

The West Runs Away



THE PEOPLE OF AFGHANISTAN have been deserted, by the United States and Britain. British and American troops are scrambling to get their citizens out before the Taliban close in on Kabul. It's not as spectacular as the fall of Saigon in 1975 with helicopters being hurled from warships into the South China Sea, but it's certainly as grim. Provincial capitals are falling to the Taliban like nine-pins, as well-equipped government troops, with extensive American air support, fall back in disarray from the advance of the Islamist forces.

Government soldiers evidently lack the belief and confidence that they can win, given the way that the Americans have played fast and loose with their lives, whilst continuing to negotiate with the Islamists. We must also take into account the extensive corruption in the Afghan Army, where senior officers are pocketing the pay of non-existent soldiers, and where there are numerous points of social and familial contact

between the personnel of the Army and the Taliban; contacts which undermine the resistance of soldiers to the threats and blandishments of the Islamist 'enemy'.

The American-led invasion of the country twenty years ago, was prompted by the preparedness of the Taliban regime to give support and succour to the perpetrators of the attacks on Manhattan and the Pentagon. Ostensibly, it was a punitive raid designed to winkle out and kill the architects of 9/11.

The audacity of Al-Qaeda's action against Washington and New York, planned and executed by Osama Bin Laden, the guest of Afghanistan's government, stunned the American public and the wider world. It was the first military engagement with foreign forces to involve the mainland of the United States directly since the War of 1812, and was undoubtedly an act of war by Al-Qaeda, supported by the Taliban.

It prompted the American-led invasion in 2001 and rapidly brought about the collapse of the Islamist state in Kabul. It squeezed Taliban forces into small corners of more or less inaccessible mountainous redoubts in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. The war did not end, it simply simmered on, shifting back and forth, killing hundreds of thousands of Afghans, 454 British soldiers, 2,312 American fighters, and more than 120,000 Afghan government soldiers and police. These figures do not, of course, include those maimed and traumatised on all sides, or the numerous suicides amongst soldiers and civilians alike. Nor do they include the years of misery, ill-health, homelessness, and deaths suffered by literally millions of refugees.

The twenty years of the NATO war, followed the Soviet invasion of 1979, which entangled Moscow's forces in Afghanistan's civil wars until 1989; wars which continued to rage well-after the Red Army had fled the field. This means that for 43 years the people of Afghanistan, and the regions of northern Pakistan which border the country, have suffered greatly as fighting has spilled over the frontier, displacing around

two million Pakistani citizens from their homes. This is a regional catastrophe of vast proportions, and its not over yet by any means.

Predictably, the American-led invasion of 2001 resulted in many on the British left opposing NATO'S actions. Within ten days of the attacks on New York and Washington the STWC (Stop-The-War-Coalition) was established by the usual suspects to fight against the entirely legitimate response of the United States and her allies in overthrowing the Islamist government in Kabul, and pursuing Al-Qaeda into the mountains. The rather baggy portmanteau term, 'Imperialism', was immediately mobilised to denounce any actions by the bourgeois democracies against an Islamist tyranny sanctioned by the Taliban against women and girls, and any men who happened to disagree with them.

Today, contradictory explanations of 'imperialist' behaviour are being canvassed in which, on the one hand, the US war in Afghanistan is said to have been highly successful at sowing chaos – a warning of the death and destruction that will be wrought against anybody who dares to raise a hand against America. At the same time, the retreat from the fight against the Taliban is said to be an "ignominious defeat". Notwithstanding the bonus of leaving the Shia Islamists of Tehran with thoroughly hostile Sunni Islamist neighbours in Kabul. [In any event Tehran would have Sunni neighbours in Afghanistan whether or not the Taliban prevail.] Despite this, it is said, by some on the British left, to be simultaneously, both a success and a defeat.

This is of a piece with a left which welcomes the assassination of Osama Bin Laden while opposing the very forces that carried it out. (Although Jeremy Corbyn, an outlier on the murder, thought the killing of Al Qaeda's leader was "tragic".) But it is hoped within all elements of the British left that we can call down a plague on both their houses – the Islamists and the Imperialists – and make clear how clean our alternative is, without spelling out in detail what the

real problems are with the failed *regime changes* in Baghdad, Tripoli, and Kabul. We hope we can paste our belief in universal values, and our hostility towards foreign invasions, over terrifying realities, and yet we always find ourselves, unaccountably, opposing the bourgeois democratic forces fighting against tyrants and obscurantist autocracies.

It is at this point that the bloody idiocy of the Western powers comes graphically into view. Refusing to pour sufficient troops in, or to fully occupy the countries they choose to invade, they put in governments stuffed full of *émigrés* who've spent years in London and Washington. Predictably these people lack all authority and are inevitably seen by great swathes of the population as 'Quislings' and placemen of the foreign occupiers.

Instead of frankly taking over all the functions of the state and focusing upon establishing the rule of law in Afghanistan, the new-colonial forces from the US, Britain, and elsewhere, decided rather like old-colonial forces, to treat with local power brokers. They have always known full-well that the Taliban were not a monolithic force, but a complex network of associations and relationships deeply embedded within religious and patriarchal communities, by marriage, friendship, and mutual commercial interests.

Absurdly the Western powers sought to establish democracy with sham elections, leaving an intrinsically robust patchwork of local potentates, warlords, and village patriarchs, fully in place. In this sense, the opening of NATO's Afghan War was a dress rehearsal for the bloody debacles in Iraq and Libya. A kind of voluntarism seems to have taken hold in Washington and London in which it was clearly thought that the organisation of elections in Kabul was going to produce the rule of law and modern civil society in Afghanistan; democratic government was to be conjured out of thin air.

This conceit was maintained despite the fact that the state in Afghanistan was, and is, extraordinarily weak, that the writ of Kabul rarely extended far beyond

the city or the principal provincial towns in a country and countryside in which essentially local relationships between local power-brokers, always took precedence over what we might call national authorities. This kind of society, was and is, held in place by the isolation of many rural areas and small towns, and the absence of good communications, which have always conferred unchallengeable authority upon regional patriarchs and their armed bands.

The Taliban could always operate within these circumstances; often by trading upon their local connections, and by supporting traditional social arrangements, venerable religious prejudices, and making it clear that the power of local patriarchs was secure with them, and nothing as foolish as democracy, modern civil society, or the emancipation of women, would be tolerated. In complete contrast, the voluntarism of the new-colonial soldiers and officials from Britain, America, and other NATO members, always represented a threat to traditional social arrangements, without offering the prospect of any kind of stable alternative.

At root in Afghanistan the Western powers are confronted by a deeply traditionalist countryside, and a mesh of small market towns and district centres in which the desire for stability, and the virtue of swift judicial decisions offered by close literal interpretations of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, is ranged against an insubstantial, incompetent, and irretrievably corrupt *émigré* government, sponsored by the foreign powers.

Thus, Western 'modernity' is sprinkled very thinly indeed over Kabul and the larger cities, and is radically undermined by Islamist sentiment and relationships, both in the government's army and police forces, and throughout urban areas – urban areas that are now falling rapidly to the Islamist armed forces of the Taliban.

Afghanistan was, and is, a desperately poor country. Human development indexes give income and other resources a value of \$2,200 per person per annum for Afghanistan, and \$48,000 per person in

Britain. These indexes are controversial, but they give a rough idea of the vast gulf between the circumstances of people in NATO countries and those of Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union built, and the United States have rebuilt much of Afghanistan's roads. However, apart from the Kabul-Kandahar highway most efforts have concentrated on roads linking the country to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. Foreign aid from Japan, India, and elsewhere has helped with infrastructure spending. The United States Army Corps of Engineers have built at least one major bridge and worked on a number of other projects. However, half the country's roads are unpaved, and 29 out of Afghanistan's 46 airports have unpaved runways.

Railways do exist. For example, the line between Herat in Afghanistan, and Khaf in Iran (225 km), was completed in December last year. There are a number of other short lines crossing into Afghanistan from neighbouring countries, but nothing that amounts to a national rail network. There are some trans-Afghanistan natural gas pipelines planned or under construction, but oil pipelines into Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been damaged and unused for decades. Despite these drawbacks 85 per cent of the population has access to telecommunications of some kind and most families have access to mobile phone services. So, there have been some improvements during the years of NATO's war and invasion, but nothing substantial enough to break the back of the underdevelopment upon which the Islamist network of patriarchs and their fighters thrives, village by village, town by town, province by province. The World Bank, which has poured billions into Afghanistan. describes the country's economy in the following terms:

Afghanistan's economy is shaped by fragility and aid dependence. The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from

agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey). Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending.

This is the report card for twenty years of British, American, and NATO occupation and military engagement in Afghanistan. The new-colonial authorities have failed to do what needed to be done. The courts and judicial services are corrupt and unfit for purpose. They have failed to create the modern social and physical infrastructure that could radically undermine the power of obscurantist traditional rulers in the relatively isolated towns and villages of the country.

Now, well over half a million people have been internally displaced – refugees in their own country. Those who have strived in Kabul and other urban centres to lift their country out of a dark past face God-knows what at the hands of the Islamist forces now pressing hard upon Kabul. Many will, no doubt, seek to flee abroad to join the three millions already in exile, but most will find themselves trapped, while Britain and the USA shepherd the remaining foreign nationals to Hamid Karzai International Airport, and out of the country. It may be that other armed factions – a revived Northern Alliance, for example – will stem the Taliban onslaught, but this will simply amount to yet another civil war.

There will be some sustained resistance around the rights of women and girls and in defence of female education. Other isolated groups will continue to put up resistance to the Islamists, but they cannot prevail without substantial help from the bourgeois democracies.

The old left slogans inspired by sentiments akin to ‘a plague on both your houses’ – *revolutionary defeatism* dressed up for the twenty-first century – amounts to no more than posturing.

As long as commercial society – capitalism – survives in the West, we have to demand that if Western powers intervene militarily against Islamists or other kinds of tyrant anywhere in the world, that they take full responsibility for their actions. We must reject any attempts by the authorities in London or Washington to camouflage ‘regime change’ as anything other than new-colonial ventures, however, temporary they purport to be. We must insist that they take full and sole charge for the countries they choose to invade by ensuring that effective state organisations and adequate economic infrastructure are rapidly built to ensure that there is a way out for the benighted populations involved, when the new-colonial occupations are brought to an end.

This would always be immensely expensive, but not nearly as expensive as soldiers killed for nothing at all – which is what the grieving relatives of our soldiers killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq must now know. The retreat from Afghanistan has brutally revealed that their sons and daughters, husbands and wives, mums and dads, were killed for nothing. The Ministry of Defence lists them all as “British fatalities: Operations in Afghanistan” in what amounts to an on-line war memorial* for the young men and women killed in an ill-thought-out, and criminally irresponsible adventure with other people’s lives. Largely, of course, with the lives of Afghans.

*<https://www.gov.uk/government/fields-of-operation/Afghanistan>.