

## **Decades of US Mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq**

By Rick Olanoff

George Santayana, born in Spain in 1862, observed that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Remember the old Rock and Roll song that includes this lyric, "Don't know much about history..."? I'm afraid that this is true in varying degrees for many Americans. And it is this lack of perspective, and this lack of historical knowledge that prevents us from speaking out and protesting in large numbers when our government commits us to wars. In this essay I am going to look at some of the history of Afghanistan and the history of Iraq to show how the US made huge mistakes in 2001 and 2003 by invading these countries. And the evidence was already available to strongly suggest that fighting these wars would only lead to disasters for the US, Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than any path to peace, prosperity, genuine allies, and a just democracy.

Afghanistan's history goes back many centuries and includes a lot of violence: assassinations and coups against governing figures. I found this Wikipedia entry interesting: In 1901 Habibullah Khan became Amir of Afghanistan. He was a secular leader who brought western medicine to his country, allowed political exiles to return, and repealed many of the harshest criminal penalties. Unfortunately, he was quickly assassinated.

On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, trying to keep the pro-Russian government in power there, and not allow the Mujahedin rebels to win. I expect that the Soviets were afraid of similar Islamic uprisings in parts of Russia, particularly those close to Afghanistan. The Russians found themselves fighting a guerilla war in a mountainous country where 90% of the people were illiterate and mainly scattered in the rugged countryside. Nine years later in 1988, the Russian government agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan, realizing that they would never win this war. (Sound familiar yet?)

There were other forces at work in Afghanistan then. According to an article in Wikipedia, the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) launched the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA. Their purpose was to harness the energy of the Afghan resistance to the Soviets and expand it into a holy war that would turn Muslim countries within the Soviet Union against the communist regime and eventually destabilize it. Over the years, through the ISI, the CIA funded and recruited almost 100,000 radical mujahedin from 40 Islamic countries as soldiers for America's proxy war. (Including one named Osama Bin Laden). The rank and file of the mujahedin were unaware that their jihad was actually being fought partly on behalf of Uncle Sam. The irony is that America was equally unaware that it was financing a future war against itself.

You might well remember that President Jimmy Carter boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Russia to protest their invasion of Afghanistan. Carter purposely did

not reveal our on-going covert participation in arming the rebels, already underway before the decision was made to boycott. Politics trumped the years of hard work and the hope of many athletes, as well as American's opportunity to form friendships at these international games.

According to Jon Krakauer's research for his book about Pat Tillman, *Where Men Win Glory*, in these 9 years between 1979 and 1988 a total of 642,000 Soviet soldiers served in Afghanistan. 470,000 (or more than 75% of them) were either wounded, debilitated by disease, strung out on heroin or killed. It is estimated that 25,000 Russians and 1 million Afghans died in this futile war.

Jon Krakauer does not seem to include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, always wide-spread in war, in his grisly tally. And PTSD haunts many veterans for decades, affecting their families and friends as well.

Furthermore, President Reagan escalated this policy, supplying the guerillas with billions of dollars of weapons, a lot of which eventually ended up in the hands of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. By 1989 the US, through these unregulated, unchecked CIA actions, was already complicit in these deaths of 1 million Afghans, 25,000 Russians, and the eventual rise to power of the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. Afghanistan then went through two civil wars, the first from 1989 to 1992. The second civil war from 1996-2001 led to the Taliban's being formed and taking over the government, brutally killing and maiming many of their fellow countrymen.

I doubt many of you remember that the US fired 75 cruise missiles into an area of Afghanistan near the Pakistan border in 1998 in an attempt to kill Osama Bin Laden and others who were expounding anti-American rhetoric. We can only assume that a large number of civilians were killed and wounded in this attack, leading some relatives of these victims to despise America's actions and want revenge.

Of course, in September of 2001 there was a massive terror attack in New York City and Washington D.C., coordinated by Al Qaeda people who at that time happened to be based in Afghanistan. 90% of Americans, almost all of whom I expect were not cognizant of Afghanistan's recent history or the CIA's role in it, supported America's invading Afghanistan in October of 2001. (Of course 15 of the 19 terrorists were Saudi and some trained in Germany and in Florida.) What the vast majority of Americans didn't grasp about our government's reaction to 9/11 was apparent to a cogent observer from India, the novelist and social critic Arundati Roy. Ms. Roy, in addition to her brilliant mind, has an excellent grasp of history, including a realistic perspective of American imperialism.

Ms. Roy wrote in 2001, shortly after 9/11, "The US government, and no doubt governments all over the world, will use the climate of war as an excuse to curtail civil liberties, deny free speech, lay off workers, harass ethnic and religious minorities, cut back on public spending and divert huge amounts of money to the defense industry. To what purpose? President Bush can no more 'rid the world of evil-doers' than he can stock it with saints. It's absurd for the US government to

even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their "factories" from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multi-nationals. " (*We now how true Ms. Roy's predictions were.*)

Ms. Roy continued, "Terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's sake, rights. Instead, when Donald Rumsfeld, the US defense secretary, was asked what he would call a victory in America's new war, he said that if he could convince the world that Americans must be allowed to continue with their way of life, he would consider it a victory." (*We now should ask, "what victory?"*)

Next Ms. Roy brilliantly explains how 9/11/01 came about. "The September 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by Bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars. The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel - backed by the US - invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousands of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists whom the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list. "

The CIA refers to this phenomenon of vengeful acts of terror as "backlash". We need to acknowledge that we continue to bring about possible revenge motives every time we accidentally or even callously bomb and kill civilians, every time we are involved or are complicit in torture, and every time we back corrupt and violent governments. And this has happened and is happening regularly in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

Here's a wonderful trivia question—Who was the only member of the House of Representatives to vote against the 2001 bill to authorize war against Afghanistan?.....It was the farsighted Black woman from California, Barbara Lee, who said this at the time. " We are not dealing with a conventional war. ...I do not want to see this spiral out of control. ....If we rush to counterattack, we run too great a risk that women, children and other non-combatants will be caught in the crossfire. Finally, we must be careful not to embark on an open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target. We cannot repeat past mistakes. "

Of course we are doing just that. Ms. Lee was recently quoted in the 11/8/10 column by Gary Younge in *The Nation*. Mr. Younge points to recent reports of our Afghanistan forces killing 8 pre-teens and teens in one incident, and two pregnant women, a teenage girl and a police commander in a second incident.

As Arundhati Roy pointed out in another essay, every Afghani civilian killed in this war adds to rather than subtracts from the grisly total from 9/11.

The history of Iraq starts in 1920 when Britain was allowed to create Iraq following WW1. Both Britain and France were given the right to take a large share of oil revenues. Iraq was put together from three separate territories: Mosul, Basra and Baghdad. Not surprisingly, these thrown together cultures did not get along and this led to mass demonstrations. And Britain's answer to this was to drop chemical weapons on the demonstrators, killing thousands of them. (Saddam Hussein might have "learned from the British" in his use of chemical weapons on the Kurdish people of Northern Iraq during his reign of terror.)

We should also remember that Iraq was the country we backed in the Iran-Iraq War, sending them money and weapons. So it seems odd that we started the Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait, a territory they had previously hoped would become part of Iraq. I have read that Iraq, saying that Kuwait was stealing its oil, was given tacit approval to invade Kuwait by an American official in Iraq.

In effect we have been continuously at war to varying degrees with Iraq since 1990, or 20 years now. According to Wikipedia, the **Iraq sanctions** were a near-total financial and trade embargo imposed by the [United Nations Security Council](#) on the nation of [Iraq](#). They began August 6, 1990, four days after [Iraq's invasion of Kuwait](#)<sup>[1]</sup> and continued until May 22, 2003, after the fall of the [Saddam Hussein](#) government in the [US-led invasion](#) earlier that year. Their stated purpose was at first to compel Iraq's military to withdraw from Kuwait, and after that to compel Iraq to pay reparations, and to disclose and eliminate any [weapons of mass destruction](#).

The sanctions banned all [trade](#) and financial resources except for medicine and "in humanitarian circumstances" foodstuffs.<sup>[2]</sup> They were perhaps the toughest, most comprehensive economic sanctions in human history. The controversy over the increased child-and-infant mortality, poverty, and suffering of the Iraqi people during sanctions led two senior UN representatives in Iraq to resign in protest.<sup>[5][6]</sup> Estimates of civilian deaths during from the sanctions range from 170,000 to over 1.5 million, most of them children.<sup>[10]</sup> If we had been better informed, Americans could have taken to the streets and said en masse, "Not in my name."

My wife Sue and I, along with our dogs, (puppies for peace according to our sign) were part of a local march and rally to try and prevent the Gulf War from starting in 1991.

The US war machine prevailed, and in a short span of just a few months were able to kill

200,000 Iraqis and free Kuwait. Yet America too suffered from this war, including the financial costs, the soldiers who ended up with Gulf War Syndrome, and those who were wounded, killed or developed PTSD. This war also showed some that we were quite willing to kill large numbers of Muslims to achieve our goals.

After 13 years of extremely punitive sanctions against Iraq, the administration of George W. Bush, whose father had ordered the start of the Gulf War, decided to declare all out war against Iraq. There were voices speaking out against this war, reminding us that Iraq had no connections to Al Qaeda. Indeed the relationship between Saddam Hussein's government and Al Qaeda was a hostile one, and it was only after we started our pre-emptive war that Al Qaeda in Iraq was created. And there were those including Chief UN Weapons Inspector and eventual Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed El Baradei who correctly told us that Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction anymore.

There was also a wonderfully powerful and ironic Doonesbury cartoon strip by Gary Trudeau featuring George W. Bush, represented by a drawing of a talking war helmet, and his father, George H.W. Bush. The elder Bush asks W., "Have you read my book on the Gulf War?" W. replies that reading is (his wife) Laura's thing. The first Bush then says how he explained in the book that invading Baghdad would lead to chaos, and a war with no viable exit strategy. W. answers, "Dad, you are either with me or against me." We now know that neither Iraq's history nor the true situation of Iraq in 2003, a country suffering greatly from the horrendous violence of Saddam Hussein's government and the tragic U.N. sanctions, were taken into consideration before this war was started. Nor were any dissenting voices listened to—if only they had prevailed. Instead, those in the Bush Administration who wanted to attack Iraq even before 9/11 prevailed.

Nine years after America's invasion of Afghanistan and seven years after our initiating war on Iraq, all three countries have suffered great losses: 4.5 million Iraqi's have become refugees, and Iraqis have been killed, maimed and tortured at the hands of the US forces and of other Iraqis. Civilian deaths mount by the tens and hundreds of thousands

as the years of war drag on. We have triggered a civil war between traditionally hostile groups within Iraq that threatens to explode at any time. Iraqi politicians can not agree on a government, corruption is rife, unemployment is quite high, and the infrastructure is still largely in ruins. Even though the US is no longer taking an active role in fighting, Iraqis are still dying from the violence between factions inside their war-torn country.

Sadly the situation is remarkably similar in Afghanistan: There are millions of internal and external refugees as well, countless civilian deaths from NATO (mainly US) and Taliban forces, a very corrupt US backed government, lack of jobs, and a very limited infrastructure. The Taliban, driven from power early in the war, are still so powerful that the Karzai government realizes it needs to negotiate with them. There is no true victory for the Afghani people either.

And very sadly, America is suffering in many ways due to this endless war: High unemployment, record debt, lack of money for our own infrastructure—We are spending *trillions* on this war including direct costs and the long-term costs of caring for veterans and active duty soldiers, wounded in body and/or mind.

Dr. Edward Tick is a psychiatrist who has worked for decades to heal veterans, particularly those with PTSD. In an article he wrote for the Utne Reader a few years ago, Dr. Tick stated that the number of suicides of Vietnam era veterans was then about 100,000, far exceeding the 58,000 combat deaths. He went on to say that on a given night there were 150,000 homeless veterans of that war. Dr. Tick estimated that of the 2.5 million veterans who served in this war, 1.5 million had some degree of PTSD.

In the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, American deaths *in combat* now exceed 5,000. This figure does not count, “non-combat deaths” nor suicides. Military suicides are now at record levels. The military is also now talking about a PTSD and other mental health problem rate of about 30%, but based on Dr. Tick’s work and on the fact that the military brass do not want to designate too many people as having PTSD, I see this as a grossly underestimated figure. Additionally, the number of veterans and active duty soldiers with PTSD will only increase with time and for some, continued deployments. So, too will the number of veteran and active duty suicides.

There are also numerous acts of violence against Americans committed by mentally disturbed veterans. A few years ago at Fort Bragg there were several murders and murder-suicides of family members by returned veterans. I know that this very tragic situation is playing out elsewhere in our country as well.

Are you aware that there are now more private contractors hired by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq than there are US soldiers (200,00 vs. 150,000) and that contractor deaths exceeded military deaths in the months of January-June 2010? These contractors, in essence a shadow military, are not counted as official war casualties. Additionally, when some of them kill civilians they are almost always not held accountable. The contractors too return to America with physical and mental wounds to cope with.

Now that you now some more history, you won't be fooled by the drums of war and the myths of glory and heroism that recruiters and militaries promise. Unlike the 2010 American electorate, you'll remember who staged a phony celebration in 2003 to claim "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq and how these wars were started. I expect you'd agree with the lawn sign I had that says No War, No Empire, No Occupation. You might well see war for what it is: Organized murder, and terrorism with an unlimited budget.

We could do all in our power to end these wars and prevent new ones from starting. We need to use diplomacy, not bombs and soldiers to improve our relationships with Iran, Yemen and other countries. The late Jimi Hendrix said these words of wisdom, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace." Maybe you are old enough to remember this too, "War is bad for children and other living things." Peace Now! and Peace Forever! Peace starts with you.

I strongly suggest that you read widely, think deeply about the consequences of our actions for the next 7 generations, and speak out for peace and social justice. Our nation could change course by brilliantly following the example of American mountain climber and humanitarian Greg Mortenson. Greg was lost descending in the high peaks of Afghanistan and Pakistan. When he was rescued by local people, Greg said he would return and build them a school. Since then he's been responsible for the building of many schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Imagine if this was the basis of America's foreign policy, based on sharing our knowledge, our resources and our innate human kindness.

Once we as a government and a nation, like Greg Mortenson, cross artificial boundaries of ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion, and truly get to know others as human beings, the walls tumble down, and peace is the result. Understanding and embracing other cultures and their histories is essential to this process.