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Afghanistan's Corruption Conundrum

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Corruption is more and more being built up as our greatest problem in Afghanistan. It's all over the newspapers and the TV. At the epi-center of this corruption, the Kabul Bank we helped create and maintain has run aground and there's talk in the air of a financial bail-out.

Meanwhile, the \$250 million commission created to buy off Taliban fighters is "almost dead," according to a top Afghan official at the commission. We have no trouble giving US tax dollars to the government and banking system in Afghanistan, but we can't seem to get the Taliban to take our money.

"In Kabul, politics is all about money," a prominent Afghan businessman recently told New York Times reporters in a story on the political connections between President Hamid Karzai and the Kabul Bank. It seems the bank gave \$14 million for Karzai's re-election after he agreed to name a bank shareholder's brother – the fearsome Tajik General Muhammad Fahim -- as his vice presidential candidate.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Afghan President Hamid Karzai

Afghan and US leaders are concerned the Kabul Bank mess could unravel the government of Afghanistan. It's a sticky matter for the US, since it helped create both the

Afghan government and the Kabul Bank when it invaded in 2001. Our government has a major capital investment in the whole shebang. Our CIA, military and other US agencies have been hosing in US funds for years.

The Who's Who of Corruption

At this juncture, it's worth reminding ourselves what's really going on here. About a year ago, former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was on MSNBC's Rachel Maddow Show. She apparently knows Brzezinski's daughter, so it was a loose, friendly conversation. Maddow earnestly asked Brzezinski to comment on the corruption in Afghanistan. Brzezinski paused, then chuckled.

“But Rachel. What about the corruption in Washington?”

It was one of those unplanned remarks that suddenly flung open locked doors and shuttered windows. Yeh, what about the corruption in Washington, the town the infamous Philly Congressman Ozzie Myers summed up this way: “In this town, money talks and bullshit walks.”

So why should we be aghast, after invading and occupying Afghanistan, to find out “politics is all about money” in Afghanistan?

The greasing of the wheels of politics in Washington is certainly more sophisticated and smoother than it is in Kabul. But let's not kid ourselves, it's all part of the same cesspool. Utilizing their best natural instincts, our loyal allies in Kabul have used our guidance and US tax dollar generosity to create an incredible infrastructure of mutual back-scratching and power-sharing. They also lined up some really cool villas in Dubai.

The real problem in Afghanistan for the US government in its determined world domination posture is not, as so many now like to complain, one of corruption. Corruption -- as we've seen historically in Central America, Vietnam and a host of other places -- is not something the United States is concerned about as long as the corrupt element is in synch with the interests of US policy makers.

All we have to do is recall Franklin Roosevelt's comment on the English-speaking gangster-President of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza. “He may be a bastard, but he's our bastard.”

No. The problem in Afghanistan is that the corruption that up until now has been fine with the US -- even funded and encouraged -- is now so pervasive and so evident and alienating for the ordinary Afghan citizen that it is making the Taliban and other insurgent elements look good.

Once again, the United States has used its great wealth and power to nurture a monster that, in the end, has become its own worst enemy. As Pogo put it, “I’ve met the enemy and the enemy is us.” It would be comical if it were not so gravely serious.

Allowing Wisdom to Happen

Andrew Bacevich opens his new, magnificent book *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* with a tale of himself as an Army colonel on a research mission into the former East Germany, part of the Cold War enemy that loomed over his entire career. He describes how the scales fell from his eyes.

“How could I have so profoundly misjudged the reality of what lay on the far side of the Iron Curtain?” he asked himself. But then that was only the half of it. “Far worse than misperceiving ‘them’ was the fact that I misperceived ‘us’ ”

He refers to himself as a “slow learner,” the truth hitting him in his forties. “Worldly ambition inhibits true learning,” he writes. “A young man in a hurry is nearly uneducable. ...All that counts is that he is going somewhere. Only as ambition wanes does education become a possibility.”

That same personal epiphany applies, he says, to the nation as it pursues a state of permanent war on what amounts to the global front lines of what was begun as westward Manifest Destiny centuries ago. This drive to control is our “worldly ambition,” the thing that “inhibits true learning” and precludes the humility it takes to see what is being done in our names as Americans, often dishonestly and in secret.

“If change is to come, it must come from the people,” Bacevich writes. “Yet unless Americans finally awaken to the fact that they’ve been had, Washington will continue to have its way.”

Without this soul-searching change, there will be no meaningful national jobs programs; there will be no needed infrastructure maintenance; there will be no domestic Marshall Plan pursuing alternative energy application; and we will continue to fall behind in educating our youth for the future.

We are now on the verge of bailing out crooks in an Afghan banking system that crashed, just like the economic crisis here, due to irresponsible loans and real estate boondoggles. Just like we did here, we will be bailing out the fat-cat crooks who caused the crisis. And just like here, the poor and working people will suffer.

We will bail the government out in Afghanistan, as Bacevich and Brzezinski make clear, because of our own blinding ambition, drive and corruption – and because we know, if we don’t bail them out in a crisis like this, we will be disempowering them and empowering the Afghan insurgency.

It could be different.

Instead of endorsing permanent militarism, President Obama could take a tact in line with Bacevich's well-developed thinking. He could use his bully pulpit to educate, "summoning Americans to take on the responsibilities of an active and engaged citizenship ... confronting illusions (and) dissecting contradictions."

If the American people don't have the courage for such soul searching, Bacevich and others predict disaster ahead. The current Afghan corruption conundrum should be a warning.

As is unfortunately our government's inclination, choosing to get tough on only the corruption that's inconvenient