

# TRANSCRIPT

## The Folly of Quick Action in Afghanistan

Financial Times 27<sup>th</sup> September 2001

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The battle of Afghanistan is the Bush administration's to lose. The Afghan population is ready for change. The networks of support from Pakistan that have been the mainstay of the Taliban regime are disrupted. Afghanistan's neighboring countries and the Arab and Islamic regimes will all be pleased to see a change of regime in Afghanistan.

Afghans are poor but have sophisticated notions of legitimacy. Compared to the average American, the average Afghan is keenly interested in the world events that affect them and do not miss a single broadcast of the BBC. They are disenchanted with the Taliban for their failures to address the urgent issues of the livelihoods and wellbeing of the people, their subordination of the internal needs of the country to external adventurism, and for bringing the confrontation with the United States. Having witnessed massive use of force by the Red army and the destruction wrought by a long civil war, they are fearful of anarchy and a new phase of warlordism that would be supported by the US. Should use of force lead to large scale civilian casualties, disruption of the lives of people and a new exodus of the Afghan population to neighboring countries that do not want them, the current disenchantment with the Taliban could easily be turned into sympathy and then support for a new militant movement in the region.

The administration has two options. It can either deal with the symptoms and the visible symbols of the extremist movement or it can take a deliberate approach to addressing the underlying causes of terrorism and support forces that would be willing to disrupt and destroy the networks that have turned Afghanistan into a launching pad for isolationist and extremist movements.

Dealing with the symptoms would involve military assaults within a space of days or weeks, funneling large amounts of money and material to warlords opposed to the Taliban and the creation of alliances with Central Asian regimes that could use the opportunity to deny the aspirations of their own people for democratic change. Such an approach would enmesh the United States in a series of very complicated relationships in the region. These relationships could in turn spawn networks that could be turned against the West in the longer term.

A more methodic approach will begin from the premise that the fundamental issue in Afghanistan is the creation of a state that would have legitimacy at home, in the region and internationally. Only a nationalist state will have the capacity and commitment to break and destroy the networks of terror. There is a major asset and a key constraint in addressing this issue. Despite nine years of civil war, no group in the country has asked for the dismemberment of the country. Afghan nationalism is strong and a potential basis for the creation of a stable and legitimate government that would offer a formula for accommodating the aspirations of various linguistic and regional groups in the country. No group or individual, however, commands sufficient legitimacy or has articulated a vision and concrete program of actions to convince the population that their aspirations for peace and prosperity can be addressed.

Forging a methodic approach would require acting on lessons from past US engagement in Afghanistan. First, dealing with Afghanistan cannot be outsourced to one of the governments in the region. The US outsourced the management of the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan to Pakistan and the current situation is a tragic consequence of that decision. Second, the US cannot funnel large amounts of money and arms to discredited warlords who are now lining up to offer their services. This approach has been tried and resulted in the destruction of the capital city and the emergence of the Taliban. Third, an interim Afghan government cannot be cobbled together in a couple of weeks. Such an approach was tried and led to the civil war among armed factions that had little unity of purpose or sense of accountability. Fourth, funneling resources to political parties or NGOs that are not willing to be accountable to the people for the use of those resources can only lead to alienation of the population. Such an approach was tried during the Soviet occupation and left little in the way of capacity or positive impacts. Fifth, the UN cannot play a constructive role if it does not receive the full backing of the United States. In recent years, there have been several very capable special envoys whose efforts have not succeeded because of the lukewarm support of the US and the opposition of regional governments.

Addressing the question of establishing a legitimate government in Afghanistan would require a multi-pronged approach. To gain the trust of the population, a credible program for reconstruction of the country has to be offered. This would require assembling the younger group of Afghan technocrats who have gained success in OECD countries and among those NGOs, such as the Swedish committee, that have had the commitment to stay through the course of the events in Afghanistan. Critical to the success of such an effort would be designing mechanisms for accountability and transparency of management of resources to be provided for reconstruction. Pakistan and the neighboring states should be persuaded to accept and support the creation of a broad based Afghan nationalist government. The role of the UN special envoy can be enhanced to find a process to establish a transitional government composed of a cross-section of Afghans. Such a process can only be credible if officials in the US government avoid the temptation of imposing lists drawn on the basis of their personal contacts or insistence on giving the eighty-six year old king a decisive role in the process.

Establishment of the transitional government would also require the establishment of an army and a police force. Once these arrangements are in place, the use of military force against bin Laden and the hard core of his Taliban allies could be followed by an orderly process of transfer of power. The administration has an option. They can act quickly, or wisely. The world prays that wisdom may guide policy.

**Published in The Financial Times on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2001**