



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 15, 2021

Pentagon Undercounting Troops in Afghanistan by 1,000

The Defense Department has once again been caught using accounting tricks to cover up the actual number of U.S. troops deployed in a foreign country, in this case Afghanistan.

“The United States has about 1,000 more troops in Afghanistan than it has disclosed, according to U.S., European and Afghan officials,” the [New York Times](#) reported Sunday. “That adds another layer of complexity to the swirling debate at the White House over whether to stick with a deal, struck by the Trump administration and the Taliban, that calls for removing the remaining American forces by May 1.”



AP Images

While the additional troops could complicate the logistics of withdrawal, the revelation of their existence should not have any effect on President Joe Biden’s decision as to whether to pull out of Afghanistan. In fact, given Congress’ primacy in foreign policy under the Constitution, it shouldn’t even be Biden’s decision to make. Since Congress has never declared war on Afghanistan, no U.S. troops should be in that country, and those who are there should be immediately withdrawn regardless of any president’s wishes.

The Pentagon has argued for retaining at least 8,600 troops in Afghanistan — the actual number is now about 3,500, down from 12,000 at this time last year — so its incentive to underreport troop levels is obvious. In fact, it continues to do so despite the *Times*’ reporting; a Pentagon spokesman told the paper, “We are still at 2,500” troops in the country. Most of them, according to the *Times*, are Special Operations troops advising the Afghan military or “flight and support crews for aircraft,” which continue to patrol the southern Afghan skies.

“Having more troops in a country than the Defense Department officially acknowledges is common practice,” wrote the *Times*. “From Syria to Yemen to Mali, the United States often details military troops to the CIA or other agencies, declares that information ‘classified’ and refuses to publicly acknowledge their presence.”

Special Operations forces frequently aren’t included in the official troop counts. The “Force Management Level” policy instituted by President Barack Obama further clouds matters by failing to acknowledge troops that are deployed to a war zone for fewer than 120 days. “That includes troops like construction engineers who are building a bridge or repairing an airfield, as well as the combat units like Marine artillery batteries that have deployed to Syria — even though those very Marines have been featured in glitzy official videos,” [Politico](#) reported in 2017.

As the age of that quotation suggests, troop undercounting has been going on for years.

“We’ve seen this movie before,” Laurel Miller, a former top State Department official who worked on Afghanistan and Pakistan diplomacy in the Obama and Trump administrations, told the *Times*. “To some



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extent, the fudging of the numbers reflects the arbitrariness of political fixation on declaring specific numbers.”

In September 2017, for example, the Pentagon revealed that it had [undercounted troops in Afghanistan by 2,600](#). The military lowballed the count to circumvent troop caps that Obama had instituted. Later that year, the Pentagon acknowledged having about [four times as many troops in Syria](#) — another unconstitutional conflict — as it had previously reported.

The Defense Department’s newfound honesty was instituted at the behest of then-Defense Secretary James Mattis. “This way of doing business [undercounting troops] is over,” a Mattis spokeswoman told reporters.

The policy, if it were ever really followed, seemed to expire after Mattis resigned in 2019. “So last year, as former President Donald J. Trump pushed for rapid troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, the Defense Department and other national security agencies used familiar methods to move numbers around, which made troop levels seem to be dropping faster than they really were,” noted the *Times*. “It was comparable to what happened in 2019, when Mr. Trump wanted to pull forces from Syria, U.S. officials said.”

Truth, it has been said, is the first casualty of war, so it is not surprising that the war-makers in Washington choose to conceal what they are doing. And as long as presidents, with the acquiescence of a compliant Congress, continue to involve the United States in illegal, interminable foreign conflicts, veracity, from both the White House and the Pentagon, is unlikely to enjoy a resurgence.



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