

8 YEARS LATER

Larry Everest

October 7 marked the eighth year of the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, making it one of the longest wars in US history, and the end is nowhere in sight. Instead, today America and its allies are facing mounting difficulties and staring into the abyss of possible defeat.

A report by the US Commander in Afghanistan, Gen Stanley McChrystal, states "the overall situation is deteriorating" and warns of possible "failure." According to McChrystal, the insurgency is "resilient and growing," while the US and its puppet Afghan government face "a crisis of confidence among Afghans...that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents." The Taliban are now thought to be active in over 80 percent of the country, and NBC News reported they may now be stronger than they were before US forces overthrew them in October 2001.

In this context, a major debate has emerged in the White House and the ruling class. The US commanding general in Afghanistan is calling for as many as 80,000 more troops. At the same time, other ruling class forces like Vice President Biden are reported to oppose sending more troops to Afghanistan.

While the debate is out in the open, the real terms of it are not. The reality is that this debate has nothing to do with ending the war in Afghanistan. On BOTH sides, and in all shades in between, the argument is over HOW to advance US strategic interests. Any discussion of the US pulling out of Afghanistan altogether is being ruled out of order. And the results, whichever side wins out, are going to bring more misery and death to the people who live in this region of the world.

People are being told to choose between one of the two sides in this debate. But this is a "debate" over how to best project and defend the interests of the US empire. The actual interests of the people of the region, and the world (including people of America), lie completely outside those terms. There is another choice...a choice which corresponds to the interests of the vast majority of people on the planet. It is standing up to and against any further US action in that region of the world, and in that way, helping bring onto the world stage another way—a force opposed to both US expansionism and Islamic fundamentalism.

Ending the war and leaving Afghanistan is off the table, as Obama's press secretary Robert Gibbs made it clear (October 5, 2009): "The President was exceedingly clear that no part of the conversation on—no part of the conversation involved was leaving Afghanistan. That's not something that has ever been entertained... I don't think we have the option to leave."

Barack Obama has insisted on having a thorough debate within his administration over which military and political strategy the US should follow in Afghanistan. Obama has not yet announced his decision, but he has said before that Afghanistan is a war the US "must win."

The stakes for the sole super-power are extremely high in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and defeat or retreat would seriously weaken the whole US empire on a number of different levels. First, Afghanistan and Pakistan are located in the middle of Central Asia, one of the most strategically important regions in the

world. Central Asia and the Middle East together contain 80 percent of the world's oil and natural gas. With demand for energy outstripping supplies, competition for control of energy sources and the energy pipelines that criss-cross Central Asia has been heating up among the US, Russia, China and others. Whoever controls global energy supplies can exert enormous influence over the whole world economy and any country that depends on oil and natural gas.

Beyond this, dominance in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia has enormous political and military significance, and is a linchpin in the current world order with US as the sole dominator.

Any retreat or defeat in Afghanistan would weaken US global credibility- the sense that it is militarily unchallengeable. It would undermine support in the US for other wars, invasions and occupations. And it could weaken the NATO military alliance, which the US is counting on for more support, not less.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are currently focal points in the clash between US and Islamic fundamentalism.

The US occupation has not, and cannot end religious fundamentalism, or the oppression of women in Afghanistan. Instead, the US occupation is fuelling Islamic fundamentalism in general and the Taliban in particular in many ways and on many levels. This deadly dynamic between these two reactionary and historically outmoded strata continues, and continues to intensify.

Turning a blind eye to-or justifying-what the US is doing only serves to give the US more freedom to carry out these crimes and only intensifies the confrontation.

First, much as it is covered up, these Islamic fundamentalists-and the crimes they commit-have been engendered and built up by the American system itself. For example, America directly supported these forces during the 1980's when the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia organized and funded the Jihadist movement and Osama Bin Laden to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Beyond that US in its drive for profit has created a situation where millions have been uprooted from their homes and lives, and suffer daily as a result of the workings of this brutal system. In the midst of great physical and social dislocation and extreme poverty brought on by American action people turn to organized reactionary Islamic fundamentalists who claim to have a "way to fight" the forces that have made people's lives a living hell-even though Islamic fundamentalism is not any kind of positive alternative to US domination, and does not seek in any way to break the chains that enslave the people of oppressed countries within the networks of "new world order".

With regard to Afghanistan in particular, let's take a look at the last eight years. Working hand in glove with the thoroughly corrupt and reactionary US-installed regime of Hamid Karzai, the US has (to one degree or another) been pursuing a strategy of preventing a Taliban take-over, promoting economic development, training Afghan forces, and facilitating reconciliation. The results have been enormous violence inflicted on the Afghan people, including torture, imprisonment, maiming, and death, deepening impoverishment, hunger and starvation—all of which have worked to drive people into the arms of the Taliban.

And neither "side" in the current debate in the White House will change any of that.

Under Biden's "lighter footprint" option, there would be more strikes from the air, like the one that killed nearly 100 recently near Kunduz, when 500 desperately poor people surrounded two tanker trucks in hopes of getting free fuel, only to see loved ones consumed in a flaming inferno after US planes bombed the tankers. US airstrikes and the Pakistan army's offensive in northwest Pakistan have driven over three million from their homes; this too would accelerate under Biden's plan.

And what of McChrystal's counterinsurgency plan that would put tens of thousands more US troops on the ground and attempt to win over and "protect" the Afghan people? This would also accelerate the killing and brutalization of the Afghan people, it would just do it on ground level. A recent Frontline (PBS) documentary, "Obama's War," which followed a group of Marines implementing this new boots on the ground, hold territory, defeat the Taliban approach in Helmand Province, provided a glimpse into what this strategy means.

While military commanders talk about this new approach as if it were a humanitarian mission, the encounters filmed by Frontline showed an occupying military force targeting a population it considered a likely or potential enemy. US soldiers operated like police in the inner cities-stopping and frisking a group of Afghan men and warning them not to stuff anything in their shirts or try and run-that this might "look suspicious" with the obvious implication that it might lead to being killed by the USA Marine officer tries to get information from local villagers, then gets angry and warns them if they don't answer he'll think they aren't "co-operating" or they're helping the Taliban. Meanwhile firefights are going on daily. (And such suspicions can get Afghans killed or sent to Baghram and other US torture centers where over 15,000 Afghans are now locked up without any due process or basic rights.)

The actions of the brutal, corrupt and oppressive Afghan government put in power by the US-and which is like a mafia or warlord state-is also driving people toward the Taliban. This is a government headed by President Hamid Karzai-hand-picked by the US-who recently presided over an election in which nearly one-third of the ballots cast for him were fraudulent. One of Karzai's chief allies and backers is Gen Abdul Dostum, a northern warlord responsible for massacring some 2,000 prisoners of war in 2001 by stuffing them into boxcars and suffocating them to death. Dostum has kidnapped and tortured political opponents, and during the 1980s played a prominent role in assassinating revolutionary Maoists.

This is the government that Biden wants to keep in place (with more training for police and military) and that McChrystal wants to strengthen even more. Again, the humanity and lives of the Afghan people are not part of the calculations.

The truth is that the US acts to strengthen relations of exploitation and western dominance, and it imposes political structures (whether the forms are more democratic or less) that enforce those relations. This includes preserving and incorporating the traditional and feudal social and economic relations that are the basis for the profound impoverishment of the Afghan people, as well as for religious fundamentalism.

Continuing US domination of this country also means empowering reactionary warlords, religious figures, tribal chiefs, and power brokers who enforce religious fundamentalism and patriarchy. After eight years of US occupation, 87 percent of Afghan women suffer abuse in their homes, honor killings and rape are on the rise, and the vast majority of women remain enslaved in their homes- under the control of male relatives. Meanwhile, an Afghan woman dies in childbirth every 30 minutes. "The human rights situation in Afghanistan is getting worse not better," one UN official recently declared.

The US can and will bring nothing good in Afghanistan. Its actions will bring down increased suffering and misery to the Afghan people, and with every village that is bombed, with every Afghani who is tortured, Islamic fundamentalism will be fuelled. And the dynamic goes on and gets worse. □□□