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Why Did the United States Invade Afghanistan?

by Tim Kelly
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The tenth anniversary of the U.S. led war in Afghanistan came and went with very little attention from the mainstream media. U.S. policymakers are nevertheless confronted with many questions regarding that conflict, such as its affordability, the effectiveness of various strategies, and even whether U.S. forces should remain in that country at all.

Those are all important issues, but the one question I believe to be the most important and fundamental regarding the war probably won't be discussed: Was the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan necessary?

President Obama, who had campaigned as an opponent of the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a war of choice said of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, "This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity."

Obama's words might have made for a good sound bite, but the evidence shows that, like the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan is, indeed, a war of choice.

Many supporters of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan argue that even if the military campaign has turned into a quagmire, the initial attack was a just and necessary response to 9/11. Perhaps President Obama provided the best summary of this position in a speech at West Point. Obama said:

We did not ask for this fight. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men hijacked four airplanes and used them to murder nearly 3,000 people. They struck at our military and economic nerve centers. They took the lives of innocent men, women and children without regard to their faith or race or station.... As we know, these men belonged to al Qaeda a group of extremists who have distorted and defiled Islam.... After the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Laden — we sent our troops into Afghanistan

Here we have the conventional view: The 9/11 attacks were carried out by 19 fanatical Muslims acting on the orders of Osama bin Laden, the founder and leader of al-Qaeda, who was being given sanctuary by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; and the invasion became necessary when they stubbornly refused to turn him over to U.S. authorities.

The Bush administration then commenced a bombing campaign and invasion of Afghanistan, asserting the need to capture or kill bin Laden and crush his terrorist organization so that they could not launch another deadly attack on the American homeland.

The problem with this narrative is that the claim that the Taliban had stubbornly refused to turn over bin Laden is not true.

CNN reported on September 21, 2001,

The Taliban ... refused to hand over bin Laden *without proof or evidence* that he was involved in last week's attacks on the United States. ... The Taliban ambassador to Pakistan ... said Friday that deporting him *without proof* would amount to an "insult to Islam." (emphasis added)

CNN also provided an explanation for the Taliban's "refusal," reporting: "Bin Laden himself has already denied he had anything to do with the attacks, and Taliban officials repeatedly said he could not have been involved in the attacks."

So the Taliban were not really refusing to turn him over but rather were demanding certain conditions be satisfied before they did so. That is not unusual. Governments routinely have evidentiary standards that must be met before they grant an extradition request. Bush, however, was not in a diplomatic mood, and he told the Taliban "the demands were not open to negotiation or discussion."

The refusal by the Bush administration to put any evidence on the table made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the Taliban to turn bin Laden over. *The Washington Post* [ran a story](#) in October 2001 that quoted Milton Bearden, a former CIA official, who said the Taliban needed a "face-saving formula." While the Bush administration was saying, "Give up bin Laden," the Taliban were saying, "Do something to help us give him up."

Even after the U.S. bombs began falling in October, the Taliban tried to negotiate by offering to turn bin Laden over to a third country if the United States would cease hostilities and provide evidence of his guilt. But Bush remained adamant, saying, "There's no need to discuss innocence or guilt. We know he's guilty." London's *Guardian*, reporting on this story, printed an article entitled "[Bush Rejects Taliban Offer To Hand Bin Laden Over.](#)"

Why was the Bush administration so stubbornly opposed to meeting the Taliban's reasonable demand that they release at least some of the copious evidence they claimed to have gathered against bin Laden? After all, such a gesture might have spared the United States and her NATO allies, and the people of Afghanistan, the costs and consequences of a war that is now entering its eleventh year.

Well, the answer to that question could be that U.S. officials might well have lacked solid evidence of bin Laden's complicity notwithstanding their certainty that he was behind the attacks. Certainly, the U.S. government has never shown such evidence to the American people.

Let's review how the Bush administration presented its case against Osama bin Laden after 9/11.

Here is what Secretary of State Colin Powell said during a September 23, 2001, appearance on *Meet the Press*:

QUESTION: Are you absolutely convinced that Usama bin Laden was responsible for this attack?

SECRETARY POWELL: I am absolutely convinced that the al-Qaida network, which he heads, was responsible for this attack. You know, it's sort of al-Qaida — the Arab name for it is “the base” — it's something like a holding company of terrorist organizations that are located in dozens of countries around the world, sometimes tightly controlled, sometimes loosely controlled. And at the head of that organization is Usama bin Laden. So what we have to do in the first phase of this campaign is to go after al-Qaida and go after Usama bin Laden. But it is not just a problem in Afghanistan; it's a problem throughout the world. That's why we are attacking it with a worldwide coalition.

QUESTION: Will you release publicly a white paper, which links him and his organization to this attack, to put people at ease?

SECRETARY POWELL: We are hard at work bringing all the information together, intelligence information, law enforcement information. And I think, in the near future, we will be able to put out a paper, a document, that will describe quite clearly the evidence that we have linking him to this attack. And also, remember, he has been linked to earlier attacks against US interests and he was already indicated for earlier attacks against the United States.

The next day there were banner headlines appearing in newspapers across the country telling Americans of the Bush administration's imminent report on bin Laden's guilt. *The New York Times* [ran a story](#) citing a government official who claimed evidence “reaches from the southern tip of Manhattan to the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan.”

But by the following day, the Bush administration was backpedaling. The White House press secretary, Ari Fleischer, said there were no plans to produce a report and that Powell's remarks had been “misinterpreted.” At a joint press conference with President Bush, Secretary Powell withdrew his pledge, saying that “most of the evidence” is classified.

Within days, all mention of the promised “white paper” had disappeared from the news media, which continued to credulously repeat the U.S. government’s narrative of events.

Investigative journalist [Seymour Hersh](#), citing officials from the Department of Justice and the CIA, said the real reason the Bush administration reneged on its pledge to release the evidence was a “lack of solid information.”

Further questions were raised regarding the U.S. government’s charges against Osama bin Laden by the FBI’s [Most Wanted Terrorists](#) webpage. While the page mentioned bombings in Kenya and Tanzania as terrorist acts for which bin Laden was wanted, it made no mention of the 9/11 attacks. When the FBI was asked about this conspicuous omission, [Rex Tomb](#), the Bureau’s chief of investigative publicity replied: “The reason why 9/11 is not mentioned on Osama bin Laden’s Most Wanted page is because the FBI has no hard evidence connecting bin Laden to 9/11.”

So, the U.S. government’s case against Osama bin Laden was not good enough to take to court, but it was good enough to take the country to war, a war that has killed or maimed countless people who had absolutely nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. The anger arising from the invasion and occupation of the country has created a perpetual supply of terrorist recruits, enabling U.S. officials to use the never-ending “war on terror” to eviscerate the Bill of Rights. And we now have a president who asserts the authority to kill off any person he deems a “threat.” I submit that this claim of unaccountable power represents a far greater threat to the peace and security of the country than any terrorist or group of terrorists could ever pose.

Surveying the evidence, it is clear the Bush administration did not even come close to exhausting its diplomatic options in the fall of 2001 and that some other route could have been chosen to respond to the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, the invasion of Afghanistan did not even succeed in its principal goal: the capturing or killing of Osama bin Laden. According to the U.S. government, that mission was accomplished almost ten years later by a team of Navy Seals in an operation lasting only a few hours ... in neighboring Pakistan.