

# Post-Taliban Afghanistan: A short route to chaos

James M. Wall

Reporting of conflict situations seems almost inevitably biased, especially when a superpower wants to carry out a particular policy without public dissent. Controlling the media and silencing opposition voices is a tactic the US government is all too familiar with. Yet speaking up, as the following commentary shows, is the only valid option for those who have serious moral reservations about how the world is run.

After a particularly heavy U.S. bombardment of the besieged Afghan city of Kunduz in November last year, Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters initially refused to surrender. Various Northern Alliance factions argued over how to arrange the surrender of Kunduz, provoking one U.S. official in Washington to describe the situation in and around Kunduz as 'chaotic'. His word 'chaotic' reminded me of an exchange in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, in which Cardinal Thomas Wolsey confronts Thomas More, demanding More's support for a Papal dispensation so that King Henry VIII could legally divorce his queen, who had failed to produce a male heir to the English throne. When More refuses to intercede with the Pope, the Cardinal glares at him: 'You are a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on without that horrible, constant moral squint, with a little common sense you could have made a statesman.'

To which More replies: 'I think that when statesmen forsake their own private consciences for the sake of their public duties they lead the country by a short route to chaos.'

With the Taliban removed from control in most of Afghanistan, the same war lords initially defeated by the religiously repressive Taliban are moving back into power. It has been a move that is anything but smooth. It is, in fact, chaotic, because the U.S. bombing campaign was so effective that no plans were in place to assemble a unified Afghanistan leadership.

At the end of the last Afghani war, when U.S.-led factions defeated the Russian occupying army and its factions, we departed in haste, leaving behind the chaos which set the stage for the rise of the Taliban. This time the U.S. is expected to hang around long enough to clamp down on the chaos and create some semblance of law and order in a land that has known only warfare for centuries.

Newsweek magazine recently reported on opposition in the United States to the Afghanistan as almost a sidebar, leaving the strong impression the editors had to look long and hard to find any opposition. The report ran in the back of the magazine on two pages, following several feature articles about the successful military campaign. Under the heading, 'The Voices of Dissent' David Gates wrote:

'Since September 11, political dissent has seemed a decadent luxury, rather than a democratic necessity. The new united-we-stand orthodoxy holds that we're all engaged in a war of unquestionable good against inexplicable evil — that, in fact, the attempt to understand the enemy's perception of us is disloyal — and that bombing Afghanistan, approved by 90 percent of Americans, is both morally and practically justified.'

Gates identified three novelists who 'refuse to get with the programme', Susan Sontag, Barbara Kingsolver and Indian author Arundhati Roy, each of whom have written and spoken about their strong objections to the war. Roy wrote: 'The bombing will spawn more anger and terror across the world', while Kingsolver says she dissents 'because I love my country and I want to do the right thing.'

Good guys vs. bad guys

Meanwhile, the President's repeated insistence that the war against terror will last a 'long time' is a strong indication that he is listening to those voices in his administration and within the American conservative community who want him to extend the war to include all nations that 'harbour' what Secretary of Defence Don Rumsfeld, who has seen too many movies, likes to call the 'bad guys.'

Administrative officials led by Paul Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld's deputy, and White House officials Condoleezza Rice and Karl Rowe, along with Richard Pearle, chairman of the President's Defence Policy Board, are urging Bush not to stop with Afghanistan. Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, now back as a Bush insider as a member the Defence Policy Board, was reported by New Yorker writer Peter J. Boyer as urging the President to 'confront Iraq even while the engagement in Afghanistan continues, and go after terrorist operations in Somalia and Sudan as well.' These political voices are promoted among U.S. conservative pundits and commentators who join the chorus urging Bush to 'finish' what his father didn't finish in Iraq (get rid of Saddam Hussein) and then replace leaders elsewhere in the region with U.S.-friendly governments.

Dissenters who have spoken out against the war are treated as something of an aberration, greeted with all the enthusiasm illegitimate children receive at family reunions. Those voices are present, however, even though rarely reported. An example of dissent appeared in a syndicated comic strip, *The Boondocks*, drawn by an African American artist. In one episode a young boy gave this Thanksgiving prayer:

'Ahem, in this time of war against Osama Bin Laden and the oppressive Taliban regime, we are thankful that our leader isn't the spoiled son of a powerful politician from a wealthy oil family who is supported by religious fundamentalists, operates through clandestine organisations, has no respect for the democratic electoral process, bombs innocents, and uses war to deny people their civil liberties. Amen.'

His grandfather, speaking for the 90 percentile within the U.S. who favour Bush's war against terror, responds: 'This is the last time you say grace, boy.' Intense patriotic support for the war was understandable immediately after an attack on American soil September 11. That initial sense of outrage has continued, sustained by the Bush administration's spinning of American public opinion, under the direction of Dorothy Beers, a former CEO of a major American advertising firm.

The Bush administration has been aided in its bellicose spin by American media's desire to make a mini-television series out of the war under a variety of headings: 'America Strikes Back' or 'America Goes to War', are two examples. They employ what sound like movie titles to accompany news reports as though they were entertainment programmes. The media were especially helpful in their initial and continuing demonisation of the Taliban by constant reminders of that group's repressive treatment of women, a running story which conveniently and respectfully remained silent about the repression of women in the autocratic regimes of Coalition allies, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Consistency has never been a virtue of wartime propaganda.

The Bush administration insists its war in Afghanistan is designed to put an end to the Osama Bin Laden terror network by bringing the criminals of September 11 to justice. But the bombing attacks and the Northern Alliance take-over of Afghanistan appear to many to have as much to do with revenge as they do with the securing of justice for the deaths of more than 3,500 citizens in the crashes of September 11.

#### Justifying reprisals

A film documentary on the life of British Queen Victoria describes a 1857 massacre of British citizens by local Indian troops. More than a hundred British women and children were trapped in a building in Cawnpore (present-day Kanpur) and hacked to death by local butchers sent in by the Indian soldiers. Their mutilated bodies were thrown into a nearby well.

In the documentary, *Albert and Victoria*, the camera pans across the well as the narrator speaks: 'The massacres of Cawnpore were not only the worst atrocity the British could imagine, they were regarded by the men who had conquered India as the most shameful reproach. They had failed the woman and children.' Soon, thousands of British reinforcements poured into the area, and the massacre ringleaders fled into the mountains. 'They were hunted by the British for years but never found. Instead the British turned on other targets for their revenge. What had happened at Cawnpore became the justification for brutal reprisals.'

Expressions of American religious opposition, which resonates with the 'constant moral squint' that so troubled Cardinal Wolsey, have gone largely unreported by war cheerleaders in the national U.S. media. Nor in the months after September 11 has much attention been paid to the silent minority of U.S citizens who had serious moral and practical reservations about a bombing campaign that was designed to locate criminals responsible for the September 11 attack. That campaign, which inevitably killed a large number of civilians, has resulted in the replacement of the Taliban, the Afghani faction we didn't like, with other factions we hope we can control, none of which will win any human rights awards. But terrorists are not nation-bound and they are, by nature, elusive. Just ask the FBI, which continues to search through the North Carolina mountains for the terrorist who set off a bomb during the Atlanta Olympics.

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