



# What the hell are the Afghanistan Papers? No, American leaders did not lie to the public

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Marc Thiessen: Hi, I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On? Dany, where the hell are you?

Danielle Pletka: I'm in Australia. As everybody will be able to tell, because it sounds like we're talking on a connection that's being gnawed at by rats under sea.

Marc Thiessen: By wallabies. Well, what are we talking about today, Dany?

Danielle Pletka: We are talking about this nominal blockbuster report, from the Washington Post. Probably one of the most hyped presentations, I've seen the Washington Post do in a long time. The so-called Afghanistan Paper, the 21st century version of the Vietnam Pentagon Papers. Yeah, what do you think about it?

Marc Thiessen: Well, they basically made the case, that Afghanistan has been, as Ryan Crocker put it, a wall-to-wall disaster for the United States. Another Vietnam that we have to admit defeat and get out.

Marc Thiessen: Two, that the American people have been lied to, not just by the Bush administration, but by the Obama administration and quite frankly, the Trump administration. That every presidential administration has been lying to the American people, telling them that we're making progress.

Marc Thiessen: Telling them that the mission is essential, when internally, they knew that wasn't the case. You mentioned the Pentagon Papers, which were a set of secret documents that were published about the Vietnam War.

Marc Thiessen: Those were classified documents, that were showing internal discussions within the government, at the time of the Vietnam War. Which showed that they did in fact lie to the American people and tell them, "We are winning. Everything is great."

Marc Thiessen: When they were talking amongst themselves, about how the effort was failing.

Marc Thiessen: The large part of these memos, is from a lessons-learned process that was being done by something called SIGAR. Which is the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

- Marc Thiessen: What they did was, they brought in lots of people who had previously and were currently involved in Afghanistan policy, in the military and private, and in the civilian side. They conducted off-the-record interviews with them, asking them essentially to do a self critique, to do a lessons-learned process.
- Marc Thiessen: The military does this all the time, and figure out, "Be brutal with yourself. What did you do wrong? What could you have done better? What failed? What we've seen, so that we can learn for the next time how to do that."
- Marc Thiessen: What the Post did with this, was they took that and turned it into a, "See, our government knew that it was all a failure," and all of these terrible things they said. It's not true.
- Marc Thiessen: It was an after-action report about the mistakes that were made, which we would hope the government would be doing. We make mistakes, and we've got to learn from them.
- Danielle Pletka: I mean, I have to confess, we have a lot of friends at the Washington Post, both among reporters and on the editorial page.
- Marc Thiessen: Absolutely.
- Danielle Pletka: I feel almost sort of Donald Trump-like, in my reaction to this. This is really fake news. It's not just fake news in the sense that, "Blank, insert your most hated president here, lied people died."
- Danielle Pletka: It is much more to my mind an effort, first of all, to boost something that they—and they didn't get by great reporting—they did a freaking FOIA request. That's number one. Number two, people weren't lying to the American people.
- Danielle Pletka: America's leaders, neither Bush nor Obama, nor the Trump people were lying to the American people about this. I couldn't find you an American, who would say, "Yeah, wow, I can't believe Afghanistan is a disaster.
- Danielle Pletka: I was told so long, it was just like in Hollywood or LA, it's wonderful there." That's number two. Number three, what implication does this have for the future? Will you sit down with an after-action report investigator?
- Marc Thiessen: Bingo.
- Danielle Pletka: Whether it was a DOD or it was an inspector general, and have a frank and open discussion, if you knew that some sleazy journalist, was going to then mischaracterize everything you ever said, and accuse you and your colleagues of having lied on the strength of it?
- Marc Thiessen: No, absolutely not. That's actually the biggest danger of this. We'll get into the policy, and what they reported in a moment. I think you're absolutely right. I mean, when I worked, as you know, for three years in

the Pentagon, I sat with Secretary Rumsfeld and our commanders in, on what are called lessons-learned exercises.

- Marc Thiessen: I know in Rumsfeld's case, and I'm sure Gates and others who've succeeded him and Panetta, have done the same thing.
- Marc Thiessen: He really pressed our commanders, to go back and look and say, "What did you do wrong? Be self-critical, criticize others," right? "You're a three-star general, criticize that other three-star general in another sector. Tell us what he did wrong.
- Marc Thiessen: It's all off the record. Don't worry, and it's not going to be in the Washington Post." They did it. They would do it, because it was really important to us to learn from our mistakes. Look, there's never been a war in human history, where everything went according to the war plan.
- Marc Thiessen: What's the famous phrase? That, "The war plan disappears the second the boots hit the ground," right? Things happen, and the enemy has a vote in how the battle goes.
- Marc Thiessen: You make strategic decisions, and then sometimes they don't work out. If we don't have the freedom in the government, our military and our civilian leaders of the military, don't have the freedom to have that kind of a frank discussion.
- Marc Thiessen: Then we're going to keep making the same mistakes over and over again. I think this report quite frankly, is really damaging to our national security.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah. No, I mean, you and I agree completely. We're going to have a conversation about this, but the other really, really big axe I have to grind here is this office of the inspector general.
- Danielle Pletka: I have watched... you and I have former colleagues, who worked in both the OIG for Iraq and the SIGAR, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan. Again, these have become, to use an expression that I absolutely can't stand, self-licking ice cream cones. These inspectors, who exist for the virtue of catching out our officials on the ground—be they military, be they development, be they state department, drive me absolutely nuts because I'm all for inspector generals, you absolutely want to make sure that people are careful, but that's not what these guys are. These guys are out there, looking for things to criticize.
- Marc Thiessen: I will not question your views on SIGAR. I'm a huge fan of Lessons Learned generally. Though it can probably get too down in the woods, where there is an incentive to just criticize everything, in order to justify your existence. Lessons Learned are a very important thing, to have that process.
- Marc Thiessen: To have some sort of a mechanism for it. I don't know if SIGAR is the right mechanism or not, but certainly, we have to have something like that. I think this reporting, puts a chill on our ability to do that.
- Danielle Pletka: Yeah. No, I couldn't agree more. I really am looking forward to the

conversation that you and I are going to have, with Michael O'Hanlon from Brookings about this. He has written about our operations in Afghanistan. He's written about our operations in Iraq.

- Danielle Pletka: He has been in both places. He's worked very closely with generals have been on the ground, with ambassadors who've been on the ground regardless of administration, regardless of political party or persuasion. He is just a really honest, and deep and serious analyst.
- Marc Thiessen: A democrat, by the way. He's not a Bush apologist. He was actually much more involved in the policy in the Obama years, than he was in the Bush time.
- Danielle Pletka: He is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. His specialty is defense and foreign policy. He's the author of numerous works.
- Danielle Pletka: He wrote a book called "Toughing it Out in Afghanistan," which is outstanding. He's written a book called "The Science of War." There is no one better to have on. We count ourselves really lucky to have a great conversation.
- Marc Thiessen: Michael, welcome to the podcast.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Marc and Dany, thanks for having me.
- Marc Thiessen: It's great to have you here. Look, there's this Washington Post series that's come out, the Afghanistan Papers, which is supposed to be an allusion to the Pentagon Papers.
- Marc Thiessen: You've written a very persuasive argument, that the Post got it wrong. First of all, tell us what the Afghanistan Papers allege, and what's wrong with the approach that they've taken?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Thanks. Well, I thought the first day of roughly a six-part series was wrong. The other days were largely... the whole thing was based largely on accessing documents that had been done by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction over the years. A lot of it is familiar terrain, as we talk about Afghanistan.
- Michael O'Hanlon: A mission that's been frustrating by any measure, to even those of us who have been pretty consistent supporters. Difficulty building the Afghan army, difficulty fighting corruption, difficulty shutting down the opium production. All these extensive documents that reaffirmed things we frankly already knew.
- Michael O'Hanlon: There is no harm in assembling them in one place. The harm was the opening day, when the Post said, "There's been a pattern of deception and duplicity, by American officials throughout this war. Officials who always knew we were falling short, but didn't want the public to know.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Didn't have the courage to tell them the truth. Wanted to keep this thing going for whatever reason. They just didn't want to fail, or they thought it would be damaging to their own personal reputations."

- Michael O'Hanlon: Consistently, according to the Post, these American officials at various levels, but presumably including our key ambassadors, and military commanders in the field as well as presidents, and their officials back in the cabinet in Washington.
- Marc Thiessen: Not just George W. Bush, but Barack Obama also-
- Michael O'Hanlon: Right.
- Marc Thiessen: ... was criticized.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Exactly. This was almost 20 years. It was a very bipartisan, broadside. I thought that part was wrong. I thought that was fundamentally wrong, because I've tracked this war, as I'm sure you and Dany have.
- Michael O'Hanlon: We know that, in my judgment, people have never played up this great, stellar success for public consumption while at the same time they were admitting to each other privately that it was failing. That was not the narrative.
- Michael O'Hanlon: The narrative for all of us was, "This is hard. Maybe we don't want to do too much nation building there. Let's try to get out if we can." George Bush wanted to minimize the presence, for most of the time he was there. Barack Obama surged up, but then he wanted to get out.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Donald Trump never wanted to be there in the first place. Presidents have been extremely lukewarm at best about this. Their officials, to my mind, have typically acknowledged the failings and frustrations. To call this a deception on the part of Washington, at the expense of Congress and the American people, I just thought, reinforced the cynicism, and disparaging of key officials that we arguably have too much of already, in this poisonous political atmosphere. I was pretty adamantly opposed to that approach.
- Marc Thiessen: Let's walk through the difference between this and the Pentagon Papers. The Pentagon Papers were documents that were released during the Vietnam War, that showed that the government had been lying to the American people about the success of our effort in Vietnam.
- Marc Thiessen: They're trying to draw an allusion between Afghanistan and Vietnam. In the case of the Pentagon Papers, these were highly classified documents. They were contemporaneous.
- Marc Thiessen: They were showing that at the very same time that the government was saying, "We are succeeding," internally, they knew we were failing. What's the difference between that and these documents?
- Michael O'Hanlon: In Afghanistan, and the documents that are now available on the Post site, but the documents that really were available publicly in many cases, throughout this whole last 20 years.
- Michael O'Hanlon: I believe officials have consistently said, "We know it's hard in Afghanistan. We're not going to be able to attain major high objectives.

This is a very weak state. This is not a place where you can expect to create Valhalla," as secretary Gates liked to say, referring back to antiquity.

- Michael O'Hanlon: This was a place where we had to be modest and minimalist in our goals, that was the public message. These documents that were created, were largely interviews done after the fact, with officials looking back on policy of two, three, four, five, eight years ago in regard to Afghanistan.
- Michael O'Hanlon: They were personal reflections about how people themselves thought about it, at that later date. They were not contemporaneous and-
- Marc Thiessen: They were from the Lessons Learned project, right?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, so-
- Marc Thiessen: But I don't think all of our listeners know, the military regular does what's called Lessons Learned. Where they go back after something has happened, and ask people to critique themselves.
- Marc Thiessen: They're being asked to criticize themselves in their performance. Where did they go wrong? What worked well? What didn't work well? They're now using that to say that the American people were lied to, is that right?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yes, and I think about the worst thing you can accuse officials of, is believing in a strategy that wasn't very promising. Also, sometimes giving the more positive interpretation when you were hoping to see success of whatever recent strategic modification you had made to policy.
- Michael O'Hanlon: If all of a sudden we start incentivizing Afghan soldiers to stay in the Afghan army in a different way, and then for the first couple of months we see a little higher retention, it's not surprising or unreasonable for an American commander to say, "I think we now have a policy that might be working."
- Michael O'Hanlon: Lo and behold, six months later, the whole thing has plateaued or even fallen back. Turns out their hopes were not justified. But they might have been very reasonable and they were not duplicitous.
- Michael O'Hanlon: They were, you could say in the worst case, sort of cheerleading. More often than not, they were adopting and adapting, and trying a new approach. Then looking for evidence as to whether it was working. Sometimes hoping they saw that evidence before it was conclusive.
- Michael O'Hanlon: That's about the worst, I believe, that people consistently did. Now, there were individual commanders at certain sites, certain people who maybe went too far drinking the Kool-Aid, or making the Kool-Aid frankly. But I don't think that General Petraeus or General Allen, or General Dunford or General McChrystal, or Ambassador Crocker or those sort of people, were trying to lay out a deliberate strategy of deception. Nor do I believe the presidents they worked for, were doing

so.

- Michael O'Hanlon: In fact, I know pretty much factually the opposite. I remember very well, and can prove from documents that were released throughout this period, that the public debate was well aware of the doubts of almost everyone about being too ambitious in Afghanistan, and attaining major accomplishments quickly.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Almost everybody was cautioning against that all the time. We can go back and talk about specifics, if you like on that front. One example that sticks out just very briefly, is the 2009 Obama debate, about if and when to increase.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Of course, president Obama has been criticized, including perhaps maybe even by you, I can't remember for sure, about how long he took to make that set of decisions. The whole reason why he took that long, and was sort of pondering in public for all of us to see, is he couldn't persuade himself that even this increase in forces would achieve the objectives that he thought important. He sort of pondered and equivocated, and tried to split the difference or split the baby, call it what you will.
- Michael O'Hanlon: There were all these discussions, of how he was potentially being pressured by these great generals, Petraeus and McChrystal, and Admiral Mullen who had so much more Washington experience.
- Michael O'Hanlon: All that was the way it was being discussed at the time. There was no cover up. There was no duplicity. There was an honest policy disagreement, and a fair amount of debate over a difficult path ahead. We all knew it then, and we know it now.
- Danielle Pletka: Okay, so Michael, not to be sort of hyper Washington and hyper political about this, but you wrote an excellent piece denying the premise of the Washington Post story. Ambassador Ryan Crocker did the same thing.
- Danielle Pletka: Jim Dobbins who was our special envoy for Afghanistan, had a piece in The Hill, in which he said the same thing. Basically, everybody who has followed this issue in a serious and close way, disagrees with the Post's premise. What's The Post up to here? What's this game?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Well, it's a good question. I'm going to be careful, because I don't want to guess too much and people can draw their own conclusions. I do think journalists work their tails off to get these kinds of documents. When they get them, they want to make it into the biggest possible story.
- Michael O'Hanlon: That's what sells. There are many times where that's reasonable as an approach. Like I said, just to prove, or I hope prove, that I'm not on a vendetta against the Post. I thought five of the six days of this series, were fine.
- Michael O'Hanlon: The headlines were somewhat dramatic in those days as well, but they weren't trying to allege misbehavior or duplicity, on the part of officials.

- Michael O'Hanlon: As Marc said earlier, they are the ones who called this the Afghanistan Papers. The reference and the echo to the Pentagon Papers, was just too obvious to miss. I think it's well known that the Washington Post did very well, in terms of its Vietnam and Watergate coverage.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Elevated its stature, and frankly did a great public service in my mind, looking back historically. There has got to be a temptation, to want to see if you can do the same thing now.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Maybe there was a little bit of, frankly, naivete, on the part of the Post, to have forgotten sort of how these debates felt when they were occurring, back in the moments that I just referred to. I think if you had a clear memory of those times, you would know that you could accuse people of a lot of things.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Not a very good strategy, not a very quick adaptation when strategy failed. You would not accuse them of duplicity because the entire public tenor of the Afghanistan mission for many years has been very sober. I'll give one more example.
- Michael O'Hanlon: We've got President Obama, of course, criticized President Bush for fighting the wrong war. He used that argument against John McCain in 2008. Then he came into office enthusiastic about Afghanistan, saying, "That was the right war. That was the place from which the 9/11 attacks had been hatched."
- Michael O'Hanlon: Then Obama's own enthusiasm for the Afghanistan mission only lasted maybe a year. His famous West Point speech of December 1st, 2009, which announced the surge, also announced the end of the surge, at the same time in the same speech.
- Marc Thiessen: Which is insane.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Which is... well, you can criticize it, and I probably would too. The point is that, it's pretty hard to accuse Obama of overselling the mission. At that point, he acknowledged that the whole reason for surging up quickly, and then coming back down, is he wanted to keep pressure on an Afghan government that he thought would otherwise, because of corruption and weakness, just depend on us too much. This was all transparent in his motivation at the time. He was not overselling the mission.
- Michael O'Hanlon: He was not telling us, "We're doing so darn well American people, that I can surge up and then surge down. It's going to be fantastic." That's not what he said.
- Michael O'Hanlon: He said, "We need to surge up, to avoid losing the war. We also need to make the Afghans know that it's their mission and they've got to own it, or we'll lose in a different way. We're going to do this whole quick build up, quick build down in an effort to find a way to split the difference.
- Danielle Pletka: Just to follow up on that, it escaped me in reading the Post's coverage, what exactly the lies were that were being told. We did make progress.

It wasn't just that we captured Bin Laden in Pakistan. It was that we got rid of the Taliban government.

- Danielle Pletka: It was that we diminished the territory from which al Qaeda was able to operate. There were certainly successes on the ground, but as you say, our leaders from Bush to Obama to even Trump have been very somber, about the limitations and especially very somber about our partners. Where's the lie here?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, I have a hard time with that too. I think that there may have been periods that were pretty short, when officials who were getting classified intelligence, as you would hope are public officials would do, may have talked with each other for a few months, as they started to see a trend line they didn't like before they talk to the public about it, or before a new policy had been built. For example, when President Bush realized, by about 2007, which is the same year as the Iraq surge of course, that the Afghanistan mission was starting to slip away, and the Taliban were coming back. I think initially, in that year, he was just trying to make a rock succeed. To only sort of do one big thing at a time.
- Michael O'Hanlon: As the year progressed, I think he and his officials were starting to realize, the Afghanistan mission needed new energy. Bob Gates started to say so. Then Barack Obama on the campaign trail was saying so.
- Michael O'Hanlon: There was maybe a, I don't know, I'm guessing a 6 to 12 month lag, between when President Bush first started to see pretty compelling evidence that this mission was slipping away and when he began to publicly articulate a new strategy in recognition of that slippage.
- Michael O'Hanlon: You would expect that kind of a time lag, because A, you don't really want presidents divulging classified information to the public. If they're using classified information to rethink their own assumption, some of that has to be done privately.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Secondly, they're not going to start saying the mission's going badly before they have either a willingness to square up with a reality that's so overwhelming, they can't do anything about it. Or they've thought through a little bit of their alternative.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Maybe President Bush waited a month or two too long, but I don't think so. I mean, when I look back on that period, I believe that we probably didn't have a great strategy in Afghanistan in '03, '04, '05, '06.
- Michael O'Hanlon: When it became clear that we were failing, President Bush was fairly quick to respond once the surge in Iraq allowed him enough forces to do so. Again, I think that the concept of deceit is fundamentally the incorrect way to describe these difficulties and strategy.
- Marc Thiessen: Michael, a lot of our listeners are looking at this and saying, "18 years and plus that we've been in Afghanistan, why the hell are we still there? What does victory look like? What does success look like?"
- Marc Thiessen: It seems like we had two goals in Afghanistan. One was to drive al Qaeda out of the country and the Taliban out of power, in the country

where they planned the 9/11 attacks, and prevent it from becoming a terrorist safe haven. I think we've done a pretty good job of that.

- Marc Thiessen: It is not a terrorist safe haven that threatens America today, so success. Strategy two was to help the Afghans become self-sufficient, both in security and governance. That's the part that hasn't gone so well. Do you agree with that assessment, and why do we need to stay?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, thank you. I think that's a pretty good way to frame it. I also would note that some people will hope now in these on-again off-again peace talks with the Taliban, that we could even tolerate them having a share of power—as long as they've definitively broken with al Qaeda.
- Marc Thiessen: I've got a bridge to sell you, if you think they're going to do that.
- Michael O'Hanlon: It's a very good point, which makes you wonder, "Have they really changed, 18 years later?" Some of them have changed. A lot of the earlier leaders are dead. A lot of the younger ones are more hard-lined, even than their predecessors.
- Michael O'Hanlon: I think it's going to be hard, just to envision seeing the Taliban be back in Afghanistan. Really empower, and really believe they're going to keep al Qaeda and ISIS, especially al Qaeda at arm's length.
- Danielle Pletka: I have two questions. One is, again, a political one and one is a structural one. You, like our colleague Fred Kagan, like a lot of others who are viewing Afghanistan through the prism of geostrategic imperative, think we need to maintain a modest, but still not huge, but not tiny, footprint in Afghanistan.
- Danielle Pletka: 5,000 troops, long-term commitment. How is this, dare I call it fake news, going to affect that? The president has adopted the language of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. He likes to refer to endless wars. The others call them forever wars.
- Danielle Pletka: Do you see any constituency here among the people, who will have the possibility of being president in 2020? After the 2020 elections, any possibility of them actually supporting even that modest commitment, particularly given this Washington Post story?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Well, maybe not on the campaign trail. I certainly don't think too many will bring it up on the campaign trail on purpose. I think once you're in the oval office, and you're responsible for protecting the country, making sure al Qaeda and ISIS don't return to the kind of influence and opportunity they had before—also you realize that the Afghanistan mission costs maybe 1% to 2% of the defense budget at the levels I'm proposing—I think that you might very well like to keep it.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Even though it polls badly, it's not as if you see million-person marches on the mall against the Afghanistan mission. There is no intensity in the feeling on the part of most Americans. Now-
- Marc Thiessen: No one asked Mark Esper, during his confirmation hearings, about this.

- Michael O'Hanlon: That's fascinating, yeah.
- Marc Thiessen: Nobody did.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Right, and we all know, and all three of us certainly—I think most thoughtful Americans—feel very indebted to the relatively small number of men and women who have served there, have continued to risk their lives there.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Of course, that also makes us less apt to want to give up in a place where we've lost so much already. At this point, we don't need a huge additional sacrifice, or huge additional risk to sustain the American contribution to that ongoing mission.
- Michael O'Hanlon: I think there is a good chance that a president is going to make a pragmatic decision and elect to more or less do what I'm proposing. Frankly, frame it in a way that's similar. What I'm trying to say is, let's have a no-drama Afghanistan policy.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Both Obama and Trump have been full of drama on this. I don't think it's really served them very well. They've wound up taking more time on the issue, getting pulled in multiple directions. We should just recognize our interests as sort of secondary, or even tertiary here.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Realize, however, that we don't need that much American capability and effort to sustain a policy that, at this point, is not a huge success. Doesn't promise some big victory, but does still help the Afghans control all of the cities and prevent major terrorist sanctuaries from developing on Afghan soil.
- Danielle Pletka: Second question, because I hope you're right on the first. Second question, and everybody is going to feel this is slightly nerdy, but it is one of my hobby horses and I can't help it.
- Danielle Pletka: One of the things that has driven me insane about recent operations, military operations both in Iraq and in Afghanistan, is the ubiquitous presence of this inspector general. There is one for Iraq, there is one for Afghanistan.
- Danielle Pletka: These guys are basically playing the role of Monday morning quarterback for everything. All of their reports are, "Oh well, you built that school, but you didn't use OSHA pre-approved construction techniques.
- Danielle Pletka: Oh, you worked with the Afghan military, but the vests that you gave them more 10 millimeters thinner, then the vests that you provided to others."
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, it's a good point. I have felt that SIGAR has a lot of good, hardworking people who sometimes make a mountain out of a molehill. What we really need to hear about are threats to the mission and to the viability of the core strategy. Not, as you say, sort of nitpicking against regulation.

- Michael O'Hanlon: Now, it turns out that in most cases in Afghanistan, policies don't work as well as you hope they will when you implement them. That's maybe even more true in this than in many wars. On balance, if you go in and you do a report, I mean, and we're talking about war in the first place, it's not a pleasant topic—like the Washington Nationals winning the world series. It's something where the news is going to be generally bad, and where the goals you set out are usually going to not be met, at least not at the level that you would prefer.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Sometimes getting to half the goal is good enough if what you're trying to prevent is the reconstitution of a terrorist sanctuary. If you're really trying to end the American involvement altogether, and get the Afghanistan government fully functional, you'd like to do better than we have.
- Michael O'Hanlon: SIGAR is going to go into a target-rich environment, so to speak, for accountants and for auditors, and people who are looking for shortcomings. I just wish there were more of a strategic sense of which of these shortcomings really matter? Which ones are surprising?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Which ones are sort of innate to the difficulty of operating, in that kind of a broken country?
- Marc Thiessen: Let me get my nerd on for a second here, to follow up on Dany. The Post series, and you've acknowledged that there're mistakes that have been made, things have not gone as well as expected. How bad is this compared to past wars?
- Marc Thiessen: I mean, what would the SIGAR report on D-Day have been? D-Day was in many ways a disaster, even though—you know the whole story of the hedgerows, and how we hadn't planned for that. You could take almost any battle that we fought...
- Marc Thiessen: What would the SIGAR report be on Korea, where the casualty rates were far, far higher than anything we've had in any of the theaters of the war on terror. How bad is this compared to past wars? How bad are the mistakes that we've made? How much of a quagmire is this compared to past wars? Compared to Korea, compared to Vietnam, compared to some of the worst battles of World War II, how bad is this?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Well, Afghanistan's in some ways been among the most frustrating because it's been so long and we've thrown our best talent. I never knew the Eisenhowers and Bradleys, but having gotten to know a number of the commanders and ambassadors, this is a remarkably talented group.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Of course, America's all-volunteer military and all-volunteer foreign service are remarkable institutions. We put a lot of talent into a place. We've tried a lot of strategies, and none of them have quite measured up to what I would have hoped.
- Michael O'Hanlon: In that sense, it's been among America's most frustrating wars. In terms of the magnitude of mistakes, the magnitude of loss, of cost, of casualties, as you well know, it doesn't even begin to compare, to many

of the cases that you just referred to.

Danielle Pletka: I think that's exactly right Michael. I mean, people don't like being in Afghanistan for 18 years. Just saying that alone, it sounds like the definition of failure.

Danielle Pletka: On the other hand, we all agree, that had we committed the kind of troops we had committed to even the first Desert Storm, let alone the Djs and Inchon landings, and the wars of the past, there would be no question of our ability, to be victorious on the ground.

Danielle Pletka: If we've committed half the resources to Afghanistan, that we committed to the Marshall Plan, we could just play an almost transformative role. It's a very apples and oranges kind of comparison that people make. What do you think the most important lessons learned of this war should be?

Danielle Pletka: What do you think, if you were SIGAR, and you are actually focused on the strategic imperative, what would you say is the most important thing that the United States should have learned and didn't?

Michael O'Hanlon: Well, when in doubt, fall back on Ryan Crocker's thoughts and comments. That's one of my guidelines in life. In his op-ed, he talked about how some of the bigger projects that we attempted in Afghanistan, just never had a chance. Probably fueled the corruption inevitably, and we should have seen it coming.

Michael O'Hanlon: Maybe even the magnitude of the troop surge and the quickness was suboptimal. Partly, because when you flood that kind of capability and that much money into a place like Afghanistan, you're inevitably going to worsen the corruption. When I look back, and we can't do the counterfactual... If we could have somehow put in about 50,000 US troops in the early years, and tried to build the Afghan army and police in such a way that those forces developed an institutional identity and loyalty. That the soldiers and policemen got paid, instead of having their commanders steal the money. If we had eyes on the ground to do that, then had sustained that kind of level over 10 years, rather than starting small, going very big, drawing down very fast, I think that would have had a better chance. I still don't think it would have been guaranteed to produce great results.

Michael O'Hanlon:: By the way, let me just be very clear, and not just because my good buddy Marc is sitting next to me, because I said this in a public session at Brookings the other day as well: I'm not criticizing the Bush administration for turning its eyes from Afghanistan to Iraq.

Michael O'Hanlon: Making the argument that somehow that was the cause of having this light footprint. Nobody wanted to invest a lot of resources in Afghanistan in the early years, including the Europeans. Many of the European countries, of course, were against the Iraq War.

Michael O'Hanlon: It's not as if they said, "Hey Washington, why don't you let us get this one, and you take care of Iraq? We think you're making a mistake over there, but you do what you got to do. Just chime in or chip in with one

fourth of the needed NATO force. We'll provide the other three fourths, we'll scale this up."

- Michael O'Hanlon: Nobody said that. Everybody was going light footprint with Afghanistan because nobody really believed you could be that successful in building a state out of virtually nothing. After all that country had been through, expectations were low from the start on both sides of the Atlantic.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Which is again, why the Washington Post was much more wrong than right, to allege this pattern of so-called deceit and duplicity. Nobody was aiming that high.
- Marc Thiessen: Is it fair to say, Michael, that looking back now at 18 years on Afghanistan, that counterterrorism succeeded and counterinsurgency failed?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah.
- Marc Thiessen: In that, the initial mission was to go and whack the people who attacked us. Make sure they didn't have a sanctuary and they couldn't carry out an attack again. That succeeded pretty well, and it's still succeeding pretty well.
- Marc Thiessen: Then we had a successful counterinsurgency experience in Iraq with the surge in 2007, and we thought, "Let's, do that over here." We started getting into all this governance building.
- Marc Thiessen: Americans look at that and say, "Why is that our problem? What I care about as an American citizen, and what I'm willing to sacrifice my kids' security for perhaps, if they are in the military, is to make sure they don't come get us over here."
- Marc Thiessen: We now seem to be walking back from that counterinsurgency approach, to a light footprint counterterrorism focused on American security. A little bit less focused on trying to do nation building in Afghanistan. Is that right, and is that the right place to be?
- Michael O'Hanlon: Well, I think you are right. I also think when General McChrystal, for example, did his review in early 2009, he decided that corruption—the very same corruption the Post has written about—was an equal threat to the overall mission and to the viability of the Afghan government, as was the Taliban itself.
- Michael O'Hanlon: He thought this would erode the support from the Afghan people for the government. Therefore, it would fall through a weakness of the state through corruption. Then the Taliban would have an entree to come back, and maybe bring al Qaeda back.
- Michael O'Hanlon: In other words, nation building was never, to the extent we were trying to do it, it was never seen as something we were just doing for the fun of it. Or because we were nice people, or because we thought we could build Valhalla in central Asia.

- Michael O'Hanlon: It was because we saw it as a way to preserve the counterterrorism success, without us being there forever. I think there are a lot of ways most of us, now looking back, would do that differently.
- Marc Thiessen: Maybe the lesson, Michael, is that the idea was, "We'll go in, counter terrorism and build capability for the Afghans. Then we'll be able to leave and let them take care of it, and keep the lid on." That takes a lot more troops, a lot more money, a lot more spending.
- Marc Thiessen: Maybe the lesson is that, that second part really wasn't ever a realistic goal. That what we really need, and this will not make the endless war crowd happy, is a small enduring counterterrorism presence in this country, for not 5 years, not 10 years, but how long have we been in Korea?
- Marc Thiessen: How long have we been in Japan? We may have to be in Afghanistan, not spending billions and trillions of dollars and not with massive troops. With a small counterterrorism force, to keep a lid on this thing for a long time.
- Marc Thiessen: That might be the better choice, than trying to build up Afghan's capability and bring them out of the stone age, to a sort of a modern society.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, I think you're basically right. I would be willing to consider that. Now I wrote 5,000 Troops for 5 Years, because I was trying to think out one presidential term-
- Marc Thiessen: Sure.
- Michael O'Hanlon: ... tie this to the political debate. Also, realize that we don't really know what's going to happen, with things like the peace process. Although, I think it'll be very slow. I would predict that, between the Taliban and the Afghan government.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Also, Pakistan's views on whether they need to keep supporting the Taliban the way they have. Chances are they will. Looking out, five years was already far enough for me for that purpose. I agree with your point. I think it may take a small to modest presence, for substantially longer than five years.
- Michael O'Hanlon: If that's what it takes, and we have that kind of presence in Afghanistan, that kind of presence in Iraq, that kind of presence in Qatar, they're all somewhat different from one to another, but I think we can sustain that.
- Marc Thiessen: Well Michael, thank you so much for joining us today, and explaining all of this to us.
- Michael O'Hanlon: Well, thanks to all of you. This was a nice opportunity, a treat for me, pleasure.
- Marc Thiessen: Okay, so Dany, I want to tackle this thing that we talked about with Michael at the end. Which is this idea that counterterrorism succeeded,

but counterinsurgency failed in Afghanistan. What do you think?

- Danielle Pletka: I think the opposite is true. I think counterinsurgency is what succeeds, when you are focused on the basic principles of counterinsurgency, which are clear, hold and build. That means you are returning people to people. The sense of their own security, that enables them to build a better society.
- Danielle Pletka: Which in turn sort of immunizes them against the return of al Qaeda or the Taliban. In counterterrorism, which is basically the whack-a-mole that we always talk about, it's, "Oh a terrorists, kill them. Terrorists, kill them. Other terrorists, kill them." I don't think that works. I don't think it's worked anywhere. I think that was the policy of the Obama administration. I think it's been the policy of the Trump administration.
- Danielle Pletka: I think it is literally us doing the same thing, over and over and over again. Not recognizing that, what's the definition of insanity? Right. Not recognizing the results are going to be the same.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, but here is the thing Dany... I mean, I'm an advocate of counterinsurgency, because I was in the Bush White House during the surge in Iraq. Which is when we switched to a counterinsurgency strategy and started protecting the population.
- Marc Thiessen: It was a huge success, because what happened was the Sunnis that had been in the insurgency against us turned and joined us to drive out al Qaeda because we protected them. They were afraid of al Qaeda-
- Danielle Pletka: Right.
- Marc Thiessen: ... and so it worked there, but it hasn't translated well in Afghanistan. We have not been able to build up the capabilities of the Afghans the way we were in Iraq. Now, maybe it's because Iraq was-
- Danielle Pletka: Hang on. Hang on one second. We had 150,000 troops in Iraq. Of course, it's not going to work in a place where we have 14,000, which is-
- Marc Thiessen: Well, we didn't have 14,000 then, and under Obama we had 100,000 troops. Maybe the difference, quite frankly, is that Iraq... what I was starting to say, before you so rudely interrupted me. Was that Iraq was a much more advanced society, than Afghanistan is.
- Marc Thiessen: I mean, Afghanistan is quite literally... it's slight exaggeration, to say it's in the stone ages. Iraq is a society with an educated population, commerce, trade, science. It's a lot easier to build up capability in Iraq. Iraq seems to be actually doing pretty well after the surge.
- Marc Thiessen: It's got its problems. It's got its challenges with the Iranian influence, and all the rest of it. It's a semi-functioning democracy in the heart of the Middle East. Afghanistan is, despite our best efforts, still in the stone age. Maybe the lesson is, we can't bring a country out of the stone age.

- Danielle Pletka: Yeah, I mean, look, let's talk about this selfishly. Okay, we can have a deep dive about Afghanistan successes and failures, and limitations and what century people there live in. At the end of the day, that's pretty irrelevant to most Americans. What is relevant, is that Afghanistan doesn't become a safe haven.
- Marc Thiessen: Absolutely.
- Danielle Pletka: The key question for us taxpayers, us policymakers, us thought leaders, whatever we want to call ourselves. The key question for us is, how do you create an Afghanistan that we do not have to keep going back to? Unfortunately, this is where we circle back to the chaos.
- Danielle Pletka: What is it that creates the environment for these people? It is the corruption. Okay, it's why people are out in the streets in Lebanon. It's why people are out in the streets in Iraq.
- Danielle Pletka: It is why the Taliban has endless opportunities to resurge in Afghanistan, because corruption, mismanagement, malfeasance. Inability to sell what you make, what you grow. Inability to drive down the road, without giving a pay off to somebody.
- Danielle Pletka: Inability to get a license to do anything, without paying off somebody. Sure, I understand that sounds like Chicago to a lot of people, but the one thing I don't worry about in Chicago is, when those people rule, the people who benefit are Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In Afghanistan, that's the case. That's why the counterinsurgency part of this is so important.
- Marc Thiessen: Maybe what we need to do is recognize that and say, "We're reducing our force levels from what was hundreds of thousands of troops under Bush and Obama, now down to 14,000, maybe going down to 10." Michael says five could do it, I don't know. Fred Kagan may disagree with that.
- Marc Thiessen: Whatever that force level is, it's a fraction of what it was before. Their job is to prevent the Taliban from coming back. Which means that Afghans are better off, because we have a generally pro-American government.
- Marc Thiessen: Maybe corrupt, maybe mismanaging things, but they don't wake up every morning saying, "America's the problem in the world, and we've got to go kill Americans."
- Marc Thiessen: Then we go play whack-a-mole, and we have to do that for a long time. The idea that we could have ever gone in, and gotten rid of the bad guys and then left, and let the Afghans handle it, may be a fallacy.
- Marc Thiessen: Maybe it means we have to be there with a small presence, but we have to be there for a very long time with a small presence. Not ever getting down to zero, in your or my lifetime.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I'm not persuaded. I'm not persuaded that's going to work. I think the one thing that we both agree is that there is a long-term commitment here necessary. We both agree that-

- Marc Thiessen: Yes.
- Danielle Pletka: ... the Washington Post has done a huge disservice. Not just to the people who fight on the ground, our generals, our ambassadors, our foreign service, our development professionals.
- Danielle Pletka: They've not just done a disservice to them, they've done a disservice to all their colleagues, who have been standing up amid one of the most odious onslaughts on the press, under the Trump administration. Actually made what is so often a lie, this expression about fake news, true.
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah. Here is the thing, the analogy that they drew in that story is with the Vietnam. That the American people turned on the Vietnam War, and that basically Afghanistan is another Vietnam.
- Marc Thiessen: Let's take that analogy forward. What happened after Vietnam? Ronald Reagan came into power and we still had to confront the spread of communism, this violent, hateful ideology around the world.
- Marc Thiessen: There was no appetite in the American people to send hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam, or to Angola, or to Nicaragua, or to Afghanistan, or all these other places. What we did was, we did the Reagan Doctrine.
- Marc Thiessen: We came up with a strategy where we would help enable indigenous forces in each of these countries to fight our enemies for us. That's essentially the place where we've gotten to in, not just in Afghanistan, but in Syria, in Iraq.
- Marc Thiessen: I mean, Michael said that I think 95% of the casualties and 92% of the combat operations in Afghanistan are being carried out by the Afghan National Army. Obviously, they couldn't do it without us. We're providing mission planning, intelligence, air cover, fire support.
- Marc Thiessen: Things that were enablers, but they're doing the fighting for us. That I think may be the right strategy. Not just in Afghanistan, but in Syria, in Iraq, and that we're going to stay there. Not at the levels where Trump pretends. That we still have hundreds of thousands of troops around the world, that we've got all these forever wars. No. We've got small deployments of troops that are enabling our partners on the ground to fight the bad guys, who would otherwise be coming to kill us here. Why is that not a sustainable strategy, and that not the lesson?
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I mean, maybe that is part of the lesson. Maybe we need to be flexible. Maybe we need to recognize that, no matter what, we need a commitment to people like the Kurds.
- Danielle Pletka: We need commitments to the Afghan National Army. We need commitments to the Iraqi army. We need these commitments, so we don't have to fight. We need to be willing to fight, when the stakes are high enough for us.
- Danielle Pletka: What can I tell you? One way or another though, the one thing that we

can all agree about is that, withdrawing from the world and pretending it's not going to come and chase us, is just a dangerous stick your head in the sand strategy.

Marc Thiessen: Now, the lesson learned from this, if you really want a Lesson Learned on Afghanistan, you've got to go back to the Reagan administration, and the early Bush 41 administration. Which is, we got the Soviets to withdraw by supporting the Mujahideen. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, and we had entered the end of history. We just forgot about Afghanistan and said, "It doesn't matter to us what happens in Afghanistan. It doesn't matter if the Taliban come to power, or if Islamic radicals come to power. It's not our problem. Let them pound sand over there."

Marc Thiessen: The result was 9/11. We need to keep that lesson in mind. That whatever the strategy is—and it may be counterinsurgency, it may be counterterrorism, it may be the Reagan Doctrine approach. The one thing we should all be able to agree on, is that we can't ignore it anymore. That we've seen the cost of that, and making that mistake again would be tragic.

Danielle Pletka: Well, for once we agree.

Marc Thiessen: Not for once, you agree with me all the time Dany, you just don't want to admit it.

Danielle Pletka: That's true. Thank you.

Marc Thiessen: All right, talk to you soon.

Marc Thiessen: All right, bye.