

WHY ARE WE IN AFGHANISTAN?

FULL SCRIPT
by Michael Zweig *

Why are we in Afghanistan? Some call it “the good war.” Most Americans think it’s a mistake, a quagmire with no good end. Many strands of policy, and currents of history, have brought us there.

In 2001, immediately after Al Qaeda destroyed the World Trade Center and attacked the Pentagon, the U.S. sent troops to Afghanistan, then home of Al Qaeda leadership. We drove the Taliban from power but we let Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda escape through Tora Bora into Pakistan in 2002. The U.S. then largely ignored Afghanistan, fighting the war in Iraq instead.

Eight years later, President Obama stopped talking about the “war on terror” that President Bush pursued, but he increased U.S. troop deployments to Afghanistan, widened the war into Pakistan, and proposed a four percent increase in the military budget for 2010.

Anyone concerned to stop Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, and other terrorists should consider a report from the Rand Corporation, a think tank closely allied with U.S. military and intelligence services, which found that “there is no battlefield solution to terrorism.” Military action, with the inevitable “collateral damage” of civilian casualties and many refugees, only creates more U.S. enemies and terrorist fighters than we kill [Seth Jones, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qaeda*; <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2008/07/29/>].

Even if we manage to secure Afghanistan, the small core of Al Qaeda leadership could stay in Pakistan, or move to Somalia, or Yemen, or the Sudan, or some other country, and back again. We should recall that the while 9/11 attacks were authorized in Afghanistan, fifteen of the nineteen attackers were Saudis, and they

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planned and trained for their mission in Germany and the United States.

We should treat terror networks as the criminal conspiracies they are, as we did before 9/11. We have a lot of experience and tools for dealing with even violent conspiracies. Police and intelligence forces are critical, as is an emphasis on diplomatic measures to enlist the broadest coalition of nations and organizations in the isolation, arrest, and bringing to justice of those who engage in terrorism.

And we should follow the money: choke off financial assets by freezing bank accounts. Shut down terrorists' avenues of financing and seize their assets.

But our war in Afghanistan is not simply focused on terrorists. President Obama is pursuing a much broader counter-insurgency war directed at defeating the Taliban. As a local political force different from the terrorist cells of Al Qaeda, the Taliban seek to reestablish the government they ran in Afghanistan until the U.S. overthrew them in November 2001. We are engaged in nation building in Afghanistan based on a foundation of the corrupt Karzai government. There is no reason to believe it can work.

In fighting the Taliban insurgency, U.S. actions in Afghanistan today go directly against U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine, which says, "Political factors are primary." The doctrine accepts that roughly eighty percent of resources should go to civilian construction and the advance of people's welfare, while only twenty percent should go to military action (David Petraeus and James Amos, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, U.S. Army, December, 2006, p. 1-22). Yet in the 2010 budget, only six percent of spending for Afghanistan will be civilian, while ninety-four percent is for the military (Steven Simon, "Can the Right War Be Won?" *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2009). See also Congressional Research Service, "Estimated War Funding by Agency: FY 2001-FY2010." Assigning troops to major nation-building tasks also contradicts U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine, which allows only temporary assignment of military units to civilian tasks.

Continuing to escalate our military presence there makes no sense. To undermine terrorism, we need to withdraw our combat forces.

Current military spending eats up nearly half of every discretionary dollar the federal government spends. Social programs claim one-third of the discretionary budget. [NOTE: The “discretionary budget” only includes expenses Congress controls each year. It excludes continuing expenses required by law like payments on the national debt, Social Security, and Medicare.] Military expenses in fiscal year 2010 will be almost thirteen times our expenditures on all civilian international affairs, including diplomacy and non-military foreign aid. It will be 1,185 times what the government spends for occupational safety and health. In nine hours our military will spend what the government devotes to helping small businesses all year long. [Source: Budget of the United States, 2010; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/>]

Military spending for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has cost the American people dearly; not just in money, but in the things we need that the government could have bought with that money instead. The National Priorities Project has calculated this “opportunity cost” of the wars for every congressional district, county, state, and major city in the U.S. In Suffolk County, Long Island, NY, for example, residents paid \$9.2 billion in taxes from 2001 through September 2009 for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. [NOTE: This is the percent of the total federal budget that has gone to these wars applied to the total income taxes paid by people in Suffolk County from 2001 to 2009.]

Based on local prices in Suffolk County, the National Priorities Project has calculated that people there could have had ALL of the items you see on the screen. You can find the cost to your own community by going to <Nationalpriorities.org>

Workers have not benefited from U.S. military power. Since 1973, real wages – after taking account of inflation – have fallen steadily in the U.S., except for a brief period at the end of the 1990s when the economy was at full employment and workers had a relatively strong bargaining position.

The negative effects of globalization, slower economic growth, and the loss of manufacturing jobs have all contributed to this wage decline. Other causes include the increasing number of low-wage jobs in the service sector, contingent jobs with low wages and few benefits, deregulation, and the weakening of the labor movement.

Nothing in the military budget will help to reverse these declines. Military spending doesn't even create as many jobs as the same money would create if spent on building schools, developing new energy sources, or fixing our infrastructure of roads, bridges, rail, and ports (Robert Pollin and Heidi Garrett-Peltier, "The Wages of Peace," *The Nation*, March 31, 2008).

So, why are the American people saddled with such large military costs?

President George W. Bush gave a straightforward answer. In his statement of U.S. National Security Strategy, delivered to Congress in September 2002, Bush mentioned "terror" or "terrorism" 87 times, but included 45 references to "free markets," "economic openness," and other names for policies that give almost unrestricted power to big business. After the 9/11 attacks, references to "terrorism" were designed to win popular support for a policy whose underlying purpose was the continuation of a long history of U.S. military interventions around the globe in pursuit of corporate interests.

The United States has been expanding since its earliest days. In the 19th century, "Manifest Destiny," the idea that the U.S. was destined by God to expand westward across the continent, guided the popular imagination in the military conquest of vast Indian territories. In the 1840s, the U.S. picked a fight with Mexico over disputed territory west of Texas (the pink area on the map) and captured more than half of Mexico's territory in the war (the light blue and pink areas).

In 1898, the U.S. provoked another war, this time with Spain. The U.S. gained control of a number of Spanish colonies that were strategically located along important sea lanes, shown in the red boxes on the map: Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, Guam

and the Philippines in the Pacific. The U.S. also conquered and colonized the Hawaiian Islands at this time. The U.S. became a colonial power, advancing the economic needs of expanding businesses for secure trade routes and access to raw materials.

After World War II, the American diplomat George Kennan, chief architect of Cold War U.S. foreign policy, stressed the primacy of power in the pursuit of American economic interests, with little concern for democracy or human rights. This is called the “realist school” of foreign policy. Kennan wrote: “We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population.... Our task is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.... To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality ... We are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.” (George Kennan, Policy Planning Study 23 (PPS23), *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1948, Vol.1, Part II, pp. 510ff)

Since Kennan, every president – Democrat or Republican – has pursued a foreign policy guided by this logic. For all his talk about spreading democracy, George W. Bush followed a strategic doctrine that continued to put raw power and corporate economic interests at the forefront of the mission.

Why did we wage war in Iraq? Weapons of mass destruction? No. Democracy and human rights? No. Rooting out terrorists and destroying Al Qaeda? No.

Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve under four presidents, addressed the question directly in his recent memoir, *The Age of Turbulence*. He wrote: “I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.” But reducing it all to “oil” alone is too narrow.

According to its 2002 statement of strategic doctrine, the Bush Administration was out to make it clear to every country that the United States would use military force to crush any opposition to the spread of free markets and U.S economic dominance. As the leaders of the Project for the New American Century, architects of the Iraq war, put it immediately after 9/11: “More important, eliminating Saddam is the key to restoring our regional dominance” (Gary Schmitt

and Tom Donnelly, "A War with a Purpose," *The Weekly Standard*, September 17, 2001). [NOTE: The Project for the New American Century is the neo-conservative group, founded in 1997, that included Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Zalmay Khalilzad, and other architects of U.S. foreign policy in the George W. Bush administration.]

As a result of this war for oil and regional domination, more than 4,000 Americans and over one million Iraqis have died. And the economic and human costs will continue to mount as we care for tens of thousands of wounded American soldiers for years to come and Iraqis rebuild their society and deal with the four million refugees the war has created.

Since World War II, the United States has intervened in more than 70 countries, sometimes with military force, sometimes with CIA operations to overthrow governments. The black dots on the map indicate the most serious interventions. To see a pattern that forms the context of U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan today, let's look quickly at four examples, beginning in 1953. [See, for example, Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, Times Books, 2007]

In 1953, the CIA engineered the overthrow of Iran's elected government after Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized Iranian oil reserves that had been owned by British oil companies. U.S. companies then got 40% of the oil; Britain kept 40%, and 20% went to companies in other countries (Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow*, (Times Books, 2006), p. 201).

The U.S. put into power the Shah of Iran and thereby got a reliable Middle East regional ally. The fierce repression of the Shah's regime led to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Because of this history, which no Iranian has forgotten, hostility and distrust towards the United States continues.

The U.S. government has also been active in Africa. A wave of anti-colonial independence movements arose in the 1950s. Patrice Lumumba led the successful independence struggle in Zaire (the Belgian Congo). As its first Prime Minister, Lumumba moved to nationalize the country's rich natural resources, including copper, gold, and diamonds. The U.S. CIA engineered his arrest and murder

in 1961. For more than 40 years thereafter, the people in Zaire lived under a pro-American dictatorship that perpetuated mass poverty and accumulated great wealth in the hands of the elite. (Ludo DeWitte, *Assassination of Lumumba*, Verso, 2003)

The U.S. opposed independence movements it could not control. Although everyone now recognizes Nelson Mandela as one of the world's outstanding political and moral leaders, the U.S. called him a terrorist when he was in jail.

The U.S. first got involved in Vietnam when we flew French military officers there in 1945 to receive the Japanese surrender. We didn't allow the Vietnamese forces themselves, under Ho Chi Minh, who had successfully fought the Japanese, to regain control of their own country. Instead, the U.S. restored France as the colonial power. After the Vietnamese defeated the French and pushed them out in 1954, the U.S. took a more active role.

President Eisenhower cancelled the scheduled 1956 election that was supposed to allow the Vietnamese to vote for their own government because it was clear that Ho Chi Minh would win. After the election was cancelled, Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communist party controlled the northern part of the country and the U.S. installed a series of governments in the southern part.

The U.S. had little direct economic interest in Vietnam, but fought a war there based on the "domino theory," which held that communist control of Vietnam would lead to the spread of communism throughout the region. This would threaten trade routes and access to resources in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Three million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans died. When the Vietnamese finally won and the U.S. withdrew in 1975, the domino theory was shown to be false. There had been no dominos.

Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile in 1970. He was a socialist who implemented a series of policies that favored workers and the poor. Business interests grew alarmed and the U.S. government, led in its foreign policy by Henry Kissinger, moved to overthrow Allende. The U.S. backed a section of the Chilean military, and General Augusto Pinochet took power in a coup on September

11, 1973. Over 3,000 labor and human rights activists were killed or “disappeared.” Free-market economists led by Milton Friedman reorganized the Chilean economy, giving free play to big-business interests in unregulated markets.

The U.S. has repeatedly acted against democratically elected governments. In all these countries – Iran, Zaire, Vietnam, Chile, and others including Greece, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Angola - the U.S. intervened to protect business interests against the interests of working people.

However, the long history of U.S. interventions has been accompanied by an equally long tradition of opposition here at home. Many Americans have called on our government to play a positive role for ordinary people in other countries, and within the United States. Nineteenth century writer Henry David Thoreau went to jail for refusing to pay taxes for the Mexican War. Abraham Lincoln spoke and voted against the war as a Congressman from Illinois; many ordinary Americans actively opposed it as well.

Although the writer Mark Twain was the best-known opponent of the Spanish-American War, widespread opposition to it existed, through the Anti-Imperialist League that Twain helped found, and other organizations.

The opposition developed even as William Randolph Hearst promoted hysterical pro-war “yellow journalism” in his newspapers—the kind of cheerleading for war some of our major media outlets still engage in today.

Mark Twain wrote that, at first, “I wanted the American eagle to go screaming into the Pacific. It seemed tiresome and tame for it to content itself with the Rockies. Why not spread its wings over the Philippines, I asked myself? And I thought it would be a real good thing to do. I said to myself, here are a people who have suffered for three centuries. We can make them as free as ourselves, give them a government and country of their own, put a miniature of the American constitution afloat in the Pacific, start a brand new republic to take its place among the free nations of the world. It seemed to me a great task to which we had addressed ourselves. But I have thought some

more, since then, and I have read carefully the treaty of Paris, and I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem.... And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.” (*New York Herald*, October, 15, 1900, in *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire: Anti-Imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War*, Jim Zwick, ed., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992)

As the Vietnam War deepened and extended through Southeast Asia, a massive anti-war movement developed in the U.S. and among active duty U.S. troops in Vietnam.

Despite the power of Cold War anti-communism prevalent in the U.S. at that time, the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace met in November 1967, when over 500 U.S. labor leaders from fifty international unions announced their opposition to the war and declared:

“The annual cost of the war to Americans will soon reach \$30 billion a year. This enormous diversion of human wealth and energies into war has grievously undermined every program to meet the needs of our cities and has intensified the undercurrents of violence in our own country.”

The Rev. Martin Luther King also spoke eloquently in opposition to the war. In a speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, Dr. King said: “I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos (of the United States) without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.”

He went on, in words still meaningful: “The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. It is curious that the Americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat.”

Even before the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, Leslie Cagan helped organize and led United for Peace and Justice, a coalition that came to include over 1,400 local, regional, and national

organizations. UFPJ, ANSWER, and other organizations built widespread opposition to the Iraq war. Millions of Americans engaged in protests.

U.S. Labor Against the War also started before the Iraq War began and has grown to a coalition of over 190 union locals, central labor councils, state federations of labor, and international unions, representing over five million workers. In 2005, the AFL-CIO, the main U.S. labor federation, officially opposed the Iraq war and called for rapid withdrawal of all US forces and bases, a stand reaffirmed at its 2009 national convention.

As the Iraq war developed, military families and returning veterans organized Iraq Veterans Against the War and Military Families Speak Out to support the troops by ending the war and bringing them home. Their organizing continues in opposition to the growing Afghan war.

The peace movement that put millions of people into the streets in massive demonstrations helped create the political climate that allowed Barack Obama to win the presidency on the basis of his early opposition to the war.

Coming back to Afghanistan, along with concerns about terrorism, securing U.S. geo-strategic interests in the region may again be playing a role in driving government policy, as it has so often in the past.

Take a look at the map. Afghanistan is next to or near Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. These are all countries that are vitally important to the United States as key allies or enemies, and as potential economic and political competitors. Afghanistan is also next to Turkmenistan and other Central Asian Republics that are rich in oil and natural gas. Their total reserves exceed those in the United States (Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* Yale University Press, 2001 p.144).

While the U.S. had no sustained interest in Afghanistan after the Soviet Union pulled out in 1989, more recent developments have made Afghanistan important. The collapse of the Soviet Union in

1991 freed the Central Asian Republics, which had been tightly tied to the USSR, and made them accessible to the U.S. And China's economy has continued to grow since the '90s, driving China into global markets for oil and gas and drawing their attention to the Central Asian Republics. The Afghan War is also a proxy battle between Pakistan and India, each with nuclear weapons. Quite apart from terrorism, this is a region where the U.S. would like to exert influence.

In May 2001, the final report of the U.S. National Energy Policy Development Group, chaired by Vice-President Dick Cheney, explicitly identified Central Asian republics and the Caspian region as a "rapidly growing new area of supply." (*National Energy Policy*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, May 2001, p. 8.7) The report called on the president and cabinet agencies to "deepen their commercial dialogue with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and other Caspian states to provide a strong, transparent, and stable business climate for energy and related infrastructure projects." (*National Energy Policy*, p. 8.20)

In late summer 2002 the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan, which lies between Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea, met with representatives of the Turkmen, Afghan, and Pakistani governments and expressed approval for a new pipeline to connect Turkmenistan with the Arabian Sea on the coast of Pakistan, passing through Afghanistan while bypassing Russia and Iran. The Asia Development Bank expressed support for the project as well. These meetings were reported in local press, but seemingly not in the United States. (<http://www.ww4report.com/static/42.html> and <http://www.ww4report.com/static/49.html>)

These efforts followed an attempt by the U.S. oil company Unocal, also supported by the U.S. government, to build a pipeline through Afghanistan to connect Central Asian oil and natural gas with the Arabian Sea in the mid-1990s. [For the details, see Steve Coll's Pulitzer Prize winning *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*.]

The U.S. Department of Energy has forecast that China's need to import oil will increase from 31 percent of its total oil consumption

in 2000 to 73 percent by 2025 (Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil*, (Henry Holt, 2004), p. 166). U.S. control over Central Asian oil and natural gas would give the U.S. access to energy reserves as well as leverage over economic development in China. But the Taliban would not agree to the pipeline when they controlled Afghanistan and any pipeline is impossible to establish as long as Afghanistan is unstable.

In the U.S., we hear very little about U.S. strategic and economic interests in the region.

We hear instead about the fight against terrorism, and for democracy and the rights of women. Yet, in the words of Malalai Joya, a young woman member of the Afghan parliament, “This democracy was a façade, and the so-called liberation a big lie. Almost eight years after the Taliban regime was toppled, our hopes for a truly democratic and independent Afghanistan have been betrayed by the continued domination of fundamentalists and by brutal occupation that ultimately serves only American strategic interests in the region. My country hasn’t been liberated: it’s still under the warlords’ control, and NATO occupation only reinforces that power.” (*Guardian* (London), July 25, 2009)

Even though the Afghan constitution guarantees that twenty-five percent of the parliament should be women, Afghan women today are subject to widespread and intense repression even by many who oppose the Taliban. [For more information, contact the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) at <http://www.rawa.org/index.php>] The continuing war is especially destructive for Afghan women, who suffer grievously from dislocation, rape, and the effects of being widows. (OXFAM International, *The Costs of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1979-2009*, at <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war.pdf>)

President Obama is extending the Afghan war in response to political pressure at home. Like Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam, he does not want to appear weak on defense, let alone lose a war he has inherited. Obama acts according to the easy expectation that the U.S. can intervene anywhere it seems to suit our interests, as we have done so often in the past.

But it is not possible or legitimate for the U.S. (or any country) to forcibly occupy and dominate another country, especially not Afghanistan, “the graveyard of empires,” with its long history of successful resistance to outsiders, from Alexander the Great to Britain to the Soviet Union.

The Afghan war appears to be another step in what the historian Barbara Tuchman described as the march of folly, in which governments pursue ruinous policies even against the advice of many respected military and political officials who see the errors and urge a different course. (Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984))

President Obama said many times as a candidate that he could not deliver a progressive agenda alone. He asked the American people to get involved, to organize and press for the changes they voted for.

To end the war in Afghanistan and prevent its mounting costs in lives and money, to make those resources available instead for health care and other progressive elements of Obama’s domestic agenda, it will be necessary to build on the long tradition of U.S. movements for peace – in unions and communities, among veterans and military families, in religious groups and schools, colleges, and universities.

Now as much as any time in U.S. history, it’s time to educate, agitate, and organize.