

“Obama’s War”: A glimpse of US debacle in Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken
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“Make no mistake, we are experts in the application of violence.” This statement, delivered by a US Marine commander to troops going into Afghanistan’s Helmand province, serves as the suitably sober beginning of “Obama’s War,” an hour-long documentary aired by the Public Broadcasting System’s “Frontline” Tuesday night.

In its first documentary of the season, the “Frontline” program aimed to provide an examination of the crisis facing the US intervention in Afghanistan.

The public network’s timing could not have been better. The program aired on the eve of yet another White House meeting between Obama and the so-called “principals” to discuss strategy for rescuing the eight-year-old US occupation from mounting popular resistance and to determine how many more tens of thousands of US soldiers and Marines to pour into this effort.

From a political standpoint, the approach of the program and its producer-correspondent Martin Smith is conventional, straying little from the official narrative of the two big business parties that have prosecuted the war.

In a discussion with readers on the *Washington Post* web site Wednesday, Smith described Washington’s official debate over Afghanistan: “Are we there to nation build in order to prevent Afghanistan from once again falling to the Taliban and becoming a sanctuary for Al Qaeda? Or are we there to prevent another 9-11 attack and do you need to occupy Afghanistan to accomplish that?”

Not considered in the film are underlying strategic objectives: “Are we there”—in a war prepared well before 9/11—in pursuit of US hegemony in Central Asia, one of the principal sources of energy on the planet.

Nor does the film have much use for history. Unmentioned is the fact that US military involvement in Afghanistan began 30 years ago, with Washington providing billions of dollars in arms and funding to provoke and sustain a protracted war against a Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

This history is not merely ignored; it is falsified. Obama’s special envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, who is described as a foreign policy “superstar” is asked at one point whether the US is engaged in “nation-building” in Afghanistan.

No, he replies, it is involved in “nation-rebuilding.” Afghanistan, he asserts, “until it was wrecked by the Soviet invasion in 1978 was a poor but proud and functioning country.”

Soviet troops did not move into Afghanistan until December 1979. Moscow was responding to a growing wave of attacks on the Kabul government by Mujahedeen forces funded, armed and trained by the US government. As then-US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has since acknowledged, Washington intended to provoke the invasion in order to give the Soviets “their Vietnam.”

This history is decisive in understanding the real content of US policy today. But it does not fit into the framework of the “Frontline” piece, which is driven by a wholly pragmatic question: can US strategy work, can America “win” in Afghanistan.

That being said, the interviews and images gathered with US troops “on the ground” provide a devastating exposure of the debacle confronting US imperialism.

Smith and a camera crew were embedded last summer with Echo Company, part of the Marine Expeditionary Brigade sent into Helmand province in the initial escalation ordered by Obama last March.

The company is given a pep talk by an officer who tells them that someday they will tell their grandchildren about their participation in the “summer of decision” in Afghanistan. He adds that they are “going to change history starting tomorrow morning,” when they are to take up the southernmost position of the area being occupied by the Marines.

The next morning, a member of the company, Seth Sharp, a 20-year-old Lance Corporal from Georgia, is shot through the neck, an incident filmed by an embedded cameraman. After the grim footage of the shooting and its aftermath, the narrator notes that the Marine “didn’t make it.” The day before, he had written home to inform his family that someday his grandchildren would read in school about the battle he was to fight.

The Marines’ mission, according to Echo Company’s commander, is to “be with the people, and close to them, so you can work with them.” This is a translation of the new counterinsurgency policy introduced under Gen. Stanley

McChrystal in which US forces are to forcibly wrest the Afghan people away from the resistance.

To that end, the Marines set up their base in an abandoned school next to a town market. In response, however, the local people abandon the market and move out of homes near the base. The Marines on foot patrol walk past empty stalls with no movement in the market save wind-blown dust.

What contacts they are able to make are fraught with intense frustration and mutual distrust. Their translator, it emerges, is fluent neither in English nor in the local dialect, making communication halting and utterly lacking in precision.

At one point, a sergeant lectures a captive audience of Afghan villagers, telling them “You all are not cooperating,” and warning them that if they fail to answer his questions they will be considered to be on the side of the Taliban. In another scene, heavily armed Marines subject two Afghan men to a full-body search and then warn them not to run from US patrols or “stuff stuff in their pockets” as “it looks suspicious.”

Attacks by the resistance are a daily occurrence. The Marines and the “Frontline” crew are forced to end one encounter with local residents and dive for cover after coming under small arms fire.

While in response, the Marines unleash a torrent of automatic weapons fire, the resistance is virtually invisible, rarely seen, much less engaged. Yet snipers are ever-present, melting back into the population after each attack. Mines and so-called Improvised Explosive Devices are also a constant danger, driving up the casualties to their highest level since the US invaded the country eight years ago.

What emerges from these scenes is a portrait of a dirty war of colonial occupation.

“Frontline” effectively cuts from the grim situation of the Marines in Helmand to a Washington conference of the Center for a New American Security, a so-called “centrist” military think tank with strong links to the Obama administration. Present are high-ranking military officers and so-called “counterinsurgency” experts, on the make for fat consultancy contracts. Smith describes them as the “the best and the brightest”—the phrase used to describe the architects of the Vietnam war—of the “counterinsurgency brain trust.”

Gen. David Petraeus, the head of the US military’s Central Command, uses an overhead projector to pitch his proposal for a “full spectrum operation” in Afghanistan.

The program also probes the corruption and impotence of the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai. One of the most effective scenes is that of a group of Karzai’s ministers being ferried in a heavily armed US military helicopter to a remote northeastern province. “This is about connecting the government to the people,” says a US general escorting the ministers. “That’s what they’re going to see today.” What the local people actually see is corrupt members of a puppet regime disconnected from their lives and wholly dependent upon foreign occupation troops for their survival.

“Frontline” concludes with a section on Pakistan, which it suggests is the real problem in the region. The implications are clear—the war being fought in Afghanistan must be increasingly extended across the border.

The program includes only one voice that even begins to question the essential issues raised by the war in Afghanistan—that of Col. Andrew Bacevich (ret.), a Vietnam veteran and professor of international relations at Boston University.

“I guess the piece that bothers me is, as a people, having accepted the proposition of open-ended war,” says Bacevich, pointing to the implications of the unchecked growth of American militarism.

The final word, however, is given to one of the counterinsurgency “experts,” Lt. Col. John Nagl (ret.), who invokes the attacks of September 11 and states that Afghanistan is “necessary war ... a war that America needs to win.”

The program’s title is somewhat misleading. Obama features little in the narrative—he is never shown and his name is mentioned just four times in one hour. There is nothing about the transition from the Bush administration or the fundamental continuity in the pursuit of military aggression.

There is one voice-over of Obama from his March speech announcing the war’s escalation. The American people, he says, “deserve a straightforward answer” as to why US troops continue “to fight and die” in Afghanistan. He provided none, and ultimately, neither does the “Frontline” documentary.

(“Obama’s War” can be viewed online at the PBS web site.)

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