

What the New York Times unwittingly reveals about the war in Afghanistan

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Over last two weeks, the *New York Times* has published a series of articles on conditions facing US soldiers fighting in Afghanistan.

In describing soldiers' lives and calling attention to the hellish conditions in Afghanistan, the *Times* articles reveal considerably more than what one suspects their authors set out to explain. For anyone reading them with a degree of historical consciousness, they depict a colonial war waged against an entire population, by US troops who see little purpose behind the violence they are unleashing on the Afghan population.

On April 20, the *Times* carried an article titled "Pinned Down, a Sprint to Escape Taliban Zone." Beginning with a description of a US platoon ducking for cover amid a Taliban ambush that claimed the life of one of its members, it states, "Another pitched firefight in a ravine in eastern Afghanistan had begun, shaped by factors that have made the war against the Taliban seem unending: grueling terrain that favors ambushes and prevents American soldiers from massing; villages in thorough collaboration with insurgents; and experienced adversaries each fighting in concert with its [sic] abilities and advantages."

The response of the trapped American troops is to call in air and artillery support, raining down bombs and mortar shells on Afghan positions above the riverbed where US troops are trapped. The targets apparently include not only barren mountainsides where insurgents are taking cover, but villages as well. The *Times* adds, "soldiers with heavier machine guns and automatic grenade launchers focused on Afghan buildings in three villages—Donga, Laneyal, and Darbart—from where the trapped platoon was taking fire."

Halfway through the article, the *Times* explains that the local population is hostile because the US-backed Afghan government threw them all out of work by banning logging in the area. It notes that the "Taliban pay the best wages in the valley now," adding that the US forces have taken over a sawmill as their base in the region.

The reader later learns that US forces are using ammunition containing white phosphorus—a chemical weapon that burns human flesh down to the bone—and that a *Times* photographer is with the troops in the fighting. The article does not say

whether the *Times* has agreed to censor itself in exchange for obtaining permission for its staff to accompany the troops into battle.

After several Afghans are killed and the Afghans withdraw, the soldiers search for and ultimately find the body of one of their number, who has gone missing. The company commander says, "There is nothing I can say or anybody else can say that will bring Dewater back. But the best thing we can do for him is to continue to do the type of stuff that you guys did the other day."

The commander is apparently referring to an incident described in a previous *Times* article. The April 17 piece, "Turning Tables, US Troops Ambush Taliban With Swift and Lethal Results," explained, "The ambush, on Good Friday, has become an emotional rallying point for soldiers in Kunar Province, who have seen it as both a validation of their equipment and training and a welcome bit of score-settling in an area that in recent years has claimed more American lives than any other."

The bulk of the April 17 article consists of a detailed account of how US soldiers "killed at least 13 insurgents, and perhaps many more, with rifles, machine guns, Claymore mines, hand grenades, and a knife."

In the April 20 article, the *Times* explains that village elders later "arrived at the outpost to say that the Americans had shot up a search party of local men who were looking for a lost girl." The US commander simply dismissed the elders' claim as "one of the most ridiculous lies he had ever heard."

The *Times* repeatedly notes the population's hostility to the US occupation. In another article in this series, the April 13th "In Afghanistan, Soldiers Bridge 2 Stages of War," reports, "Villagers have bluntly told the American military that its presence is not wanted.... In one village, the soldiers found an old woman carrying an assault rifle under her shawl; in another, they found a 12-year-old boy with a rocket-propelled grenade."

What emerges from the *Times'* accounts, whatever its intentions, is a description of an imperialist occupation. The *Times* takes for granted that local population's hostility to the US occupation should be repressed, that its livelihood can be taken away at will, and that local inhabitants can be killed without trial. As for American soldiers, their grief at the death

of their comrades is apparently handled with recommendations to get on with killing Afghans.

The *Times'* coverage comes shortly after President Barack Obama—whose election was in part motivated by popular opposition to war, due to his initial statements against the Iraq war and the Bush administration—announced plans to escalate US fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan. On March 27 he announced plans to send at least 21,000 more US troops to Afghanistan and to intensify US attacks inside Pakistan.

The April 13 article makes clear that Obama's policy will entail stepping up the fighting detailed in his later articles. The *Times* writes, "New construction is visible on a string of small American bases between Kabul and the Pakistani border. The officers said the infrastructure will house many of the 21,000 additional American soldiers due to arrive later this year and will serve as an on-ramp for fresh combat forces to flow into the field and fill many current gaps."

US forces will present Afghans with an ultimatum: join a US-sponsored militia or face US attack. In an April 15 article titled "In Recruiting an Afghan Militia, US Faces a Test," the *Times* notes, "The military is borrowing a page from a similar program that helped bring about the recent calm to Iraq, where the Americans signed up more than 100,000 Iraqis, most of them Sunnis and many of them insurgents, to keep the peace."

In Afghanistan, US forces are bringing Afghan village elders to meetings and telling them that "time is running out" to decide whether they will join a US-sponsored militia. Those who fail to join the US will be treated as targets. An Afghan working for the Americans told reticent village elders, "If you don't take it, we are just going to associate you with the Taliban."

The *Times* is well aware that this fighting along the Afghan-Pakistani border regions will also spill over into Pakistan, with disastrous consequences for that country. It writes, "Taliban militants are teaming up with local militant groups to make inroads in the Punjab, the province that is home to more than half of Pakistanis, reinvigorating an alliance that Pakistani and American authorities say poses a serious risk to the stability of the country.... As American drone attacks disrupt strongholds of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the tribal [border] areas, the insurgents are striking deeper into Pakistan—both in retaliation and in search of new havens."

The Taliban also obtain support by appealing to peasants' hostility to big landowners, who make up a substantial section of the Pakistani ruling class. The Taliban have forced unpopular landlords to leave, taking over the rents paid by the peasantry and control of local mines. They strike, the *Times* noted, "at any competing point of power: landlords and elected leaders—who were usually the same people—and an underpaid and unmotivated police force."

In an unusual piece of class analysis that seemed out of place in its pages, the *Times* added, "after independence in 1947, Pakistan maintained a narrow landed upper class that kept its

vast holdings while its workers remained subservient, the officials and analysts said. Pakistani governments have since failed to provide land reform and even the most basic forms of education and health care. Avenues to advancement for vast majority of rural poor do not exist."

The *Times'* readers could be pardoned for asking why these issues are not raised more often in its pages. However, this important admission raises another question: what is it about the US that has allowed it to use as its main ally in the Indian subcontinent the state of Pakistan, which maintains such an iniquitous class structure? In fact, the oppressiveness of Pakistani capitalism is closely bound up with the aims the US bourgeoisie itself pursues in the region.

Obama's war in Afghanistan and Pakistan—in direct continuity with the policies of Bush and his predecessors—defends a regional order that has proved immensely profitable for the American ruling class. US forces in Afghanistan and violence in Pakistan block direct overland access from China and India to the energy reserves of the Persian Gulf, further the US policy of isolating Iran and threaten Russia to the north.

They thus prevent developments that would threaten the dominant role that US military, energy and financial interests play in Eurasia and the Middle East—and, one might add, inside the US itself.

Such policies are not bound up with a growth of prosperity or democracy. Rather, they entail the use of violence to repress discontented populations and maintain corrupt elites with whom the US bourgeoisie shares the spoils in the region. These are the interests dictating the bloodshed detailed in the pages of the *Times*.



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