

# You Had ONE Job: The U.S. Military's Epic Fail

by Brendan B. McBreen

**I'm mad.** Why did we fight in Afghanistan? I spent one year of my life as an advisor to the Afghan National Army. Now, after two decades of effort, two trillion dollars of U.S. taxpayer money spent, two thousand dead Americans, and twenty times that in dead Afghan soldiers, what have we wrought? Defeat, dissolution, and debacle.

The U.S. military failed to build the Afghan National Army because it didn't think the mission was important. You could see that a mile away. And the U.S. government found itself with an ineffective Afghan Army because it had entrusted the task—with unjustified and naïve faith—to an indifferent and self-dealing U.S. military.

There are many reasons why Afghanistan the country collapsed. But the Afghan Army's collapse can be tied directly to the aimless efforts of the U.S. military. When the U.S. government can't make our military do what it's told, we've got big problems.

**I'm mad at the U.S. Army.** After 2001, The Army had new priorities, but one of them was not, "Build the Afghan National Army." Instead of sending its best soldiers, leaders, and elite units, the Army shunted the Afghan training program onto the shoulders of its poor cousin, the National Guard.

Task Force Phoenix, the organization established to build the Afghan National Army, was manned by an ever-changing series of National Guard headquarters: from Oklahoma, Oregon, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Georgia, and elsewhere. These part-time soldiers were dedicated patriots, but they had no experience, worldliness, or aptitude to train a foreign army. It was amateur hour.

The Guard units I worked with spent 95 percent of their total attention span just getting themselves organized—trained, equipped, deployed, sustained, administered, and paid.

The U.S. Army doesn't trust the National Guard to train *themselves*. Who thought they were qualified to build a new Afghan National Army?



Then Lieutenant Colonel McBreen with Afghan Generals Munir Mangal—201st Corps, Bismillah Khan—Chief of Staff, and Mohammad Karimi—Chief of Operations, 2006.

**I'm mad at the U.S. Marine Corps**—the institution I loved and served for twenty-five years. Like the U.S. Army, the Marine Corps had zero interest in training the Afghan National Army.

I—and thousands of Marines like me—went to Afghanistan as part of a scratch-built team of “individual augments.” We were hastily assembled, minimally trained, and then randomly assigned. But we embraced the mission: to *live with*, *eat with*, and *work with* our allies. The Afghan soldiers I knew were fighters, patriots who loved their country and worked hard to protect it. I came to believe that the Marine Corps could do so much better for the Afghans. We could do this mission right.

When I briefed the Marine Corps director of operations, who was visiting from the Pentagon, I argued for expanding our role and strengthening our feeble minimum effort—so alien to Marine Corps culture. But the general simply smiled, “Isn't it good we can get away with it?”

What he meant of course, was that Afghanistan would not interfere with the Marine Corps and its own internal priorities. Our best sergeants,

captains, and lieutenant colonels would lead *our* units, not some peasant army. Business as usual meant we would ignore U.S. Army, Department of Defense, and U.S. national interests. I was discouraged. When our country needed tough professionals to build up an ally, the Marine Corps chose to look the other way.

**I'm mad at the generals.** You had ONE job. What kind of an army did you build? What decisions did you make? The leaders of Task Force Phoenix and its higher headquarters, the Combined Security Transition Command—Perryman, Balfe, Huber, Durbin, Fornica, Caldwell, Tovo, Davis, Kaiser, Fontes, Rainy—are all responsible for the Afghan Army that collapsed.

When I was in Afghanistan, I asked questions about our haphazard efforts and lack of a blueprint, a long-term plan. I have more questions today. How did you spend your 50 billion dollars? Why did you focus on superficial training and not on the structural foundations of the army? Pay, personnel, promotion, planning, logistics? Why did you allow multiple, conflicting chains of command? Why did you pay contractors for duplicate work? How much did you spend teaching PowerPoint to Afghan soldiers?

And if the Afghan National Army was never viable, as some have claimed, why didn't you say something? After twenty years of happy talk, did any of you speak truth to power?

Every general stayed on message, was decorated, and then promoted. Why—as Thomas Ricks and Paul Yingling have been asking for years—was no one fired? Is any general ever held accountable for results?

**I'm mad at the U.S. Congress.** They hired a bricklayer to build a garden wall, and then failed to supervise the project. When Congress saw that the bricks were crooked, the wall wasn't level, the foundation was weak, and the layout was incorrect, they did nothing. Congress never stopped to ask questions, provide corrections, enforce schedules, or hire a new contractor. So the builder kept laying bricks in the wrong direction.

What Congress did oversee, however, was domestic defense spending that generated local jobs. The billions in high-technology aircraft, ships, satellites, and missile-defense systems that we purchased over the last twenty years contributed *nothing* to building the Afghan Army. Did Congress care? There is no money for constituents in training a foreign army.

Did Congress force the services to prioritize Afghanistan? No. Did Congress re-shape military spending to reflect new national priorities? Did they review the commanders selected to train the Afghan National Army? Or ensure the services assigned officers with aptitude and vision? Did Congress demand to see a comprehensive training plan? Did they ever question the flawed concept of building an Afghan Army as a mirror-image of the U.S. Army? The logistics- and aviation-dependent U.S. Army? Did Congress ever question the services' personnel decisions that sent an endless stream of half-trained citizen-soldiers, reservists, and individual augments to Afghanistan?

Congress *knows* that the services are difficult to steer—that the services often resort to untruthfulness when under scrutiny. The U.S. military is like a huge planet with its own gravitational pull, its own goals and aspirations which are separate from national interests. It takes a ruthlessly strong hand—empowered with oversight, investigative authority, control of the purse strings, and approval power over leader selection—to force the military to accomplish those national goals set by our elected leaders.

This compliance issue is bigger than Afghanistan. No one really asks the generals what they are doing. No one disciplines the services. No one stops writing the checks. And now in Afghanistan, no one knows what to do next.

The U.S. exit strategy required a robust Afghan National Army, but the U.S. military never cared for the mission of building that army—and Congress never held them to the task. ■

*Brendan McBreen, a retired Marine Corps officer, served as the senior advisor to the 201st Corps, Afghan National Army during 2005–2006.*