

This American Died for Our Lies in Afghanistan

Foreign Service officer Anne Smedinghoff was sent to the country to show how we were "winning." She never came home.

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It's common this time of year to write summary articles trying to make sense of the last 12 months; you'll soon see them popping up everywhere. But all of them will omit one of the most important stories of the year. For the first time in some two decades, America hasn't started a new war.

A total of [6,857](#) American service members have died in war since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. George W. Bush began that war, then invaded Iraq in 2003. Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, then immediately expanded the war in Afghanistan. He went on to restart America's war in Iraq after it was over the first time, launch a new war that turned Libya into a failed state and triggered refugee flows still disrupting European politics, engage the U.S. in Yemen, and abet a humanitarian crisis in Syria. So three full years without a new war is news indeed.

This year also brought [mainstream](#) confirmation of the truth behind the Afghan war. *The Washington Post*, long an advocate for all the wars everywhere, took a tiny step of penance in publishing the Afghanistan Papers, which show that the American public has been lied to every step of the way over the past 18 years about progress in Afghanistan and the possibility of some sort of success. Government officials from the president(s) to the grunt(s) issued positive statements they knew to be false while hiding evidence that the war was unwinnable. The so-called Afghanistan Papers are actually thousands of pages of notes created by the Special Inspector for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), a watchdog federal agency created to oversee the spending of close to \$1 trillion in reconstruction money.

The SIGAR documents (all quotes are from the *Post's* [Afghanistan Papers reporting](#)) are blunt.

"We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing," said Douglas Lute, a three-star Army general who served as the White House's Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama administrations. He added: "What are we trying to do here? We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. ...If the American people knew the magnitude of this dysfunction, 2,400 lives lost. Who will say this was in vain?"

There are plenty of similar sentiments going back a decade, with hints of the same almost to the first months of the conflict. Dead men tell no tales, they say, but the record of lies is

as stark, final, and unambiguous as the death toll itself.

But Afghanistan was always supposed to be more than a “kinetic” war. The real battles were for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, with money as the weapon. One of the core lies told to the public, and on the ground in Afghanistan, was that a large portion of the reconstruction money would be spent on education. “We were building schools next to empty schools, and it just didn’t make sense,” a Special Forces officer explained. “The local Afghans said they wanted their kids out herding goats.” Sure, people have to eat, but America would create an Afghan democracy from the primeval mud, with cluster bombs as its Adam, and schools for boys *and* girls as its Eve.

And it is on that bruised prayer of a lie that Anne Smedinghoff, the only State Department Foreign Service Officer to lose a life in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, [died](#) one April morning in 2013 long after the Afghanistan Papers show her bosses in Washington knew the war was unwinnable.

This is what all those lies translated to on the ground. Anne was a diplomat, just 25 years old, assigned by the State Department to create good press in Afghanistan so the people at home could see we were winning. It was a hard fight, her work was supposed to show, but the sacrifices were worth it because we were accomplishing *this*. *This*, in the very specific case that destroyed Anne, was handing out unneeded books in front of an unused school building to Afghans who lacked clean water 12 years into America’s longest war so she and (important) more senior people could be photographed doing so. Inside the Beltway, *this* was called a “happy snap,” photos of Americans doing good with (albeit always in the background) smiling Afghans lapping it up. Yet through a series of grossly preventable [micro-errors](#) in [security](#) nested like Russian dolls inside the macro-error of what Anne or any American was doing in rural Zabul, Anne’s body was riddled by jagged fragments of steel from an IED.

The school where Anne was killed was “[built](#)” by the U.S. in October 2009, only to enjoy a \$135,000 “renovation” a few months later that included “foundation work, installation of new windows and doors, interior and exterior paint, electricity and a garden.” The original contractor did miserable work but got away with it in the we’ll-check-later Potemkin world of the Afghanistan Papers. The Army noted as the school opened that “the many smiles on the faces of both men and women showed all were filled with joy and excitement during this special occasion.” That the Afghans in the area likely needed sewage processing to lower infant mortality levels was irrelevant.

The limited official reporting on what happened to Anne bungled most of the details. State clung (as they later did with Benghazi) to the weak tea that the “cause” of Anne’s death was the actions of the bad guys—anything we did up to our very presence on the ground was treated as a kind of minor detail. The desire not to look too deep was underscored by then-secretary of state John Kerry, who [said](#) that Anne “tragically gave her young life working to give young Afghans the opportunity to have a better future,” and enjoined the media into blending Anne’s death into what the entire world now knows was the fake narrative Anne herself died trying to create.

Kerry is an easy target because of his Vietnam-era protests, including his famous [statement](#) to Congress in 1971 about that war: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?” To the State

Department, what mattered in the life and then death of Anne Smedinghoff was never such a question, but simply damage control for what the Afghanistan Papers show was an already-failed story.

Anne was only one of thousands of Americans and literally-only-God-knows how many Afghans who died for our lies in Afghanistan. That's why the biggest story of 2019 is the one no one is talking about—that for the first time in decades, we seem to be slowing this all down. In 2019, only 34 American service members died in war. In 2009 it was 459; in 2003 it was 526.

Someone will inevitably dismiss my writing here as playing politics with a young woman's death. But if you read just one more sentence, read this: Anne's presence in Afghanistan was about politics, and her death delivering books for a photo-op was a political act in support of lies. That thrusts her into the role of symbolism, whether anyone likes it or not, and our job is to determine what it is that she symbolizes and try to learn from it.

On the same day that Anne died, an airstrike inadvertently [killed 10 Afghan children](#).

There are nights it takes a fair amount of tequila to abort thoughts about why no one gets impeached for wasting human lives. I am ashamed to admit that I usually just drink from the bottle. But tonight I'll use a glass, so I can raise it to Anne. I know she wasn't the last to die for the Afghan mistake, and that there will be "papers" for places like Libya and Syria, too. But there's always hope at the bottom of a glass, isn't there?

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Featured image: An April 8, 2013 memorial service for Anne Smedinghoff at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. Anne was killed in an insurgent attack on Saturday April, 6, 2013 while traveling to donate books to a school in Qalat, Zabul province. (Photo by Musadeq Sadeq/U.S. State Department)

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