

WHY ARE WE IN AFGHANISTAN?

EXPRESS 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 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/>].

We should treat terror networks as the criminal conspiracies they are, as we did before 9/11. 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.

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

Current military spending eats up nearly half of every discretionary dollar the federal government spends. [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 1,185 times what the government spends for occupational safety and health. [Source: Budget of the United States, 2010; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/>] 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.

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.]

The Iraq war was nothing new. 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.

The U.S. has overthrown democratically elected governments and blocked elections many times since World War II – in Greece, Iran, Guatemala, Zaire, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, and Chile.

However, the long history of U.S. interventions has been accompanied by an equally long tradition of opposition here at home. From the Mexican War in 1848 to Vietnam and Iraq, millions of Americans have spoken out and organized for peace.

US Labor Against the War, Iraq Veterans Against the War, military families, and hundreds of other organizations built the peace movement against the Iraq war. This movement 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.

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. China has entered global markets for oil and gas and has relations with 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. (<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 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*.] 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 these 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. But 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.