

# Afghan President Karzai back in Washington—and few take notice

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It is a rule of thumb in Hollywood that most sequels fare poorly compared to the initial film. Apparently that rule also applies to other stage-managed productions, like last week's visit to Washington by Afghan's interim president, Hamid Karzai.

When Karzai traveled to the US capital last year he was a media sensation. He was a guest of honor at the State of the Union speech where Bush declared war on the "axis of evil." It was impossible to turn on a television set without seeing Karzai's flowing green cape, or hearing media pundits gush over his perfect English and even more perfect agreement with the Bush administration.

On his return visit, the Afghan president was every bit as obsequious as last year, but this time his deference won him no plaudits. He received only perfunctory attention from both the media and the Bush administration.

Karzai made his rounds, meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, and accepted an award from the International Republican Institute, an arm of the Republican Party that reportedly serves as a conduit for CIA funding of right-wing parties around the world.

He visited Bush in the White House February 27, but was all but ignored by the press corps when the two presidents made a joint appearance. Reporters asked five questions, all directed to Bush and none relating to Afghanistan.

Karzai appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a public hearing, rather than the informal closed session that is usual for visiting heads of state. Both Democratic and Republican senators treated him with impatience bordering on contempt.

He claimed great success in reopening Afghan schools, launching a new national currency, and

beginning the repair of the country's shattered infrastructure, while pleading, "Don't forget us if Iraq happens."

The response was a virtual grilling of a head of state. Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California, demanded to know why police in Herat "are detaining women and girls caught alone with unrelated men," and forcing them "to submit to medical exams to see if they have had sexual relations." Karzai could not give the real answer—that he is closer to mayor of Kabul than president of Afghanistan, and has no control over events in Herat, which is ruled by Ismail Khan, a local warlord who enforces a modified version of the Taliban oppression of women.

Senator Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, warned Karzai that if he presented too rosy a picture of conditions in Afghanistan "the next time you come back, then your credibility will be in question." Karzai complained afterward that senators were trying to compare life in Afghanistan to conditions in Switzerland or Honolulu. "It is a good thing for the Senate to be negative all the time, but I can't do that," he said.

Karzai was treated more politely by the Bush administration, but obtained no substantive pledges of increased aid, the main goal of his visit. The US has quietly doubled the number of soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, to nearly 10,000, but economic and social assistance has lagged far beyond the military component.

The Afghan president came with a shopping list, asking aid for rebuilding irrigation systems, power plants, dams, canals, roads and other infrastructure. He arrived in Washington only weeks after the Bush administration "forgot" to include any aid to Afghanistan in its proposed budget. The omission was

blamed on a clerical error.

Despite Karzai's claims of progress, echoed by the Bush administration, not a single house has been rebuilt in Kabul since the new regime was installed in power nearly 15 months ago. Religious police continue to enforce Islamic criminal laws, including those calling for the imprisonment of women for alleged adultery and prescribing stoning and amputation as penalties for other offenses.

As for the security situation, the US buildup continues to ignite popular hostility and resistance. In December the US abandoned a forward base at Lwara, in eastern Afghanistan, after frequent rocket attacks made it untenable. Karzai himself owes his continued physical survival to US protection, as American special forces make up the bulk of his personal bodyguard.

Not only the interim president, but his entire cabinet carries the "Made in America" stamp. According to a report last month in the *Washington Post*, US citizens of Afghan extraction, many of them former employees of US intelligence and propaganda agencies, currently serve as ministers of the interior, finance, higher education, information and culture, and environment and irrigation. Other Afghan-Americans serve as vice president, head of the Central Bank, and Karzai's personal chief of staff.

Karzai's trip did nothing to alter the reality that his is a puppet regime with dwindling support, not only within Afghanistan, but from his imperial sponsor in Washington. He seemed to come away empty-handed from his meeting with Bush.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, "There was no specific discussion of any one area of increase." The *Los Angeles Times* put the matter more bluntly: "What he got was some US sugarcoating: Bush declared himself deeply impressed with Karzai's reports of children going back to school and refugees returning to their homes."

Karzai was hand-picked for his position by the Bush administration, and his every move has been orchestrated by the chief White House representative in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan exile who is now a US citizen. Khalilzad and Karzai both worked for Unocal, the California-based oil company that has been the most aggressive proponent of building pipelines from oil- and gas-rich Turkmenistan across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the sea. But Khalilzad was

not even in Washington during the Karzai visit, since he is preoccupied with new duties as the principal US envoy to the Iraqi exile groups.

Khalilzad's activity could serve as a metaphor for the US intervention in Afghanistan as a whole. Having overthrown the Taliban and turned Afghanistan into a free-fire zone for American military forces, the Bush administration has moved on to new business, the impending war with Iraq. As for Karzai, he is yesterday's man, installed in power by last year's war.

Moreover, his example is not the one the Bush administration intends to follow in Iraq. There will be no Iraqi Karzai, a political rabbit pulled out of the hat to rule the country, backed by US bayonets. As far as Washington is concerned, Iraq's vast oil reserves—estimated at \$7.2 trillion if oil is priced at \$30 a barrel—are too important to be left to Iraqis. Instead, an American general will be installed in Baghdad to insure the interests of American imperialism.



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