

America's War in Central Asia

Speech to Students Occupying Cambridge University Law Faculty

By [Craig Murray](#)

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Despite being denied proper access to the Law Faculty building, ex-ambassador Craig Murray spoke and answered questions from the entrance for over 45 minutes. He spoke on the US war in Central Asia for control over natural gas pipelines, Lord Taylor of Blackburn and other war profiteers, and anti-Muslim propaganda in the media. Murray explicitly supported several key demands of the occupation as reasonable: that the university withdraw investment from the arms trade; that there be bursaries for Palestinian students; and that the university condemn Israel's recent actions towards Gaza.

(Upon arrival at the Law Faculty Murray was told by university officials that, as a non-member of the University, he was barred from entering the building. So he spoke at the building's entrance, ringed by university officials in various fancy dress. Around sixty or seventy students sat on the floor to listen to him inside; others, like him denied entrance to the building as non-students, listened in the cold around the door next to him. This is a paraphrased transcript. Although the space didn't encourage general discussion, Murray responded to some questions from those listening to him at the end.)

MURRAY'S ADDRESS

Let me first apologise to those who can't see me - though they might possibly regard this as an advantage! I was initially invited to Cambridge to participate in a debate about the war in Afghanistan. Events having moved on, I was subsequently invited to address you here, and so I will try to talk more broadly about the causes of the current rash of wars in the world.

Many of you are probably aware that I was once British Ambassador to Uzbekistan. I will begin by quoting from a letter regarding that part of the world, written on 3 April 1997. (See <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/bushlay12.html>) It is addressed to the Honorable George W. Bush, then Governor of the State of Texas, by Kenneth Lay, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Enron.

"Dear George", it begins. "You will be meeting with Ambassador Sadyq Safaev, Uzbekistan's Ambassador to the United States, on April 8th. ...Enron has established an office in Tashkent and we are negotiating a \$2 billion dollar joint venture with Neftegaz of Uzbekistan, and Gazprom of Russia to develop Uzbekistan's natural gas and transport it to markets in Europe, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. This project can bring significant economic opportunities to Texas, as well as Uzbekistan... I know you and Ambassador Safaev will have a productive meeting which will result in a friendship between Texas and Uzbekistan. Sincerely, Ken."

A remarkable 'friendship' did indeed develop between Texas - later the United States as a whole - and Uzbekistan. For one thing, Tashkent became a major centre for America's

extraordinary renditions program. But of most decisive importance to Lay and Bush, of course, were the natural gas reserves of Central Asia. The thermal unit value of Uzbekistan's natural gas reserves is equivalent to that of the oil reserves of Iraq. Exploiting these gas reserves and controlling their route to European markets: this is the new Great Game.

There are three possible routes to get this gas to Europe. The most obvious route, though it is one which the United States has for some reason refused to countenance, is that through Iran. A second possible route would run through Georgia & Azerbyja: tensions over that led to the war between Georgia and Russia war last summer. The United States was keen to support the third possibility: a pipeline though Afghanistan. So Unocal, the US energy company, set about looking for partners who could guarantee the safety of such a pipeline, and found that the Taliban might help in this regard. Negotiations between Unocal and the Taliban were held in Houston, Texas in 1997. Two of those involved in negotiating for Unocal are particularly worthy of mention: Hamid Karzai, today President of Afghanistan, and Zalmay Khalilzad, later the US ambassador to Iraq & then US ambassador to the United Nations.

One often hears that wars are essentially about the control of natural resources - oil or natural gas - and it can often sound rather abstract, as if it were merely an academic construct. But here you see how just concrete it is.

One problem with any natural gas pipeline is that it is really rather easy to blow up. To guarantee the commercial running of a gas pipeline requires physical control of the region. As US companies - particularly Bechtel and Halliburton - took on contracts associated with this pipeline project, their interest led to NATO control over Afghanistan. Diferent NATO powers took control of different regions of Afghanistan, and a remarkable feature of the zone apportioned to the United States was that it did not correspond to any administrative or regional division of Afghanistan. Indeed, it appears to make no sense until you superimpose a map of the projected pipeline.

Last year the production of opium and narcotics was 60% higher than it had ever been before in history. Opium is no longer exported, but processed in Afghanistan to produce heroin. All one hears of the Taliban being narcotics smugglers is untrue. Under the Taliban - and I should stress that I am certainly no apologist for narrow, extremist theocracies such as the Taliban - the opium trade had been virtually eliminated. Yet now the four biggest heroin smugglers in the world are ministers in the Karzai government - foremost among them General Dostum, now head of the Afghanistan armed forces.

In short, we are maintaining in power a bunch of warlords and thugs and perpetuating a state of civil war. All in an effort to control the region's natural resources - just as, in Iraq, safeguarding profits from oil has taken priority over other political objectives.

Those of you who have been participating in this occupation may have been too busy in the past few days to keep up with the newspapers. But, for those who have been following the news of the last few days, I should say a few words about Lord Taylor of Blackburn. The Sunday Times has recently caught him in a sting operation, offering his services to influence decision makers for a fee. This is not new. He has been working like this for twenty years, principally as consultant for the defence industry. For his services to the company Electronic Data Systems, for example - a shadowy company which has made billions through defence contracts with the UK and US military - Lord Taylor has been paid a fee of £84,000 per year

plus bonuses. Taylor is especially close to Jack Straw, whom he knows through Blackburn politics, and has hosted parties to introduce Straw to various American industrial concerns. Taylor and Straw lobbied successfully together to have the criminal proceedings against BAE dropped.

Taylor lists twelve consultancies, all paid, in the Members' Register of interests.

(See http://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2007/08/more_lord_scumb.html)

It is unlikely that the interests explicitly listed there reflect the full range and extent of his activities, but by making some reasonable assumptions we can use the data there to estimate how much he has been able to make: around £3 million per year, for acting effectively as New Labour's bagman for the defence industry.

That is the nexus of corruption: where defence interests meet government interests. When you hear of the vast amount spent on the war in Iraq – over a trillion spent by the US, billions by the UK – remember that these aren't notional figures. Only a tiny proportion goes to the poor bloody soldiers who fight and die in those wars. The vast majority goes to the arms companies and mercenary companies and logistics providers, who all pay lobbyists to influence government. Profits run into billions. Heavier than expected ground fighting in Iraq? An opportunity for celebration in BAE's annual report, and for an additional bonus to the chief executive. from those who profit directly from the extension of war

All of which shows the relevance, I think, of one important demand of your occupation: that Cambridge University withdraw investment from arms companies.

I've said something about the belt of hydrocarbons through the middle east to central asia, which are today the scene of wars fought for the benefit of war profiteers. How has this been justified to the general public? By whipping up a frenzy of Islamophobia in the corporate media, and exaggerating the dangers of terrorism.

I condemn terrorism. Yet contemporary terrorism needs to be kept in proper perspective. In the last ten years the number of those who have died on the UK mainland though terrorist atrocities has been around 70. One is more likely to win the national lottery, or drown in the bath, than to die as a result of a terrorist incident. By contrast, in the 1970s thousands died as a result of Irish terrorism. Yet it would have been unthinkable then that I could have been denied entrance to speak to students in the Cambridge Law Faculty. Exaggerated fears of terrorism have been used to make assaults on civil liberties seem routine.

A further effect of the anti-Muslim media propaganda has been to make us desensitized to the bodies of the dead. Think of the fifteen people killed by the American operation in Pakistan last week. Think of those in Gaza.

Of course, we have recently seen a transition in the American presidency. Yet I personally remain agnostic at present about how much better Obama will be. On the one hand, I welcome Obama's announcements on Guantanamo. On the other, I am dismayed by the military operations in Pakistan which have already happened on Obama's watch.

Perhaps more important is what seems to me evidence of a real demand for change in public opinion. The student occupations here and at other universities seem to me evidence of a growing forcefulness amongst young people.

i would like to conclude by thanking you very much for the opportunity to speak. I am sorry that it should have taken place in such peculiar conditions, though perhaps otherwise it might have been boring indeed.

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