

Afghanistan

# Afghanistan



By Gwynne Dyer

*The current fighting in the south, the Pashtun heartland, which is causing a steady dribble of American, British and Canadian casualties, will continue until the Western countries pullout*

**T**HIS week is the sixth anniversary of the start of US air strikes against Al Qaeda and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan.

It was a very clever politico-military operation, and by December 2001, all Afghanistan was under the control of the United States and its local allies for a total cost of twelve American dead. Then, for no good reason, it fell apart, and now the war is lost.

In the days just after September 11, George Tenet, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) chief, came up with a

bold proposal. Why invade Afghanistan with a large American army, deploying massive firepower that kills large numbers of locals and alienates the population? Why give Osama Ben Laden the long anti-American guerilla war that he was undoubtedly counting on?

Instead, Tenet proposed sending teams of CIA agents and special

their opponents with money and weapons, and tip the balance against the Taliban?

It worked like a charm. Pakistan, whose intelligence services had originally created the Taliban, withdrew its support, the regime fled Kabul, and most of the Taliban troops melted back into their villages. The government of a

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Afghanistan has usually been run by regional and tribal warlords with little central control: nothing new there. But now it is also a country where the biggest minority has been largely excluded from power by foreign invaders who sided with the smaller minorities, and then blocked the process of accommodation by which the various Afghan ethnic groups normally make power-sharing deals

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forces into the country to win the support of the various militias, loosely linked as the Northern Alliance, that still dominated the northern regions of the country.

Although the Taliban had controlled most of the country since 1996, they had never decisively won the civil war. So why not intervene in that war, shower

country of 27 million people was taken down for a death toll that probably did not exceed 4,000 on all sides.

By mid-December 2001, the United States effectively controlled Afghanistan through its local allies, all drawn from the northern minority groups: Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara. There had not been the mass killing of innocent bystanders

# — a war won and lost

that would inevitably have accompanied a conventional US invasion, so there was no guerilla war.

The traditional ruling group and biggest minority, the Pashtun, who had put their money on the Taliban and lost, would have to be brought back into the game somehow, but the usual Afghan deal making would suffice.

Washington had the wit to make Mahmoud Karzai, a Pashtun from a clan that never had much to do with the Taliban, its puppet president in Kabul, but it didn't carry through. It froze out all the prominent Pashtun political and religious leaders who had had dealings with the Taliban - which was, of course, almost all of them.

The Taliban had been the government of Afghanistan for almost five years, and were at the time the political vehicle of the Pashtun ascendancy in the country. If you were a traditional Pashtun leader, how could you not have had dealings with them?

An amnesty that turned a blind eye to the past, plus pressure by the United States on its recent allies to grant the Pashtuns a fair share of the national pie, would have created a regime in Kabul to which Pashtuns could give their loyalty, even if they were less dominant at the centre than usual. But that never

happened.

The United States had so closely identified the Taliban with Al Qaeda (although Ben Laden probably never told the Taliban leadership what he was planning) that it would not talk to Pashtun leaders who had been linked to the Taliban. Six years after the invasion that wasn't, the Pashtuns are still largely

and then blocked the process of accommodation by which the various Afghan ethnic groups normally make power-sharing deals.

The Taliban are still the main political vehicle of the Pashtuns, because there has been no time to build another. It doesn't mean that all Pashtuns are fanatics or terrorists.

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After the foreigners are gone, the Afghans will make the traditional interethnic deals and something like peace will return. Will Karzai still be the president after that? Yes, if he can convince the Pashtuns that he is open to such a deal once the foreigners leave. Will the Taliban come back to power? No, only to a share of power. Will Osama Ben Laden return and recreate a 'nest of terrorists' in Afghanistan. Very unlikely

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frozen out. That is why the Taliban are coming back.

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Indeed, not all the Taliban are fanatics (though many of them are), and hardly any of them nurse the desire to carry out terrorist acts in other countries. That was the specialty of their (rather ungrateful) Arab guests, who fled across the border into the tribal areas of Pakistan almost six years ago.

The current fighting in the south, the

Pashtun heartland, which is causing a steady dribble of American, British and Canadian casualties, will continue until the Western countries pullout.

(Most other NATO members sent their troops to various parts of northern Afghanistan, where non-Pashtun warlords rule non-Pashtun populations and nobody dares attack the foreigners.)

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Will Karzai still be the president after that? Yes, if he can convince the Pashtuns that he is open to such a deal once the foreigners leave.

Will the Taliban come back to power? No, only to a share of power, and only to the extent that they can still command the loyalty of the Pashtuns once it is no longer a question of resistance to foreigners.

Will Osama Ben Laden return and recreate a "nest of terrorists" in Afghanistan. Very unlikely. The Afghans paid too high a price for their hospitality the first time round. COURTESY THE JORDAN TIMES

*The writer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries*

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