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Unjust War

by Doug Bandow

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Afghanistan is the sort of country which humanitarian-minded people understandably want to “fix.” It has become a target of aggressive pro-war activists ranging from neoconservatives who believe in remaking other societies at gunpoint to feminists who believe in waging war to improve the status of women.

The latter group belies the common assumption that the Left opposes war. While the Right traditionally resisted imperialistic social engineering around the globe, many on the Left believed military intervention abroad to be a logical extension of its attempt to perfect mankind at home. The roots of liberal war-making are older than today’s militaristic nation-building neoconservatives. Woodrow Wilson more than Theodore Roosevelt is the philosophical father of today’s militaristic crusaders, those willing to kill in the name of promoting democracy.

President Barack Obama appeared to be a liberal hawk in March, when he explained his first troop escalation in Afghanistan: “For the Afghan people, a return to Taliban rule would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people—especially women and girls.”

However, he took a very different tone when announcing his decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan. He sounded much closer to a cautious realist than the crusading George W. Bush ever did. President Obama that “Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda.” He refused to “set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests.”

This disappointed the pro-war Left. Dana Goldstein of The Daily Beast **wrote**:

... a number of prominent women’s and human-rights organizations have declared themselves disappointed—not only by Obama’s choice of words, but, more significantly, by his plan to begin withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan in 18 months, which they say is far too little time to improve the situation markedly and turn women’s rights efforts over entirely to the Afghan government and NGOs.

Explained Sunita Viswanath, founder of Women for Afghan Women (WAW): “When I think of why the U.S. and the world have a moral obligation to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, women are the central issue.” Getting Afghanistan “up on its feet, able to govern, run, and secure itself” simply is not “in the realm of possibility” in the near term, she added. Without a long-term U.S. military commitment, women “will be back in the dark ages.

Esther Hyneman, also with WAW, warned: “If the U.S. left, women would be back in their burkas.” Masuda Sultan, a WAW board member, said a troop surge was “the platform on which everything else can be built.” Indeed: “We have a moral obligation to continue to follow through for Afghan women who have put themselves at risk over the last eight years.”

Palwasha Hassan of the taxpayer-funded U.S. Institute for Peace argued that Washington had an obligation to Afghan women growing out of its support for the mujahideen, some of whom turned into the Taliban. She explained that she wanted more than just troops, “a very holistic approach to Afghanistan-longer-term thinking.” Goldstein quoted Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority Foundation as criticizing the president’s plan: “it’s perplexing, disappointing, and I don’t understand why.”

Obviously, these women do not speak for all feminists, let alone all liberals. Nevertheless, the idea of a feminist military crusade is odd enough in theory. It looks particularly unwise in Afghanistan.

Although women have made “modest” gains since the ouster of the Taliban, in Viswanath’s words, the status of women remains wretched. A new United Nations report concluded that violence against women is “widespread and deeply rooted in Afghan society.” Human Rights Watch (HRW) recently called the status of women “dismal in every area.”

Malalai Joya, a woman attacked by traditionalists for running for parliament, complained to Westerners: “Your governments have replaced the fundamentalist rule of the Taliban with another fundamentalist regime of warlords.”

The Karzai government may not be as bad as the Taliban, but remaining in power is its first priority: if that means working with abusive warlords and accepting traditional social restrictions, so be it. Indeed, reported HRW, “Women will not seek help because of their fears of police abuse and corruption, or their fears of retaliation by perpetrators of violence.”

Some war advocates admit as much, and want the United States to do more to transform Afghanistan. For instance, Zia Moballegh, acting country director for the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, contended: “No real peace and national development are possible without the elimination of violence against women.”

How to achieve that? Rachel Reid of Human Rights Watch argued that Washington must push the Afghan government to make “painful political reforms to address the systematic problems Afghanistan has with its culture of impunity.”

That’s easier said than done, however. What evidence is there that the West can force peace and national development at the point of a gun? The fact that the end is desirable—and, indeed, that many Afghans desire that end—does not mean that it can be achieved through outside intervention. To the contrary, attempting to impose liberal social policies will make respect for women look like a Western import and Afghan officials look like Western puppets. Any gains won in this way would not likely be sustainable over the long-term.

Moreover, escalating the war is not likely to improve the status of women. Defeating the Taliban would be a positive, to be sure, but even after the president’s planned force build-up allied forces will lag far behind the minimum number suggested as necessary by anti-insurgency doctrine to triumph. If the consequence of U.S. policy is to extend the war rather than reach a compromise political settlement, all Afghans are likely to be worse off.

The issue is not one of intentions, but consequences. War is no gentle tool for transnational social engineering. **Observed** Glenn Greenwald of Salon: “the claim that we’re fulfilling some sort of moral responsibility to the plight of Afghans by continuing to occupy, bomb and wage war in their country—and by imprisoning them *en masse* with no charges—is sheer self-glorifying fantasy.”

Most important, the war cannot be justified in feminist terms given the cost to the American people. Viswanath said of the president's speech: "this sounds to us like it isn't a statement of 'we're with the people of Afghanistan for the long-haul or committed to staying with you until you're able to secure and govern yourself.'"

Viswanath apparently wants a potentially limitless commitment to war in Afghanistan irrespective of the cost in lives and money. That's impossible practically and wrong morally.

Even if humanitarian intervention was as effective as its proponents unrealistically assume, it would still have to be balanced against the cost of promiscuous war-making. Ultimately, the lives and wealth of Americans should not be sacrificed unless their own political community has something fundamental at stake in a conflict. Promoting democracy, women's rights, or other liberal values in other societies, though worthy, doesn't warrant war. Which means the president deserves praise for his honesty. Noted Greenwald: "There were no grandiose claims that the justness of the war derives from our desire to defeat evil, tyrannical extremists and replace them with more humane and democratic leaders." Rather, President Obama contended that we are in Afghanistan to protect America. (A dubious contention, but at least he is using the right criteria to judge U.S. intervention.)

Tragically, many nations violate human rights. The status of women is an important value, but not the only, or even most important, measure of liberty. Countries like Burma and North Korea murder, imprison, and brutalize both men and women on a large scale. The behavior of the Taliban, though awful, still lags far behind that of other groups and regimes.

While the United States has a strong interest in promoting human rights for others, it has an even stronger interest in maintaining the peace for its own people. In Afghanistan the situation of women in Afghanistan, though horrid, cannot justify more years of costly war.

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