2003 the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was preceded by a constitutional *loya jirga* and a debate concerning the approval of the new constitution for Afghanistan. *NYT* covered this *loya jirga* and the final composition of the upcoming administration of Afghanistan extensively, as it would include many improvements for the Afghan population after years of strict Taliban rule. Among these were the recognition of women's equal status to men, representation for women in the National Assembly, and improvements of language rights for the minority languages¹³⁴. Once more Gall reported on the constitutional *loya jirga* along with editor Amy Waldman in an article titled: "Afghanistan Faces a Test In

¹³²Crawford, 3-4, 2015, UNAMA, 16-17, 2009

¹³³The New York Times, 19.06.2007, 06.11.2008

¹³⁴The Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 16, 22, 84, 2004.

Democracy”. Evident in this article was Karzai’s optimistic attitude regarding the debates over the new constitution, which advocated for a strong presidency in Afghanistan despite some underlying divisions among the delegates of the *loya jirga* and opposition towards Karzai’s presidency¹³⁵.

Despite some of the initial discord, the constitutional *loya jirga* ultimately approved the new constitution for Afghanistan on January 4th, 2004. *NYT* continued portraying the constitution in a largely positive light by, for example, quoting Karzai who was elated that there was now an Afghanistan in which “a poor boy like him could grow up to be the president” and in which “tribal and ethnic rivalries could become a thing of the past”. The positive welcoming of this constitution was further enhanced by praise from the U.S. president Bush and the American ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, who went as far as to call it “one of the most enlightened constitutions in the Islamic world”¹³⁶.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, especially during its draft stage, was not exempt from interpretational problems regarding, for example, the unsolved question of women’s right of inheritance and the lack of affirmative action to compensate for the past discrimination of women and ethnic minorities¹³⁷. *NYT* would, however, follow the compliance with the newly approved constitution in practice during the following years in Afghanistan. One notable *NYT* article by Carlotta Gall titled “In Poverty And Strife, Women Test Limits: Bringing Change To Afghan Province” gave some insights into the day- to-day lives of women in the province of Bamiyan. In the article Gall interviewed local Afghan women who were now working outside their homes which had up to this point, according to Islamic *sharia* law and the prevailing culture, been deemed mostly unsuitable for them¹³⁸.

What was most striking in Gall’s article was the transparent hopefulness of the five Afghan women interviewed. In addition to this the article showed how *NYT* could present the efforts made by the Afghan government to better the rights of Afghan women. A good example of this

¹³⁵The New York Times, 15.12.2003

¹³⁶The New York Times, 05.01.2004

¹³⁷International Crisis Group, 6-8, 2003

¹³⁸Emadi, 33-34, 79, 2002

was the first female governor of Bamiyan Province, Habiba Sarābi,¹³⁹ who was quoted by Gall, as saying “if the general situation improves, it can improve the situation of women”. This hopeful tone regarding the status of women in Afghanistan was further enhanced by two other female interviewees who were working as police officers in the local police station. Both were satisfied by their new occupation and hopeful that other women would follow in their footsteps¹⁴⁰.

By now making the status of women one of the centrepieces of its news coverage of Afghanistan, *NYT* presented a different undertone regarding the ongoing war and added a new dimension to it¹⁴¹. While *NYT* and the U.S. media in general tended to construct a positive narrative around the status of Afghan women under the new Afghan government, they often forgot to mention the historical context which up to this point had continued to influence it negatively. This influence was in large part due to the U.S. policies followed during the Soviet-Afghan and the follow-up Afghan Civil Wars to back different Islamist warlords for whom the improvement of Afghan women's rights had been a foreign concept¹⁴².

Another article which covered the slow development of the status of women in Afghanistan by reporter Kirk Semple titled “Long Viewed as Chattel, Afghan Women Slowly Gain Protection” approached its rather sensitive subject matter from an alternative angle. A young Afghan woman called Mariam recounted her story of being forced to marry a 41-year-old blind cleric when she was only 11. In the article Mariam’s story was integrated into the reportage of the then recently established women’s shelters in Afghanistan. What was most thought-provoking in Semple’s article was the narrative that the idea of women's rights was still unimaginable for some Afghan men despite their promotion in Afghanistan’s new constitution. This was most clear from a quote by the director of Women for Afghan Women, Manizha Naderi: “Women are property of men. This is tradition” and the story of another young Afghan woman whose husband had mutilated her to avenge a dispute he had had with her father¹⁴³.

¹³⁹Habiba Sarābi served as the second Minister of Women’s Affairs from 2002 until 2004 and as the governor of Bamiyan Province from 2005 to 2013. After her appointment, Sarābi was the only female governor of any province in Afghanistan.

¹⁴⁰The New York Times, 06.10.2008

¹⁴¹Kumar, Stabile, 2005

¹⁴²Kumar, Stabile, 2005

¹⁴³The New York Times, 03.03.2009

By showcasing stories such as these, *NYT* offered quite an in-depth coverage of the situation of Afghan women in the country after the introduction of the new Afghan constitution despite approaching the subject from a more western point of view. This was a noticeable change for the newspaper, which had in previous years been quite taciturn around the status of Afghan women prior the U.S. invasion of the country. Before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the newspaper had largely neglected to highlight the plight of the Afghan women, which was a result of the seemingly endless war in the country. As the weak state of the rights of Afghan women was often used as one of the justifications for the U.S. intervention in the country¹⁴⁴, *NYT* initially portrayed the daily lives of Afghan women very much in this light.

Based on the newspaper's coverage on the subject, the constitution and its contents regarding women's rights were understood very differently by different segments of the Afghan population. This might have been due to the low amount of knowledge of the new constitution among rural Afghans, especially during its drafting phase. Despite this, *NYT* continued to report on the subject matter of women's right until the final years of the war in Afghanistan¹⁴⁵, but as the war progressed, the newspaper's showcasing of the direction in which the country was heading was mostly focused on the Afghan government. Although the constitution provided many improvements to Afghan women's lives, the overall culture regarding the status of women did not change, as evidenced by Kirk Semple's article, for example. This was in large part due to the deeply rooted effects of the political warlordism in Afghanistan, which had caused many human rights violations, especially sexual violence, towards Afghan women but which were now overlooked by the western media such as *NYT*, as many former warlords who had committed such acts now filled key political positions in the new democratic Afghan governance¹⁴⁶. The improvements of legal rights gained by the Afghan women would slowly start to deteriorate, as, among other things, the Afghan government's inefficiency to unify the still fragmented judiciary system in the country would turn out to be a major debilitating factor¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁴Khattak, 18-19, 2002, Cortright, 18-20, 2011

¹⁴⁵The New York Times, 31.07.2010, 08.02.2014, 28.01.2019

¹⁴⁶Ahmad, 33-35, 2006

¹⁴⁷Mazurana, Nojumi, Stites, 88-89, 269-286, 2008

The formation of the ANA, which would slowly take up the brunt of the task of quelling the Taliban insurgency with the development and training aid provided by mainly the U.S.,¹⁴⁸ was also covered quite extensively by *NYT*. The first steps in building up the ANA were, however, plagued by many problems, as Carlotta Gall's reportage from Afghanistan clearly highlighted, but these were still at times seemingly glossed over by the newspaper. As the influence of the powerful Afghan warlords following the toppling of Taliban was still prominent during the first years of the war¹⁴⁹, the ANA faced many challenges regarding its legitimacy among the Afghans as an efficient counter to the Taliban. While the actual contribution that the ANA and other Afghan security forces offered against the Taliban insurgency would turn out to be questionable, as the next section will demonstrate, the initial narrative around it in *NYT* was a remarkably positive one.

While the ANA was at this point of the war safe from the less flattering portrayals of *NYT*, the same could no longer be said of the U.S. military's preferred tactic of using airstrikes to combat the Taliban. Even though there was no definite evidence of why the increase in the amount of news reports concerning the U.S. airstrikes took place in the pages of *NYT*, it is possible that the newspaper wanted to distance itself from its previous conduct during the first year of the War in Afghanistan. This factor, coupled with the setback for the newspaper's journalistic credibility before and during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when its journalists would falsely report that the Hussein-regime was producing weapons of mass destruction¹⁵⁰, served as a return to form for *NYT*. It is also worth noting that this change of tone regarding the news coverage of the airstrikes in Afghanistan was a gradual one and that it coincided with the more violent incidents of the U.S. military's firepower.

The criticism and negative portrayal that the Karzai administration faced in *NYT* remained initially quite minimal, despite some notable early cases of internal power struggles and corruption, such as the one presented in Gall's article at the start of this section. This criticism would slowly grow and resurface on the pages of *NYT* after more and more cases of corruption and

¹⁴⁸Peabody, 179-197, 2009

¹⁴⁹Ahmad, 33-35, 2006

¹⁵⁰The New York Times, 08.09.2002

ineffectiveness in the Karzai administration would emerge in the following years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

During the early years of the War in Afghanistan, however, *NYT* mostly focused on highlighting the positive changes that the Karzai administration would make in the country after years of Taliban rule. At the same time, as the Bush presidency would eventually be replaced by the Obama presidency, so would the U.S. troops in Afghanistan slowly be replaced by their Afghan counterparts. *NYT* would continue actively to cover Afghanistan and to showcase the ongoing fight against the Taliban insurgency under the Obama administration.

3.4 End of “Operation Enduring Freedom” and withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan

While the Taliban insurgency continued and even intensified during the first years of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Karzai administration would simultaneously face criticism and mounting dissatisfaction from its U.S. ally when its efforts to strengthen stability in Afghanistan would turn out to be insufficient. This slowly growing discord between the governments of Afghanistan and the U.S. would only grow worse when, among other things, the deadly effects of the U.S. military's firepower showcased in the previous chapter and the corruption of Karzai, and his inner political circle would drive a wedge between the Obama and Karzai administrations.

Despite this wedge, the first years of the Obama presidency would include the highpoint of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and result in a re-escalation of the fight against the Taliban. After this highpoint, however, the end of Operation Enduring Freedom would mark the end of major combat operations conducted by the U.S. and its western allies and slowly shift the responsibility of fighting the Taliban insurgency to Afghanistan's own security forces. How did *NYT* cover the relationship between the Obama and Karzai administrations as well as the U.S. troop surge? Were there any critical portrayals of the Karzai government during the Obama presidency and why did this occur? In what way did the newspaper report of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan?

NYT began to address the developing situation in Afghanistan anxiously in two near consecutive editorials published in July and August 2006 titled “Losing Ground in Afghanistan” and

“Losing Afghanistan”, respectively. In these editorials *NYT* vocally criticised Karzai and his administration for its corruption as well as its inability to put an end to the influence of local warlords and to the Afghan drug trade, to which Karzai would even be closely linked¹⁵¹. While in its editorials *NYT* still acknowledged the importance of keeping Western troops in Afghanistan to enhance security and rebuilding efforts in the country, it simultaneously stated that “international efforts can only buy time to build an Afghanistan its own people will fight to defend after Western troops leave.”¹⁵²

What was interesting during this time period of *NYT*'s coverage of Afghanistan was that even readers of the newspaper started to be more vocal with criticism regarding the ongoing war and its effects. This was evident in the letters to the editor published in August 2006 in which readers of *NYT* criticised the Bush administration for enabling “the current decay of Afghanistan's democracy” and even stated that the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan were failing miserably thanks to the Bush administration's inability to acknowledge its failures and by diverting its efforts to “the pointless war in Iraq”¹⁵³. Judging by the aforementioned article and editorials, it is safe to argue that *NYT*, after some years of initial precaution, started to be more critical and concerned of the path the U.S. was taking in Afghanistan and of how the Karzai administration was performing. Simultaneously, however, the newspaper stressed the importance of continuing the military aid provided by the U.S. and its western allies during the final years of the Bush administration. This would noticeably continue during the start of the Obama presidency.

The Obama “surge”

During his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama spoke extensively about the failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan made by the Bush administration. In one of his remarks made in connection with the 2008 presidential elections, Obama vowed that as President he would re-focus the U.S. efforts from Iraq back to Afghanistan and reduce the growing Taliban hold in the country by training the Afghan security forces and changing the U.S policy with Pakistan, which according to Obama's words still offered considerable sanctuary to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban¹⁵⁴. Moreover, Obama actively spoke on behalf of increasing the number of U.S. troops

¹⁵¹The New York Times 05.10.2008

¹⁵²The New York Times 23.07.2006

¹⁵³The New York Times, 25.08.2006

¹⁵⁴The New York Times, 15.07.2008

in Afghanistan and even proposed sending 10 000 U.S. soldiers in response to the growing Taliban insurgency¹⁵⁵.

Only a month after Obama's inauguration as the 44th president of the United States, a *NYT* article by Helene Cooper entitled "Obama Weighs Adding Troops in Afghanistan as Overall Strategy Waits" analysed the possible steps President Obama would take to keep his election promise of increasing the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. In the article Cooper wrote analytically about the possibilities Obama could undertake to introduce this "surge" of U.S. troops just in time to provide additional security for the upcoming 2009 Afghan presidential election. By also stating that "the Obama administration has distanced itself with Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai"¹⁵⁶, *NYT* openly showcased the inherent difficulties the respective administrations had with working with each other during the initial phase of the Obama presidency, despite the growing commitment by the U.S. in Afghanistan.

Even though the article did not include any specific details on the timeline or the number of troops the Obama administration would send to Afghanistan, it clearly showcased that the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan were now initially being refocused to counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. This showed that *NYT*, just as it had done during the start of "Operation Enduring Freedom", covered the upcoming resurgence of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan quite neutrally but simultaneously offered extensive and analytical coverage on the subject. Only days after the publication of Cooper's article on 17th February, the Obama administration announced the commitment of 17 000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan in February 2009, followed by 13 000 troops in October and 30 000 in December, which would bring the total number U.S. troops in the country to around 100 000¹⁵⁷. By early 2011 this figure would mark the highpoint of the U.S. military's involvement in the country¹⁵⁸.

While Obama's decision to send more U.S. troops to Afghanistan was covered quite neutrally by *NYT* at the time, it quite noticeably resulted in some opposition inside Obama's own administration. Among the principal opponents of the troop "surge" were the Vice President, Joe

¹⁵⁵The New York Times, 14.07.2008

¹⁵⁶The New York Times, 12.02.2009

¹⁵⁷DiMaggio, 17, 2015

¹⁵⁸Farrell, Osinga, Russell, 57, 2013

Biden, who advocated a “counterterrorism plus” strategy which would make Al-Qaeda the main target of U.S. military efforts, and the then U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, who argued that the increase of U.S. troops would only make the Afghan government more dependent on American assistance and delay the goal of shifting the responsibility of fighting against the Taliban to the Afghan security forces¹⁵⁹.

In an article published on October 14th, 2009, during the slow increase of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, *NYT* wrote about the change Vice President Biden had undergone from a strong supporter of the Bush administration’s invasion of Afghanistan to a critic of the growing U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. In this article the newspaper was now portraying Biden as “Mr. Obama’s in-house pessimist on Afghanistan”, arguing that he had become increasingly disillusioned with the Karzai administration. This disillusionment had reached a climax only months before during a formal dinner between Biden and Karzai and two other U.S. senators, as Biden became exasperated with Karzai’s dismissals of his administration's corruption¹⁶⁰. The incident was covered in a separate *NYT* article entitled “Afghan Leader Finds Himself Hero No More”, by Dexter Filkins, which examined more closely the difficult political situation Karzai was finding himself in with the Obama administration as the 2009 Afghan presidential election was nearing.

Filkins’s article included mentions of Obama regarding Karzai as “unreliable and ineffective” and that Karzai's popularity among Afghans was also dwindling, as evidenced by a private Afghan poll in which “85 percent of those surveyed would vote for someone other than Karzai”. What was also notable in the article was that it presented a general view that many Afghans and U.S. officials in Washington were now considering the removal of Karzai as a necessary step to reverse the worsening situation in the country¹⁶¹. This article was a clear sign that *NYT* was now even more open in its criticism towards Karzai and his administration and began to highlight the Obama administration's dissatisfaction with its Afghan ally.

¹⁵⁹Marsh, 274, 2014

¹⁶⁰The New York Times, 14.10.2009

¹⁶¹The New York Times, 08.02.2009

Even though the relationship of the Obama and Karzai administrations was, judging by *NYT*'s coverage at the time, quite strained, this did not necessarily mean that it was at its minimal. In two *NYT* articles published in conjunction with Karzai's visit to the White House on 12th May 2010, entitled "Karzai Visits Washington, With Smiles All Around" and "Obama Reassures Karzai, but Both Steer Clear of Worrisome Topics", *NYT* gave alternative perspectives to this complicated but still working political relationship. In the former article Karzai's visit was portrayed as a way to "put the relationship between the United States and Afghan government on a better footing"¹⁶². This was further evidenced by the quotes made of both U.S. and Afghan government officials who mainly praised the cooperation between their countries. The underlying tensions between the administrations were better analysed in the latter article, which mentioned Karzai's previous threat to join the Taliban himself if the U.S. did not stop pressuring him for more political transparency.¹⁶³ Additionally, the article stated that Obama carefully eluded mentioning the corruption and drug trafficking in Afghanistan and repeating the previous critical statements made by himself and his government officials¹⁶⁴.

While *NYT* covered the U.S. efforts to counter the growing Taliban threat in Afghanistan by increasing its military presence in the country, it also focused quite extensively on the Obama and Karzai administrations' relationship and what it foretold about the future cooperation between the U.S. and the Afghan governments. By continuously analysing the complicated and at times even adversarial relationship between the Obama and Karzai administrations, *NYT* offered different insights into a subject which the newspaper had in previous years been quite often sidelined. This was the rather negative portrayal of Karzai and his administration which was now more visible on the pages of *NYT*. Despite this portrayal, the U.S. public support for the war in Afghanistan would grow after a period of significant decline, thanks in part to the U.S. media's role in selling President Obama's "surge"¹⁶⁵. The issue of corruption in the Karzai government would, however, still be closely examined by the newspaper.

Corruption in the Karzai administration and the 2009 Afghan presidential election

¹⁶²The New York Times, 12.05.2010

¹⁶³Nojumi, 89, 2016

¹⁶⁴The New York Times, 13.05.2010

¹⁶⁵DiMaggio, 27-29, 51-55, 2015

As presented above, the corruption in the Karzai administration during the run-up to the 2009 Afghan presidential election had begun to become a major concern to its U.S. ally, and notions of corruption would only increase during the elections. After the Afghan presidential elections began on the 20th of August, *NYT* covered the elections extensively and even independently on the ground. First signs of fraud became public quickly when Carlotta Gall reported of fraud in the form of ballot-stuffing and intimidation conducted by the Taliban and the more powerful electoral candidates. Moreover, Gall reported on the low turnout of Afghan female voters who were being disproportionately intimidated and segregated at the polling stations¹⁶⁶. The instances of fraud were a major subject during the election, and Gall, for instance, continued to write about it for *NYT*. In one of her articles entitled “Rising Accounts of Fraud Cloud Afghan Election”, Gall reported about a notable case of ballot-stuffing, as an Afghan teacher working as an election official arrived early on election day only to find the ballot boxes already full before the voting had even started. In addition, Gall’s article mentioned the possible role of the local member of Parliament, Mullah Tarakhel Mohammad, in orchestrating the incident to tip the number of votes in favour of Karzai rather than his leading competitor, the former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, in the Kabul Province¹⁶⁷.

While Gall’s article highlighted only one example of the widespread corruption which troubled the Afghan presidential elections, *NYT* could, thanks to its extensive efforts, showcase the electoral fraud which would make the final outcome, Karzai's victory, highly questionable. This was quite evident in the U.S. officials' reception of the election results¹⁶⁸. By reporting on the problems the Afghan presidential elections faced, the newspaper also highlighted the severe challenges that were still evident in Afghanistan, despite the country's democratization process aided by the U.S. and its western allies. These included the continuing prevalence of political violence and the weakness of the local Afghan governance and judiciary systems, which were major factors in the existence of widespread corruption¹⁶⁹.

The reported incidents of electoral fraud and intimidation were not the only subjects which cast a poor light on Karzai and on the results of the 2009 presidential election. As mentioned

¹⁶⁶The New York Times, 23.08.2009

¹⁶⁷The New York Times, 31.08.2009

¹⁶⁸Miller, 19, 2020

¹⁶⁹Mazurana, Nojumi, Stites, 215-216, 2008. Nojumi, 103-104, 2016

previously, the links Karzai had with the Afghan drug trade were beginning to reappear on *NYT*'s pages when the newspaper published an investigative article on 28th October 2009 entitled "Brother of Afghan Leader Said to Be Paid by C.I.A", which illustrated Karzai's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai's probably significant role in the Afghan drug trade and electoral fraud. According to some unnamed U.S. and other Western officials interviewed, Ahmed Wali Karzai had been working closely with the CIA for years and had recently "orchestrated the manufacture of hundreds of thousands of phony ballots for his brother's re-election effort in August"¹⁷⁰. Even though the role Ahmed Wali Karzai played in the Afghan drug trade could not be fully confirmed, there were unconfirmed sources which put Karzai's and even CIA's role in the Afghan drug trade in the limelight¹⁷¹. Moreover, the whole incident bode ill for the Obama administration's promises to battle the Afghan drug trade, which was a major contributing factor for the Taliban's continuing insurgency¹⁷².

By highlighting the problems that plagued Afghanistan's presidential elections and Karzai's close ties to the country's large-scale drug trade which fuelled the ongoing Taliban insurgency, *NYT* painted a very contradictory picture of the ongoing war in Afghanistan. It covered the more secretive aspects of the conflict and showed how complicated the political situation and entrenched corruption had become when Obama's "surge" began. This, in turn, influenced how *NYT* wrote about the Karzai administration, which was now seen in a more critical light by the newspaper than ever before.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and inefficiency of the Afghan National Army

When Obama announced the incremental withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan to begin in July 2011 during his speech at West Point Military Academy on 1st December 2009¹⁷³, the U.S. public support for the War in Afghanistan saw a slight increase, which was in large part due to the promise of a withdrawal from a war which had lasted nearly ten years for the U.S.¹⁷⁴ This growth of support was quite a contrary phenomenon to the U.S. media's mainly negative coverage of the growing violence and corruption in Afghanistan at the time¹⁷⁵. Even though

¹⁷⁰The New York Times, 28.10.2009

¹⁷¹Scott, 133-135, 2011

¹⁷²The New York Times, 28.10.2009

¹⁷³The New York Times, 02.12.2009

¹⁷⁴DiMaggio, 5, 2015

¹⁷⁵King, 78-79, 2014

Obama's announcement of the withdrawal might have hinted at some success in the fight against the Taliban insurgency and in the stabilisation processes in the country,¹⁷⁶ this would eventually turn out to be unfounded, as the situation in Afghanistan slowly started to deteriorate back to what it had been right before the U.S. troop "surge".

First signs of the "surge's" failure to enhance the Afghan security forces' capabilities started to become noticeable when on 13th August 2010, *NYT* reported of a military operation conducted by the ANA without U.S. military assistance. This military operation, which "Afghan officials had expected to be a sign of their growing military capacity" quickly became a "debacle" as a battalion of nearly 300 Afghan soldiers was ambushed by Taliban fighters, which resulted in between 10 to 27 Afghan soldiers being lost. Also noticeable in this article was its mention that despite now having 134 000 soldiers in its ranks, roughly the same the number as U.S. and Western coalition forces in the country, the ANA was taking nearly double as many casualties without conducting significant operations on its own¹⁷⁷.

By covering the ANA's combat effectiveness in a different tone than during the initial years of its existence, *NYT* began to showcase the Afghan military's severe lack of capabilities and self-sufficiency despite years of training and large-scale resources provided to it. While the ANA's performance had at times been slowly improving, thanks to the extensive training provided by the U.S.¹⁷⁸, it is worth noting that *NYT*'s less flattering coverage of the ANA started to coincide with the slow withdrawal of U.S. troops. Despite not making any extensive analysis of the ANA's reliance on U.S. and Western military assistance, *NYT* continued to cover the problems the ANA was starting to face as its U.S. ally began to transition more and more responsibilities on its shoulders.

A *NYT* article by Rod Norland entitled "Afghan Forces Struggle as U.S. Military Steps Back" published on 18th June 2013 continued to portray ANA's problems with self-sustainment, as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan was increasing significantly, with possibly only 9000 U.S soldiers left in the country by the following year¹⁷⁹. Nordland's article included

¹⁷⁶Miller, 21, 2020

¹⁷⁷The New York Times, 13.08.2010

¹⁷⁸Jones, 72-75, 2008

¹⁷⁹The New York Times, 06.01.2013

mentions of the official transfer of security responsibility to Afghan government forces as well as the “withdrawal deadline for western forces in 2014”. What was most notable in the article, however, were the many quotes by wounded Afghan soldiers who criticised the lack of air support from their U.S. ally during battles with Taliban fighters, which had resulted in them getting gravely wounded. By disapproving of the inaction of the U.S. troops, the Afghan soldiers interviewed in Nordland’s article showcased how the War in Afghanistan was beginning slowly to shift in favour of the Taliban. The ANA was overly reliant on U.S. assistance and the military operations it had been conducting on its own were resulting in a startling number of casualties¹⁸⁰.

In another article entitled “War Deaths Top 13,000 In Afghan Security Forces”, Nordland continued to cover the growing number of Afghan casualties, which were now four times higher than the overall U.S. and Western military casualties during 13 years of war in Afghanistan. What was most notable in this article was that it reported that in the past three years, as the responsibility of fighting the Taliban insurgency had been transferred to the Afghan security forces, the number of Afghan casualties had grown to more than 8000. Even though Nordland’s article contributed this staggering figure to the increase of clashes between the Taliban fighters and Afghan government forces following the U.S. withdrawal¹⁸¹, it is safe to argue that the figure also hinted at the inefficiency of Afghan security forces, such as the ANA. In addition to the growing amount of casualties ANA was now once more facing a determined Taliban insurgency, which was making gains outside its traditional southern strongholds, for example in the provinces surrounding Kabul. This increase of the Taliban threat was taking place in conjunction with the U.S. withdrawal, and despite the graveness of the situation, the Afghan officials remained largely taciturn about it¹⁸².

By describing the plight, the ANA was experiencing when its U.S. ally began to withdraw from Afghanistan, *NYT*’s coverage presented quite a negative picture of the War in Afghanistan, which was once again turning in favour for the Taliban. A good example of this coverage was the significant number of ANA casualties, which illustrated how the work done by the U.S. and its allies to train and equip the rapidly growing the ANA had not resulted in its increased

¹⁸⁰The New York Times, 18.06.2013

¹⁸¹The New York Times, 04.03.2014

¹⁸²The New York Times, 27.07.2014

combat effectiveness, which in turn kept the Afghan military from preventing the growth of the Taliban insurgency¹⁸³.

During the first years of the Obama presidency *NYT* covered the complicated US-Afghan relationship extensively and quite analytically, as it repeatedly showcased the problems the Karzai administration had with its U.S ally. These problems were due to the rampant corruption and political inefficiency which was still evident in Afghanistan despite many attempts and pleas by the U.S. to reduce it. The corruption and political inefficiency in the Afghan government provided the Taliban a foothold to escalate its operations but was in large parts initially halted by the U.S. “surge”. Despite this the “surge” eventually did very little to strengthen the rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan¹⁸⁴.

Even though the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan got extensive coverage in *NYT*, the newspaper portrayed the withdrawal in quite a neutral light despite simultaneously showing how grievously it affected the Afghan security forces, namely the ANA’s fight against the Taliban. As presented above, the rather negative portrayal of the ANA’s performance was most likely due to the combination of a more western point of view and the growing critical outlook on the Afghan government and its corruption. Evaluations of what the U.S. withdrawal would possibly entail for the Afghan civilian population were surprisingly quite absent from *NYT*’s coverage during this period. This would, however, change during the latter stages of the war, as the Taliban would reassert its grip over Afghanistan.

The largest period of U.S. involvement in the War in Afghanistan ended on December 28th, 2014, when President Obama announced the end of “Operation Enduring Freedom”. The end of the operation would mark a gradual but complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, although initially roughly 10,000 U.S. soldiers would still stay in the country the following year¹⁸⁵. In addition to the end of “Operation Enduring Freedom” and the withdrawal of the U.S from Afghanistan, one arguable event which marked a major turn in the war was Hamid Karzai's speech at the end of his term of office in September 2014. In his speech Karzai accused the United States of betraying Afghanistan and pursuing its own goals in the country

¹⁸³Farrell, Osinga, Russell, 268-274, 2013

¹⁸⁴Miller, 24, 2020

¹⁸⁵Miller, 24, 2020

for the last thirteen years¹⁸⁶. The ingratitude of the outgoing, democratically elected Afghan president towards the United States' attempts to rebuild Afghanistan, which had resulted in the deaths of over 2000 U.S. soldiers¹⁸⁷, was perhaps an apt final act for the war which had required the attention of the United States for almost twenty years.

¹⁸⁶The New York Times, 24.09.2014

¹⁸⁷The Department of Defense, 2024 (cited 25.03.2024)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The New York Times covered the War in Afghanistan considerably widely during the war's most intense years, which began with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11 in 2001 and ended with the end of "Operation Enduring Freedom" in 2014. When the war began, it marked a significant change in global international politics after the end of the Cold War. This change was highly influenced by the birth of global terrorism fuelled by radical and militant Islamism, which would have far-reaching global consequences following the start of the new millennium. When the War in Afghanistan began, it marked a situation for the United States in which it had not found itself since the end of the Vietnam War some 30 years earlier. Once again, the country would find itself on the other side of the world promoting democracy, building peace and stability in a country where, based on its recent and turbulent history, this would be difficult, if not downright impossible, to achieve.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks brought militant Islamic terrorism on the United States soil and even closer to *NYT*, which would be most affected by the terrorist attacks compared to all the leading U.S. newspapers due to its location in the city where the terrorist attacks most noticeably took place. This was a big reason why the newspaper would be among the first to take up the notable task of covering the aftermath of 9/11 and the beginning war in Afghanistan. 9/11 and its immediate aftermath were primarily covered by *NYT* in the form of a section called "A Nation Challenged", which was especially dedicated to the victims of the terrorist attacks but also covered the effect the attacks were causing in Afghanistan. In addition to this section, the newspaper also wrote extensively about the speeches president Bush held to his nation to reassure the people that the terrorist threat was being addressed and that it would be answered with similar force by the U.S. Although *NYT* was not the only major U.S. media to initially support Bush and his plan to invade Afghanistan, the newspaper's coverage of Bush and his speeches was a major contributing factor for the overwhelming support for the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. public.

The first year of the War in Afghanistan, namely the start of "Operation Enduring Freedom", was extensively covered by *NYT*, which wrote about the possible progress of the military operation for the U.S. and about the difficult political situation in which the U.S. would find itself in Afghanistan following the ousting of the Taliban. While *NYT* followed the events of the U.S. invasion closely, it at times wrote about them in quite a jingoistic or at least a strongly western

fashion, which often forgot to mention the turmoil the U.S. invasion and previous U.S. actions during the Cold War had caused and continued to cause for Afghan civilians.

During the early years of the Afghan transitional government and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *NYT* continued to cover the ongoing war in Afghanistan as well as the efforts made to rebuild the country and to strengthen its governance in a varied fashion. Even though the newspaper slowly began to distance itself from its previous tendency to slightly neglect the deadly effects that the U.S. airstrikes against the now emerging Taliban insurgency caused to Afghan civilians, it still often portrayed the now ruling Karzai administration in a rather positive light. This was mostly evident in *NYT*'s coverage of the Afghan National Army during its first years, which lacked any critical evaluations of, for example, the high initial dropout rate among the Afghans as well as the improvements of Afghan women's rights included in the new Afghan constitution of 2004.

As the status of women in Afghanistan was largely influenced by the still prevalent culture of warlordism and political violence, which had been markedly on the rise in the preceding years, it is interesting that *NYT* often failed to note this historical and cultural context. This was quite incongruous, to say the least, as many of the now ruling Afghan politicians were linked to human rights abuses and cases of sexual violence towards Afghan women. However, this often seemed to be forgotten by the newspaper, which was focused on presenting the democratization processes underway in Afghanistan.

The decision of the Obama administration to first increase and then gradually withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan was extensively covered by *NYT*, which followed the "surge" with the same journalistic enthusiasm as during the buildup of U.S. troops at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. By the time of the Obama presidency, *NYT*'s portrayal of the Afghan president Hamid Karzai, his administration and the ongoing fight against the Taliban insurgency was starting to become more noticeably critical and somewhat apprehensive. As the Afghan government's inefficiency to counter the Taliban threat was resulting in a growing Taliban foothold in the country as well as an escalation in violence, *NYT* started to shift the tone of its coverage and to portray the Karzai administrations and the Afghan security forces in a more negative and realistic light than in the past years of the war.

When *NYT* began to showcase how years of training and material provided by the U.S. to the ANA were inadequate to counter the Afghan military's inherent problems with self-

sustainment and combat effectiveness, the tide of the war was already slowly turning in favour of the Taliban, and the escalating U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan coincided with this progression of the war. The ineffectiveness of the ANA was mostly portrayed by *NYT* as a result of the Afghans' dependence on U.S. military assistance. However, the newspaper often forgot to mention that this dependence was in part self-inflicted, as the rapidly growing ANA could not realistically meet the required standards to efficiently combat the Taliban, as more and more of its U.S. trainers were leaving Afghanistan after Obama's announcement of the U.S. withdrawal. By also openly presenting the numbers of Afghan casualties which were mounting quickly, *NYT* began to paint a rather demoralising picture of the ongoing fight against the Taliban insurgency, which probably did little or nothing to attain any more support for the war from the U.S. government and the public alike.

The end of "Operation Enduring Freedom" in 2014 came with a heavy cost for the U.S. After over a decade of military involvement in Afghanistan, which had resulted in billions of dollars spent in the rebuilding process and the deaths of over two thousand U.S. soldiers, the military operation was given quite an unceremonious end. This was more than likely due to the growing disenchantment that the War in Afghanistan had slowly begun to gain among the U.S. public, but which was also notable in the U.S. media, such as *NYT*. The newspaper's coverage of the war during "Operation Enduring Freedom" was highly variable and ranged from portrayals of U.S. military might with a jingoistic undertone to critical evaluations of the primary ally of the US, the Afghan government. What was indisputable, however, was that *NYT* was able to produce accurate and extensive coverage of the War in Afghanistan. This the newspaper would continue to do up until the war's official end in the summer of 2021, when the Afghan government would fall and Taliban rule would be reintroduced, a process that is continuing to the present day.

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