



# Hear, Hear

by Jonathan Aitken

**W**HEN A RESPECTED CONSERVATIVE magazine becomes an anti-war magazine its readers and writers should sit up, take notice, and examine their consciences. That was the reaction of your High Spirits columnist to the coruscating editorial attacking “Obama’s War” (*TAS*, October 2010) by our distinguished publisher, Alfred S. Regnery.

Examination of conscience is always a challenging task. It is particularly difficult when reassessing the reasons for having given instinctive support to one’s country fighting a war. Yet there are well-tryed tests for such an exercise using theological and historical tools to make the examination.

I have been trying to apply these tests using the ancient spiritual writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas on the theory of the just war, connecting them with two illuminating books published this fall: *Obama’s Wars* by Bob Woodward (Simon & Schuster) and *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* by Thomas Barfield (Princeton University Press). The net result of burning the midnight oil on these tomes is that I have swung firmly behind the pessimistic viewpoint on Afghanistan championed by our publisher.

Like the present administration’s foreign policy, Christian theology on the doctrine of the just war seems rather confusing in 2010. Yet the original questions asked by Augustine and Aquinas still have validity. Is there legitimate authority for waging war? Is there a just cause? Is there a right intention?

These simple moral issues became obfuscated when the Obama administration was making its biggest decisions on Afghanistan. Here is Bob Woodward’s account of one pivotal NSC meeting, chaired by the president, at which the legitimate authority of the Kabul government was discussed:

“I understand the government is a criminal syndicate,” said General Petraeus, “but we need to help achieve and improve security.”...Biden broke

in for a question. “If the government’s a criminal syndicate a year from now, how will troops make a difference?” No one recorded an answer in their notes. Biden was swinging hard at McChrystal, Gates and Petraeus. “What’s the best-guess estimate for getting things headed in the right direction?” he asked. “If a year from now there is no demonstrable progress in governance, what do we do?”

No answer.

Vice President Biden is portrayed throughout Woodward’s book as a garrulous old uncle who keeps barging in at White House meetings on Afghanistan with embarrassing questions and monologues that the rest of the key figures ignore. But theologically Biden was right on the money with many of the points he kept making. For the most up-to-date pronouncements on the theory of the just war were formulated by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 1970. In their doctrinal statement they built on the foundations set by Augustine and Aquinas and added extra conditions. The two most important were: (1) that war must be a last resort. (2) that war must have a reasonable possibility of success.

Neither condition is anywhere near being fulfilled in the latest moves in the Afghanistan war. President Obama and his team had plenty of options before they raised the stakes by committing an extra 33,000 troops. The idea they were doing this as a “last resort” looks nonsensical. Even the basic mission statement of the United States has been oscillating between “defeating” and “degrading” the Taliban.

As for the “reasonable possibility of success” test, I was initially hesitant about accepting our publisher’s harsh judgment in his editorial that “Obama’s Afghan war is a fool’s errand with virtually no chance of success.” Now, after reading Woodward, I think Al Regnery has understated his case.

The amoral dysfunctionality of the Obama administration's decision-making process on Afghanistan is exposed to look like a bad episode of *The West Wing*. All the big players come out poorly. The military's top brass fight against each other and leak to the *Washington Post* (a.k.a. the ubiquitous Woodward) with a ruthlessness that leaves the politicians shambling around like rank amateurs. They in turn think only of elections. The story (so far) ends with the commander in chief surrendering to his generals by giving them more than three-quarters of the 40,000 extra troops they demanded. However, to appease his political aides, Obama's killer twist is to announce that he has set a date for starting the withdrawal of those troops—July 2011. This electioneering gesture is a virtual guarantee of military failure, ensuring that an unjust war will become an undisguised debacle.

**E**XTRAORDINARY THOUGH IT SOUNDS, there is not a single mention in Woodward's pages of the Afghan people. The tribal chiefs and chiefs of staff in Washington appear to be far too busy with their own internecine feuding to bother with the history of the complex tribes whose lands they are fighting in.

Thomas Barfield makes no such mistake in his historian's picture of Afghanistan. He reminds us that the country is a complex patchwork of Pashuns, Pathans, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Aimaqs, helpfully adding, "but ethnic group definitions are based on multiple criteria that are often locally idiosyncratic."

I have some ancestral understanding of these idiosyncrasies. In the heyday of the Raj my maternal grandfather, Sir John Maffey, was governor of the North West Frontier Province of British India. My mother was born in his official residence overlooking the Khyber Pass. From both of them I heard many stories about the tribal terrorists who created chaos in the region that is now partly Pakistan and partly Afghanistan. The essence of those tales was that most of the tribes were cruel and corrupt double-

crossers. Brutal in their hostilities *against* each other, they were nevertheless serpentine in their conspiracies *with* each other when it came to undermining any foreign invader or occupying power.

The British came to understand this all too well after the losses suffered in the Anglo-Afghan wars. But, alas, the first lesson of history is that the politicians of the present rarely learn from the mistakes of the past. Today the mix of chaos-creators around the Khyber Pass is far more lethal than it was in my grandfather's day. He too had to deal with the taking of Western hostages, booby-trap bombs (made with barrels of gunpowder!), and arms financed by profits from the opium trade. But the stakes today are immeasurably higher because of Pakistan and Islamic extremism—two elephants in the situation room that did not exist when the leaders of the British Empire made their military decisions.

Sadly, whether you approach it historically, theologically, or militarily, the quagmire in Afghanistan is destined to get much, much worse.

I will leave the last word to my mother, whose Afghan nursemaids had taught her fluent Pashto. Shortly before she passed away in her 95th year she addressed Tony Blair in this language. As he appeared on her television screen announcing that the British troop commitment in Helmand province was to be increased to 10,000 soldiers, my mother wagged her finger at the prime minister and said some angry words in her best Pashto. She translated them as: "Those Afghans will give us a bloody nose again."

This is exactly what has been happening and will go on happening until we find how to disentangle the forces of NATO and the United States from an increasingly unjust and unwinnable war. ❁

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