

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Antiwar.com

This Is What Defeat Looks Like

By Tom Engelhardt

November 8, 2011

How about a moment of silence for the passing of the American Dream? M.R.I.C. (May it rest in carnage.)

No, I'm not talking about the old dream of opportunity that involved home ownership, a better job than your parents had, a decent pension, and all the rest of the package that's so yesterday, so underwater, so [OWS](#). I'm talking about a far more recent dream, a truly audacious one that's similarly gone with the wind.

I'm talking about George W. Bush's American Dream. If people here remember the invasion of Iraq — and most Americans would undoubtedly prefer to forget it — what's recalled is [kited intelligence](#), Saddam Hussein's nonexistent [nuclear arsenal](#), dumb and even [dumber decisions](#), a bloody civil war, [dead Americans](#), [crony corporations](#), a trillion or more taxpayer dollars flushed down the toilet ... well, you know the story. What few care to remember was that original dream — call it The Dream — and boy, was it a beaut!

An American Dream

It went something like this: Back in early 2003, the top officials of the Bush administration had no doubt that Saddam Hussein's Iraq, drained by years of war, no-fly zones, and sanctions, would be a pushover; that the U.S. military, which they idolized and romanticized, would waltz

to Baghdad. (The word one of their supporters used in *The Washington Post* for the onrushing invasion was a “[cakewalk](#).”) Nor did they doubt that those troops would be greeted as liberators, even saviors, by throngs of adoring, previously suppressed Shi’ites [strewing flowers](#) in their path. (No kidding, no exaggeration.)

How easy it would be then to install a “democratic” government in Baghdad — which meant their autocratic candidate [Ahmed Chalabi](#) — set up four or five strategically situated military mega-bases, exceedingly well-armed American [small towns](#) already [on the drawing boards](#) before the invasion began, and so dominate the oil heartlands of the planet in ways even the Brits, at the height of their empire, wouldn’t have dreamed possible. (Yes, the neocons were then bragging that we would outdo the Roman and British empires rolled into one!)

As there would be no real resistance, the American invasion force could begin withdrawing as early as the fall of 2003, leaving perhaps [30,000 to 40,000](#) troops, the U.S. Air Force, and various spooks and private contractors behind to garrison a grateful country ad infinitum (on what was then called “[the South Korean model](#)”). Iraq’s state-run economy would be privatized and its oil resources [thrown open](#) to giant global energy companies, especially American ones, which would rebuild the industry and begin pumping millions of barrels of that country’s vast reserves, thus undermining the OPEC cartel’s control over the oil market.

And mind you, it would hardly cost a cent. Well, at its unlikely worst, maybe [\\$100 billion to \\$200 billion](#), but as Iraq, in the [phrase](#) of then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, “floats on a sea of oil,” most of it could undoubtedly be covered, in the end, by the Iraqis themselves.

Now, doesn’t going down memory lane just take your breath away? And yet, Iraq was a bare beginning for Bush’s dreamers, who clearly felt like so many proverbial kids in a candy shop (even if they acted like bulls in a china shop). Syria, caught in a strategic pincer between Israel and American Iraq, would naturally bow down; the Iranians, caught similarly between American Iraq and American Afghanistan, would go down big time, too — or simply be taken down Iraqi-style, and who would complain? (As the [neocon quip](#) of the moment went: “Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.”)

And that wasn’t all. Bush’s top officials had been fervent Cold Warriors in the days before the U.S. became “the sole superpower,” and they saw the new Russia stepping into those old Soviet boots. Having taken down the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, they were already building a network of bases there, too. (Let a thousand Korean models bloom!) Next on the agenda would be rolling the Russians right out of their “near abroad,” the former Soviet Socialist Republics, now independent states, of Central Asia.

What glory! Thanks to the unparalleled power of the U.S. military, Washington would control the Greater Middle East from the Mediterranean to the Chinese border and would be beholden to no one when victory came. Great powers, phooey! They were talking about a *Pax Americana* on which the sun could never set. Meanwhile, there were so many other handy perks: the White House would be loosed from its constitutional bounds via a “[unitary executive](#)” and, success breeding success, a *Pax Republicana* would be established in the U.S. for eons to come (with the

Democratic — or as they said sneeringly, the “Democrat” — Party playing the role of Iran and going down in a similar fashion).

An American Nightmare

When you wake up in a cold sweat, your heart pounding, from a dream that’s turned truly sour, sometimes it’s worth trying to remember it before it evaporates, leaving only a feeling of devastation behind.

So hold Bush’s American Dream in your head for a few moments longer and consider the devastation that followed. Of Iraq, that [multi-trillion-dollar](#) war, what’s left? An American expeditionary force, still 30,000-odd troops who were supposed to hunker down there forever, are instead packing their gear and heading “[over the horizon](#).” Those giant American towns — with their massive PXs, fast-food restaurants, gift shops, fire stations, and everything else — are [soon to be](#) ghost towns, likely as not looted and stripped by Iraqis.

Multi-billions of taxpayer dollars were, of course, sunk into those American [ziggurats](#). Now, presumably, they are goners except for the [monster embassy-cum-citadel](#) the Bush administration built in Baghdad for three-quarters of a billion dollars. It’s to house part of a [17,000-person](#) State Department “mission” to Iraq, including 5,000 armed mercenaries, all of whom are presumably there to ensure that American folly is [not utterly absent](#) from that country even after “withdrawal.”

Put any spin you want on that withdrawal, but this still represents a defeat of the first order, humiliation on a scale and in a time frame that would have been unimaginable in the invasion year of 2003. After all, the U.S. military was ejected from Iraq by ... well, whom exactly?

Then, of course, there’s Afghanistan, where the ultimate, inevitable departure has yet to happen, where another trillion-dollar war is still going strong as if there were no holes in American pockets. The U.S. is still taking casualties, still building up its [massive base structure](#), still training an Afghan security force of perhaps 400,000 men in a county too poor to pay for a tenth of that (which means it’s ours to fund forever and a day).

Washington still has its [stimulus program](#) in Kabul. Its diplomats and military officials shuttle in and out of Afghanistan and Pakistan in search of “reconciliation” with the Taliban, even as CIA drones [pound](#) the enemy across the Afghan border and [anyone else](#) in [the vicinity](#). As once upon a time in Iraq, the military and the Pentagon still talk about [progress](#) being made, even while Washington’s [unease](#) grows about a war that everyone is now officially willing to call “unwinnable.”

In fact, it’s remarkable how consistently things that are officially going so well are [actually](#) going [so badly](#). Just the other day, for instance, despite the fact that the U.S. is training up a storm, Maj. Gen. Peter Fuller, running the training program for Afghan forces, was dismissed by war commander Gen. John Allen for [dissing](#) Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his generals. He called them “isolated from reality.”

Isolated from reality? Here's the U.S. record on the subject: it's costing Washington (and so the American taxpayer) [\\$11.6 billion](#) this year alone to train those security forces and yet, [after years](#) of such training, "not a single Afghan army battalion can operate without assistance from U.S. or allied units."

You don't have to be a seer to know that this, too, represents a form of defeat, even if the enemy, as in Iraq, is an underwhelming set of ragtag minority insurgencies. Still, it's more or less a given that any American dreams for Afghanistan, like Britain's and Russia's before it, will be buried someday in the rubble of a devastated but resistant land, no matter what resources Washington chooses to continue to squander on the task.

This, simply put, is part of a larger landscape of imperial defeat.

Cold Sweats at Dawn

Yes, we've lost in Iraq and yes, we're losing in Afghanistan, but if you want a little geopolitical turn of the screw that captures the *zeitgeist* of the moment, check out one of the first statements of Almazbek Atambayev after his recent election as president of Kyrgyzstan, a country you've probably never spent a second thinking about.

Keep in mind that Bushian urge to roll back the Russians to the outskirts of Moscow. Kyrgyzstan is, of course, one of the former Central Asian SSRs of the Soviet Union, and under cover of the Afghan War, the U.S. moved in, renting out a major air base at Manas airport near Bishkek, the capital. It became a significant resupply station for the war but also an American military foothold in the region.

Now Atambayev has [announced](#) that the U.S. will have to leave Manas when its lease is up in 2014. The last time a Kyrgyz president made such a threat, he was trying to extort an extra \$40 million in rent from the globe's richest power. This time, though, Atambayev has evidently weighed regional realities, taken a good hard look at his resurgent neighbor and the waning influence of Washington, and placed his bet — on the Russians. Consider it a telling little gauge of who is now being rolled back where.

Isolated from reality? How about the Obama administration and its generals? Of course, Washington officials prefer not to take all this in. They're willing to opt for isolation over reality. They prefer to talk about withdrawing troops from Iraq, but only to [bolster](#) the [already powerful](#) American garrisons throughout the Persian Gulf and so free the region, as our secretary of state [put it](#), "from outside interference" by alien Iran. (Why, one wonders, is it even called the *Persian* Gulf, instead of the American Gulf?)

They prefer to talk about [strengthening U.S. power](#) and bolstering its bases in the Pacific so as to save Asia from ... America's largest creditor, the Chinese. They prefer to suggest that the U.S. will be a greater, not a lesser, power in the years to come. They prefer to "reassure allies" and talk big — or big enough anyway.

Not *too* big, of course, not now that those American dreamers — or mad visionaries, if you prefer — are off making up to [\\$150,000](#) a pop giving inspirational speeches and raking in [millions](#) for churning out their [memoirs](#). In their place, the Obama administration is stocked with dreamless managers who inherited an expanded imperial presidency, an American-garrisoned globe, and an emptying treasury. And they then chose, on each score, to play a recognizable version of the same game, though without the soaring confidence, deep faith in armed American exceptionalism or the military solutions that went with it (which they nonetheless continue to pursue doggedly), or even the vision of global energy flows that animated their predecessors. In a rapidly changing situation, they have proven incapable of asking any questions that would take them beyond what might be called the usual tactics (drones vs. counterinsurgency, say).

In this way, Washington, though visibly diminished, remains an airless and eerily familiar place. No one there could afford to ask, for instance, what a Middle East, being transformed before our eyes, might be like without its American shadow, without the bases and fleets and drones and all the operatives that go with them.

As a result, they simply keep on keeping on, especially with Bush's global war on terror and with the [protection](#) in financial tough times of the Pentagon (and so of the militarization of this country).

Think of it all as a form of armed denial that, in the end, is likely to drive the U.S. down. It would be salutary for the denizens of Washington to begin to mouth the word "defeat." It's not yet, of course, a permissible part of the American vocabulary, though the more decorous "decline" — "[the relative decline](#) of the United States as an international force" — has crept ever more comfortably into our lives since mid-decade. When it comes to decline, for instance, ordinary Americans are voting with the opinion poll version of their feet. In [one recent poll](#), 69 percent of them declared the U.S. to be in that state. (How they might answer a question about American defeat we don't know.)

If you are a critic of Washington, "defeat" is increasingly becoming an acceptable word, as long as you [attach it](#) to a [specific war](#) or event. But defeat outright? The full-scale thing? Not yet.

You can, of course, say many times over that the U.S. remains, as it does, an immensely wealthy and powerful country; that it has the wherewithal to right itself and deal with the disasters of these last years, which it also undoubtedly does. But take a glance at Washington, Wall Street, and the coming 2012 elections, and tell me with a straight face that that will happen. Not likely.

If you go on a march with the folks from Occupy Wall Street, you'll hear the young chanting, "This is what democracy looks like!" It's infectious. But here's another chant, hardly less appropriate, if distinctly grimmer: "This is what defeat looks like!" Admittedly, it's not as rhythmic, but it's something that the spreading Occupy Wall Street movement, and the un- and underemployed, and those whose houses are foreclosed or "underwater," and the millions of kids getting a subprime education and graduating, on average, more than [\\$25,000 in hock](#), and the increasing numbers of poor are coming to feel in their bones, even if they haven't put a name to it yet.

And events in the Greater Middle East played no small role in that. Think of it this way: if de-industrialization and financialization have, over the last decades, hollowed out the United States, so has [the American way of war](#). It's the usually ignored third part of the triad. When our wars finally fully come home, there's no telling what the scope of this imperial defeat will prove to be like.

Bush's American Dream was a kind of apotheosis of this country's global power as well as its crowning catastrophe, thanks to a crew of mad visionaries who [mistook](#) military might for global strength and acted accordingly. What they and their neocon allies had was the magic formula for turning the slow landing of a declining but still immensely powerful imperial state into a self-inflicted rout, even if who the victors are is [less than clear](#).

Despite our panoply of bases around the world, despite an arsenal of weaponry beyond anything ever seen (and with [more on its way](#)), despite a [national security budget](#) the size of the Ritz, it's not too early to start etching something appropriately sepulchral onto the gravestone that will someday stand over the pretensions of the leaders of this country when they thought that they might truly rule the world.

I know my own nominee. Back in 2002, journalist Ron Suskind [had a meeting](#) with a "senior adviser" to George W. Bush and what that adviser told him seems appropriate for any such gravestone or future memorial to American defeat:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. ... That's not the way the world really works anymore. ... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

We're now, it seems, in a new era in which reality is making us. Many Americans — witness the Occupy Wall Street movement — are attempting to adjust, to imagine other ways of living in the world. Defeat has a bad rep, but sometimes it's just what the [doctor ordered](#).

Still, reality is a bear, so if you just woke up in a cold sweat, feel free to call it a nightmare.