

An Inarticulate Imperialism: Dubya, Afghanistan and the American Century.

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From Containing Communism to Combating Terrorism

The first independence day of the post-9/11 era in the United States was celebrated with characteristic patriotism and vigor. Parades, military music, fly-pasts and fireworks were everywhere, and the red-white-and-blue of the American flag impossible to escape. Thanks to strident but unspecific warnings of ‘terrorist attacks’ by state managers, every act of celebration was tinged with a sense of anxiety. Meanwhile, in a faraway village named Kakarak in Afghanistan, a stunned community was trying to make sense of the incredible violence that had burst upon them through the night sky. It was a little after midnight on July 1st, 2002, and wedding celebrations were in full swing. Amidst dancing, music, cups of hot tea and revelry, some of the men were firing off automatic rifles into the air. Suddenly, an American AC-130 plane loomed over the horizon and launched a missile attack on the two adjoining compounds where the wedding was to be held early the next day. 48 civilians including many children were massacred and more than twice that number injured.

As the dust settled after the attack, a familiar story of faulty intelligence, trigger happy over-reaction, stalling, and obfuscation, has emerged on the American side – a story buried in the inside pages of its leading newspapers and hardly covered at all in its more provincial media. Searches of Kakarak by the Americans, in a vain quest to unearth arms caches or anti-aircraft

guns or individuals affiliated with the Al Qaeda or the Taliban – something, anything, that would render the murder of the wedding guests into collateral damage – have proved fruitless so far. The villagers are bewildered at the attack as they see themselves as among the earlier supporters of the new President Hamid Karzai, and as potential targets of the rump Taliban still afoot in Afghanistan.¹

The horrendous attacks of September 11th, 2001, on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon demand a police, not a military, response that gradually and thoroughly determines the specific organizations responsible for them and then brings them to justice. Such a police response would entail the acquisition of detailed knowledge, intelligence, and penetration of militant organizations over a long period of time. It would rest upon a more long-standing social, political, cultural, and economic intimacy with societies the hijackers originated from. Such intimacy is something that American imperialism has never cared to cultivate with regard to the countries of the middle East and south Asia – and seems even less likely to acquire now than at any time in its history. Instead, the fear of being perceived as weak and indecisive has made the Bush administration launch a war in Afghanistan that makes the death of innocent civilians in Kakarak not so much an aberration as a foretold tragedy. Like the proverbial drunk looking for his keys underneath the street lamp not because he had lost it there but because that's where the light was, the American assault on Afghanistan is more a reflection of what it can do rather than what it ought to do.

I argue that as imperialisms go, the American variant of the last half a century has evolved into an extraordinarily inarticulate and unintelligent one. Even a cursory reading of Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism is sufficient to indicate that erstwhile colonial enterprises (notably the British and French) were accompanied by an assiduous (if also irremediably

orientalist) desire to understand the history, economy, culture, philosophy, society, law, religion, scriptures, and language of the territories they conquered. Such orientalist knowledge turned out to have been often empirically inaccurate and, more perniciously, to have created the very social realities they were ostensibly representing.² Nevertheless there was an impressive intellectual energy, scholastic discipline, will to knowledge, socio-political intimacy, and degree of articulateness that constituted the culture of the imperialism that Said describes. When the book on the intellectual, artistic and socio-cultural accompaniments of contemporary American imperialism is written I fear that it may have all the loquacity of a George W. Bush soundbite, with the accompanying arrant grammar, grade-school vocabulary and a dimwit's sense of history. Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* depiction of the US president as a ditz floating beneath a broad-brimmed Stetson says it all.

The American disinclination for an imperialism that seeks to know its dominions is an enduring one. In earlier times it could be seen in the ideology of isolationism, but even more so in a genealogy that prized its own novelty and distance from the rest of the world. This 'new world' defined itself in opposition to the entangling alliances of the old – with their valorization of antiquity, history, culture and other assorted 'soft' disciplines. A frontier ideology that privileged pragmatism, practicality and, not to put too fine a point on it, a robust anti-intellectualism, was seen as the American way. Ignoring the fact that from the very inception they have been a settler colony that effaced the indigenous population, and thereafter built their country on the back of various forms of slavery, Americans regard themselves as reluctant and inexperienced imperialists, if they see themselves as imperial at all – whereas the best that can be said is that they are certainly the most inarticulate and unself-reflexive of the tribe.

In recent decades (that is to say, after Vietnam) this inarticulate brand of imperialism has come to be accompanied by a war-making strategy that further alienates America from the specifics of the societies it engages with. Since Vietnam, the United States does not wish to deploy any soldiers (let alone scholars or numismatists or linguists) at all – preferring instead bombing raids from up on high in the clouds. Such a bombing-intensive strategy with a quick exit is preceded by a Hannibal-like amassing of superiority in terms of men and materiel over the adversary – the so-called Powell Doctrine. The techniques of waging a sanitized conflict from afar are multiple – smart bombs, satellite imaging, simulations, special forces – and they are all designed to keep America from getting into, learning about, immersing itself in, the societies it seeks to dominate. This is an all-holds-barred wrestling style where you reach out and touch your enemy only through the digitized images on a computer screen. Such a war-making strategy, designed to minimize American casualties and maximize the breadth of destruction (all this talk of precision bombing and surgical strikes notwithstanding), built as it on an already imposing historical inheritance of detached imperialism, makes incidents like the one at Kakarak only a matter of “when” and not of “if”.³

For much of the 20th century, the ideology of American imperialism condensed itself into the slogan of “containment”. Containment precluded the need for serious and complex thought even as it legitimated the political economy of the world’s largest ever military-industrial complex. It was a form of abstraction that served well the American distaste for acquiring systematic knowledge about other social and political contexts. Internationally, containment conflated a diversity of political struggles that sought autonomy – be it the peasant-based revolt against rural hierarchies and Japanese occupation in the China of the 1930s and 1940s, or the anti-colonial and nationalist movement of the Vietnamese of the 1950s, or the Atatürk-inspired

secular Muslim nationalism of the likes of Nasser and Mossadegh, or the anti-gringo, anti-corporate and populist Latin nationalisms of Guatemala, Chile, Cuba, or Nicaragua – into a simplistic and unified category of communism. Once tarred with that brush, the movement in question was deemed worthy of extermination. Domestically, containment delegitimized labor organizations, civil rights movements, anti-war protestors, ecological struggles, and any movement that questioned the corporate capitalist model. It precluded discussion of international or domestic politics except in terms of Manichean categories of light and dark. Political containment was always accompanied by an intellectual “strategy of containment” if by the latter we understand with Frederic Jameson a process that allows its wielders to “... project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient...” and further deludes them into the belief that their thought is “...internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable ... which lies beyond its boundaries.”⁴

If containment was the condensed unwisdom that allowed America to escape the need for complex and articulate thinking about the international social, we now have in the post-cold war era its farcical successor: terrorism. Whether it is Mindanao in the southern Philippines or the intifada in Palestine, the United States is ostensibly against terrorism and for the security of states. This distinction between terrorism and the legitimate rights of sovereign states, a fuzzy distinction at best, can be sustained only by an energetic amnesia. Terrorism, and the use of terrorist organizations, is one of the main weapons in the arsenal of any country’s foreign policy. Support for such anti-statist ‘terrorist’ organizations constituted one of the main means by which the United States and the Soviet Union dealt with each other for over four decades during the Cold War, as the bloody twentieth century and the ubiquity of such proxy wars in every corner of the globe indicate. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that in an era marked by an

unprecedented degree of inter-state alienation and estrangement, terrorism constitutes one of the primary modes by which nation-states are in any contact with each other at all.⁵ A brief tour through the recent history of American involvement in Afghanistan would suffice to demonstrate the veracity of such a claim.

Containment by Terrorism

Faced with the prospect of a collapse of the communist regime in that country, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979. As disaffected factions within the Afghan communists made common cause with various tribal warlords in their fight against Soviet occupation, the Americans sensed an opportunity to ensnare their longtime adversary in a Vietnam of their own. American money and weapons poured into the Afghan resistance via its conduit in neighboring Pakistan. By the mid-1980s nearly a fifth of Afghanistan's twenty-odd millions were refugees – mostly in Pakistan – while thousands of others were either killed or seriously injured in the war. At its height, the Soviet occupation had involved over a 100,000 troops and they would lose more than 15,000 of them during that decade. When the mujahideen succeeded in forcing a Soviet withdrawal in 1989 (soon followed by the political collapse of Gorbachev's Soviet Union and the East bloc as a whole), the Americans turned their backs on both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The initiators of the strategy that inveigled the Soviets into the Afghan quagmire crowed with their success. One of them, Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, recently admitted that US aid to the Afghan mujahideen had begun even before the Soviet invasion. In other words, as in the case of Ethiopia, Somalia, Angola and literally innumerable other contexts, Afghanistan was yet another instance of American containment

through the support of anti-statist ‘terrorism’. Brzezinski’s rhetorical cost-benefit calculus of American involvement in Afghanistan is worth quoting:

What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?⁶

This quote captures succinctly the role that anti-statist ‘terrorists’ played in the execution of a foreign policy of containment. What is also striking about Brzezinski’s boast is its ethnocentric conceit. He, like many others within the United States, cannot conceive of a situation in which the damage done to the societies of South Asia by Soviet and American policy in Afghanistan might be deemed too high a price to pay for the demise of communism – the question is simply dismissed out of hand. What allows Brzezinski the luxury of such a view (expressed before the attacks of 9/11) is simply the hitherto inviolable security of the mainland United States - the possibility of blowback is not even considered.

The policy initiated under Carter and Brzezinski was carried to its logical end by William Casey (the new director of the CIA) and Ronald Reagan. Now, Casey and the CIA, in cahoots with the Saudis and the Pakistani secret service ISI (the Inter-Services Intelligence), found in extremist variants of Islam a tool with which to destabilize not just Afghanistan but the Soviet Union, China, Iran, Kashmir and possibly others in Central and South Asia. Most of the recruits into the mujahideen came from the hundreds of madrasas set up with Saudi money all over Pakistan. ‘Educated’ into an extremely intolerant, narrow, and violent caricature of Islam, these ‘talibs’ (students) would become the Taliban of the mid-1990s who gradually brought all of Afghanistan under their control. Their main underwriters in their formative period had been the Americans and their faithful allies the Saudi regime, including a scion of one its richest industrial

families Osama Bin Ladin. Comprising mainly impoverished pashtuns from Afghanistan and Pakistan, the talibs soon came to include young men from as far afield as Chechnya, the Balkans, northern Africa and China, not to speak of Kashmir. The evidence is overwhelming that Casey and others in the Reagan administration had figured extremist Islam to be their newest weapon for destabilization of some of their enduring adversaries in Central Asia.⁷

The larger picture that lay outside the vision of this myopic strategy of using any means to destabilize one's adversary was what would happen to Afghanistan and to Pakistan in the longer run. The war years had resulted in the Afghan frontier with Pakistan becoming the opium capital of the world, and an arms bazaar wherein weapons ranging from Kalashnikovs and anti-tank weaponry to Stinger missiles were available for the right price. The narcotics and weapons economy (which underwrote the power of the tribal warlords) has proven far more resilient than Soviet occupation and has severely destabilized both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The political equation between civilian regimes on the one hand and the Pakistani military and secret service on the other had been irreversibly changed in favor of the latter as a result of American "aid" to its frontline ally in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The rising dominance of hard-line sections within the Pakistani military and especially of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency has resulted in that country's lurch back to military government, and increasing adventurism in Kashmir. The Indians have done much to further destabilize the situation with their nuclear tests of 1998, and their own politics of Hindu majoritarianism and the alienation of minorities especially in states like Kashmir.

The Pakistanis were interested in ensuring that any post-occupation regime in Afghanistan would be dominated by the ethnic Pashtuns (such as the Taliban) rather than the Tajiks and Uzbeks from the north, or the Iranian influenced Hazaras of the central uplands, who

had all been prominent among the mujahideen factions that fought against the Soviet occupation. These ethnic fractures rose to the fore after the common enemy, the Soviets, had departed. By mid-1995, Afghanistan was a virtual anarchy. The civil war lurched to an end in 1998 with the Taliban establishing its writ all over Afghanistan (to the extent that any regime can do so at all) barring a few pockets at the very border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Their regime was supported by Pakistan, and by Osama bin Ladin and his Al Qaeda who moved to Afghanistan in the summer of 1996. Bin Ladin had broken with the Americans in the early 1990s itself, especially after the Gulf war. He found in Taliban-led Afghanistan the ideal and secure base from which to conduct his global operations – it was a mutually beneficial association, one that included Pakistan's ISI as an important third element in the triangle.

The Americans were largely disinterested in the post-Soviet order of Afghanistan. Staying true to a script written back in the early years of the cold war, having expediently used their Pakistani allies and the mujahideen to serve their ends, they simply turned their backs on South Asia. This time, however, they were forced to revert their attention to that region in a manner unimaginable in earlier decades.

Intelligence, Imperialism and the World after 9/11

Until September 11th, 2001, the United States mainland had had a degree of inviolability that underwrote its imperial indifference to the socio-cultural details of its various adversaries, or the long-term consequences of its foreign policies. Prior American targets for retribution had always been afar – embassies in northern Africa, or Marines in Lebanon, soldiers in Vietnam, or airliners and cruise ships in distant places. The sheer scale and spectacularly mediated nature of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have brought home to the United States that its Olympian detachment from the entailments of its global involvements is no longer

sustainable. This realization is reflected in the aptly named new department for ‘homeland security’ that has been touted. As the surveillance and delivery systems of US weaponry have acquired an awesome reach, there has been a parallel development in the techniques and resources of ‘terrorist’ organizations as well. And just as the hacker and computer security expert are locked in a race wherein one can never sufficiently out-distance the other, the state and the terrorist will have to continuously circle each other looking for a momentary lowering of the guard.

US intelligence about its latest other – the terrorists of Al Qaeda and related organizations inspired by extremist variants masquerading as Islam - is stymied by a problem that cuts to the very core of its detached imperialism. Effective intelligence is, ultimately, human intelligence. During the height of the cold war, for all their differences in ideology, the United States and the Soviet Union met in and as “Europe”. This shared (albeit unequally) culture and race (reduced here entirely to physical attributes) allowed Americans to ‘enter’ the other society, and vice versa, establishing an intelligence equilibrium that created its own habitus of unstated limits and boundaries. (The shock of the Cuban missile crisis was more on account of its departure from this unstated limit than any seismic shift in the nuclear balance of terror as such). All said and done, there was a sociality to superpower interactions during the Cold War that mitigated somewhat the detached character of US imperialism. Having deemed its latest other – terrorist groups claiming to be inspired by Islam - to be ineffably inferior and culturally unapproachable, the United States finds it difficult, if not impossible, to get under its skin – to glean human intelligence, in other words.

The requirement of intimate human intelligence has become extremely pressing at a time when the trajectory of weapons technologies and the much-ballyhooed Revolution in Military

Affairs (RMA) are moving in precisely the opposite direction. As Der Derian argues in his cartography of what he calls the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, our techniques of abstraction have left us increasingly incapable of sustaining distinctions between the real and the simulated, and between video imaging of violent encounters and the actual beast itself. These techniques are moreover premised on a desire to escape specificity and ethnographic knowledge about the other, preferring instead to control and kill from afar. As he notes,

The United States, as unilateral deus ex machina of global politics, is leading the way in this virtual revolution. Its diplomatic and military policies are increasingly based on technological and representational forms of discipline, deterrence, and compulsion that could best be described as “virtuous war.” At the heart of virtuous war is the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance – with no or minimal casualties [of American lives –SK]. Using networked information and virtual technologies to bring “there” here in near real-time and with near-verisimilitude, virtuous war exercises a comparative as well as strategic advantage for the digitally advanced.⁸

The United States government, that mute and inarticulate imperialist at the best of times, finds itself less capable of getting under the skin and into the minds of its adversaries than ever. Such insight, critical for anticipating, deflecting, or detecting, the course of actions of the other cannot be done by technology. It is this lacuna that has channeled the post 9-11 response of the United States administration into a military operation in Afghanistan as distinct from the police operation of detecting and bringing to heel the perpetrators of those acts. The temptation to retreat into the gamed exercises of dancing pixels is more irresistible than ever before. Given the irresistible momentum propelling the strategies of detached and abstract war (basically the entire military-industrial-media-entertainment complex) I suspect we are in for a mimetic spiral of terrorist violence targeted at national symbols followed in turn by American responses that make more Kakaraks inevitable.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Bush administration has since made an apology of sorts to the people of Kakarak, but continues to insist that anti-aircraft attacks were launched from the wedding compound. So far there has been no evidence forthcoming that anything other than exuberant celebrations, including firing bullets into the air, triggered the missile attack.

² See Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993). For a recent depiction of the degree to which colonial knowledge practices constituted (as distinct from reflecting) the social and political reality of the conquered peoples, see Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996). Mamdani shows how institutions today regarded as timelessly African – such as the chief or the tribe – emerged in the colonial encounter and have since corralled the imagination of Africans as they try to live up to these representations of their putative ‘essence’.

³ One indicator of the speciousness of claims about precision bombing can be found in the Gulf war. Once the initial hyperbole of the efficacy of such precisely targeted bombing and the limited extent of collateral damage dissipated, it turned out that over 90% of the American bombs deployed in that war had not been “smart bombs” at all, and that over 70% of all bombs used had missed their targets in any event. Anywhere between 200,000 and 300,000 Iraqis were killed but the one person targeted for death – Saddam Hussein – lives on.

⁴ See Frederic Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): 10, 53. For an elaboration of the way in which such a strategy of intellectual containment has worked to cohere the discipline of international relations, see my recent essay “Race, Amnesia and the Education of International Relations” in Alternatives 26, 4: 401-424 (2001). I can think of no better demonstration of the repressed obverse of containment than that depicted by Stanley Kubrick in the movie “Dr Strangelove: or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb.” Between fluoridation, contamination of bodily fluids, no fighting in the war room, sanctifying corporate property by refusing to steal a coin from a Coke machine in order to save the world, and trying a little tenderness, that movie said it all.

⁵ See James Der Derian, Antidiplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed and War (London: Basil Blackwell, 1992) for a genealogy of estrangement within the nation-states system and the displacement of classical diplomacy by orchestrated insurgencies and mediated terror.

⁶ Brzezinski, as quoted in Pankaj Mishra, “The Making of Afghanistan” in The New York Review of Books 43, 18 (November, 2001): 20.

⁷ Pankaj Mishra, *Ibid.*

⁸ See James Der Derian, Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001): xv. Emphasis original.