

P.J. O'Rourke's Progress

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In the 1990s, I was a fan of economic humorist P.J. O'Rourke. One of his best books is *Eat the Rich*, which I described in a *Fortune* book review as an "Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* with a laugh on every page." And if you think O'Rourke's understanding of the actual *Wealth of Nations* is superficial, read his book *On The Wealth of Nations*. In it, O'Rourke shows a subtlety that I just hadn't known he had.

I became a non-fan when he and I both spoke at a Cato Institute event in San Francisco about one month after 9/11. Because my book *The Joy of Freedom: An Economist's Odyssey* had come out in September 2001, I had been asked to give the keynote speech at Cato's one-day event. O'Rourke, whose book *The CEO of the Sofa* had come out earlier that year, gave the luncheon speech. I spoke solely about domestic policy issues because that's what my book was about. As I recall, O'Rourke spoke not at all about his book, but devoted his entire speech to 9/11 and to making the case for war on Afghanistan. I'll never forget one of his lines: He said that he wanted the U.S., in that war, to "turn sand into glass." In other words, he wanted to destroy Afghanistan along with, it seemed, the millions of people living there. When a long-haired libertarian at my luncheon table asked a somewhat critical question about his views on foreign policy, O'Rourke answered: "I see that a libertarian has somehow managed to sneak into the room." While he seemed to understand that his call for blind revenge on innocent Afghans was somehow unlibertarian, he didn't seem to care. I'm normally not at a loss for words, but I was so stunned by how ugly O'Rourke's speech was that I couldn't quite think what to say. Later that day, for the first time in my life, I donated money to [Antiwar.com](#).

But there's good news. P.J. O'Rourke has changed his mind. In [an article](#) in the *Weekly Standard*, the leading magazine of the neoconservative, pro-war faction in America, O'Rourke reports on his recent trip to Afghanistan. I defy anyone to read that article and conclude that he thinks it's a good idea for the U.S. government to stay in Afghanistan. Sure, he takes a few stabs at justifying the U.S. presence. But they're weak stabs. The overall thrust of the article is that the situation in Afghanistan is a disaster, with the governments of various countries, not just the Taliban, being part of the problem.

Start with what is possibly the best news about O'Rourke's progress – not his view on the war but his view on Afghans. Here's a passage from early in the article:

"This is where the poor live, with panes of glass to keep out the winter winds but not much else. At night you can see how far the electric wires run uphill – not very far. The water pipes don't go up at all, and residents – women and children residents I'm sure – must climb from the bottom with their water."

It's a simple description, but the tone is one of someone who cares about his fellow humans who live there. This person differs a lot from the one who, just nine years earlier, wanted to "turn sand into glass."

At one point, O'Rourke tells of a conversation he had with a member of the Afghan parliament. After O'Rourke suggested that the "real clash of civilizations is between people who believe in God and people who don't," the parliament member dismissively said, "Chinese, Muslims, Jews, Europeans – they work together in international finance markets every day." I'm sure this got O'Rourke's attention because one of his favorite themes and, indeed, one of the favorite themes of economists since Frédéric Bastiat, the early-19th-century economic journalist, is that economic freedom creates harmony and promotes tolerance. O'Rourke got schooled in something he himself had believed and, possibly, had thought didn't apply to people in Afghanistan.

One of the themes in my writing in economics and on foreign policy is [the late Friedrich Hayek's concept of "local knowledge."](#) Hayek didn't use that term, but economists who discuss his insight today do. Hayek's point was that for an economy to work well, people

must be free to buy, sell, and produce based on their own knowledge, and no central government planner can have that knowledge. As I've noted ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), that concept also applies to governments making war in foreign countries and trying to figure out who is an enemy and who is not. The central government bureaucrat, whether sitting in Washington or at Nevada's [Nellis Air Force Base](#) at the controls of a drone, will not typically have the detailed local knowledge needed.

Sure enough, O'Rourke makes that point by quoting an Afghan journalist, who "gestured toward the more prepossessing of the two" mullahs O'Rourke was interviewing.

"He's a drone problem," said the journalist. "They see the clothes and the turban from up in the air and they think, "Taliban!" And he is like Taliban, but on the good side."

But it's even worse than that, and O'Rourke explicitly recognizes that fact. He writes:

*"A journalist for Radio Azadi [the U.S. government-sponsored radio station in Afghanistan] said, 'Afghans were happy **in principle** that Americans brought peace and democracy. But when rival tribes began to use the U.S. to crush each other, the attitude of the Afghan people changed.'*

"Afghans think Americans have sided with the wrong people. It's not that Afghans think Americans have sided with the wrong people in a systematic, strategic, or calculated way. It's just that we came to a place that we didn't know much about, where there are a lot of sides to be on, and we started siding with this side and that side and the other side. We were bound to wind up on the wrong side sometimes."

Again, Hayek's information problem. The U.S. government simply does not know enough to take the "right" side, assuming there even *is* a right side. O'Rourke goes further:

"We're outsiders in Afghanistan, and this is Occam's razor for explaining the Taliban. Imagine if America were a country beset with all sorts of intractable difficulties. Or don't imagine it – America is a country beset with all sorts of intractable difficulties. Our government is out of control, wantonly interfering in every aspect of our private lives and heedlessly squandering our national treasure at a time when Americans are suffering grave economic woes. Meanwhile vicious tribal conflicts are being fought for control of America's culture and way of life. (I've been watching Fox News.)"

"What if some friendly, well-meaning, but very foreign power, with incomprehensible lingo and outrageous clothes, were to arrive on our shores to set things right? What if it were Highland Scots? There they go marching around wearing skirts and purses and ugly plaids, playing their hideous bagpipe music, handing out haggis to our kiddies and offending our sensibilities with a lack of BVDs under their kilts. Maybe they do cut taxes, lower the federal deficit, eliminate the Department of Health and Human Services, and the EPA, give people jobs at their tartan factories and launch a manhunt for Harry Reid and the UC Berkeley faculty. We still wouldn't like them."

"The Pashtun tribal leader said, 'I tell my own tribesmen to not support the Taliban, but they don't listen. They see the Taliban as fighting invaders.'

"The Radio Azadi journalist said, 'When people felt they were dishonored, they needed revenge. The Taliban gave them revenge.'

"To fully sympathize with the dishonor an Afghan might feel, foreign government, U.N. and NGO aid agencies must be considered. Myriad of them operate in Afghanistan, staffed by people from around the globe. So it's not just that you've got Highland Scots marching in hairy-kneed formations up and down your cul-de-sac. Many of the most ordinary functions of your society have been taken over by weird strangers. When you need a flu shot or a dog license or a permit to burn leaves, you have to go see Bulgarians and Bolivians and Nigerians and Fiji Islanders."

O'Rourke gets it. What's next? Would O'Rourke conclude, as [Ron Paul did](#) in a 2007 Republican presidential candidates' debate, "They're [the terrorists] over here because we're [the U.S. government] over there?"

So there are really three victories here. First, P.J. O'Rourke goes to Afghanistan and comes back and tells the truth. Second, he understands that, to put it mildly, the case for the U.S. government staying in Afghanistan is weak. Third, his critique is published in the one of the major pro-war publications in the country.

I'm one of those people who see the glass as half full instead of half empty. Or, in this case,

20-percent full instead of 80-percent empty. There has been a little progress in getting conservatives to see some of the problems with the war in Afghanistan. First, we had Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele [advising Republican candidates for Congress to disown the war](#), although he [backtracked](#) almost as soon as [Bill Kristol publicly chastised him](#) and asked him to resign. Second, conservative pundit [Ann Coulter defended Steele's statement](#), although she has not said much about it since. And now P.J. O'Rourke writes an article in the *Weekly Standard*, stating that the U.S. government is messing up in Afghanistan and implicitly concluding that the U.S. government ought to get out.

George Orwell once wrote, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." Who will be the next conservative to see what is in front of his or her nose?

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