

“War Is a Racket”: The US War in Afghanistan Validates General Smedley Butler

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“I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.” – Major General Smedley Darlington Butler (1881-1940) in his book “War is a Racket” (1935).

The ending of the 20-year-war in Afghanistan, the longest ever engagement in a single conflict by the United States armed forces, has been variously described as a “catastrophe”, a “disaster” and a “debacle”. Yet this national failure from which parallels have been drawn with the Vietnam War has not had the same ring of misfortune for some.

Indeed, long before the recent scenes of calamity and collapse in Kabul brought home with resounding finality the futility of a supposed nation-building exercise, the profit-motive for the initial US invasion and the preservation of an enduring occupation was an open secret to anyone who bothered to embark on the slightest inquiry.

The gravy train of American defence spending was in full effect, facilitated by the tentacles of what US President Dwight D. Eisenhower prophesied would become the Military Industrial Complex. For the last two decades have witnessed what has been described as a “wealth transfer from US taxpayers to military contractors”. But the war, apart from confirming Afghanistan’s reputation as the “Graveyard of Empires”, also validates the phrase coined by US Major General Smedley Butler that war is a racket.

The blame game currently being played out in the United States media by the political class risks obscuring one fundamental issue: the centrality of money and the profit motive in the waging of America’s two-decade-long war in Afghanistan.

The invasion of that country had been planned well in advance of the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the event which provided the impetus for mounting a military response including the country’s occupation. The United States has long coveted gaining access to the mineral and oil rich Caspian region and Central Asia, and the coming to power of the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban movement was not seen at the time by US policy makers as an impenetrable obstacle.

As the French writers Jean-Charles Briscard and Guillaume Dasquie wrote in their book *Forbidden Truth: U.S.-Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy and the Failed Hunt for Bin Laden*, which was published in 2002, the American government had been prepared to accept Taliban rule on condition that they agreed to the construction of an oil pipeline across Central Asia.

Thus, it was that in February 2001, the administration headed by George W. Bush entered talks with the Taliban, a group which along with al-Qaeda had germinated from the remnants of the local and foreign recruited anti-Soviet Mujahideen insurgents which had been supported by the Americans during the Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-1989. At one point during the negotiations, noted Briscard, the US representatives told the Taliban,

‘Either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs’.

The invasion of Afghanistan which commenced in October 2001, and which led to the overthrow of the Taliban two months later formally inaugurated the war that was ended by this month’s American withdrawal and the swift capitulation of the US-trained Afghan military.

“Operation Enduring Freedom” was described as a “police action”, but it had decidedly mixed results. While the Taliban was overthrown and several Islamist training camps were overrun and their inhabitants apprehended, the main objective of the operation, the capture of Osama Bin Laden did not come to pass. Furthermore, the Taliban remained as a guerrilla force whose control of territory would increase with the passage of time.

It is against this background that the colossal waste of American taxpayer’s money and the corresponding enrichment of American military contractors, as well as members of the Afghan elite can be documented.

The cover for this was the stated goal of “nation building”. In other words, Afghanistan was to be transformed socially and economically into a modern progressive society which would exhibit the panoply of Western values through the creation of strong democratic institutions, the equal treatment of women, as well as a free market economy.

But evidence of the waste of American taxpayers’ money eventually surfaced.

In 2015 ProPublica, an independent investigative news concern unveiled a report which revealed that the United States had blown [\\$17 Billion](#) through a number of uncompleted projects. There was the story of patrol boats which never left the factory and of planes which could not fly. After the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) ruled that the planes, which cost \$486 million, were a “death trap”, 16 of the planes were sold as scrap for a total of \$32,000.

The report referred to many more including the \$14.7 million spent on a storage facility for the military, which was never used, a \$456,000 police-training facility that disintegrated owing to poor construction, as well as a \$335,000 unused power plant. It is worth reminding that waste is not an uncommon issue with the Military Industry given the debacles surrounding the development of the F-35 fighter jet and the Zumwalt Class naval warships.

The issue of accountability of these wastages were never satisfactorily addressed by Congress, the Department of Defense, the State Department and SIGAR.

The following year, the fifteenth of the conflict, it was estimated that the war had cost the American taxpayer more than \$737 billion and was consuming another \$4 million per hour, every day that it continued. The most recent estimates put the total cost at \$2.26 trillion which divides into \$300 million per day over the 20-year period of occupation.

And who profited from all this? The answer is the Military Industrial Complex; the “network of individuals and institutions involved in the production of weapons and military technologies” that typically lobby lawmakers for increased military spending. They consist of former senior ranking members of the US armed forces, former defence secretaries and a range of companies including Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics.

Needless to say, the value of stock in each of the corporations has increased to extraordinary levels given not only the duration of the Afghan war but also interventions in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria as well as the ongoing policy of expanding NATO and ratcheting tension with Russia after the departure of Boris Yeltsin and the coming to power of his successor Vladimir Putin.

For instance, a purchase of \$10,000 worth of stock in 2001 is worth an estimated \$133,559 in Lockheed Martin; \$129,645 in Northrop Grumman; \$107,588 in Boeing; \$72,516 in General Dynamics; and \$43,167 in Raytheon. Unsurprising among the board members benefiting financially from this are an array of admirals and generals who held positions such as the Chief of Naval Operations and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Many names may not be familiar to the public although the name of James Mattis, a former marine corps general who served as a Secretary of State for Defense stands out.

The interlocking and interdependent structure of interests results in a revolving door culture of former military men becoming paid lobbyists and media pundits. The industry is also aided by an array of think tanks and members of congress who receive campaign donations from military contractors and the energy industry.

It is not hard to see therefore why US military intervention has been consistently encouraged and why specifically the war in Afghanistan was allowed to endure for so long: it is clear that the war provided a corporate welfare program for both the defence and chemical industries. The contractors benefited from the numerous projects including those designated as white elephants, while the chemical industries were keen to benefit from the exploitation of Afghanistan’s rare-earth minerals.

When in 1961 President Dwight Eisenhower warned about the “unwarranted influence” by the then burgeoning Military Industrial Complex in his [farewell address](#) to the American nation, he might as well have been referring to the conduct of the Afghan war. He clearly foresaw the threat it could pose to America’s “economic, political (and) even spiritual” wellbeing.

So far as the corruption of America’s political institutions is concerned, Michael J. Glennon, a Tufts University professor has identified what he terms the “Trumanite” institutions of government, in contrast to the “Madisonian” institutions of state governance prescribed by the American constitution, which consist of an unaccountable collection of former military, intelligence and law enforcement offices whose influence has been pervasive enough to guarantee that America’s national security policy, one of consistent militarism, has essentially remained unchanged through successive presidential administrations.

On the economic front, an earlier speech given by Eisenhower in April 1953 which was dubbed the “Chance for Peace” speech, gives illumination to the claim that the Afghan War can be characterised as a “wealth transfer from US taxpayers to military contractors”.

Eisenhower said that “every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

His words could be extrapolated to mean in present terms that the excesses of the military industry in its ruthless extraction of taxpayer’s money, has taken away the opportunity to get rid of student debt, to tackle homelessness, alleviate poverty, put young people through college and increase spending on scientific research.

The same could be said of Afghanistan, the focus of a “nation building” project. Despite the colossal amount of money directed to the country, in 2015 the World Justice Project ranked the country at 111 out of 113 on the Rule of Law Index. Not only had the goal of creating a more ethical society with strong political institutions failed, it scored poorly in the areas of corruption and the operating of a criminal justice system.

Government services ranging from the prison system to the education system were found to be inadequate or poor. Roads were not built, sub-contractors not paid as indeed were a range of low-tier servants of the state including the police. This meant that to gain an income of sorts, members of the Afghan police were reduced to kidnapping people and then ransoming them to their families.

In Afghanistan, illiteracy and poverty reigned. The money pouring in from the United States stopped at the corrupt elites with a connection to the Afghan government and the US military. Fabulously wealthy Afghans who were invariably government officials of the US sponsored regime who owned ostentatious mansions and castle-like edifices in the upmarket districts of Kabul preferred to rent out the properties to expatriate contractors and corporate employees while they lived in parts of Pakistan and in Dubai.

“War is a racket”, wrote Smedley Butler. “It always has been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious. It is the only one international in scope.” These words must surely resonate with any objective bystander when examining the US occupation of Afghanistan.

But any form of national self-examination must necessarily go further than the usual grind of political scorekeeping between the two major parties. For the wars waged by the United States have all had bipartisan approval. Those media figures identified with the “liberal left” are complicit in the militarism that has characterised the post-Cold War era. They subscribe to the doctrine of so-called “humanitarian wars” which fit hand-in-glove with the war agenda constantly pushed by the Military Industry.

This is also true of figures in the Democratic Party establishment. For while Democratic Party Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, theatrically tore up her copy of President Donald Trump’s State of the Union address in 2020, she rose to applaud Trump’s expression of support for the US puppet Juan Guaido, the man who was being used by the US National Security State in an attempt to overthrow the legitimate government of Venezuela.

Given this background, it would be difficult to proffer that the expensive foreign adventures

of the money-seeking Military Industry will end with the humiliating withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan. Some neoconservative figures are already calling for a redeployment of resources towards applying military pressure against Iran, while efforts aimed at confronting China in the Pacific have been steadily increasing. The American public must, as Eisenhower warned, “guard against” this constant promotion of a war agenda by the combination of Wall Street and military contractors’ who surely have long inherited the mantle of Basil Zaharoff, the notorious Greek arms dealer and industrialist who came to be known as the “merchant of death”.

As the political scientist Chalmers Johnson once noted:

When war becomes the most profitable course of action, we can certainly expect more of it.

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