Liberating Afghan Women

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Abstract

Public opinion in the United States and elsewhere celebrated the liberation of Afghan women following the defeat of the Taliban government. The United States promised to stay in Afghanistan and foster security, economic development, and human rights for all, especially women. After years of funding various anti-Soviet Mujahidin warlords, the United States had agreed to help reconstruct the country once before in 1992, when the Soviet-backed government fell, but had lost interest when the warlords began to fight among themselves. This time, however, it was going to be different.

To date, however, conditions have not improved for most Afghan women and reconstruction has barely begun. How did this happen? This article explores media presentations of Afghan women and then compares them with recent reports from human rights organizations and other eyewitness accounts. It argues that the media depictions were built on earlier conceptions of Muslim societies and allowed us to adopt a romantic view that disguised or covered up the more complex historical context of Afghan history and American involvement in it. We allowed ourselves to believe that Afghans were exotic characters who were modernizing or progressing toward a western way of life, despite the temporary setback imposed by the Taliban government.

In Afghanistan, however, there was a new trope: the feminist Afghan woman activist. Images of prominent Afghan women

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sans burqa were much favored by the mass media and American policymakers. The result, however, was not a new focus on funding feminist political organizations or making women's rights a foreign policy priority; rather, it was an unwillingness to fulfill obligations incurred during decades of American-funded mujahidin warfare, to face the existence of deteriorating conditions for women, resumed opium cultivation, and a resurgent Taliban, or to commit to a multilateral approach that would bring in the funds and expertise needed to sustain a long-term process of reconstruction.

Historical Background

Afghanistan is a loosely governed country of about 24 million people with diverse linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups whose identity boundaries are far more blurred than in typical journalistic representations. Women's rights have long been a flashpoint for religious conservative forces. In 1929, King Amanullah abolished female seclusion and veiling and introduced coeducation; his government collapsed in the ensuing fallout. In 1959, a reforming prime minister, Mohammad Daoud, tried to abolish female seclusion and encouraged women to enter higher education and the professions, but religious conservatives and their followers forced him from power. In 1973, Daoud, in power once again, reintroduced some of his reforms; instability again ensued.

Afghans endured years of upheaval while Soviet-supported governments attempted to force coeducation on the populace and eliminate the bride price, often the main economic exchange in rural areas. Jihadi forces resisting the Soviet-backed Afghan government often said they were trying to protect their families from the un-Islamic, and hence immoral, communist forces. In 1978, a small group of urban leftist Afghans deposed Daoud and tried to force a program of land redistribution, secular education, and modernization on uncomprehending villagers. Afghanistan had made public education free and compulsory in 1935, and by 1979 all provinces had girls' primary schools. But most girls did not go to school. In 1979, at the beginning of the Soviet era, the literacy rate was about 4 percent for girls and 30 percent for boys.

The pro-Soviet Afghan regime had little popular support, and factions within it struggled for power. The United States, with Pakistan's support, began arming one of the opposing Mujahidin (religious forces) groups. When another faction called on the Soviet Union for direct assis-

tance in gaining power, Afghanistan became the cold war's final battleground. The Mujahidin forces called for a jihad against the godless Soviet-supported government, and Washington cheerfully proclaimed them freedom fighters nobly and fearlessly struggling against the "evil empire."

The United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other governments increased their support and armed, funded, and trained Mujahidin groups. The Soviets spent about $45 billion supporting the pro-Soviet Afghan government, while the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other western and Muslim nations spend over $10 billion supporting the Mujahidin forces. The resulting 20 years of war caused an estimated 1.5 million deaths and devastated Afghanistan politically, socially, culturally, economically, and environmentally. Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, the Soviet-backed Afghan government fell in 1992, and a coalition of rival Mujahidin forces came to power.[1]

Regional and international interests continued to back one of the various Mujahidin forces. Pakistan, which did not want a strong Afghan government that might challenge its regional predominance, usually supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States. Hekmatyar was remembered for having organized gangs to throw acid on women students at Kabul University if they were judged not properly attired. Iran backed the Shi`i Hazaras; France backed Ahmad Shah Masud, head of the Northern Alliance of Tajiks; and Russia backed General Dostum, an Uzbek warlord. When Hekmatyar proved unreliable, Pakistan shifted to the Taliban, Afghan students trained in religious schools in Pakistan.[2]

The United States abandoned Afghanistan to the warlords who, in their internecine power struggles, destroyed much of Kabul, decimated the civilian population, and further devastated the already weak economy. Since the former Soviet-backed government had expanded women's secular education and encouraged women to take professional positions vacant in wartime conditions, the Mujahidin forces intensified their insistence on women's near total seclusion from public life. With the exception of the Kalashnikov, four-wheel vehicles, and other imports useful for military purposes, they considered anything connected with the Soviet Union or the United States to be un-Islamic and immoral. Conditions for women deteriorated rapidly, especially in Kabul, but also in other cities and towns where corruption and violence against women spiraled out of control. The Mujahidin leaders announced decrees requiring women to wear the burqa and restricted their

access to education by requiring, in many cases, sex-segregated venues that were often not available.

The Pakistan-backed Taliban vowed to stop the warfare and corruption of the Mujahidin forces and to establish their own version of Shari`ah (Islamic law) in Afghanistan. The Taliban were militantly opposed to modernizing trends in Islamic thought, which they taught had led to corruption and immorality and thus were undermining the foundations of Islam. On September 27, 1996, the Taliban conquered Kabul. Some nongovernmental organizations, including various United Nations agencies, initially welcomed their arrival, hoping that they would bring security at last. The Taliban immediately closed the public schools, which had 250,000 students (100,000 of whom were girls) and Kabul University, which had 10,000 students (4,000 of whom were women).[3]

In all, about 40,000 women, not only professionals but also bakers and domestic workers, lost their jobs. Many of them, war widows who had no means to support themselves and their children, were reduced to begging. According to a widely read Physicians for Human Rights report, women suffered a high rate of depression and some committed suicide.[4] Western women activists launched unprecedented and successful campaigns to prevent western governments from recognizing the Taliban government and Unocal from building a pipeline through Afghan territory. With the 1998 bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, apparently by militants based in Afghanistan and closely associated with the Taliban, any possibility of diplomatic recognition ground to a halt. Afghanistan faded from the world stage until the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. With the "war on terrorism" launched in October 2001, the liberation of Afghan women became a central feature in the American media's coverage of the war and its aftermath.

American Orientalism and Media Depictions of Afghan Women

Edward Said famously argued that western representations of eastern or Oriental peoples resulted from and reinforced western political, social, and economic power. Mohja Kahf showed that while post-eighteenth-century depictions of the Muslim woman often featured an odalisque, a victim, or a veiled dancer, or a reclusive figure, pre-eighteenth-century depictions tended to show plucky, unveiled, and often scheming and devious Muslim

women. Before the eighteenth century, western conceptions of Muslim women, though distinctly negative, reflected a relatively equal balance of power. Kahf concluded that the image of Muslim women in western culture is not "natural, timeless, and uniform," but rather "shifting, contingent, and heterogeneous." Kahf is right: Current media depictions of Afghan women are indeed "shifting, contingent, and heterogeneous." They reflect several familiar tropes of the oppressed woman, the victim, the Muslim woman saved by western (male) intervention, and the popular new theme of the Afghan woman activist. The images reflect several narratives in popular American culture: American Orientalist narratives, westernizing or progressive narratives, and feminist narratives.

American Orientalism, a complex phenomenon usually associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is equally potent in the present. In the nineteenth century, travelers sought to retrace the steps of Biblical figures by locating and visiting places named in the Bible, experience the exotic, and acquire the luxury goods of the Orient. Domination for political, economic, cultural, and religious purposes characterized the western Orientalist project. Oleg Grabar, the noted Islamic art historian, wrote: "(for many Americans) the Orient only matters as providing illustrations for some significant moments in the long history that led to the American Promised Land, and its very misery is a demonstration of the latter's success."[5] Artists routinely depicted an exotic, colorful Orient with luxurious harems and nude women in indolent poses, picturesque atrocities, mystery, and danger. Native Americans were often depicted in similar ways, with the "noble savage" a favorite theme.

The viewers were flattered that they were outside of such scenes and felt little connection to them or to the political arrangements that underlay the inequalities and degradation depicted in them. Unlike the French Orientalist painters who depicted the power and glory of a masculine France and the exotic qualities of a semi-nude feminized Orient under French imperial rule, mid-nineteenth-century American Protestant painters preferred Oriental landscapes often with properly clothed, though beautiful and reticent, women. Timelessness, emptiness, and the desolation of ruins nearly devoid of people in Egypt and the Holy Land were major themes. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise in American power, American popular culture discovered the Orient and sensuality based on power relations became a major theme.

Men and women spectators wanted to escape from their boring lives and experience the mysterious East and its secret pleasures from a safe

distance and a position of power. Orientals were semi-civilized, superstitious, corrupt, shrewd, fractious, and violent, but also colorful and attractive. The Orient meant Barbary pirates and cruel despots, in contrast to the honest democrats of the United States. More than a few western men found Oriental women to be romantic and exotic, in contrast to the strident and demanding American women activists. The image of the beloved American hero, the cowboy, the lonely scout, and the master of horses and natives merged with the image of the desert shaykh. Later, the Shriners and other Americans influenced by Lowell Thomas's slide show depictions of T. E. Lawrence enjoyed dressing up like Orientals to explore new identities. The Orient might be feminine in its passivity and indolence, but, contradictorily, the warriors of the desert became symbols of masculinity.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, politically minded Americans expected that their country would become a power in the Orient, displacing the British and the French. Missionary-minded Americans knew that the Orient included India and China, but believed that Protestantism was destined to prevail mainly in the Muslim and Eastern Christian regions of the Near East. In the post-World War I era, Hollywood ran away with the image of the exotic Orient in movies like "The Sheik" (1921), "The Thief of Baghdad" (1940), "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" (1944), and "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962). "Exotic" came to mean different and exceptional, colorful and luxurious, but not subject to the same standards, expectations, or rights as proper "western" culture. There was always an underlying assumption of power with the designator of "exotica" being in the position of control and those dubbed "exotic" occupying a suspect and morally dubious position.

Even as western powers reinforced the powers of local tribal and royal leaders, they argued that the expansion of western political and economic domination would free Muslim women and men from the oppression of their traditional cultures. Under western influence, Muslim women adopted western fashions and lifestyles. Many in the West concluded that Afghan women, like other non-western women, must become western and, therefore, modern in appearance and culture to advance their interests. Westernizing narratives often portrayed Afghan women as having emerged from the darkness of the past into the light of the present. These narratives generally cheered on the American invasion of Afghanistan. The Orientalist narrative led directly to the idea that western powers had an obligation to save the Orientals from themselves.

Time Magazine and Afghan Women

In November 2001, *Time Asia* published an issue and a popular Web series, "Through the Ages: Afghan Women from the 1960s to the Present Day," that emphasized Afghan women's progress, decline, and recovery.[6] The article explained that in the 1960s and 1970s, Afghanistan had been a typical developing country with slowly increasing rights for women. A 1970 photo showed Afghan girl and boy scouts happily parading together at a Kabul youth gathering.[7] A 1989 photo showed a group of happy, laughing, middle-class young Afghan women, all in western dress, walking in Kabul. The photo was taken during the Soviet era, just before the Soviet-backed government collapsed and the warlords destroyed Kabul.[8] The women wore stylish boots, slacks, and fashionable wraps.

Women in short skirts and high heels walking freely down a street in Kabul. Photo by V. Seykov, 7 June 1978. Printed by permission of Getty Images.

The photos suggested that Afghanistan was making progress in women's rights. In contrast, the next photo was of a propaganda leaflet dropped by American and British jets in Taliban-controlled territory during the 2001 war.[9] The Taliban often beat women with steel cables as punishment for petty crimes. The image was taken from a RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) leaflet but without attribution. A photo shot during the Taliban regime portrayed women waiting in a doctor's office.[10]

"Women wait to be seen by a female doctor in a small village clinic in Herat, Afghanistan, that is backed by a Danish NGO. Though officially there are no women working in the Taliban area, Herat, and some other areas relax the rules. After nearly 20 years of war, 5 years of drought, and 4 years of the Taliban's decrees, women in Afghanistan face one of the worst living situations in the world. Even in the tiny alliance held areas, strict Islamic law seriously limits women's potential. Some easing of restrictions in certain Taliban areas has allowed basic education and health care to re-kindle, and girls seek to learn and grow within these small cracks of opportunity." Photo by Roger Lemoyne, 1 December 2000. Printed by permission of Getty Images.

The final photo in both the *Time Asia* essays depicted a

beautiful woman lifting her burqa to view her daughter as they fled the battle-ravaged northern city of Kunduz on November 19, 2001.

The caption said: "With the Taliban gone, there is now fresh hope for the women of Afghanistan."[11] There was love and hope in the mother's face and readers want to cheer her newfound freedom.

"An Afghan refugee woman lifts her burqa to speak to her daughter.." Photo by Sion Touhig, 19 November 2001. Printed by permission of Getty Images.

The December 3, 2001, issue of *Time* featured a photo essay entitled "Lifting the Veil."[12] On the cover was a striking photograph of an unveiled Afghan woman that, of course, was meant to attract readers. The photo essay featured a haunting photograph of a lonely woman in the desolate ruins of Kabul.[13] The woman was colorful, isolated, and depersonalized, while the ruins were uninhabited and distant. The article reinforced western public opinion at the time, that with the fall of the Taliban, freedom had returned.

Yet how could women, by themselves, be expected to make headway in this ruined land? Did the West not take any responsibility for the devastation? Readers learned that Afghan women were taking their future into their hands. Dr. Sima Samar, an Afghan physician and human rights activist, became a favorite of the Bush regime. Samar, who was appointed minister for Women's Affairs in the interim Afghan government, ran four hospitals, ten clinics, and rural schools for girls and boys in Afghanistan and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan through her non-governmental organization, Shuhada.

"Dr. Sima Samar, winner of Rights and Democracy's human right prize and a member of the transition government in Afghanistan speaks at a news conference, December 10, 2001, in Montreal, Canada." Photo by Sevy/Stringer. Printed by permission of Getty Images.

Soraya Parlika, an Afghan feminist activist based in Kabul, also became well-known in western media outlets. *Time* called Parlika "a fiery and feisty woman, and very passionate, who spent time in prison under the Taliban's rule."[14] Photos of feminist Afghan women abounded. *Time* saw photos of a group of over thirty women meeting

secretly in Soraya's home to plan future campaigns for women's rights.[15] The women wear kerchiefs, but not the burqa. There is no hint of the victim or the odalisque here, and these are the women *Time* wants us to support. Yet the next photograph, showing a man selling burqas to a veiled woman shopper, made the woman appear strange and distant, almost indistinguishable from the racks of burqas.[16] We had just learned that Afghan women had had their freedoms restored, so perhaps it is too early to celebrate their liberation. The next photograph depicted Shakaba Amid, an unveiled woman television announcer, in her second day on the air after the Taliban's fall.[17]

The theme of freedom restored for both women and men continued. The men's new-found freedom was suggested by a photo of a man looking at postcards of women, mostly Indians, now for sale in liberated Kabul. The caption read: "These men haven't seen any photographs depicting the human form since the arrival of the Taliban seven years ago."[18] The photographer commented: "Selling such items is allowed again now, and women in Afghanistan are still wearing burkas, so there's this great demand for pictures of women in full view."[19] *Time*'s readers found themselves gazing at the gazer of women's photographs. Indian women were now objects for the men and for the magazine reader.

Readers then met with a group of men playing with a blond hula doll.[20] Afghan men gazed at a female doll crowned with blond hair, unlike most indigenous Polynesian women, dressed in a grass hula skirt, itself a creation of the tourist industry and Hollywood/television myth- and image-making. The photographer then introduced readers to a crowded bazaar where women were shopping for once-forbidden make-up.[21] They were all wearing the burqa. The viewer was meant to chuckle, since the make-up presumably would not be visible to the public. The make-up would, of course, be worn at women's gatherings, weddings, and other celebrations, but few general readers would understand the richness of women's private lives. Other photos in the series depicted intimate family scenes that were both distant and forbidding, much like nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings.[22]

Finally, *Time* presented a photo shot from the backseat of a taxicab. Veiled women with children were begging from the passenger-photographer.[23] It was a sad scene with power relations between the women and the passenger depicted clearly: He is male, they are female; he is western, they are Afghan; he is riding, they are standing; he is inside, they are outside; he has money, they do not. Optimistically, *Time*, like *Time Asia*, featured the photo of the woman in Kunduz lifting her veil to view her daughter.

The Modernization of Afghan Women

While the media celebrated the American liberation of Afghan women, it also glorified the masculinity of Afghan society and the militarization of American society. Newspapers carried photos of American troops playing *buzkashi*, the national game of Afghanistan, partaking with their Afghan counterparts in the romance of the desert warrior.[24] Ahmad Karzai, president of Afghanistan, became a familiar fashion statement in his *pakul* and cape.[25] The media made Afghanistan the exotic Orient seen in films and paintings, novels and travelers' accounts. Afghan women and men were beautiful, distant, lonely, unattainable, and hopelessly different from and inferior to the western viewer. Americans were their heroic rescuers.

On February 9, 2002, veteran *New York Times* journalist John Burns visited Kabul University, where hundreds of women were sitting for entrance exams. Burns celebrated the fall of the Taliban and the new opportunities for Afghan women. He wrote: "In the hallways, the burka, the head-to-toe shroud that became an emblem of Taliban repression, was now a fashion statement tossed backward from the candidates' heads as if to say, 'Take a hike, Mr. Mullah.'" As the journalist left, the chief librarian ran after him to say: "We say hello to the educated people in the Western countries, and we ask them, kindly, if you have any books about the technical and scientific world, engineering, literature – anything – please send them to us. The Afghan people are in darkness, and we ask the Western countries to help us shine some light."[26]

On November 17, 2001, Laura Bush became the first "First Lady" to give the presidential Saturday radio talk. She spoke out on behalf of Afghan women and the poverty, poor health, and illiteracy in Afghanistan and said that "because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. But the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[27] Widespread governmental attention to selected Afghan

"An Afghan women takes a university entrance exam with male classmates at Kabul's Polytechnic Institute. An estimated 8,000 students took the entrance exams throughout the capital city." Photo by Natalie Behring/staff, 20 February 2002. Printed by permission of Getty Images.

women followed the speech. On November 29, a group of Afghan women living in the United States were feted in Washington. They met the First Lady and had dinner with UN secretary general Kofi Annan. They received training in how to respond in interviews, were interviewed by *Good Housekeeping* magazine, and dined with Madeline Albright, the former secretary of state who had earlier spoken out on behalf of Afghan women. Hilary Clinton held a hearing with Afghan women on Capitol Hill. For a time, it became popular to be associated with Afghan women.

Still, not all were unimpressed. The *Christian Science Monitor* ran a story called "Voices from behind the Veil" by Nicole Gaouette.[28] Gaouette interviewed Heba Attieh, a Saudi physician, who argued that First Lady Laura Bush's radio address on Afghan women was meant to provide the United States with an excuse "to keep bombing. It's not for women in the US to say Afghan women are oppressed and should take off the veil," she says. "If an Afghan woman is upset about her situation, she should change it, not you." Gaouette commented: "History gives her good reason to be suspicious. European nations often used Muslim women to justify their intrusions into Islamic countries. French charities in late 19th-century Algeria would dispense free oil and flour to the poor, but only if they removed their veils."[29] Muslim women recalled that during Algeria's war of independence (1954-62), French authorities insisted that women present themselves unveiled for emergency relief; many women send their servants. The veil became a symbol of nationalist resistance. In the late 1800s, the English envoy, Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) urged his superiors to colonize Egypt on behalf of the country's downtrodden women. Meanwhile, back in England, he was a founding member of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.

The Bush administration similarly celebrated the liberation of Afghan women while supporting a regressive policy toward women's rights at home. At no time did the Bush administration carry out a foreign or a domestic policy that was in any way feminist, despite the triumphalist imagery of happy and colorful Afghan women and children. The war in Afghanistan heightened a sense of patriotic militarism within the United States that did little to advance the rights of women and minorities. It also served to deflect public attention from the ongoing domestic crises. In the post 9/11 era, American women experienced severe cutbacks in unemployment compensation, disability insurance, health benefits, and access to reproductive choice. The gap between rich and poor widened with women and children at the bottom of the hierarchy. More women joined the ranks

of the working poor and were threatened by unemployment, homelessness, malnutrition, and poor health.

The media was nearly silent when, in 2002, religious conservatives accused Sima Samar, the minister for Women's Affairs, with blasphemy for allegedly saying in an interview with an Iranian newspaper in Canada that she did not believe in Shari`ah law, which she insisted she did not say. On June 25, 2002, Afghanistan's Supreme Court dropped the blasphemy charge saying that there was no evidence, but President Karzai did not reappoint her to her ministerial job. Samar is currently chair of the Independent Afghanistan Human Rights Commission and remains active in Shuhada, the humanitarian organization that she founded.

Afghan Women's Human Rights

Conditions for Afghan women have worsened. Amnesty International reported that the Northern Alliance had committed more documented cases of rape than had the Taliban. Few women shed their burqas and revenge attacks and rapes of enemy women continued. Indeed many women insisted that they did not mind the burqa as much as the poverty and the lack of security, schools, and jobs.[30] In the fall of 2002, Human Rights Watch reported that a revived Vice and Virtue squad (renamed "Islamic Teaching") was harassing women for improper dress and behavior. Even during the widely publicized *loya jirga* process, in which Afghans were to form a new government, warlords and local commanders threatened women delegates and candidates and allowed their troops to harass women and girls in areas under their control. Militants attacked with rockets or set girls' schools in Kandahar, Sar-e Pol, Zabul, Logar, and Wardak provinces on fire. In Herat, local commanders pressured women not to work for foreign organizations. Troops loyal to the government or to warlords forbade music and dancing at weddings, and musicians and guests have been beaten. The report observed that women's human rights were being routinely abused and that conditions were not conducive for redress.[31]

A subsequent Human Rights Watch report released in July 2003 documented the widespread and continuing abuse of women and children. While customs varied from region to region, many Afghan women and girls did not have the right to seek education, work, or move about at will before the Mujahidin forces or the Taliban came to power. The reforming and Soviet-backed governments carried out certain policies favorable to women, but these were largely limited to urban areas and the higher social classes. The

level of violence against women, however, was unprecedented. It was entirely unacceptable for the authorities to beat a man's female relatives because they were not appropriately attired. Local tribal or regional leaders protected women under their patronage. The abduction and rape of women and girls was unprecedented. Both the long-standing seclusion of women, the denial of equal access to education and women, and to freedom of movement, and, of course, violence against women are all abuses of human rights, whether they are customary or unprecedented practices.[31]

In Kabul, many private English language schools have opened because English is increasingly necessary in the workplace. Human Rights Watch learned, however, that a uniformed police officer beat a male teacher for speaking with a female student in his class. The officer claimed that the teacher was "against Islam." Another witness claimed that the officer slapped the teacher, took him out of class, and punched him in the nose. Other witnesses said that after police officers began harassing students and teachers, some girls stopped coming to the school. In 2003, the minister of education announced that schools were to be gender-segregated and that men were not permitted to teach girls, although women would be allowed to teach boys.

Adeena Niazi, president of the Afghan Women's Association, stated: "People in the West blame the Afghanis [sic], the Mujahideen, the Taliban for what is happening in Afghanistan, they do not see how they are implicated, they do not see that their political and economic interests and their politicians, as well as the interests of Afghanistan's neighbours, have created the Afghanistan of today. They will not accept responsibility for how they are implicated in the plight of Afghanistan and the conditions of Afghan women."[32] Should we "blame the West?" Many insisted that Taliban and others had not been exposed to the real Afghan culture and that their policies were "from outer space," as one RAWA representative stated.

There were many candidates to blame, including the United States, the Soviet Union, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Mujahidin and Taliban warlords, and longstanding misogynous traditions that prevailed in most regions of Afghanistan, including the territories of the Northern Alliance. Western feminists should not overlook the fact that harsh patriarchal norms have prevailed throughout much of both rural and urban Afghanistan, and not just during the Mujahidin and Taliban eras. *Time Asia* did not point out that the happiest photo in its series was taken in 1989, during the Soviet era, that most of the destruction in Kabul occurred after the Soviets withdrew under

the American-sponsored Mujahidin coalition, or that the violence against women has continued.

Since the fall of the Taliban government, most international aid has gone for emergency relief rather than to long-term reconstruction. After repeated warnings that the warlords were reasserting themselves, the U.S. Congress, toward the end of 2002, passed legislation authorizing the government to increase funding for the reconstruction of Afghanistan's roads and infrastructure, for women's programs, and for the expansion of international peacekeeping forces in and around Kabul. It did not, however, establish a mechanism for appropriating the funds. Today, unstable conditions prevail throughout Afghanistan. The Taliban and the Mujahidin forces have regrouped and are waging a guerilla war against the American-supported government in Kabul.

Before the Taliban came to power, most Afghan women and girls did not have access to education, freedom of movement, the right to work at an occupation of their own choosing, the right to choose or not choose a spouse, or the right to seek medical care without the mediation of male relatives or guardians. In addition, governments currently supported by the United States, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, discriminate against women in very similar ways. In Pakistan, women who claim that they have been raped can be prosecuted for committing a sexual crime. The United States remains indifferent.

In Afghanistan and other Muslim societies, as in many other parts of the world, governments manipulated religious traditions for their own purposes. Muslim human rights groups actively worked for reform, but their governments often repressed them with arms supplied by the United States and other western powers interested more in stability, security, and a safe atmosphere for business than human rights. Yet many girls remain unable to take classes, forced to focus on survival in a society devastated by two decades of war. As of May 2003, the Bush administration had allocated $2.5 million for Afghan women's programs. Fourteen women's centers were built, but the centers received no additional funds for education or job training.[33]

Masuda Sultan, an Afghan-American, visited Afghanistan in September 2003. She reported: "When I visited Kabul and Kandahar this September, women asked me why my government was so quick to send bombs to liberate them but so tardy in sending them the aid they were promised." Sultan went to Kandahar to help organize a conference on women and the constitution. She met with forty-five women leaders who wrote the Afghan Women's Bill of Rights,[34] which called for human rights

for women, national disarmament, curtailment of warlords, and trials for war criminals.[35]

The *loya jirga* (grand council) met in December 2003 to work out a constitution for Afghanistan. One of the women delegates, Malalai Joya, took the microphone to protest the treatment of women and the prevalence of warlords and drug dealing throughout the country. Security police promptly threw her out of the assembly. After intensive and heated discussions and backroom logrolling, the *loya jirga* announced the long-awaited Constitution of Afghanistan on January 4, 2004. Internal and international pressure resulted in the inclusion of a statement calling for equal rights for women and the doubling of seats for women in the new Parliament. Under the new quota system, women were to hold 25 percent of the total number of seats. Yet the poverty and lack of security and underlying ethnic and gender tensions will make implementing the constitution difficult, if not impossible. International peacekeeping troops still patrol only Kabul and the warlords control the rest of the country.

The United States wants to hold presidential elections in time for the American elections, but the United Nations voter registration project has not been able to register more than a minority of voters. In many regions, local leaders have excluded women from the lists. Following heavy criticism for having defeated the Taliban government and then abandoned the Afghans to their fate, the American government proposed an increase in its aid commitment, but far less than needed. American forces are trying to establish Afghan Provincial Reconstruction Teams in the Pashtun regions, but they are underfunded and too few in number to defeat the regrouping Taliban forces.

The unilateralist American government has not understood the complexity of the Afghan political, social, and economic contexts, and Europe and Japan have been reluctant to give aid under the terms set by the United States. UN efforts to demobilize the warlord's militias; the World Bank's plan to fund rural reconstruction of Afghanistan's 32 provinces; and the American program to train a national army, police force, civil service, and judiciary all are underfunded and lag way behind schedule. Non-governmental organizations, schools, and social services run by Afghan women and men complain of a lack of funding and security.

Opium cultivation is back in force. The UN estimates that Afghanistan currently produces 75 percent of the world's opium, about 4,000 tons a year. Profits from the drug trade fund the warlords' militias and the resurgent Taliban forces, which have better pay and arms and more motivation than

trainees in the national army.[36] The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates that the area of cultivation has grown from 1,685 hectares in 2001 to 61,000 hectares in 2003. Deadly attacks on foreign aid workers have increased. American warplanes continue to kill Afghan civilians, often women and children. Warlords have been fighting internecine battles in Herat and other areas. Of the $4.5 billion in foreign aid originally for reconstruction and long-term development projects, $2.2 billion has been diverted to military projects and emergency relief. The American military distributes relief supplies to those who give information on the whereabouts of Taliban forces, which has further endangered relief workers. The streets of Kabul are no longer safe, and foreigners travel in convoys. Taliban attacks have damaged power lines and irrigation projects.[37]

Fearing for the stability of the Karzai government, the United States has chosen to look the other way and negotiate with Taliban leaders. Eventually, peacekeepers will have to confront the druglords and warlords to ensure the rule of law and the advancement of women's basic needs. The U.S. State Department proudly declared in its mission statement on human rights:

> The protection of fundamental human rights was a foundation stone in the establishment of the United States over 200 years ago. Since then, a central goal of U.S. foreign policy has been the promotion of respect for human rights, as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United States understands that the existence of human rights helps secure the peace, deter aggression, promote the rule of law, combat crime and corruption, strengthen democracies, and prevent humanitarian crises. Because the promotion of human rights is an important national interest, the United States seeks to: Hold governments accountable to their obligations under universal human rights norms and international human rights instruments; Promote greater respect for human rights, including freedom from torture, freedom of expression, press freedom, women's rights, children's rights, and the protection of minorities; Promote the rule of law, seek accountability, and change cultures of impunity; Assist efforts to reform and strengthen the institutional capacity of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Commission on Human Rights; and Coordinate human rights activities with important allies, including the EU, and regional organizations.[38]

In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, American policymakers forgot these words.

Conclusion

For the first time, such mass media outlets as *Time* and *Time Asia* made Muslim feminist activists a central feature of their coverage, and the public loved it. Yet the compelling images of Muslim women lifting the burqa enabled the West to celebrate its victory without confronting its long-standing commitment to ensure the Afghan people's basic human rights. The local and international political, economic, and social relations that created the horrific inequalities in Afghanistan seemed far too complex to confront. The triumphalist depictions lulled the public into ignoring the fact that the abuses of women's human rights continued and, in some cases, increased under the American-backed government. While the media exploited the color and picturesque misery of Afghan women, the unprecedented focus on Afghan women activists should have led public opinion to insist that the United States fulfill its obligations to give substantial and long-term funding to Afghan women's human rights organizations. Yet in the end, the media made the Afghanistan war seem like an action-packed movie. When the show was over, the audience left.

Notes

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