

# The makings of a protracted colonial war in Afghanistan

Peter Symonds  
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A strange war is taking place in eastern Afghanistan—at least, if one accepts at face value the statements made by the US administration and the military. Victories are being won, successes are being registered, the remnants of Al Qaeda and Taliban are being mopped up. Yet, according to President Bush, the US has “a lot more fighting to do in Afghanistan” and at least 1,700 more British troops are required.

The US has just wound up Operation Anaconda—the largest military offensive of the war to date—against concentrations of “hard-core Al Qaeda” and “Taliban holdouts” in the Shah-e-Kot district. The US top brass overseeing the operation, which for the first time involved hundreds of American troops, have hailed the campaign as a huge success.

General Paul Mikolashek, commander of US ground forces in Afghanistan, described the offensive as a “textbook” operation, which made it extremely difficult for the enemy to gather together again in strength. General Tommy Franks, overall commander of US forces in Afghanistan, claimed the operation as “an unqualified success,” adding later that the security situation in the country was under control.

General Frank “Buster” Hagenbeck, the operational commander, was even more effusive: “I think we’ve taken out a large chunk of the Al Qaeda-Taliban hardcore, well-trained experienced veterans. If you want to compare it to a US military unit, I would describe it as... their majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels. We’ve isolated their command and control element, and their logistics structure, and we’re going to go after that.”

On surface appearances, everything is cut and dried. More than 1,000 US troops together with about the same number of \$200-a-month Afghan mercenaries battered “enemy” positions for more than two weeks. Around 3,250 sophisticated bombs were dropped by an array of US and French warplanes on targets in the area. At any sign of resistance, US forces could call for support from helicopter gunships and heavily-armed A-10 planes.

Everyone in the Pentagon, from US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld down, insists that, after Vietnam, they “don’t do body counts”. In the same breath, however, military spokesmen bragged to the media that the unequal battle had resulted in the deaths of up to 1,000 “Al Qaeda-Taliban fighters”.

Major Bryan Hilferty, spokesman for the 10th Mountain Division, attempted to maintain a tenuous link between the slaughter in eastern Afghanistan and the terrorist attack on New York, saying: “It took only 20 terrorists to kill 3,000 of the world’s citizens in the World Trade Towers. We’ve killed hundreds and that means we’ve saved hundreds of thousands of lives. This is a great success.”

By drawing a direct connection, Hilferty only underlines the absurdity of US propaganda. None of those who alleged to have carried out the attack on the World Trade Centre were Afghans. Most were citizens of US ally Saudi Arabia with the means and the education to live in Europe and the US and credibly present themselves for advanced flight training. Neither Hilferty nor any other US spokesmen have provided any credible evidence that the “enemy” fighters killed in Operation Anaconda were foreigners, let alone members of Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network. The majority of the dead were rural Pashtun tribesmen, whose first loyalty was to their local warlord, as well as innocent civilians.

Doubts have been raised from a number of quarters about US claims of success. Western journalists who visited the Shah-e-Kot area last week reported that there was little to substantiate the Pentagon estimates that hundreds of enemy fighters had been killed during Operation Anaconda. According to one of their Afghan guides, General Zia Lodin, more than 100 bodies had been found in the course of searching the area and a few freshly dug graves. Three dead “Chechens” were on display but the only evidence of the nationality of the disfigured corpses was the word of one of the guides—we know “from their papers”. Only 30 or so fighters were captured.

Local Afghan militia leaders allied to the US openly dispute American boasts of success, saying that hundreds of fighters escaped to other strongholds or over the border to Pakistan. “Americans don’t listen to anyone,” Commander Abdul Wali Zardran commented. “They do what they want. Most people escaped. You can’t call that a success.” A Mujaheddin veteran of the 1980s, when the CIA financed Islamic guerrillas against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, remarked that it had been standard practice to break up and hide in small groups to avoid intense bombardments.

An article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted: “US intelligence officials believe that as many as 400 Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters may have escaped from Operation Anaconda into Pakistan because a local Pakistani military commander apparently failed to seal the Pakistani side of the border as he had been ordered to do. The commander, one official said, appears to have sent false reports to his superior in Islamabad saying he had moved his troops into position.”

The response of General “Buster” Hagenbeck to these comments is as significant as the numerical disparities themselves. Indignant that his military reputation had been called into question, he perhaps revealed more than the Pentagon would have liked about the US lethal attacks on the area.

The intensity of the bombing, Hagenbeck explained, would not have left much in the way of remains. Many bodies would be entombed in caves. He also said that multiple intelligence reports indicated that

enemy fighters ordered 300 coffins after the heaviest fighting of the battle.

Then, however, the general pointed to the destruction of three villages in the middle of the Shahikot Valley, which he said the US believed were occupied almost entirely by enemy fighters. “We levelled it. There is nobody left—just dirt and dust.”

Obviously warming to his subject, Hagenbeck cited surveillance information about the destruction of about 30 fighters inside one adobe-style building by three precision-guided 2,000 pound bombs. After the bombs hit, he bragged, military analysts had to use global-positioning satellite signals to find the exact location. “It was just a mud hill 15 feet high with a single leg sticking out.”

Whose leg it was and who exactly was in the three villages reduced to “dirt and dust” were matters of complete indifference to Hagenbeck. The US military might be trying to shake off the memory of Vietnam by eschewing the release of “body counts”. But its outlook is thoroughly permeated with the same callous disregard for innocent lives in Afghanistan as in Indochina, when all bodies—men, women and children—counted as “successes” in the gruesome daily tally of dead Vietnamese.

The Pentagon was forced to admit last week that women and children were among 14 people killed in the first days of Operation Anaconda when American warplanes attacked a vehicle from “a suspected Al Qaeda sanctuary” in eastern Afghanistan. US Central Command spokesman Brad Lowell excused the attack, saying: “Clearly, this is an area where the bad guys are. We have no indication to suggest these were not Al Qaeda. We think this was a good target.”

In other words, to paraphrase Bush, if women and children were not identifiably for the US, then they were against the US and were treated accordingly. The green light for such barbaric assaults had been given just days before by Defence Secretary Rumsfeld when he explained that “women and children were in the battle zone “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.”

There was one sense in which the US army’s body count in Vietnam was accurate. Every dead man, woman and child did count, as Washington was at war with the whole Vietnamese population—all except those who actively supported the US client regime in Saigon. The mounting toll of innocent dead added to reservoirs of bitterness and hatred that provided a flow of ready recruits to the anti-US forces.

It is difficult to estimate at a distance, through the prism of a subservient international media, the impact of months of US bombing and a rising toll of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. There are a growing number of signs, however, which indicate that the US military is not engaged in a mopping up operation but faces Afghan militia groups, previously allied to the Taliban regime, who are sustained by growing local resentment and anger towards Washington.

The leader of the anti-US fighters in the Shah-e-Kot valley was local warlord Saif Rahman Mansour. Several US military spokesmen noted that Mansour’s forces knew in advance of the timing of the US offensive and were able to call up reinforcements. During the US bombing blitz, according to Afghan commanders, Mansour managed to escape along with most of his troops. All of this points to local knowledge, sympathy and intelligence sources inside the US-led forces. As a US Special Forces soldier, Jim, commented to the media: “Don’t underestimate them. They come and go as they please.”

The *Chicago Tribune* reported: “A senior Afghan intelligence official said a core group of 1,000 to 2,000 Al Qaeda fighters is

moving freely among the remote Pashtun mountain villages straddling the Pakistan-Afghan border, where residents share ethnic ties and a history of sympathy for the Taliban and its Arab allies. ‘They are commuting,’ the Afghan official said. ‘Like migratory birds.’”

An *Associated Press* report noted the circulation of clandestine pamphlets or “night letters” inside Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and within Afghanistan itself denouncing the US-backed regime in Kabul. “It is now the duty of all Afghans to begin the struggle against the USA and its allies,” one leaflet read. “ We think that the days are very near when Afghanistan shall prove worse than Vietnam or Somalia for US forces.”

It is even beginning to dawn in Washington that the US military successes in Afghanistan could prove to be elusive. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, CIA Director George Tenet warned that US troops confronted the dangers of a protracted guerrilla-style conflict. “You’re entering into another phase here that actually is more difficult because you’re probably looking at smaller units who intend to operate against you in classic insurgency format.”

Tenet also pointed to the shaky character of the Karzai administration which faced extreme economic, social and political problems, including “ongoing power struggles” among the predominant Pashtun population. Karzai, he noted, “will have to play a delicate balancing act domestically”.

Reinforcing Tenet’s comments, Vice Admiral Thomas Wilson, director of the Defence Intelligence Agency, told the Senate committee that there was “a very widespread probability of insurgency-type warfare” in Afghanistan’s cities and rural areas. The enemy, he said, “may bridge the difference between terrorism and... insurgent warfare, and that is what the military has to be prepared for.”

As if to underscore the point, guerrilla fighters armed with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns struck a US base at the Khost airport in eastern Afghanistan on Wednesday, killing three Afghan guards and wounding one American soldier. The US responded with a massive display of airpower, calling in a B-1 bomber and an AC-130 gunship to batter the attackers who then retreated.

Everything points to a brutal and protracted colonial war in the making.



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