



## US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Root Causes

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**Abstract:** *Afghanistan has remained under the rule of different powers but none of them could completely control it and had to leave it for different reasons. World powers had a keen interest and intervened in the state but could not stay there for long. This study has mainly focused on exploring the main causes behind the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The study was conducted using qualitative data from secondary sources. The main causes behind the US failure are a lack of awareness about the Taliban's nature, corruption, US over-confidence improper management of resources etc. The value of the work can be better judged by observing the contemporary complex world where the US has been criticized among the community of nations for its withdrawal and could assign a new role to the US in the near future.*

**Key Words:** Taliban, Afghanistan, Intervention, Causes, Withdrawal.

### Introduction

Afghanistan, most notably dubbed as “Graveyard of Empires or Empire stopper” is a multi-ethnic, mountainous and landlocked country situated in South-Central Asia. Its vicinal position to Eurasia, West Asia, South Asia and Central Asia has made it strategically important for all the major powers and therefore has been invaded by multiple empires, multiple times throughout the history. In nineteenth century, Britain sought to acquire Afghanistan in order to preserve its Indian empire against Russian expansion, culminating in a series of three prolonged Anglo-Afghan wars in 1839, 1878 and 1919.

British’s debacle in the third protracted war led to Afghanistan’s independence. Amir Amanullah Khan declared Afghanistan a monarchy and publicly announced himself King after the country gained independence (Thomas, 2005). King Amanullah’s modernist policies were deemed as heretical which led to his abdication in 1929. During the brief period of 1929-1933 Afghanistan was governed by succession of monarchs and finally in 1933 King Zahir Shah took the throne and ruled the country for about forty years. Although Zahir Shah was the monarch but real powers were wielded by his uncles and cousin Daud Khan. In 1964, King Zahir Shah tried to break the royal family’s hold on power by passing a

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democratic constitution that clearly barred the royal family's members from being part of the government. Daud Khan ultimately retorted by toppling Zahir Shah's government and becoming president of the republic in 1973. Daud Khan endeavor to isolate the government from Soviet union and disparaging the Parchamis (one of the faction of People's democratic party of Afghanistan) led to his assassination in 1978. The political turmoil was perceived as threat to its southern border by the Soviet Union. Hence, Afghanistan once again fall prey to a foreign invasion in 1979 (Ullah et al., 2023). The Soviet spent almost a decade in Afghanistan but could not accomplish its objectives and was compelled to withdraw in February 1989. In a wider public perception, Soviet union's failure in Afghanistan was one of the final nails in its coffin. The Soviet Union withdrawal in 1989 left Afghanistan in rubble. In the wake of withdrawal the communist government lost popularity. The Northern alliance was formed in 1992 in opposition to president Najibullah's communist administration. The freedom fighters soon turned on each other after defeating the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. Among the resistance factions were also seven cliques that were functioning from Pakistan during the early phases of civil war (Kissinger, 2021). These cliques included Harkat-e-Inqilabi-e-Islami headed by Maulvi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi, Jabha-e-Nijatt-e-Milli headed by Sibghatullah Mujjadidi, Mahaz MilliIslami under chiefdom of Syed Ahmad Gilani, Hizb-e-Islami under supervision of Younus Khalis, Jamiat-e-Islami headed Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ittihad-e-Islami headed by Rasul Sayyaf and Hizb-e-Islami headed by Gulbadin Hikmatyar. The civil war quickly turned into intra-mujahideen fight because of difference in political stances (Nisar et al., 2023). And peace remained evasive even with United Nations

attempts. In the midst of this turmoil and chaos another group emerged in 1994 i.e. The Taliban. The Taliban were actually the religious elites and were kept marginalized by almost every government in order to prevent them from declaring Jihad. At first they captured Kandahar and were committed to restore law and order situation. The Taliban goals and objectives were quite convincing therefore it readily intrigued the war-exhausted populace. The Taliban's policy rather worked well in avoiding direct conflict with other potential rivals. The Taliban's top objective was disarming the local militias (Pengyu, 2022). The weapons were given up amicably because the local militias leaders thought the Taliban were neutral. The Taliban slowly and gradually captured the three key cities i.e. Herat, Kabul and Mazari Sharif in 1995, 1996 and 1997 respectively. Around 90% of the country was controlled by Taliban in 1997. The Taliban then installed shuras in order to get political stability in the country. Besides, they also changed the country's official name from Islamic State of Afghanistan to Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Sadizade, 2022). The Taliban regime was also recognized by United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In 1996 Osama bin Laden; one of the founders of Al-Qaeda, reached Afghanistan and joined hands with Taliban. The United Nations inflicted sanctions on both Al-Qaeda and Taliban in 1999 for carrying out terrorist activities. On September 9, 2001 Al-Qaeda launched attacks in New York and Washington. Following these attacks the United States demanded Taliban to handover Osama Bin Laden which was ultimately rejected by Taliban. After the Taliban refusal Afghanistan once again fall prey to foreign invasion as on 7th October, 2001 the United States invaded her, thus instigating the war on terror. Following the fall of Kabul on 13th December, 2001, The

United States invited significant Afghan groups including the northern Alliance to a summit in Bonn, Germany (Ullah et al., 2023). The groups signed the Bonn agreement and designated Hamid Karzai as interim president. Later on, in 2004 Hamid Karzai won presidential elections held in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been a battleground between the United States and Taliban since the beginning of global War on terror. United States sought to reconstruct and make Afghanistan a full-fledge democracy while Taliban sought to administer the country according to Sharia Law. Over 22,000 US' military personnel's have died in Afghanistan over the last two decades of conflict and Congress has spent approximately \$144 billion on rebuilding and reconstructing Afghanistan. On February 29, 2020, representatives from the US and the Taliban reached a bilateral agreement after more than a year of discussions, agreeing to two interrelated assurances: the complete withdrawal of US as well as all international troops by May 2021 and that Taliban will not let other forces to use Afghan soil for threatening US and its allies.. In addition, on April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden declared that the US will start its final withdrawal on May 1 and finish it by September 11, 2021. The US decision to stay beyond May 1st, according to the Taliban, permits them to take all necessary countermeasures, and they will hold the US accountable for any future fallout. The Taliban accused the US of violating the February 2020 deal (Nisar et al., 2023). However, in an attempt to end its longest war overseas, the United States has abruptly withdrew its soldiers from Afghanistan, opening the way for decadence and degeneration. With the US making a rapid departure and the Taliban seizing control, a cloud of uncertainty hangs over what drove the US to make such a hurried exit and what would be the

consequences for Afghanistan. The abrupt departure of the US and coalition forces from Afghanistan is a massive strategic failure. This failure can be attributed to a number of factors, including: a lack of clarity of objectives on the part of the American administration right from the start, NATO troops' lack of awareness of Afghanistan's geographical and territorial complementarities, a steadfast commitment to resolve the Afghan situation through military means, Afghanistan's tough and rugged terrain, which makes it easier for native fighters to use hit-and-run tactics, and failure to break the Taliban's chain of command (Marashi, [2021](#)).

### **Reasons behind the withdrawal**

The United States entered Afghanistan on 7th October 2001 in order to annihilate the militant group- Al-Qaeda which launched terror attacks in the United States on 11th September 2001 and overthrew the then Taliban government. The US ended its 20-year longest war in Afghanistan on 30th August 2021. The end of the global war on terror is considered by some observers as a tombstone on the grave of Americanization. The analysts have put forward different reasons behind this withdrawal (Kissinger, [2021](#)).

### **Lack of Knowledge about the Taliban**

One of the most potential reasons behind the United States withdrawal is that she was not well-informed about her main enemy i.e. Taliban. Before engaging in any conflict you must be well-versed about your enemy that who are they and what they want and who is backing them. You need not fear the outcome of a hundred wars if you know your adversary and yourself, as Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu properly said. For every win you achieve, you will also experience a setback if you are unaware of your own weaknesses. Every war will end

in defeat if you don't know the enemy or yourself (Kakar, 1978). Knowing your adversary can help you achieve faster peace and greater results. It has the potential to fully prevent conflict. The United States went to Afghanistan without having enough knowledge about its enemy. She knew herself, her potential but lacked clear idea about the enemy. Because they were focused on the major target: al-Qaeda, the United States did not pay heed to comprehending the Taliban's beliefs, aims, or strategy (Ilham). The United States lack of knowledge about her enemy is stated in the following confessions:

According to analyst Bill Roggio, "We never grasped the nature of the adversary we were fighting," nor that the main goal of the Taliban was to restore the Islamic emirate. Even as late as mid-2009, a top US diplomat said, We had almost no intelligence on what the Taliban wanted." In 2017, a US soldier came clean and admitted that they had assumed I would provide a map showing them where the good men and bad guys lived (Noreen & Junaid, 2022). They had to have multiple chats before they realized that I was not in possession of such knowledge. They simply kept asking questions at first, such "Who are the bad guys and where are they? "As stated by another US diplomat We did not penetrate their minds in the slightest. We had overlooked the fact that they are a political and social movement, believing them to be only military. In actuality, there is a lot of gray; they assumed there were basically good men and bad guys (Sadizade, 2022). They needed quite some time to figure that out. A pundit expressed opinion. It is further asserted that assessments regarding the strength of the Taliban, the ineffectiveness of counter-insurgency strategies, and the need for reconciliation were ignored by General David H. Petraeus, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and that Early

on, the US might have started diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban far sooner if it had possessed sufficient useful intelligence. Owing to ignorance, US strategists believed that the Taliban only had military objectives, although they also had political and social ones. There were gaps in intelligence and information because to the regular turnover of US diplomats, commanders, troops, and civilian counterparts in Afghanistan (Nisar et al., 2023). Furthermore, U.S. diplomats stayed mostly inside U.S. compounds to prevent casualties, which hindered access to vital intelligence and information (Herd, 2021). US military leaders believed that this risk-averse mindset was detrimental to gathering intelligence. Furthermore, the Taliban were ignored by the US during the formation of the administration, even though they were significant. Their attempts to mediate a peace agreement requiring disarmament and recognizing Karzai as the head of Afghanistan were rebuffed by the Bush administration. Rejecting the plan meant that key Taliban commanders who had indicated interest in helping to find a solution were left out of the formation of the Afghan government. Important Taliban figures reportedly expressed interest in giving the new system a try, but we denied them that opportunity, according to the Washington Post. The Bush administration lost a chance to put an end to the fight shortly after it started by refusing to engage in negotiations with the Taliban, according to US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad (Hoodboy, 2005).

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### Cultural Illiteracy

Because of the highly dynamic environments that characterizes 21st-century warfare, understanding the language and culture of the enemy is more important than your own culture. Hence, another important factor behind US setback was the gap between US and the Afghan

public. The US failed to bridge the cultural and lingual barriers between themselves and Afghan society and therefore could not win the hearts and minds of populace. Interpersonal relationships between Afghans and American forces, was critical for gathering valuable intelligence and instilling trust in the local populace. Furthermore, a significant contributing cause to tactical, operational, and strategic failures has been a lack of understanding of the social, cultural, and political context of Afghanistan. Inadequate security impeded planners' and practitioners' access to crucial information, which led to policymakers' and implementers' ignorance of the Afghan situation. Owing to ignorance, planners made a number of audacious assumptions about the nation, many of which proved to be false, compelling operators to implement plans designed for a distinct national context. For example, the United States misinterpreted what many Afghans consider to be an appropriate legal system, which gave the Taliban leverage locally. Between 2003 and 2015, the US government invested over \$1 billion in rule of law initiatives in Afghanistan, with more than 90% of the funds going toward the establishment of an official legal system. Most Afghans, on the other hand, were not aware with that system; instead, they favored informal, community-based traditional dispute resolution processes, which have traditionally resolved 80–90% of civil cases. These unofficial legal systems are far more effective and adhere to norms that the majority of Afghans are familiar with. Even with large financial outlays, cases in the formal legal system can drag on for years. Furthermore The US and Afghan governments focused on expanding governance through the provision of services, including the official legal system, while the Taliban fought for popular support by providing a sense of security and

justice through their own version of traditional conflict settlement that actually aligned with the Afghan culture. Because the "rules of justice the Taliban follow are already understood in society, which makes them easier for the population to accept," in the words of the former deputy minister for autonomous directorate of local governance Furthermore, they would engage in counterinsurgency operations without giving the surrounding area adequate consideration. They imposed policies that inadvertently benefited one interest group at the expense of others, escalating tensions in the community and giving rebels a chance to form an alliance with a party that was unhappy. Errors such as these in an ongoing war like Afghanistan were partially the result of incomplete information. According to Afghan politician and diplomat Jabar Naimee We never even heard the actual challenges that people were facing in most districts (Hoodboy, 2005). We brought in government personnel, carried out military operations, and made the assumption that this would result in security and stability. Due to the unclear social and political landscape, American consultants and coalition partners had to rely on local partners for information and perspectives, which left them vulnerable to control and manipulation. One US officer stated that the Afghans constantly played his team. In addition, a protracted struggle in Afghanistan between traditionalists and modernists on the place of women in society has framed American efforts to advance gender equality. Since the late 1800s, Afghanistan has had a turbulent history of trying to change gender conventions. These endeavors have frequently encountered violent resistance, especially in rural regions. However, US agencies often failed to set realistic targets that acknowledged the constraints or to acknowledge the unique cultural context and strong sensitivities

around gender norms in Afghanistan when working to promote the status and rights of Afghan women and girls. After all, the declared objective of the US administration in many cases was to instigate a nonviolent revolution that would usurp the Afghan social structures that were in place and replace them with western ones. We were going to give them something that, according to a former USAID official, they had never had before. However, it turned out to be the exact opposite—a culture torn apart by violence and prepared for the adoption of Western political, economic, and judicial systems. Afghanistan is a complicated country with deeply ingrained traditions and a rigid political economy. These traditions were hard to replace or abolish, and they could not be adapted into an institutional framework more like that of the West. The US officials also emphasized their own political preferences for how Afghanistan should be rebuilt. Officials in the United States developed plans on the misguided belief that a choice in Washington might change the calculation of Afghanistan's complicated institutions (Herd, 2021).

### **Inefficient allocation of resources and rampant corruption**

The US officials underestimated the time and money necessary to rebuild Afghanistan and early in the battle, US leaders refused to provide the operation with the resources it required, to have an effect. The US spent around \$946 billion in Afghanistan since 2001. Among this \$816 billion accounted for military expenditure, \$83 billion were spent on Afghan security forces, \$10 billion went to drug prohibition endeavors, and \$15 billion on US forces expenditures and only \$21 billion went to economic assistance. A significant amount of US assistance was exploited and misused by dishonest and unskilled power brokers.

For example, Much of the money paid by the US military to Afghan security firms to safeguard supply lines was divided with the Taliban in exchange for assurances of safe passage. The required changes to prevent the waste of billions of dollars in US economic aid were not implemented because the US military and foreign policy failed to hold the Afghan government responsible. Increased financial aid led to a rise in corruption and fraud since Afghan institutions were unable to use the funds. One possible explanation why US strategy failed to solve the corruption problem was that anticorruption efforts may have strained relationships with intelligence-gathering groups. Furthermore, many US officials and policymakers felt that corruption was endemic to Afghanistan rather than the product of political forces. These beliefs also discouraged them to impose critical reforms to improve accountability and transparency in Afghan institutions. Basically animosity among local Afghans was fueled by corruption, profiteering, and wasteful spending by NGO workers. Ordinary Afghans who were aware of massive international financial assistance pouring into the country saw no significant improvement in their lives, but were aware of the high standards of living among the NGO staff who connected warlords and local officials. However, contrary to those claims, the extent of corruption has not only harmed the Afghan army's morale, but has also alienated ordinary Afghans from their own government. As a result, neither the Afghan people nor the country's security forces or army were willing to resist the Taliban. Regarding the amount of corruption, Colonel Christopher Kolenda claimed that the Karzai government was self-organized into a kleptocracy and that corruption was pervasive from the start. Similar to skin cancer, petty corruption may be managed,

and chances are you'll be alright. Higher level ministry corruption is similar to colon cancer in that it's harsher but usually curable if detected early. But kleptocracy is deadly, much like brain cancer (Hartung, [2021](#)).

### **Short-term objectives and inconsistent policies**

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A mission's success depends on its objectives' consistency and clarity. The United States' mission was unsuccessful because its goals were not always consistent or obvious across its military, diplomatic, and development organizations. As the former assistant to the president, General Douglas Lute, put it, We didn't have the slightest idea of what we were undertaking; we didn't have a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. The goals and mission of the United States in Afghanistan underwent a significant change. The initial justification for entering Afghanistan was to eradicate Al-Qaeda, expel the Taliban, and prevent another assault on the United States and its allies. Following the defeat of Al-Qaeda and the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the United States' role in Afghanistan grew beyond its original counterterrorism objective. The US's goals and tactics in Afghanistan became increasingly unclear over time (Afsar, [2008](#)). The United States acknowledged that violence needed to be drastically reduced to promote economic, political, and social opportunities, and that the Afghan government needed to be stable enough to provide security and basic services in order to prevent AL Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from infiltrating the country. Thus, the US started missions of social engineering and state-building. But without a long-term, well-resourced, coherent strategy and the backing of the American people, America's goals of restructuring domestic affairs in Afghanistan while battling a flexible and

regenerative enemy in a nation shattered by forty years of war were unachievable and bound to fail (Koç & Şeker, 2023). The missions and objectives of the US government, the Pentagon, and the State Department have changed over time. Some politicians wanted to use the war to bring democracy to Afghanistan, while others wanted to change the way Russia, Pakistan, India, and Iran held varying degrees of dominance in the region. For instance, the Obama administration changed President Bush's counterterrorism plan to a compromise that included 150,000 US and NATO troops as well as more foreign financial aid to the Afghan government. While the Obama administration placed limitations on how the military could engage, the Trump administration reversed course and approved the deployment of up to 7,000 additional US troops, expanded targeting authority, and allowed the use of airstrikes to support Afghan ground forces. By the time his administration came to an end, President Trump had broken his earlier pledge to aid the Afghan government in its war with the Taliban and had given mixed signals on the latter group's desire to split from Al-Qaeda. Moreover, repeated statements that the US military will leave the operation without setting deadlines based on results undermined the support of US allies and other foreign partners. These statements increased skepticism about the US' dedication to the effort, giving the Taliban more confidence, undermining the Afghan government, and enabling terrorist groups to reorganize (Grinter, [1982](#)).

### **The war in Iraq**

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Amid the war on terror in Afghanistan, the United States embarked on another mission and invaded Iraq in 2003 in order to topple the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussain and destroy the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This war proved as a huge fiasco for

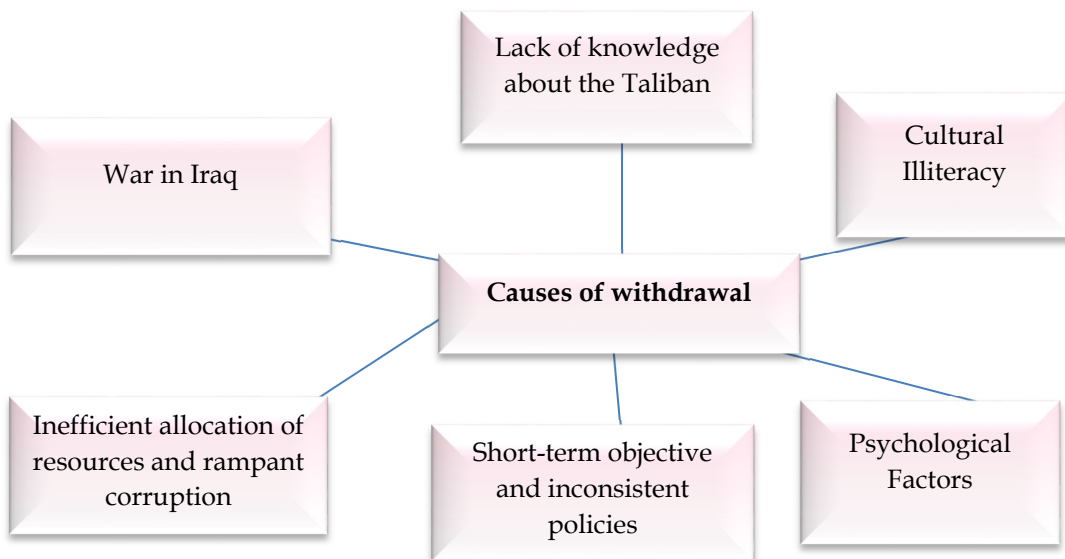
America and thus became one of the main causes of its withdrawal. Regarding US involvement in Afghanistan, US diplomat James Dobbin said First, just kind of attack one nation at a time. Iraq diverted focus from Afghanistan until about 2005, at which point it started to draw resources as well. Similar to Dobbins, Douglas Lute predicted that the Bush administration would focus roughly 85% of its emphasis on Iraq and 15% on Afghanistan, or perhaps 90% on Iraq and 10% on Afghanistan (Koç & Şeker, 2023). Along with pointing out that the US was sending the brightest brains and greatest resources to Iraq, British General David Richards also emphasized the folly of the US initiating a war in Iraq at the same time that it was fighting in Afghanistan. Most concerning, the Bush administration was pressuring NATO to assume leadership during the Taliban's military resurgence in the mid-2000s, claiming that the US had too much on its hands. Thus in the light of above confessions it can be argued that invading Iraq was the largest mistake since it diverted resources away from warfighting. If the US has abandoned its Iraq invasion and instead focused on the rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan today the results would have been quite different (Goldman, 2014).

### **Psychological factors**

There were numerous psychological factors too that compelled the United States to Withdraw from Afghanistan. Firstly, there existed the concept known as "Attribute error" which is a tendency to ascribe someone else's actions to their character or personality and attribute one's own behaviour to external circumstance which is beyond one's control. Afghanistan is a textbook example of attribution error, a US official acknowledged. Each believes it is only responding in response to the other's actions, whereas the other is responding in

accordance with its emotional identity. Additionally, neither party acknowledges its own role in motivating the other's behavior, as is typical in these kinds of circumstances (Brotman, 2021). For example, The Taliban downplayed its part in giving Al-Qaeda shelter, thus they were unaware of the effects of 9/11. The US was oblivious to the notion that insurgents would perceive its unrelenting efforts to crush the Taliban as driven by innate enmity. Furthermore, overconfidence was another cause. The US's failure was also a result of overconfidence, which was seen in its lofty goals for state establishment and warfighting, which included spreading western ideas of gender equality and creating a workable formal legal system. This arrogance is frequently associated with the notion of "American exceptionalism," or distinctive national traits. Although they couldn't actually control the acts or the results, US authorities thought they could. An American diplomat said, "We think we can change things when we can't." That region of the world is unaffected by us. Regarding US overconfidence, another official said that all one can do is attempt to steer a dynamic process, the results of which are unpredictable. Additionally, US failure was caused by cognitive dissonance reduction, which is the process of explaining data in a way that supports our own preconceived notions. A US diplomat said that there is a reluctance to accept evidence that contradict the narrative. How many times have we heard that if we give it one more season, we'll break the back of the Taliban? They can always find data to back up their allegations, even though it never happened. The same point was said by a UK official as well: We cannot accept things that fundamentally challenge our worldview; things that, if we accept, would call everything into question (Ghufran, 2001).





### **Conclusion**

Afghanistan has been a trap for major powers. It has never been completely controlled by any foreign power which is evident from British efforts to dominate Afghanistan, Soviet invasion and then United States occupation. The fate of all the occupations was a precipitous withdrawal without any major objectives achieved. Among all the occupations the US stay in Afghanistan has been the longest. It had invaded Afghanistan in 2001 in order to eliminate Al-Qaeda and topple the then Taliban regime. After achieving these objectives temporarily the US started nation-building mission in Afghanistan and

endeavored to transform Afghanistan into democratic and modern state. Despite allocating abundance of resources and spending billions of dollars, it could not achieve its goals and was compelled to withdraw. The precipitous withdrawal of US poses a lot of questions such as why it could not achieve its objectives in spite of being there for about two decades. The US withdrawal can be attributed to a number of factors, the most important of which are: The lack of awareness about Taliban and their ambitions, war in Iraq, Cultural and lingual illiteracy, corruption, inappropriate utilization of resources and over-confidence of US in its objectives and decisions.

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