

The United States in Afghanistan: An Unjust War

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The attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) were a tragedy that altered the landscape of global security, increased the influence of non-state actors in global affairs, and ushered in a new era of Islamophobia. Afghan society has been riddled with United States (U.S.) retaliation and counterinsurgency campaigns since George W. Bush first announced the commencement of “Operation Enduring Freedom,” in response to the 9/11 attacks, and there is considerable debate around whether this war can be considered “just.” John Lango (2014) argues that while there may be a cause that is “right,” in the sense of moral theory, it may still not be considered “just” in terms of just war theory.

Just war theory is a philosophy developed to address issues of war, and it includes three main principles: *jus ad bellum* (the justification of entering into war), *jus in bello* (the norms of how military battles are fought), and *jus post bellum* (the just transition out of war). Just war theory is not considered a perfect model by some; as Schott (2008) argues, it does not sufficiently address the finer intricacies of individual moral intention, human freedoms, and collective harm. According to this understanding, war itself, and the subsequent examination and judgement of war, are not purely objective and absolute (Schott, 2008). However, just war theory is a helpful framework in which to analyze this U.S.-led campaign.

Through this framework, it becomes clear that the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was unjust in its motivation, and the means of war show a dichotomy between the U.S.’s political and economic interests and its stated values with regards to human rights and principled international relations. The U.S.’s lack of effort in helping rebuild a safe Afghanistan is an example of “American exceptionalism.” This term refers to the U.S.’s attitude of moral superiority over the ways in which it governs other states, and highlights the egocentric American worldview that is

driven by an unprincipled approach to international relations. The U.S. war in Afghanistan was predicated on unjustifiable, selfish, and ambiguous motives.

The U.S.'s intervention in Afghanistan was unjust in its motivation, regardless of whether the justification was to fight terror or liberate people from the Taliban. The U.S. initially went to war on the grounds of retaliating against the 9/11 attacks, and began its campaign by targeting the terrorist group al-Qaeda through air strikes. There ensued an *asymmetrical* war, where the U.S.'s resources and military power outweighed those they attacked. While there has been substantial research focused on whether or not the U.S. chose to act on terrorist intelligence prior to the 9/11 attacks (Wilson, 2005), it is more relevant to focus on the idea that a preventative war to "defeat terrorism" creates too much destruction and civilian harm (Wolfendale & Tripoli, 2011).

The next phase in the war was centred on the Taliban, the group in power at the time. The U.S. justified this focus by claiming the group needed to be overthrown because of their alleged involvement in the 9/11 attacks (either directly or through harbouring al-Qaeda terrorists). The U.S. claimed it was liberating Afghans from the Taliban regime on the basis of human rights abuses. Within this context, "the just cause is the just goal of preventing sufficiently grave violations of basic human rights" (Lango, 2014, p. 109). However, as Lango (2014) points out, "it is morally obligatory not to perform the military action, if the just goal is not the primary goal" (p.127). At this point, there was no just basis to be at war, as the primary goal (defeating terrorism) had now shifted towards overthrowing the Taliban, in order to install a more democratic, human rights-focused, U.S.-supporting government.

This shift in U.S. focus highlights the idea that America prioritizes its own personal interests over its stated values if there is no way to achieve both (Record, 2010). The U.S.'s intention around going to war was that it was going into Afghanistan to rid the world of terrorist threats. However, after a short-lived offensive and decisive victory, the intention shifted towards transitioning Afghanistan into a democratic ally, which was in the U.S.'s best interest. The U.S. rhetoric at this time was focused on Islamic terrorists; however, terrorism is not limited to any one religious or ethnic group. Terrorism is considered a political attack against non-combatants, with the intention of creating fear, in order to bring about change. By this definition, a mass shooting by a U.S. White Nationalist, accompanied by an anti-immigrant manifesto, would be considered terrorism. The U.S.'s focus on rooting out terrorism in Afghanistan created a strong link between terrorism and Islam, which further polarized human rights discussions. It moved the U.S. further away from its stated values around human rights, and focused the world's attention on the centralization of terrorism in Islamic countries, which supported the U.S.'s interests. If the U.S. was serious about fighting a just and transparent war on global terrorism, it should have expanded its focus beyond Afghanistan and led a global effort to eradicate all terrorism. However, it kept its focus primarily on this region of the world, as this supported its own interests. This shift in the primary goal undermines the legitimacy and transparency of U.S. intervention.

Furthermore, Wolfendale & Tripoli (2011) point out that war "should not cause more destruction than it is intended to prevent" (p. 23), and Lango (2014) supports this position by explaining that the planned "means" of military action towards achieving a goal, as well as the goal itself, determine whether projected military can be justified. The next phase of U.S.

involvement in Afghanistan shifted “from a counter-terrorist approach focused on the enemy to a counterinsurgency approach focused on the population” (Tadde, 2010, p. 27). After the U.S. overthrew the Taliban, the ineffective leadership that was put in place in Afghanistan led to the U.S. shifting their efforts towards preventing civilian dissent and violence. The means of fighting, along with the lasting consequences of the U.S.’s actions, make this war even harder to justify.

The U.S.’s relative lack of effort in rebuilding a safe Afghanistan is further evidence that this war was unjust. Eckert & Gentry (2014) state that “the United States is the first actor in recent history who can kill without suffering the risk of dying in return” (p. 79), and this is clearly elucidated throughout this conflict. In just war theory, one *jus in bello* principle includes *proportionality*, which refers to the amount of military force considered appropriate. The U.S. sent relatively few troops to Afghanistan, instead gaining military advantage through advanced tactical aircraft, and using their Special Operations Forces to support the Northern Alliance rebel group (Tadde, 2010). These strategies do not support the idea of symmetry, which “implies that - to some degree - both adversaries enjoy similar military capabilities and face similar levels of vulnerabilities” (Eckert & Gentry, 2014, p. 81). In a war between a state and terror groups/ruling factions, having mastery of just war principles, which includes controlling proportional effort and using non-discriminatory tactics, is the responsibility of the state (Eckert & Gentry, 2014). Non-discriminatory tactics refer to the moral need to be able to clearly distinguish combatants from civilians, and the U.S. did not put enough effort into making a clear distinction between terrorist and innocent Muslim civilians.

In the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. failed to shoulder the responsibility of having command over *jus in bello*. After the war, the U.S. could have helped form a more stable government; gained trust among Afghans; and worked on the security of regional environments and the country (Tadde, 2010). Instead, it alienated itself from citizens on the ground because airstrikes did not lead to more ground security for civilians, but caused high civilian casualties (Tadde, 2010). In fact, the U.S. allocated no money in the initial 2004 budget for reconstruction (Ignatieff, 2005), as the resources were reallocated to the Iraq War (Record, 2010). The U.S. supposedly supported the Northern Alliance in rebuilding Afghanistan; however, these efforts lack logistical and moral clarity, as the U.S. had no deep and lasting connection to the Northern Alliance (Wolfendale and Tripiod, 2011). The U.S. cannot justify going to war with the intention of achieving peace and human rights, only to support, at arm's length, the installation of a questionable regime. The deaths of civilians in this asymmetrical war cannot be justified, as the problem "has not been what the United States has done, but what it has not done" (Ignatieff, 2005, p.121). The unjust nature of this war is a result of the U.S.'s uniquely autonomous, global position, and the immunity the U.S. has achieved in the face of international scrutiny regarding its unjust conduct is self-imposed.

The war in Afghanistan is an example of egocentric worldviews, abuses of power, American exceptionalism, and a foreign policy based on self-determined superiority. Ignatieff (2005) argues that in a post-9/11 world, the U.S. was able to frame its exceptionalism as American national interest. As evidence, the "Bush Doctrine" used the war on terror and preemptive self-defence to justify waging war on states that supposedly had connections to terrorism (Eckert & Gentry, 2014). The moral dilemma, as Wilson (2005) points out, is that if

preemptive self-defense is justified, then the U.S. could be justifiably attacked by its own political rivals. Furthermore, the conflict in Afghanistan demonstrates the disparity between America's role as a leader in diplomacy, and the exceptional might, influence, and autonomy of the U.S. military (Ignatieff, 2005). It is the responsibility of a world leader to take moral responsibility, particularly in matters of war, and the need for non-combatant protection is incredibly important where non-combatants are on the front lines of proposed national liberation and counterterrorism campaigns (Skerker, 2004). The problem lies in the fact that "it would be the United States that would judge on both the legitimacy of its own preventative acts of force, and on that of others" (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 234).

A latent function of the U.S. war on terror has been the disintegration of civil rights at home and abroad, as "the Bush Doctrine and its wars threatened to dilute Just War principles by utilizing the moral language of the tradition to serve political purposes" (Eckert & Gentry, 2014, p. 2). As an extension of the war on terror, President Bush used increased powers as commander-in-chief to exclude the U.S. from Geneva Convention provisions (Ignatieff, 2005). By extension, the war on terror also undermined the privacy of people at home and abroad, through wiretapping and device monitoring. Furthermore, the U.S. held and tortured suspected terrorists indefinitely, both abroad (in Afghanistan) and at home (eg. Guantánamo Bay). This ability to abuse power stems from the issue that most Americans do not see relevance in fighting costly wars to establish stable democracies, unless they promote national interest and security (Record, 2010).

Human rights laws "speak of the promise of civilized humanity in the face of tyranny, barbarism, and evil that threatens it" (Denike, 2008, p.98). These laws support powerful nations

coming to the aid of those that find themselves in unsafe circumstances. Sadly, there is a dark side to human rights, as they can also legitimize the actions of states in which human rights violations are used to delegitimize states that fall outside the perceived moral authority of the international community (Denike, 2008). Powerful states are able to harness the importance of their own national interest to justify dissolving the security of those who are unfairly deemed a threat. The United States fought a war in Afghanistan predicated on unjustifiable and ambiguous motives, highlighting an egocentric American worldview, bolstered by unprincipled international relations.

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