

[graveyard of empires]

Losing Afghanistan

Prolonging this good war may be worse than persisting in the bad one in Iraq.

By Leon Hadar

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD observed, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” From that perspective, some of the proud members of Washington’s reality-based community exhibit the characteristics of very intelligent super-achievers when they ridicule President George W. Bush’s grandiose plans for remaking Iraq—while embracing similarly ambitious designs for nation-building in Afghanistan.

But then, as George Orwell wrote in *1984*, “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them” amounts to the kind of Doublethink that politicians use to deceive and manipulate their people. Is that what critics of the Freedom Agenda are doing these days when they seem “to use logic against logic” (Orwell’s words) in offering conflicting policy recommendations for two regions in the Broader Middle East?

Realists urge the U.S. to take a cautious approach to achieving ethnic and religious reconciliation in Mesopotamia, pointing to deep-rooted conflicts between Arabs and Kurds, Shi’ites and Sunnis. But these same Realpolitik types become born-again idealists as they insist that American leaders, together with the entire “international community,” should help resolve the ancient differences between Pashtun and Tajik,

Uzbek and Hazara, and the Aimak and the Turkmen and the Baloch people. You see, the Aimak are not so different from the residents of Chevy Chase, Maryland. They just want to live together in peace with their friendly neighbors the Baloch, and we have the obligation to help them do that.

Well, forget Fitzgerald and Orwell. Since some of my best friends are Iraq skeptics and Afghanistan enthusiasts, I’ll try to be somewhat neutral. Embracing the judgment of a value-free social scientist, I propose that my pals are neither super-smart jugglers nor duplicitous propagandists. Rather, they may be suffering from a mild form of cognitive dissonance.

One assumes that rational political players holding two contradictory ideas will try to reduce the dissonance by rejecting one. They could propose that we actually undertake nation-building in both Iraq and Afghanistan or, like other powers (the British Empire, czarist Russia, the Soviet Union) who tried without success to impose their preferred order on Afghanistan, we admit that we will probably not be able to get these many tribes to sing “Kumbaya” around the campfire in Kandahar.

They won’t be the last aspiring policymakers to deal with the stress of holding conflicting ideas at the same time. Neo-conservatives are finding out that establishing an empire and spreading democ-

racy are mutually contradictory. Since learning that reality the hard way—somewhere on the roads between Baghdad and Beirut and Gaza—they have been trying to minimize their dissonance by denying discomforting evidence like the tendency of free elections in Arab countries to bring anti-Western figures to power.

Meanwhile, the rest of us continue to pay the costs of juggling imperial imposition and democracy promotion. And contrary to the expectations that many opponents of the neocons have invested in the “antiwar” Democratic presidential candidate, these costs will only rise if President Obama decides to play Queen Victoria and Woodrow Wilson simultaneously. He seems inclined to do just that.

“As president, I would deploy at least two additional brigades to Afghanistan to re-enforce our counter-terrorism operations and support NATO’s efforts against the Taliban,” candidate Obama promised during a foreign-policy address at the Wilson Center in Washington. “As we step up our commitment, our European friends must do the same, and without the burdensome restrictions that have hampered NATO’s efforts,” he explained to members of the foreign-policy establishment, who want to see U.S. troops relocated from Iraq to Afghanistan to do nation-building there—and to do it right this time.

John McCain argues that Iraq is more important to long-term American security, but believes that the U.S. should now undertake a surge in the Hindu Kush to match the one in Mesopotamia. Obama contends that Iraq is a costly diversion from Afghanistan, which he believes is more crucial to winning the war on terror. “We must also put more of an Afghan face on security by improving the training and equipping of the Afghan army and police, and including Afghan soldiers in U.S. and NATO operations,” he said in his Washington address, insisting, “the solution in Afghanistan is not just military—it is political and economic.” As president, he would increase our non-military aid by \$1 billion to fund local projects. Sounding like an enthusiastic nation-builder, Obama stressed that “we must seek better performance from the Afghan government, and support that performance through tough anti-corruption safeguards on aid, and increased international support to develop the rule of law across the country.”

One could dismiss much of this mumbo-jumbo rhetoric about ambitious plans to rebuild, remake, restructure, reconstruct, and reform the “failed state” of Afghanistan and its mishmash of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups, its underdeveloped economy, nonexistent military, and “civil society”—whatever that is. But notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) the mess in Iraq, Washington continues to be mesmerized by the notion—popularized by chroniclers such as our own Rudyard Kipling for poor people, the travel reporter turned military strategist Robert Kaplan—that Afghanistan could become our last New Frontier. A great cinematic romantic adventure. Another good war to eclipse the Iraqi bad war.

There in the snowy mountains and green valleys of the Hindu Kush, the exploits of Special Ops hunks and for-

eign-aid babes—joined by Blackwater professionals and DynCorp contractors delivering “customer-driven solutions”—could make any of us, including our War President, feel a certain “Afghanistan Envy,” as *Slate*’s Fred Kaplan put it. “I must say, I’m a little envious,” Bush admitted, speaking by video conference from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to U.S. personnel in Afghanistan. “If I were slightly younger and not employed here, I think it would be a fantastic experience to be on the front lines of helping this young democracy succeed,” said the ex-National Guard bombardier who passed an opportunity to take part in that great American drama in Southeast Asia. “It must be exciting for you,” he continued, “in some ways romantic, in some ways, you know, confronting danger. You’re really making history, and thanks.” Kaplan noted, “I suspect very few of these men and women see themselves as indulging in enviable adventures from *The Green Berets* or *Gunga Din*.”

That Bush, Obama, McCain, and the rest of the Washington elite regard Afghanistan as a good war has to do with the shared narrative about the U.S. campaign there. Indeed, some of the most vociferous antiwar voices in this country, including contributors to *The American Conservative* on the Right and *The Nation* on the Left, supported the launching of that war on Oct. 7, 2001 in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The war’s stated purpose was to capture Osama bin Laden, destroy al-Qaeda, and remove the Taliban regime that had provided support and safe haven to the terrorists. But while President Bush vowed that bin Laden would be captured “dead or alive” and made the destruction of al-Qaeda and the Taliban a top priority, he is expected to leave office with most of their leadership, probably including bin Laden, alive and well after they relocated from Afghanistan to Pakistan’s tribal areas.

There is no doubt that bringing to justice those responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—or better still, Coalition forces killing bin Laden and his conspirators, Che Guevara-style, on the battlefield—would have provided appropriate closure to the horrific events of 9/11. Like other Afghanistan-centric voices, Obama argues that instead of shifting American intelligence, military, and financial resources to invade Iraq, President Bush should have continued to fight the war in Afghanistan to victory.

But how does Obama define “victory”? Pursuing al-Qaeda and the Taliban into Pakistan and completing the nation-building project in “liberated” Afghanistan.

The part where Afghanistan enthusiasts fantasizing about V-Day get their narrative wrong begins after the devastating American and British aerial bombing campaign. (Remember the Daisy Cutters?) According to the fairy tale concocted by Washington and popularized by the media, we encouraged a bunch of pro-American Afghan good guys to liberate their country from Islamofascist bad guys and create the conditions for building a democratic and unified nation-state. In this version, the Northern Alliance and their leader, the late Ahmed Shah Massoud, played the role of the Free French Forces during the other Good War. (The Iraqi National Congress and Ahmed Chalabi were assigned this part in the bad war.) The role of Vichy is played by the Taliban, and the Nazi occupiers are represented by al-Qaeda.

What’s wrong with this story, and why does it matter? First, we need to remember that the outside military and financial backers of the Taliban and by extension of al-Qaeda—the only governments to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government in Kabul—were our staunch allies Pakistan, Saudi Arabia,

and the United Arab Emirates. The Pakistanis needed an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban's Pashtun fundamentalists to counterbalance the power of India, their regional rival. (The Pashtun are the main ethnic group in Afghanistan and on the other side of the border in Pakistan.) For the Saudis, the Talibs helped spread their anti-Western Muslim doctrine of Wahhabism. Before 9/11, the Northern Alliance was a military-political umbrella organization uniting various Afghan groups otherwise fighting each other to resist the Taliban. It remains dominated by the Tajik, the Shi'ite Hazara, and the Uzbeks and is backed by Russia, Iran, Turkey, and India.

To make a long story short, the horrors of 9/11 were perpetrated by the religious, political, and military partners of our Pakistani and Saudi allies. And the defeat of the Taliban was achieved through the help of anti-Western warlords allied with four regional players—an adversary (Iran), a not-so-great-friend (Russia), a friend (Turkey), and a rival of Pakistan (India). We formed an ad hoc partnership with the Northern Alliance, providing them money and arms while at the same time pressuring the Pakistanis and the Saudis to end their support for groups responsible for the deaths of 3,000 innocent Americans. This was an example of a sensible Realpolitik policy—co-operating with a mixed bag of local and regional players to capture our enemies and destroy their military infrastructure. An ideological crusade to bring democracy to Afghanistan wasn't part of the plan.

Pursuing the same kind of realistic approach, we could have encouraged the remnants of the Northern Alliance to work with their regional backers to co-opt Pakistan and members of Afghanistan's Pashtun majority into an imperfect political settlement. This, in turn,

would probably have led to the creation of a loose confederation of ethnic groups, locally controlled and secured by backing from Russia, India, Turkey, Iran—and Pakistan and the United States.

Instead, we insisted on imposing our man, the Pashtun Hamid Karzai, as head of a central government, while hoping against hope that Pakistan would back this arrangement. In the process, we antagonized the Indians, the Iranians, and the Russians, and most importantly, the various gangsters that had helped us “liberate” the country.

To support the fragile balance of power and pursue an ambitious nation-building scheme, we now have two military operations that seek to stabilize Afghanistan. Operation Enduring Freedom is a combat operation led by the United States against al-Qaeda remnants, primarily in the eastern and southern parts of the country along the Pakistan border. The mission consists of 20,000 troops, including about 18,000 U.S. forces. The second operation is the International Security Assistance Force, established in 2002 by the international community and controlled by NATO. ISAF has about 47,000 troops from 40 countries, including 17,000 American troops. The main problem has been the reluctance of our NATO allies to deploy more troops to take part in combat operations due to strong public opposition at home to fighting what has become an Afghan civil war.

Indeed, the good war in Afghanistan is not so good anymore. “In a remarkable shift, Afghanistan, where U.S. officials were once confident of victory, is now rivaling Iraq as the biggest cause of concern for American policymakers,” according to a recent front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal*. In fact, a Pentagon assessment issued in June on conditions in Afghanistan since the invasion acknowledged that Taliban guerrillas have regrouped since their fall from

power and “coalesced into a resilient insurgency,” making Afghanistan now more dangerous for American forces than Iraq. The Pentagon review states that the fledgling national government in Kabul remains incapable of extending its reach beyond the capital or taking effective counter-narcotics measures.

The insurgency that had once been limited to small portions of the country is now spreading to its more stable eastern parts. It carried out a record 2,615 roadside-bomb attacks in 2007, up from 1,931 in 2006. The roadside bombings, along with a wave of suicide and other attacks, killed more than 6,500 people in 2007, another post-invasion record. “The Taliban is likely to maintain or even increase the scope and pace of its terrorist attacks and bombings in 2008,” the report stressed. It concluded that “the greatest challenge to long-term security within Afghanistan is the insurgent sanctuary” within the tribal areas of Pakistan—our formal ally in the war on terror and a recipient of billions in U.S. military and economic aid. The document adds that the ceasefire accords between Pakistan and the militants resulted in “substantially” more cross-border attacks.

That so many American realists are clamoring for “victory” in Afghanistan while giving up on Iraq would probably surprise the proverbial man from Mars. Imagine him as Martian von Clausewitz landing in Washington this year. Based on hard-core geostrategic calculations, he would probably argue that the U.S. has more reason to remain engaged in Mesopotamia—including the need to maintain access to the energy resources in the Persian Gulf and to protect key allies in the region from the alleged threat of Iran—than to be drawn into Afghanistan's civil war in the name of nation-building.

“It is a rule in the life of modern nations that nationalism trumps all

else,” columnist William Pfaff recently wrote. “If the government in Saigon or a government in Baghdad or Kabul, cannot, even with appropriate foreign material assistance, establish and maintain order within its own frontiers and by its own means, armed legions of foreign democracy-teachers, state-builders and winners of hearts and minds cannot do it for them.” And as Pfaff suggested, if the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks do not wish to be ruled by Pashtun religious reactionaries, they should not need thousands of NATO and U.S. troops to defend them. “If they will not defend themselves, there is nothing the foreigners can do to save them from their countrymen,” he concluded.

Iraq and Afghanistan skeptics recognize that both countries are involved in civil wars, with tribal forces fighting over territory and resources in order to preserve their power and identity. Their political, economic, and religious interests don’t necessarily correspond to or conflict with American interests. After all, in Afghanistan, Pakistan backed al-Qaeda and Iran supported the Northern Alliance. In Iraq, the U.S. has partnered with a Shi’ite movement with ties to Iran.

During the 20th century, the U.S. and its allies had an interest in preventing aggressive global powers from dominating these regions. Such a threat doesn’t exist today—unless one considers the mythical Caliphate, the brainchild of the al-Qaeda-neocon coalition. The notion that America will succeed in nation-building through military force in either Iraq or Afghanistan is pure fantasy.

One hopes that Obama and company will resolve their cognitive dissonance by modifying their belief about the moral benefit and policy utility of nation-building. Indeed, the new administration should abandon these fantasies and instead embrace a realist policy of

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British and American intelligence have concluded that rogue elements in Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence were behind the June 7 attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul that killed 41 people and injured 140.

If that assessment is correct, it would confirm that at least some Pakistani officials are willing to use terrorist groups to wage a proxy war against India, something that New Delhi has been claiming for years. Afghanistan’s government has repeatedly accused ISI of protecting and supporting the Taliban, culminating in Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s recent threat to send his forces into Pakistani territory to root out the insurgents. Pakistani President Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani has said repeatedly that his country has no wish to destabilize Afghanistan, but he is clearly not in complete control of his own intelligence service. The role of the ISI in supporting the Taliban insurgency is a highly sensitive issue for both London and Washington because there are a number of trade-offs involved. The British and U.S. governments have both avoided directly accusing Pakistan of aiding insurgent groups. Britain depends on the ISI for critical information on terror plots in the UK, nearly all of which have been at least partly planned in Pakistan. The U.S. is completely dependent on ISI support in its campaign against Osama bin Laden, recognizing that Pakistani security services have killed or captured more al-Qaeda activists than the rest of the world combined. But off the record it is generally acknowledged that some ISI elements are actually working closely with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. British intelligence sources revealed that last summer a Taliban corpse found on a battlefield in Helmand was carrying papers that identified him as a serving ISI colonel. When the British Foreign Office queried Islamabad about the man’s status, the Pakistani army reported that the officer was “on leave” at the time of his death. A U.S. Department of Defense-funded study carried out by the RAND Corporation and published last month stated that at least some officers in the ISI are aiding the Taliban.



Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers have frequently been used to air sensational stories that appear to have been produced by Israeli intelligence.

The latest is a July 6 article in *The Sunday Times* of London entitled “‘Germ warfare’ fear over African monkeys taken to Iran.” According to the story, a Tanzanian dealer claims he sold 215 wild monkeys to the Razi Vaccine and Serum Institute in Tehran and that the Iranians were secretive and seemed to want the monkeys very much. The article then speculates that “the monkeys may be used for research involving biological weapons,” adding that U.S. intelligence believes “the pharmaceutical industry in Iran has long been used as a cover for developing germ warfare capability.” Having made its point, the report then describes how a number of animal welfare groups are looking into the allegations, neatly linking Iran to germ warfare to the brutal treatment of animals without any evidence to connect the various elements of the story.

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