

We Are at War

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We Are at War

By Johnny Barber

“We are at War. Somebody is Going to Pay.” George W. Bush, Sept 11th, 2001.

Eleven years later, we are still at war. Bullets, mortars and drones are still extracting payment. Thousands, tens of thousands, millions have paid in full. Children and even those yet to be born will continue to pay for decades to come.

On a single day in Iraq last week there were 29 bombing attacks in 19 cities, killing 111 civilians and wounding another 235. On Sept 9th, reports indicate 88 people were killed and another 270 injured in 30 attacks all across the country. Iraq continues in a seemingly endless death spiral into chaos. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President, Obama claimed he ended the war in Iraq, well... not quite.

The city of Fallujah remains under siege. Not from U.S. troops, but from a deluge of birth defects that have plagued families since the use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus by U.S. forces in 2004. No government studies have provided a direct link to the use of these weapons because no government studies have been undertaken, and none are contemplated.

Dr. Samira Alani, a pediatric specialist at Fallujah General Hospital, told Al Jazeera,

“We have all kinds of defects now, ranging from congenital heart disease to severe physical abnormalities, both in numbers you cannot imagine. There are not even medical terms to describe some of these conditions because we’ve never seen them until now.” The photographs are available on line if you can bear to look at what we have wrought. George W. Bush will loudly proclaim his “Pro-life” bona fides, and he’ll tell you he believes “that every child, born and unborn, ought to be protected in law and welcomed into life.” Apparently, “every child” doesn’t apply to the children of Fallujah, and the “law” doesn’t apply to George W. Bush.

Our soldiers, some physically damaged by IED’s, some mentally destroyed by PTSD, will pay for these wars for the rest of their days. Drug and alcohol abuse is out of control. Suicide among the troops is an epidemic. 2,916 Americans were lost in the towers on that fateful day, many, many more have perished in the intervening years.

Today we will be asked to honor the men and woman of our armed forces, but what does honoring the veterans entail? In its most recent report, The Veterans Administration estimates about 107,000 veterans are homeless on any given night. Mental illness plagues

45% of homeless vets and 70% suffer from some kind of substance abuse. So how do you honor our veterans? Are "Support Our Troops" ribbons still in vogue? How does our government honor our veterans other than use them as political pawns in stump speeches and cannon fodder for their wars?

84,000 American troops remain in Afghanistan. While the occupation is rarely mentioned in the U.S. mainstream media, that doesn't mean the killing has stopped. On average, one U.S. soldier dies everyday. Not an enormous sum, unless it is your mother, father, son or daughter that has perished. Few Americans notice. Afghan loses are not reported. They have loved ones who grieve as well.

The American public has turned their attention to feeding their families, keeping their homes, and finding employment. But what of the \$2 billion dollars per week we are spending on war in Afghanistan? What would \$2 billion per week look like in our devastated communities, in our schools, in creating jobs or in caring for our elders? Politicians in both parties claim our first priority is to reduce the debt. If they were really serious, if they were honest, they would end this occupation and stop calling for cuts to Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Social Security.

And what is the price extracted from the Afghan people? Security is still a dream, even in Kabul. As I write this, 6 people have perished in a suicide bombing outside NATO headquarters, in the heart of Kabul. Several of them were impoverished street kids, peddling packs of gum to the westerners who frequent the area.

Hilary Clinton, Madeline Albright, Jan Schakowsky, and other prominent American women claim American forces are necessary in Afghanistan to protect the gains made in woman's rights. On Sept 6th, Emma Graham-Harrison reported in the Guardian that 3 women in Kabul were attacked by a group of men because of their work as television actresses. One of the women was murdered. After seeking treatment at the hospital, the two survivors were taken to prison, where they face intrusive virginity tests and possible charges of prostitution or collusion in the attack. They face long prison sentences. This is not the Taliban; this is woman's rights in Afghanistan today, rights that Hilary Clinton fears will be rolled back!

On the streets of Kabul it is not unusual to see burka clad women clutching starving children begging for spare change. Poverty and hunger is even worse in Kandahar and Helmand, areas that have seen some of the most intense fighting of the war. In southern Afghanistan 29.5% of the children are suffering from severe malnutrition. This compares to famine stricken areas of Africa, yet, officially, there is no famine in Afghanistan and hundreds of millions of dollars of humanitarian aid has flowed into the country.

In America, 35 million people are hungry or do not know where their next meal is coming from and 13 million of them are children. Who benefits from the "War on Terror"?

On Sept 2nd, Hamid Karzai announced his choice for the new intelligence chief, Asadullah Khalid. Khalid is currently the country's minister of tribal and border affairs who oversees its southern security forces. In 2009 Richard Colvin, Canada's former deputy ambassador to Afghanistan, testified before Canada's parliament that his team had uncovered "very credible" evidence of torture, which allegedly included Khalid's direct involvement. "He was known to have had a dungeon in Ghazni, his previous province, where he used to detain people for money, and some of them disappeared," Colvin said in his testimony. "He was known to be running a narcotics operation. He had a criminal gang. He had people killed

who got in his way.” Khalid and Karzai dismiss the allegations as unfounded.

In Kabul, children freeze to death in the winter, and they starve to death all year round. Meanwhile on the edge of Kabul a “New City” is being built. Hamid Karzai’s brother, Qayum Karzai, the owner of a construction company, benefits as his company “wins” government contracts without the hassles of competitive bidding. Karzai’s relatives are also benefiting from lucrative contracts in the oil and mineral sectors. In late 2011, Watan Oil and Gas, a company controlled by President Karzai’s cousins Rateb and Rashid Popal gained a contract with China’s National Petroleum Corporation. In 1989 Rateb was convicted for smuggling drugs in the U.S. and spent more than eight years in prison. The Popal family’s company, Watan Risk Management, also worked as a contractor for the US forces. In 2010, they were accused of paying off Taliban insurgents with a cut from NATO contracts. According to the NY Times, another brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai was involved in the heroin trade and was also on the CIA’s payroll for several years before his assassination in 2011. The Karzai family now brings in billions of dollars a year. 42% of Afghans live on less than a dollar a day. So we are bent on ridding Afghanistan of the Taliban while the government is full of warlords, gangsters, and drug dealers.

Since America’s intervention in Afghanistan, the heroin trade has exploded, doubling opium production. Afghanistan is now the source of 90% of the world’s heroin. This dovetail’s nicely with America’s “War on Drugs.”

The growth in the heroin trade coupled with the despair of daily living has contributed to an eruption of drug addiction. Addicts can be found huddled under bridges throughout Kabul. As these men succumb to addiction, their families are left to fend for themselves. Heroin floods the streets of Europe and Russia. Which banks benefit from the enormous cash flows generated by the heroin trade? Who in the Afghan government benefits?

The corruption is mind-boggling. We support terrorist elements, most recently in Syria and Libya, but before that in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, and then find ourselves fighting them down the road. In a reversal of our usual modus operandi, it has come to light that during the Bush years the CIA tortured numerous members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), an armed Islamist Group that had worked to overthrow Gaddafi for 20 years, before transferring them to Gaddafi’s regime for further torture. Some of these same fighters rendered and tortured by America and Libya now hold key leadership posts in the “liberated” Libya.

Private interests in Saudi Arabia continue to fund Sunni extremists around the world. Wikileaks released a Dec. 2009 cable from the State Department that complained that Saudi donors remain the primary financiers of militant groups like Al-Qaeda. In May 2010, the Sunday Times of London revealed that the Afghan Financial Intelligence Unit, FinTRACA, reported that since 2006 at least 1.5 billion dollars from Saudi Arabia was funneled to the Taliban in Afghanistan, with Al-Qaeda withholding a cut for their delivery services. Why is there no outcry from the U.S.?

In 2011 overseas weapons sales by the United States totaled \$66.3 billion, or more than three-quarters of the global arms market. Russia was second, with \$4.8 billion in deals. Who benefits from the War on Terror and who benefits when America threatens war?

Over half of the sales, or \$33.4 billion, consisted of arms sales to Saudi Arabia. These sales included F-15 fighter jets, dozens of Apache and Black Hawk helicopters, as well as an array

of missiles, bombs and delivery systems, as well as accessories such as night-vision goggles and radar warning systems. These sales offset the flow of US dollars to pay for Saudi oil, and this explains why there is no outrage directed toward the Saudi regime.

The War on Terror exploits the tragedy of September 11 for the benefit of a very few. Poor people continue to pay an enormous price, while the elites, including our own government and the corporations it answers to, ignore everything but the influx of cash into their coffers. The war business is profitable if you refuse to count the cost of human lives.

In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President, Obama said, "Our destinies are bound together. A freedom which only asks what's in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity, is unworthy of our founding ideals." In closing, he said, "We travel together. We leave no one behind. We pull each other up." Why is it our Presidents fail to include those they bomb in their lofty sentiments? The simple truth is our destinies are bound together with those who lie beyond the borders of our country as well.

A young, educated Afghan man, an advisor to Parliament, sees the corruption of his government and despairs. He asks me, "What is my share in this world?" He continues, "Absolutely nothing. And for my child, the same." His voice trails off. We sit drinking tea as night comes on.

Johnny Barber is writing from Kabul where he is a guest of the Afghan Peace Volunteers in Kabul. To learn more, visit www.oneBrightpearl-jb.blogspot.com and www.oneBrightpearl.com

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