

The Good Guys?

Thieves of State

Sarah Chayes

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Why were British troops in Afghanistan? Was it to help liberate Afghan women, to establish good governance and prosperity for the Afghan people, or to protect Britain's streets from terrorist attack? All these pretexts were at various times put forward. None was true. The real reason was, of course, to try and sustain the 'Special Relationship' with the United States. In pursuit of this end, the British found themselves supporting one of the most corrupt governments in the world, a government that was dominated by drug traffickers and warlords. This essential truth about the war in Afghanistan is still not generally known so that the politicians responsible have by and large prospered in retirement; unless, that is, like Geoff Hoon and Jack Straw, their personal venality became a public scandal. Sarah Chayes' new book, *Thieves of State*, which recounts her part in the fight against corruption in Afghanistan, will go some way towards remedying this, although I suspect that the unholy alliance between the political establishment, the media and the military high command will continue to succeed in portraying Afghanistan as 'the good war'.

The United States overthrew the Taliban by means of a comparative handful of CIA agents and special forces personnel allied with the warlords of the Northern Alliance. With the support of overwhelming US air power, this small army was able to defeat the Taliban, although their leadership escaped capture. Two things stand out about this success: first of all, the Northern Alliance would never have been able to defeat the Taliban without US support, which did rather suggest that they would need continued US support to remain in power. The shift in US attention and resources to Iraq was, from this point of view, a disaster. Second, the Northern

Alliance was a gangster organisation of warlords and drug traffickers. Putting them in power was like invading Colombia to instal the drug cartels in government. And, once the Taliban were removed, opium production did indeed dramatically increase. These two factors together made the return of the Taliban inevitable.

Sarah Chayes arrived in Kandahar at the end of 2001 and remembers that it was not long before people were complaining to her of 'the presence of notorious criminals in their new government'. She watched 'warlordism take hold and solidify' and came to the conclusion that the resulting corruption was what 'was driving people to violent revolt in Afghanistan'. Eventually she went to work for the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) where she was one of a number of people arguing that corruption was fuelling the insurgency and that combating it was a military priority. 'Corruption', she writes, 'in army-speak, was a force multiplier for the enemy'. While lip-service was sometimes paid to this insight, in practice the US commitment to the gangster regime they had installed in power was too strong for anything effective to be done about the problem.

She describes the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as

'best understood not as a government at all but as a vertically integrated criminal organization – or a few such loosely structured organizations, allies but rivals, coexisting uneasily – whose core activity was not in fact exercising the functions of a state but rather extracting resources for personal gain'.

Every government post, from top to bottom, was for sale with the purchaser expected to recoup their investment by means of bribery and extortion. Predictably, the most expensive positions were in the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, where senior posts could cost as much as \$200,000 a year. Such an outlay would, of course, be recouped by actual involvement in drug trafficking. The Minister for Counter-Narcotics, Daoud Daoud was, she writes, 'according to multiple, separate strands of information, one of the biggest drug traffickers in

the country'. This goes some way towards explaining the failure of the Karzai government to not only curb opium production, but to preside over its dramatic expansion. The people at the top also systematically pillaged the foreign aid budget to the tune of billions of dollars, while lower down police and local officials systematically robbed and oppressed the local population. Afghanistan under Karzai was a 'kleptocracy'; and it was, she argues, 'the moral and material depravity' of the Karzai government that was fuelling a 'brutal and tenacious insurgency' as many Afghans were persuaded that the only way to end the government's depredations was through 'religious rectitude'. Interrogation of Taliban prisoners showed that they were not primarily motivated by religion or hostility to foreign occupation but by 'the perception that the Afghan government was "irrevocably corrupt"'.

The 2009 Presidential election gave public notice of the extent of the corruption with the electoral fraud 'so egregious and widespread as to stun even seasoned election monitors'. Subsequently, Karzai pacified international opinion by promising to curb corruption. When he made the public announcement of his intention to 'clean the government', however, he had standing either side of him his two vice presidents, Karim Khalili and Muhammad Qasim, 'two of the most notorious war criminals in all Afghanistan'. They were there in order to make clear to corrupt officials, policemen and soldiers that the promise was empty, meaningless, just something to appease the Americans, but that otherwise it was business as usual. And indeed every effort to actually curb corruption was blocked by Karzai.

Attempts to persuade the Americans authorities to do something about this failed. She had high hopes of General Stanley McChrystal when he took over command, but he was not prepared to risk alienating Karzai and co. When General David Petraeus took over, she was confident that he would take action. She 'had been corresponding with him about corruption and the insurgency in Afghanistan for nearly two years' and knew that as far as he was concerned the Karzai government was a 'criminal syndicate' (his words). Petraeus

was the principal advocate of a US turn towards a long-term counterinsurgency strategy and had been instrumental in a dramatic reshaping of military doctrine in the form of Field Manual 3-24. This shift had been celebrated in the media and the Field Manual itself was, unprecedentedly, a best seller. Chayes believed that she had persuaded him that countering corruption and establishing good governance was an essential component of such a successful counterinsurgency strategy: 'I heard Petraeus murmur something under his breath: "This is the revision of the Field Manual"'. Her hopes that he would tackle the problem were never fulfilled.

Looking back, she blames the CIA which was heavily involved with the gangsters, warlords and drug traffickers. Karzai's half brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, for example, 'stole land, imprisoned people for ransom, appointed key public officials, ran vast drug trafficking networks and private militias' and was hated by 'the inhabitants of three provinces'; but he was also a CIA 'asset'. They paid him undisclosed amounts of money for his 'services'. Of course, none of this will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the activities of the CIA. She refers to Matthew Rosenberg's revelation, writing in the *New York Times*, that President Karzai himself was also on the CIA payroll, the recipient of 'millions of dollars per year in cash'. The CIA effectively sabotaged any 'anticorruption agenda' and to her surprise Petraeus, in the end, went along with this. Indeed, he went on to become Director of the CIA!

What she does not take into account is the Obama Administration's decision not to embrace a long-term counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan or anywhere else for that matter. Instead, the decision was taken to exercise US power through assassination by drone, special force raids and proxy armies. Corruption was an essential component of this strategy.

One other important point that Chayes makes concerns the number of regimes that there are that have similar characteristics to the Karzai regime in the sense that they are little more than 'criminal organizations', despoiling their own countries. She discusses Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt,

Uzbekistan and Nigeria as variations on this theme. They are all 'kleptocracies' facing Islamist challenges. The regime the US put in place in Iraq is another obvious example. These regimes, she argues, are a threat to US security because they provoke rebellion and today this rebellion all too often puts on an Islamist face.

There is nothing new about 'kleptocratic' regimes or rebellions against them. What is new is that the US is much weaker than it was and is less well placed to intervene in other countries. They can bring governments down but no longer determine their replacement. And second is the impact of globalisation. The bosses of the 'criminal organizations' she writes about, the 'kleptocrats', today invest their money in Dubai, Switzerland, Britain (or, more properly, London) and elsewhere. If Islamist rebels make life too uncomfortable they can always go and live elsewhere. Indeed, she sees 'kleptocracy' as the way that so-called liberal democracies are moving. Altogether a very interesting and thought-provoking book.

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A new edition of his *British Counterinsurgency*
is due out later this year.