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Bringing Freedom and Prosperity to Afghanistan

by James Bovard,
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The Obama administration is seeking to rechristen the Afghan debacle it inherited from the Bush administration. Obama's efforts to legitimize the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan simply ignore the previous record of American actions in that nation. But the past debacles ensure the failure of Obama's ramped-up interventions.

Afghanistan was recently judged to be the second most corrupt nation on Earth. According to Transparency International, the only place in the world that is more corrupt is Somalia — a nation best known for its pirates. The *Washington Post* reported last November that one of Afghanistan's top ministers took a \$30 million bribe to give a special deal to a Chinese mining company. The *New York Times* reported, "Everything seems to be for sale: public offices, access to government services, even a person's freedom."

And yet, Americans are supposed to believe that sending in more troops will morally redeem the Karzai regime. Unfortunately, that is the message that the American media often trumpet — following the White House script, the way they have done since 2001.

U.S. government handouts have enabled the Afghan government to increase repression of the Afghan people. The U.S. government has poured billions of dollars into building up the Afghan army. But Afghan soldiers are often a pox on their countrymen. Human Rights Watch reported that government

troops and police in many parts of the [southeast] region, and parts of Kabul itself, are invading private homes, usually at night, and robbing and assaulting civilians. By force or by ruse, soldiers and police gain entry into homes and hold people hostage for hours, terrorizing them with weapons, stealing their valuables, and sometimes raping women and girls. On the roads and at proliferating official and unofficial checkpoints, local soldiers and police extort money from civilians under the threat of beating or arrest.

U.S. aid is supposedly going to generate the prosperity that leads to Afghan freedom. And yet, even within a couple years after the U.S. invasion, foreign aid was floundering in Afghanistan, just as it almost always does elsewhere.

On December 16, 2003, dignitaries from the U.S. government, the Afghan provisional government, the United Nations, and other organizations gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony. President Bush issued a statement from Washington bragging that

the first phase of paving the Kabul-Kandahar leg of the highway is completed under budget and ahead of schedule. This new road reduces travel time between Kabul to Kandahar to five hours. It will promote political unity between Afghanistan's provinces, facilitate commerce by making it easier to bring products to market, and provide the Afghan people with greater access to health care and educational opportunities.

Though the announcement and the ceremony were widely portrayed in the U.S. media as a triumph for the Bush administration, the reality was less cheery. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that "it took hundreds of U.S. and Afghan troops, backed by attack helicopters, antitank weapons, snipers and bomb-sniffing dogs, to make it safe for President Hamid Karzai to cut the ribbon on the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway." Prior to the signing ceremony, "troops set up roadblocks to stop traffic in both directions for more than three hours. That was just long enough for dignitaries to arrive in heavily guarded convoys and on Chinook helicopters, celebrate a job well done and rush back to safer ground in Kabul, the capital, 25 miles northeast."

The trip from Kabul to Kanda-har is faster now — unless a person gets killed or kidnapped along the way. Andrew Natsios, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, bragged, "We built this road right through a war zone." But the road is doing nothing to end the war. Though the road itself is a vast improvement over the horribly potholed road first built by the United States in the 1960s, the *Chicago Tribune* noted that "all but about 40 miles of it are off-limits to the United Nations agencies and international aid workers" because of the high risk of attacks. The soaring crime rate can make the road too perilous even for Afghan taxi drivers.

Despite the dismal failure of U.S. foreign aid to Afghanistan during the Bush administration, the Obama administration's promises of redemptive aid are usually taken at face value by most of the American media. Neither the media nor the White House has shown a learning curve.

The blessings of liberty?

Another defense of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan is that it will bring the blessings of freedom to the long-suffering Afghan people. But that is the same charade that the Bush administration used — very successfully for his 2004 reelection campaign.

In a February 5, 2004, speech in Charleston, South Carolina, Bush declared, “Thanks to the United States and our friends, thanks to the bravery of many of our fellow citizens ... Afghanistan is a free country.” Bush also asserted that the United States “liberated the ... Afghan people from oppression and fear.” But it takes more than the abolition of weekly public executions in the Kabul soccer stadium to make Afghans free. If freeing people were as simple as toppling a bad government, almost all of the people in the world would have long since been free.

Bush’s proclamation that Afghans were free provides more insight into his concept of freedom than it does into the daily sufferings of Afghans at the hands of their government. The U.S. State Department noted in 2004,

Arbitrary arrest and detention are serious problems.... Procedures for taking persons into custody and bringing them to justice followed no established code.... Limits on lengths of pretrial detention were not respected....

... There were credible reports that some detainees were tortured to elicit confessions while awaiting trial.

On the bright side, the State Department noted that “defendants ... were permitted attorneys in some instances.”

Unfortunately, the Afghans were receiving the same type of freedom that Bush was creating for Americans. The Afghan government created a National Security Court to try terrorist cases and other cases but did not disclose any details on how the court would actually function. The new court provided the appearance of a judiciary while permitting maximum political manipulation of charges and verdicts. The Karzai government also expanded the number of judges on the Afghan Supreme Court from 9 to 137. Even Franklin Roosevelt’s 1937 scheme to pack the U.S. Supreme Court was timid in comparison.

Freedom has been flattening for some Afghans unlucky enough to live near high-ranking government officials. The State Department reported, “Government forces demolished homes and forcibly removed populations from and around the homes of high government officials and other government facilities, without any judicial review. Police officers, led by Kabul Chief of Police Salangi, destroyed the homes of more than 30 families in Kabul.” The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission has “investigated and registered” hundreds of cases of “police arbitrarily destroying homes.”

Freedom of speech and freedom of press are sparse in many parts of Afghanistan. The government and political forces have a stranglehold on broadcast media and also dominate much of the print media. The State Department noted, “The State owned at least 35 publications and almost all of the electronic news media. All other newspapers were published only sporadically and for the most part were affiliated with different provincial authorities. Some government officials through political party ties maintained their own communications facilities.” Considering the high rate of illiteracy in Afghanistan, the government broadcast media monopoly ensures that few Afghans will hear a discouraging word — at least regarding their rulers.

The Bush administration followed the usual pattern of touting to the heavens meaningless reforms by its foreign lackeys. In 2004, Bush gushed about the provisional constitution recently approved by a meeting of Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga. Bush bragged that “the people of Afghanistan have written a constitution which guarantees free elections, freedom, full participation in government by women. Things are changing. Freedom is powerful.”

But the new Afghan constitution has thus far had about as much effect on the average Afghan as Stalin’s 1936 constitution, which generously proclaimed a panoply of freedoms, had on the typical Soviet citizen. The Afghan constitution is largely a list of positive-sounding aspirations — the type of public relations slogans that Washington lobbies emit all the time for their foreign clients. The new constitution did little more than provide an applause line for Bush’s speeches.

The Obama administration is following in Bush’s footsteps in its portrayal of the Karzai regime as a legitimate elected government. The election last summer in Afghanistan was one of the most corrupt in the world since the fall of the Soviet bloc. But after it became clear that Karzai was not going to budge from power, the Obama administration decided to treat him as if had won fair and square. That was the same folly that the Johnson administration fell into regarding its South Vietnamese lackeys in 1967. But in the same way that the Vietnamese people were not fooled, the Afghan people are increasingly bitter about both Karzai’s abuses and the fact that the United States is sanctioning their oppressor.

There will be no happy ending to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. By vesting himself in one of Bush’s greatest follies, Obama is destroying his credibility both with Americans and with the world. Who will be the last American soldier to die so that the U.S. president can continue denying his Afghan follies?