

The Afghan War, Past and Present

By [FAIR](#)

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This week, as the Afghan War entered its 10th year, there were the usual retrospectives in the media, as well as calls to rethink the war. What's striking, though, is how little thinking media did about the war in the first place.

-Some pundits were calling for indiscriminate attacks before the Afghanistan War even started, as FAIR noted ([9/21/01](#)):

Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly, the channel's most popular host, declared on his September 17 broadcast that if the Afghan government did not extradite Osama bin Laden to the U.S., "the U.S. should bomb the Afghan infrastructure to rubble—the airport, the power plants, their water facilities, and the roads." O'Reilly went on to say:

"This is a very primitive country. And taking out their ability to exist day to day will not be hard. Remember, the people of any country are ultimately responsible for the government they have. The Germans were responsible for Hitler. The Afghans are responsible for the Taliban. We should not target civilians. But if they don't rise up against this criminal government, they starve, period."

-Early anti-war protests were barely covered— and when they were the results were often abysmal, as FAIR noted in an Action Alert ([10/2/01](#)) about the **New York Times'** coverage:

After thousands of anti-war activists gathered in Washington, D.C. on September 29, the **Times** responded with a 10-sentence story, under the headline "Protesters in Washington Urge Peace with Terrorists." Given that a call for bringing terrorists to justice through non-military means was central to the rallies, the headline is a gross mischaracterization of the protesters' message....

The next day (10/1/10), the **Times** ran a slightly longer story about the second day of protests on page B7. The photo that accompanied the story, however, was dominated by a sign held by one of the counter-demonstrators: "Osama Thanks Fellow Cowards for Your Support."

-Some outlets were ready to accept government "guidance" on how to practice journalism (FAIR Press Release, [10/12/01](#)):

On October 10, television network executives from **ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox** and **CNN** held a conference call with national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, and apparently acceded to her "suggestion" that any future taped statements from Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda group be "abridged," and any potentially "inflammatory" language removed before broadcast.

—**CNN** decided that the U.S. public should not see images of dead Afghan civilians (FAIR Action Alert, [11/1/01](#)):

According to the **Washington Post** (10/31/01), **CNN** chair Walter Isaacson “has ordered his staff to balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbors murderous terrorists, saying it ‘seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.’”

Post media reporter Howard Kurtz quotes a memo from Isaacson to **CNN**’s international correspondents: “As we get good reports from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, we must redouble our efforts to make sure we do not seem to be simply reporting from their vantage or perspective. We must talk about how the Taliban are using civilian shields and how the Taliban have harbored the terrorists responsible for killing close to 5,000 innocent people.”

A week later, FAIR noted ([11/8/01](#)):

The host of **Fox News Channel**’s **Special Report With Brit Hume** (11/5/01) recently wondered why journalists should bother covering civilian deaths at all. “The question I have,” said Hume, “is civilian casualties are historically, by definition, a part of war, really. Should they be as big news as they’ve been?”

—As a FAIR Action Alert ([11/2/01](#)) noted, newspaper opinion pages offered “little space for dissent to the military line”:

A FAIR survey of the **New York Times** and the **Washington Post** op-ed pages for the three weeks following the attacks (9/12/01-10/2/01) found that columns calling for or assuming a military response to the attacks were given a great deal of space, while opinions urging diplomatic and international law approaches as an alternative to military action were nearly non-existent.

These problems changed very little as the war went on. Media outlets went from downplaying Afghan civilian deaths to explaining them away (**Extra! Update**, [8/07](#)):

When they’re discussed at all by corporate media, civilian deaths in Afghanistan are often presented as a tactical or public relations problem for U.S. military and political officials, or labeled as “accidental” or “errant.” The civilian deaths are not accidents, however; they are the predictable result of a deliberate decision to protect American troops by putting Afghan noncombatants at risk

Later coverage tended to present new explanations for the same problem (**Extra!**, [6/09](#)):

The increased use of airstrikes and drone-fired missiles in both [Afghanistan] and neighboring Pakistan are likely to increase civilian deaths. Recent coverage, however, suggests that corporate media will present such incidents as aberrations that distract from U.S. strategic interests—or highlight the supposed public relations prowess of official enemies like the Taliban.

—And the spectrum of debate scarcely improved, as FAIR noted (Action Alert, [8/25/09](#)):

With new polls showing the American public becoming increasingly critical of the U.S.-led

war in Afghanistan, the Sunday morning network talkshows turned primarily to Pentagon officials and war boosters to discuss the issue, continuing the media marginalization of critics of the escalation of the war (**Extra!**, 4/09).

-Another FAIR study of op-ed page debate (**Extra!**, [12/09](#)) in the first 10 months of 2009 showed that newspapers were still ignoring majority opinion:

Both newspapers marginalized antiwar opinion to different degrees. Of the New York Times' 43 columns on the Afghanistan War, 36 supported the war and only seven opposed it—five times as many columns to war supporters as to opponents. Of the paper's pro-war columns, 14 favored some form of escalation, while 22 argued for pursuing the war differently.

In the **Washington Post**, pro-war columns outnumbered antiwar columns by more than 10 to 1: Of 67 **Post** columns on U.S. military policy in Afghanistan, 61 supported a continued war, while just six expressed antiwar views. Of the pro-war columns, 31 were for escalation and 30 for an alternative strategy.

-Some pundits grew tired of the supposedly excessive debate over the Afghanistan surge. The **Washington Post's** David Broder earned a "P.U.-Litzer Prize" from FAIR in 2009 ([12/22/09](#)):

Post columnist Broder expressed the conventional wisdom on Barack Obama's deliberations on the Afghanistan War, writing under the headline "Enough Afghan Debate" (11/15/09): "It is evident from the length of this deliberative process and from the flood of leaks that have emerged from Kabul and Washington that the perfect course of action does not exist. Given that reality, the urgent necessity is to make a decision—whether or not it is right."

That lack of debate continues up to the present, as FAIR pointed out in an [August 18 Action Alert](#), "Tell **NBC**: Sunday Morning Needs a Real War Debate":

The war in Afghanistan has re-emerged as a major news story, thanks to the controversies surrounding the removal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal and the WikiLeaks release of classified documents. But on **NBC's Meet the Press**, the opportunity to engage in a robust debate about the war has taken a back seat to promoting the views of the military and supporters of Obama's Afghanistan policies.

-Those recent scandals seemed unable to move the media debate. When the website **WikiLeaks** posted thousands of classified documents relating to the Afghan War, much of the media reaction was dedicated to downplaying the story, or seeing it as an opportunity for the White House to bolster public support for the war (FAIR Media Advisory, [7/30/10](#)):

The July 27 **Washington Post** provided a remarkable case study. One news story, headlined "WikiLeaks Disclosures Unlikely to Change Course of Afghanistan War," presented the leaks as good news for the war effort, asserting that the "release could compel President Obama to explain more forcefully the war's importance," and conveying White House claims that "the classified accounts bolstered Obama's decision in December to pour more troops and money into a war effort that had not received sufficient attention or resources from the Bush administration."

Another **Post** story, headlined "WikiLeaks Documents Cause Little Concern Over Public Perception of War," suggested that the White House and Congress were trying to turn the

leaks into “an affirmation of the president’s decision to shift strategy and boost troop levels in the nearly nine-year-long war.”

The reaction was similar to the media’s response to a **Rolling Stone** report (6/22/10) about Gen. Stanley McChrystal. The ensuing controversy, which led the White House to replace McChrystal with Gen. David Petraeus, was cheered as a sign that the White House was sticking with its war plan (FAIR Media Advisory, [6/25/10](#)):

So a story that was an indictment of the war became a lesson in how the White House would be sticking with its plan. As the **Washington Post** (6/24/10) put it, Obama’s “decision to turn over the Afghan command to Gen. David H. Petraeus allowed the president to keep his war strategy intact.” **NBC** Pentagon reporter Jim Miklaszewski (6/23/10) declared that “the military is very high on David Petraeus, and there should be no slowdown or hitch in the Afghanistan strategy.” **NBC** reporter Chuck Todd (6/23/10) noted that the “one thing the president made clear: He may be changing commanders, but not the mission.... Trading McChrystal for Petraeus neutralized what could have turned into another political mess.”

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