



# War for Women

The interesting question about the war in Afghanistan is not what its outcome will be—the “Coalition” will not be the first foreigners to conquer the country—but why it continues.

The establishment’s answer remains 9/11. But al-Qaeda now has little or no presence in Afghanistan. Its bases in Pakistan are more useful than any potential Afghan camps. Unlike Washington, al-Qaeda understands that Pakistan is strategically a vastly more important prize than Afghanistan. Reportedly, the Taliban have already offered to keep al-Qaeda out as part of a peace deal. (Osama and company were neither easy nor grateful guests.) So why are we still fighting?

I suspect the question can be answered in one word: feminism. One of the better recent pieces on the war, a column by anthropologist Scott Atran, “Turning the Taliban Against Al Qaeda” in the October 27 *New York Times*, stated:

Washington’s goals officially remain those stated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: to strengthen Afghan Army forces and to ‘reintegrate’ the supposedly ‘moderate’ Taliban, that is, fighters who will lay down arms and respect the Afghan Constitution, including its Western-inspired provisions to respect human rights and equality of women in the public sphere.

All of these conditions are fanciful, and together they represent a diktat that a victorious America might impose on a beaten Taliban—an unlikely situation. But the important question is not which

conditions the Taliban might accept. Rather, it is which stipulations the Obama White House regards as domestic political requirements. One leaps from the page: “the equality of women.”

No Democratic administration would dare say to feminists, who are a key component of the Left’s coalition, “Sorry, but feminism doesn’t travel well to Afghanistan. Pashtun women will continue to have two options: they can be in their home, or they can be in their grave.” The banshee wails would rise to the heavens.

American feminists are no doubt willing to see the war go on indefinitely in pursuit of their fantasy. After all, most of the American dead are male soldiers and Marines, a type of man feminists particularly loathe.

But what might be the public reaction if flyover-land Americans, who provide most of our armed forces’ recruits, figured out that their kids are coming home in boxes because we are at war for feminism? Many of them are less than enthusiastic about that ideology here at home.

Meanwhile, as feminism blocks any prospect of a negotiated peace, time is working against us over there. Thus far, the Afghan War has offered us an advantage unusual in Fourth Generation conflicts. We have someone with whom to negotiate.

Normally, the endless fragmentation characteristic of Fourth Generation forces leaves no one with whom to sit

down in Paris and make peace because no local leader can deliver more than a splinter of the enemy. In contrast, Mullah Omar can probably supply something that resembles peace, at least by Afghan standards.

In his column, Atran warns that our tactical military success may be eroding that strategic advantage. As U.S. special-operations forces succeed in killing or capturing mid-level Taliban leaders, enemy ranks are being replenished by younger fighters who are less likely to take orders from Mullah Omar. Atran writes:

As with the older Taliban, their ideology—a peculiar blend of pan-Islamic Shariah law and Pashtun customs—is ‘not for sale,’ as one leader told a *Times* reporter. But the new cohort increasingly decides how these beliefs are imposed on the ground: recently the Quetta Shura sent a Muslim scholar to chastise a group of youthful commanders in Paktia Province who were not following Mullah Omar’s directives; they promptly killed him.

It is often the case that governments make decisions on military and foreign policy based on domestic political considerations rather than realities on the ground. Unfortunately, by subordinating the realities in Afghanistan to political factors, the Obama administration leaves our armed forces playing for time when time is working against them. The consequences could be worse than the Kilkenny cat howls of jilted feminists, for the country if not for the Democratic Party. ■

# Ostrich America

The ludicrous, destructive, curiously enduring myth of U.S. isolationism.

By Chase Madar

OF ALL THE RECEIVED IDEAS that clog America's foreign-policy discourse, none is more at variance with reality than the threat of so-called isolationism. We have never been more engaged with every corner of the world, yet we have never been lectured more often about the consequences of "retreating within our borders." The more countries we attack—Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen—the more dire warnings we get about national introversion. The specter of isolationism has never looked healthier.

A case in point was George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union address, a venue he used to tell a spine-chilling tale. With his foreign policy exploding all around him, Bush warned against an even more disastrous alternative: there were those who would "tie our hands" and have us "retreat within our borders." From the tenor of his talk, he seemed to think that Americans were about to burn down both the Pentagon and Department of State, beat defense intellectuals into postal workers, and force every house in the land to set up a little steel foundry in the back yard—just like in the Great Leap Forward—while learning to live on grubs and wild mountain honey.

Of course, this is absurd: as many pointed out in response to this scare-mongering, there are no isolationists in America—not in either political party, not in the media, and not in the academy. (The i-word is often used as a synonym for unilateralism. Here I am assigning only its most common meaning: a tendency to ignore security threats beyond territorial borders and disen-

gage diplomatically, politically, and economically from the rest of the world.) Nevertheless, the menace of a return to geopolitical autarky is carted out whenever our sclerotically narrow foreign-policy consensus gets an unwelcome jolt. This habit of mind did not end with the exit of George W. Bush.

It was predictable, for instance, that the publication earlier this year of Andrew Bacevich's latest study of the military-industrial complex, *Washington Rules*, would draw fresh choruses of "we can't just retreat within our borders." Andrew Exum, impresario of counterinsurgency warfare at the Center for a New American Security, poutily suggested that Bacevich just come out and own up to being an isolationist. For its part, the *Washington Times* qualified its grudging praise of *Washington Rules* with the backhanded aside that "unlike many of his ideological compatriots, Mr. Bacevich understands and respects the military and doesn't advocate withdrawing from the world."

Bacevich is far from the only public figure to be smeared so. Earlier this year, one of the homemade counterterrorism experts at the Intelwire blog dropped the i-bomb on Salon.com columnist Glenn Greenwald for proposing withdrawal from Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Did we Americans live in geopolitical solitude before our drones hammered Waziristan?) And during the last presidential election, editorialists of all stripes wasted no time in tarring Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul as ostrich-headed isolationists; they were wholly

unsuitable for making foreign policy and had flunked the most elementary lessons of U.S. diplomatic history.

But what does the historical record teach us? According to a very common narrative, the 1920s and '30s were, in the words of one skeptical historian, "a period when the United States disregarded its world responsibilities by getting inebriated on the homemade gin of isolationism." In the aftermath of the Great War, a parochial and selfish Senate failed to ratify America's accession to the League of Nations, and soon the U.S. was jitterbugging on the sidelines as the world went to hell. If only we had not withdrawn within our borders, the story goes, we could have prevented the rise of fascism, rolled back the Japanese empire, smashed the fledgling Soviet Union, and staved off World War II. Instead, in our smug naïveté, we were caught unprepared by the attack on Pearl Harbor, which many a talking head to this day points to as the watery grave of American isolationism.

Some version of this parable is holy writ not just to neoconservative Republicans but to our entire foreign-policy establishment, including Democratic Party courtiers like the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—who muttered darkly of an interwar "return to the womb"—as well as a new generation of liberal hawks like Peter Beinart.

We should first note that this story-with-a-moral assumes American omnipotence: if any evil is committed anywhere in the world—be it the Ukrainian famine, the Rape of Nanking, or the rise of Benito