

# **We won the Afghan war. What happens now ?**

By Dr Robin Edward Poulton\*

Since President Bush decided to overthrow the Taliban regime, destroy Al-Qaida, and seek out Osama Ben Laden, events have moved fast. But if we won a war, we certainly have not yet won the peace! We may not even have won the war, just one battle in No-Man's-Land. Afghanistan doesn't really exist. 120 years ago a Pathan (Pashtoon, Pakhtun) warlord called Abdur Rahman Khan created a buffer state between the British and Russian Empires. British and Russian surveyors fixed the frontiers of his new kingdom between 1888 and 1893. The buffer turned to anarchy when the Empires vanished - Afghanistan's inhospitable mountains have not seen a coherent nation-state for 22 years.

Assuming we have won a war in Afghanistan, how does this help us to achieve peace? We have killed off several hundred fanatics, chased the Al-Qaida leadership from their cave dwellings, and destroyed the training camps. So far so good. But scattered across the globe are thousands of saboteurs, who passed through these camps we built to fight the Russians. What should the US, UK and their allies do next, to create peace out of our Afghan victory? Here are things I think we should do immediately.

## **HOW SHOULD WE REACT ?**

### **1. Say prayers for the victims**

An American friend was shocked in his church that sermons about the World Trade Center, never mentioned the suffering of the innocent Afghan people. It is important for Americans and British alike, as human beings believing in freedom and justice, to remember the misery of others as well as our own. Bombs dropped on Afghanistan have killed and maimed more farmers and children than the 3300 office workers killed in New York.

### **2 Stop focusing on Ben Laden**

The terrorist's first weapon is publicity. By focusing on his name and persona, the western media have built up Ben Laden, placing him on the same level as his enemy George W. Bush. CNN and Fox – as much as Al-Jazeera - have created the Ben Laden myth. He started his war not as a respected religious leader, but as an ambitious building contractor.

### **3. Declare VICTORY in Phase I, then lay out Phase II and Phase III**

The US-UK alliance should declare victory in Phase I of the anti-terrorist campaign, and re-center the objectives. We need to remember that we are liberating Afghanistan from

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Al-Qaida and Taliban, destroying Al-Qaida battalions composed of Ben Laden's Arab mercenaries

#### **4. Pursue long-term covert operations against terrorism**

US-UK leaders should announce that we have entered Phase II - countering the overseas tentacles of Al-Qaida, and seeking the arrest of its leaders. Phase II includes destroying the Al-Qaida financial apparatus, rounding up terrorist cells, and tackling a number of issues which are unpopular with US corporations: fighting money-laundering, abolishing tax havens, attacking organized crime, accepting that we have failed to stop the drug trade and trying a new approach, restricting unfettered movement of small arms, other weapons and ammunition ... At the same time, we need to change the focus of the media battle by launching Phase III.

### **ATTACKING THE CAUSES OF TERROR**

Why will people commit suicide to express hatred of the West? Mainly because they have nothing to lose – they have no jobs, no schools, no future, no honour, no hope. Having defeated the Russians in Afghanistan, the West abandoned Afghans in their refugee camps for the past 20 years. Palestinians have been festering in their camps for 40 years. A young man born in a refugee camp is offered nothing except religious fanaticism, so he follows fanatical Mullahs. Our Phase III strategy needs to address – for the very first time - the underlying causes of hatred.

#### **5. Phase III is “Rebuilding for Peace”**

Whatever our military success, we lose the war if we fail to win the peace. The US-UK should supplement war strategy with a peace offensive. A peace strategy would rebuild the roads and bridges and schools of Afghanistan, making massive investments to transform refugee slums into cities we can be proud of. Refugees need schools and education, clinics and water and better health, telephones and roads and railways, jobs and ambitions and hope. If young men believe they will be able to marry and raise children, suicide will no longer seem such an attractive proposition. We need to launch the " Bush-Blair-Brown Marshall- Plan to give people something to live for".

One of Osama Ben Laden’s strategies in Afghanistan was to rebuild Kandahar. He was the only person who built anything in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion of 1979; he created jobs and cemented his popularity among the southern Pashtuns. If he was smart enough to do it, we should be smart enough to do it too.

#### **6. Use Business To Promote Peace**

A peace plan would promote joint ventures between neighbors and ex-enemies, with business entrepreneurs having access to banks and venture capital, as well as technical inputs to make business work. In this way, people's self-interest will be involved in making profits, and people living in places like Pakistan and India (Kashmir), Palestine and Israel (Jerusalem) will find they are better served by peace than by war.

### **7. Promote new images and new image-makers**

A peace plan would promote the manufacture of all sorts of products, and their export across local frontiers, including films. Investment in making films and television is important for peace. People need to see their own stories and legends in place of those we export from the west. We export Rambo and Dynasty, selling images of violence, extravagant wealth and sex. They please lovers of violence and sex, while they inspire jealousy and anger. Through serious investments in film-making, a new breed of Moslem leaders will arise. Thoughtful secular people will suddenly own companies and have a voice, creating new images and messages which will counter the verbal abuse of the mosques.

### **‘BUSINESS AS USUAL’ WAS A FAILURE!**

#### **8. We need a new business model, understanding other cultures**

“Business as usual” brought us the attacks of New York and the Pentagon. We need to change our way of doing business, if we are to avoid repeated crippling attacks on western interests. Good business promotes peace. We need to launch a long-term business plan, including foreign films on prime-time American and European television screens, so that we can learn what other people are saying, feeling, believing. Understanding the opinions and ideas of other cultures is the key to reducing fear and distrust inside our own culture.

Using business to promote peace will not be easy. American film studios, for example, run a de facto monopoly that keeps Arab and Asian (and even European) films off the screens (there is not much ‘free trade’ in the US film business!). Transnational corporations seek short-term profits; but the profit motive for a few companies may be fundamentally opposed to the “public good” factors which ought to drive our foreign policy. Foreign policy is quintessentially a long-term affair. Long-term peace and stability are also good for business. We know that we are fighting **against** terrorists and their wanton violence. **But we often forget what we are fighting for.** PEACE is something worth fighting for.