BOOK REVIEW
Troops Out Now!

Bleeding Afghanistan
by Sonali Kolhatkar
and James Ingalls
New York: Seven Stories Press,
2006

Reviewed by Harold Lavender

Canadian troops may be fighting in
Afghanistan, but (war propaganda
aside) many of us know little of the real
history and impact of foreign interven-
tion. Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington,
Warlords and the Propaganda of Silence
is therefore a work very much worth
reading.

This 2006 work by Sonali Kolhatkar
and James Ingalls, coordinators of the
US non-profit Afghan Women’s Mis-

sion, is rooted in the experience of the
Afghani women’s movement, especially
the Revolutionary Women’s Association
of Afghanistan (RAWA). The book op-
poses the role of imperialism, warlordism
and Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, it
raises the urgent need for a democratic
and secular (though not anti-Islamic) so-
ciety that respects and promotes women’s
rights.

It does an excellent job of exposing the
huge gulf between imperial rhetoric and
the reality of women’s lives in Afghan-
istan. The authors thoroughly dismantle
the notion (peddled even by some liberal
feminists) that the occupation has made
major gains in liberating Afghani women.

The work is thoroughly grounded in the
tragic history of Afghanistan, especially
the ongoing warfare that has engulfed
and destroyed the country over the last
30 years.

The authors are also sharply critical of
the Soviet Union’s 1979 invasion of Af-
ghanistan and the indefensible methods
used to maintain the occupation. But the
book is primarily a critique of the role
of US imperialism and the terrible con-
sequences of Washington’s pursuit of its
own self-interest via alliances with Islamic
fundamentalist forces and warlords.

Today, some propagandists paint
Washington as defending civilization
against Islamic “terrorism.” But Bleed-
ing Afghanistan breaks the mainstream
propaganda of silence and exposes a very
different reality and advances a detailed,
well organized body of evidence to show
the dark side of imperialist intervention
in Afghanistan.

US ROLE

The initial section of the book shows
how US policy between 1979 and 2001
helped destroy the Afghani state. The US
materiaily backed the Mujahideen war-
lord forces to defeat the Soviet Union.

These groups used widespread terror,
including much directed at women, and
later engaged in vicious civil war among
themselves. Many war crimes were com-
mitted and many thousands were killed
in Kabul between 1992 and 1996. But
this terrible devastation was virtually
ignored in the corporate media.

The following section examines why
and how the US effected regime change
in Afghanistan. The authors argue that
Iraq was the main target of US neo-cons,
but that

Afghanistan was targeted for deliber-
ate punitive action following 9/11. A
success in Afghanistan was viewed as a
necessary stepping stone to the invasion
of Iraq.

Over 3,000 civilians were killed in US
bombing. It was the beginning of a long
tirany of US abuses, including torture and
the militarization of aid as a tool of coun-
ter-insurgency warfare. The US was able
to drive the Taliban (whose takeover they
did not initially oppose) out with the aid
of the well funded and armed Northern
Alliance. In doing so, the US made an
alliance with armed warlords. Their pre-
vious atrocious human rights records and
war crimes were confidently ignored.

The US also found and made their
own man, Hamid Karzai, whom they
manoeuvred to the forefront as interim
President. But the power of warlords
and Islamic fundamentalists (from local
dictates to Sharia law and the courts)
was not challenged. Warlords stole and
controlled land, grabbed revenues at
checkpoints, stole humanitarian aid and
engaged in massive narcotics trafficking.

Afghanistan is today the world’s largest
supplier of heroin.

The warlords and their allies came to
dominate both houses of what the au-
thors dubbed “a parliament of vultures.”

According to the authors, most Af-
ghans, devastated by years of war, were
initially grudgingly prepared to tolerate
the occupation. However, promises of
greater security and well-being have not
materialized, and odious US tactics have
helped drive a significant sector (perhaps
30 per cent, far broader than the Taliban)
to support resistance.

ILLUSORY CONCLUSIONS

The book has real merit. However, it
disappointments sharply from an anti-
imperialist perspective when it tackles the
thorny question of solidarity and activist
perspectives. Not surprisingly, given the
weakness of the US and Afghan left, the
authors fall deep into lesser-evil politics.

Kolhatkar and Ingalls have an excellent
critique of the US role in Afghanistan,

providing an analysis of Washington
geo-political motives. And they do look
to end the occupation, but not until
the security situation improves. Curr-
ently, they argue, the US presence is still
needed. And they call for an increase in
international security forces.

In reality, the security situation under
the occupation is unravelling. Canadians
were told our forces would be peace-
keepers. Now it is absolutely clear they
are war-makers in an escalating conflict.
The anti-war movement should certainly
not shy away from demanding Canadian
Troops Out Now! ★

Harold Lavender is an editor for New Socialist