

What the Afghan War Diary Really Tells Us

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by SWJ Staff

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What the Afghan War Diary Really Tells Us About the Changing Dynamics of the Conflict

by Javier Osorio and Christopher Sullivan

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The major news headlines that followed the release of the Afghan War Diary, a collection of tens of thousands of leaked field memos from Afghanistan, describe how U.S. forces are battling an increasingly resilient and well-armed Taliban army. Coverage in the New York Times featured two major stories — an intensive review of events at Combat Outpost Keating, where U.S. forces defended themselves against an ever-growing and more violent Taliban enemy, and the analysis of a half dozen significant incidents highlighting the changing dynamics of the conflict. Coverage in the Guardian, meanwhile, focused on 200 “key events” that documented significant increases in the Taliban’s fighting capacity. Indeed, from these reports it appears as though U.S. efforts in Afghanistan are, at best, maintaining an uncomfortable status quo. At worst, the war is being lost to Taliban forces, whom we now know have been receiving aid from Pakistan.

But how can we draw inferences about a war involving more than 100,000 American soldiers and nearly 10 years of combat based solely on a smattering of documents hand selected by reporters? By purposefully choosing to report just a few hundred documents released as part of the War Diary, and ignoring the broad swaths of data contained in the rest of the records, the existing reportage has opened itself up to charges that the coverage is biased towards the perspective given off by those hand selected documents. A better strategy for understanding what the War Diary can tell us about how the war is faring would be to analyze all of the records and let the data speak for itself.

A statistical analysis of the more than 76,000 events so far released by Wikileaks reveals that the war is not faring as reported on in the major newspapers. The picture revealed is actually much worse.

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