

## Afghanistan as "Lost Cause"

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The idea that liberal democracy is alien to the country, now being used to legitimise early western withdrawal, is racist libel.

In 2004, at a packed gathering in southern Afghanistan's troubled Paktia province, the eminent Pashto laureate, Matiullah Turab, read out a wrenching new poem: “war is a female fly,” it went, “hatching a hundred eggs a day.”

Last week, a deranged United States soldier shot dead 16 people in a village near Kandahar: the latest evil spawn to join a swarm of events that could ensure the war in Afghanistan will run on without end. In February, murderous riots broke out after copies of the Koran were found to have been burned by U.S. troops; earlier, video surfaced showing soldiers urinating on the corpses of killed enemies.

Each disaster has sharpened tensions between Afghans and the West — tensions which, in turn, have legitimised calls for an early withdrawal from intellectuals in Europe and the United States. In a sharp commentary in *The Atlantic*, for example, James Joyner demanded a “hastening [of] the day Americans stop dying for a lost cause.”

Powerful voices in western geo-strategic discourse had long railed against efforts to build a secular-democratic order in Afghanistan after 9/11. Now, the notion that liberal democracy is in some way alien to Afghanistan has become a pervasive meme. In order to legitimise early withdrawal, the anti-democratic politics of the Taliban is being marketed as an authentic voice of Afghan tradition. The ideological underpinnings of these ideas need extremely careful examination.

### **Enlightenment vs. darkness**

Last week, in an essay published in *The New Yorker*, the influential British diplomat, scholar and Conservative politician Rory Stewart, made the most comprehensive “lost cause” case so far. He claimed that the pursuit of modern democratic values post-9/11 Afghanistan was founded on was “an Enlightenment faith that there is nothing intrinsically intractable about Afghan culture and society and that all men can be perfected [to a western ideal] through the application of reason.” Mr. Stewart doesn't

explain which Enlightenment faith he is referring to, since there was no one single Enlightenment dogma, nor what “intrinsicly intractable” might mean — but his propositions underpin much recent writing.

Doug Bandow, writing in the *National Interest* in 2010, claimed that the U.S. government “was embarking on a long-term mission to transform Afghanistan by turning it into a Western-style liberal democracy.” Hamida Ghafour, writing in the United Arab Emirates-based *National*, had this variant: “European and North American donor nations ... are obsessed with the idea of establishing a western-style liberal democracy”.

“Lost cause” polemic draws, perhaps unconsciously, from Joseph Conrad's brilliant but profoundly racist masterpiece, *The Heart of Darkness*. Afghanistan, in this narrative, is a place where the West's efforts to promote its values will fail — and where those values themselves will become corroded from within.

The problem with this line of argument is this: there is nothing in recent Afghan political behaviour that suggests it is any different from that of peoples elsewhere. There are few places on the planet where the killings of innocents, such as those in Kandahar, do not have the potential to incite large-scale violence. Indeed, irrational scale violence has been a feature of the West's political heritage, too.

No one in his right mind, however, would link race riots in the U.S. to the culture of black Americans. Nor could a reasonably literate commentator attribute the lynching of black people in the U.S.' southern States in the 1960s to a traditional honour code — even if it was invoked by the killers. Political scientists and media know that tradition was invoked by political actors to sharpen group boundaries, and to scare white women from asserting their rights. In writing on Afghanistan, however, it remains perfectly acceptable to attribute political behaviour to a supposedly self-evident term called “Islam” or “tradition.”

### **Myth & reality on democracy**

A lack of thought has allowed a few key myths about the democracy-building project in Afghanistan to entrench themselves. The first is that the practice of democratic politics — and its foundational structure, a central state — was a post-9/11 western imposition. Even a cursory acquaintance with Afghan history would show that the state had strengthened itself steadily for over a century, building up to the promulgation of a new constitution in 1964.

Muhammad Zahir's monarchy was overthrown in 1973, and a republic declared — but the idea that Afghanistan ought to be a democracy was not assaulted, except from Islamists who argued that the Shari'a, not popular will, ought to be the basis of the government. In 2001, when Afghan leaders met in Bonn to deliberate how the country ought to be rebuilt, they chose to adopt the 1964 constitution as its basis: simply, democracy was an Afghan choice, not a western one.

The second myth is this: President George W. Bush was committed to the promotion of western values — whatever this ill-defined thing might be — in Afghanistan. Neoconservative dogma held, on the contrary, that left to themselves, people would make rational choices. The Iraqi state was thus dismantled; in Afghanistan, administration and security were subcontracted to warlords. Hamid Karzai, it bears remembering, was installed as President not in pursuit of some grand project to promote democracy, but to address concerns that a regime led by the victorious Northern Alliance might not have legitimacy among southern Pashtuns, and would displease Pakistan.

Thirdly, the proposition that there is no cultural foundation for democracy is dubious. Farhat Taj has demonstrated the existence of democratic traditions among the Pashtun tribes who straddle the Afghanistan-Pakistan border; the work of historian Sana Haroon demonstrates, likewise, that what western commentators refer to as tradition was, in fact, the outcome of complex political contestation between tribal custom, nationalism and neo-fundamentalist theology.

Historically, there is evidence that Afghanistan's cultural-religious traditions have been capable of considerable flexibility. In spite of the Koran's express prohibition of interest, scholar Ashraf Ghani has shown, Afghanistan's 19th century cleric-run court system routinely mediated commercial disputes involving loans. Put another way, god's words were given meaning by human power. The merchant class, not exegetes, shaped the substance of Sharia.

Indeed, Mr. Stewart's suggestion that reason is not central to Afghanistan's Islamic tradition is utterly without foundation. Though powerful anti-rational tendencies exist in Islamic tradition — just as they do in other faith-systems — the canon stretches to the frankly atheist. Muhammad ibn al-'Arabi al-Ta al-Hatimi, a 13th century philosopher, saw reason as a key element that could elevate man to the status of khalifa, god's vice-regent. Earlier, Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali also placed reason at the core of his work.

The western philosophical tradition, for its part, doesn't rest on the idea of human perfectibility alone. For every philosopher like Jean Jacques Rousseau, there were those from Thomas Hobbes to Carl Jung with somewhat darker perspectives on humankind. Like every other crisis on our planet today, the roots of the war in Afghanistan lie in modernity: the battles for empire of the 19th century; the Cold War; secularisation against faith.

There are entirely legitimate debates to be conducted on when the West should leave Afghanistan, and how the war there should be fought. The truth, though, is this: the world chose not to commit the resources, and blood, needed to build a modern nation-state from the ruins of the Cold War. Blaming Afghans for a fate they did not choose isn't legitimate debate — it is deeply racist libel.

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