NO PREP

9/11 to Forever War

The US in Afghanistan

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

9/11 to Forever War: The US in Afghanistan

A Nation Under Attack

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers from the terrorist network al-Qaeda turned four airliners into weapons, destroying the World Trade Center, smashing into the Pentagon, and crashing in a Pennsylvania field. Nearly 3,000 people were killed, and a stunned nation demanded to know who was responsible. Investigators quickly confirmed what intelligence agencies already suspected: the attacks were planned by al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, operating from training camps in

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Operation Enduring Freedom

The military campaign, named Operation Enduring Freedom, began on October 7, 2001, with American and British airstrikes against al-Qaeda training camps and Taliban military targets. But the ground war was fought by an unusual coalition. Rather than sending a massive invasion force, the United States inserted small CIA teams and Army Special Forces units — some famously operating on horseback — to fight alongside the Northern Alliance, a coalition of Afghan militias that had resisted Taliban rule for years. The combination of American airpower, laser-guided bombs, and Afghan fighters who knew the terrain proved devastating. The strategically vital city of Mazar-i-Sharif fell in early November; Kabul, the capital, was abandoned by the Taliban days later; and by early December the movement's birthplace, Kandahar, had surrendered. A regime that had ruled most of Afghanistan collapsed in about ten weeks, at the cost of remarkably few American lives. Yet the campaign's most important objective slipped away. In December, intelligence placed Osama bin Laden in the mountain cave complex of Tora Bora near the Pakistani border. American commanders relied heavily on Afghan militias and airstrikes rather than committing large numbers of U.S. troops to seal the escape routes, and bin Laden crossed into Pakistan, where he would remain hidden for nearly a decade — a choice critics would debate for years afterward. The swift victory created a dangerous illusion: driving the Taliban from power had taken weeks, so building a stable Afghanistan, many assumed, would be manageable. It would prove to be the harder war by far.

Mission Creep: The Goals Multiply

America's original objective in Afghanistan was narrow: destroy al-Qaeda and deny terrorists a safe haven. But with the Taliban gone, the mission grew — a pattern military planners call mission creep. The United States and its allies committed to building a democratic Afghan state where none had existed. An interim government led by Hamid Karzai took office; a new constitution was adopted in 2004, followed by the country's first direct presidential election. Coalition programs promoted

women's rights, reopened girls' schools, built roads and clinics, and tried to eradicate the opium poppy crop that financed the insurgency. Each goal was ambitious on its own; together they amounted to rebuilding one of the poorest, most war-torn nations on Earth. The obstacles were enormous. Afghanistan lacked trained administrators, corruption drained aid money, and the rugged terrain made governing the countryside nearly impossible. Most dangerously, the Taliban had not surrendered — it had regrouped across the border in Pakistan's tribal areas. By 2006 its fighters were flowing back, planting roadside bombs and ambushing patrols in a full-scale insurgency: a war fought not by armies in the open but by guerrillas hiding among civilians. American attention and resources, meanwhile, had been divided since 2003 by a second, larger war in Iraq. Year after year, coalition commanders reported progress; year after year, the insurgency grew stronger. The conflict settled into a grinding stalemate in which victory was repeatedly redefined and never quite arrived. Each administration inherited the war, searched for a new strategy, and passed it on unsolved.

The War's Toll on Afghanistan

The people who paid the war's highest price were Afghans themselves. Over two decades, researchers estimate that more than 170,000 people died in the conflict in Afghanistan, including roughly 46,000 civilians caught by roadside bombs, suicide attacks, airstrikes, and crossfire. Millions more fled their homes, becoming refugees abroad or displaced inside their own country. The fighting battered an economy already among the world's poorest and left a generation that has never known peace. For the United States, the costs were also staggering: about 2,461 American service members killed, more than 20,000 wounded, and over two trillion dollars spent. Yet the war years changed Afghan life in genuine ways. Under Taliban rule, girls had been barred from school almost entirely; by the end of the war, millions of girls were enrolled, and women served as doctors, judges, journalists, and members of parliament. Life expectancy rose sharply as clinics opened across the country. Cell phones, independent television, and a raucous free

press connected Afghans to each other and the world. Cities like Kabul grew into bustling, modern places unrecognizable from 2001, and a generation of young Afghans grew up online, educated and expecting freedoms their parents never knew. These gains were real, but they were fragile — dependent on foreign money and foreign soldiers, and concentrated in cities while much of the countryside lived the war as checkpoints, night raids, and funerals. Whether the transformation could survive without American protection became the central question of the war's final decade, and in 2021 the world learned the answer.

The Longest War Ends

Every strategy was eventually tried. President Obama surged American forces to roughly 100,000 troops in 2010-2011, seeking to break the Taliban's momentum. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011, avenging 9/11 and removing the war's original cause. Combat operations formally passed to Afghan forces in 2014, with Americans remaining to train and advise. Still the stalemate held. In February 2020, the United States signed an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar: American troops would withdraw in exchange for Taliban pledges to break with al-Qaeda and negotiate with the Afghan government. President Biden completed the withdrawal in 2021, and what followed shocked the world. As American forces departed, the Afghan army — built with twenty years and billions of dollars — dissolved in weeks, its soldiers demoralized, unpaid, and stripped of the air support they depended on. Provincial capitals fell like dominoes through early August, often without a shot fired. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul without a battle. A desperate airlift evacuated more than 120,000 people from the capital's airport, where a suicide bombing killed 13 American service members and about 170 Afghans in the war's final days. Twenty years after 9/11, the movement toppled in ten weeks ruled Afghanistan again, and girls were soon barred from secondary schools and women pushed from public life. The war left America a bitter inheritance of questions — about nation-building, about endless

commitments, about what victory even means — that will shape its foreign policy for decades.

Key Information: The U.S. War in Afghanistan

Detail	Information
Operation Enduring Freedom	U.S.-led campaign launched October 7, 2001
Northern Alliance	Afghan militias who fought the Taliban alongside U.S. forces
Tora Bora (Dec. 2001)	Bin Laden escaped into Pakistan from mountain caves
Mission creep	Goals grew from destroying al-Qaeda to nation-building
Bin Laden's death	Killed by Navy SEALs in Pakistan, May 2011
Doha agreement (2020)	U.S.-Taliban deal setting terms for withdrawal
Fall of Kabul	Taliban retook the capital August 15, 2021
U.S. cost	About 2,461 service members killed; over $2 trillion spent

Case Study: The Interpreter's Choice

Farid Rahimi, 29, spent seven years as an interpreter for American units in eastern Afghanistan, riding in the lead vehicle where translators sit and where bombs hit first. The work paid for his sisters' schooling — under the new government, both were studying to be teachers. It also earned him Taliban death threats slipped under his family's door. In 2019 he applied for a Special Immigrant Visa, the program created for Afghans who served alongside U.S. forces, and began a wait that outlasted the war itself. In August 2021 he watched the army he had served beside board planes while his paperwork sat unfinished. "I was not afraid of the fighting years," he said. "I was afraid of the filing years." Farid reached the airport gates three times during the evacuation before finally being pulled aboard a flight with his wife; his sisters remained behind, no longer permitted to teach. From an apartment in Virginia, he sends money home and keeps his old unit's patch framed beside the door.

1. How does Farid's story show both the genuine gains and the fragility of the war years described in the reading?

_____

_____

2. Using the reading, explain why the 2021 withdrawal created impossible situations for Afghans like Farid.

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. Why did the United States invade Afghanistan in October 2001?
    a) To seize control of lucrative Afghan oil and mineral fields
    b) To respond to a Taliban military invasion of neighboring Pakistan
    c) The Taliban refused to hand over al-Qaeda's leaders
    d) To stop growing Soviet influence in Central Asia

2. Which Afghan force fought alongside U.S. troops to topple the Taliban?

a) The Northern Alliance

b) The Republican Guard

c) The Mujahideen of 1979

d) The Afghan National Army

3. What happened after U.S. forces withdrew in 2021?

a) Afghanistan held new elections with international observers

b) The Afghan military defeated the Taliban insurgency without help

c) A United Nations peacekeeping force replaced the American troops

d) The Taliban rapidly regained control of the country

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Al-Qaeda	A) The gradual expansion of a military mission beyond its original goals
2. ___ Taliban	B) Terrorist network led by Osama bin Laden that planned the 9/11 attacks
3. ___ Northern Alliance	C) Guerrilla war fought by fighters hiding among the civilian population
4. ___ Insurgency	D) Fundamentalist movement that ruled Afghanistan and sheltered terrorists
5. ___ Mission creep	E) Coalition of Afghan militias that fought alongside U.S. forces in 2001

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The 2001 U.S.-led military campaign was named Operation Enduring _____.

2. Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. forces in 2011 in the country of _____.

3. The war in Afghanistan became the _____ war in American history.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain how the American mission in Afghanistan expanded far beyond its original purpose.

_____

_____

_____

2. Weigh the war's costs against its gains for Afghan society. Was either side of the ledger permanent?

_____

_____

_____

3. What lessons should U.S. leaders draw from the twenty-year war? Support your view with evidence.

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