

# Was it worth it? Afghanistan 11 years later

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*October 7 marked the eleventh anniversary of the US war in Afghanistan. More than 2,000 American soldiers have now been killed, and as the US presidential candidates debate each other to lead the most dominant power on Earth, perhaps it is time for someone to ask them: Was it worth it?*

On September 11th 2001, 2,977 people were killed. Almost 700 people in one firm alone (Cantor-Fitzgerald) died; 343 fire fighters and paramedics were killed, as were 60 police officers. Only 291 bodies were ever found 'intact'. Over half of the families who lost loved ones that day received not a single piece of remains. Within three months 300 fire-fighters went on leave due to respiratory problems, almost half a million New Yorkers are being treated for post-traumatic stress disorders, and 1,000 first responders have since died from acute illnesses related to clean-up activities.

Wall Street shut down for 6 days, and as a direct result of 9/11 more than 146,100 people lost their jobs. Within the first month New York City alone exceeded \$105 billion in economic losses.

Was it worth it?

America then went to war. But not just Iraq and Afghanistan: Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia have also been attacked. So have the citizens of the United States: freedoms, privacy and civil rights once taken for granted are gone, in the name of 'national security'.

Operation Iraqi Freedom officially lasted for eight years and eight months. By December 2011, 4,486 US and 318 non-US troops had been killed fighting in Iraq, more than 1,800 more than who died on September 11<sup>th</sup>. However, according to the New York Times, a year after operations ceased US Special Operations units have quietly begun re-entering Iraq at the behest of the Iraqi government.

In Afghanistan, the war that began on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2002 still marches on. Operation Enduring Freedom is not due to end until 2014, an exact century after the onset of World War One. So far Afghanistan has taken the lives of 3,196 soldiers: 2,130 American, 433 British, and 158 Canadian. Forces killed in Afghanistan also amount to more than all the lives lost on 9/11.

Thus 8,000 troops have been killed for the 2,977 lost on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

Was it worth it?

It gets worse. Once soldiers return from the theatre of operations the numbers keep

climbing. For every single death in Afghanistan or Iraq, twenty-five soldiers commit suicide. During the first six months of 2012 there were 187 Army suicides, 55 Air Force, 32 Marine Corps, 39 Navy and 5 Coast Guard. The cumulative effect of multiple deployments and post-traumatic stress disorders et alia suggest, however, tens of thousands of additional deaths.

Each year, 6,500 veteran suicides are documented at a rate of one every 80 minutes. Only the Army releases figures and it is unclear if this includes active duty personnel or veterans of other wars. Although only 1% of Americans have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, they account for a massive 20% of the total annual rate. The Department of Veterans Affairs claim 18 veteran suicides per day, and for every successful suicide 20 are attempted yet fail. Rates of death were far higher in both World Wars: permanent disabilities now affect veterans today who otherwise would have died on the field. In World War One, an average of 57% of all soldiers mobilised were killed; in World War Two, more than 55 million soldiers and civilians died. In other words, the wounded from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are a testimony to modern medicine saving lives that in the past would certainly have been lost, but can lead to tragic results nevertheless.

If the lowest suicide rate to assume is one per day by active duty or Iraq/Afghanistan vets, more than 4,000 must be added to the numbers killed above. And if we assume only half of the 6,500 veterans suicides per year are as a result of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an additional 36,000 deaths could be included to the totals. Whether suicides account for a further 4,000 or 40,000 deaths, they bring the ratio to between 4:1 to 16:1 deaths in payback for the 2,977 victims of 9/11.

These are just coalition losses of course. The official number of victims in Iraq has been stuck on 100,000 since 2004, not revised upwards since. But, in 2007 the British *Opinion Research Business* survey calculated that up to 1.5 million Iraqis had been killed in the war. This confirmed an earlier British survey by the *Lancet* that calculated 655,000 to 1 million Iraqis had died in just three years, from 2003-2006. Although the war continued for a further five years the studies have not been repeated nor revised to account for additional Iraqi casualties, arguably due to intense American criticism.

There are almost no figures for Afghanistan casualties, but Human Rights Watch recorded 1,000 civilian deaths in 2006 and the UN estimates 12,000 deaths since 2007. There are no statistics for the first five years of the war.

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Let us not omit the secret wars in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Considering the drone programme is covert the numbers are almost certainly low. We do know however, that in Yemen drones have killed up to 1,026 men, women and children (at least 34) since 2002. Somalia is not on most Americans' radar-screens but it is on the drones': since 2007, 170 Somalis are dead from these Unmanned Aerial Vehicle strikes. In Pakistan drones have killed a reported 3,341 (at least 176 children) and wounded a minimum of 1,366 people. The ratio of wounded-to-killed indicates how deadly drone are, in part confirming their 'precision'. They are surgically precise in that they do not wound: they intentionally tear to pieces anyone nearby.

How about the cost of capture, torture and rendition? Housing a single prisoner at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba costs the US taxpayer \$800,000 per year. More than 100,000 men

were detained in Iraq, many at the notorious Abu Ghraib; thousands more were held at Bagram Airfield or the infamous (CIA funded) ‘Salt Pit’ torture chamber north of Kabul, Afghanistan. Officers forced scores of detainees to physical, psychological and sexual abuse before shipping them off to even worse prisons around the world.

The non-fiscal cost of the consequences of tortures and imprisonment-without-trial cannot be calculated. For every single death or incarceration there is a father, brother, son, nephew, friend or neighbour who will never forget what these wars have wrought. Revenge lives long—generation-to-generation. We already see the first signs of what the wars have bought, exhibited in riots, uprisings, increased anti-American hostilities, destruction of US sovereign life and property, coups, and civil wars.

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What about the economic cost? In 2003, George W. Bush estimated that the wars would cost \$50 to \$60 billion. Yet a 2011 study by Brown University’s *Watson Institute for International Studies* estimated the final cost of the wars to be \$4.4 trillion, not including medical costs for injured veterans or rebuilding aid to Afghanistan. Economist Joseph Stiglitz estimated the war in Iraq alone would cost \$2.2 trillion. And all of the costs are funded upon borrowed money, demonstrated by the US debt skyrocketing from \$6.4 trillion in March 2003 to over \$16 trillion as of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012.

During the Vietnam war, Undersecretary of State George Ball wrote, “[I]n terms of US prestige...we would gain more through enlarging the war.” National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy opined, “[E]ven if it fails, the policy will be worth it” because of US “prestige”.

If the American public—22.5 million now actually (not officially) unemployed—understood the economic price they would have to pay, would they have agreed to so eagerly support the wars? If the US Congress could have foreseen that a bare-minimum of four times as many soldiers as those who died on 9/11 would die, would it have been worth it? If the consequences of anger, revenge, blowback—and stratospheric loss of prestige—were considered, would the US have still gone to war?

Was it worth it?

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