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A history of folly, from the Trojan horse to Afghanistan

By recording failure in meticulous detail, the leaked war logs bear devastating witness to our incompetence



Simon Jenkins

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Is it the death of war? In Vietnam the horror of fighting was brought to TV screens in real time. Such was the reaction that American citizens withdrew their consent. In the 1980s computers were said to have restored the aloofness of battle by enabling armies to fight and defeat an enemy by remote control. They could locate the foe, direct fire and drop bombs with pinpoint accuracy.

That thesis is now threadbare. There is no such thing as a secure computer, let alone an accurate one. Every jot of information is leaky, permeable, corruptible, accessible, free-to-air. Computerisation and miniaturisation have stripped command of all secrecy and rendered every success or failure vulnerable to WikiLeaks. As a result, like Hal in 2001: A Space Odyssey, computers can change sides and become the enemy.

Far from defeating the enemy, technology is portrayed as shielding soldiers from the immediate result of their actions, hence distorting tactics and corrupting strategy. By recording failure in meticulous detail, the logs mock the moral basis for so-called wars among the peoples. Like Vietnam's TV images, they leave the Iraq and Afghan conflicts as bloodthirsty killing fields, devoid of rational justification.

The war logs are not so much sensational as relentless. Most of the material was known. It is the detail that bears devastating witness. Afghanistan 2001 now enters firmly into the pantheon of folly, from the wooden horse to Napoleon in Moscow to Vietnam. Indeed it bears the added crassness of coming two decades after the Russians committed the exact same folly in the same place.

In 1971 the Pentagon papers revealed the deception of the Johnson and Nixon governments during the Vietnam war. The papers were credited with collapsing US morale as the war drew to a close. The Afghanistan logs convey a different message. They show George Bush, Tony Blair and their generals to be so dazzled by their massive military (and intellectual) firepower that they thought they were invincible against a tinpot Taliban.

Anyone who visited Kabul in the past eight years knew that a western war of occupation would end in tears. The Taliban were a concept, not an army. Al-Qaida was an unwelcome guest, but only the Taliban were likely to expel it. Mujahideen would ooze from the rocks if provoked and never stop fighting until the infidel was expelled.

Pakistan, long holder of the key to the Afghan door, had a powerful interest in backing the Taliban, an interest promoted and financed by the CIA in the 1980s. All this was known – and is now confirmed.

What could not have been predicted is that Nato, the Pentagon and Britain's defence ministry could so ignore past history and current intelligence as to invade with main force, seek to pacify the Pashtun and then "build a nation" in a medieval land along western democratic lines – all with such incompetence. We could not have predicted, back in 2001-2, that this adventure would become the apotheosis of liberal interventionism, a good war, a righteous war, a New Labour war.

The logs reveal the resulting hubris in ghoulish detail: the failure of "hearts and minds", the waste of aid, the flip-flop on opium production, the odious belief that money trumps zeal and love of country. The logs are shot through with the arrogance of the hi-tech warrior and the glee taken in murdering leaders from the air. If enough Taliban are killed, says the machine, the enemy must surely run out of men.

What is most startling is the continuance of a strategy – the bombing of civilian targets in the hope of killing Taliban – that everyone seems to accept is counterproductive. Bombing and strafing crowds, like assassinating leaders and blowing up civic buildings, hopelessly disrupts communities and benefits mafias. Each dead Pashtun is not a talisman of success, as Nato press releases claim, nor is each civilian killed merely "regrettable". It recruits 10 more to the enemy. Every Taliban elder murdered breeds another, younger one, frantic for vengeance.

Yet no US or British general has succeeded in getting the bombings to cease. The computers are literally on autopilot. Hence last week's [rocket attack on 45 civilians in Helmand](#), a massacre that would be a war crime if committed by infantry rather than airmen. The consequence of such slaughter is catastrophic in a civilian battlefield. The kit may work on Salisbury Plain but in Helmand, the piled corpses merely form a second front for the enemy.

With each atrocity another thousand Afghans must cry, better alive under the Taliban than dead under Nato. Yet in the Guardian yesterday, a former British officer, [Richard Kemp](#), protested that the Taliban "deliberately and routinely uses women and children as human shields, and attempts to lure our forces to kill innocent people". He seems completely ignorant of counter-insurgency tactics.

There is no justice in Britain's continued presence in Helmand, merely ceaseless bloodletting and a desperate hope to extricate the army with minimal loss of face. Soldiers, and the politicians who rely on their advice, have become ever slower learners, like generals on the Somme. They disregard Afghan history and the "[lantern on the stern](#)", blundering blind into the darkness ahead.

Nato is already talking down the Afghan war as "not being about winning". Since the logs reveal the hopelessness of relying on Afghans to fight Taliban, the war can hardly be about anything else. Since [Lady Manningham-Buller's evidence to Chilcot](#) last week, nobody can claim it is about making Britain safe from terrorism. Nor is it anything to do with oil, or drugs, or Iran, or Pakistan, because in each case the war is making matters worse.

I cannot avoid the conclusion that, just as the Pashtun are said to be "hardwired to fight", so now are certain western regimes. War is about sating the military-security-industrial complex, a lobby so potent that, long after the cold war ended, it can induce democratic leaders to expend quantities of blood and money on such specious pretexts as suppressing dictators in one country and terror in another.

Like puppets dancing to manufactured fears and dreams of glory, these leaders have lost their grip on Plato's "sacred golden cord of reason". Until that grip is restored, the folly revealed by the war logs will continue.

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