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Afghanistan: Now It Can Be Told . . . After All the Harm Has Been Done

This week, the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. government made war in Afghanistan while helping to “recruit, train and pay for lawless bands of militias that pillaged homes and laid waste to entire communities.” Those militias “tortured civilians, kidnapped for ransom, massacred dozens in vendetta killings and razed entire villages, sowing more than a decade of hatred toward the Afghan government and its American allies.”

Written by a former Kabul bureau chief for the *Times*, the article appeared under a headline saying that “U.S.-backed militias” in Afghanistan were “worse than the Taliban.”

Now they tell us.

The new reporting made me think of a chapter in my book *War Made Invisible* titled “Now It Can Be Told.” Here’s an excerpt:

* * *

Timing is crucial in media and politics — and never more so than when war is at stake. It’s completely unsatisfactory for journalists to toe the war line for years and then finally report, in effect: *Now it can be told — years too late.*

Virtually the entire U.S. media establishment gave full-throated support to the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in early October 2001. Twenty years later, many of the same outlets were saying the war was ill-conceived and doomed from the start.

Immediately after the invasion of Iraq began in March 2003, with very few exceptions, even the mainstream news organizations that had been expressing trepidation or opposition swung into line to support the war effort. Two decades later, many of the same media outlets were calling the invasion of Iraq the worst U.S. foreign-policy blunder in history.

But such framing evades the structural mendacity that remains built into the military-industrial complex, with its corporate media and political wings. War is so normalized that its casualties, as if struck by acts of God, are routinely viewed as victims without victimizers, perhaps no more aggrieved than people suffering the consequences of bad weather.

What American policymakers call mistakes and errors are, for others, more aptly described with words like catastrophes and atrocities. Attributing the U.S. wars to faulty judgment — not premeditated and hugely profitable aggression — is expedient, setting the policy table for supposed resolve to use better judgment next time rather than challenging the presumed prerogative to attack another country at will.

When the warfare in Afghanistan finally ended, major U.S. media — after avidly supporting the invasion and then the occupation — were awash in accounts of how the war had been badly run with ineptitude or deception from the White House and the Pentagon. Some of the media analysis and commentaries might have seemed a bit sheepish, but news outlets preferred not to recall their prior support for the same war in Afghanistan that they were now calling folly.

A pattern of regret (not to say repentance or remorse) emerged from massive U.S. outlays for venture militarism that failed to triumph in Afghanistan and Iraq, but there is little evidence that the underlying repetition compulsion disorder has been exorcized from America's foreign-policy leadership or major news media, let alone its political economy. On the contrary: the forces that have dragged the United States into an array of wars in numerous countries still retain enormous sway over foreign and military affairs. For those forces, over time, shape-shifting is essential, while the warfare state continues to rule.

The fact that strategies and forms of intervention are evolving, most conspicuously in the direction of further reliance on airpower rather than ground troops, makes the victims of the USA's firepower even less visible to American eyes. This presents a challenge to take a fresh look at ongoing militarism and insist that the actual consequences for people at the other end of U.S. weaponry be exposed to the light of day — and taken seriously in human terms.

Despite all that has happened since President George W. Bush vowed in mid-September 2001 to “rid the world of the evil-doers,” pivotal issues have been largely dodged by dominant U.S. media and political leaders. The toll that red-white-and-blue militarism takes on other countries is not only a matter of moral principles. The United States is also in jeopardy.

That we live in one interdependent world is no longer debatable. Illusions about American exceptionalism have been conclusively refuted by the global climate emergency and the

Covid-19 pandemic, along with the ever-present and worsening dangers of thermonuclear war. On a planet so circular in so many ways, what goes around comes around.

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