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No Color-Coded Revolution for Afghanistan

By Kelley B. Vlahos

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The March 14, 2005, cover of *Newsweek* was nothing short of a gift to the Bush administration: an attractive, youthful girl ripped straight from a Noxzema commercial astride the shoulders of a dashing young man, arms thrown open in a joyous invocation of freedom.

The two star children could have been at a college football game, a pop festival, even a political rally here in the United States. But this was the [Cedar Revolution](#), American-style, in Lebanon. Below the mesmerizing illustration read the headline for one of writer Fareed Zakaria's apologies for then-president George W. Bush: "[Where Bush Was Right](#)." Well-calibrated Madison Avenue genius collided with keen political spinography, competing only perhaps with the gratuitous manipulations of the other news magazines that week, all featuring exotic but wholesome-looking girls at the front lines of Bush's Middle East freedom dream with memorable headlines like "[Party in Beirut – Pass It On](#)."

Lebanon was certainly not the first, nor will it be the last, attempt to impose a wide-angle American lens on foreign politics, including street protests, so-called revolutions, coups d'état, or just plain elections in which the U.S. has some sort of geopolitical interest. The slick cover photography is unsettling in its naked pursuit to reduce someone else's political events down to the seductive and familiar touchstones of our own American culture, or rather, what the corporate media establishment defines as our American culture. The images and breathless coverage of the recent Iranian protests attest to this. *Time* didn't even waste time on authenticity: it went straight to Photoshop to achieve its agenda and just affixed a [disclaimer to its cover](#), acknowledging (in small print) that it was "digitally altered." So goes the struggle for democracy.

But no amount of fancy editing, splicing, or spin-doctoring is likely to transform the upcoming Afghan elections into the kind of color-coded revolution so desired by newsmakers and Washington political interests. The media has labored to turn the Aug. 20 presidential contest into an old-fashioned horse race, following the often ambiguous cues put out by the

Obama administration and relying on the old playbooks, but so far the whole thing has come off as stilted and frankly halfhearted. Even the pert voice of National Public Radio's Renée Montagne in her one-woman mission to make the Afghan election accessible and stimulating – "[Democracy at Work!](#)" – can't mighty-morph this story into anything other than a foregone disappointment.

After all, anyone who has been paying attention to what's been going on in Kabul for the last several months knows this is not the story we want to hear. Americans wish they had more to show for nearly eight years, \$223 billion spent, and 773 American lives lost than an incumbent everyone knows has been sewing up his reelection by buying off his opponents with top jobs, favors, and who knows what else. We wish the place didn't have to go on [lockdown](#) because of the threat of the Taliban insurgents we supposedly defeated seven years ago. We wish we didn't hear Afghans say the "[the Americans will make Karzai president again](#)" anyway, or worse, the "[Western democracy is freedom and fornication](#)," or that rural farmers are waiting for their community leaders to tell them [how to vote](#).

Still, Montagne and the news-bringers are giving it the old college try. They'll try *anything* to build anticipation, such as focusing on political intrigue and quaint personal stories rather than what appears to be a predetermined outcome. CNN has brought on the three "top challengers" – there are 41 candidates running – [to crank on Hamid Karzai](#). Talk of an unexpected runoff – if no candidate gets above 50 percent, there is a second round of voting in October – has surfaced and is gaining [momentum](#). There's worry over voter fraud, particularly in the Karzai-friendly Pashtun provinces, and the threat of [Iranian-style protests if Karzai wins, or if there is a major upset and he loses](#).

This Western media-driven drama has its villain – Karzai – and two reform candidates: Abdullah Abdullah (former Afghan foreign finance minister and aide to assassinated anti-Taliban hero [Ahmad Shah Masoud](#)) and Ashraf Ghani (a U.S.-friendly technocrat who consults with American strategists such as [fading Democratic operative James Carville](#)).

And it wouldn't be a proto-democratic event without dueling ethnic groups: the majority Pashtun (Karzai's people and home to the Taliban) and the Tajiks (who call Abdullah their own). On Friday, a story emerged suggesting that Karzai was busy trying to [forge a secret deal with Ghani](#) (who, as a Pashtun, competes directly with Karzai for votes). It may just work. Karzai has succeeded with this strategy before. All three are fighting over the Hazara vote, which could be as much as 20 percent.

But if there were a runoff or an extraordinary upset, how does one even scare up any excitement for Abdullah, who appears to be running second and far ahead of Ghani? As some analysts point out, Abdullah – a former key man in the Northern Alliance and later nondescript bureaucrat in Karzai's problematic machine – has generated support among the ever important elites, but what would his success mean for the future of Afghanistan?

Not surprisingly, no one is trying to make Karzai out to be anything other than what he is, an American creation who has grown shrewder, more astute, and more self-serving since the U.S. helped him into power in 2002. He clearly won't dance to "Yankee Doodle" today unless it directly benefits his position. In fact, he seems to be trying to shake off Uncle Sam to prove he isn't a tool. In the meantime, he has made up for his slow bleed of credibility with Afghans and everyone else by [wheeling and dealing with powerful warlords and political allies](#), the real power brokers in town.

Washington would *love* to be waltzing with someone else, but all signs indicate Karzai has this thing nailed down. U.S. envoy Richard "The Bulldozer" Holbrooke appeared peevish and enigmatic after Montagne said, "The feeling was, among those here in Afghanistan as well as outside observers, that this election was almost a done deal for [President Hamid Karzai]..." Holbrooke interrupted with a quip: "I heard that in Iraq, and I heard that in Iran, too."

No doubt praying for the return of "viceroy" [Zalmay Khalilzad](#), Holbrooke seems torn. On one hand, he says that "this is all politics, Western-style, in a wartime condition. It's just remarkable to watch. It's exciting." His anonymous "aides" fan the horse-race narrative suggesting Karzai is suddenly "[worried](#)" about his prospects.

Perhaps there is even a secret hope that Afghans will take to the streets alleging fraud and vote-rigging if Karzai wins, opening space for a new leadership or movement.

But the fear over who might fill that space keeps such desires in check. "I think they quickly realized that maybe this isn't a situation where we need to be experimenting," said one Washington Middle East expert. "You deal with the devil you know."

So, on the other hand, Holbrooke subtly warns the audience not to expect too much.

And we shouldn't, as the hangovers from our other freedom binges in Lebanon, Ukraine, Iran, and Iraq can attest.

We will not soon forget the purple fingers waving at all the war skeptics after the 2005 elections in Iraq. The media adored them. Republican members of Congress self-righteously swaggered into Bush's State of the Union Address that year, photo-ready with ink-stained digits in [contrived and superficial solidarity](#).

Four years later, it turns out it took putting 90,000 former insurgents on the U.S. payroll, ethnic cleansing, and sheer American firepower to stanch the bloodletting in Iraq, not a "purple revolution." As for Iraq's long-term prospects for democracy, Col. Timothy Reese, chief of the Baghdad Operations Command Advisory Team, laid them out in [a leaked internal memo](#) making the case for immediate withdrawal from Iraq, published in *The New York Times* July 30:

"There is no progress towards resolving the Kirkuk situation. ... Sunni Reconciliation is at best at a standstill and probably going backwards. ... The Kurdish situation continues to fester and political violence and intimidation is rampant in the civilian community as well as military and legal institutions."

Lebanon has settled back into its [familiar complexities](#) of coalitions and rivalries, compromises and power plays. The 2004 Cedar Revolution ousted the Syrian occupation, but Syria's Hezbollah allies remain a powerful political faction, despite efforts by Lebanon's Western-backed political factions and Israel to discredit and disarm them.

Our own 2008 presidential election was in part a rejection of Bush's supercilious attempt to light the democracy pipe and "pass it on." The pipe got lost because it was all about staging and pretty words that contradicted our actual policies and ignored the cultural and religious dynamics of the countries we wanted to democratize. The mainstream media, romanced by

the narrative, enabled this time and again, playing both manipulator and manipulated, never quite paying the price for its silliness.

The Obama administration today risks the same in Afghanistan. The temptation to Americanize, to spin the Aug. 20 election as more than it is, must be great, given the [flagging popular support](#) for the war. It's important to Washington that Americans see the escalation of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and believe it's worth *something*.

Meddling as observers is one thing, but muscling into this election as an occupying force could prove poisonous. The administration seems to recognize this and has sobered up its rhetoric a bit in recent days.

But the media and assorted Washington stylists and operatives are now making their way to Dulles Airport for flights to Kabul. Don't be surprised if there is an attempt to make this all about us anyway. Again.