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New York Times admission of Afghanistan fiasco provokes “human rights imperialist” backlash

An editorial published by the *New York Times* on February 4 titled “End the War in Afghanistan” has provoked a backlash from prominent supporters of the decades-long US “war on terrorism” and the fraud of “humanitarian intervention.”

The *Times* editorial was a damning self-indictment by the US political establishment’s newspaper of record, which has supported every US act of military aggression, from the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the US wars for regime change in Libya and Syria beginning in 2011.

The editorial presents the “war on terror” as an unmitigated fiasco, dating it from September 14, 2001, when “Congress wrote what would prove to be one of the largest blank checks in the country’s history,” i.e., the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Al Qaeda and its affiliates, which is still invoked to legitimize US interventions from Syria to Somalia, Yemen and, of course, Afghanistan.

On the day that this “blank check” was written, the *Times* published a column titled “No Middle Ground,” which stated “the Bush administration today gave the nations of the world a stark choice: stand with us against terrorism, deny safe havens to terrorists or face the certain prospect of death and destruction. The marble halls of Washington resounded with talk of war.”

It continued, “The nation is rallying around its young, largely untried leader—as his rising approval ratings and the proliferation of flags across the country vividly demonstrate ...”

This war propaganda was sustained by the *Times*, which sold the invasion of Afghanistan as retribution for 9/11 and then promoted the illegal and unprovoked war against Iraq by legitimizing and embellishing the lies about “weapons of mass destruction.”

With the first deployment of US ground troops in Afghanistan, the *Times* editorialized on October 20, 2001: “Now the nation's soldiers are going into battle in a distant and treacherous land, facing a determined and resourceful enemy. As they go, they should know that the nation supports their cause and yearns for their success.”

Now the *Times* acknowledges: “The price tag, which includes the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and increased spending on veterans’ care, will reach \$5.9 trillion by the end of fiscal year 2019, according to the Costs of War project at Brown University. Since nearly all of that money has been borrowed, the total cost with interest will be substantially higher... More than 2.7 million Americans have fought in the war since 2001. Nearly 7,000 service members—and nearly 8,000 private contractors—have been killed. More than 53,700 people returned home bearing physical wounds, and numberless more carry psychological injuries. More than one million Americans who served in a theater of the war on terror receive some level of disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs.”

The massive loss of life, destruction of social infrastructure and vast human suffering inflicted by these wars on civilian populations are at best an afterthought for the *Times*. Conservative estimates place the number killed by the US war in Afghanistan at 175,000. With the number of indirect fatalities caused by the war, the toll likely rises to a million. In Iraq, the death toll was even higher.

What does the *Times* conclude from this bloody record? “The failure of American leaders—civilians and generals through three administrations, from the Pentagon to the State Department to Congress and the White House—to develop and pursue a strategy to end the war ought to be studied for generations. Likewise, all Americans—the news media included—need to be prepared to examine the national credulity or passivity that’s led to the longest conflict in modern American history.”

What a cowardly and cynical evasion! Three administrations, those of Bush, Obama and Trump, have committed war crimes over the course of more than 17 years, including launching wars of aggression—the principal charge leveled against the Nazis at Nuremberg—the slaughter of civilians and torture. These crimes should not be “studied for generations,” but punished.

As for the attempt to lump the news media together with “all Americans” as being guilty of “credulity” and “passivity,” this is a slander against the American people and a

deliberate cover-up of the crimes carried out by the corporate media, with the *Times* at their head, in disseminating outright lies and war propaganda. The *Times* editors should be “prepared to examine” the fact that journalistic agents of the Nazi regime who carried out a similar function in Germany were tried and punished at Nuremberg.

The *Times* editorial supporting a US withdrawal reflects the conclusions being drawn by increasing sections of the ruling establishment, including the Trump administration, which has opened up negotiations with the Taliban. It is bound up with the shift in strategy by US imperialism and the Pentagon toward the preparation for “great power” confrontations with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

The *Times*’ call for an Afghanistan withdrawal has provoked a heated rebuke by defenders of the “war on terrorism” and “humanitarian intervention,” who have denounced the newspaper for defeatism. Such a withdrawal, a letter published by the *Times* on February 8 argued, would “accelerate and expand the war,” “allow another extremist-terrorist phenomenon to emerge,” and “result in the deaths and abuse of thousands of women.”

The signatories of the letter include Frederick Kagan, David Sedney and Eleanor Smeal.

Kagan has a great deal invested in the Afghanistan war. He and his wife Kimberly served as civilian advisers to top generals who directed the war and elaborated the failed strategies of counterinsurgency (COIN). He has been a vociferous supporter of every US war and every escalation, arguing most recently for the US military to confront Russian- and Iranian-backed forces in Syria.

Likewise Sedney, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense responsible for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, now working at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Married to a top lobbyist for Chevron who worked extensively in Central Asia, he has his own interests in the continuation of US military operations in the region.

Smeal is the president of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMD) and a former president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), who is widely described as one of “the major leaders of the modern-day American feminist movement.”

A leading figure in the Democratic Party, Smeal is no Jane-come-lately to the filthy campaign to promote the war in Afghanistan as a “humanitarian” exercise in promoting the rights of women. In 2001, Smeal and her FMD circulated a petition thanking the Bush administration for its commitment to promoting the rights of women in Afghanistan. After the bombing began on October 7, she declared, “We have real momentum now in the drive

to restore the rights of women.” A few days later, she and representatives of other feminist organizations showed up at the White House to solidarize themselves with the US war.

Urging on the conquest of Afghanistan, she wrote, “I should hope our government doesn’t retreat. We’ll help rip those burqas off, I hope. This is a unique time in history. If you’re going to end terrorism, you’ve got to end the ideology of gender apartheid.”

Aside from costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghan women, the US war has left women, like the entire population, under worse conditions than when it began. Two-thirds of Afghan girls do not attend school, 87 percent of Afghan women are illiterate, and 70-80 percent face forced marriage, many before the age of 16.

Recent reports suggest that the maternal death rate may be higher than it was before the war began, surpassed only by South Sudan. While USAID has poured some \$280 million into its Promote program, supposedly to advance the conditions of Afghan women, it has done nothing but line the pockets of corrupt officials of the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul.

The attempt by the likes of Smeal and leading elements within the Democratic Party to cloak the bloodbath in Afghanistan as a crusade to “liberate” women and promote “democracy” is itself a criminal act.

On October 9, two days after Washington launched its now 17-year-long war on Afghanistan and amid a furor of jingoistic and militarist propaganda from the US government and the corporate media, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board posted a column titled “Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan.” It rejected the claim that this was a “war for justice and the security of the American people against terrorism” and insisted that “the present action by the United States is an imperialist war” in which Washington aimed to “establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control” over not only Afghanistan, but over the broader region of Central Asia, “home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world.”

The WSWS stated at the time: “Despite a relentless media campaign to whip up chauvinism and militarism, the mood of the American people is not one of gung-ho support for the war. At most, it is a passive acceptance that war is the only means to fight terrorism, a mood that owes a great deal to the efforts of a thoroughly dishonest media which serves as an arm of the state. Beneath the reluctant endorsement of military action is a profound sense of unease and skepticism. Tens of millions sense that nothing good can come of this latest eruption of American militarism.

“The United States stands at a turning point. The government admits it has embarked on a war of indefinite scale and duration. What is taking place is the militarization of American society under conditions of a deepening social crisis.

“The war will profoundly affect the conditions of the American and international working class. Imperialism threatens mankind at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a repetition on a more horrific scale of the tragedies of the twentieth. More than ever, imperialism and its depredations raise the necessity for the international unity of the working class and the struggle for socialism.”

These warnings and this perspective have been borne out entirely by the criminal and tragic events of the last 17 years, even as the likes of the *New York Times* find themselves compelled to admit the bankruptcy of their entire record on Afghanistan, and their erstwhile “liberal” allies struggle to salvage some shred of the filthy banner of “human rights imperialism.”