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## Doug Bandow: War no way to Afghan women's rights

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Afghanistan has become a target of aggressive pro-war activists, including feminists who believe in waging war to improve the status of women. Many on the left believed military intervention abroad to be a logical extension of its attempt to perfect mankind at home. 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, speaking of "the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people – especially women and girls." However, the president took a very different tone when

announcing his decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

President Obama said that "Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida." 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: 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."

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. 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."

Some war advocates admit as much, and want the U.S. to do more to transform Afghanistan. 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."

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.

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, 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. 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. Promoting democracy, women's rights, or other liberal values in other societies, though worthy, doesn't warrant war.

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 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 U.S. 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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