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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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The “Moral Equivalence” of War: British Soldiers versus Afghan Children

By Andy Dilks

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Last week, six British soldiers were killed in a Taliban roadside bomb attack. It was one of the worst losses for the British Army in a single attack since we invaded in 2001, and their deaths were mourned for several days both in the news (notably the tabloids) and throughout the social media sites – their deaths were a “tragic loss”; they were “brave soldiers fighting for Queen and country”.

This weekend, a US soldier went on a rampage in Afghanistan killing 16 civilians, mostly women, children, the elderly, murdered as they slept. There is talk, of course, of a “full investigation” – we all know how effective they are (recall the soldiers who were photographed urinating on dead Afghans) – but as far as sadness for these deaths, or outrage for such atrocities, those who would shed tears for the deaths of men who are trained and paid to kill foreigners in a foreign land appear to be silent or, worse, blaming the victims for their fate.

This is the “moral equivalence” of war writ large by the masses with neither shame nor any real understanding, urged on by a media system which is designed to justify the perpetuation of wars of aggression and sell them to the public not just as “necessary” but as “just” and “righteous”.

One only has to take a look through some of the comments posted by people on a Yahoo News article, "[Afghans Demand Public Trial of US Soldier](#)", to get a sense of how morally bankrupt many in Britain have become. A number of comments focus exclusively on the danger these killings will place our own soldiers in as a consequence of inevitable Taliban retaliation, demonstrating a "they started it" mentality which implicitly excuses the murders of these civilians while betraying an ignorance of the origins of the Afghanistan invasion and occupation. Many of these people, no doubt confused by propaganda which deliberately conflates the Taliban with "al-Qaeda" through its lack of historical context, reference terrorist attacks against white Westerners, yet are unable to point to any specific attacks since in reality terrorism in the West remains a significantly smaller threat to their lives than peanut allergies and slipping and falling in the bath, both of which are responsible for greater fatalities. They confuse their perception of the threat of terrorism, bolstered by constant media alerts regarding the latest "threat level", with a misguided belief that terrorist attacks are actually a frequent event.

Many more echo the tiresome fallacies about Arabs in general and Muslims in particular: they are a barbaric people who "love to kill each other"; the "Islamic way" towards the resolution of conflicts is "to kill and maim ... is it any wonder he [the US soldier] flipped?" Still further, that not only are they murderous, they're murderous drug dealers, an accusation which runs completely contrary to the facts, since the Taliban had all but eradicated poppy cultivation before the invasion in 2001, which now produces record yields – the highest in the world – under the auspices of NATO occupation. "I'm getting sick of these Afghans – the Russians couldn't tame these savages nor the Brits 100 years ago. We should pull out and let them kill each other". The "White Man's Burden" alive and kicking on the internet.

Sadder still than these all-too-predictable bigoted expressions of moral superiority is the almost complete absence of any comments expressing anything approaching compassion for the loss of innocent life. The exceptions are notable for their infrequency, such as this from one "Fahid": "What's wrong with you people? These weren't Taliban, these were innocent people in their homes! Most of them women, children. People's attitude to the murders on here is "oh well, look what they did..." are you serious?" The replies are as disturbing as – yet in keeping with – the overall tone of the general comments, including, "that's not a British name, is it?" (as if his moral objection to the detached and unfeeling responses is borne from bias, not a universal feeling of empathy) and "because we don't want anymore muslims in the uk, what about child bombers, give the us soldier a medal." This last comment is exactly the kind of justification ardent Zionists use when the IDF kill innocent Palestinian children and represents the ultimate demonization of the "other", where none are innocent as all are potential enemies, justifying the most barbaric and cruel acts of collective destruction.

So what are we to make of this callous disregard for the lives of innocent men, women and children murdered in their sleep in Afghanistan, by a soldier from an occupying army which invaded their country on false pretexts? And how does it square with the opposing reactions to the deaths of the British soldiers, men who voluntarily signed up to the Army fully aware of the implications of their actions, trained to kill and sent to occupy a foreign land?

The fundamental building block for this ideological predisposition is the notion that "we" are morally superior to our "enemies". Once this has been established (usually with flawed and

misconceived historical notions of our “greatness” – we are, after all, “Great” Britain), it is reinforced with interchangeable yet fundamentally Archetypal figures of “evil” drilled into the collective psyche (bin Laden, Gadaffi, Kony and so on). Once established, any atrocity committed by “our boys” or “our Allies” is automatically justified, since we are “good”, they “evil”, and our killing, henceforth and for all time, is judged at worst “the lesser of two evils”. Since the innocent women and children of Afghanistan have been thoroughly delegitimized as feeling, loving sentient human beings – cast into the “other” of the unknown/unknowable “enemy figure” – their deaths are not worthy of our compassion, no matter how barbaric the manner of their killing may be.

Ultimately, the violent death of anyone, whether British soldiers or a family from Afghanistan, should be lamented, just as we should all speak out to prevent its future occurrence. Instead of perpetuating the cycle of retributive “justice” – an excuse used by supporters of the British occupation and the Taliban alike – we should be seeking compassionate reconciliation and recognizing the core human values of love and compassion that each and every one of us – Britain or Afghan – possess. Instead of blindly supporting “our boys” we should be questioning the nature of their presence overseas and asking ourselves if their actions in foreign lands really have anything to do with protecting us from “terrorism” and assisting with the development of this or that country, or if there are hidden motives which in actual fact thrive on the perceived threat of “terrorism”, as part of an endless “War on Terror” used as a cover for imperialistic expansion and a move towards a wider – perhaps global – war.

Until we step back as a species and understand that an eye for an eye truly will turn the whole world blind, deaths and atrocities such as these will continue to occur, and war will remain a sad inevitability of the human condition.