

# Will the US Meet Its Waterloo in Afghanistan and Iraq?

2nd Anuradha Ghandy Memorial Lecture

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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*Napoleon's defeat in the battle of Waterloo, 1815*

St Xavier's College, Mumbai

Dear friends!

I am deeply honoured by being invited to hold this memorial lecture in honour of the late Anuradhu Ghandy, a great Indian revolutionary and intellectual.

At present, the US is waging two wars in West and Central Asia. In both of them the US have clear economic and strategic goals. A third war, one against Iran seems to be looming – the faithful British ally Blair mentioned Iran 58 times during the Chilcot testimony last week. As all these wars are directed against and conducted in Muslim countries they also take on the colour of what Huntington called Wars of Cultures.

This in itself is dangerous. These wars are becoming a factor in the rising tide of ethnical and religious contradictions. In Europe it is evident that the sharpened conflict about jobs and housing in the economic crisis between immigrants from Asia and Africa and local populations are being given religious and racial colouring by different reactionary groups.

The US seems to have learned from the British how to use and develop such contradictions in order to try to secure their own rule. They now develop the conflict between Shi'a and Sunni in Iraq like the British developed the conflicts in Cyprus, Palestine and South Asia (Bengal!).

Possibly also with the same historically tragic long term results.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan the people have had to pay heavily -both materially and in dead and wounded - for the US war. At the same time it has proved impossible for the US and their more or less willing allies to gain a clear victory despite the fact that they have managed to install themselves militarily in the oil rich Iraq.

But what is generally important is that what is called the "War on Terror" has led to the militarisation of both the US and its allies; the long range effect in our countries has been the rise of modern police states. Even my own country - Sweden - has as a result seen the deterioration of traditional legal and civic rights.

But that the US and its empire in the longer run is doomed to failure is evident. No tree grows up into heaven. The US is a paper tiger, as Mao put it. It will follow the road of other world empires. The Roman and Spanish - and British. But that is a very general statement, it does not say when and how that empire will come to its end. But if it does so by meeting a Waterloo is another question., It is of course possible that its end will be of the Waterloo kind; a defeat like that of Napoleon by a coalition of powers. That is possible. Washington is after all waging its present wars on credit.

If China, The European Union, the Gulf states refused to finance the present wars of the United States any longer then they would stop.

It would be as turning the ignition key in a car. But even if these powers are getting reluctant they are much too afraid of the resulting financial meltdown; you could say that the US is blackmailing them to continue financing its wars by threatening suicide!

Already in the war against Iraq it was difficult for the US to get its European allies like France and Germany to become willing allies.

Today with the continuing war against Afghanistan there are new and increasing signs of tension. The European Union is beginning to act as if it has its own agenda in the Afghan war. China is showing increasing signs of uneasiness. China Daily published an interesting article by Han Dongping "Say no to NATO use of the Wahan Corridor" on January 15th. Even if the paper stated that the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the China Daily" the publication indicates that they are not contrary to the opinion of the Chinese government.

But still I don't think that such a Waterloo ending of the US empire is imminent. A repetition of the Soviet breakup after the military defeat in Afghanistan would of course be possible. The internal economic and social difficulties and conflicts in the ever more deeply divided United States are great. But still, they might not be as acute as those of the Soviet Union twenty years ago when the defeat in a relatively minor war triggered a total collapse of the system.

There is instead another Napoleonic example of an empire nearing its end. The US empire is now getting involved in its "Spanish War".

It was the Spanish war that signalled the end of the Napoleonic empire.

For the first time the army of Napoleon got bogged down in un-

winnable war. A war against a people in arms. As it dragged on it sapped the power of the undefeatable French army. The situation of the French forces in Spain are not unlike those of the US forces in Afghanistan.

A militarily superior army is met by a popular resistance by poorly armed peasants. (There are great differences of course – the role of Great Britain for instance.) The war becomes unwinnable. The costs (a million dollars a year for each US soldier in Afghanistan) mount and the war becomes ever more cruel while the results are not to be seen.

But there is also another lesson to be learned from the Spanish war of Napoleon. He had installed his brother as king of Spain. The policies of that king were officially liberal in the Napoleonic sense. For example the hated inquisition was abolished. But this did not endear the French occupation to the poor peasants. One could say that the Spanish people preferred the inquisition to the officially liberal French occupiers.

In their propaganda the US is in Afghanistan to help the Afghan people.

That is the normal verbiage of colonialism and imperialism. I remember when Mussolini was going to attack Ethiopia. It was the first such war I remember following on the radio. In the League of Nations his diplomats declared that Italy was waging this war in order to liberate the people from slavery and feudalism.

Of course Haile Selassie was a feudal monarch and official slavery had only just been abolished but certainly still existed. But I remember my parents laughing at Mussolini. His propaganda was fake. His troops were not there to liberate the people but for the loot to themselves and an empire to Mussolini.

Today it seems according to some Swedish politicians that the US forces, the NATO forces and the Swedish soldiers sent to Afghanistan are there to liberate the women of Afghanistan.

When some friends on the left side in politics begin to talk about liberating the women of Afghanistan from the Taliban I remind them first of how the Spanish peasants preferred the inquisition to the French occupiers and then point out that if they want to send Swedish soldiers abroad to liberate women there are other more suitable targets. The Swedish state does not allow men to buy women. Those who do are punished. But in Germany prostitution is legal. Hamburg on the other side of the Baltic is one of the large and legal prostitution centres of Europe. The German state takes much revenue in taxes from the Hamburg brothels. (Many of the women working in these brothels are trafficked from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe.) Sweden could of course send its army, navy and air force to Hamburg in an attempt to liberate these unfortunate prostitutes from the tax paying brothels of Hamburg.

But we do not. Instead we send our soldiers to Afghanistan where they are to liberate Afghan women side by side with brothel keepers from Germany.

Up to now I have been discussing this fifth Afghan war from outside.

As if the interesting question was how much the war costs to the US (and to NATO and the European Union). But the real question is of course that it is a war against Afghanistan and its people. For me that is the main question. Not only in general but because I have a great feeling for the country and the people. It is now more than fifty years ago I and my wife came driving to Afghanistan in July 1958.

We were young, we were poor, we then travelled all around in Afghanistan that year and the next. We even drove up the Wakhan Corridor and up the Kunar valley to the Bashgul valley in Kafiristan.

Our small car was like donkey. The reason we got all these travel permits was simple: "You are from a small neutral country." Britishers and Americans did not get them.

Even if we travelled in border areas where there was some tribal fighting we were always protected by the pushtun tribal tradition.

Unarmed travellers are guests. Of course we were unarmed. If we had carried arms we would have been regarded as enemies. I know some who did. They disappeared. They had not shown respect.

We travelled all around the country, stayed in big cities like Kabul (where we had a small house) and Herat, in robats high up in the mountains as with black tent nomads. The Afghans were always friendly, my wife and I never met a harsh word. Everybody was helpful. We often had punctures (16 in one day – in 1959 when our tires were bad) the truck drivers then always stopped and asked if we needed help. It was a partly tribal, partly feudal society but if you were from a small neutral country, behaved in a polite way and showed respect people were friendly, helpful and polite to you.

This is not the Afghanistan you meet in British travellers tales but it is the Afghanistan we met in the fifties and seventies when we were living there. I then also wrote two books on Afghanistan that are in their sixth edition now and sold through the Swedish association "Afghanistan Solidaritet".

I have wanted to say this as this war for me is not just any war but a war against people I know and who are close to me. These last two Afghan wars have been barbaric. My anger is so strong that I can feel the taste of blood in my mouth when I see TV pictures of US marines, Swedish mercenaries or NATO soldiers in Afghanistan and my deepest personal feeling then is that the only good foreign soldier on Afghan soil is a dead one. But that is a personal feeling that I have to repress in order to be useful in the solidarity work.

Because in this war the international solidarity with the Afghan people is needed. I know that the Afghans will defend their land and people as they always have done. This fifth Afghan war is as horrible as the first barbaric three British wars and the fourth Russian one. The international solidarity is necessary not only in order to see to it that the price the Afghan people this time when the US empire is conducting the war will not be unbearably high but also for our own sake. As long as we can not stop our states participating in such a war we are both responsible for the cruelty to the Afghan people and at the same time our possibilities to change our own society are lessened.

The solidarity movement is not a political movement for the sake of others but for our own sake.

In Germany, Great Britain, Sweden and most of Western Europe a growing opinion – a majority in most cases – are demanding the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. This is creating increasing difficulties for the European governments taking part in the war. If we can strengthen this then it will become increasingly difficult for our governments to continue this war against the Afghan people.

In Sweden we founded a solidarity movement when the fourth war began.

It had to carry through a great struggle with false leftist groups trying to support the occupation policies of the then Soviet Union. We at that time discussed a principal question that had been central in European politics since the French revolution; the impossibility of carrying the revolution to others on bayonettes. In that Robespierre was right and Danton has been proved wrong! There was at that time a real left wing movement in Afghanistan but it was drenched by Soviet troops.

As the movement for Afghanistan grew in Sweden during that war time it also evolved into a state supported NGO organising schools and hospitals in the post-Soviet era in Afghanistan.

With the US war against Afghanistan it tended to follow the Swedish government line (not surprising as it was the state that paid it).

What then had to be built up was a new and growing movement based on the demand that all foreign troops should leave Afghanistan: *"Afghanistan Solidaritet"*.

We work together with other organizations with discussions, meetings, exhibitions, demonstrations and our own magazine. *"Afghanistan Nu"*.

It is not a sectarian organisation The former Swedish minister of defense and speaker of the parliament Thage G. Peterson who took the initiative to the appeal for calling home the Swedish force from Afghanistan is one of its most prominent members and activists.

Together with other social democratic politicians and prominent diplomats he demands that Sweden should return to its traditional foreign policy. "As a minister of defense I would not have allowed Swedish armed forces to be used in this way."

The Swedish political situation is very labile. The elections this fall now seem to result in a change of government. Against the present conservative led government stands a coalition of the Social Democrats, the "Greens" and the "Left". The party chairman of the "Left" has just declared that he will stand by the demand to take home the troops even if the elections will result in a change of government with the "Left" entering the new government.

If we are able to succeed in this work and change at least the Swedish participation in the Afghan war that could be a help to the Afghan people. Let us hope!

*Jan Myrdal is a prominent and distinguished Swedish author. Jan Myrdal has written more than thirty books, including fiction, plays and books on literature, art and politics. He has also made a number of feature films and TV documentaries.*

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