

Liberal television host Rachel Maddow solidarizes herself with US military in Afghanistan

David Walsh
15 July 2010

The visit by MSNBC news program host Rachel Maddow to Afghanistan in early July was as revealing as it was repugnant. Maddow is a principal voice of the liberal-left in the American media mainstream. When her program first aired in September 2008, the press made much of the fact that she was the first “openly gay anchor” to host a prime-time news program in the US.

Maddow spent several days in Afghanistan this month, interviewing American officers and soldiers, touring Kandahar and Kabul, discussing counter-insurgency strategy and the overall state of the US military occupation. Whatever misgivings she might have about the ultimate fate of the American and allied effort in Afghanistan, Maddow solidarized herself fully with the occupation and the US military, endorsing the bloody suppression of the insurgency.

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, there were those in the US and elsewhere who were deceived into thinking that the American invasion of Afghanistan had something to do with bringing terrorists and their Taliban sponsors to justice. Nine years of the conflict—with the location and fate of Osama bin Laden largely dropped and the number of Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan calculated, by US officials, to be between 50 and 100—have clarified the issues.

The US ruling elite seized on the 9/11 attacks and, in the name of the “war on terror,” stepped up its drive for global domination. The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan never had anything to do with democracy, freeing the Afghan people from oppression, or safeguarding the US population from future terrorist attacks.

The massive military operation has everything to do with the vast energy reserves in the Caspian Sea region, oil pipeline routes, and the general determination of the US ruling elite to implant itself in the strategically critical Central Asian region, both in its own interests and to thwart those of its rivals in Europe, Russia, China and elsewhere.

Maddow and the entire American liberal-left, however, accept the premise of the Bush and now the Obama administration’s argument that US forces are sincerely attempting to set Afghanistan on its feet. During her visit and in subsequent comments, Maddow never seriously challenged the official version of events or in any way expressed opposition to the war, now the longest in US history.

Her program of July 6th set the tone. She introduced the series by suggesting that she and her crew had come to Afghanistan “to try to figure out two things about the war:

“One, does it make any sense that America’s military is still here and in such huge and still increasing numbers? If you take as given America’s goals here, is putting 105,000 troops here the right way to achieve those goals? And second, what does all that mean for Americans who are here?”

But this is to exclude all critical thinking from the outset. Any serious journalistic investigation would begin with precisely an examination of

“America’s goals,” or, rather, the goals of those who are prosecuting the war. Why should they be taken at face value? White House and Pentagon officials were notorious and widely despised for their deceit during the Vietnam War. And who is unaware that the Iraq war was launched in 2003 on the basis of a gigantic lie?

If Maddow buys the official propaganda, it is because she is predisposed to do so by her class position and political outlook. She feels at one with the American imperial project, as she made clear throughout her trip.

On her July 6 program, for example, Maddow asserted at one point, “You fight insurgents by killing and capturing them, sure.” Who uses language like this? Maddow has adopted the manner of speaking of the semi-criminal elements who came to prominence in the Bush administration and continue to thrive under Obama.

She went on: “But you also try to create an environment in which the insurgency can’t survive because the population doesn’t want the insurgents to be running the show. They want their own government to be running the show. So, that term—nation-building... That’s honestly what they’re trying to do here, and I don’t mean that in a bad way.”

She suggested the American forces were attempting to set up a “government, and law and order via the government, so that no one in the population wants what the Taliban is offering.”

Maddow is so enthralled with the war and the military that she doesn’t recognize the absurdity of her comment. The US is establishing or supporting a government, obviously of its liking, but this will supposedly satisfy the Afghans’ desire for “their own government to be running the show.” How is it possible, moreover, that at present the population, or a portion of it, in the face of such generosity apparently wants “what the Taliban is offering?”

For much of the rest of the program July 6, Maddow provided a platform for Brig. Gen. Ben Hodges, the head of the regional southern command in Afghanistan. She flew in a Blackhawk helicopter with Hodges from Kandahar airfield to a “forward operating base” and through the city of Kandahar. Riding along in a “mine-resistant vehicle,” Maddow noted “a little boy... throwing rocks” at the US vehicle and “a lot of hard stares” in the crowd. The unpopularity of the occupation among Afghans never arose as an issue during Maddow’s visit.

In her conversation with Hodges, the general made a revealing comment. In response to Maddow’s question as to where the money for future Afghan operations was going to come from, Hodges remarked, “I think, you know, Afghanistan does not have oil, but they certainly have incredible mineral wealth potential.”

One of the more scandalous aspects of the July 6 show was Maddow’s endorsement of the new US prison facility near the Bagram airfield. Part of the effort, she observed, to give the Afghan government “its best chance of... staying in charge so the Taliban doesn’t come back... is law

and order. And part of law and order is locking people up.”

Maddow introduced her producer, Cory Gnazzo, who explained that he had visited the Parwan Detention Facility, close to Bagram. “The US is trying,” he said, “to make the world forget the alleged atrocity that took place here.”

Gnazzo, although forbidden to film at Parwan by the US military, essentially vouched for its humane character, one of whose goals “is to educate the detainees in the hopes that once they’re released, they will be able to earn a living and not be tempted to join the Taliban.”

Gnazzo noted that “another mission” is “to interrogate prisoners for information about the enemy in Afghanistan.”

In May, the International Committee of the Red Cross confirmed that the US was continuing to operate a secret “black jail” at its Bagram facility. Numerous former detainees reported that prisoners at the site were abused, beaten, humiliated and subjected to sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation and other forms of torture. (See, “US continues to detain, torture prisoners at secret Afghan base”)

As for the new Parwan facility which so impressed Maddow and Gnazzo, the BBC’s Hilary Andersson was allowed one hour there in April and described what she saw:

“In the new jail, prisoners were being moved around in wheelchairs with goggles and headphones on. The goggles were blacked out, and the purpose of the headphones was to block out all sound. Each prisoner was handcuffed and had their legs shackled.

“Prisoners are kept in 56 cells, which the prisoners refer to as ‘cages.’ The front of the cells are made of mesh, the ceiling is clear, and the other three walls are solid. Guards can see down into the cells [from] above.”

Corrupt regime, “no infrastructure”

Maddow’s reports were schizophrenic. On the one hand, she endorsed the “honest” US effort at “nation-building” in Afghanistan and remarked on “how committed the forces are to try to make it work, despite what an uphill climb it is.” On the other, especially in portions of her conversations with NBC’s foreign affairs correspondent Richard Engel, she was obliged to make reference to the desperate poverty of the country and the rottenness of the Afghan puppet regime.

On the July 6 program, Engel admitted, speaking of Kabul, “There is no infrastructure. There are open sewers over there.” Catching himself, he then claimed that the situation “has improved dramatically”... before acknowledging again, “But there’s still no infrastructure to support the city.” This is after nine years of US occupation and tens of billions of dollars poured into the country.

Engel let the cat out of the bag in that regard too. The common misconception, he noted, “is that this is a narco state and that people here who are corrupt live off drug money.” No, he said, “by far, the biggest industry is the war... \$5.5 billion a month... So anyone connected with the war has made much, much more money than anyone connected with drugs.”

Maddow and Engel traveled July 7 to a fabulously wealthy neighborhood in Kabul. Engel commented, “There is a distribution of wealth. This is where it is distributed. This is where it ends up. All of the money from contracts and association with the government and association with the US military has ended up here.”

The houses in the neighborhood, “rococo... nouveau riche” castles, as the pair of journalists described them, are “almost all owned by [Afghan] government officials,” but they don’t live in them. “They rent them out to foreign companies, contractors,” explained Engel, for \$10,000 to \$25,000 a month. “And they live in Dubai or have their families in Islamabad. So

they are purely investment properties.”

Maddow said of one residence, “That looks like a hotel.” Engel replied, “It’s a private home. It probably has 25 bedrooms in it and garish, colonnades and unusual architectural features. And then, they’ll rent that out to some Western client and they’ll charge either by the bedroom or by the floor or for the whole thing.” Commented Maddow cynically, “America, it’s your tax dollars at work.”

Both Maddow and Engel go right on supporting this filthy war.

Who is Rachel Maddow? The daughter of a former US Air Force captain and raised in Castro Valley, California, Maddow attended Stanford University. Later she won a Rhodes Scholarship and studied at Oxford. She was apparently the first “openly gay American” to receive a Rhodes Scholarship.

After some years in radio, Maddow became a regular panelist on MSNBC’s “Tucker,” hosted by Tucker Carlson. She was also a frequent guest on “Paula Zahn Now” on CNN. In January 2008, she won a position as political analyst on MSNBC, and in April 2008, substituted for Keith Olbermann on his “Countdown” program. She got her own show on MSNBC later that year.

Maddow is articulate and more quick-witted than most of her counterparts on television. Any favorable impression those qualities make is more than compensated for by her immense self-satisfaction and insipid, timid social commentary.

Maddow labels herself as a “national security liberal.” Intending to be ironic, she explains, “I’m undoubtedly a liberal, which means that I’m in almost total agreement with the Eisenhower-era Republican party platform.” The *New York Times* terms her a “defense policy wonk,” who is writing a book on the role of the military in postwar American politics.

As her coverage of Afghanistan reveals, Maddow is a supporter of the American military and its operations around the world. She worries, like many left-liberals, that the Afghan war is not going well and that it may be unwinnable. But what if it were winnable? Maddow, like the editors of the *Nation* (that magazine’s Washington editor, Chris Hayes, sat in for the host while she was traveling abroad), opposes the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and Iraq.

The war in Afghanistan is not only an assault on the Afghan people, it is part of the conspiracy against the American population. Its prosecution is bound up with wholesale attacks on democratic rights, the defense of privilege and wealth, and the ongoing attack on jobs and living standards in the US.

Maddow is part of the upper-middle-class liberal left. She is a product of a period in which questions of personal identity, at the expense of social class, emerged as the major component of the American liberal outlook and the orientation of the Democratic Party. The striving for privileges by sections of the African-American and Latino petty-bourgeoisie, the elevation of gender and sexuality to world-historical political importance—these are what formed Maddow. As a result, she is quite indifferent to the conditions of the working population.

One can prove the point concretely. Taking her program’s transcripts over the course of three weeks in May 2010 (May 10-28), one searches in vain for a single reference to “joblessness” or “the jobless,” or to “unemployment.” During the month there was widespread discussion in the media of the record levels of long-term unemployment in the US.

Nor does the phrase “social inequality” appear, or “inequality” by itself. The word “poverty” comes up once, but in relation to Mexico, and not uttered by Maddow.

In what sense then can Maddow be designated “left” or “progressive”?

It is enough for the *Nation* (whose effusive July 28, 2008 piece reported, “Love is too weak a word to describe how some people feel about Rachel Maddow”), or the *New York Times*, that she is gay. Just as Barack Obama’s ethnicity was enough to earn their support.

The world doesn’t function that way. The determinant division is not

ethnicity, race or gender, but social class. By her support for a brutal, neo-colonial war, Rachel Maddow has identified herself in the most indelible fashion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact