

Revenge or justice? Revenge won't work in Afghanistan: Revenge won't work in Afghanistan

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

It was much easier to oppose the gulf war. The situation that evoked the U.S. military response ten years ago was not personal, unless you count the loss of a plentiful oil supply as personal. Certainly Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait didn't carry anything like the emotional impact of the September 11 attack that killed 5,000 citizens. Yet it is essential to oppose this new war. President Bush is taking advantage of the public's patriotic and religious fervor, along with the eager and unquestioning support of the media, to direct a steady assault on a country that is already bombed-out.

This war is morally wrong. It doesn't even begin to meet the just war criteria. Further, we must protest on pragmatic and humane grounds. As columnist Molly Ivins warns, we are running out of time with our current military strategy for three reasons: "Winter, Ramadan and the prospect of millions of people starving to death."

The American public doesn't want to see the body bags of American soldiers who have died in the snows of Afghanistan. Nor do we want to see our shaky Arab coalition collapse when airstrikes continue throughout the sacred season of Ramadan. As a compassionate people we do not want to be responsible for mass starvation, which is a real possibility. According to an Oxfam report, "Even before current events, 5.5 million people were already partially or completely dependent on food aid . . . 2.5 million [of these] will run out of food between now and December." The U.S. decision to drop bombs and food supplies at the same time was hypocritical in the extreme, and led to a cruel absurdity: the American military was forced to warn Afghan children not to confuse unexploded cluster bombs with widely scattered food packets.

President Bush has identified his demons—Osama bin Laden, his al-Qaeda network and the Taliban—and promises to eradicate them in a war that “could last a long time.” How long? He wouldn’t put it this way, but it is safe to say he wants it to last as long as it takes to get rid of the Taliban government and replace it with Afghans compliant to our interests—specifically, our interest in an oil pipeline through Afghanistan, and our interest in an Afghanistan that can live more peacefully with our allies in the neighborhood, Pakistan and India.

We are working to replace the Taliban with the Northern Alliance, our newest Afghan friends. Yet Molly Ivins reports that an Afghan women’s organization says that the Alliance is “as bad as the Taliban, and in addition, consists of minority tribes that have always warred with the majority Pushtun.” Some of the Northern Alliance leaders have been known to traffic in the lucrative opium trade. Building a government with them makes as much sense as hiring convicted criminals to handle security.

Someone has noted that American foreign policy is built on one-night stands, not long-term commitments. We use partners for the short time we need them, as we did in the closing years of the cold war when bin Laden and “our” Afghans fought as our surrogates against the Soviet Union. Even Saddam Hussein was a staunch ally while Iraq was fighting its decade-long war against Iran. But when that war ended and Saddam decided to increase his oil-holding power in Kuwait, he became our demon. The morning after we are satisfied with a military victory is not a good time to be a friend of the American government, especially where oil is involved.

War is always a sign of failure, the result of failed diplomacy. As angry and stunned as we were after September 11, there was still time to negotiate with the Taliban to bring Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network before a court of justice. From the outset, however, President Bush said he was not interested in negotiating, which meant that he wanted revenge more than he wanted justice.

John J. Mearsheimer believes the Bush military strategy is not working. Mearsheimer, who is a University of Chicago political scientist and the author of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, writes that “neither the current bombing campaign nor the deployment of American ground forces in Afghanistan offers good military options for dealing with the Taliban and Al Qaeda.”

Mearsheimer advocates an emphasis on “ground-level diplomacy, with open wallets, among Pashtun leaders in central and southern Afghanistan, the fullest use of Pakistani intelligence and influence, and selective military action. The moment for dramatic demonstration of American military power has passed. Our resolve must now be expressed through many careful steps, or we will never achieve the victory we seek against Al Qaeda.”

Revenge is never the best way to resolve problems or achieve justice. A film documentary on the life of British Queen Victoria records the 1857 slaughter of British citizens in India by a local army in revolt. More than a hundred British women and children were trapped in a building in Cawnpore and hacked to death. Their mutilated bodies were thrown into a nearby well.

As the camera pans across the well, the narrator says, “The massacres of Cawnpore were not only the worst atrocity the British could imagine, they were regarded by the men who had conquered India as the most shameful reproach. They had failed the woman and children.” Soon, thousands of British reinforcements poured into the area, and the massacre ringleaders fled into the mountains. They were hunted for years but never found. Instead the British turned on other targets for their revenge. “What had happened at Cawnpore became the justification for brutal reprisals.”

Revenge didn’t work then and it won’t work now in Afghanistan.