

Editorial

Ending the War without End Obama's Afghan Dilemma

I

Taking stock of Afghan wars

When asked for his motto, Karl Marx said 'doubt everything'. Never was this better advice than in the case of official views about the war in Iraq. Even more is this true in the case of hostilities in Afghanistan.

What is not in doubt is that the cost of operations in Afghanistan continues to mount, and the casualties relentlessly levy their toll. More dubious are the apologies for this war. A whole group of the critics of the war in Iraq have sought a bolthole from the reproach that they have lacked patriotic ardour by aggressively arguing that too much mayhem in Iraq has made more difficult what they now claim to be the more necessary war in Afghanistan. Notable among these people is, apparently, Barack Obama, whose views we must consider later.¹

Initially, the conflict between the United States and the Taliban Government was directed towards the destruction of Al Qaeda, and the Taliban were led to think that maybe they could be spared if they gave up Osama Bin Laden and surrendered his men for punishment. Hostilities were not, in the beginning, mainly pursued by American boots on the ground, but by extensive bribery and the deployment of remorseless air power. The bribery was shrewdly directed towards the warlords along the northern border of the country. Some of these people, but by no means all, were simply bandits and the operation depended on the passive engagement and air bases of Central Asian Republics from the former Soviet Union. At that time the Russians looked kindly on the American War on Terror, although their ardour may have been somewhat cooled by subsequent United States depredations and subversions in the territories of the 'near abroad'. Thus, some of America's cash-conscious Afghan allies became a wasting asset, and it is a little early to evaluate the significance of renewed agreements on the use of the airbase in Uzbekistan.²

As the post 9/11 Afghan war opened up, United States special operations provided a few hundred soldiers, along with a number of CIA operatives who were more or less familiar with the terrain, having previously nurtured and then sustained the forces of Osama Bin Laden. A vast resource in air power was the most material help given to the formerly Russian and Iranian sponsored warlord forces who finally lanced the Taliban boil. But they did this by relying on their ability to call down American air strikes which were most effective against the cities. This rather firmly persuaded the Taliban to withdraw from cities and targetable emplacements and repair to the countryside.

We are reminded of the story of Brer Rabbit, who was captured by Brer Fox, and threatened with brutal punishment. 'Do not' said Brer Rabbit, 'whatever you do, put me into the briar patch, Brer Fox. Anything but the briar patch.' Not

unnaturally, Brer Fox, like the Americans, immediately threw Brer Rabbit, just like the Taliban, into the briar patch. 'Born and bred in the briar patch', said the Taliban, as they withdrew and readied themselves for a renaissance.

In the event, Al Qaeda was disrupted but not destroyed. American military deployment did much to revive and extend it. The Taliban, in contrast, maintained much if not most of their military capacity. The newly elected Government of Afghanistan, headed by Hamid Karzai, was advertised as expected to defeat the Taliban in due course, and it was to help it that 50,000 troops were subsequently despatched by various Nato members to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, these proved inadequate to contain the Taliban forces, while the Americans themselves deployed enough soldiers to hold major cities and, from time to time, mount forays which could hinder the Taliban in the countryside, whilst widely alienating the surrounding population.

In their previous Afghan war, the Russians had been defeated, having deployed 300,000 troops. The Russians also sponsored a number of social policies which won them a degree of actual support in Afghan cities, so that it would be interesting to know how the attendance of girls in schools compares then with now. The combined forces of Nato today muster one-sixth of the numbers engaged in the Soviet forces, but they are likely to be less effective. Their Commanders have scabbled and bickered all around Afghanistan, and the much-vaunted solidarity of that beleaguered alliance has been severely tested. Some have lined up for combatant duties, providing at the same time a photogenic role for junior members of the British Royal Household. Others appear to have volunteered mainly for parading or other forms of display. Acrimony between the different camps knows no bounds, and the Canadians have announced that they will be off out of it if their allies do not shoulder greater burdens. All the while, the Taliban insurgency has been improving its range and performance. Across the border, in Pakistan, severe doubts arise about the commitment of Mr. Musharraf's allied forces, and even about the President's survival, whilst Taliban sympathisers range widely across his country. To be fair, it is pretty clear that from the beginning the Americans had no desire to reconstruct, or do anything very much, with Afghanistan. They needed to protect the Karzai Government, which has been universally described as the local government of Kabul. This was necessary to confer legitimacy on the foreign forces which sustained it, and to counter Al Qaeda, supposed to be holed up in Pakistan, perhaps more than to hamper the Taliban's efforts in Afghanistan. But it was seen for what it was: an outpost, an imperial token, rather than an effective alternative to the rural anarchy which the Americans, like all their predecessors, had decided was, in principle, completely ungovernable.

So what are all those troops engaged to do? They cannot modify the real situation on the ground in Afghanistan. If they don't try, they won't be disappointed, and modern Generals tend to avoid disappointment wherever possible. It has been argued that Afghanistan found a role for Nato, to maintain its cohesion. That cohesion is perhaps more doubtful now than it was before so many foreigners voyaged to Central Asia.

II

Opium wars

The first excuse for renewing the offensive in Afghanistan is that it is necessary to put an end to the opium trade. After the overthrow of the Taliban, this grew by leaps and bounds under the protection of the victorious warlords. Previously, it had been outlawed by the Taliban from the year 2000. Before that, three-quarters of the opium poppies in the world grew in Afghanistan, but a decree of July 27th 2000 forbade their cultivation. This took instant effect, and from 12,600 acres at the time of its promulgation, the area under poppies shrank to seventeen within six months. No poppies were allowed under the Taliban.

The warlords, however, put paid to that regime. Free enterprise has seen opium flourish, from 75 per cent of world production before the Taliban decree, to 87 per cent in 2005, and 90 per cent in 2006. In the heady days of Empire, Queen Victoria's brave men could tackle this problem by launching a full-scale war on China to persuade the Chinese to abrogate their prohibition of the drug, and re-open the market. Today, the Chinese might prove unreasonably obdurate on this matter.

It has been suggested that the production of opium might cease to be a problem if it were all sold to approved customers among the allies. How many poppies could the National Health Services usefully use? Until now, this welfare solution for the farmers of Helmand has not gathered influential support among the Governments whose forces are embattled there. Opium output grows remorselessly, but the American experiments with lethal sprays have to be applied extremely judiciously for fear of antagonising Afghan hearts and minds.

The extinction of the Taliban is an even more elusive goal than is the uprooting of all those poppies. The insurgents continue to prosper, and the longer they do so, the less likely are the Nato allies to prevail. Michael McConnell, the Director of National Intelligence in the USA, reported at the end of February 2008 that President Karzai's forces control less than one-third of the country, while the Taliban holds sway over ten or eleven per cent of it. The rest is held locally, often by warlords. The undoubted resilience of Taliban forces stems at least in part from the fact that they are fighting in their own country, and they do not know where else to go. But their occupiers may well be thanking their lucky stars that Afghanistan is not their own country, and looking forward quite avidly to the prospect of going home. British soldiers used to have an anthem which accurately expressed their view of such matters: 'we're here because we're here because we're here', they sang.

III

What do you get for your money when you buy warlords?

Meantime, not only body bags, but bills continue to arrive to the distress of all the allies. The bills of the Americans have now become acutely difficult to sustain. Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize winning economist, has completed a painstaking enquiry into the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.³ At the moment, these run to \$16 billion for the Americans alone every month, over and above their regular defence expenditure. The cumulative cost, to America alone, is \$3 trillion.

Needless to say this staggering sum was not imagined anywhere at the time that hostilities commenced.

At the beginning, one could buy a substantial phalanx of warlords for a pittance, and the CIA normally disposed of a good deal more than a pittance. The heavy ordinance that could be called in for air raids was expensive, but it had been stored up for precisely such an eventuality as this. The British commitments added a considerable volume of rhetoric, and what passes for moral support.

One of the warlords in Afghanistan who might have been able to demand something more than a pittance from the American dispensers of funds was Abdul Rashid Dostum, who probably still holds the title of General, and Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Afghan National Army. Not all of his forces believe that this title reflects reality. Many of his supporters regard it as more than a little honorific. What is certainly true, however, is that he is recognised as a main leader of the Uzbek community in Afghanistan.

His career has been somewhat colourful, and he has participated, on various

Where is all the money going?

As I sit here in Afghanistan on my third 'Combat' deployment, I ask myself one question; where is all of the money going? I did a combat deployment at the beginning of 2003 on the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom for 'Shock and Awe'. I watched the planes I worked on take off the pointy end of the ship armed to the teeth with Mavericks, JDAMs, GBUs, AMRAAMs, Sparrows, HARMS, and Sidewinders to take out strategic targets as well as provide close air support in Northern Iraq for the 101st Airborne, and the 173rd Armored Brigade. It was pretty amazing, granted at the time I supported the war in Iraq, due to ignorance on my part. For the summer of 2006, I sat in Al Asad, Iraq, and I watched the planes I currently work on, take off into the desert sky, and support the troop convoys all over the roads in Central Iraq by tactically jamming improvised explosive device signals. Now, currently, I watch those same planes take off into the frozen Afghani night sky to do a 'new' mission, one that has yet to be unclassified. Being in the Naval Aviation, you expect to do your deployments on an Aircraft Carrier, not as a 'Dirt Sailor', but who cares, I'm here, trying to do my job the best I can. Back to my point, where's all the money going? In October 2001, the President said something along the lines of 'We're gonna get the guy who did this (bin Laden)'. Well, he was in Afghanistan, and apparently we weren't fast enough, and he got away, so we needed a new war to 'win'. So we invaded Iraq, under false pretences, and have yet to 'win' that one. If Osama bin Laden is such a bad motherfucker, why do we only have 27,000 troops in Afghanistan looking for him, and 130,000+ troops in Iraq staving off a civil war? Living arrangements on a ship are living arrangements on a ship, they don't change from ship to ship, it is the same damn 'coffin'. Ship life is ship life, it never changes, Groundhog Day takes on a new meaning when you are floating for 6 months. In Iraq, I had it pretty sweet compared to boat life. In each 'can', there were two sailors, furniture, an air conditioner (a must, it was 125 every day), and huge concrete barriers

sides, in almost all of the myriad conflicts which have torn his country asunder. Since 1970, when he got a job in the nationalised gas refinery in Sheberghan, he has served in a variety of military forces. He joined up with the Afghan army in 1978, and fought the Mujahideen throughout the next decade. In 1992 he joined forces with Ahmad Shah Masoud of the Northern Alliance, to fight against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In 1996 the Taliban took Kabul, so that Dostum was driven in retreat to Mazar-i-Sharif.

The following year his lieutenant, General Abdul Malik, defected to the Taliban, and Dostum withdrew from the battle to seek refuge in Turkey. Soon afterwards Malik changed his allegiances again, and was able to hand over thousands of Taliban, including many juveniles, to their enemies, who slaughtered between six and eight thousand of them. The Taliban rallied and subjugated Malik's group, and he took refuge in Washington before withdrawing to Iran.

Dostum, for his part, waited for the call, and in April 2001, it came when Massoud invited him to open up a Western front against the Taliban. So it was that

around our camp to protect us from indirect fire (which we received often). Our BX/PX was like a damn Wal-Mart, aisle upon aisle of EVERYTHING you could possibly need in a combat OR to live a tolerable life. Our hangar was a huge Hardened Aircraft Shelter, a relic of the Saddam Era, but a good facility nonetheless. We had to team up with the Seabees to build it up to our standards, but we were provided everything we needed in minimal time. Here in Afghanistan, it is quite a different story. My living quarters are pathetic. It's a particleboard hut, with seven other dudes, some of us only separated by sheets. No room is the same, and we have only two heaters per hut (that aren't always working). Oh yeah, it has yet to get above 40 degrees F since I've been here. These particleboard houses have been fire tested by the Army, and the average time for one to be FULLY engulfed in flames is 3 minutes, 30 seconds. Rather unsettling considering mine is 45 feet from the perimeter fence. Our BX/PX is 'sufficient' at best. It has a bare minimum of stuff you don't need, and they sell the same crap they give away at the DFAC, wtf? Our 'hangar' if you can call it that, is like a big circus tent. They call it a 'clamshell', probably because it opens like a clam, but it is the stupidest thing ever. If it were to take a direct hit from an rocket propelled grenade it would melt in no time flat. EVERYTHING on this base in Afghanistan is either made out of plywood, or old shipping containers. Everything in Iraq was all nice and either brand new or refurbished. If Osama is such a bad motherfucker, and we want his head, why don't we pour some money into Afghanistan instead of into Iraq? Why don't we utilize the greatest fighting force on the planet to catch guys who are actually the 'bad guys', instead of using them for the benefit of a small group of people and their personal interests? If you ask me, the priorities in this region are all fucked up, and something needs to change.

AME1(AW) James S. Huetteman
US Navy, Deployed.

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he found himself embattled alongside the American invading forces in spite of the fact that the CIA nourished considerable distrust for him. The American forces were led by Mike Spann, the first casualty from the United States to be killed in that war, alongside one hundred and twenty Afghans and most of the foreign forces who accompanied him.

In November 2002 unnamed witnesses told Jamie Doran, a former BBC television producer, the story of some thousands of Taliban prisoners who surrendered to Dostum's forces after the siege of Kunduz (see *Spokesman 77*). Three thousand of the prisoners were forced into sealed containers and loaded on to trucks, allegedly for transport to the prison at Sheberghan. Suffocating, the prisoners began to cry out for air. Dostum's soldiers fired into the trucks, killing many of those inside them. The rest underwent a long slow trek by road, without water and deprived of fresh air. The death toll was horrific. Doran's film was contested by witnesses who claimed that it was untrue.

Dostum established a Northern zone of Afghanistan, against the wishes of Hamid Karzai, now the interim President. It was after that, on May 20th 2003, that he assumed the title of Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Afghan Armed Forces. Armed conflict soon broke out in the North, between Dostum and the Tajik General Ustad Atta Mohammed Noor. This required intensive efforts by the American led coalition and the Nato forces to establish an uneasy and truculent *modus vivendi*.

On February 2nd 2008, some fifty members of the Dostum forces attacked the home of Akbar Bai, who had challenged the rule of the General. Bai was beaten up and taken prisoner, as was his son and a bodyguard. He was liberated by Afghan police who arrested Dostum, surrounding his house. The Afghan Attorney General sought to bring charges against Dostum, accusing him of kidnapping, assault, and breaking and entering.

From his hospital bed, where he has been nursed for 'serious injuries', Mr. Bai has levelled a formal complaint that the General 'has committed a crime and must be punished if there is law and democracy in this country. This is on top of many other crimes he has committed'.

Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabat was reported as saying that:

'The case is that someone enters someone else's house in the middle of Kabul city 500 metres from the presidential palace, beats the people in that house, kidnaps them and abuses them. If the law is not implemented against such a person, it means there is no law at all. If General Dostum knew there was the certainty of the law being implemented, he would not dare to have done it.'⁴

General Dostum is reported as having retired to his base at Sheberghan in the North. His retainers are being rearmed, and his supporters hold daily demonstrations threatening an uprising if the arrest warrant against him is not revoked and if his official powers are not restored. Nato's Northern forces may need more than their diplomatic skills to sort out the problems which are maturing at Sheberghan.

IV**First time tragedy, second time farce:
Britain goes East of Suez again**

The United Kingdom styled its intervention in Afghanistan as Operation Veritas, which had four objectives: to deny Al Qaeda its base in Afghanistan; to deny them any alternative bases; to attack them internationally; and to support others who were pursuing similar efforts.

It was in October 2001 that the Americans launched Operation Enduring Freedom, with the British in support. Submarines from the Royal Navy fired Tomahawk missiles at targets which they assured us included Taliban and Al Qaeda capabilities. The RAF reconnoitred in support of such targeting, and provided refuelling capacities to American strike aircraft. Diego Garcia, the 'British' island leased out to the Americans as a deniable base, flew as many missions as were necessary, while others dropped down from Uzbekistan and adjacent territories. British troops finally arrived in Afghanistan to secure the airfield at Bagram in November 2001. One thousand seven hundred British Marines continued to be deployed after this operation, destroying bunkers and caves, and offering humanitarian assistance to villages which had formerly been under the control of the Taliban. This commitment came to an end in July 2002.

After December 2001, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 mobilised sixteen member-states into a military mission to secure the Afghan Transitional Authority in Kabul and police its surrounding neighbourhoods. Britain contributed the brigade headquarters and a battalion of infantrymen. 'Our contribution initially peaked at 2,100 troops, later decreasing to around three hundred personnel after the transfer of the leadership of the UN forces to Turkey in the summer of 2002.'⁵ The mission of these UN forces, including the British, was to train non-commissioned officers for the Afghan National Army. The British also set up a 'Sandhurst' style amenity in Kabul, and operational liaison teams in Helmand.

In 2003, Nato took over the responsibilities that had previously been discharged by the United Nations under Security Council Resolution 1510. The Rapid Reaction Force under these auspices engaged about a thousand British troops. The following year six Harrier jets were deployed to Kandahar to help these forces. Staged Nato expansion, aimed at 'extending the writ of the Kabul Government', began during the presidential elections of October 2004.

By the end of July 2006 the third of these stages was entered, taking the Nato forces into Southern Afghanistan, where eight member-states are contributing some ten thousand troops. The main forces come from the UK, the United States, Canada and The Netherlands, with additional support from Denmark, Estonia, Australia and Romania.

A fourth stage of this expansion, in October 2006, extended the reach of the UN forces' deployment over the whole territory of Afghanistan for the first time. It also sharpened the conflict between different members of Nato, who were deployed under different regimes of engagement, reflecting their national jurisdictions and specific rules of engagement. The expenditure entailed in these deployments is not

inconsiderable. But the tally of American costs is evidently much larger. This is augmented by the propensity of American funds to evaporate, or 'fall between the cracks at the Department of Defence'. For ten years now this has resoundingly defeated the official auditors, who have been unable to approve a single annual audit. There was a famous case in which \$8.8 billion of development funding, the responsibility of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, simply went absent without leave. It has never been recovered. The principles of free enterprise have been widely applied in occupied Iraq to say nothing of Afghanistan, and nowhere more evidently than among the occupiers themselves.

British rules might be more stringent. Certainly they used to be. Denis Healey, reporting on his efforts to annul military commitments East of Suez, describes a grand tour which he made of the principal assets in the Gulf States. One famous dignitary, let him be discreetly veiled as the Akond of Swat, generously decorated all Healey's advisory team with elegant wristwatches, reserving for their leader a magnificent gold Rolex of great solidity and weight. Upon returning home, the appropriate Civil Service gauleiters examined all this booty, and graciously announced that all the small fry could keep their modest watches, but that the Minister must surrender his indecently large gold bauble to the State. Healey ruefully reports in his Memoirs that the next time that he saw this precious object was in the Cabinet Room, where it was gracing the wrist of Harold Wilson. But we must suppose that it is the thought that counts.

Be that as it may, a substantial proportion of the American budgetary effort must be accounted for in various forms of corruption, which is not likely to be so true of British expenditure. There is, of course, corruption and corruption. A mercenary employed as a security guard in Iraq is paid \$400,000 a year: while an ordinary American soldier is estimated to receive about \$40,000. Perhaps matters are made worse by the fact that the American Government steps into the breach vacated by insurance companies, to cover its mercenaries, and to pay death and injury benefits over and above that cover. A kind of Gresham's law takes effect, ensuring that recruits are very hard to find for the American army, since any with lingering ambitions in that direction would be foolish to avoid the lure of the mercenaries, thus marrying the call of patriotism to that of free market propriety.

Stiglitz's calculations have explored these niceties, and persuaded him that the minimum cost of America's wars in these theatres has run at \$2 trillion, while the more likely actual cost has run at \$3 trillion. The cost for all the other allies and partners in the various coalitions is estimated at as much again, but obviously this is only a guess. What is not a guess is Stiglitz's computation of the alternative uses of even \$1 trillion worth of expenditure: health care for 530 million children, or the construction of eight million houses.

Aid for Africa has recently been a fashionable cause. The Americans are spending \$5 billion a year on this cause, or, as Stiglitz points out, roughly ten days fighting, 'so you get a new metric of thinking about everything'.

For how long can this insane activity be continued? None of this military waste has been funded by direct taxation. All bills were paid by borrowing. The

patrimony of future generations, even in the remarkable economy of the United States, will thus ensure a continuing bondage of debt down the ages. Who can take the pen and cross off these mighty obligations? How can wars of these dimensions be written off? The dead, both combatant, and non-combatant victims, are a standing and continuing reproach to all of us. But age will in fact wither memories, and States will forget those heroes. However, the debts are a reproach that will not be allowed to go away while the rule of money, raw red in tooth and claw, continues to hold its terroristic sway.

The rules of financial prudence, alas, do not normally apply to wars. Once the bloodlust is on them, statesmen lose any knowledge they may once have had of the laws of arithmetic. A paradigm case of this forgetfulness can be found in the British Government, parsimonious in the extreme when it concerns elderly pensioners or juvenile tots.

Currently the British Royal Navy is mired in a severe dilemma about procurement. Conservative Governments had been cutting the resources for the Navy as long ago as 1982, and this was the subject of considerable debate during the early days of the Falklands War. Cutbacks were arrested, but resumed when the war was safely over and the Cold War was in its declining years. Major cuts took place from 1991, and warships are now being retired quite remorselessly, even though their replacement has been intermittent and sluggish. The result is that a surge in procurement is on the cards, slumps and evil economic weather probably notwithstanding.

The biggest ships involved are two aircraft carriers, the bare shells of which are expected to cost £3.6 billion, without allowing for the planes they are supposed to deploy, which will be purchased, no doubt at a considerable price, from the United States. They will be F-35 Lightning Two Joint Strike Fighters. An alliance like this one must be deemed a considerable asset, at any rate for someone. Ranged behind the carriers is the nuclear-powered attack submarine, already £1 billion over budget, and four years behind schedule. Then there is the Type 45 Daring Guided Missile Destroyer programme, the leading ship of which will cost £1 billion, and the programme for which is already £1 billion over budget and two and a half years behind schedule.

What are all these attack forces for? Against whom are they directed? Long ago, when Denis Healey was sent a-voyaging, a British Labour Government ended its commitment to police the world East of Suez. Then it was allegedly being policed in the British interest, although careful assessments revealed that the Empire was costing more than it was yielding in dividends. But today's Empire does not belong to the British, and does not pay any dividends to the British Exchequer.

Hard-pressed social services need the new East of Suez policy like they need a hole in the head. In fact, they will be very lucky if a hole in the head is all they get from this lunatic commitment.

Some of this Naval rubbish will undoubtedly be acquired. But since cuts will be inevitable, it will all cost over the odds. The economies of scale, which reduce the costs of the second and subsequent units progressively, will not be available. All these loud announcements about the impending modernisation of Naval forces

are supposed to indicate a degree of Governmental priority. Unfortunately, there is no priority whatever for rational analysis of foreign policy objectives or even of the costs and benefits of military decisions.

The Afghan chaos is currently in danger of spilling into Pakistan. Already the forces of the Taliban operate across the frontier of the two countries to their considerable advantage. American Generals regret this fact, and show themselves quite open to the idea that frontiers are imaginary lines. It is not only Generals who think like this. This understanding impacted on South Waziristan in March 2008 when ““three bombs ... dropped by American aircraft killed nine people and wounded nine others,” a Pakistani security official said’. This was the third raid on Pakistan in less than three months.⁶

We feature below an important declaration on foreign policy by Senator Barack Obama, which ought to ring alarm bells in London. The alarm bells already rang at the beginning of March 2008, with the resignation of Admiral William J. Fallon, Commander of Centcom, the American Central Command. Informed commentators tell us that this resignation was either a protest, or a dismissal. In what respect was Fallon deemed to have failed? He cannot easily be accused of failure, when the regime in Washington is trumpeting the success of the recent surge in Iraq.

We have documented some part of the astonishing shambles in Afghanistan, which is ripening into a grisly farce. Undoubtedly that shambles is underpinned and reinforced by the Pakistan dimension. Just as the insurgency rolls back and forth across the frontier, so its consequences destabilise what passes for political authority in Pakistan itself.

This is the context in which a military surge is being proposed for the American forces in Afghanistan. If such a surge does go where the action appears to take it, randomly traversing the boundaries, a sinister dimension affects Gordon Brown’s new East of Suez policy. For him, Pakistan is not simply a distant country, with exotic customs. He has got Pakistan at home, as well. East of Suez can all too easily mean mayhem in the Home Counties.

V

USA: New deal or no deal?

Barack Obama has aroused much admiration among a new generation of Americans, to say nothing of his influence abroad. He is perceived by many as an anti-establishment figure, and nobody likes the American Establishment. His criticism of the war in Iraq has won him many friends. But the Afghan turmoil is no more worthy of support than is the bloodbath in Iraq. It is not going anywhere, and even if it were, it would encompass many wrongs. How can we account for Obama’s apparent ambivalence? Does he believe that the Taliban bore direct responsibility for 9/11? This is a doubtful proposition, since Al Qaeda had its own chains of influence and command. But even if it were true, how would condign punishment of Afghan peasants redress the undoubted wrongs inflicted in New York?

Barack Obama numbers among his foreign policy advisors none other than

Zbigniew Brzezinski, to whom we have made reference before. His version of geopolitical realities has chilled us to the marrow more than once. How far has he fixed his claws into this young hopeful, who might yet be President?

We should surely recall Brzezinski's interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Jan 15-21, 1998):

Q: The former director of the CIA, Robert Gates, stated in his memoirs [*'From the Shadows'*], that American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahideen in Afghanistan six months before the Soviet intervention. In this period you were the national security adviser to President Carter. You therefore played a role in this affair. Is that correct?

Brzezinski: Yes. According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the President in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.

Q: Despite this risk, you were an advocate of this covert action. But perhaps you yourself desired this Soviet entry into war and looked to provoke it?

Brzezinski: It isn't quite that. We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.

Q: When the Soviets justified their intervention by asserting that they intended to fight against a secret involvement of the United States in Afghanistan, people didn't believe them. However, there was a basis of truth. You don't regret anything today?

Brzezinski: Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: we now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the break-up of the Soviet empire.⁷

Q: And neither do you regret having supported the Islamic [integrisme], having given arms and advice to future terrorists?

Brzezinski: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

Q: Some stirred-up Moslems? But it has been said and repeated: Islamic fundamentalism represents a world menace today.

Brzezinski: Nonsense! It is said that the West had a global policy in regard to Islam. That is stupid. There isn't a global Islam. Look at Islam in a rational manner and without demagoguery or emotion. It is the leading religion of the world with 1.5 billion followers. But what is there in common among Saudi Arabian fundamentalism, moderate Morocco, Pakistan militarism, Egyptian pro-Western or Central Asian secularism? Nothing more than what unites the Christian countries.'

We may not be alone in suggesting that the advice of Zbigniew Brzezinski comes from a poisoned chalice. Those who can influence the new President might be well-advised to proceed with caution. As he candidly admits, Zbig is not much interested in the fate of Afghanistan itself, but he is likely to be an assiduous promoter of the Second Cold War, already vigorously maturing with the enlargement of Nato and related policies of nuclear deployment around Russia. Why is he so very critical of the Iraq war? Could it be that he fears America is losing sight of his main enemy?

Ken Coates

Notes

1 See below, pages 15 to 25.

2 Karshi-Khanabad airbase is among the biggest in the former Soviet Union, and serviced the Soviet forces during their Afghan war from 1979-1989. The Americans leased this facility for similar purposes during its main offensive against the Taliban. But quarrels about the lamentable human rights record of the Uzbek Government, and fears of the surge of American-backed Rose and Orange revolutions, persuaded the Uzbek Government to throw out the American forces in 2005. If it is true that Nato is about to be allowed back into Karshi-Khanabad, we may expect a boost to the hyperactivity of Nato forces. This is likely to give rise to fractious responses among the less fanatical of America's allies.

3 Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes: *The Three Trillion Dollar War*, Allen Lane, £20.

4 *The Independent*, 11 March 2008.

5 Ministry of Defence Factsheet, 'Operations in Afghanistan: Background Briefing 1 – The background to UK military involvement in Afghanistan'.

6 *New York Times*, 17 March 2008.

7 A new memoir on the work of the CIA, by a sometime official, Frank Wisner, recalls the young Brzezinski's appearance as a disrupter of the Vienna Youth Festival in 1959: 'Having sneaked into the Soviet encampment, Zbigniew Brzezinski (the son of a Polish diplomat) walked openly among its Russian residents deliberately bumping into them and saying in Russian, with a heavy Polish accent, "Out of my way, Russian pig!" in a deliberate attempt to stir ill-feeling between the Russian and Polish contingents.' The CIA's techniques became more sophisticated, but Mr Brzezinski apparently retains his antipathy for 'Russian pigs', even if, today, they are more likely to be 'capitalist pigs', than communist ones. Source: Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America*, pp145-146, Harvard University Press.