

Bombing Will Not Make U.S. More Secure

By Stephen Zunes

The use of military force for self-defense is legitimate under international law. Military force for retaliation is not. The magnitude of these initial air strikes raises not only serious legal and moral questions but political concerns as well, as it will likely set back the fight against terrorism.

The use of heavy bombers against a country with few hard targets raises serious doubts about the Bush administration's claim that the attacks are not against the people of Afghanistan. His father offered similarly reassuring words that the U.S. had "no quarrel with the people of Iraq," yet thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed outright during the Gulf War from U.S. air strikes and hundreds of thousands—mostly children—have died from malnutrition and preventable diseases as a result of the postwar sanctions.

It's certainly true that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has given Osama bin Laden and his supporters sanctuary. But this is not a typical case of state-backed terrorism. As a result of Bin Laden's personal fortune and elaborate international network, he does not need and apparently has not received direct financial or logistical support from the Afghan government. Destroying the limited government resources in Afghanistan, therefore, will not cripple Bin Laden and his cohorts.

The Afghan people are the first and primary victims of the Taliban—perhaps the most totalitarian regime on earth. It is tragic that the U.S. has chosen to victimize them still further through a large-scale military operation that will almost certainly lead to widespread civilian casualties. The Taliban regime has had little concern for the welfare of the Afghan people. As a result, there is widespread hatred of this reactionary theocracy.

The Afghan population has already suffered through a 23-year nightmare of communist dictatorship, foreign invasion, civil war, competing war lords, and fundamentalist rule. The recent bombing adds to this long history of destruction. Indeed, attempting to destroy the country's infrastructure will accomplish little, since that destruction has, in large part, already happened.

The Taliban leaders will likely escape harm in their bunkers or in remote mountain outposts. The victims are likely innocent civilians or unwilling conscripts already suffering under fundamentalist rule. Indeed, it will likely solidify support for the regime and even Bin Laden himself, as people under attack tend to rally around their flag.

The real enemy is Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, which is a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells that operate throughout Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. They do not have much in the way of tangible targets that can be struck—as if Washington were at war with a government. To target Afghanistan seems to be more an act of catharsis than a rational strategy to enhance U.S. security.

To break up these terrorist cells and bring the terrorists to justice, the U.S. needs the cooperation of intelligence services and police agencies in a number of Muslim countries. If the ongoing attacks are seen to be excessive and innocent lives are lost, it will be politically difficult for these regimes to provide the U.S. with the level of cooperation needed.

If there is any logic to Bin Laden's madness, it was probably the hope that the U.S. would overreact militarily, creating an anti-American backlash in the region that would play right into his hands.

To win the war against terrorism, we need to reevaluate our definition of security. The more the U.S. militarizes the Middle East, the less secure we have become. All the sophisticated weaponry, all the brave fighting men and women, and all the talented military leadership we may possess will not stop terrorism as long as our policies cause millions of people to hate us.

President George W. Bush is wrong when he claims we are targeted because we are a “beacon for freedom.” We are targeted because the support of freedom is not part of our policy in the Middle East, which has instead been based upon alliances with repressive governments and support for military occupation. We would be much safer if the U.S. supported a policy based more on human rights, international law, and sustainable development—and less on arms

transfers, air strikes, and punitive sanctions.

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