

January 24, 2010

Dear Friends,

I have just had a delightful and unusual experience I want to share with you: I was invited to speak at the Oxford Union last Thursday.

You may know that in 1939, the Oxford Union briefly played a disastrous role in world affairs. When the members debated whether or not Britain should enter the lists against Germany, they decided against it. Hitler apparently took their vote as a reliable guide to English public opinion and, as they say, the rest is history.

The Union, as its president wrote to me, “enjoys a reputation as the world’s oldest and most famous student debating society. Over the years, it has gained a reputation as the most prominent debating platform outside Westminster, and contains the world’s oldest purpose-built debating chamber. Throughout our 180-year history, we have regularly hosted high-profile international figures here in Oxford to discuss contemporary and controversial issues. We are proud to be able to count amongst our past guests Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Charter, Michael Jackson and her Majesty the Queen to mention but a few.”

Among the “few” he skipped over were Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, Margaret Thatcher, Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, Tony Blair, Bobby Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, Pervez Musharraf and John McCain.

The Union is and acts like the proving ground for leaders of the British (and other) governments. Indeed, as I was told, twelve British prime ministers have been members of it along with Prime Minister Benazir (known in our family as Milbry’s former roommate at Harvard “Pinkie”) Bhutto from Pakistan.

The officers of the Union assembled dressed in white or black tie

with the women in long dresses, laid on a remarkable feast and disported themselves as a sort of Edwardian vision of Parliament or House of Lords. No one thought his dress, talk or actions were light-hearted or in any way exaggerated. Everyone assumed that they were the prime assembly at the center of the world -- Oxford.

The issue under debate was set out as “That this House would now withdraw from Afghanistan.”

I was the lead speaker for the motion.

Opposing me was the Deputy Whip of Parliament, Bob Blizzard, MP, Frederick Forsyth, the author, Frank Cook, MP, who is chairman of the NATO committee on Afghanistan, and General Sir Richard Dannatt, a former Chief of the British General Staff.

With me was a young Pakistani student, an Iraqi from Saddam Husain’s hometown, Anas al-Tektite, who is now head of the Cordoba Foundation, and Marjorie Cohn, the former president of the US National Lawyers’ Guild.

Curious, I thought, that those who thought we should get out were two Americans, one Pakistani and one Iraqi whereas those who wanted to stay were all English, Conservatives and certified members of the Establishment.

I was sternly informed that I must limit my talk to exactly 10 minutes. However, I should expect that one or more members might rise, touch the top of his head and raise either a “point of information” or a “point of order.” I would then have the option of listening and responding or calling out “no.”

I naturally assumed that a speaker should listen and respond. But, what I was not told was this interruption was counted as part of my ten minutes. So, by allowing two points of information, my time was cut to about half what I had expected. All this, as you can see, is Parliamentary

protocol with which, I confess, I was maladroit.

Moreover, as it turned out, my case was severely weakened by my failure to challenge Frank Cook when he accused me, "joking, of course," of favoring something like the disaster the British endured in the retreat from Kabul in 1842. I should have called him on the point and made my case again that what I was asking for was the firm, exact and comprehensive statement of a policy of withdrawal, and an orderly retreat while negotiations took place. Wily Parliamentary speaker that he no doubt is, he was able to saddle me with a weak position which in fact I do not hold. It is, I suppose, exactly this debating skill which the Union aims to teach its members.

I had rather expected that the emotional call to "respect our soldiers" by not "running away" would be raised. It was not. The closest was the talk by Frederick Forsyth who made a big point of the fact that whereas in the past no one had much of a view of the bloody side of war, today everyone sees the coffins returning to England and often sees the wounded. Thus, he implied, we can no longer fight like we used to. So, the implication was: we should grin and bear it. (I was not so much struck by the logic as by the fact that the student monitor, the secretary, could not close him down for nearly 20 minutes!)

I also had expected that, like the audiences I have addressed in America, the Union members would be concerned about the monetary costs. Quite the contrary: one of the two interventions I received was by a young man who made a point of saying (in the form of a loaded question), if Britain were prepared to pay the cost of the Second World War, why should it turn aside from the cost of this war?

No interest either in the audience in the other emotional issue of remaking the barbaric Afghan-Islamic society into a Western democracy. I thought that probably most of the young men and women I met would have shared this attitude toward the natives of an earlier generation. However, to my surprise, Bob Blizzard, the Deputy Whip of the Parliament, rather caught me out. He made quite a point that his

daughter had converted to Islam and had married a Muslim. So the "perversion of Islam" by the Taliban struck home to him. However, he made his point with care and tact. I was astonished by the religious divide in his family and the audience's (and Parliament's) lack of interest in it: like several other members of Parliament, he has many Muslim constituents. But can you imagine the reaction in America if Ms. Pelosi's daughter (if she has one) had become a Muslim!

The issue of women, Islam and both multiculturalism and morality were taken up rather more emotionally by Anas al-Tektite and Marjorie Cohn. Tektite's argument came down to two points – is what we are doing moral and does it work? He answered by saying that without the moral issue on our side we could not win and since we are displacing, wounding and killing large numbers of Afghans, they believe us to be immoral. Hence, they will keep on fighting, and we cannot win because in our struggle we are making enemies faster and in greater number than we were killing them.

Ms Cohn pressed this point onto the issue of terrorism: why do the al-Qaida followers hate us, she asked. The answer, she said, was partly what Tektite had said, that relatives of those wounded or killed hated us for having done so. But more generally, it was that what we are doing on such issues as supporting tyrannical and corrupt governments (among which she included the Afghan, Saudi and Egyptian governments) and the support we have given Israel (in their "vicious, illegal and immoral suppression of the Palestinians") that had turned -- and was bound to turn -- people against us and into terrorists.

General Dannatt, not surprisingly, joined Frank Cook in emphasizing the military aspects of the campaign and held out firmly the belief that the Afghan army is beginning to perform well if not gloriously. Both men pointed to the reaction of the group of guards (Tajiks?) in fighting off the Taliban attack in Kabul last week. That was true, of course, they did. But what remained unsaid and difficult, in the debate to point out, was that the group of guards, an elite force, numbered only about a hundred out of an "army" today of c. 80,000. The Kabul guards were hardly typical and

were, of course, trying to save their own lives. The other, nearly 80,000 have been described by NATO officials as almost entirely illiterate, disaffected and drug addicts. This raised for me perhaps the most important aspect of the evening: the lack of a factual base.

Looking back at my reading of official reports during the Vietnam War, I remember being struck by the enormous intake of facts. But what I then found was that while we were deluged with details, we lacked a matrix into which to put them or evaluate them. That finding is what spurred me toward my study of guerrilla warfare and my attempt to construct a system to differentiate what mattered from what was merely interesting. That overview, I think, is still lacking among journalists, diplomats and especially the military on Afghanistan.

But what particularly struck me during the discussion in Oxford was how easily “facts” were created and, conversely, how easily existing facts were simply not noticed. For example, I have cited the assertion that the Afghan army is increasingly effective because the small elite group in Kabul performed their duties well. That is the “fact.” The facts to be overlooked are that the number of Afghan soldiers whom the officials training them believe to be to some discernable degree effective has declined over the last year; indeed the actual numbers have declined. Many police and soldiers are just names on payrolls. As in Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, they exist only for accounting purposes. And the number of security forces (including the police), as I mentioned, addicted to narcotics is believed by our officials to be one in three while nine in ten are illiterate, despite our having spent \$19 billion to train them. Listening to Cook and Dannatt, you would certainly not have guessed these things.

Nor would you have reflected on the Russian experience. In fact, Cook explicitly urged us to “forget history...it misleads us.” But, the contrast with the Russians is instructive: the Russians had spent decades before their invasion training soldiers and training and indoctrinating officers in the army of the monarchy. So when they invaded in 1979, they “inherited” the existing Afghan army. These people were almost exclusively Pashtuns. To them, the Russians added a well-paid

Pashtun militia that at its height numbered about 100,000 men. They served the Russians well in the early years of the occupation; when the Russians withdrew in 1989, this force disintegrated in the ensuing civil war. What then emerged from the chaos were paramilitary forces with two important characteristics: the first was that the more successful fighters were not ethnic Pashtuns but Tajiks and the second was that command or control of fighters fell to local “warlords.” These forces were then overthrown by the incoming Taliban. They beat back the Tajiks and drove the warlords into exile or hiding.

So when we invaded in 2001, we did not “inherit” a standing native military force as the Russians had but had to patch together whatever we could from the bits and pieces we found. The easiest and cheapest way to keep some order seemed to our men on the spot to be by bringing back, arming and tolerating the warlords and by embodying the Tajiks as the country’s security force. That really is where we are today. Our allies are the Tajiks so, more or less automatically, our enemies are the Pashtuns. Today, the Tajiks, who form about a quarter of the population, hold most of the commands in the security forces and make up the bulk of the soldiers and officers while the Pashtuns who comprise nearly half of the Afghans are largely sidelined.

It is this divided, untrained, largely Tajik group we are trying to form into coercive organizations, the army and the police, to “win” the war against the Taliban. To try to do so, they must fight primarily in the south which is Pashtun territory and whose language, Pashto, most do not speak and by whom they are regarded as foreigners. And enemies. One elite unit, the “Kandahar Strike Force,” according to the reporting team of *The New York Times*, is believed to be employed partly to levy protection money on the local, Pashtun, population. Even General Petraeus admits – and told President Obama (according to the report on Obama’s decision-making which was orchestrated by the White House and published in *The New York Times* on December 6, 2009) -- “to think of elements of the Karzai government like ‘a crime syndicate.’ Ambassador Eikenberry was suggesting, in effect, that America could not [afford to] get in bed with the mob.” The odds of this combination of a corrupt,

oppressive government using mainly Tajiks as its armed force creating stability in Afghanistan are very long. In fact, the American and British commanders, almost certainly including General Dannatt, are planning on a generation or more.

Perhaps more important was another “fact” that was brought up in the meeting: “70% of the Afghans – up from 30% last year – want us to stay.” That was the report Frank Cook brought back from his several visits to the British forces there, “where I spoke to brigadiers and lance corporals...from top to bottom.” He did not claim to have spoken to any Afghans, but did, he said, meet with President Karzai, apparently for a photo-op.

But, can anyone pretend to know what seven in ten Afghans think or want?

What we do know is that about eight in ten Afghans live in the country’s 20,000 or so villages which are self-governing and where the Kabul government has little control and less authority and into which society few foreigners can even pretend to penetrate. It is the strategy of General McChrystal to admit this fact and, just as the Russians did in the 1980s, to withdraw from 70% or 80% of the country to concentrate on the urban areas. But even assuming information on this vast majority of the Afghans, what do we hear to be the facts? A 2009 opinion poll carried out, presumably mainly in the “secure” areas such as Kabul and the Tajik and Hazara north, by the BBC, ABC News and ARD of Germany came up in 2009 not with 70% in favor of our staying, as Mr. Cook asserted, but 18%. But, why quibble; so leave aside these numbers.

The most elaborate and impressive study of attitudes I have seen was done by a Tufts University team that conducted some 400 in-depth interviews. Their finding, reported in *The International Herald Tribune* on September 17, 2009 was that the Afghans did not want us meddling with their affairs: “Afghan perceptions of aid and aid actors are overwhelmingly negative.”

There is even more concrete evidence: When the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office set up a post in Lashkar Gah, they had to put it inside a fortress. And, as *The Sunday Times* reported, they were virtual prisoners in it: “Most never venture beyond the compound walls. Those who occasionally brave the five-minute drive to the governor’s office do so in armed convoys, surrounded by bodyguards and travelling at high speed. The cracks on the vehicles’ windows from rocks thrown almost every time they go out are a measure of the locals’ appreciation.”

I could cite a number of other examples of half-truths, un-truths and overlooked facts, but for me the bottom line is that it would be a real public service if we could assemble and agree upon a body of information that corresponds to reality. As the Oxford Union meeting made clear, we are now like the Brahmins in the Indian fable, men of good will, no doubt, but blind, so that we are trying to describe the “elephant” by some of us grasping the tail and some the trunk.

We need to open our eyes. Then, once we “see,” we can begin to try to evaluate what we see. I thought we were further along the road to understanding than that. The Oxford Union meeting showed me that, never mind “understanding,” we are far short of even an agreed set body of information.

So I offer you what I said (or tried to say) at the debate:

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Thank you for inviting me here this evening. Recently in America, where sound bytes and photo-ops reign supreme, I was once asked to deal with Afghanistan in 3 minutes, so here in this venerable university, of which I am proud to be a graduate, being given 10 minutes is at least statistically impressive. Of course, there are too many reasons for leaving the wretched war in Afghanistan to cover in so short a time, but I will promise to be quick if you will promise to listen.

Most of the reasons for an occupation of Afghanistan are now passé.

Afghanistan, as we all know, is a poor, land-locked stretch of Central Asian mountains and deserts without major natural resources; its people can barely feed themselves – 42% survive on less than £1 a day -- and offer no significant rewards to foreign colonists. So, most invaders hurried through it to lush areas.

Nor does Afghanistan any longer attract imperialists: The dream Peter the Great bequeathed to his successors of conquering India has long since sputtered out in its deserts while successive British governments' nightmare of galloping Cossack hordes pouring through the high reaches of the Hindu Kush ended with Indian independence in 1947. Finally, the Soviet Union's fear of Afghanistan's messianic Islam tumbling its Central Asian Muslim republics like dominos has also ended with the actual break-up of the USSR.

So why should anyone wish to conquer or occupy Afghanistan?

Let us be clear: nearly everyone agrees that we should get out. The only disagreement is over when.

So what will determine when we get out?

Two objectives have been proclaimed:

- the first is to end the threat to us of terrorism and
- the second is to convert this collection of ancient societies into a modern Western-style republic.

Analyzing these – their feasibility, their cost, their importance to us -- are what the issue of when to leave turns on.

Let us be realistic: remaking Afghanistan into a Western democracy is beyond our capacity. Even the most optimistic Neoconservatives believe it would require a commitment beyond your expected life-span. As

the former chief American intelligence officer in Afghanistan has written, “indeed we never can, and certainly not at gunpoint.” And, as we all know, we have not been successful at such social engineering even in the poorer parts of our own societies. So I will leave that fantasy aside to concentrate on the most dramatic and popular worry, terrorism.

If, by continuing to occupy Afghanistan, we could eliminate the threat of terrorism, then a case could be made for the occupation. If ending the threat of terrorism is not feasible, then the horrific costs in human suffering, both theirs and ours, damage to our civic and legal institutions and the waste of our economic resources into an indefinite future cannot be justified and we should get out.

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We must first understand what we are up against -- guerrilla warfare.

Guerrilla warfare is essentially the use of covert force by those too weak to employ overt force. Not having the heavy weapons of war, militants fight with what they can acquire and use the only tactics they can mount against large armies. This has been true of insurgents all over Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia for centuries. When we approve of their cause, we call them “freedom fighters.” Then we often actively help them as during the Second World War we helped the French underground, Tito’s Partisans and the Greek Andartes, and as we did the Afghan guerrillas who fought the Russians in the 1980s.

When we disapprove, we call them terrorists and seek to destroy them as the French did the Algerian nationalists, you did the insurgents in Ireland and Malaya and we did the Viet Minh. What was different was more our attitude than their causes or tactics.

What we learned in all of these wars was that when insurgents are based on a popular cause, they are virtually impossible to defeat. That is what the Germans found in Yugoslavia and Greece, the French found in

Indo-China and Algeria, the Russians found in Afghanistan and we found in Vietnam. In each of these wars, as Mao Zedong memorably put it, the insurgents are like fish swimming in the water of the people.

Now, as I am sure you know, both the British and the American intelligence and the military commanders tell us that the Afghan insurgents are undefeatable no matter how many troops we put into Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgents are “fish” swimming in the “water” of the people.

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Let us be clear, it is the Taliban we are talking about when we discuss whether or not we get out of Afghanistan.

No Afghans and certainly no Taliban took part in the September 11 or other attacks on Britain and America. The al-Qaida terrorists did not operate from Afghanistan but from Europe and America – terrorists can operate from virtually anywhere as we now see in Jordan, Yemen and Nigeria. But Afghanistan is a poor choice. Terrorists need what Afghanistan cannot offer, good communications. Afghanistan did provide a refuge for al-Qaida. But the al-Qaida followers of Usama bin Ladin have long since abandoned it. In areas controlled by the Taliban, al-Qaida militants are not returning. Our joint intelligence tells us that less than 100 remain.

Fighting the Afghan insurgents, the Russians won all the battles, but could not win the war. After losing about 15,000 soldiers, they pulled back into the cities, abandoning the rural areas. We are following their lead, pulling back from over 3/4th of the country in which 4 out of 5 Afghans live.

We face a guerrilla force, similar to the one they faced, of about 17,000. To fight them, like the Russians we are implementing counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency failed us in Vietnam and failed

them in Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency doctrine sets impossible demands: 20 to 25 soldiers for each 1,000 inhabitants. In Afghanistan that adds up to 825,000 troops. That huge figure does not count contractors. There were 73,968 of these civilians in Afghanistan in December. They will also increase, about one mercenary for each soldier, so the combined force should ultimately approach at least a million and five hundred thousand.

And we now know that the cost averages out to about \$1 million or roughly £700,000 a person.

These are only the allocated costs: other indirect costs will affect our economies in much larger amounts. Estimates for cost of the Iraq war just to the American economy were between \$3 and \$6 trillion. In Afghanistan, they are increasing. We are told that the cost to America next year is expected to be \$1 trillion. Britain is spending £2.6 billion a year to keep its troops there. Deeply in debt and plagued with sick economies, both of our governments are faced with cutting essential public services.

But it is not so much money that you need to consider. The real costs are to be measured in the dead, the wounded, the blighted lives, the displaced people. We have not lost so many soldiers as the Russians: as of Christmas, Britain had suffered 243 dead and 2,317 wounded. America has suffered far more, 928 dead and more than 70,000 with traumatic brain injury since 2007, 20,000 of them just in 2009.

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What are these cost buying us. The Afghans don't want us in their country. It isn't only the Taliban, but even the Karzai government has repeatedly said that it is keen to have us leave. All the polls tell us the same thing. And there is concrete evidence. When you put a civilian mission into the south, your people, according to *The Sunday Times*, found that "The cracks on the vehicles' windows from rocks thrown almost

every time they go out are a measure of the locals' appreciation.”

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Worse, we have no effective Afghan partner. That Afghanistan's government is hopelessly corrupt hardly needs discussing. But what is significant is that it lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its people. Never mind the election fraud, the government has not been approved by the body called for in the Constitution to legitimate it, the *Loya Jirga*. Consequently, those few journalists who have actually gone out into the villages to ask are told that it is regarded as just a group of armed thugs who visit periodically to steal from the people. Even General David Petraeus, who wants us to stay in Afghanistan, told President Obama to think of the Karzai government as a “crime syndicate.” War lords, now up to be members of the cabinet, are accused of narcotics dealings and vicious human rights abuses. Parliament is hardly better: A number of its members have been indicted for crimes up to and including murder.

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With all these things evident, many senior commanders and supposed experts have concluded that this war is unwinnable and will fuel terrorism the longer it lasts. In recent months, your ambassador wrote that the war was already lost and that more troops would not help. His view was reiterated by your Defence chief. A former Soviet general commented “it has been always will be impossible to solve political problems using force.” And the man who edited our government's study of the Vietnam War has said simply, “We cannot defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan.” Worse, the study of the Carnegie Endowment for international Peace noted that “the presence of foreign troops is the most important factor in mobilizing support for the Taliban.”

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So can't we just turn our war over to President Karzai's army?

Hardly. It is so disaffected that 1 in 5 soldiers abscond each year. Thus, 10,000 recruits are required each year just to stay level. NATO officials estimate that 9 in 10 would-be soldiers are illiterate and 3 in 10 are drug addicts. Perhaps even worse, many police and soldiers are just names on payrolls. Like Gogol's *Dead Souls*, they exist only for accounting purposes. The effective army is smaller now than in last year despite our having spent \$19 billion over the last 8 years to build it up. To create an effective army - our generals tell us, will take not just years but decades.

If our armies can't win, can't we just win over the moderates and so break up the Taliban? We tried that in Vietnam without success. In Afghanistan, there have been no notable defections and no splinter group of any significance. The Taliban are in for the duration.

So, the Pentagon is planning for a 50-year war. But take heart: the chief of your general staff was more modest. He said it could last only 40 years!

Forty years, fifty years, it hardly matters. Unless we call a halt, the war in Afghanistan will become a permanent part of our lives -- and if you can imagine it, even the lives of your grandchildren.

Moreover, it will metastasize into invasions of other countries. Plans already exist for wars in Pakistan, Iran, the Sudan, Somalia and several other countries. The so-called Long war – begun in Afghanistan -- could plunge our societies into permanent depression and, worse, perhaps permanent militarism that would eat away at our democratic traditions. George Orwell would come to seem an optimist!

So can we get out if we choose to do so?

“Our man in Kabul,” President Hamid Karzai has said there is an “urgent need” for negotiations with the Taliban and his Taliban counterpart, Mullah Muhammad Umar, has indicated his willingness once

our forces agree to depart.

Our governments have blocked these efforts toward peace.

Taliban has also agreed to meet our worries about al-Qaida. Most recently in December 2009, the Taliban's leaders signaled their willingness to prevent al-Qaida from using Afghanistan as a base for attacking other countries. It has also broken with al-Qaida over relations with China (where al-Qaida has espoused the Uighur cause) and other issues. So even if our fears of a return of al-Qaida were realized, which is unlikely, Afghanistan will not become their base.

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Then there is despair. General McChrystal has said that "no alternatives had been offered beside 'the helicopter on the roof' – referring to the humiliating evacuation of Saigon.

That is simply not true. As the former member of the U.S. Policy Planning Council responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia I have prepared a plan on how to get out. I do not have the time here to discuss it, but I should tell you that in my professional judgment – and I have helped to negotiate two ceasefires and have written three peace plans – it is doable. And quickly.

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In conclusion, I am happy to say that I have good news for you. The issue before us has already been decided. The British government decided to get out of Afghanistan!

From a trusted source, I have secured a copy of a secret dispatch, dated January 10, announcing the decision. I will paraphrase it. It says:

"The British forces in Afghanistan will now be withdrawn. To force a

regime upon a reluctant people would be as inconsistent with the policy as it is with the principles of the British government. The enormous expenditure required for the support of our forces in a false military position at such a distance from our own frontier will no longer be borne. “

The only problem with this good news is that the dispatch was issued 168 years ago, in 1842, by the governor general of British India.

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