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The Nation

Afghanistan Election Fraud and the High Price of Empire

John Nichols

09/10/2009

It is amusing, if remarkable, that there are still some players in Washington who try to maintain the fantasy that Afghan President [Hamid Karzai](#) governs with anything akin to legitimacy.

Karzai, an alleged [oil industry fixer awarded control of his country by occupying powers](#), has always served with strings attached.

And the Afghan people have been quite aware of that fact.

It is true that, at different points over the past eight years, Karzai has enjoyed measures of popular support, thanks to alliances with warlords and drug dealers, the inflaming of ethnic rivalries and an awareness that he was the one distributing all those billions of dollars from the United States.

But, aside from a slick sense of dress, Karzai has never had much going for him in the political department.

So he has, out of instinct and by necessity, relied on fraud to "win" the elections that have kept the Afghan president and his minions in power.

That was not much of a problem during the Bush-Cheney years. The men who assumed control of the United States after losing the 2000 popular vote by more than 500,000 and then shutting down the recount of votes in the contested state of Florida were not going to gripe about the mangling of democratic processes in distant Afghanistan.

But the fantasy is getting harder to maintain now that Bush has retired and Cheney has repositioned himself as the planet's primary defender of torture.

So we get the "news" -- not from the satirical *Onion* but from the nation's newspaper of record -- that US officials are trying to prevent Karzai from declaring "victory" in the exercise in fraud that naive commentators still insist on referring to as an election.

The *Times* was as delicate as possible in reporting the predicament:

WASHINGTON -- On Monday, as the vote-counting in Afghanistan was nearing an end, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was briefed by the American ambassador in Kabul, Karl W. Eikenberry. The same day, the ambassador delivered a blunt message to the front-runner, President Hamid Karzai: "Don't declare victory."

The slim majority tentatively awarded Mr. Karzai in Afghanistan's fraud-scarred election has put the Obama administration in an awkward spot: trying to balance its professed determination to investigate mounting allegations of corruption and vote-rigging while not utterly alienating the man who seems likely to remain the country's leader for another five years.

Another way of putting it might be to say that US officials are finding it increasingly difficult to construct a rationale for allowing the man they put in charge of Afghanistan to remain in charge of Afghanistan.

This is not a new problem.

Colonial powers have faced these challenges throughout history.

It is one of the wages of empire.

And that's the problem with the US presence in Afghanistan.

While it may have been initiated with a practical purpose -- to hunt down the plotters of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and to rid the country of its terrorist-friendly Taliban leaders -- and while it may have been reimagined as an experiment in the sort of "nation building" that presidential candidate George Bush once decried, this imperial endeavor has ended up as imperial endeavors invariably do.

The United States, a country founded with the purpose of breaking the chains of empire, has gotten into the dirty business of constructing and maintaining them.

The machinations required to maintain Hamid Karzai in a position to enrich himself and his favored warlords -- even when it involves making excuses for electoral fraud and worse -- are precisely the sort of "entangling alliance" about which George Washington warned in his farewell address to a young nation.

This is what Secretary of State John Quincy Adams pledged to avoid when he told the Congress in 1821 that:

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will (America's) heart, her benedictions and her prayers be.

But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.

She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.

She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

America has drifting far from the moorings of her establishment.

The continued occupation of Afghanistan provides evidence of how far.

But it also does something else.

It provides a pivot point.

Those who would have America return to the most fundamental, the most essential, of her founding values with regard to foreign policy should see Afghanistan as the starting point for a renewal of those values.

The work of extracting US troops from that distant land -- and from the service of Hamid Karzai's fraudulent presidency -- is, of course, about Afghanistan. But it is also about America.

How do we pursue it?

Aggressively.

If our representatives in the House have not signed on to Massachusetts Congressman Jim McGovern's resolution to ["require the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to Congress outlining the United States exit strategy for United States military forces in Afghanistan."](#) they need to be encouraged to join the 97 current cosponsors. This is a bipartisan measure and many of the newest cosponsors are conservative Republicans, so don't fall into the trap of thinking that only progressive Democrats care about bringing the troops home.

If our senators are not siding with Wisconsin Democrat Russ Feingold, who has called for [a flexible timetable to bring the troops home](#), tell them to join with their colleague to challenge the Obama administration's wrongheaded surges of more troops into a quagmire.

If our news media fails to tell the full story on the nightmarish turns that the occupation has taken, tune in to the Brave New Foundation's terrific [Rethink Afghanistan](#) project. And read [Tom Hayden's smart analysis](#), with its unblinking assessment of the administration missteps.

Hayden reminds us that: "August was the cruelest month for American forces in Afghanistan, with at least 49 killed, not including possible last-minute reports. The August numbers exceeded the previous high of 43 in July, as a result of the new escalation of fighting approved by President Obama. The President is expected to approve another troop increase shortly, which will inevitably increase American casualty rates in the 18-24 months of "hard fighting" forecast by the Pentagon. At a rate of 45 American deaths per month, the toll on Obama's watch would be 1,080 additional American deaths through 2011, as the President heads into a re-election."

Those are unsettling numbers, as are the numbers of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. They call for a renewal of antiwar activism. To make it happen, link up with [Progressive](#)

[Democrats of America](#), [Peace Action](#) and the [Friends Committee on National Legislation](#), all three of which have taken the lead in arguing that those who really care about Afghanistan and America must work to get the United States out of the business of occupying distant lands and propping up puppet presidents.