

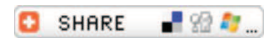
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Gene Healy: Not even our leaders know why we are in Afghanistan

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By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
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It's Bob Woodward season again in Washington, D.C., as the Watergate scribe's latest tome dominates Borders' display racks like the skulls and pumpkins at your local CVS.

"Obama's Wars" is mostly about President Obama's war: Afghanistan, where he's nearly tripled deployments in the ever-enduring Operation Enduring Freedom. Woodward's book hit the shelves as coalition losses passed 550 this year, making 2010 the deadliest yet.

You don't need Woodward's connections to figure out that the Afghan War is a hideous, unwinnable, unnecessary mess. But the Post reporter's stenographic, fly-on-the-wall account of key meetings bolsters the case that the Obama administration should have recognized that from the start.

"We haven't really seen an Arab here in a couple of years," the Afghan theater commander admitted to Vice President Biden early on. Nor was there much reason to believe that the Taliban would risk providing al Qaeda a safe haven if the U.S. left.

Nevertheless, the military brass pushed hard for more troops. We'd have to provide security while we built a government Afghans could trust — and we might only have a year to do it. Unfortunately, the existing government was "a criminal syndicate," Gen. David Petraeus admitted at a meeting in October 2009. Biden, of all people, asked the pertinent question: "If the government's a 'criminal syndicate' a year from now, how will troops make a difference?"

"No one recorded an answer," Woodward reports.

If we leave too soon, though, Obama warned in early 2009, we'd see "denial of human rights to the Afghan people, especially women and girls."

That's what Time Magazine suggested last July, with a gruesome cover photograph of a teenage girl who'd had her nose sliced off by the Taliban. "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan" the caption read — no question mark.

Yet that brutal crime happened while we stayed, as did August's execution of a young couple from Kunduz province who had eloped against their parents' wishes. "Hundreds of men, stones in hand, closed in to carry

out the mullah's death sentence," the Los Angeles Times reported.

Woodward's book reveals that Afghan President Hamid Karzai is a manic depressive with "severe mood swings." Looking at the country Karzai purports to govern, though, maybe he's just a realist.

Then again, maybe what Afghanistan needs is just a good, taxpayer-funded, pro-democracy kite festival. That's a winning proposition if you're bucking for a U.S. Agency for International Development grant these days.

Two weeks ago, a USAID contractor gave it a try, passing out "justice-themed comic books" and kites with logos celebrating women's equality to a couple hundred children in Kabul. "The mere portrait of 500 kites soaring in the winds, against a backdrop of beautiful mountain ranges, is enough to instill hope in even the most disheartened observer of the war-torn country," read the press release.

Unfortunately, the New York Times reported, "Afghan policemen hijacked the event, stealing dozens of kites for themselves and beating children with sticks when they crowded too close." The cops even stole the comic books, but most of them are illiterate, so they ended up just "tossing piles of them in the dirt."

Last October, Woodward reports, National Security Adviser James Jones called an emergency meeting with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "The president was not happy": After countless meetings and dueling memoranda, "they had not found a way to articulate why the United States was in Afghanistan. What were America's interests?"

It was a good question then. A year and several hundred fallen soldiers later, it's still a good question.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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