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BY ROBIN ANDERSEN

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## *After 20 Years of Failed War, Corporate Media Still Give Wars of Empire a Pass*



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When Taliban fighters swept across Afghanistan in a little over a week and entered the capital city of Kabul on August 15, 2021, they surprised the US media, the Biden White House, and the military. Desperate to get out of the country, those who had worked with the US-backed Afghan government fled to the airport in Kabul, running across the tarmac and swamping the runways. US corporate media covered the chaos with images of hundreds of people jamming the runways and clinging onto aircraft or forcing their way

into military transport planes. Focusing on the spectacle of the war's end, in three days Afghanistan received more coverage than it had in years.

20 years earlier, the US Military said the bombing of Afghanistan was necessary to avenge the attacks on the World Trade Center, and thus began the longest war in US history.

### **In the Chaos of Kabul: Only Some Lives are Valuable**

As desperate people crowded the Kabul airport, US Corporate media expressed great concern for the lives of those who worked with the American military and its Afghan government. In the twisted logic of war journalism—only some lives are valuable, worthy of safety, security and dignity. The vast majority of those who suffer and die in war are not. For years, what FAIR has identified as “multitudes” of lives lost in Afghanistan and Iraq, died without witness, reporting, or care. They “simply go unmentioned.” During the US withdrawal of Afghanistan, Gregory Shupak surveyed the editorial pages of five major US newspapers and noted that not one mentioned the 71,000 civilians killed noting, “civilians evidently aren’t significant enough to factor into ‘the cost’ of the war.” Though big journalism has hidden the vast majority of civilian suffering, some close to the killing refuse to condone the human horrors they have helped create, such as Daniel Hale a former U.S. Air Force intelligence analyst, who only three weeks earlier, was sentenced to 45 months in prison for leaking government documents “that exposed the inner workings and severe civilian costs of the U.S. military’s drone program.” When sentenced, Hale told the judge “I am here because I stole something that was never mine to take — precious human life.” He said he believed it “was necessary to dispel the lie that drone warfare keeps us safe, that our lives are worth more than theirs.” As The Intercept reported, Hale explained. “I couldn’t keep living in a world in which people pretend that things weren’t happening that were.” Almost no corporate media covered this story.

The war in Afghanistan was promoted with a set of false narratives carefully designed by military and government and repeated in the press, like smart bombs don’t kill civilians and belligerencies are the only way to stop terrorism. Military pronouncements are now recognizable tropes of twenty-first century war journalism; US wars are a fight between “good versus evil,” you can’t “negotiate with terrorists,” and US military might “will always win.”

From the first bombs that hit Afghanistan in 2001, to the smart bombs that “lit up the night sky over Bagdad,” in 2003, to Brian William’s adoration of the “beautiful” bombing of Syria in 2017, TV news anchors have not hidden their admiration of U.S. bombs over the Middle East. But as the death of young Americans became the greatest impediment to the

public's appetite for war, the military turned to secret operations by Special Forces, such as night raids and terror, and most importantly, drone bombs that carried out their deadly missions without fanfare or accolade. Secrecy perpetuated the myth of American moral superiority, gained through a war lexicon that the "beautiful" bombs "accurately target terrorists." Always a lie, civilian bodies have simply been hidden.

### **Unwinnable War**

In a rare piece published in 2019 titled "At War with the Truth," the *Washington Post* reported on a trove of documents called the "Afghanistan Papers" that revealed "that senior U.S. officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable." Yet by August of 2021, big journalism seemed to forget the contents of this report. The swift Taliban take-over of Afghanistan should have shattered assertions that military operations always vanquish America's identified enemies. Yet media pressed on, lamenting the end of occupation and criticizing President Biden for ending the unwinnable war.

### **"Intelligence"- Driven Fake News and Blaming Biden**

By August 18<sup>th</sup> the *New York Times* along with many cable news outlets had settled on a pro-war framework and adopted a critical stance to its end. Biden took the blame, as Amanda Marcotte observed on *Salon*, "The collapse of the Afghan government was portrayed as a massive political liability for Biden." On *CNN*, Jake Trapper was shocked that Biden "could have been so wrong," directing viewers to watch the "tragic foreign policy disaster unfold before our eyes," and describing the White House as "flat-footed." Yet the CIA and the military were rarely the subjects of criticism.

On August 18, 2021 a front page *New York Times* article reported that "intelligence" warned of rapid collapse, "despite Biden's assurance." Filled with anonymous attribution from "senior officials," "former officials," and "a person familiar with intelligence," major contradictions infect the piece, which admits that "it is not known if there were reports contradicting this point of view." In addition, "intelligence" reports critical of President Biden contradicted the paper's own assessment in April, based of course, on "intelligence reports," that the Taliban were not a great threat. This reporting is emblematic of confused, speculative "intelligence"- driven war journalism that repeats assessments of dubious value given the history of deception that characterize their often-wishful thinking. Biden took the heat with little criticism directed toward spy agencies and military planners who

knew so little and demonstrably failed the translators, Afghan security forces, journalists, and human rights activist in Kabul.

### **Ignoring Diplomatic Openings and Negotiations**

Another *New York Times* article announces that the Taliban are “promising peace at home and urging the world to look past their history of violence and repression.” No reference is made to the 20-year history of violence perpetrated by the United States, or for example that Human Right Watch reported that in the first six months of 2019, the US and its partners in the Afghan government killed more civilians than the Taliban did. Yet over and over narratives portray the monstrous Taliban so depraved that they cannot be negotiated with. Three days later alternative media published an expose that would complicate these assertions and shatter many assumptions of dominant war journalism.

### **The Taliban Surrendered in 2001**

On August 20, 2021, *Consortium News* carried a piece by Richard Behan with the headline, “The Taliban Surrendered in 2001,” writing that on Dec. 5, 2001, at a U.S. Special Forces camp near Kandahar “the Taliban offered an unconditional surrender. Furthermore, they would disband and disarm: a military force would no longer exist.” The US military refused. Osama bin Laden would continue to be the iconic terrorist who must be killed for orchestrating 9/11. Behan goes on to assert that Bush could have negotiated with the Taliban to assassinate bin Laden or to surrender him into U.S. custody. “That was the standing offer the Taliban tendered in late 2000, seeking to retain U.S. favor after bin Laden bombed the *U.S.S. Cole*.” Indeed, the Bush White House had a cordial relationship with the Taliban, rewarding them, as late as May 2001, with a war on drugs “stipend” of \$43 million in military aid for cracking down on poppy growers. The considerable sum was given with no human rights stipulations or demands to improve conditions for Afghan women and girls. At the start of the second week of bombing the Taliban again offered to discuss handing Bin Laden over to a third country to stop the US bombing that was killing civilians. A *Baltimore Sun* article featured a picture of an agonized man and his son wounded in a US air strikes while Bush is quoted saying, “They must have not heard. There’s no negotiations.” Writing in Inter Press Service, Gareth Porter confirmed that at a secret meeting in Islamabad Oct. 15, 2001 the Taliban offered to put bin Laden in the custody of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), to be tried for the 9/11 terror attacks on the United States.

On August 23, 2021, the *NYT* picked up the story of the Taliban’s surrender in a piece bearing little resemblance to the more informative and factual reporting on alternative

media. Beginning on the front page it occupied two thirds of an inside page with a large photograph of Donald Rumsfeld captioned, “We don’t negotiate surrenders.” The long, wordy piece details the brilliant thinking and back-and-forth between war planners, with claims that the Taliban didn’t really control the country, or they couldn’t trust them, and they just had to “take a pass.” Lost in all the column inches are two sentences that should have been the story’s content, “Nearly 2,500 Americans had died fighting on Afghan soil,” and another 1000 allied troops. “At least 240,000 Afghans have died, many of them civilian according to the Watson Institute at Brown University.” (Whistleblower Daniel Hale is not mentioned.) American “taxpayers have spent nearly two trillion dollars on the effort,” with little to show for it. No comparisons about how the money might have been spent to cancel student debt, completely pay for four Green New Deals, or cover the costs of medical care for victims of Covid 19.

Only weeks before the war’s end, obituaries for Donald Rumsfeld bathed him in glowing accounts as a war visionary and lauded his role in Afghanistan saying, “the Taliban regime was toppled within weeks.” He was an “all-American” handsome Midwesterner off the “Wheaties Box.” As Jim Naureckas asked, “Could any war criminal ask to be remembered more fondly?” Rumsfeld’s reputation as the war visionary remained unsullied even in the face of an enemy who wanted to surrender, and later won. The *Times* makes no call for holding military planners accountable for squandering life and funding that could have been used to save the people and the planet. Instead, the pullout quote laments, “A need for revenge may have blinded officials to a more prudent path.” And this may be the biggest lie of all.

### **These are Resource Wars**

The grand simplicity of the war on terror is the fundamental claim that it was launched to fight terrorism. Though plenty of evidence should have shaken this certainty long ago, it continues to be the sole explanation for waging the war on terror in corporate media. There is now ample documentation of the events, planning and opportunistic reasons that together offer a very different narrative for the war. The launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in the days following 9/11 had another purpose and origin. In fact, as Behan writes, “within 10 days of taking office the Bush administration had already formalized a decision to invade Iraq,” so that invasion had little to do with terrorism. These were resource wars. The objectives were a pipeline right-of-way across Afghanistan for the Unocal Corporation, and then preemptive access to Iraqi oil. 9/11 offered a spectacular

covering alibi and President Bush declared a “war on terrorism” and launched his premeditated wars, according to Behan.

These assertions match those made by former FBI special agent Coleen Rowley who famously wrote the 2002 Memo to then FBI Director Robert Mueller, which revealed the failure of the FBI to act on information it had, and the “agonizing truth, that the horrible terrorist attacks of that day could have been easily prevented.” Since then more facts have come to light about the CIA, and what it knew. CIA agents had been monitoring key Al Qaeda figures for a couple of years and knew that the terrorists who would become 9/11 hijackers were in the country, “but they kept those facts secret from other counter-terrorism agencies.” In addition, the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, had been briefed with a “Fundamentalist Learns to Fly” PowerPoint weeks before the attacks. Rowley notes that Tenet, “later could not explain why as head of all U.S. national security intelligence, he still took no action.” Though these failures to “connect the dots,” could easily have been addressed and corrected, “massive cover-ups ensued after 9-11. Nearly all U.S. political figures and other officials in Washington would bury the truth, fight accountability and even lie in order to institute their pre-determined agendas, long planned to commence after a ‘new Pearl Harbor’ pretext.” Though, as Patrick Cockburn writes, “9/11 was a Saudi-led operation through and through,” (15 out of 19 of the hijackers were Saudi nationals) only recently has the US government agreed to declassify information about the Saudis’ role in the terrorist attack. The US “special relationship” with the oil-rich country continues to this day.

As Rowley argues, stifling dissent and hiding the truth allowed Bush and the military to launch “the misbegotten, counter-productive ‘global war on terrorism’” that would lead to “successive wars on Mideastern countries” and “take the lives of millions but had no chance of reducing terrorism or spreading democracy.” That would not have succeeded without active media corporate complicity.

By the end of 2001 the US could have won an easy victory over the Taliban that would have ensured the fighting force was disbanded and no longer a military threat. Bin Laden would have been handed over and the women of Afghanistan freed from oppression and incorporated into civic life—had the stated objectives truly been the reasons for war. As Behan argues, “George Bush was fighting a war for oil and empire, and victory would pose a huge tactical difficulty: with no enemy to fight he would have to demobilize his forces in the Mideast and bring them home.” But the big prize, Iraqi oil, “had yet to be won, so the fighting in the Mideast would have to be sustained — as a “war on terrorism”



— until the invasion of Iraq could be planned, authorized by Congress, and sold to the American people.” Thus, did military planners dismiss the Taliban’s offer and continue the war — for 20 years. Today U.S. combat troops remain stationed in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, Turkey, the Philippines and Cyprus, and America conducts counterterrorism operations in 61 additional countries around the world. To date the true costs of the global war on terror are \$8 trillion dollars and a million lives. Yet terror group around the world are five times more prolific than they were in 2001, and violent domestic terrorism now tops the list of terror threats to Americans.

### **The Game of Empire: Good Muslims, Bad Muslims**

In *Consortium News*, long time journalist John Pilger who has written about war in the Middle East, considers Afghanistan and the post-9/11 wars in the context of Western Imperialism. Back when the CIA lead the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, it recruited and bribed armed tribal and religious Islamicists from all over the Muslim world who came to be known as the *mujahedeen*. They were trained in camps in Pakistan run by the CIA and Britain’s MI6. “Others were recruited at an Islamic College in Brooklyn, New York – within sight of the doomed Twin Towers. One of the recruits was a Saudi engineer called Osama bin Laden.”

Islamic fundamentalists were used in the proxy war to destabilize the Soviet Union. This was done with no regard for the future of the Afghan people, as Pilger writes, “In August 1979, the U.S. embassy in Kabul reported that “the United States’ larger interests ... would be served... *despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan*.” Pilger lays out this game of empire, quoting the viceroy of India, Lord Curzon in 1898, when he proclaimed people and countries are seen as “pieces on a chessboard, upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world.” Lord Curzon was referring to Afghanistan. A century later, the words of Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed similar imperial aspirations after 9/11 when he said, “This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.”

In 1985, Ronald Reagan referred to the Afghan Mujahideen, as freedom fighters, and the film “Rambo III,” (1988) depicts the Rambo fighting with the brave Mujahideen. Deepa Kumar points out the ways in which Muslims are portrayed in media, in a complex and contradictory process where “good Muslims” are “cast as those who further U.S. interests,” and “bad Muslims,” are those who oppose it. As Kumar states, the roots of

Islamophobia in the U.S. lie “in the political, economic, and geo-strategic interests that the U.S. has in the region, particularly the flow of oil.” In other words, US imperial discourse activates Islamophobia as determined by the needs of empire.

George Bush launched a war for oil and empire. In doing so he violated international law. The war on terror has proven to be a colossal and costly failure, but its military planners and perpetrators remain the objects of media admiration. A report from the Institute for Policy Studies calculates that the total “cost of US militarization since 9/11 is a staggering \$21 trillion.” To date there has been no accountability for wars’ failures, for the trillions of dollars and the lives of 4,400 US service people, and no accountability for the atrocities perpetrated on the people of Middle East. Corporate media bitterly denounce President Biden, yet they give George W. Bush and the wars of empire a pass. US wars are still killing and starving people around the world. They are profitable for a few elites, the military-media-industrial-complex and the extractive industries, but they never result in peace and stability, and they rob the rest of the country of its wealth and well-being. Will corporate media ever learn what President Biden now seems willing to contemplate—that there may be no winners in the game of empire?

*Robin Andersen is Professor Emerita at Fordham University. Her latest book is Death in Paradise: How a Popular TV Show Tapped into an Ancient Narrative.*

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