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Afghan Absurdities

by James Bovard

Americans have heard many news reports about Bush administration falsehoods on Iraq. However, the scams of Afghanistan have not gotten as much attention as they deserve. Following are some examples of how the Bush administration has misled the American people regarding Afghanistan.

In the wake of the U.S. military victory over the Taliban, President Bush warned America in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002,

Our discoveries in Afghanistan confirmed our worst fears.... We have found diagrams of American nuclear power plants and public water facilities.... What we have found in Afghanistan confirms that, far from ending there, our war against terror is only beginning.

The news that al-Qaeda was targeting American nuclear reactors was the most chilling revelation in Bush's speech. Senior CIA and FBI officials gave background briefings to the Washington media in the wake of the speech, amplifying the threat that Afghanistan-based al-Qaeda fighters were targeting U.S. nuclear-power facilities. This news made the terrorist threat far more ominous and may have spurred support for Bush's preemptive war policy.

Two years later, the Bush administration admitted that the president's statement was false and that no nuclear-power-plant diagrams had been discovered in Afghanistan. A senior Bush administration official told the *Wall Street Journal*, "There's no additional basis for the language in the speech that we have found." Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner Edward McGaffigan, who had testified in 2002 on this issue in closed hearings on Capitol Hill, commented that Bush was "poorly served by a speech-writer."

When word began circulating that the nuclear-power-plant story was a hoax, at least one White House official refused to raise the white flag. *Nucleonics Week* reported that National Security Council spokesman Sean McCormack denied that Bush ever claimed the nuclear-powerplant diagrams were found in Afghanistan. McCormack told *Nucleonics Week*, "We stand

by the line in the president's speech." McCormack emphasized that, although Afghanistan was mentioned in sentences before and after the bombshell about discovering U.S. nuclear-powerplant diagrams, the word "Afghanistan" did not appear in that specific sentence. He revealed that Bush's comment was merely referring to the possibility that terrorists might access the websites of U.S. nuclear-power plants. McCormack said,

In terms of wording of the president's speech, at the time we didn't want to talk in public about what we knew about the ability of al-Qaeda to access the Internet and download information from the Internet.

But the FBI had revealed months earlier that the 9/11 hijackers routinely used the Internet to communicate with one another.

That Bush's Afghan nuclear claim was bogus popped up in the news for a day or two and then vanished. Almost no one on Capitol Hill showed any interest in investigating.

Sham women's lib

In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush, listing the achievements of the invasion of Afghanistan, declared, "The mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes.... Today women are free."

But most Afghan women have yet to experience the Bush deliverance. A January 2003 UN report on conditions in rural Afghanistan concluded that "the situation of women has not changed to any great extent since the removal of the Taliban."

The U.S. State Department, in a February 2004 report on Afghanistan, noted the following imperfections in Afghan equal rights:

- Kabul police authorities placed women under detention in prison, at the request of family members, for defying the family's wishes on the choice of a spouse.

- Tribal elders resolved murder cases by ordering defendants to provide young girls in marriage to the victims' families, in punishment for the murder.

- In some areas, women were forbidden to leave the home except in the company of a male relative.

- Some local authorities excluded women from all employment outside the home, apart from the traditional work of women in agriculture.

- In Herat province, ruler-warlord Ismael Khan closed down all beauty parlors and banned women from working as tailors.
- The government of the Nangarhar province banned all women entertainers from radio and television in April 2004.

Barbarity oversold

Like a knight in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Bush continually inflates the size of the dragons he has supposedly slain. In a speech in Louisville, Kentucky, on September 2, 2002, he bragged, "We went in to liberate people from the clutches of the most barbaric regime in history." This was an upgrade for the Taliban, since Bush usually characterized them as only "the most barbaric regime in modern history."

The Taliban were brutal and killed tens of thousands of civilians during their five-year rule over most of Afghanistan. But on a year-to-year basis, the Taliban may have been less bloodthirsty than the Northern Alliance, which ruled most of Afghanistan in the mid 1990s and whose factions killed more than 25,000 civilians in Kabul alone. The Taliban's brutality never approached that of the Soviet military, which killed 1 to 2 million Afghans between 1979 and 1989.

Many governments have far exceeded the Taliban's carnage. Three million North Koreans have perished because of their government's brutal repression and its destruction of the agricultural sector. More than a million people were killed by government forces and rampaging paramilitaries carrying out ethnic-cleansing campaigns in Rwanda and Burundi in 1994. The Khmer Rouge killed an estimated 2 to 3 million Cambodians beginning in 1975 — almost a third of the population. Nor does the Taliban's grisly record compare with that of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, or Mao's China. And many conquerors in earlier history make the Taliban look like pikers.

American-made victims don't count

The Taliban's barbarism does not absolve the U.S. government from its abuses. Though the Bush administration continually portrays the U.S. defeat of the Taliban as a triumph for human rights, the U.S. military has routinely covered up its abuses of Afghan civilians.

The Bush administration continually seeks to ignore, shrug off, or misrepresent actions of U.S. forces that kill innocent Afghan civilians. After the United States killed 15 Afghan children in two separate bombing incidents in December 2003, the Afghan government, the United Nations, and other organizations demanded a public accounting. The military conducted its own investigation of an incident in which 9 children were killed and concluded that it was blameless. The results were top secret, but, according to U.S. military spokesman Bryan Hilferty, "The

investigating officer said we used appropriate rules of engagement and did follow the law of conflict.”

Human Rights Watch condemned U.S. practices in a March 2004 report, noting that “civilians are being held in a legal black hole — with no tribunals, no legal counsel, no family visits, and no basic legal protections.” The report declared,

There is compelling evidence suggesting that U.S. personnel have committed acts against detainees amounting to torture or cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment.

The deaths of two Afghans being held at the U.S. Bagram air base were officially classified by military doctors as homicides resulting from “blunt force injuries.”

The Taliban forever vanquished

On November 30, 2003, in a speech to U.S. Army troops at Fort Carson, Colorado, Bush declared,

Working with a fine coalition, our military went to Afghanistan, destroyed the training camps of al-Qaeda, and put the Taliban out of business forever.

Shortly after Bush’s announcement, the U.S. military launched Operation Mountain Blizzard to fight Taliban elements and terrorist suspects in the southern part of Afghanistan. Mountain Blizzard was so successful in putting the Taliban “out of business forever” that the United States brought in thousands of reinforcements and launched Operation Mountain Storm in March 2004.

On the main road in the Zabul province, “the Taliban have set up daytime road blocks. They scrutinize vehicles for potential targets to kill or kidnap. Four engineers working on that road have been kidnapped, and 15 Afghans working for the central government have been killed in the past three months,” according to a February 2004 report in Canada’s *Globe and Mail*.

The Taliban continue to pose a mortal threat to many Afghans who seek progress and stability in their country. As of March 2004, the Taliban and cohorts controlled roughly a third of Afghanistan, primarily in the southern areas adjacent to Pakistan. Gen. James Jones, the U.S. commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, testified to Congress in January 2004 that enemy forces “have some military capability to psychologically demoralize us.” The UN Development Program warned in March 2004 that Afghanistan may again become a “terrorist breeding ground” unless it receives far more international aid.

Conclusion

As long as the Taliban have not reentered Kabul in triumph, Bush can continue to portray the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as one of the greatest humanitarian triumphs in history. He inflated the victory over the Taliban to make himself appear as not only a great military conqueror but also a savior of part of humanity. He is playing on the ignorance of Americans who vaguely recall the television news broadcasts showing the U.S. troops' victories but otherwise followed few, if any, of the details of what has happened in Afghanistan since late 2001.

James Bovard is author of [The Bush Betrayal](#) as well as [Lost Rights](#) (1994) and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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