

America's "Afghan Trap" Enters 10th Year

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Global Research, October 11, 2010

[RT](#) 7 October 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

When the US opened "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan following 9/11, few people questioned the decision. But today, after nine years of sacrifice, that attitude is changing.

By now, the history behind the start of the War in Afghanistan nine years ago is well-known: On the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States security apparatus was caught unawares by a massive terrorist attack that led to the death of more than 3,000 people in some of the best-protected real estate in the free world.

Indeed, the audacity of the attack was such that not a single US fighter jet was scrambled in the 1 hour and 42 minutes that it took for four hijacked commercial jets to strike the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Incidentally, in case future US history books fail to carry this heavy footnote, it must be added that not one US military officer or government official was reprimanded for what some would consider a dereliction of duty to protect American airspace from outside attack).

The blame for this unspeakable crime against humanity was immediately placed at the cave door of terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden. However, despite a mounting international manhunt made up of professional soldiers equipped with state-of-the-art hardware, Osama is still eluding the search party in the labyrinthine mountain ranges between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Osama's snake-like slipperiness makes it tempting to believe that this evil character, like some sort of Dr. No, is surrounded by a wall of computer terminals and video monitors deep in the heart of some fortified, carved-out-of-rock mountain complex. It is from here where the Islamic fundamentalist is secretly watching the world's every move, wringing his hands and laughing, especially when he releases yet another one of those frightful videos.

Now, with the Obama administration beating a slow retreat from Afghanistan, promising to be out of Dodge by July 2011, many are beginning to wonder if Osama bin Laden will really have the last laugh.

Has America fallen into the Afghan trap?

But the big question remains: how did the United States get itself so entangled in this bloody mess? After all, Washington could not have forgotten the heavy price the Soviet Union paid for mobilizing its troops against the "Graveyard of Empires," which humbled both the British and Soviet empires.

In 1998, US political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski boasted in an interview with a French

journal that the United States, in 1979, lured Soviet forces into the “Afghan trap” by supporting the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

“According to the official version of history,” Brzezinski revealed in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, “CIA aid to the Mujahedeen began during 1980...after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan [in December, 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.

Brzezinski told the US President that this aid “was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.”

The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border into Afghanistan, where they would remain for almost ten grueling years, Brzezinski wrote to President Jimmy Carter: “We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War.”

So why did the United States decide to open a war in a land that, in Brzezinski’s words, “brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.”

Lessons learned, lessons forgotten

Part of the reason for launching “Operation Enduring Freedom” (which, incidentally, was never legally sanctioned by the UN Security Council) without much concern for the long-term risks was partially due to the heady hubris the United States was suffering at the time 9/11 exploded on the scene.

It must be remembered that the US military enjoyed something of a cakewalk during George Bush I’s Gulf War in Iraq (August 2, 1990 – February 28, 1991); coalition forces declared a cease-fire just 100 hours after the ground campaign started and about six months after Kuwait was liberated. And this was after Saddam Hussein had warned that the US would face “the mother of all wars” if it dared attack.

Then there was NATO’s “surgical” bombardment of Yugoslavia (March 24, 1999 to June 11, 1999), which seemed to prove that war could be won from the sky with high-precision missiles. During the ten weeks of conflict, NATO aircraft flew over 38,000 combat missions; ground units were never activated, partially because the coalition wanted to minimize the risk of losing forces. Clearly, war had entered a whole new phase, and it looked as if the US military was unstoppable.

Next, the US military decided to move against the Taliban in Afghanistan on the charges that it was responsible for “harboring terrorists,” specifically Al-Qaeda. It is on this point that history started to catch up with the United States, as it found itself suddenly fighting against its former protégés.

During Brzezinski’s interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, he casually dismissed the risk of training and arming the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, arguing that it was far more important to defeat the Soviet Union.

When asked if he had any regrets about supporting “the Islamic [integrisme], having given arms and advice to future terrorists,’ America’s premier political strategist staunchly defended his actions.

“What is most important to the history of the world,” Brzezinski asked, “the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”

“Some stirred-up Muslims?” the interviewer questioned with surprise. “But it has been said and repeated: Islamic fundamentalism represents a world menace today.”

Judging by the present hysteria over the threat of global (Islamic) terrorism, Brzezinski’s response is nothing less than startling: “Nonsense! It is said that the West had a global policy in regard to Islam. That is stupid. There isn’t a global Islam.”

According to the Council of Foreign Affairs website, “During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan co-operated in efforts by the US Central Intelligence Agency to arm the anti-Communist Mujahideen. After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan ceased to be a priority for US strategists.” Today, many of those same individuals are taking up weapons against coalition forces in Afghanistan.

It must be admitted, however, that the United States got off to a better-than-expected start in Afghanistan: the odious Taliban was quickly routed, and Al-Qaeda’s bases were dealt a heavy blow. It seemed like another easy victory for the Western coalition was in the works. But then the United States broke the first rule of warfare in March, 2003 when it opened a second front, this time in Iraq, against the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Not only did this throw off the military momentum in Afghanistan, but it cost the United States a huge amount of international support. But this did not seem to trouble the Bush administration much. After all, real superpowers have no need for support groups. It also did not help the reputation of the western intelligence community that not a single “weapon of mass destruction” was ever discovered in Iraq. Now, every time a soldier loses his or her life in Afghanistan, the US military gets part of the blame for taking its eye off the ball, recklessly invading Iraq “for its oil” while operations in Afghanistan continue to unravel.

Since 2006, the Taliban-led insurgency has enjoyed a comeback, while suicide attacks have dealt coalition forces a deadly blow. The single worst setback for US forces came in December, 2009, when an alleged Afghan informant detonated a bomb as he was being escorted into Forward Operating Base Chapman in eastern Afghanistan, near Khost. The attack killed seven agents.

Meanwhile, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which the Afghans had turned into a devastating weapon in their war against the Soviet Army, have become the insurgency’s primary weapon of choice. In January, 2010, military experts reported that Taliban fighters had developed a new generation IED that was practically undetectable because it had no metal or electronic parts.

According to a report by the US-based Homeland Security Market research, the number of IEDs used in Afghanistan has increased by 400 per cent since 2007, while the number of troops killed by these devices rose by 400 per cent, and those wounded by 700 per cent. Clearly, IEDs are the number one cause of death among NATO troops in Afghanistan.

As of October 1, 2010, there have been 2,049 coalition deaths in Afghanistan, with US fatalities numbering 1,234, according to the independent website iCasualties. The nation with the second-highest number of fatalities is Britain, with 338.

Trying times for nation-building

In the midst of increasing fatalities, as well as Barack Obama's "surge" of 30,000 additional troops, US attempts at democratic nation-building have been patchy at best.

For example, following a series of Taliban offensives across the nation prior to August elections, the Afghan government was forced to call for an international media blackout. The call came after at least 12 people were killed in more than a dozen bomb and rocket attacks across Afghanistan.

"All domestic and international media agencies are requested to refrain from broadcasting any incident of violence during the election process," a foreign ministry statement said.

Meanwhile, perhaps the most disturbing sign to come out of Afghanistan is that US forces are being drawn further away from the main theater of operations in a desperate search of the elusive Taliban. This is prompting the United States to increase the implementation of drone missile attacks against suspected terrorist hideouts - in Pakistan.

On Thursday, in the aftermath of a US helicopter attack that killed two Pakistani soldiers, Islamabad remained undecided as to when it would re-open a key border crossing NATO uses to transport supplies to Afghanistan.

US and NATO expressed their condolences Wednesday for the September 30 attack and said American helicopters mistook the Pakistani soldiers for insurgents being pursued across the border from Afghanistan.

Despite the tensions between the United States and Pakistan, the US military continues to launch missile strikes in Pakistan, specifically in the North Waziristan tribal region, where several militant groups are based.

On Thursday, US drones targeted a vehicle in a forested area near the town of Mir Ali, Pakistani intelligence officials told reporters.

The identities of the killed were not released, but the territory is believed to be controlled by Pakistani Taliban militants.

"The strike Thursday would be the fifth suspected missile attack this month, keeping up a recent surge in such CIA-run, drone-fired attacks," according to the Associated Press. "In September, the US is believed to have launched at least 21 such attacks, an unprecedented number and nearly all in North Waziristan."

The United States rarely acknowledges its covert drone missile program. In Pakistan, the strikes are officially condemned, yet grudgingly supported behind the scenes.

In light of these recent developments, which see the United States being pulled further afield in its efforts to pursue escaping insurgents, it should keep one crucial thing in mind that is regularly ignored in the Western media: unlike Afghanistan, Pakistan has nuclear weapons.

Before the actions of the United States prompts Pakistanis to elect a government that has far less patience for military incursions on its territory, better to show some restraint and draw the line at the Pakistani border. No need to incur the rise of another Ahmadinejad in

the region - especially one with the capabilities that Pakistan now has.

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