

The ‘humanitarian’ campaign for the war in Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
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The US media has launched a full-scale effort to suppress growing popular opposition to the war in Afghanistan, using one-sided propaganda about Taliban atrocities to conceal the murderous character of the American intervention. Beginning with the cover of *Time* magazine, showing a young woman mutilated by her Taliban husband, the media blitz now focuses on the killing of 10 medical aid workers Friday in the northeastern province of Badakhshan. Six of the ten were American citizens.

Both of these events are, without a doubt, terrible human tragedies. But they are being used in the most cynical fashion to browbeat the American people into accepting an indefinite continuation of the war in Afghanistan, under conditions where a clear majority of the population now regards the war with hostility and favors a rapid US pullout.

The July 29 issue of *Time* marked the official kickoff of the campaign, with the cover photo of the young woman whose nose and ears were hacked off for attempting to flee her husband, and an accompanying headline declaring this atrocity to be “What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan.” The political message was unmistakable: those who advocate withdrawal of US forces are condemning Afghan women to butchery.

Managing Editor Rick Stengel gave the following explanation to readers upset at the magazine for publishing the gruesome image, writing, “I felt that the image is a window into the reality of what is happening—and what can happen—in a war that affects and involves all of us. I would rather confront readers with the Taliban’s treatment of women than ignore it. I would rather people know that reality as they make up their minds about what the US and its allies should do in Afghanistan.”

It is fair to ask a different question, however. Why didn’t the *Time* editor publish a photograph on the

magazine’s front cover of any of the thousands of innocent Afghan men, women and children killed by US air strikes, missiles, artillery and mortar shells? He might have chosen the scene at Kunduz, where 140 people were incinerated in a single air strike that detonated a gasoline tanker. Or the wedding party in the eastern province of Nangarhar, where 47 were blown to fragments by bombs and missiles, including the young bride. Or the 90 people machine-gunned by US helicopter gunships during a funeral ceremony in Herat province. Or any of the hundreds of individual, small-scale killings of civilians detailed in the recent release of documents by WikiLeaks.

There are enough such victims of imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan to fill the covers of American news magazines for decades to come. But the giant corporations that control the media are not in the business of informing the American people about the atrocities being committed in their name. Their task is to manipulate public opinion in the interests of policies decided on by the financial aristocracy and its political representatives, and they are hard at work at that task.

The *Time* cover is a lie on another level as well. The horrific treatment of women under the Taliban (and to a large extent under the US-backed Karzai regime as well), is itself the product of the American intervention in Afghanistan over the course of three decades. The Carter and Reagan administrations sought to mobilize opposition to a Soviet-backed regime in which, at least in urban areas, women had substantially improved rights, education and social standing. The mujahedin were drawn from the most right-wing elements in the Islamic world, financed by Saudi Arabia, trained by the CIA in terror techniques, and dispatched to Afghanistan. Among them was the future leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden.

The United States government deliberately fomented and spread a version of Islamic fundamentalism that had

no widespread support at the time, except from a handful of close US allies like the Saudi monarchy. When the mujahedin warlords fell into civil war after the Soviet withdrawal, the Pakistani military, with US backing, promoted the Taliban as a more reliable replacement. Thus the Taliban, like Al Qaeda, is very much a Frankenstein's monster, raised up in the course of the Cold War struggle with the USSR, which has turned against its creator.

The killing of the medical missionaries in Badakhshan has now become the focus of saturation media coverage. Many basic facts of the massacre remain uncertain, including the affiliation of the killers. There have been suggestions that bandits motivated by robbery were actually involved, despite the Taliban's claim of responsibility. Most other encounters between unarmed Western aid workers and insurgent forces have resulted in kidnapping for ransom and propaganda purposes, and only a handful, albeit well-publicized, have ended in murder.

Whatever the exact circumstances, however, such atrocities are an absolutely inevitable by-product of a counterinsurgency war waged by an imperialist state armed with overwhelming firepower against an enemy rooted in a tribal society that has proven fiercely hostile to foreign occupiers.

The bulk of the US media coverage initially focused on the individual medical aid workers, their long labors in Afghanistan, and the sorrowful impact on their families and colleagues, but has begun to exploit the event to promote the war. One New York tabloid published its report under a giant one-word headline, "SAVAGES," consciously or unconsciously making the connection between US policy in Afghanistan and the attempted extermination of Native Americans in the 19th century.

The Obama administration began to draw its desired political conclusions from the event Sunday, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issuing a statement denouncing the "despicable act of wanton violence" that revealed the "twisted ideology" of the Taliban, and reaffirming her government's determination to prevail in the war, now nearly nine years old.

Characteristically, the *Wall Street Journal* drew the most explicit and reactionary conclusions from the event in an editorial Monday headlined "The Taliban Method," calling the killings "especially notable as an education in the nature of our enemy."

"The murders are a window on the threat that thousands of Afghans face every day if they dare to cooperate with

the Afghan government," the *Journal* continued. "The assassinations and disfigurements (cutting off ears or arms) are a war tactic, designed to make it harder for the government to collect intelligence and deliver services to win over the population."

This ignores the well-known fact that a large majority of the Afghan people oppose the US-led occupation of their country and Washington's corrupt puppet government in Kabul. Moreover, the high-tech war machine operated by the Pentagon inflicts far worse damage on the bodies of its victims, without the well-paid reactionaries in US editorial offices shedding any tears.

The *Journal* concludes, "The main US strategic purpose in this war is self-defense in denying an Al Qaeda sanctuary. But our cause also includes the moral imperative of preventing Islamic radicals from a victory that would give them rein to maim and murder thousands of innocents."

This combines the lie that was the original basis for the invasion of Afghanistan—the war as revenge for the 9/11 terrorist attacks—with the "moral" and "humanitarian" rationale now being propagated so assiduously by the American media.

In his explanation of why *Time* published its cover photograph, executive editor Stengel makes a revealing reference to the fact that "The much publicized release of classified documents by WikiLeaks has already ratcheted up the debate about the war." A major reason for the furious hostility towards WikiLeaks is that this small Internet-based organization has broken through the self-censorship practiced by the vast corporate-controlled media machine.

Those who play the decision-making role—the editors of the leading newspapers and magazines, the executives, producers and anchormen of the major television networks—are well aware of the nature of the war in Afghanistan. WikiLeaks was no revelation to them. In their deliberate suppression of the brutality of the American war, they play an important role in enabling the crimes of imperialism.

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