US massacre in eastern Afghanistan

The Editorial Board
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No amount of lies or distortion from the American media can disguise the fact that US forces are carrying out a colonial-style massacre in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Hundreds of Taliban and Al Qaeda forces have been killed in five days of fighting, according to American military officials, who make clear that they intend to see the remainder exterminated.

There is nothing heroic or brave about the US-led onslaught. The most sophisticated and horrific means of mass destruction are being thrown against a small band of fighters wielding only the most rudimentary weapons. The unequal contest is a sickening spectacle, a shameful chapter in American history. The "battle" in the Paktia mountains east of Gardez is an exercise in mass carnage.

The language used by the US military establishment provides an insight into the character of the campaign. Major General Frank Hagenbeck, commander of Operation Anaconda, told reporters, "In the last 24 hours, we have killed lots of Al Qaeda and Taleban. I won't give you precise numbers but we've got confirmed kills in the hundreds."

He went on: "Conservatively speaking right now, I'm convinced from the evidence I've seen that we've killed at least half of those enemy forces.... As long as they want to send them here, we'll kill them here. Should they go somewhere else, we'll go with our Afghan allies and coalition forces and kill them wherever they go."

Only the most depraved social type savors and repeats the word "kill" in this manner.

Villagers in the area where the fighting is taking place, even those hostile to the former Taliban regime, are fearful that American bombs are killing women and children, the families of the Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, who came with the latter to the area in December. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, one of America's chief war criminals, expressed an utter lack of interest in the fate of these women and children. He told journalists March 4, "We have assumed that where you find large numbers of Al Qaeda and Taliban, that there may very well be noncombatants with them who are family members or supporters of some kind." Rumsfeld commented that the civilians were there "of their own free will, knowing who they're with and who they're supporting and who they're encouraging and who they're assisting."

The forces arrayed against one another in the mountains are entirely mismatched. The estimated 500 to 800 Taliban and Al Qaeda troops are armed with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns and are running low on ammunition. On the other hand, as the *Washington Post* noted, "US commanders have used the most devastating conventional weapons in the US air arsenal to kill enemy troops, including a 2,000-pound 'thermobaric' bomb designed to blast the caves where Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters are believed to be hiding. Two were used for the first time in a battle near Gardez."

Air Force B-52 and F-15E bombers and Navy carrier-based strike aircraft, along with AC-130 gunships, were used in military strikes this week. Hundreds of bombs have been dropped on Taliban positions to "soften up" the enemy. Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopters have also been used. Officials reported on Wednesday that the US military has added more than a dozen Apache and AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters since the fighting began.

The American-led force of several thousand includes soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division based in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan and the 101st Airborne at Kandahar in the south of Afghanistan. Troops from Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany and Norway are participating in the effort, as are pro-US Afghan fighters, with thousands more standing by.

Eight US and seven Afghan soldiers have died in the operation, with several dozen more wounded, compared to hundreds of Taliban and Al Qaeda troops. The model for this kind of slaughter is the campaigns of the US military against the American Indians in the 1870s and 1880s. It was during those campaigns that General Philip Sheridan popularized the infamous phrase, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian."

The infinitely corrupt and servile American media is pretending that the massacre near Gardez is a hard-fought contest reminiscent of the battles of World War II. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, for example, in an editorial, asserted: "This, in terms of an earlier war, is Berlin in 1945.

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What then was house-to-house, room-to-room combat is now boulder-to-boulder, cave-to-cave fighting. And in such last-ditch warfare, good men will die with the bad."

This is self-deluded nonsense. The US army in the Second World War faced a powerful European imperialist nation, armed to the teeth with the most advanced weaponry of the day—not a rag-tag group of men, with their wives and children, trapped in freezing caves in the mountains in one of the most impoverished, backward countries on earth.

A more apt comparison from the World War II era would be to the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini's fascist Italy. During the 1935-41 colonial war some 275,000 Ethiopian soldiers lost their lives; in addition, hundreds of thousands of civilians starved to death, died in concentration camps or were executed. By comparison, an estimated 15,000 Italian soldiers died.

The Bush administration and the media have seized on the loss of eight American lives for their own cynical purposes. On the one hand, the dead men are apotheosized and made into martyrs for a great cause, as part of an ongoing effort to whip up enthusiasm for the war within the American public. A *Washington Post* editorial, "Remember the Fallen," comments that the deceased "all were willing to risk that grim trip back in a flag-covered coffin to defend the United States. The battle these men died in ... is essential to the Afghan campaign. That campaign is supported by the overwhelming majority of Americans and recognized as just by most of the nations of the world. From a political point of view, the American casualties must be accepted as a necessary sacrifice; President Bush has frequently said that they will be inescapable if the war is to be won."

The tragic truth is that these men's lives—and there will be more to come—were wasted. They didn't die defending "the United States," but the interests of the American ruling elite, the oil companies, the defense contractors and all the transnational corporations for whom George W. Bush serves as a political figurehead.

While encouraging popular mourning and wrath over the killed US soldiers, the more forthright commentators can barely conceal their glee over the deaths. In the view of the American establishment, the only means by which the "Vietnam syndrome" (i.e., the resistance of large sections of the public to foreign military adventures in which American youth are sacrificed to the US war machine) can be overcome is to incur casualties in the current conflict. The population has to be "blooded," made used to the idea that its sons and daughters are going to die in combat.

This is the theme of a bloodcurdling *Wall Street Journal* commentary by Ralph Peters, "a retired military officer," entitled, "In War, Soldiers Die." Peters writes: "Combat deaths indicate that we are serious about destroying the enemy, that we are willing to do whatever it takes. I would be far more distrustful of a campaign without casualties."

He goes on, in reference to the Afghan campaign, "Our military, admittedly still suffering a residual infection from the cowardice of the Clinton years, moved timidly at first. Then the generals and admirals seem to have gotten the message that our national leadership was serious this time. The lights went on, and they were green ones.... There likely will be more American casualties. Perhaps many more. We may see some American elements ambushed and even wiped out. That's war, folks."

The United States has the overwhelming military advantage in the current fighting. The outcome of the conflict near Gardez has never been seriously in doubt. Hundreds more men, women and children will be killed over the next several days by US bombs and guns and the guns and bombs of their local agents and allies. Thousands have already died in the pursuit of American geopolitical interests in the region.

However, the military side, contrary to the fantasies of Cheney, Rumsfeld and company, is only one part of the equation, and a subordinate part. The political destabilization inevitably brought about by reckless American action will have the most far-reaching consequences, well beyond anything imagined by the ignorant and shortsighted policymakers in Washington.

The US campaign in Afghanistan is a brutal, criminal enterprise. In the future, the American political and military leadership will be regarded with the same hatred and disgust that the overwhelming majority of the world's population today feels for the Indian killers of the nineteenth century, the Italian generals in Ethiopia in the 1930s or, for that matter, the German high command on the eastern front in World War II.

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