

When in Doubt, Bomb Afghanistan

America's Other Glorious War

By WILLIAM BLUM, *Counterpunch*, January 7, 2009

The Pentagon pushes hard for a large increase in troops for Afghanistan. Barack Obama has been calling for the same since well before the November election. Listen to the drumbeats telling us that the security of the United States and the Free World necessitates increased action in this place called Afghanistan. As urgent as Iraq 2003, it is. Why? What is there about this backward, reactionary, woman-hating, failed state that warrants hundreds of deaths of American and NATO soldiers? That justifies tens of thousands of Afghan deaths since the first US bombing attacks in October 2001?

In early December, reports the Washington Post, "standing at Kandahar Air Field in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said the United States is making a 'sustained commitment' to that country, one that will last 'some protracted period of time'." The story goes on to discuss \$300 million in construction projects at this one base to house additional American forces, erecting guard stations and towers and perimeter fencing around the barracks area, putting in vehicle inspection areas, administration offices, cold-storage warehouse, a new power plant, electrical and water distribution systems, communications lines, housing for 1,500 personnel who sustain the systems, maintenance shops, warehouses ... America's wealth bleeds out endlessly.

Back in April Maj. Gen. David Rodriguez, commander of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division, when asked how long it would take to create "lasting stability" in Afghanistan, replied: "In some way, shape or form ... I think it's a generation."

"Stability", it should be noted, is a code word used regularly by the United States since at least the 1950s to mean that the regime in power is willing and able to behave the way Washington would like it to behave. It is remarkable, and scary, to read the US military writing about how it goes around the world bringing "stability" to (often ungrateful) people. This past October the Army published a man-

ual called "Stability Operations". It discusses numerous American interventions all over the world since the 1890s, one example after another of bringing "stability" to benighted peoples. One can picture the young American service members reading it, or having it fed to them in lectures, full of pride to be a member of such an altruistic fighting force.

For those members of the US military in Afghanistan the most enlightening lesson they could receive is that their government's plans for that land of sadness have little or nothing to do with the welfare of the Afghan people. In the late 1970s through much of the 1980s, the country had a government that was relatively progressive, with full rights for women; even a Pentagon report of the time testified to the actuality of women's rights in the country. And what happened to that government? The United States was instrumental in overthrowing it. It was replaced by the Taliban.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, US oil companies have been vying with Russia, Iran and other energy interests for the massive, untapped oil and natural gas reserves in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. The building and protection of oil and gas pipelines in Afghanistan, to continue farther to Pakistan, India, and elsewhere, has been a key objective of US policy since before the 2001 American invasion and occupation of the country, although the subsequent turmoil there has presented serious obstacles to such plans. A planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline has strong support from Washington because, amongst other reasons, the US is eager to block a competing pipeline that would bring gas to Pakistan and India from Iran. But security for such projects remains daunting, and that's where the US and NATO forces come in to play.

In the late 1990s, the American oil company, Unocal, met with Taliban officials in Texas to discuss the pipelines.[6] Zalmay Khalilzad, later chosen to be the US ambassador to Afghanistan, worked for Unocal[7];

Hamid Karzai, later chosen by Washington to be the Afghan president, also reportedly worked for Unocal, although the company denies this. Unocal's talks with the Taliban, conducted with the full knowledge of the Clinton administration, and undeterred by the extreme repression of Taliban society, continued as late as 2000 or 2001.

As for NATO, it has no reason to be fighting in Afghanistan. Indeed, NATO has no legitimate reason for existence at all. Their biggest fear is that "failure" in Afghanistan would make this thought more present in the world's mind. If NATO hadn't begun to intervene outside of Europe it would have highlighted its uselessness and lack of mission. "Out of area or out of business" it was said.

In June, the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives published a report saying Taliban and insurgent activity against the US-NATO presence in Kandahar province puts the feasibility of the pipeline project in doubt. The report says southern regions in Afghanistan, including Kandahar, would have to be cleared of insurgent activity and land mines in two years to meet construction and investment schedules.

"Nobody is going to start putting pipe in the ground unless they are satisfied that there is some reasonable insurance that the workers for the pipeline are going to be safe," said

Howard Brown, the Canadian representative for the Asian Development Bank, the major funding agency for the pipeline.

If Americans were asked what they think their country is doing in Afghanistan, their answers would likely be one variation or another of "fighting terrorism", with some kind of connection to 9-11. But what does that mean? Of the tens of thousands of Afghans killed by American/NATO bombs over the course of seven years, how many can it be said had any kind of linkage to any kind of anti-American terrorist act, other than in Afghanistan itself during this period? Not one, as far as we know. The so-called "terrorist training camps" in Afghanistan were set up largely by the Taliban to provide fighters for their civil conflict with the Northern Alliance (minimally less religious fanatics and misogynists than the Taliban, but represented in the present Afghan government).

As everyone knows, none of the alleged 9-11 hijackers was an Afghan; 15 of the 19 were from Saudi Arabia; and most of the planning for the attacks appears to have been carried out in Germany and the United States. So, of course, bomb Afghanistan. And keep bombing Afghanistan. And bomb Pakistan. Especially wedding parties (at least six so far).

William Blum is the author of Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II, Rogue State: a guide to the World's Only Super Power. and West-Bloc Dissident: a Cold War Political Memoir