



# AFGHANISTAN: WHERE WAS THE INTEL?

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**Genevieve Lester:** Welcome to A Better Peace: The War Room Podcast. I'm Genevieve Lester, the De Serio Chair for Strategic Intelligence at the U.S. Army War College. It's a pleasure to have you with us.

Today, I'm joined by Director Jim Clapper, the fourth Director of National Intelligence. He served from August 2010 to January 2017 under President Barack Obama. This appointment came after a long and distinguished career in the U.S. Armed Forces where he retired as a Lieutenant General and served in a range of leadership positions, including Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, first Civilian Director of the National Imagery and Mapping Agency. In this role, he transformed the agency into the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, otherwise known as NGA. Beyond this, he served for over three years in two presidential administrations as the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence. Welcome, Director Clapper. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**James Clapper:** Well thanks, Gen, for having me.

**GL:** What we're going to be addressing today is obviously the situation in Afghanistan and the variety of explanations for what is occurring there. And I just want to start with this question. We've seen different reasons for the failure for what is happening there. One of them is intelligence failure. Can you speak to this? Do you feel that it was an intelligence failure?

**JC:** Well, I think it was a collective or a corporate failure. Because the way this worked, certainly during my six plus years as DNI, is that the intelligence community classically and consistently rendered pretty pessimistic outlooks to include in national intelligence estimates about the prospects for stability in Afghanistan, about stability of the government, and about the viability of the Afghan military and security forces. To the point where this was always a bone of contention, frankly, between the Department of Defense generally and ISAF specifically. In fact, I recall one specific occasion when General David Petraeus was ISAF Commander. And he was unhappy with the national intelligence estimate that had been done and insisted that he be

permitted to put a dissent in that NIE which reflected what he thought was a better informed and more optimistic outlook for Afghanistan. So I find it hard to believe that all of a sudden, the intelligence community has come up with a rosy projection of what was going to go down in Afghanistan.

So the point here is that the judgment about the viability of the Afghan government, its military and security forces, and it's a survivability against a Taliban attack would not be an exclusive intelligence community call. And in my experience, whenever we had NSC meetings, Principles Committee meetings, intelligence would give its, what was regarded as negative perspective. And the Department of Defense, led principally by whoever the ISAF commander was at the time, would give a more optimistic portrayal. I'll never forget, once I was asked by Senator Levin, and of course it was a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, "Why is it that there is this gulf between the intelligence perspective in Afghanistan and the military?" I said, "Well, perhaps it's because intelligence occupies the half of the glass that's empty. And the military represents the half of the glass that's full. And maybe the truth is somewhere at the water line."

But the point of all this is that I believe if you want to finger point here to failure, it was a collective or corporate failure. And I may sound defensive here, but I don't think it was an exclusive call by intelligence. You know what? Nobody's actually seen what those assessments are. No one actually knows what the DNI or the CIA director perhaps have said to the president. We're all speculating about this. And let's say there was a pronouncement that Kabul wouldn't fall for 30 days versus falling eminently. Well, in one sense, that's irrelevant because there should have been planning done for an evacuation in either event, whether it was eminent or 30 days off. And that apparently didn't happen.

**GL:** That's an excellent point. I think also the timeframe issue that you mentioned, the imminent nature of the collapse versus 30 days or a year out, and that is also being ascribed to the intelligence community, that the assessment of the timeframe was much longer than what actually occurred. What could you attribute this to?

**JC:** Well, I guess that's the nature of war, the fog of war. I think to me, it's like arguing about how many things on the head of a pin, on how many days before the government collapses? The fact is, there was one thing there was agreement on, the government wouldn't last. No one was arguing that. So it's a question of how many days? Well, if you can calibrate in the future, is it going to be 26 days or 16 days? And to me, that is immaterial. Arguing about it is irrelevant. The point is, there was no question about its lack of viability. And there was no question that in any event, there needed to be a lot of detailed planning for evacuations, and that didn't happen. So now we're going to turn... Of course, the classic old line in intelligence, there's only two conditions in life, policy success or intel failure. There's no other condition in life. So intelligence is always, I can attest, the convenient scapegoat.

**GL:** From a military perspective, using your military hat and from your strategic perspective, what do you think happened with the Afghan army? The U.S. had invested tremendous amounts of resources and time, what happened?

**JC:** Well, what this proves is a repeatable lesson that I saw and experienced during "my war", Southeast Asia. And that is, you cannot buy leadership and you cannot buy will to fight. And like it or not, the Taliban had an ideology and a narrative. And their ideology, as objectionable as you might find it, was something they believed in and consistently held to. And they had a narrative which said that the central government in Kabul was corrupt, uncaring, and the only reason it existed is because it was propped up by infidels from the West. And that narrative appealed to many Afghans, particularly in the rural areas. Not so much the urban elites, but it certainly appealed to those in the rural areas, which is where the Taliban was strong. This is not unlike what I saw happen in my war, Southeast Asia. The Vietcong and the North Vietnamese had a narrative, which was simply renewed from when they fought the French. And we didn't have a counter narrative, and we thought we could buy will to fight and leadership on a part of the South Vietnamese. And we failed. And to me, this is almost a repeat of history from Southeast Asia to Afghanistan.

**GL:** Again, I'm not trying to ascribe intelligence failure here, but do you think we failed to understand the depth of the ideological attractiveness of the Taliban? Under...

**JC:** Well, who's we?

**GL:** ... The U.S.

**JC:** Well, U.S., the administration, the National Security team, I don't know. I think during the Obama Administration, it was a good bit of realism, I think. And I don't know what happened here. So it's important when you say "we", who's we? The United States collectively, this administration, National Security team, National Security Advisor, or Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense. So you need to stipulate who "we" is.

**GL:** Does the United States have expectations that a U.S. style democracy would be attractive to the Afghans?

**JC:** I think most thinking people realize that wasn't possible. There was no way to... I guess we gave it a try. But the notion of imposing a modern, liberal democracy, shining city on the hill kind of thing in Afghanistan is really naive and unrealistic. There's a culture there, a medieval society in many respects, that is not amenable to, in my opinion, a democracy in the sense that we know it.

**GL:** I think this is such an interesting point. As we see the Taliban go from a movement into governance and to running the government, what role would the U.S. intelligence community have going forward?

**JC:** Well, it'll still have a big responsibility and still be looked to, to glean intelligence about what's going on in Afghanistan. And obviously that's going to be a lot more difficult if we don't even have an embassy there. So we're going to be looking, to form the expression, over the horizon. Which is not insubstantial, but it's going to be much more difficult in the absence of people on the ground. I hope and trust we have some contacts with people that are there, but intelligence gathering is going to be a lot more difficult. And that's problematic because of the potential for Taliban once again harboring the likes of Al Qaeda or ISIS or any other insurgent group that's bent on attacking the U.S. homeland. And it'll be the intelligence community's responsibility to try to determine if that's going on or not. So the intelligence communities usually don't get a pass.

**GL:** So the Taliban, it seems unified when we're looking at the maps covered in red, but it is riven by factions as well. Can you speak to this?

**JC:** Well, I'm not an expert on Taliban, but I do believe that a lot has changed in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. And the Taliban has factions within it. I think that was evident even through the course of the negotiations. And I think they remind me somewhat of the dog catching the car, but what's going to happen the morning after? Or as Tom Friedman of the New York Times says aptly so, "The morning after, the morning after," when the reality sets in and now they're in charge. They're supposed to govern the whole country. I think what'll happen is that will be on a very decentralized basis. And then you're going to have, I think, wide differences in how individual Taliban leaders in each one on the provinces and districts runs things. And so it's going to be interesting to watch now that the euphoria of walking down the main drag in Kabul is over and the reality of actually running the place sets in.

**GL:** How do you think this is going to play out regionally?

**JC:** Well, I don't know. I think in some sense, this is uneasy for the region. The U.S. presence there provided a certain degree of stability in Afghanistan, which potentially has spillover effect. I think, frankly, Pakistanis may be a bit uneasy with this. They have a modus vivendi, if you will, with the Taliban, notably the Haqqani network. So I think the countries in the region are going to be a bit nervous and as Tom Friedman again said, "may be looking up the United States in their Rolodex."

**GL:** That's exactly what I was going to ask. Do you see an American re-engagement in the region, an American re-engagement with the Taliban, as we think about whether to legitimize...

**JC:** We already are, apparently, informally. We've had this negotiating link with them for some time, and apparently there's some dialogue with somebody in the Taliban with respect to the evacuation. Whether or not we recognize Afghanistan with the Taliban government, I don't know.

**GL:** ... Going back to a more granular level and back to the issue that we began with, intelligence failure, was there anything the Army intelligence could have done differently to understand how quickly the Taliban was moving, how effective they were going to be?

**JC:** Well, Army, any intelligence component, to the extent that... And of course, intelligence was affected by the drawdown in Afghanistan, too. So the intelligence resources, I'm pretty sure, I don't have inside baseball here but I'm surmising, the intelligence resources that we have in the United States, regardless whether the U.S. Army or CIA or whatever, we're focused on the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the bad guys and less focused on the Afghans. The people actually in a position to gauge the Afghan military competence were the advisors. And for that matter the embassy, rather than intelligence, which I don't think in the country was focused very much on the Afghans and rather focused on the Taliban, that subset of the Afghans, as well as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, or any other insurgent group.

**GL:** Back to your Air Force general officer hat, the Afghans did have an air force. Can you speak to how the air force was used, and why it wasn't more effective in this case?

**JC:** Well, I really don't know. I think the air force, like the Afghan army, was patterned after us. And this again is very reminiscent of my experience in Vietnam, where we organize train, equip, and uniform proxy military to act, look, and drive vehicles like us. And so I think we ascribe a certain professional competence to proxy militaries because of that, and that's probably misplaced.

**GL:** Mirror imaging, sounds like a little bit.

**JC:** Yeah. Exactly.

**GL:** At the beginning of their stint at the U.S. Army War College, students are exposed to strategic concept that integrates ends, ways, and means. Do you think there was a misalignment of ends, ways, and means in Afghanistan?

**JC:** I want to make sure I understand what you mean by ends, ways, and means. So if you mean the end state of defeating the Taliban and having a stable central government that was regarded as credible by the Afghan people, if that was end, the end objective was probably very unrealistic. And we have known, and people who served in Afghanistan have known because many of them told me this, that they recognized the corruption in the Afghan government and the Afghan military. And we never really dimed them out for that. So if you're looking for lessons learned here, might've been better to have said, "If you want this kind of capability, if you want this kind of support, you're going to have to do something meaningful to change your ways with respect to corruption."

**JC:** Because I think that, over time, really undermined the effort to support the Afghan government such as it was and their military. And that's one reason why, put to the test, it was hollow and rotten.

**GL:** Do you think there was any way-

**JC:** And I think people realized that contemporaneously as they deployed for their six, seven months or a year or whatever it was. And then somebody came in to replace them and relearned the same lesson. And we kept seeing it over and over again, but we never really did anything about it.

**GL:** ... Was it possible to do anything about it, do you feel?

**JC:** Well, I don't know. There are certain cultural characteristics in Afghanistan that are pretty hard to change. So that's a good question. I don't know.

**GL:** Just as we wrap up, thanks again for joining us, Director Clapper. Is there anything, any other lessons learned for our students that we should draw from this as we watch this-

**JC:** Well, we classically... And I say we, define that as military operators and intelligence people, have always had trouble gauging will to fight. We have historically underestimated the will to fight of our adversaries and overestimated the capabilities of those we're supporting. That certainly was true in Vietnam, and it was true in Iraq. And it's certainly true in Afghanistan. So the lesson here are guesses. Look at the military being supported with a cold, objective eye.

**GL:** Director Clapper, thank you so much for joining us today and contributing your insights. We really appreciate it.

**JC:** Oh thanks, Gen. Thanks for having me.

**GL:** And thanks to all of you for tuning in and listening to us. Please send your comments on this program and all programs and send your suggestions for future programs. Please subscribe to A Better Peace. And please rate and review this podcast on your pod catcher of choice so that other people can find us, too. We're always interested in growing this community so that we can have more people tuning in for conversations like this. This conversation is over, but there will be others. And we look forward to welcoming you. Until next time, from the War Room, I'm Genevieve Lester.