

An exchange with a reader on “Liberal television host Rachel Maddow solidarizes herself with US military in Afghanistan”

David Walsh
20 July 2010

In early July, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow spent several days in Afghanistan, and the WSWWS posted the following comment on her trip: “Liberal television host Rachel Maddow solidarizes herself with US military in Afghanistan.”

We post below a reader’s response to the article, and a reply.

I read with interest your article on July 15th, 2010 by David Walsh entitled “Liberal Television host Rachael [sic] Maddow solidarizes herself with US military in Afghanistan.”

I am a regular viewer of the Rachael [sic] Maddow Show and a Socialist. I very much admire Ms. Maddow’s reporting. I was particularly impressed with the extensive reporting she did from Afghanistan. My impression was and, especially today, is very different from Mr. Walsh’s premature conclusions. Ms. Maddow was careful to simply gather the facts of why we were there, what was happening, what progress or lack thereof was being made, what the difficulties were, etc.

Today, July 15th, she finally spoke out with her own very “rational” (her word) assessment of the situation. Far from being at one with the US military’s position, she stated that to continue to risk even one more US soldier on a mission of “standing up” an Afghan government that we approved of—and that presumably would benefit and make stable the nation of Afghanistan—is probably a “dream” that would simply never happen.

I’m sure that you and Mr. Walsh would agree. She will probably “hear from” the US government and many viewers for her perceived disloyalty, etc., but I hope Mr. Walsh will write a “follow-up” piece in which he now—that Maddow has finally actually commented on her observations—apologizes for his earlier premature opinions.

DH
15 July 2010

Dear DH,

Having watched Rachel Maddow’s July 15 program (and read the transcript), I think our view of her trip and her outlook has been strikingly confirmed.

Maddow makes clear that her opposition to the US presence in Afghanistan is purely tactical, i.e., she doesn’t think Washington’s present aims—which she takes at face value—are

workable, even as she pays fulsome tribute to the American military. This is a debate within US political establishment and media circles about how best to advance the geopolitical interests of American imperialism.

On her July 15 show, Maddow first ran a lengthy clip in which Richard Holbrooke, US special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, made the Obama administration’s case for the war. Holbrooke, whose career on behalf of the American state goes back to a stint in Vietnam, claimed that US failure in Afghanistan would represent “a direct, immediate danger to us,” since it would mean the Taliban and Al Qaeda gaining “a worldwide success, which will be very dangerous for our national security interests.”

Leaving this assertion unchallenged, Maddow proceeded to sum up the administration’s argument that “we need to do everything we can to ensure that there is an Afghan government, a big competent national police force... a well-trained, well-equipped army... basic services, national ministries, governors and municipal offices, all linked to the central government in Kabul.”

Maddow noted, “You don’t have to be crazed or even religious to be against a foreign power fighting in your country,” but went on, resignedly, “But we’re there. We are there and we are talking about our Afghan partners.”

Yes, the US military is undoubtedly there. But *why* is it there? In so far as Maddow never addressed this question, her comments were either an evasion or a cover-up. And who are “our Afghan partners?” A puppet regime and its supporters among the warlords, drug traffickers and profiteers of various stripes.

Maddow went on to explain that “Gen. David Petraeus’ statement to the troops upon taking over command referenced the American military’s compassion for the Afghan people.”

Petraeus is a man whose hands are dripping with blood from Iraq, where he presided over the slaughter of thousands or tens of thousands in the “surge,” and who now hopes to reproduce the experience in Afghanistan. So much for the US military’s “compassion.” How obscene! Maddow presents Petraeus, with a straight face, as someone who is going to protect the Afghans from the “bad guys.”

She continued, “The administration’s argument for staying in Afghanistan and what to do there is logical. It’s an argument I understand ... I also feel like I saw eye-to-eye with the incredibly impressive American troops who are trying to implement the US

mission in Afghanistan. They are earnest, capable, professional and they understand the mission and its value.”

This is a lie. The US military is there in its capacity as the oppressor of the Afghan people in the interests of the American ruling elite. Its function is to intimidate and terrorize opposition to the US, its allies and the Karzai regime. This is a brutalizing role, and it inevitably leads to abuses and atrocities, as the record of every counter-insurgency effort demonstrates, from Algeria to Vietnam and beyond.

Nowhere in Maddow’s reports from Afghanistan did the word torture appear. A brief reference to an “alleged atrocity” at the Bagram prison, a well-known hellhole, where Afghan detainees were systematically tortured and even murdered, was used as an opportunity to claim that the US was now operating a humane facility in Parwan province. The reports of a second “black site,” at the Bagram airbase, confirmed by the International Committee of the Red Cross earlier this year, where prisoners are “disappeared”—no mention at all.

Maddow made no reference either to the “collateral damage” from drone attacks or the bombings of civilians, which have provoked outrage and innumerable anti-American protests. Her comments July 15 sanitized the US military’s role. They vindicate our headline.

After praising the military, she went on, somewhat sorrowfully, to argue that the US effort was based on a “romantic and unproven and, I believe, unlikely” premise: that it is possible for the US to set up “a real Afghan government.”

Maddow told the camera: “A real Afghan government is the outcome we want for us and for the Afghan people. It’s practically inarguable as a desired outcome. But whether or not that outcome is achieved is not really up to us.”

The corruption of the elite in Kabul, the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil which helps the Taliban to recruit, and the lack of support within the Afghan population for the efforts by the US on its behalf—all of this will make it difficult to achieve a happy outcome, she told her viewers.

In a final clip, Maddow asked the American general in charge of operations in the south of the country what would happen if the Afghans don’t “step up and do their part” (in his words) over the course of the next year. He replied, “Then we will have given them the best chance they’ve ever had.”

She repeated these words, as though they represented a profound truth, instead of the arrogance of a colonial overlord discharging the “white man’s burden.”

Maddow concluded: “If you believe our actions, our American actions in 2010 can make it more likely that there’s a real government in Afghanistan, then asking Americans to die in Afghanistan is asking them to die for something that is in the national security interests of the United States, which is what American kids sign up for when they enlist.

“But if you believe that our actions, our American actions in 2010 cannot make it more likely that there’s a real Afghan government, that there’s a real government in Afghanistan, then asking Americans to die in Afghanistan is wrong. It’s over.”

Maddow disagrees with the Afghan policy. The war is unwinnable, the situation in Afghanistan is a mess, the Kabul regime is hopelessly corrupt, the insurgency is gaining strength. But this is not principled opposition to imperialist war.

What if the war were ‘winnable,’ what if the Karzai government—or a replacement—managed to pull itself together, what if massive bloodletting and filthy political deals could stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, at least temporarily, as in Iraq? What happens to Maddow’s “opposition” then?

Hers is not the consensus view of the American ruling elite. Holbrooke speaks for the majority opinion—that it is necessary, come what may, to prevail or at least hang on in Afghanistan. Too much is at stake. The ruling elite has determined that the region is geopolitically critical, and there is also the need to demonstrate in an exemplary fashion that the US will not tolerate resistance to its plans.

But Maddow is a voice within the establishment, attempting to take part in its discussions and strategizing. Her stance has nothing in common with socialist opposition to imperialist war and neo-colonialism.

Following the launch of the war in Afghanistan in October 2001, the WSWS wrote (“Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan”): “The US government initiated the war in pursuit of far-reaching international interests of the American ruling elite. What is the main purpose of the war? The collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago created a political vacuum in Central Asia, which is home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world...

“These critical resources are located in the world’s most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.”

We stand by that judgment. The American liberal-left postured as “anti-war” under Bush for a time, but they have largely come around under Obama. This element squirms when things don’t go well and popular opposition mounts, but, in the end, the well-heeled layer to which Maddow belongs understands that its wealth and privileges are bound up with the fate of American imperialist policy and the US military in particular.

Maddow respectfully, politely rejects the current Afghan policy. But how will she and others like her, at MSNBC or the *Nation*, respond to the emergence of popular, working class resistance to war and to the austerity measures imposed to help pay for it? We predict: less respectfully, less politely.

David Walsh



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