

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 intervention. *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 Mission, is rooted in the experience of the Afghan women's movement, especially the Revolutionary Women's Association of Afghanistan (RAWA). The book opposes the role of imperialism, warlordism and Islamic fundamentalism. Instead, it raises the urgent need for a democratic and secular (though not anti-Islamic) society 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 Afghanistan. The authors thoroughly dismantle the notion (peddled even by some liberal feminists) that the occupation has made major gains in liberating Afghan 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 Afghanistan and the indefensible methods

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used to maintain the occupation. But the book is primarily a critique of the role of US imperialism and the terrible consequences 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 *Bleeding 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 materially backed the Mujahideen warlord 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 committed 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 deliberative 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 litany of US abuses, including torture and the militarization of aid as a tool of counter-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 previous 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 authors dubbed "a parliament of vultures."

According to the authors, most Afghans, 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. Currently, 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! ★