

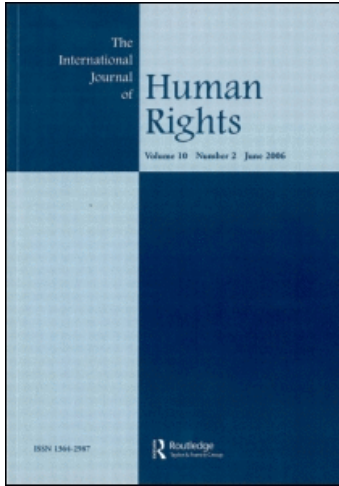
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Oz Hassan^a; Andrew Hammond^a

^a Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

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The rise and fall of American's freedom agenda in Afghanistan: counter-terrorism, nation-building and democracy

Oz Hassan* and Andrew Hammond

Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

The US invasion of Afghanistan, in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, was originally conceived in narrow strategic terms. However, what began as a counter-terrorism policy, based on eliminating and eradicating al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime, led to increasing calls for nation-building and the establishment of a democratic state. This 'mission creep' was increasingly associated with the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, and consequently the democratisation of Afghanistan became a central US security objective. In spite of this, however, the Bush administration was never able to reconcile the tensions between countering terrorism and promoting democracy. This was exacerbated by policy decisions that generated greater insecurity in Afghanistan, which amounts to a disturbing picture of mishandling and negligence. As such, when the Obama administration inherited the Afghanistan campaign, the situation was worse than that which had been seen at the start of the war. This has resulted in the Obama administration abandoning the notion of democracy promotion in favour of transferring power as quickly as possible to an illegitimate Afghan government. This article details the ebbs and flows of US–Afghan policy as it relates to the Freedom Agenda, whilst highlighting the contradictions and problems that the US has faced over nearly a decade of war.

Keywords: Afghanistan; democracy promotion; human rights; freedom agenda; security governance; counter-terrorism; nation-building; New York Consensus

Introduction

In response to the 11 September 2001 attacks, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) on 7 October 2001. This marked the first major combat initiative of the G.W. Bush administration's 'War on Terror', and if withdrawal of NATO troops occurs in 2015 as intended, it will greatly surpass Vietnam as the longest military campaign in American history.¹ Initially, the objectives of OEF were relatively confined, with US short-term objectives being clearly articulated. The Bush administration had identified the 'enemy [as] a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them', and asserted that 'Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.'² Moreover, the president argued that OEF was 'designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime'.³ Accordingly, the war in Afghanistan was initially predicated on

*Corresponding author. Email: O.A.Hassan@Warwick.ac.uk

a counter-terrorism strategy, which assumed that there were a finite number of terrorists that could be identified and destroyed.⁴

This initial counter-terrorism strategy was devoid of a long-term political strategy. Throughout late 2001 to early 2003, the Bush administration was highly reluctant to engage in 'nation-building'⁵ and did not envisage a long-term commitment to democratising Afghanistan. By late 2003, however, the Bush administration became more assertive in its concerns over the democratic nature of the Afghan government. For some authors, this change in emphasis, from counter-terrorism to a democratisation agenda, has been explained by 'the administration want[ing] rapid positive results to help President Bush's re-election campaign at a time when the Iraq operation was becoming problematic'.⁶ Yet, whilst such an assertion certainly provides a modicum of an explanation, it fails to place the Afghanistan conflict into the wider strategy adopted by the Bush administration, which was incrementally developed throughout 2002 and 2003. Within this period the Bush administration began to expand its strategic thinking and construct what became known as the 'Freedom Agenda'.

The implications of the Freedom Agenda on the Afghanistan campaign are therefore of great significance. The adoption of this agenda not only demonstrates an expansion of the US' original objectives, but it further informs current understandings of the nature of US democracy promotion more broadly. Accordingly, this article details how the Afghanistan campaign was increasingly framed in the context of democracy promotion, firstly by the United Nations, but then by the Bush administration, only to be rejected by the Obama administration. As such the ebb and flow of the democratisation objective is intrinsically entwined with American policy towards Afghanistan. Thus, whilst the Bush administration democracy promotion was raised to the level of an idol of the tribe, the Obama administration has come to see a disjuncture between the objectives of the 'Freedom Agenda' and the socio-political reality in Afghanistan. The Obama administration has at times indicated support for democracy promotion in US foreign policy more broadly, but it has greatly downplayed the role of democracy promotion in relation to OEF. In place of democracy promotion, however, the Obama administration is seeking to pursue an 'escalate and exit strategy' that seeks to transfer power with all due haste to a highly problematic government whose democratic credentials are greatly questioned.

The New York Consensus and the war on terror: Bonn, warlords and security

Operation Enduring Freedom did not begin with the US outlining a democratisation objective. To a large extent this reflected the G.W. Bush administration's reluctance to use the US military for nation-building missions. Indeed, throughout the 2000 presidential campaign, candidate Bush repeatedly asserted that the military should 'fight and win wars', rather than become a 'nation building core of America'.⁷ This was echoed by Condoleezza Rice, who wrote, in her often quoted *Foreign Affairs* article, that the American military 'is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society'.⁸

The administration's position on nation-building was not immediately transformed by the events of 11 September 2001 and the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom. Consequently, the upper echelons of the Bush administration were reluctant to construct a post-Taliban political plan throughout October to November 2001. The administration focused on the objectives of regime change and counter-terrorism, and not nation-building or democracy promotion. Thus, when asked about any responsibility that a policy of regime change may have on US commitments to Afghanistan, secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld argued at length that:

The United States of America, and certainly the United States military...are simply doing exactly what the president indicated, trying to root out terrorists...because we have that concern and we go in and root out terrorists, I don't think [this] leaves us with a responsibility to try to figure out what kind of government that country ought to have...I don't know people who are smart enough from other countries to tell other countries the kind of arrangements they ought to have to govern themselves.⁹

As a result of the Bush administration's initial approach, when Ambassador James F. Dobbins was announced as the Bush administration's representative to the Afghan opposition, and tasked with putting together and installing a post-Taliban regime, he 'had no particular instructions' regarding how to fill the political vacuum that would be left once the Taliban was removed. Far from a democratisation agenda, Dobbins has argued that the Bush administration would have been 'happy for the king [Mohammed Zahir Shah] to come back and make it a monarchy or whatever'.¹⁰ Once King Zahir Shah, who was residing in Rome and aged 87, made it clear that he had no desire to seek a formal role in any post-Taliban administration, the Bush administration's discourse shifted towards embracing a more representative outcome, but remained determined not to adopt America's more traditional post-conflict role of nation-building. Consequently, the Bush administration asserted the aspiration of a 'new Afghan government' that would 'adhere to accepted international principles' and therefore be 'broad-based, represent all Afghans, men and women, and be drawn from all ethnic groups'. Yet, this was conditioned with assertions that the US would not 'create the future government of Afghanistan' because 'it is up to the Afghans themselves to determine their future'.¹¹ Symptomatically, this *laissez faire* approach was also to apply to Afghan security, as public safety was to be the responsibility of Afghans themselves. The Bush administration made clear that it wanted to maintain a low military presence throughout the country, focusing on counter-terrorism, and leaving the country as soon as its military objectives were achieved.¹² As Ambassador Dobbins has explained:

No one in the Bush administration wished to see an American military occupation of Afghanistan on the model of post-World War II Germany or Japan. Neither did anyone want to see an international administration on the model of Bosnia or Kosovo. Instead, everyone hoped the Taliban could be succeeded by a broadly based, moderate Afghan regime that would unify the country, reassure its neighbours, and cooperate with the United States in stamping out any residual terrorist threat. Determining how to achieve that outcome was the problem.¹³

The solution arrived at was the US inviting the United Nations (UN) to take the lead in calling for a conference, from which a new Afghan government would be formed; therefore initiating the Bonn Process under the leadership of special adviser to the secretary-general, Lakhdar Brahimi.¹⁴ In undertaking this process however, the US had invited the UN to take a central role in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan.

With the UN adopting this central role, however, two potentially conflicting strategies and objectives for Afghanistan emerged between the UN and the US. Whilst the US focused on a counter-terrorism strategy, it was the UN that began to formulate a democratisation agenda for post-Taliban Afghanistan. That the UN would favour such an outcome is unsurprising given that it had officially made multiple calls for Afghanistan to move towards democratisation throughout the 1990s, and UN officials saw this as an opportunity to pursue this normative agenda. Moreover, such calls reflect what has become known as 'the New York Consensus' that has flourished since the end of the Cold War. As such, the UN has increasingly seen the need for a more transformational role in fragile and

failed states, and regarded democratisation as the best means of securing so-called international 'goods', such as 'the creation of liberal democratic polities that preside over vibrant civil societies and market economies'.¹⁵ With the UN taking such a prominent role in Afghanistan, the New York Consensus began to define the politically feasible and desirable outcomes that the UN would attempt to steer Afghanistan towards.

The preferred strategy, for the UN to pursue under the tenets of the New York Consensus, was termed the 'light footprint' approach, outlined by Lakhdar Brahimi.¹⁶ The emphasis of this approach asserts that statebuilding should be seen as the central objective of UN peacebuilding operations, but that this should be done in *partnership* between the international community and national stakeholders. Brahimi's reasoning behind this was that 'to build a state, there must be consensus on the type and shape to be built and agreement between all parties as to the process that will be used to create that state'.¹⁷ Embedded within this approach is a particular emphasis on the 'sequencing' of tasks, which begins with establishing a diplomatic framework. In turn, this framework sets up the rules of the game for a future constitutional process, which, finally, should contribute to the overall success of the peace process. Such a sequence places an emphasis on key activities such as constitution-making, electoral processes, reintegration and national reconciliation and the rule of law.¹⁸ The Bonn Process was the start of this sequential logic and focused on these key activities in an attempt to restructure Afghan political authority within a democratic framework. When the Bonn Agreement was signed in December 2001, the document asserted that the Afghan people would 'freely determine their own political future in accordance with the principles of Islam, democracy, pluralism and social justice'.¹⁹ Accordingly, it applied Afghanistan's 1964 constitution, until a permanent constitution could be drafted, and established an Interim Authority of 30 members chaired by Hamid Karzai. Notably with the US lobbying vigorously to secure Karzai's role, as the Bush administration made clear that it was not comfortable with other potential candidates.²⁰

The establishment of the Interim Authority, on 22 December 2001, was to be followed by further stages. The first stage was to convene an 'Emergency' *Loya Jirga*, or grand assembly, to decide a Transitional Authority. This was to be done within six months of establishing the Interim Authority, and was conducted in June 2002. Once the Transitional Authority was established, its aim was to act as a 'broad based administration, to lead Afghanistan until such a time as a fully representative government can be elected through free and fair elections'.²¹ The Transitional Authority would also provide the conditions for the next stage of the Bonn Agreement, by establishing a Constitutional Commission. This commission was tasked with drafting a permanent constitution that it would present to a Constitutional *Loya Jirga* for approval.²² Accordingly, the commission unveiled a draft constitution in November 2003, and a Constitutional *Loya Jirga* was held from 13 December 2003 to 4 January 2004, finally approving Afghanistan's constitution. This paved the way for presidential and parliamentary elections to take place, later than first intended, in October 2004 and September 2005 respectively.

Evident in the Bonn Agreement and the sequence of events that followed, was the UN's emphasis on promulgating the New York Consensus that favoured political sequencing and the rebuilding of national institutions. Yet, conspicuously, the Bonn Agreement had a 'security gap'. With the Bonn Agreement being heavily influenced by the US, Annex I, paragraph one asserted that 'the responsibility for providing security and law and order throughout the country resides with the Afghans themselves'. Yet, paragraph two of Annex I concedes the need for 'the assistance of the international community in helping the new Afghan authorities in the establishment and training of new Afghan security and armed forces'. The security gap here is clearly evident by virtue of the Bonn Agreement placing the responsibility of security

with Afghans themselves, yet openly acknowledging the need to build institutions to enable them to undertake this task. To bridge this gap paragraph three of Annex I asserted the need for a UN mandated force, but, at the behest of the US, this force would only 'assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas'. Symbolically, what the Bonn agreement referred to as the 'International Security Force', was subsequently renamed the 'International Security Assistance Force' (ISAF). This discursive transformation clearly demonstrated the Bush administration's emphasis on Afghans providing their own security and was designed to 'eliminate any suggestion that international soldiers might themselves provide security for the Afghan population'.²³

ISAF was mandated on 20 December 2001 by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 and proved relatively successful in providing security in and around Kabul.²⁴ This led to interim Prime Minister Hamid Karzai personally appealing to both the UN and President Bush for a greater number of peacekeepers beyond Kabul, which was a clear acknowledgement of the security gap beyond the nation's capital. Chief UN envoy Brahimi acknowledged that far from ISAF being seen as illegitimate, as some commentators had feared,²⁵ he had heard demands for the expansion of ISAF 'even from the warlords', whilst the then secretary-general Kofi Annan declared that 'security was the number one preoccupation of everyone we met in Afghanistan'.²⁶ In spite of this, the Bush administration remained firmly committed to placing counter-terrorism at the core of US objectives and argued that with respect to ISAF 'such a force must do nothing that would in any way inhibit the coalition from carrying out the primary objectives of ridding Afghanistan of terror'.²⁷ Such a position, driven by both the Bush administration's objectives and a desire to avoid war by committee, ultimately led to the administration failing to answer pleas for help from the Interim Authority, and demonstrated how the potential tensions between UN and US objectives were foregrounded.

Notably, these tensions should not be overstated. The US position on the UN Security Council and US involvement in the Bonn Process clearly demonstrated that the US had a formal, although tacit, commitment to the New York Consensus, and that it was willing to allow the UN to pursue such a transformative agenda. However, in areas where the objectives of the New York Consensus and the War on Terror collided, the latter was privileged and pursued. The US position can therefore be summarised as one in which it would tacitly support nation-building and democratisation if and only if it did not collide with the immediate interests of the war on terror. As a result, a policy of counterterrorism was pursued by the US, which subjugated both the UN's objectives and wider security concerns for Afghans beyond Kabul. A policy of counterterrorism had therefore been pursued in absentia of any guarantee of security. The impact this had on UN democratisation objectives is that it further undermined what was already an extremely difficult, if not highly unlikely, democratisation exercise.

The epitome of the contradiction between the war on terror and the New York Consensus manifested itself most notably with regards to the role of so-called 'regional strongmen' throughout Afghanistan. With the security gap existing beyond Kabul, Karzai's Interim Authority lacked the capacity to provide governance, which led to warlords, militias and regional power brokers filling political, economic and security vacuums. As Mohammad Amin Farhang, who served as the Afghan minister for reconstruction following the fall of the Taliban, surmised:

In Afghanistan, local warlords have the power. They had no power under the Taliban – the American's action against the Taliban gave them their power back. They don't want to give up any of that power to central government.²⁸

Afghans refer to such individuals as *topak salaran*, or 'gun-rulers', which fittingly captures the manner in which warlords maintain control over armies and exercise a political role throughout the country's regions.²⁹ Moreover, it captures the manner in which violent coercion and Afghan politics are intricately entwined. Yet the warlords present a conflict between the democratisation objective of the New York Consensus and the counter-terrorism objective of the war on terror.

For the US-led coalition, such individuals prove valuable in their fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. This was certainly the emphasis during the initial phases of the war in late 2001, when the US supplied the Northern Alliance with weapons, ammunition, food and money to cement the anti-Taliban coalition.³⁰ Yet, regardless of the Bonn process installing Karzai into power, collaboration with such individuals continued. Reports in early 2002 began to emerge detailing how the US was providing satellite communication equipment and \$200,000 to each of seven Afghan warlords, whilst also paying 35 warlords a total of \$7million for 'their loyalty'. This was not simply to Northern Alliance leaders who had helped the US overthrow the Taliban, but also individuals such as Mirza Mohammed Nassery, who 'defected from the Taliban and served as a commander with the Pir Gillani group' based in the northern city of Kunduz.³¹ Further still, this relationship has expanded and 'fuelled' what a US congressional investigation termed, 'a vast protection racket run by a shadowy network of warlords, strongmen, commanders, corrupt Afghan officials, and perhaps others'.³² Thus, rather than US-led coalition forces providing security for Afghans, the US pays Afghans warlords to provide the US with security.

The US relationship with warlords sent a clear signal that counter-terrorism would take precedence over democracy promotion. However, US funding and joint operations legitimised and strengthened these regional powers over those of the central government. It provided such individuals with money for weapons and ammunition that turned Afghanistan into 'a multitude of states in the form of warlords'.³³ This situation is clearly problematic if the Weberian definition of a state is consulted. If the state is the legitimate and chief purveyor of coercion and physical force, then US policy was generating competitors to the very state that the New York Consensus was trying to build. Moreover, what's notable about Max Weber's definition of the state, is firstly its emphasis on a set of institutions with a dedicated personnel, and secondly the notion that the state should wield a monopoly of authoritative rule-making within a defined territory.³⁴ By failing to fill the security gap, the Afghan state was not fulfilling its obligations. Instead regional power-brokers emerged directly challenging the Afghan state and adding to insecurity throughout the country. As the Congressional report 'Warlord Inc.' asserted:

Whether called 'businessmen', 'commanders', 'strongmen', 'militia leaders', or 'warlords', any single individual who commands hundreds or thousands of armed men in regular combat and operates largely outside the direct control of the central government is a competitor to the legitimacy of the state.³⁵

This competition with the state was evident in the manner in which powerful warlords have been able to defy requests from Karzai's central government. This was certainly the case regarding the issues of taxation and weapons decommissioning.³⁶

The failure of decommissioning alone clearly undermined both the process and outcomes of the *Loya Jirga*, and has allowed for wide spread human rights violations throughout Afghanistan. These have included a wide array of violations committed by warlords and parts of the Afghan state itself, ranging from threats to journalists, arbitrary arrest, kidnap, torture, sexual violence and murder. Troublingly, as Human Rights Watch has illustrated,

there is an accumulation of these cases throughout Afghanistan's districts, which demonstrates the pervasiveness and urgency of the problem.³⁷ This chronic insecurity undermines any aspiration of Afghans creating a democratic state. This was propagated by America's counter-terrorism policy creating a dependence on regional powerbrokers, which fundamentally undermined the New York Consensus in the post-Taliban conditions. Yet, this was also the result of international actors neglecting security concerns and failing to provide incentives for warlords to disarm and cooperate with the central government. Such conditions are clearly problematic, and as the Bush administration began to see the promotion of democracy as a fundamental American national interest, the Freedom Agenda was forced contend with them.

The Iraq distraction and rise of the Freedom Agenda

The short-term counter-terrorism approach pursued by the Bush administration neglected security and undermined what meagre opportunity Afghans had for moving towards a democratic polity. This was clearly a fundamental failure, and one that caused President Bush to express regret, arguing that in retrospect 'our desire to maintain a light military footprint left us short of the resources we needed'.³⁸ Yet, this original sin was compounded by the launching of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. The build up to war was initiated before the Bonn Agreement was signed. President Bush asked Donald Rumsfeld to turn his attention to Iraq for an assessment of possible military options on 21 November 2001, and as a result the administration began turning its attention away from Afghanistan.³⁹ Symptomatic of this was the manner in which Tommy Franks was told to conduct war planning against Iraq, whilst he was in Kabul, and briefed the President on 28 December 2001, just days after the Interim Authority had come to power in Afghanistan. This reflected a new hubris within the administration that followed on from what appeared to be a swift military success in Afghanistan.

The Bush administration believed that Afghanistan had demonstrated US military supremacy and that through technological innovation, the US military was powerful, swift and effective enough to be projected across the world and achieve a desirable outcome.⁴⁰ The rapid collapse of the Taliban regime was perceived as vindication of the Rumsfeld-Franks strategy of combining the indigenous Northern Alliance with American Special Forces and airpower.⁴¹ This not only silenced critics, but fundamentally altered how the Bush administration viewed the strategic context; it altered what was seen as politically feasible, practical and desirable. No longer was the military seen as 'declining', which had been the position put forward in the 2000 presidential campaign to undermine appeals of 'nation-building'. Rather, a military strategy had supposedly been constructed by the Pentagon and the CIA, which made fears of military overstretch redundant; a military doctrine of 'more-with-less' had been constructed.⁴² In effect, the Afghanistan campaign, and subsequent rapid regime change, facilitated the conditions for the US to foster and narrate a new hubris, which helped the Bush administration dispel the myth of American weakness established as a result of the Vietnam War.⁴³

What began to emerge after the initial campaign was a discursive transformation in which the Bush administration, in spite of its overriding emphasis on counter-terrorism, was now assimilating events into an American exceptionalist narrative. Having removed the Taliban regime, the Bush administration now narrated the reasons for removing them as 'liberation'. The narrative espoused began to assimilate the events of late 2001 into a privileged genealogical past; for the Bush administration the war represented a continuation of America's so-called democracy promotion tradition:

Part of that cause [of the war] was to liberate the Afghan people from terrorist occupation, and we did so. . . In Kabul, a friendly government is now an essential member of the coalition against terror.⁴⁴

This combination of hubris and a new narrative based around the concept of liberty began to transform and legitimate a policy of pre-emption and regime change in Iraq. That is to say, that throughout 2002, the Bush administration began to conflate threats such as WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), terrorism and rogue regimes, most notably through the use of the term ‘Axis of Evil’, and came to the conclusion that a liberal grand strategy was needed to combat such a threat. Indeed, within such a schema, this grand strategy was to regard the internal nature of states as a fundamental interest to American national security. Within such a context, Afghanistan was described as merely the first step of a liberal grand strategy:

The first phase of our military operation was in Afghanistan. . . *You’ve got to understand that as we routed out the Taliban, they weren’t sent in to conquer; they were sent in to liberate. . . America seeks hope and opportunity for all people in all cultures. And that is why we’re helping to rebuild Afghanistan. . . The Marshall Plan, rebuilding Europe and lifting up former enemies, showed that America is not content with military victory alone. Americans always see a greater hope and a better day. And America sees a just and hopeful world beyond the war on terror. . . by your effort and example, you will advance the cause of freedom around the world.*⁴⁵

Evidently, the discourse of the war on terror was in flux and the Bush administration began to see the need for a larger project than merely counter-terrorism. Throughout 2002 the Bush administration’s position began to define itself not only in terms of the need to counter terrorism, but became much more closely aligned with the tenets of the New York Consensus. The culmination of this position, and indeed its most forthright expression, came in the form of the Bush administration declaring its ‘Freedom Agenda’. The basic thrust of this agenda was that the United States would seek to promote democracy throughout the world, as the domestic character of other states was perceived to be of vital importance to the attainment of American interests.⁴⁶ As such, the US was no longer tacitly supporting the New York Consensus, so much as advocating the tenets of this consensus through the rubric of its own security interests.

The importance of this transformation should not be understated. Whereas the Bush administration had originally refuted the need for nation-building, its objectives in Afghanistan had incrementally transformed to the point in which the Bush administration would repeatedly declare that ‘the success of a free Afghanistan is our fight’.⁴⁷ Such is the prominence of these assertions, that in President Bush’s memoir *Decision Points* he argues that he changed his mind about nation-building after 9/11, and that ‘Afghanistan was the ultimate nation-building mission’.⁴⁸ Although rather disingenuously the former President also writes out the length of time it took to arrive at this decision, arguing that ‘helping a democratic government emerge’ was a cause célèbre of the original ‘comprehensive’ strategic vision for OEF.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, throughout late 2002 and into 2003 US objectives were no longer limited to counter-terrorism, and Washington began to expand its goals and define its national interests in terms of larger long-term geopolitical orientations. Afghanistan throughout 2002–2003 increasingly began to resemble a new ‘turbulent frontier’ in the ‘global’ war on terrorism, and the US began legitimising its presence in Afghanistan not just in terms of counter-terrorism operations, but also based on the political constitution of Afghanistan. Notably, as Robert Jervis explains:

Most countries are concerned mainly with what happens in their immediate neighbourhoods; but for a hegemon, the world is its neighbourhood, and it is not only hubris that leads lone superpowers to be concerned with anything that happens anywhere. However secure states are, they can never feel secure enough. . . The historian John S. Galbraith identified the dynamic of the ‘turbulent frontier’ that produced unintended colonial expansions.⁵⁰

Whilst in the counter-terrorism strategy the abstract noun ‘terrorism’ had been securitised, under the banner of the Freedom Agenda, the internal political constitution of other states was securitised. The impact this had on US–Afghan relations, is that the Afghanistan campaign became increasingly understood in terms of America’s global and regional ‘security governance’ and democracy promotion became seen as a ‘technology’ to meet perceived American national interests. The Bush administration began to see democracy promotion as a method of coordinating, managing and regulating the international security architecture and as a technology to produce a utopian ‘democratic peace’ more generally. More specifically the long term democratic stability of Afghanistan was seen as vital to American national interests, not only to stop Afghanistan as a host for al Qaeda but also as an island of stability adjacent to Iran and Pakistan. Undoubtedly, this strategic vision was never met with the resources required to achieve it however, as the Iraq campaign began to pull American financial and political commitments towards Mesopotamia (see Tables 1 and 2).

What these tables show, is that although Afghanistan has been a longer war in a bigger and more populous country than Iraq, it received over ten billion dollars less in US assistance. This certainly was not a ‘Marshall Plan’ for Afghanistan, which the Bush administration claimed to be providing.⁵¹ Similarly, with regards to the ‘boots on the ground’ figures, Afghanistan consistently maintained a much lower US troop presence than Iraq, in spite of the Bush administration’s assertions about the importance of the Afghan campaign. Indeed, from FY2003 to FY2007 Afghanistan only had around 11–15 per cent of the US troop presence compared to Iraq. In addition to this there was of course ISAF, yet as President Bush has asserted:

The multilateral military mission proved a disappointment as well. Every member of NATO had sent troops to Afghanistan. . . But many parliaments imposed heavy restrictions – known as national caveats – on what their troops were permitted to do. . . The result was a disorganised and ineffective force with troops fighting by different rules and many not fighting at all.⁵²

Table 1. US financial year assistance to Afghanistan and Iraq 2002–2009 (in millions of \$US).

	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009
Afghanistan	815.9	737	2483.2	4826.52	3527.16	9984.98	5656.53	10,352
Iraq		3798.1	18,530.2	6322.6	5362.2	8519.8	5199.7	1893

Source: Congressional Research Service Report RL31833, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Table 2. US average monthly ‘boots on the ground’ in Afghanistan and Iraq 2002–2009.

	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009
Afghanistan	5200	10,400	15,200	19,100	20,400	23,700	30,100	50,700
Iraq	0	67,700	130,600	143,800	141,100	148,300	157,800	135,600

Source: Congressional Research Service Report R40682, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

At the same time the Bush administration had begun to construct the Freedom Agenda as fundamental to American national interests more broadly, it was clearly diverted towards ensuring the success of its campaign in Iraq. This left what President Bush termed a 'more daunting' task than he had 'anticipated' and a US administration that 'was not prepared for nation-building'.⁵³ As a result, significant space was afforded in Afghanistan's security vacuum for the return of the Taliban, and consequently the further undermining of America's Freedom Agenda.

Policy neglect and the return of the Taliban

The Bush administration's new emphasis on democracy promotion and nation-building, as a central objective in Afghanistan, was signified by Zalmay Khalilzad being sent to Kabul as ambassador in late 2003. In such a position, Khalilzad sought to shore up Karzai's power and make sure that Afghanistan began to move towards a strong presidential system. Such a move 'showed there would be no uncertainty about who held legitimate executive power in Kabul' and had the added benefit of making sure that Washington's patron would remain, with 'the benefit of having a clearly identifiable Afghan partner whom it would know well and indeed preferred'.⁵⁴ Accordingly, Khalilzad would prove pivotal at ensuring that as the 2005 parliamentary elections approached, political parties could not formally field candidates and that a system of Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) would be adopted. This led to over 2700 candidates competing for 249 seats in the Lower House, each 'identified by name, photo and a personal logo'. The aim of this was to maintain a weak parliament, rather than adopt a more proportionally representative system as advocated by UN representatives.⁵⁵ Such a position, sought to strike a compromise between two parallel objectives, countering terrorism and promoting democracy. Through elections the administration was able to talk of democratic progress in Afghanistan, whilst also maintaining a strengthened patron that would act in Washington's favour.

Such electoral tinkering demonstrated the manner in which the Bush administration had come to view elections as the key indicator of 'democracy', and adopted the assumption that as long as the majority of the Afghan population became aware of, and participated in, a Western styled democratic model then peace would shortly ensue. The Freedom Agenda had bought into the same flawed logic of the New York Consensus, which viewed elections as a panacea to political problems, which in turn would solve wider security problems because anti-democratic forces would no longer be able to gain purchase with the majority of the Afghan population. With the US maintaining funding to warlords, and distracted by Iraq it was clear that American security governance had placed a considerable emphasis on democracy and not the security of the Afghan population beyond Kabul.

The consequences of this have been disastrous in terms of an actual democratisation objective. With the administration believing it had 'defeated' the Taliban, and that all that was required was a 'mopping up exercise' it had failed to appreciate that the Taliban was gaining strength across the border in neighbouring Pakistan. This led to, what one International Council and Security Development study called in 2008, 'seven years missed opportunity' that allowed the Taliban to 'root itself across increasing swathes of Afghan territory'.⁵⁶ Indeed, by December 2008 the same study estimated that the Taliban insurgency had gained a permanent presence across 72 per cent of Afghan territory (up from 54 per cent in 2007).⁵⁷

In spite of NATO's ISAF forces expanding their presence to all Afghan provinces in October 2006, and the US administration pursuing a 'silent surge',⁵⁸ this was too little too late, with the insurgency posing a serious tactical challenge to US and NATO forces as the war intensified to levels not seen since 2001. Having retreated to Pakistan, the

Table 3. American casualties by year through 10 November 2010.

Year	Total deaths	Wounded in action
2001	11	33
2002	49	74
2003	45	99
2004	52	214
2005	98	267
2006	98	401
2007	117	752
2008	155	793
2009	311	2139
2010 (to November 10)	432	4481

Source: US Department of Defense, Statistical Information Analysis Division, <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/oefimonth.pdf> (accessed 8 March 2011).

Taliban were able to recruit what have become known as the ‘Pakistan Taliban’ consisting of Pashtun tribesmen on the Afghan-Pakistan border, and also align themselves with al-Qaeda. Moreover, they have also been able to organise and learn from the insurgency in Iraq, with one Taliban commander declaring that ‘we have “give and take” with the mujaheddin in Iraq.’⁵⁹ This deterioration of security, and the rise of the insurgency, is clearly reflected in American troop casualties (see Table 3).

Thus, far from Afghanistan becoming a new democratic state, it has become a highly violent and insecure geography that is only partly ruled from Kabul. This increasingly violent picture is far from that presented by the Bush administration upon leaving office, where the virtue of holding elections was increasingly elided with the notion that Afghanistan was a ‘young democracy’. Yet, holding intermittent elections in a politically fractured and violent war zone, where human rights violations are rife clearly does not qualify Afghanistan as a democracy; young, emerging or otherwise. Herein, when the Obama administration came to power in 2009, members of the new administration understood the situation in far starker terms, translating a sense of despondency, drift, disorder and wasted opportunity. As Obama’s press secretary Robert Gibbs has argued ‘we had a policy...and a situation in Afghanistan that had been neglected for seven years, that was badly under-resourced and desperately in need of new ideas and a new strategy’.⁶⁰ As such, the Obama administration has sought to steer the trajectory of this inheritance, allowing the Afghanistan campaign to begin defining the new administration’s foreign policy.

Obama’s war: ‘the war we need to win’

From the beginning of his presidential candidacy Obama was a critic of Bush’s mishandling of Afghanistan. In a speech to the Wilson Centre in August 2007 he was unequivocal:

We did not finish the job against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did not develop new capabilities to defeat a new enemy, or launch a comprehensive strategy to dry up the terrorist’s base of support. We did not reaffirm our basic values, or secure our homeland. Instead we got...a deliberate strategy to misrepresent 9/11 to sell a war against a country that had nothing to do with 9/11...I pleaded that we finish the fight with Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.⁶¹

In stark contrast to Obama’s representation of the Iraq war, the new President has defined himself as a ‘strong supporter of the war in Afghanistan’. Arguing, in his June 2008 speech in Cairo, that Iraq was a ‘war of choice’, whereas Afghanistan was a war of ‘necessity’.⁶²

Thus, in particularly strong terms the new president has condemned his predecessor by arguing that ‘we went off to fight on the wrong battlefield’ and Bush confused ‘our mission’.⁶³ As a logical corollary of this position, President Obama argued in his inaugural address that his policy would be to begin ‘responsibly leav[ing] Iraq...and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan’.⁶⁴

Initial attempts to win this ‘hard-earned peace’ were delivered in February 2009 by the Obama administration ordering an extra 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan, and beginning an internal strategic review of US policy towards the country. Notably, the decision to deploy these troops before the completion of the strategic review was driven by the need to have more boots on the ground to provide greater security for the upcoming Afghan presidential elections in August. As the president told Bob Woodward:

... there were strong warnings, both from the military as well as our intelligence agencies...that if we did not bolster security in Afghanistan rapidly, that the election might not come off, and in fact you could see a country that splintered.⁶⁵

Within such a context, the Obama administration had two objectives for the troop deployment. First, to provide enough security in the country to at least stabilise the situation and provide time for the administration to complete its strategic review. Secondly, to ensure that polls remained open for the elections, in the hope that elections would provide a possible major turning point in the country.⁶⁶ Given such objectives, however, it is difficult to understand the strategic thinking behind deploying 8000 of these troops to rural Helmand province, which contained less than one per cent of the Afghan population and would provide little security to so few voters.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, throughout late February to December 2009 the Obama administration did begin to outline its strategy for Afghanistan.

The first instalment of the new Afghanistan strategy was declared by the president in March, and came to include neighbouring Pakistan. Consequently, the administration was no longer simply focusing on a demarcated geography, but making links between groups and their cross border movements. This marked a major shift in policy that treated Afghanistan and Pakistan as distinct state entities, but which were increasingly seen as an inherently interconnected ‘Af-Pak’ problem. As President Obama declared:

The future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbour Pakistan. In the nearly eight years since 9/11, Al Qaeda and its extremist allies have moved across the border to remote areas of the Pakistani frontier...For the American people this border region has become the most dangerous place in the world.⁶⁸

What the Obama administration outlined was a policy which no longer operated on the basis of borders, so much as a policy that focused on countering a growing insurgency of hostile groups. As such the emphasis of American security governance has shifted and for the Obama administration Pakistan has become recognised as a new, and more dangerous, ‘turbulent frontier’. Yet, whilst the decision to deterritorialise the conflict was being undertaken, the Obama administration also began to set out a more restrictive set of objectives.

Moving away from the objectives of the ‘Freedom Agenda’, the Obama administration has sought to reassure the American people with a much narrower ‘clear and focused goal’. Indeed, President Obama had said to NBC’s Matt Lauer, upon coming into office:

We are not going to be able to rebuild Afghanistan into a Jeffersonian democracy...What we can do is make sure that Afghanistan is not a safe haven for Al Qaida. What we can do is make sure that it is not destabilising neighbouring Pakistan.⁶⁹

This new goal, then, was to ‘disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future’. In other words, the US’ end game in Afghanistan had shifted from Bush’s notional desire to build a ‘flourishing democracy as an alternative to a hateful ideology’,⁷⁰ to a more circumscribed attempt to wind down OEF and leave behind a government with the capacity to conduct counter-terror and counter-insurgency campaigns. As such, ‘victory’ for the Obama administration has been circumscribed to providing some semblance of internal security and stable governance. That is to say, an Afghanistan able to operate conductively towards US security interests, with minimal US support.

To achieve these ends, the Obama administration’s strategy has involved regaining resources from Iraq, and redeploying them in Afghanistan. This has been accompanied by a drive to train and increase the size of the Afghan security forces alongside increased US troop levels. As such, 4000 extra US soldiers have been earmarked for the Afghan army training scheme, with the objective of building an Afghan army of 134,000 and an Afghan police force of 82,000. Relatedly, the Obama administration has pushed for an accompanying civilian surge ‘to facilitate the development of systems and institutions. . . [to] provide basic infrastructure, and [to] create economic alternatives to the insurgency at all levels of Afghan society’.⁷¹ Furthermore, the Obama administration has attempted to engage the Afghan government and bolster its authority, to at least bestow a veneer of legitimacy on a systemically corrupt Afghan government.

In keeping with the ‘Af-Pak’ strategy, however, there was a Pakistani thrust. Besides recognising the deep Afghanistan–Pakistan imbrications, it involved engaging Islamabad on a number of fronts and bolstering the Pakistani state militarily and economically. On the military front, for example, training and equipment – especially helicopters – would ensure that Pakistan had the ability to fight extremism within their own borders and that they were capable of ‘succeeding in sustained counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations’.⁷² On the economic front, meanwhile, Obama urged Congress to pass the Kerry-Lugar bill which would triple non-military US support to Pakistan to the tune of \$1.5 billion every year for five years. As Obama argued, ‘a campaign against extremism will not succeed with bullets or bombs alone’.⁷³

Yet, evident in the Obama administration’s strategy is the manner in which these stabilisation measures have been decoupled from the longer term expansive aims and democracy promotion and nation-building. That is to say, there is no clear long-term articulation of what will emerge from this policy. Rather there is an assertion that these are the measures necessary to secure the exit of American troops within a desirable timetable. As such, even the terms ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic’ have been avoided; for example they are only mentioned three times in the administration’s new policy white paper, and all instances are in relation to Pakistan.⁷⁴ Thus, whilst the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke has outlined a range of goals that resemble nation-building efforts,⁷⁵ the administration is desperately attempting to avoid ‘mission-creep’ and to secure American withdrawal. As President Obama argued at West Point on 1 December 2009, his policy is to pursue three core elements: a ‘civilian surge’, an ‘effective partnership’ with Pakistan, and crucially an enhanced ‘military effort to create the conditions for a transition’. The latter of these is to follow a ‘bell-curve’ logic, where an escalating surge has taken place to ensure that an earlier exit is possible. As the president explained:

I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home [July 2011]. These are the

resources that we need to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan...our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended, because the nation that I'm most interested in building is our own.⁷⁶

The president explained the logic of these decisions to Bob Woodward, arguing that during the exploration of the policy in 2009, he decided that 'the troops should be in sooner, then out sooner'.⁷⁷ Yet, a year on from the West Point speech, the results of Obama's strategy look ominous, and the future of Afghanistan is highly uncertain; democratic or otherwise. The disclosure of 91,000 secret documents by WikiLeaks in July 2010 – the month after the commander of US Forces in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, was relieved of his duties – provided a 'war diary' of the conflict which has made for troubling reading. They reveal how Taliban attacks have soared and how they have exacted an increasing toll on the Afghan population, primarily through their concerted roadside bombing campaign. They also expose the fact that coalition forces have killed hundreds of non-combatants in unreported incidents.⁷⁸ Similarly, they have shown American concerns that parts of the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) have been playing a 'double game' in Afghanistan, by supporting both the US, whilst also providing financial and logistical succour to the Afghan Taliban.⁷⁹

Such circumstances add to a sense of crisis, especially when viewed through the prism of the August 2009 and September 2010 elections, which were meant to provide both the Afghan government and the US campaign in Afghanistan with a renewed sense of legitimacy. This has been deeply flawed and lays waste to the notion that the US is capable of promoting even a procedural level of democracy. A lack of security, intimidation, low voter turnout, ballot stuffing, and electoral fraud severely undermined the presidential and provincial elections of 2009. The Afghan Electoral Complaints Commission invalidated over 1.2 million votes and excluded over 700 polling stations from the Provincial Council elections nationwide.⁸⁰ In the end widespread fraud led to Karzai being stripped of what was ostensibly an outright victory in the presidential race. The main presidential challenger Abdullah Abdullah, meanwhile, withdrew prior to the run-off citing his lack of faith in any result. 'I felt', he said, 'that it might not help the democratic process, it might not restore the faith of the people in (the) democratic process'.⁸¹ His appraisal of Karzai's unwillingness to participate fairly in any democratic re-calibration of political power seems sound, given that behind the scenes the defence secretary Robert Gates was describing Karzai's government as 'way beyond the pale in terms of corruption' while senior US officials who met Karzai in the immediate aftermath of the election noted that he spoke as if his outright victory was a foregone conclusion.⁸² The parliamentary elections of 2010, meanwhile, were also marred by violence, intimidation and the 'breakdown of the most basic anti-fraud mechanisms'.⁸³

With such widespread corruption and insecurity in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has less inherited a turbulent but emerging young democracy, as so much a partnership with an illegitimate and highly problematic government. Nevertheless, the US is utilising blood and treasure in support of Karzai, in absence of an identified alternative, yet looking to transfer and withdraw as soon as possible in spite of concerns about Afghanistan's democratic future. As US ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry bemoaned: 'In counter-insurgency...we talk about clear, hold and build, but we actually must include *transfer* into this'.⁸⁴ Such a transfer is in spite of Eikenberry's concerns before the 2009 elections that the US should:

... convince Karzai to put his backing behind democratic institutions and professionalized security forces [which] are better equipped to lead Afghanistan into the future, rather than...[his] preference for tribal structures and informal power networks.⁸⁵

This tension, between transferring power and persuading the Afghan government to embrace democracy, is however clearly being resolved in favour of the former because of the US political cycle. With US public opinion polls demonstrating that six out of ten voters say Afghanistan is a 'lost cause', the Obama administration has already begun considering the impact this will have on the 2012 presidential election.⁸⁶ As the president is quoted in *Obama's Wars* as saying, in relation to an open-ended, counter-insurgency commitment, '[There is] No way...such a strategy would not be sustainable with the American public...it would break the budget, and it would leave the Afghan government more dependent on us.'⁸⁷ It seems, then, that the prospects of building a 'flourishing democracy' in Afghanistan are highly unlikely and that the Obama administration has abandoned them. Yet, with policy being led on Washington's timescales, and not as a result of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, it is clear that Obama's strategy – in terms of withdrawing – is all but certain to succeed, while the prospects for building a 'flourishing democracy' in the short to medium term are all but doomed to failure.

Conclusion

American involvement in Afghanistan since 2001 has been intricately entwined with, and attempted to delineate between, nation-building, democracy promotion, and counter-terrorism. At first, the Bush administration clearly favoured counter-terrorism, whilst tacitly supporting the UN pursuit of the New York Consensus. Security, in this context, was narrowly defined as the eradication of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet, through such a narrow lens, which overwhelmingly placed American national security above that of Afghanistan's population, the Bush administration inadvertently fostered the post-Taliban conditions of origin that had a dramatic impact on the war that followed. Whilst warlords have been able to consolidate power in opposition to the Afghan state, endemic levels of human rights violations have been committed and the Taliban has been allowed to regroup to levels not seen since the start of the war.

By the time the Bush administration had 'changed its mind' about the perils of nation-building and came to see democracy promotion as a technology for achieving its much coveted democratic peace, it had already deployed the majority of American resources in Iraq. This prevented the security gap in Afghanistan being overcome, and greater levels of insecurity have followed as a result. Evidently, the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda for Afghanistan was therefore deeply troubled from its inception; it not only attempted to navigate the tensions of promoting democracy whilst engaged in counter-terrorism, it operated under circumstances in which it was under resourced. Thus, although members of the Bush administration try to construct their legacy as one in which freedom was spread abroad and a 'young democracy' created, a closer analysis of the situation reveals a deeply disturbing picture of mishandling and negligence. Without security in Afghanistan, the difficult exercise of fostering democracy was always going to be troubled. Yet, with the Freedom Agenda reducing democracy promotion to little more than a trope, democracy promotion has proved near impossible. Consequently, by the time the war was handed over to President Obama, his administration had inherited a situation where the likelihood of establishing a democratic policy was in tatters.

In the face of growing insecurity, corruption, an illegitimate Afghan government, and increasing pressure to withdraw coming from American public opinion, the Obama administration has abandoned democracy promotion in favour of a stabilisation and exit strategy. Yet, as the President has pointed out, 'it's easier to start wars than to end them'.⁸⁸ The conflict has already seen a certain level of 'mission creep', as Pakistan has become seen as the new turbulent frontier, and counter-terrorism has once again been foregrounded. What the Obama administration has not set out, however, is what exactly 'stability' in Afghanistan and Pakistan looks like. Is stability constituted by an Afghan government that is able to protect itself from the aspirations of a resurgent Taliban; is it a government that has more control over the Afghan geography and is able to face down both challenges from wider internal enemies such as warlords and corrupt factions inside the government itself; or is it indeed a government that reconciles itself to having to accept the Taliban as a possible partner? Either way, the adoption of a 'stability' objective is a far cry from the high aspirations of the Freedom Agenda and its assertions of a marshall plan for Afghanistan. Nonetheless, in spite of this scaling down of aspirations, it remains to be seen as to whether the withdrawal of troops along Obama's timeline will in fact be possible given the strategically selective context on the ground. This remains uncertain but will no doubt be determined by the American political cycle. What is not uncertain is the failure of democracy to flourish in Afghanistan.

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Notes on contributors

Oz Hassan is a research fellow on the EU funded FP7 EU-GRASP project and directs the MA level international security programme in the Department of Political and International Studies at Warwick University. He is also a former British Research Council Fellow at the John W. Kluge Centre at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. He is the author of the monograph *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East: Between Democracy and Domination*, is the co-founding editor of the British International Studies magazine *International Studies Today* and has published in peer-reviewed journals including *European Security* and *Democracy and Security*.

Andrew Hammond is currently an ESRC 1+3 funded doctoral candidate in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. His PhD looks at US foreign policy towards Afghanistan under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Before commencing his PhD research he spent a number of years as a professional photographer in the Royal Air Force.