

JOHN PILGER

The background of the cover features a silhouette of two people standing on a dark, rounded hill. One person is pointing their right arm towards the sky. The sky is a gradient of warm colors, from dark orange at the bottom to a lighter, hazy orange at the top, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**The Betrayal of
Afghanistan**

ColdType

The Betrayal of Afghanistan

JOHN PILGER

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE GUARDIAN MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 20, 2003

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

www.coldtype.net

October 2003

At the Labour party conference following the September 11 attacks, Tony Blair said memorably: “To the Afghan people, we make this commitment. We will not walk away... If the Taliban regime changes, we will work with you to make sure its successor is one that is broadbased, that unites all ethnic groups and offers some way out of the poverty that is your miserable existence.” He was echoing George Bush, who had said a few days earlier: “The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and its allies. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan. The US is a friend of the Afghan people.”

Almost every word they spoke was false. Their declarations of concern were cruel illusions that prepared the way for the conquest of both Afghanistan and Iraq. As the illegal Anglo-American occupation of Iraq now unravels, the forgotten disaster in Afghanistan, the first “victory” in the “war on terror”, is perhaps an even more shocking testament to power.

It was my first visit. In a lifetime of making my way through places of upheaval, I had not seen anything like it. Kabul is a glimpse of Dresden post-1945, with contours of rubble rather than streets, where people live in collapsed buildings, like earthquake victims waiting for rescue. They have no light and heat; their apocalyptic fires burn through the night. Hardly a wall stands that does not bear the pock-marks of almost every calibre of weapon. Cars lie upended at roundabouts. Power poles built for a modern fleet of trolley buses are twisted like paperclips. The buses are stacked on top of each other, reminiscent of the pyramids of machines erected by the Khmer Rouge to mark Year Zero.

There is a sense of Year Zero in Afghanistan. My footsteps echoed through the once grand Dilkusha Palace, built in 1910 to a design by a British architect, whose circular staircase and Corinthian columns and stone frescoes of biplanes were

celebrated. It is now a cavernous ruin from which reed-thin children emerge like small phantoms, offering yellowing postcards of what it looked like 30 years ago: a vainglorious pile at the end of what might have been a replica of the Mall, with flags and trees. Beneath the sweep of the staircase were the blood and flesh of two people blown up by a bomb the day before. Who were they? Who planted the bomb? In a country in thrall to warlords, many of them conniving in terrorism, the question itself is surreal.

A hundred yards away, men in blue move stiffly in single file: mine-clearers. Mines are like litter here, killing and maiming, it is calculated, every hour of every day. Opposite what was Kabul's main cinema and is today an art deco shell, there is a busy roundabout with posters warning that unexploded cluster bombs "yellow and from USA" are in the vicinity. Children play here, chasing each other into the shadows. They are watched by a teenage boy with a stump and part of his face missing. In the countryside, people still confuse the cluster canisters with the yellow relief packages that were dropped by American planes almost two years ago, during the war, after Bush had prevented international relief convoys crossing from Pakistan.

More than \$10bn has been spent on Afghanistan since October 7 2001, most of it by the US. More than 80% of this has paid for bombing the country and paying the warlords, the former mujahedin who called themselves the "Northern Alliance". The Americans gave each warlord tens of thousands of dollars in cash and truckloads of weapons. "We were reaching out to every commander that we could," a CIA official told the Wall Street Journal during the war. In other words, they bribed them to stop fighting each other and fight the Taliban.

These were the same warlords who, vying for control of Kabul after the Russians left in 1989, pulverised the city, killing 50,000 civilians, half of them in one year, 1994, according to Human Rights Watch. Thanks to the Americans, effective control of Afghanistan has been ceded to most of the same mafiosi and their private armies,

THE BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN

who rule by fear, extortion and monopolising the opium poppy trade that supplies Britain with 90% of its street heroin. The post-Taliban government is a facade; it has no money and its writ barely runs to the gates of Kabul, in spite of democratic pretensions such as the election planned for next year. Omar Zakhilwal, an official in the ministry of rural affairs, told me that the government gets less than 20% of the aid that is delivered to Afghanistan - "We don't even have enough money to pay wages, let alone plan reconstruction," he said. President Harmid Karzai is a placeman of Washington who goes nowhere without his posse of US Special Forces bodyguards.

In a series of extraordinary reports, the latest published in July, Human Rights Watch has documented atrocities "committed by gunmen and warlords who were propelled into power by the United States and its coalition partners after the Taliban fell in 2001" and who have "essentially hijacked the country". The report describes army and police troops controlled by the warlords kidnapping villagers with impunity and holding them for ransom in unofficial prisons; the widespread rape of women, girls and boys; routine extortion, robbery and arbitrary murder. Girls' schools are burned down. "Because the soldiers are targeting women and girls," the report says, "many are staying indoors, making it impossible for them to attend school [or] go to work."

In the western city of Herat, for example, women are arrested if they drive; they are prohibited from travelling with an unrelated man, even an unrelated taxi driver. If they are caught, they are subjected to a "chastity test", squandering precious medical services to which, says Human Rights Watch, "women and girls have almost no access, particularly in Herat, where fewer than one per cent of women give birth with a trained attendant". The death rate of mothers giving birth is the highest in the world, according to Unicef. Herat is ruled by the warlord Ismail Khan, whom US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld endorsed as "an appealing man... thoughtful, measured and self-confident".

“The last time we met in this chamber,” said George Bush in his state of the union speech last year, “the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today, women are free, and are part of Afghanistan’s new government. And we welcome the new minister of women’s affairs, Dr Sima Samar.” A slight, middle-aged woman in a headscarf stood and received the choreographed ovation. A physician who refused to deny treatment to women during the Taliban years, Samar is a true symbol of resistance, whose appropriation by the unctuous Bush was short-lived. In December 2001, Samar attended the Washington-sponsored “peace conference” in Bonn where Karzai was installed as president and three of the most brutal warlords as vice-presidents. (The Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum, accused of torturing and slaughtering prisoners, is currently defence minister.) Samar was one of two women in Karzai’s cabinet.

No sooner had the applause in Congress died away than Samar was smeared with a false charge of blasphemy and forced out. The warlords, different from the Taliban only in their tribal allegiances and religious pieties, were not tolerating even a gesture of female emancipation.

Today, Samar lives in constant fear for her life. She has two fearsome bodyguards with automatic weapons. One is at her office door, the other at her gate. She travels in a blacked-out van. “For the past 23 years, I was not safe,” she told me, “but I was never in hiding or travelling with gunmen, which I must do now... There is no more official law to stop women from going to school and work; there is no law about dress code. But the reality is that even under the Taliban there was not the pressure on women in the rural areas there is now.”

The apartheid might have legally ended, but for as many as 90% of the women of Afghanistan, these “reforms” - such as the setting up of a women’s ministry in Kabul - are little more than a technicality. The burka is still ubiquitous. As Samar says, the plight of rural women is often more desperate now because the ultra-

THE BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN

puritanical Taliban dealt harshly with rape, murder and banditry. Unlike today, it was possible to travel safely across much of the country.

At a bombed-out shoe factory in west Kabul, I found the population of two villages huddled on exposed floors without light and with one trickling tap. Small children squatted around open fires on crumbling parapets: the day before, a child had fallen to his death; on the day I arrived, another child fell and was badly injured. A meal for them is bread dipped in tea. Their owl eyes are those of terrified refugees. They had fled there, they explained, because warlords routinely robbed them and kidnapped their wives and daughters and sons, whom they would rape and ransom back to them.

“During the Taliban we were living in a graveyard, but we were secure,” a campaigner, Marina, told me. “Some people even say they were better. That’s how desperate the situation is today. The laws may have changed, but women dare not leave their homes without the burka, which we wear as much for our protection.”

Marina is a leading member of Rawa, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, a heroic organisation that for years tried to alert the outside world to the suffering of the women of Afghanistan. Rawa women travelled secretly throughout the country, with cameras concealed beneath their burkas. They filmed a Taliban execution and other abuses, and smuggled their videotape to the west. “We took it to different media groups,” said Marina. “Reuters, ABC Australia, for example, and they said, yes, it’s very nice, but we can’t show it because it’s too shocking for people in the west.” In fact, the execution was shown finally in a documentary broadcast by Channel 4.

That was before September 11 2001, when Bush and the US media discovered the issue of women in Afghanistan. She says that the current silence in the west over the atrocious nature of the western-backed warlord regime is no different. We met clandestinely and she wore a veil to disguise her identity. Marina is not her real name.

“Two girls who went to school without their burkas were killed and their dead bodies were put in front of their houses,” she said. “Last month, 35 women jumped into a river along with their children and died, just to save themselves from commanders on a rampage of rape. That is Afghanistan today; the Taliban and the warlords of the Northern Alliance are two faces of the same coin. For America, it’s a Frankenstein story - you make a monster and the monster goes against you. If America had not built up these warlords, Osama bin Laden and all the fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan during the Russian invasion, they would not have attacked the master on September 11 2001.”

Afghanistan’s tragedy exemplifies the maxim of western power - that third world countries are regarded and dealt with strictly in terms of their usefulness to “us”. The ruthlessness and hypocrisy this requires is imprinted on Afghanistan’s modern history. One of the most closely guarded secrets of the cold war was America’s and Britain’s collusion with the warlords, the mojahedin, and the critical part they played in stimulating the jihad that produced the Taliban, al-Qaida and September 11.

“According to the official view of history,” Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national security adviser, admitted in an interview in 1998, “CIA aid to the mojahedin began during 1980, that is, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan... But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise.” At Brzezinski’s urging, in July 1979 Carter authorised \$500m to help set up what was basically a terrorist organisation. The goal was to lure Moscow, then deeply troubled by the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Soviet central Asian republics, into the “trap” of Afghanistan, a source of the contagion.

For 17 years, Washington poured \$4bn into the pockets of some of the most brutal men on earth - with the overall aim of exhausting and ultimately destroying the Soviet Union in a futile war. One of them, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord particularly favoured by the CIA, received tens of millions of dollars. His speciality

THE BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN

was trafficking opium and throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil. In 1994, he agreed to stop attacking Kabul on condition that he was made primeminister - which he was.

Eight years earlier, CIA director William Casey had given his backing to a plan put forward by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, to recruit people from around the world to join the Afghan jihad. More than 100,000 Islamic militants were trained in Pakistan between 1986 and 1992, in camps overseen by the CIA and MI6, with the SAS training future al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in bomb-making and other black arts. Their leaders were trained at a CIA camp in Virginia. This was called Operation Cyclone and continued long after the Soviets had withdrawn in 1989.

"I confess that [countries] are pieces on a chessboard," said Lord Curzon, viceroy of India in 1898, "upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world." Brzezinski, adviser to several presidents and a guru admired by the Bush gang, has written virtually those same words. In his book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, he writes that the key to dominating the world is central Asia, with its strategic position between competing powers and immense oil and gas wealth. "To put it in terminology that harkens back to the more brutal age of ancient empires," he writes, one of "the grand imperatives of imperial geostrategy" is "to keep the barbarians from coming together".

Surveying the ashes of the Soviet Union he helped destroy, the guru mused more than once: so what if all this had created "a few stirred up Muslims"? On September 11 2001, "a few stirred up Muslims" provided the answer. I recently interviewed Brzezinski in Washington and he vehemently denied that his strategy precipitated the rise of al-Qaida: he blamed terrorism on the Russians.

When the Soviet Union finally collapsed, the chessboard was passed to the Clinton administration. The latest mutation of the mojahedin, the Taliban, now ruled Afghanistan. In 1997, US state department officials and executives of the

Union Oil Company of California (Unocal) discreetly entertained Taliban leaders in Washington and Houston, Texas. They were entertained lavishly, with dinner parties at luxurious homes in Houston. They asked to be taken shopping at a Walmart and flown to tourist attractions, including the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida and Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, where they gazed upon the faces of American presidents chiselled in the rockface. The Wall Street Journal, bulletin of US power, effused, “The Taliban are the players most capable of achieving peace in Afghanistan at this moment in history.”

In January 1997, a state department official told journalists in a private briefing that it was hoped Afghanistan would become an oil protectorate, “like Saudi Arabia”. It was pointed out to him that Saudi Arabia had no democracy and persecuted women. “We can live with that,” he said.

The American goal was now the realisation of a 60-year “dream” of building a pipeline from the former Soviet Caspian across Afghanistan to a deep-water port. The Taliban were offered 15 cents for every 1,000 cubic feet of gas that passed through Afghanistan. Although these were the Clinton years, pushing the deal were the “oil and gas junta” that was soon to dominate George W Bush’s regime. They included three former members of George Bush senior’s cabinet, such as the present vice-president, Dick Cheney, representing nine oil companies, and Condoleezza Rice, now national security adviser, then a director of Chevron-Texaco with special responsibility for Pakistan and Central Asia.

Peel the onion of this and you find Bush senior as a paid consultant of the huge Carlyle Group, whose 164 companies specialise in oil and gas and pipelines and weapons. His clients included a super-wealthy Saudi family, the Bin Ladens. (Within days of the September 11 attacks, the Bin Laden family was allowed to leave the US in high secrecy.)

The pipeline “dream” faded when two US embassies in east Africa were bombed and al-Qaida was blamed and the connection with Afghanistan was made. The

THE BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN

usefulness of the Taliban was over; they had become an embarrassment and expendable. In October 2001, the Americans bombed back into power their old warlord friends, the “Northern Alliance”. Today, with Afghanistan “liberated”, the pipeline is finally going ahead, watched over by the US ambassador to Afghanistan, John J Maresca, formerly of Unocal.

Since it overthrew the Taliban, the US has established 13 bases in the nine former Soviet central Asian countries that are Afghanistan’s resource-rich neighbours. Across the world, there is now an American military presence at the gateway to every major source of fossil fuel. Lord Curzon would never recognise his great game. It’s what the US Space Command calls “full spectrum dominance”.

It is from the vast, Soviet-built base at Bagram, near Kabul, that the US controls the land route to the riches of the Caspian Basin. But, as in that other conquest, Iraq, all is not going smoothly. “We get shot at every time we go off base,” said Colonel Rod Davis. “For us, that’s a combat zone out there.”

I said to him, “But President Bush says you liberated Afghanistan. Why should people shoot at you?”

“Hostile elements are everywhere, my friend.”

“Is that surprising, when you support murderous warlords?” I replied.

“We call them regional governors.” (As “regional governors”, warlords such as Ismail Khan in Herat are deemed part of Karzai’s national government - an uneasy juxtaposition. Karzai has pleaded with Khan to release millions of dollars of customs duty.)

The war that expelled the Taliban never stopped. Ten thousand US troops are stationed there; they go out in their helicopter gunships and Humvees and blow up caves in the mountains or they target a village, usually in the south-east. The Taliban are coming back in the Pashtun heartland and on the border with Pakistan. The level of the war is not independently known; US spokesmen such as Colonel Davis are the sources of news reports that say “50 Taliban fighters were killed by

US forces". Afghanistan is now so dangerous that it is virtually impossible for reporters to find out.

The centre of US operations is now the "holding facility" at Bagram, where suspects are taken and interrogated. Two former prisoners, Abdul Jabar and Hakkim Shah, told the New York Times in March how as many as 100 prisoners were "made to stand hooded, their arms raised and chained to the ceiling, their feet shackled, unable to move for hours at a time, day and night". From here, many are shipped to the concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay.

They are denied all rights. The Red Cross has been allowed to inspect only part of the "holding facility"; Amnesty has been refused access altogether. In April last year, a Kabul taxi driver, Wasir Mohammad, whose family I interviewed, "disappeared" into Bagram after he inquired at a roadblock about the whereabouts of a friend who had been arrested. The friend has since been released, but Mohammad is now in a cage in Guantanamo Bay. A former minister of the interior in the Karzai government told me that Mohammad was in the wrong place at the wrong time: "He is innocent." Moreover, he had a record of standing up to the Taliban. It is likely that many of those incarcerated at Bagram and Guantanamo Bay were kidnapped for ransoms the Americans pay for suspects.

Why, I asked Colonel Davis, were the people in the "holding facility" not given the basic rights he would expect as an American taken prisoner by a foreign army. He replied: "The issue of prisoners of war is way off to the far left or the right depending on your perspective." This is the Kafkaesque world that Bush's America has imprinted on the recently acquired additions to its empire, real and virtual, rising on new rubble in places where human life is not given the same value as those who perished at Ground Zero in New York. One such place is a village called Bibi Mahru, which was attacked by an American F16 almost two years ago during the war. The pilot dropped a MK82 "precision" 500lb bomb on a mud and stone house, where Orifa and her husband, Gul Ahmed, a carpet weaver, lived. The bomb killed all but Orifa and one son - eight members of her family, including six children.

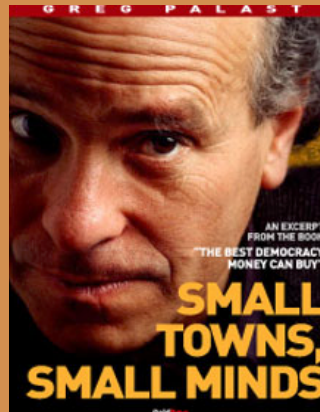
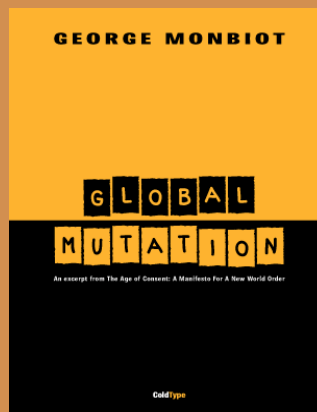
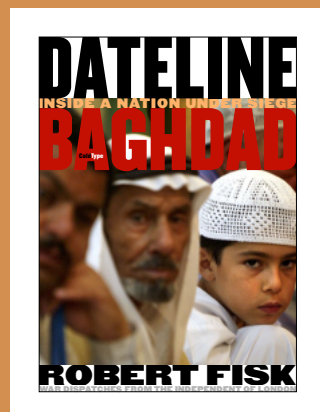
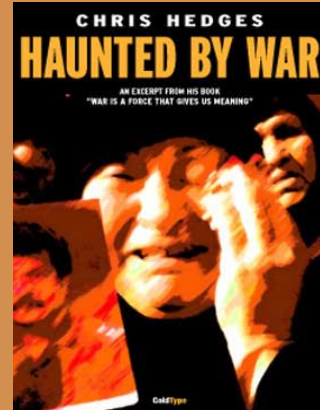
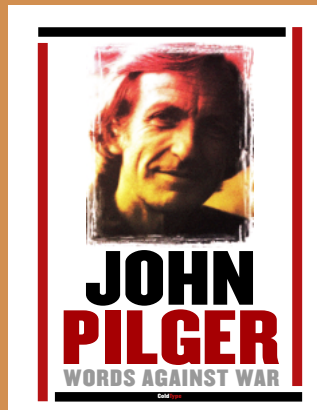
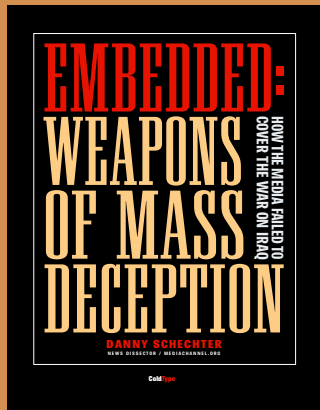
THE BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN

Two children in the next house were killed, too.

Her face engraved with grief and anger, Orifa told me how the bodies were laid out in front of the mosque, and the horrific state in which she found them. She spent the afternoon collecting body parts, “then bagging and naming them so they could be buried later on”. She said a team of 11 Americans came and surveyed the crater where her home had stood. They noted the numbers on shrapnel and each interviewed her. Their translator gave her an envelope with \$15 in dollar bills. Later, she was taken to the US embassy in Kabul by Rita Lasar, a New Yorker who had lost her brother in the Twin Towers and had gone to Afghanistan to protest about the bombing and comfort its victims. When Orifa tried to hand in a letter through the embassy gate, she was told, “Go away, you beggar.”

In May last year, the Guardian published the result of an investigation by Jonathan Steele. He concluded that, in addition to up to 8,000 Afghans killed by American bombs, as many as 20,000 more may have died as an indirect consequence of Bush’s invasion, including those who fled their homes and were denied emergency relief in the middle of a drought. Of all the great humanitarian crises of recent years, no country has been helped less than Afghanistan. Bosnia, with a quarter of the population, received \$356 per person; Afghanistan gets \$42 per person. Only 3% of all international aid spent in Afghanistan has been for reconstruction; the US-led military “coalition” accounts for 84%, the rest is emergency aid. Last March, Karzai flew to Washington to beg for more money. He was promised extra money from private US investors. Of this, \$35m will finance a proposed five-star hotel. As Bush said, “The Afghan people will know the generosity of America and its allies.”

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Download more books, booklets, essays, newspapers and magazines
– all in pdf format, all free of charge – at

www.coldtype.net

(Click on this link to enter web site)

ColdType

Published by ColdType magazine at www.coldtype.net