

Esper, Milley Reject Assertions in 'Afghanistan Papers'



Soldiers load onto a Chinook helicopter to head out and execute missions across the Combined Joint Operations Area-Afghanistan. U.S. Army/1st Lt. Verniccia Ford

The U.S. defense secretary and its top military officer rejected the premise of the recently published "Afghanistan Papers" in The Washington Post – that defense leaders engaged in a deliberate effort to deceive the public on the lack of progress in the 18-year-long war. And Joint Chiefs Chairman Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, who repeatedly led forces there, emotionally insisted that none of the troops killed in Afghanistan died in vain.

In a Dec. 20 media briefing at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper and Milley also defended the prolonged military engagements in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria as necessary to protect the nation from terrorists and said U.S. forces would be there until that mission was completed.

But Esper, citing the new National Defense Strategy's recognition of "great power competition" with Russia and China, said his aim is to determine "how can we reduce our presence in other parts of the world to

either return troops home to retrain and equip for those bigger missions or to allocate to the Indo-Pacific.” Esper has said he is considering removing about 5,000 of the 13,000 U.S. troops now in Afghanistan.

And Milley, speaking for the military, said “none of us want forever wars. It has to do with the national interests.”

The two leaders were asked several times about the week-long series of stories in The Washington Post that extensively quoted senior military and diplomatic officials as privately expressing strong doubts about the way the Afghanistan conflict was going, while giving more positive views in public.

“I know there is an assertion out there of some sort of coordinated lie over the course of 18 years,” but that was “more than a stretch. I find that a mischaracterization,” Milley said. With hundreds of general officers, State Department officials and other involved, “I just don’t think you can get that level of coordination on a lie.” He said the assessments he and others gave were “based on facts that we knew at the time, and those were honest assessments and were never intended to deceive either the Congress or the American people.”

Milley contrasted the Post’s expose on Afghanistan with the 1970s “Pentagon Papers,” which revealed secret documents on the government’s consistently gloom views on Vietnam. He said those were “contemporary papers written in

advance of decision making. These, the Afghan papers, were an attempt by SIGAR in about 2,000 pages to do post-facto interviews, looking back, to determine lessons learned," he said, referring to the reports of the special investigator general for Afghanistan.

"For years, we were clear there is not a reasonable chance of a military victory against the Taliban or the insurgency... and that remains true today." Milley said. "There is only one way this is going to end, in a negotiated solution." Milley conceded that Afghanistan has been "a strategic stalemate," where the Taliban cannot win as long as the United States provides some degree of military support, but cannot defeat the Taliban "so long as they have sanctuary in Pakistan and some degree of popularity with the people."

And, with evident emotion, Milley said: "Our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who have given their lives in Afghanistan did not give their lives in vain."

Esper pointed out that some of the reporters in the audience had been to Afghanistan as had many members of Congress and the SIGAR investigators. "This has been very transparent. It's not like this war was hiding somewhere. For all the folks who have been in this conflict over the years, some insinuation there's been some kind of conspiracy, is ridiculous."