AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES ARE STILL IN AFGHANISTAN. BUT, WHY ?

by George Venturini * (Part 1)

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> "[President] Karzai and [Prime Minister] Gillard signed a memorandum of understanding that says in part that Australia 'welcomes the continued efforts of the Afghan people to build a stable, democratic society, based on the rule of law, where human rights, including the equality of all men and women, are guaranteed under the Afghan constitution. In particular, the governments reaffirm their commitment to promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan'." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 May 2012.

OF LIES, RHETORIC, *CLICHÉS* AND MYTHS

If one insists on giving credit to the content of the previous quotation, then one may go all the way and believe in what follows as 'the narrative' of what happened around 11 September 2001.

'The narrative' could go almost like this: on the early morning of that day, nineteen men armed with box-cutters, directed by a man who had been for years on dialysis and was then in a cave-fortress halfway around the world using a satellite phone and a laptop, carried out the most sophisticated penetration of the most heavily-defended airspace in the world, overpowering the passengers and the military combat-trained pilots on four commercial aircraft before flying those planes wildly off course for over an hour without being molested by a single fighter interceptor.

The nineteen hijackers were devout religious fundamentalists, who liked to drink alcohol, snort cocaine, and live with pink-haired strippers, managed to knock down three buildings with two planes in New York, while in Washington a pilot who could not handle a single engine Cessna was able to fly a 757 in a 2,400 metre descent to come exactly level with the ground, hitting the Pentagon in the budget analyst office where Department of Defense staffers were working on the mystery of the 2.3 trillion dollars that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had announced 'missing' from the Pentagon's coffers in a press conference held the day before.

Fortunately, the news anchors knew who did it within minutes, the pundits knew within hours, the Administration knew within the day, and the evidence literally fell into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's lap. Unfortunately, some obsessed conspiracy theorists demanded an investigation into the greatest attacks on American soil in history.

That was only the beginning of problems: the investigation was delayed, was underfunded, quite likely designed to fail, in a conflict of interests and a cover up from start to finish. It was based on testimony extracted through torture, the records of which were destroyed. It failed to mention the existence of a building designated as WTC 7; of *Able Danger* - a classified military planning effort led by the U.S. Special Operations Command and the Defense Intelligence Agency. *Able Danger* was set up pursuant to a directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in early October 1999 by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to develop an information operations campaign plan against transnational terrorism; of one Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden and the Central Intelligence Agency; of a Sibel Deniz Edmonds - a former F.B.I. translator and founder of the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition who would testify before the 9/11 Commission, but whose testimony was excluded from the official 567 page 9/11 Commission Report; of the drills of hijacked aircraft being flown into buildings which were being simulated at the precise same time that those events were actually happening. The investigation was perverted by the lies of the Pentagon, the C.I.A., and the Bush Administration. When President Bush and Vice-President Cheney appeared before the Commission they testified in secret - not under oath, off the record, and behind closed doors. The Commission seemed unconcerned as to who funded the attacks - that matter was regarded as of 'little practical significance'. Still, the Commission answered all questions put to it - except most of the victims' family members' questions, and pinned blame on all the people responsible - although no one so much has lost her/his

job. It concluded that the attacks were "a failure of imagination", because it did not "think anyone could envision flying airplanes into buildings" - except the Pentagon and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, and the National Reconnaissance Office - one of the sixteen U.S. intelligence agencies and one considered, along with the C.I.A., the D.I.A., the National Security Agency, and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, to be one of the 'big five' U.S. Intelligence agencies.

The D.I.A. destroyed 2.5 trillion computer bytes of data on *Able Danger* - 1 byte being the base unit of measurement in computer language. Not important ? - but, who knows.

The Securities and Exchange Commission disposed of its records on the investigation into the insider trading before the attacks. Why ?

The **National Institute of Standards and Technology** classified the data that it used for its model of the WTC7's collapse, on the ground that knowing how it made its model of that collapse would "jeopardize public safety". How so ?

The F.B.I. insisted that all material related to their investigation of the attacks should be kept secret from the public. For what reason/s ?

Osama bin Laden had lived in a cave-fortress in the hills of Afghanistan, but somehow got away. Then he was hiding out in Tora Bora, but somehow got away. Then he lived in Abottabad for years, taunting the most comprehensive intelligence dragnet employing the most sophisticated technology in the history of the world for ten years, releasing video after video with complete impunity - while getting younger and younger as he did so, before finally being found in a daring raid by a team of the United States Navy's Sea, Air, and Land forces, commonly known as the U.S. Navy SEALs, the Special Operations Force which is a part of the Naval Special Warfare Command. The SEAL team raid was not recorded on video, Osama was unarmed, did not resist, and yet these crack Special Forces operatives panicked and killed him, even though he might have been the best source of intelligence about terrorists. Then the SEALs dumped his body in the ocean before telling anyone about it. Then more than a dozen of that team's members died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan.

This story - which is adapted from a 'Colbert Report' of the American television humorist Stephen Colbert - is nothing but Orwellian.

In 1979 Osama bin Laden left his comfortable Saudi home for Afghanistan to participate in the Afghan *jihad*, or holy war, against the invading forces of the Soviet Union. The Afghan *jihad* was supported by the American government and had the blessing of the governments and the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The American government funded, armed, trained and supported Osama bin Laden and his followers in Afghanistan during the cold war. With a huge investment of US$ 3,000,000,000 (three billion !), the C.I.A. effectively created and nurtured bin Laden's *al-Qaeda* terrorist network using American tax-payers money. So *Forbes business news* informed on 14 September 2001 in *Who is Osama Bin Laden ?*. Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries, where such an enormous sum of money would have had extraordinary value.

In retrospect, it is clear that the C.I.A. made a historic mistake in encouraging Islamic groups from all over the world to go to Afghanistan. The consequences of that mistake would be devastating. The covert army which operates in Afghanistan to engage in *Obama's wars* is a well-known fact. Bob Woodward, the author of that book, published in September 2010, revealed that the C.I.A. alone has a 3,000 man "covert army" in Afghanistan counterterrorism pursuit teams.

By 1984 the Americans and the Saudis had become deeply committed to funnelling huge sums of money and vast quantities of weaponry through Pakistan's intelligence outfit, the Inter-Services Intelligence, to support the most fundamentalist and extreme of the Afghan *mujahideen* who were then fighting the other superpower, the Soviet Union, in their country. These included Gulbuddin Hekmatyar - about as extreme as they came, and Jalaluddin Haqqani - who received millions of dollars, anti-aircraft missiles, and even tanks. He was, at the time, so beloved by Washington officials "that former congressman Charlie Wilson once called him 'goodness personified.' " Hekmatyar and Haqqani were among those whom President Ronald Reagan would dub "freedom fighters."

Gathering Muslims from across the Islamic world to wage war against Russian troops in Afghanistan was part of a strategy developed by Reagan's C.I.A. head Bill Casey and others

to create a "new Vietnam" for the Soviet Union which would lead to a humiliating defeat of the Red Army and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union.

Almost two decades later the Haqqani network is perhaps Washington's greatest 'enemy' in the present Afghan war, and a group regularly denounced by the Obama Administration for its attacks on U.S. troops; while Hekmatyar and his group *Hizb-i-Islami*, like the Haqqani's, are allied with the Taliban. The third "freedom fighter" at the time was Osama bin Laden, who, in 1984, founded the 'Services Office' in Peshawar, Pakistan, to recruit, support, and fund those "freedom fighters," and in 1988, formed a group called al-*Qaeda* - 'The Base' to further his vision.

The Soviets, of course, left Afghanistan in 1989 - in defeat. For Washington, the "freedom fighters", soon to be at each others' throats in a horrific civil war which left yet more dead Afghans in its wake, came to be forgotten. And in a sense, they are still forgotten.

These days, how often does anyone remember that a number of 'the West' present foes, the evil terrorists who must be destroyed, were the American government's former heroes, or that some of the members or allies with the present Afghan government of Hamid Karzai were both *mujahideen* and blood-thirsty protagonists in that civil war era ?

Nowadays Osama bin Laden is identified in military documents and official statements of both the Bush and Obama Administrations, and their allies from N.A.T.O., and their vassals from Canberra as the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. The Afghan government - actually, the 'Taliban regime' in official documents - is identified as supporting *al-Qaeda* and providing refuge to its leader Osama bin Laden inside Afghan territory at the time of the 9/11 attacks.

But as respectable a journalist as Dan Rather of C.B.S. - formerly the Columbia Broadcasting System - reported on 28 January 2002 that on 10 September 2001 Osama bin Laden was in Pakistan.

Ostensibly, American forces invaded Afghanistan in hot pursuit of Osama bin Laden, but the American Army gave him a pass when it had him cornered in Tora Bora. He was obviously more valuable as a poster boy than a corpse. Still, his death was reported by 9/11 Scholar

David Ray Griffin in his book *Osama bin Laden – Dead or alive,* published on 2009. According to Griffin's copious research, bin Laden died in late December 2001. That jibes with the fact that in August of 2001 he was rumoured as having entered the American Hospital in Dubai to undergo serious kidney dialysis and to meet with his C.I.A. handler.

In fact there were ulterior, much more concrete motives for invading Afghanistan and later Iraq.

In September 2007, at the launch of his memoir *The age of turbulence*. *Adventures in a new word*, as mild mannered and staunch conservative as the former top American central banker Alan Greenspan abandoned his reserve and took swipes at the Bush Administration for everything - from its motives for invading Iraq to its unbridled spending. The most explosive charge in Greenspan's book is that the George W. Bush Administration was driven to overthrow Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in a large part by a lust for Iraq's oil.

"I'm saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows - the Iraq war is largely about oil." he wrote.

Richard Cheney, who was from 1995 until 2000 Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Halliburton, a *Fortune* 500 company and market leader in the energy sector, and became Vice-President of the United States between 2001 and 2009, in a speech to oil industrialists in 1998 had openly made Iraqi's oil fields a national security priority. "I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian." he said.

In May 2001 the Vice-President recommended in the national energy policy report that "the President makes energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy", singling out the Caspian basin as a "rapidly growing new area of supply."

With a potential oil production of up to 6 million barrels per day by 2015, the Caspian region has become crucial to the American policy of "diversifying energy supply." It is designed to wean the United States off its dependence on the Arab-dominated Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, O.P.E.C. cartel, which is using its near-monopoly position as pawn and leverage against industrialised countries. As global oil consumption keeps surging and many oil wells outside the Middle East are nearing depletion, O.P.E.C. is expanding its

share of the world market. At the same time, the United States will have to import more than two-thirds of its total energy demand by 2020, mostly from the Middle East.

In the same year 1998, the California-based petroleum giant Unocal - Union Oil Company of California, which held 46.5 per cent stakes in Central Asia Gas, CentGas, a consortium which planned an ambitious pipeline across Afghanistan - withdrew in frustration after several fruitless years. The pipeline was to stretch 762 miles/1,226 kilometres from Turkmenistan's Dauletabad fields to Multan in Pakistan at an estimated cost of US$ 1.9 billion. An additional US$ 600 million would have brought the pipeline to energy-hungry India.

Five months before 11 September 2001 the United States advocated using force against Iraq … to secure control of its oil.

The Afghanistan war was planned before 9/11. According to French intelligence officers, the United States wanted to run an oil pipeline through Afghanistan to transport Central Asian oil more easily and cheaply. And so the United States told the Taliban shortly before 9/11 that they would either get "a carpet of gold or a carpet of bombs", the former if they 'green-lighted' the pipeline, the second if they did not.

All this was happening because of the strong influence that the oil industry had on President Bush's government.

There is evidence of un-surprisingly close ties between Bush's U.S. Government and big oil companies, partly brought to light through relatively recent high-profile cases of alleged corruption involving U.S. government officials and major oil companies. As example of such undue influence one should remember that during the 2000 elections, oil, gas and other energy interests donated more than US$ 40 million to Republicans, including the Bush presidential campaign. Further, in 2001 Condoleezza Rice, the American National Security Adviser, had a Chevron oil tanker named after her. It appeared in 2003 that President George W. Bush failed to follow the law and disclose details of shares [in a Texas oil company] he sold when he was a company director.

The war on Afghanistan was presented to the public as a reaction to the attacks on 11 September 2001. However, the war was planned before the infamous 9/11 disaster, and the military action began long before the World Trade Centre fell.

To be precise, the conquest of Afghanistan had been planned since at least 12 February 1998, and 9/11 happened just in time to secure public support for the attacks.

As the British Broadcasting Corporation had announced on 3 November 1998, other attacks had stopped the plans for an oil pipeline. During the presidency of Bill Clinton up to 80 cruise missiles were fired at Afghanistan and Sudan in August 1998. An American-funded training programme in Afghanistan had to close down. The programme was funded by Unocal. Unocal is now a defunct company which was a major petroleum explorer and marketer in the late 19th century, through the 20th century, and into the early 21st century. On 10 August 2005 Unocal merged with Chevron Corporation and became a wholly owned subsidiary. Unocal has now ceased operations as an independent company, but continues to conduct many operations as Union Oil Company of California, a Chevron company. But in the mid-nineties Unocal was hoping to be involved in building a gas pipeline across Afghanistan from Turkmenistan to Pakistan.

No sooner had the Taliban won a series of victories in the north of the country, than the United States launched an attack in early January 1999 on camps in Afghanistan run by Saudi now-dissident Osama bin Laden, who had been held responsible for masterminding the bombing of U.S. embassies in East Africa.

According to *Jane's International Security News* of 15 March 2001, India was believed to have joined Iran, Russia, and the United States in a concerted front against Afghanistan's Taliban regime. India was supplying the Northern Alliance with military equipment, advisers and helicopter technicians, the magazine said, and both India and Russia were using bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for their operations. The magazine informed that: "Several recent meetings between the newly instituted Indo-US and Indo-Russian joint working groups on terrorism led to this effort to tactically and logistically counter the Taliban. Intelligence sources in Delhi said that while India, Russia and Iran were leading the anti-Taliban campaign on the ground, Washington was giving the Northern Alliance information and logistic support."

Insider accounts published in the British, French and Indian media had revealed that U.S. officials threatened war against Afghanistan during the summer of 2001. These reports include the prediction, made in July, that "if the military action went ahead, it would take place before the snows started falling in Afghanistan, by the middle of October at the latest."

Military sources in Delhi claimed that the opponent of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance's capture of the strategic town of Bamiyan, was precipitated by the four countries' collaborative effort.

On 16 March 2001 President Bush prepared America to wage war overseas: "I want to remind the American people that the prime suspect's [Osama Bin Laden] organisation is in a lot of countries." Bush told reporters on the White House lawn.

On 3 September 2001 the B.B.C. announced that the aircraft carrier H.M.S. *Illustrious* had sailed from Portsmouth to lead the biggest Royal Navy and Royal Marine deployment since the Falklands. The *Illustrious* was the flagship of three groups of warships travelling to the Middle East to take part in an exercise named *Saif Sareea 2*. More than 24 surface ships from Britain, plus two nuclear submarines, were to complete the 13,000 mile round trip. The operation, which would have also involved the Army, Royal Air Force and Armed Forces of Oman, costing nearly 100 million pounds, was to end with a major exercise before the end of December 2001. The strike force had been put together to take part in a conflict between the fictional forces of the so-called state of 'Alawham' and those of Oman.

On 11 September 2001 the war came home to America.

Exactly a week after, on 18 September 2001, a diplomat revealed that the 9/11 'response' had begun well before 9/11. A former Pakistani diplomat told the B.B.C. that the United States was planning military action against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban even before the attacks. Mr. Niaz Naik, a former Pakistani Foreign Secretary, had been told by senior American officials in mid-July 2001 that military action against Afghanistan would go ahead by the middle of October. Mr. Naik said that U.S. officials told him of the plan at a U.N.-sponsored international contact group on Afghanistan which took place in Berlin.

The wider objective, according to Mr. Naik, would be to topple the Taliban regime and install a transitional government of moderate Afghans in its place - possibly under the leadership of the former Afghan King Zahir Shah.

Mr. Naik had been told that the United States would launch its operation from bases in Tajikistan, where American advisers were already in place. He was told that Uzbekistan would also participate in the operation and that 17,000 Russian troops were on standby. Mr.

Naik had been told that if the military action went ahead it would have taken place before the snows started falling in Afghanistan, by the middle of October at the latest. He said that he was in no doubt that after the World Trade Centre bombings this pre-existing U.S. plan had been built upon and would be implemented within two or three weeks.

The Bush Administration began its bombing strikes on the hapless, poverty-stricken country on 7 October 2001, and ground attacks by U.S. Special Forces began on 19 October.

It is not an accident that revelations such as those made by Mr. Niaz Naik have appeared overseas, rather than in the United States.

The American media have conducted a systematic cover-up of the real economic and strategic interests which underlie the war against Afghanistan, in order to sustain the pretence that the war emerged overnight, full-blown, in response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

The official American myth is that 'everything changed' on the day four airliners were hijacked and nearly 3,000 people murdered. The United States military intervention in Afghanistan, by this account, was hastily improvised in less than a month. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in a television interview on 18 November 2001, actually claimed that only three weeks went into planning the military onslaught.

This is only one of many lies emanating from the Pentagon and the White House about the war against Afghanistan. The truth is that the U.S. intervention was planned in detail and carefully prepared long before the terrorist attacks provided the pretext for setting it in motion. If history had skipped over 11 September, and the events of that day had never happened, it is very likely that the United States would have gone to war in Afghanistan anyway, and on much the same schedule.

The United States had been contemplating war in Central Asia for at least a decade. As long ago as March 1991, following the defeat of Iraq in the Persian Gulf war, *Newsweek* magazine published an article headlined *Operation steppe shield ?* It reported that the U.S. military was preparing an operation in Kazakhstan modelled on the *Operation desert shield* deployment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

American oil companies had acquired rights to as much as 75 per cent of the output of these new fields, and U.S. government officials had hailed the Caspian and Central Asia as a potential alternative to dependence on oil from the unstable Persian Gulf region. American troops had followed in the wake of these contracts. U.S. Special Forces began joint operations with Kazakhstan in 1997 and with Uzbekistan a year later, training for intervention especially in the mountainous southern region which includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan.

The major problem in exploiting the energy riches of Central Asia was and remains that of getting the oil and gas from the landlocked region to the world market. U.S. officials had opposed using either the Russian pipeline system or the easiest available land route, across Iran to the Persian Gulf. Instead, over the last decade of the past century, U.S. oil companies and government officials had explored a series of alternative pipeline routes - west through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean; east through Kazakhstan and China to the Pacific; and, most relevant to the current crisis, south from Turkmenistan across western Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean.

The Afghanistan pipeline route was the project of Unocal, which engaged in intensive negotiations with the Taliban regime. These talks, however, ended in disarray in 1998, as U.S. relations with Afghanistan were inflamed by the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, for which Osama bin Laden was held responsible. In August 1998 the Clinton Administration launched cruise missile attacks on alleged bin Laden training camps in eastern Afghanistan. The U.S. government demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and imposed economic sanctions. The pipeline talks languished.

Throughout 1999 the U.S. pressure on Afghanistan increased. On 3 February 1999 Assistant Secretary of State Karl E. Inderfurth and State Department counterterrorism chief Michael Sheehan travelled to Islamabad, Pakistan, to meet the Taliban's deputy foreign minister, Abdul Jalil. They warned him that the United States would hold the government of Afghanistan responsible for any further terrorist acts by bin Laden.

According to a 3 October 2001 report by the *Washington Post*, the Clinton Administration and Nawaz Sharif, then prime minister of Pakistan, agreed on a joint covert operation to kill Osama bin Laden in 1999. The United States would supply satellite intelligence, air support and financing, while Pakistan supplied the Pashtun-speaking operatives who would penetrate

southern Afghanistan and carry out the actual killing. The Pakistani commando team was up and running and ready to strike by October 1999, the *Post* reported. One former official told the newspaper: "It was an enterprise. It was proceeding." Clinton aides were delighted at the prospect of a successful assassination, with one declaring, "It was like Christmas."

The attack was aborted on 12 October 1999 when Sharif was overthrown in a military *coup* by General Pervez Musharraf, who halted the proposed covert operation. The Clinton Administration had to settle for a U.N. Security Council resolution which demanded the Taliban turn over bin Laden to "appropriate authorities," but did not require that he be handed over to the United States.

U.S. subversion against the Taliban continued in 2000, according to an account published on 2 November 2000 in the *Wall Street Journal*, written by Robert McFarlane, former National Security Adviser in the Reagan Administration. Mr. McFarlane was hired by two wealthy Chicago commodity speculators, Joseph and James Ritchie, to assist them in recruiting and organising anti-Taliban guerrillas among Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Their principal Afghan contact was Abdul Haq, the former *mujahideen* leader who was executed by the Taliban in October 2001 after an unsuccessful attempt to spark a revolt in his home province.

McFarlane held meetings with Abdul Haq and other former *mujahideen* in the course of the fall and winter of 2000. After the Bush Administration took office, McFarlane parlayed his Republican connections into a series of meetings with State Department, Pentagon and even White House officials. All encouraged the preparation of an anti-Taliban military campaign.

During the summer, long before the United States launched airstrikes on the Taliban, James Ritchie travelled to Tajikistan with Abdul Haq and Peter Tomsen, who had been the U.S. special envoy to the Afghan opposition during the first Bush Administration. There they met with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance, with the goal of coordinating their Pakistan-based attacks with the only military force still offering resistance to the Taliban.

Finally, according to McFarlane, Abdul Haq "decided in mid-August to go ahead and launch operations in Afghanistan. He returned to Peshawar, Pakistan, to make final preparations." In other words, this phase of the anti-Taliban war was under way well before 11 September 2001.

While the Ritchies have been portrayed in the American media as freelance operators motivated by emotional ties to Afghanistan, a country they lived in briefly while their father worked as a civil engineer in the 1950s, at least one report suggests a link to the oil pipeline discussions with the Taliban. In 1998 James Ritchie visited Afghanistan to discuss with the Taliban a plan to sponsor small businesses there. He was accompanied by an official from Delta Oil of Saudi Arabia, which was seeking to build a gas pipeline across Afghanistan in partnership with an Argentine firm.

McFarlane's revelations came in the course of a bitter diatribe against the C.I.A. for 'betraying' Abdul Haq, failing to back his operations in Afghanistan, and leaving him to die at the hands of the Taliban. The C.I.A. evidently regarded both McFarlane and Abdul Haq as less than reliable - and it had its own secret war going on in the same region, the southern half of Afghanistan where the population is predominantly Pashtun-speaking.

According to an article in the *Washington Post* of 18 November 2001, the C.I.A. had been mounting paramilitary operations in southern Afghanistan since 1997. The article carried the by line of Bob Woodward, the *Post* writer made famous by Watergate, who is a frequent conduit for leaks from top-level military and intelligence officials.

Woodward provided details about the C.I.A.'s role in the current military conflict, which included the deployment of a secret paramilitary unit, the Special Activities Division. This force began combat on 27 September 2001, using both operatives on the ground and 'Predator' surveillance drones equipped with missiles which could be launched by remote control.

According to Woodward, the Special Activities Division "consists of teams of about half a dozen men who do not wear military uniforms. The division has about 150 fighters, pilots and specialists, and is made up mostly of hardened veterans who have retired from the US military. For the last 18 months, the CIA has been working with tribes and warlords in southern Afghanistan, and the division's units have helped create a significant new network in the region of the Taliban's greatest strength."

This means that the C.I.A. was engaged in attacks against the Afghan regime - what under other circumstances the American government would call terrorism - from the

spring of 2000, more than a year before the suicide hijackings which destroyed the World Trade Centre and damaged the Pentagon.

With the arrival of George Bush Administration the focus of American policy in Afghanistan shifted from a limited incursion to kill or capture bin Laden to preparing a more robust military intervention directed at the Taliban regime as a whole. And this is what *Jane's International Security* had reported on 15 March 2001.

On 23 May 2001 the White House announced the appointment of Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad to a position on the National Security Council as special assistant to the president and senior director for Gulf, Southwest Asia and Other Regional Issues. Mr. Khalilzad was an official in the Reagan and the first Bush administrations. After leaving the government, he went to work for Unocal.

On 26 June 2001 the magazine *IndiaReacts* reported more details of the cooperative efforts of the U.S., India, Russia and Iran against the Taliban regime. "India and Iran will 'facilitate' US and Russian plans for 'limited military action' against the Taliban if the contemplated tough new economic sanctions don't bend Afghanistan's fundamentalist regime." the magazine said.

At that stage of military planning, the United States and Russia were to supply direct military assistance to the Northern Alliance, working through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in order to roll back the Taliban lines towards the city of Mazar-e-Sharif - something strikingly similar to what actually took place over the first two weeks of November 2001. An unnamed third country supplied the Northern Alliance with anti-tank rockets which had already been put to use against the Taliban in early June.

"Diplomats say that the anti-Taliban move followed a meeting between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and later between Powell and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in Washington." the magazine added. "Russia, Iran and India have also held a series of discussions and more diplomatic activity is expected."

The original plan involved the use of military forces from both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as Russia itself. *IndiaReacts* said that in early June Russian President Vladimir Putin told a meeting of the Confederation of Independent States, which includes many of the

former Soviet republics, that military action against the Taliban was in the offing. One effect of 11 September was to create the conditions for the United States to intervene on its own, without any direct participation by the military forces of the Soviet successor states, and thus claim an undisputed American right to dictate the shape of a settlement in Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, two reports appeared in the British media indicating that the American government had threatened military action against Afghanistan several months before 11 September.

On 22 September 2001, the *Guardian* newspaper confirmed the account given by Mr. Niaz Naik on 18 September 2001. The warnings to Afghanistan came out of a four-day meeting of senior American, Russian, Iranian and Pakistani officials at a hotel in Berlin in mid-July, the third in a series of back-channel conferences dubbed "brainstorming on Afghanistan."

The participants included Mr. Naik, together with three Pakistani generals; former Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Saeed Rajai Khorassani; Abdullah Abdullah, foreign minister of the Northern Alliance; Nikolai Kozyrev, former Russian special envoy to Afghanistan, and several other Russian officials; and three Americans: Tom Simons, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan; Karl Inderfurth, a former assistant secretary of state for south Asian affairs; and Lee Coldren, who headed the office of Pakistan, Afghan and Bangladesh affairs in the State Department until 1997.

The meeting was convened by Mr. Francesc Vendrell, a distinguished Catalan diplomat, formerly Special Representative of the European Union for Afghanistan, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Special Mission for Afghanistan, and now an Adjunct professor of International Relations.

While the nominal purpose of the conference was to discuss the possible outline of a political settlement in Afghanistan, the Taliban refused to attend. The Americans discussed the shift in policy towards Afghanistan from Clinton to Bush, and strongly suggested that military action was an option.

While all three American former officials denied making any specific threats, Coldren told the *Guardian* that "there was some discussion of the fact that the United States was so disgusted with the Taliban that they might be considering some military action." Mr. Naik,

however, cited one American declaring that action against bin Laden was imminent: "This time they were very sure. They had all the intelligence and would not miss him this time. It would be aerial action, maybe helicopter gunships, and not only overt, but from very close proximity to Afghanistan."

The *Guardian* summarised: "The threats of war unless the Taliban surrendered Osama bin Laden were passed to the regime in Afghanistan by the Pakistani government, senior diplomatic sources revealed ... . The Taliban refused to comply but the serious nature of what they were told raises the possibility that Bin Laden, far from launching the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon out of the blue [on 11 September 2001], was launching a pre-emptive strike in response to what he saw as U.S. threats."

Further light on secret contacts between the Bush Administration and the Taliban regime is shed by a book released on 15 November 2001 in France, entitled *Forbidden truth - U.S.-Taliban secret oil diplomacy and the failed hunt for Bin Laden*, written by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie. Brisard is a former French secret service agent, author of a previous report on bin Laden's *al-Qaeda* network, and former director of strategy for the French corporation *Vivendi*, while Dasquie is an investigative journalist.

The two French authors wrote that the Bush Administration was willing to accept the Taliban regime, despite the charges of sponsoring terrorism, if it cooperated with plans for the development of the oil resources of Central Asia.

Until August 2001, the authors claimed, the U.S. government saw the Taliban "as a source of stability in Central Asia that would enable the construction of an oil pipeline across Central Asia." It was only when the Taliban refused to accept American conditions that "this rationale of energy security changed into a military one."

By way of corroboration, one should note the curious fact that neither the Clinton Administration nor the Bush Administration ever placed Afghanistan on the official State Department list of states charged with sponsoring terrorism, despite the acknowledged presence of Osama bin Laden as a guest of the Taliban regime. Such a designation would have made it impossible for an American oil or construction company to sign a deal with Kabul for a pipeline to the Central Asian oil and gas fields.

Talks between the Bush Administration and the Taliban began in February 2001, shortly after Bush's inauguration. A Taliban emissary arrived in Washington in March with expensive presents for the president. But the talks themselves were less than cordial. Brisard wrote: "At one moment during the negotiations, the US representatives told the Taliban, 'either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs'."

As long as the possibility of a pipeline deal remained, the American administration stalled any further investigation into the activities of Osama bin Laden, Brisard and Dasquie wrote. They reported that John O'Neill, deputy director of the F.B.I., resigned in July 2001 in protest over this obstruction. Mr. O'Neill told them in an interview, "the main obstacles to investigate Islamic terrorism were US oil corporate interests and the role played by Saudi Arabia in it." In a strange coincidence, O'Neill accepted a position as security chief of the World Trade Centre after leaving the F.B.I., and was killed on 11 September.

Confirming Mr. Naik's account of the secret Berlin meeting, the two French authors added that there was open discussion of the need for the Taliban to facilitate a pipeline from Kazakhstan in order to insure U.S. and international recognition. The increasingly acrimonious U.S.-Taliban talks were broken off 2 August 2001, after a final meeting between U.S. envoy Christina Rocca and a Taliban representative in Islamabad. Two months later the United States began bombing Kabul.

The gangsterish alternative: "You will either accept our carpet of gold or we will carpet-bomb you." is more likely to have been uttered by another person present at that last meeting. Australian viewers seem to be fairly impressed by the bluntness of 'diplomat' U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. He has the 'benefit', in the view of many 'consumers of Australian TV' - of 'telling it like it is', a favourite national myth.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is already well-known for having threatened to bomb Pakistan "back to the stone age" unless it joined the fight against *al-Qaeda*. General Musharraf said that Armitage delivered the threat to Pakistan's intelligence director. "The intelligence director told me that Mr. Armitage said: 'Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age'." former Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said. Armitage is most likely the same 'diplomat' who threatened the Afghan government two months before 9/11: "You will either accept our carpet of gold or we will carpet-bomb you." It fits Armitage's 'style'.

* * *

This account of the preparations for war against Afghanistan brings to 11 September 2001. The terrorist attacks which destroyed the World Trade Centre and damaged the Pentagon were an important link in the chain of causality which produced the United States attack on Afghanistan. The U.S. government had planned the war well in advance, but the shock of 11 September 2001 made it politically feasible, by stupefying public opinion at home and giving the Bush Administration essential leverage on reluctant allies abroad.

Both the American public and dozens of foreign governments were stampeded into supporting military action against Afghanistan, in the name of the fight against terrorism. Australia went eagerly, as it becomes a client-state. The Bush Administration targeted Kabul without presenting any evidence that either bin Laden or the Taliban regime was responsible for the World Trade Centre atrocity. It seized on 11 September as the occasion for advancing longstanding ambitions to assert American power in Central Asia.

There is no reason to think that 11 September was merely a fortuitous occurrence. Every other detail of the war in Afghanistan was carefully prepared. It is unlikely that the American government left to chance the question of providing a suitable pretext for military action.

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001 there were press reports - again, largely overseas - that U.S. intelligence agencies had received specific warnings about large-scale terrorist attacks, including the use of hijacked airplanes. It is quite possible that a decision was made at the highest levels of the American administration to allow such an attack to proceed, perhaps without imagining the actual scale of the damage, in order to provide the necessary spark for war in Afghanistan.

How to explain otherwise such well-established facts as the decision of top officials at the F.B.I. to block an investigation into Zaccarias Massaoui, the Franco-Moroccan immigrant who came under suspicion after he allegedly sought training from a U.S. flight school on how to steer a commercial airliner, but not to take off or land ? The Minneapolis field office had Massaoui arrested in early August, and asked F.B.I. headquarters for permission to conduct further inquiries, including a search of the hard drive of his computer. The F.B.I. top officers refused, on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence of criminal intent on Massaoui's

part - an astonishing decision for an agency not known for its tenderness on the subject of civil liberties.

This is not to say that the American government deliberately planned every detail of the terrorist attacks or anticipated that nearly 3,000 people would be killed. But the least likely explanation of 11 September is the official one: that dozens of Islamic fundamentalists, many with known ties to Osama bin Laden, were able to carry out a wide-ranging conspiracy on three continents, targeting the most prominent symbols of American power, without any U.S. intelligence agency having the slightest idea of what they were doing.

There is no question that, if undeclared economic factors were involved in America's decision to invade Afghanistan and install a new government, this would invite a closer investigation of reports that more could have been done to prevent the disastrous attack on the World Trade Centre, which was declared to be the reason for invading Afghanistan. Otherwise, why were both the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. suspected of hindering the investigations which might have prevented the 9/11 catastrophe ? How much did the C.I.A. know about the *al-Qaeda* hijackers operating in the United States who allegedly orchestrated the 11 September attacks ?

The most serious reports claim that senior U.S. intelligence officials 'hindered enquiries'. An official investigation was launched but "the hearings are secret in order to protect sources."

At different times, the British Broadcasting Corporation reported that "The national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, says that President [Bush] was briefed in August [2001] that Osama bin Laden planned to hijack American aircraft." - B.B.C. News, "World Trade Centre: Could the attacks have been prevented?", 22 May 2002; that "FBI agent ... expected to publicly tell a Senate committee ... bosses hindered enquiries into the man now suspected of being the would-be 20th hijacker [Zacarias Moussaoui]"; that "The United States Congress has begun hearings into possible US intelligence failures in the run-up to the attacks of 11 September." "The hearings are secret in order to protect sources." - B.B.C. News, "Congress probes US intelligence failures", 5 June 2002; that "Ms Rowley, an FBI agent for 22 years, said senior personnel put 'roadblocks' in the way of Minneapolis staff trying to investigate Zacarias Moussaoui, now alleged to be the '20th hijacker'." - B.B.C. News, "Bush overhauls domestic security", 7 June 2002 ; that the "The White House says it received intelligence reports in the months before the 11 September attacks that Osama bin Laden's

Al-Qaeda network was plotting to hijack US passenger planes." - B.B.C. News, "Q&A: US terror intelligence", 11 June 2002.

When Bush entered the White House in 2001 he found himself confronted by issues he could not understand and/or was not prepared to study diligently - perhaps for lack of interest.

This, of course, was not the attitude of a group of people gyrating around Vice-President Cheney, who had just left - albeit nominally - Halliburton, the corporation which had been active since 1997 or earlier in developing the petroleum reserves of Central Asia. Cheney and friends, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz in particular, were eager to implement the *Project for the New American Century* - P.N.A.C. One of the goals of such project was "to establish forward-based forces" in Central Asia.

This *neocon* agenda was partially to maintain American and Israeli domination of the region for security purposes, and to create the conditions for future unilateral pre-emptive actions against unfriendly states like Iraq. In particular it was designed to establish new secure bases in the Middle East, anticipating Rumsfeld's predictable announcement in 2003 that the United States would pull "virtually all of its troops, except some training personnel" out of Saudi Arabia. But it was partly also to strengthen American influence in particular over the newly liberated states of Central Asia, with their sizable unproven oil and gas reserves.

Iraq had been a target for Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz since at least 1998, when the two men co-signed a P.N.A.C. letter to President Clinton, calling for "the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power." But Iraq was not the only target in the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz agenda, which since at least 1992 had been nothing less than global U.S. dominance, or what Andrew Bacevich called "permanent American global hegemony." It was a high priority for the *neocons*. Even before Bush had been elected by the Supreme Court in December 2000, Cheney was at work securing key posts for the 1998 letter's co-signers - including Richard Armitage, John Bolton, Richard Perle - in the White House, at State, and at Defense.

From its outset the terror war was designed as an instrument to implement P.N.A.C. objectives. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on 24 September 2001 "raised the issue of state sponsorship of terrorism: 'What is our strategy with respect to countries that support terrorism like Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Sudan ?'" In his memoir, *Winning modern wars*, published in 2003 General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander

Europe of N.A.T.O., reports that the question had evolved by November into a Pentagon five-year plan.

"As I went back - General Clark writes - through the Pentagon in November 2001, one of the senior military staff officers had time for a chat. Yes, we were still on track for going against Iraq, he said. But there was more. This was being discussed as part of a five-year campaign plan, he said, and there were a total of seven countries, beginning with Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia and Sudan." (at page 130)

Iraq, Libya and Somalia have been 'liberated' - to put it in an Orwellian paradox. Syria is going through the process; it could involve Lebanon. Sudan has been divided and probably rendered 'impotent' - to consider American global hegemonic interests.

An important question such as: was the United States attacked by Afghanistan on 11 September 2001 ?, remains an 'academic' problem - meaning by that that it is now *passé* and politically un-important. But some details are worth examining, particularly to establish the position of Australia, following the decision of the Howard government to rush in defence of a Great and Powerful Friend - the un-questioning, pimpish attitude of most Australian governments during the past seventy years.

The pretext, quickly turned into a 'legal argument' employed by the Bush Administration, and *therefore* by the Howard government, to invade Afghanistan was that the 11 September attacks constituted an undeclared "armed attack" "from abroad" by an unnamed foreign power, and that consequently "the laws of war" apply, allowing the nation under attack, to strike back in the name of "self-defence".

This has been the *Leitmotif* of both governments and their sycophantic media: *al-Qaeda* was seen and identified with Afghanistan. Hence the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan were from the very beginning described as a 'campaign' against Islamic terrorists, rather than a war. To this date, however, no proof has been provided that *al-Qaeda* was behind the 9/11 attacks.

Even accepting the official '9/11 narrative', for the purpose of argument, there is no evidence that Afghanistan as a nation state was behind or in any way complicit in the attacks.

Both governments, in Washington and Canberra, identify Osama bin Laden as the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. And the Afghan government was identified as supporting *al-Qaeda* and providing refuge to Osama inside Afghan territory at the time of the attacks.

The Afghan government, in the weeks following the attacks, offered on two occasions to deliver Osama bin Laden to American justice, if there were preliminary evidence of his involvement in the attacks. The Afghan government knew, presumably, where Osama was. These offers were rejected by the Bush Administration.

But, most likely, the Afghan government knew that Osama was not in the country, but in a Pakistani military hospital in Rawalpindi. Certainly, 'western' intelligence knew that. Alternatively, Osama was at the American hospital in Dubai.

How could Afghanistan be made responsible for these attacks by *al-Qaeda* ? And by a Saudi subject ? These would become matters of un-important detail for 'western' powers. What mattered was the 'pseudo-legalistic' argument that the attacks constituted an undeclared "armed attack" "from abroad" by an unnamed foreign power, and that consequently "the laws of war" would apply, allowing the nation under attack, to strike back in the name of "self-defence".

On 11 September 2001 Bush officially launched the 'Global war on terrorism'. The following day N.A.T.O. adopted a resolution by which "if it is determined that the [11 September 2001] attack against the United States was directed from abroad [meaning by that Afghanistan] against 'the North Atlantic area', it shall be regarded as an action covered by Article 5 of the [N.A.T.O. establishing] Washington Treaty." That article provides that: "The Parties agree that an *armed attack* against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered *an attack against them all* and consequently they agree that, if such an *armed attack* occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or *collective self-defence* recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, *including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area*." [Emphasis added]

That resolution presented immediately a serious problem: establishing beyond any doubt that Afghanistan, as a nation state, had any involvement with the 11 September attacks. To date, the problem has not been solved and, of course, has long been overcome by events.

There is no doubt that as at 11 September both the United States and the N.A.T.O. countries were in an advanced state of readiness. No military genius is required to undrstand that the implementation of a large scale theatre war takes at least one year of advanced operational planning, prior to the launching of an invasion.

The enforcement of Article 5 of the N.A.T.O. Treaty had obviously been contemplated by military planners, as a pretext for waging war, long before the attacks.

No official declaration of war was made on 12 September; that would have to wait until three days before the invasion.

As for the resolution, at least two elements were necessary for its validity and logical acceptance. They were: 1) that *al-Qaeda* had ordered the 'attack from abroad' on the United States and, 2) that the attack constituted a military operation - as provided by Art. 5 - by an alleged foreign country (Afghanistan, in the case) against a N.A.T.O. member state and consequently against all N.A.T.O. members pursuant to the doctrine of collective security. Clearly such elements were missing.

N.A.T.O. Secretary General, Lord Robertson, subsequently informed the Secretary-General of the United Nations of the Alliance's decision.

The final decision to invoke Article 5 in relation to the attacks came three weeks later upon the submission to the N.A.T.O. Council of a mysterious classified report by a U.S. State Department official by the name of Frank Taylor, styled as U.S. Ambassador at Large and Co-ordinator for Counter-terrorism. The report was submitted to N.A.T.O. on 2 October, five days before the commencement of the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan.

Mr. Frank Taylor was working in the U.S. State Department. He had been entrusted with the writing of a brief to establish whether the United States "had been attacked from abroad", pursuant to the North Atlantic Council's resolution of 12 September 2001.

The report was not released to the media, and is still classified.

N.A.T.O.'s Secretary General Lord Robertson casually summarised the substance of the Frank Taylor report in a press release:

"This morning, the United States briefed the North Atlantic Council on the results of the investigation into who was responsible for the horrific terrorist attacks which took place on September 11.

The briefing was given by Ambassador Frank Taylor, the United States Department of State Coordinator for Counter-terrorism.

This morning's briefing follows those offered by United States Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and United States Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and illustrates the commitment of the United States to maintain close cooperation with Allies.

Today's was a classified briefing and so I cannot give you all the details.

Briefings are also being given directly by the United States to the Allies in their capitals.

The briefing addressed the events of September 11 themselves, the results of the investigation so far, what is known about Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida organisation and their involvement in the attacks and in previous terrorist activity, and the links between al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The facts are clear and compelling. The information presented points conclusively to an al-Qaida role in the September 11 attacks.

We know that the individuals who carried out these attacks were part of the world-wide terrorist network of al-Qaida, headed by Osama bin Laden and his key lieutenants and protected by the Taliban.

On the basis of this briefing, it has now been determined that the attack against the United States on September 11 was directed from abroad and shall therefore be regarded as an action covered by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which states that an armed attack on one or more of the Allies in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.

I want to reiterate that the United States of America can rely on the full support of its 18 NATO Allies in the campaign against terrorism."

In other words, on 5 October 2001, two days before the actual commencement of the bombing campaign on 7 October, the North Atlantic Council decided, based on the information provided by Mr. Taylor to the Council "that the attacks were directed from abroad" by *al-Qaeda*, headed by Osama bin Laden, thereby requiring an action on the part of N.A.T.O. under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

N.A.T.O. action under Article 5 was outlined in a 4 October decision, three days before the commencement of the bombings. This N.A.T.O. decision implied eight measures in support the United States, which were tantamount to a declaration of war on Afghanistan. The most important were:

- to enhance intelligence sharing and co-operation, both bilaterally and in appropriate N.A.T.O. bodies, relating to the threats posed by terrorism and the actions to be taken against it;

- to provide, individually or collectively, as appropriate and according to their capabilities, [military] assistance to Allies and other states which are or may be subject to increased terrorist threats as a result of their support for the campaign against terrorism;

- to take necessary measures to provide increased security for facilities of the United States and other Allies on their territory;

- to backfill selected Allied assets in N.A.T.O.'s area of responsibility which are required directly to support operations against terrorism;

- to provide blanket over-flight clearances for the United States and other Allies' aircraft, in accordance with the necessary air traffic arrangements and national procedures, for military flights related to operations against terrorism;

- to provide access for the United States and other Allies to ports and airfields on the territory of N.A.T.O. nations for operations against terrorism, including for refuelling, in accordance with national procedures;

- that the Alliance is ready to deploy elements of its Standing Naval Forces to the Eastern Mediterranean in order to provide a N.A.T.O. presence and demonstrate resolve; and that the Alliance is similarly ready

- to deploy elements of its N.A.T.O. Airborne Early Warning Force to support operations against terrorism.

Press reports of Mr. Taylor's brief to the N.A.T.O. Council were scanty. The invocation of Article 5, five days before the bombings commenced, was barely mentioned. The media consensus was: "all roads lead to bin Laden" as if bin Laden was a Nation State which had attacked America.

What stand out are outright lies and fabrications.

The two United Nations Security Council resolutions - Security Council resolution 1368 (2001) *Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts*, and Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) *Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts* - adopted in the course of September 2001, did not, under any circumstances, provide a justification for the invasion and illegal occupation of a U.N. member country of 28 million people.

Nowhere in these resolutions was there any mention of military action against a U.N. member state.

Some conclusions are possible. Afghanistan did not attack the United States on 11 September 2001.

The war on Afghanistan was already on the Pentagon's drawing board prior to the attacks.

The U.S.-led war on Afghanistan, invoking the attacks of 11 September as a pretext and a justification, is illegal and criminal.

The United States and N.A.T.O. heads of state and heads of government from 2001 to the present are complicit in the launching of a criminal and illegal war. Invoking Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is an illegal and criminal procedure. The United States and N.A.T.O. heads of state and heads of government from 11 September 2001 should be prosecuted for war crimes.

Not long after the eleventh anniversary of the attacks two important articles appeared. They both dealt with what the Cheney/Bush Administration was told about the *al- Qaeda* threat and

what they chose to pay attention to - nothing.

It has been common knowledge that the Presidential Daily Briefing paper of 6 August 2011 warned that Osama bin Laden was determined to strike in the United States. To which Bush responded to its deliverer with words to the effect of "OK, you've covered your ass."

Both writers disclosed that repeated briefings on the danger were repeatedly ignored by Bush and the National Security Council.

At the same time, the C.I.A. which was gathering that information was increasingly preoccupied by the indifference to its warnings.

Furthermore, Richard Clarke, the Clinton Administration's point man on *al-Qaeda*, had told Bush, Cheney and Rice as early as 21 January 2009 that *al-Qaeda* was becoming increasingly dangerous and very close attention needed to be paid. But every time Clarke would say *al-Qaeda* Bush would 'understand' Iraq.

In August 2009 John O'Neill, the man in charge of the matter at the F.B.I., resigned in frustration at the indifference of the Bush administration. He went on to become director of security for the World Trade Centre and lost his life on the attacks.

The obviousness of the conclusion of incompetence on the part of the Bush Administration, particularly Cheney and Rice, opens the way to another possibility. This would lead far away from the 'accepted narrative'.

* * *

For all the available evidence adduced to explain the attacks on the Twin Towers, no plausible reason is given for the fall of the WTC 7 building. No airplane hit it, and all signs are there that it was brought down by a controlled explosion.

Final solution of this matter would be very important because, amongst other things, the building lodged New York City's emergency command centre as well as the local offices of the C.I.A. and F.B.I.

Mayor Rudy Giuliani was responsible for the failure to fund a system which would have

connected the radios of the New York City police and fire departments. The command of the former knew when the collapse of the Twin Towers was imminent and was able to call most of its men out. However, there was no way directly to communicate the danger to the fire-fighters still working inside. Result: 343 of them perished. For reasons yet to be explained, Mayor Giuliani was also responsible for having the wreckage moved as quickly as possible and buried in New Jersey swamps, before a full forensic analysis of it could be performed.

In addition, a large group of reputable architects and engineers happen to believe that the Twin Towers were actually brought down the same way as Building 7.

These circumstances and many others, such as the mysterious trades in stock of the affected airlines just before the attacks, the order given by Attorney General John Ashcroft to stop flying commercial back in July 2001, literally fuel a conspiratorial view of the events.

Unexplained remains why Messrs. Bush and Cheney were so determined to prevent the formation of the 9/11 Commission, why they would not testify under oath before it, why they did not testify in public, why they testified only together, not separately.

Furthermore, there has never been an investigation of the Pentagon bombing, much less any explanation of how a hollow aluminium tube, which is what an airliner is, could penetrate two walls, leave a symmetrical hole almost five metres in diameter in the inner one that it reached, and left no wreckage or debris or human remains.

Finally, and quite importantly, during the three-day banning of commercial flights in the United States, eighteen members of the bin Laden family living in the United States were flown out before the F.B.I. could interview them.

One need not subscribe to ‘conspiracy theories’ simply from drawing comfort from doubts raised by such persons as the 9/11 Commission co-chair Lee Hamilton; the 9/11 Commissioner Max Cleland, who felt forced to resign from the Commission; the 9/11 Commissioner Bob Kerrey; the 9/11 Commissioner Timothy Roemer; the Senior Counsel to the 9/11 Commission, John Farmer; the Co-Chair of the Congressional Inquiry into 9/11 and former Head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Bob Graham; the 20-year C.I.A. veteran Robert Baer; the 29-year C.I.A. veteran, former National Intelligence Officer and former Director of the C.I.A.’s Office of Regional and Political Analysis, William Bill Christison; the

27-year C.I.A. veteran Raymond McGovern, who was in charge of National Intelligence Estimates; the C.I.A. Operations Officer Lynne Larkin; the Division Chief of the C.I.A.'s Office of Soviet Affairs, Melvin Goodman; Senator Patrick Leahy; former Republican Senator Lincoln Chaffee; former Democratic Senator Mike Gravel; Republican Congressman Jason Chafetz; Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich; Republican Congressman Ron Paul; former U.S. Democratic Congressman Dan Hamburg; former U.S. Republican Congressman and senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, Curt Weldon; and Dr. Daniel Ellsberg.

All those persons have raised serious questions about the official 'narrative', about the 'conspiracy theory', as have many other current and former intelligence and law enforcement operatives.

It may well be that anyone who could and would possibly talk about what really happened on 11 September 2001 and the months leading up to that day is dead, from natural or other causes. But it appears obvious that ignoring all of those warnings from the C.I.A. was not because of negligence.

An analysis of what really happened to WTC 7 is beyond the scope of this paper, but one should not omit a reference to the discovery of pieces of an extremely explosive form of super-Thermite in the dust of the World Trade Centre. This is of profound importance because it is possible evidence of the actual nano-Thermite used to demolish and pulverise the twin Towers. In a very controversial paper, Dr. Steven E. Jones of Brigham Young University has sustained that the red-gray chips found in the dust disprove the American government's claims about what caused the destruction of the three towers on 11 September 2001. Fragments of the nano-composite explosive were analysed by an international team of nine scientists and the evidence presented in a peer-reviewed paper in March 2009.

In the view of those scientists, the discovery of super-Thermite in the dust exposes the government-funded reports as fabrications produced to conceal the explosive demolition of the Twin Towers and WTC 7. The 9-11 reports presented by the **Federal Emergency Management Agency** and the **National Institute of Standards and Technology**, those scientist allege, were written to mislead the public and media about what really happened to the buildings - and the thousands of people trapped within them. This is to say that the U.S. government and controlled media have intentionally deceived the public for eleven years. It is a daring proposition.

The highest officials of the Obama Administration have the evidence discussed in the Jones paper but ignored the discovery of super-Thermite in the rubble and refuse to discuss the evidence of explosions in the towers. On 18 May 2009 Vice-President Biden was presented with a copy of the 25-page Jones paper during a visit to Los Angeles. He was asked about the administration's position on the need for an investigation in light of this discovery, but Mr. Biden refused to answer the journalists' questions; he took the paper and immediately left the event.

The government and the controlled media claim that the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre collapsed due to fires caused by the crashes of the two airplanes which hit them.

If the evidence of the extremely powerful nano-composite explosive in the dust is reliable, as it appears to be, it would mean that the Bush and Obama administrations, members of Congress, and the media are intentionally deceiving the American people about what happened on 11 September 2001. This deception, which began that day, was used to send U.S. forces to invade and occupy Afghanistan. If this is the case, the officials engaged in this deception are committing high crimes.

This dilemma is most acute in the United States, but other nations face similar predicaments. More than forty nations were involved in the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan and in each of them the public has been deceived about the real reasons for the war. On its part, Australia seems actively not to care; it is all the more comfortable that way.

In matters such as these nothing seems too far-fetched. But some corroboration of some events may come from the most disparate sources. For instance, on 8 January 2002 Cable News Network, better known as C.N.N., aired an interview with the Australia diplomat

Richard Butler, former chief United Nations weapon inspector, and at the time on the Council on Foreign Relations. During the course of that interview the following exchange took place:

"[Paula] Zahn [CNN anchor woman]: Boy, if any of these charges are true... [Ms. Zahn was referring to the already mentioned book *Forbidden truth - U.S.-Taliban secret oil diplomacy and the failed hunt for Bin Laden*, by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie.]

Butler: If...

Zahn: ... this...

Butler: Yes.

Zahn: ... is really big news.

Butler: I agree.

Zahn: Start off with what your understanding is of what is in this book - the most explosive charge.

Butler: The most explosive charge, Paula, is that the Bush administration - the present one, just shortly after assuming office slowed down F.B.I. investigations of *al-Qaeda* and terrorism in Afghanistan in order to do a deal with the Taliban on oil - an oil pipeline across Afghanistan.

Zahn: And this book points out that the F.B.I.'s deputy director, John O'Neill, actually resigned because he felt the U.S. administration was obstructing...

Butler: A proper...

Zahn: ... the prosecution of terrorism.

Butler: Yes, yes, a proper intelligence investigation of terrorism. Now, you said if, and I affirmed that in responding to you. We have to be careful here. These are allegations. They're worth airing and talking about, because of their gravity. We don't know if they are correct. But I believe they should be investigated, because Central Asian oil, as we were discussing yesterday, is potentially so important. And all prior attempts to have a pipeline had to be done through Russia. It had to be negotiated with Russia.

Now, if there is to be a pipeline through Afghanistan, obviating the need to deal with Russia, it would also cost less than half of what a pipeline through Russia would cost. So financially and politically, there's a big prize to be had. A pipeline through Afghanistan down to the Pakistan coast would bring out that Central Asian oil easier and more cheaply.

Zahn: (unintelligible) as you spoke about this yesterday [still on C.N.N.], we almost immediately got a call from *The New York Times*.

Butler: Right.

Zahn: They want you to write an op-ed piece on this over the weekend.

Butler: Right, and which I will do.

Zahn: But let's come back to this whole issue of what John O'Neill, this F.B.I. agent...

Butler: Right.

Zahn: ... apparently told the authors of this book. He is alleging that - what - the U.S. government was trying to protect U.S. oil interests? And at the same time, shut off the investigation of terrorism to allow for that to happen?

Butler: That's the allegation that instead of prosecuting properly an investigation of terrorism, which has its home in Afghanistan as we now know, or one of its main homes, that was shut down or slowed down in order to pursue oil interests with the Taliban. The people who we have now bombed out of existence, and this not many months ago. The book says that the negotiators said to the Taliban, you have a choice. You have a carpet of gold, meaning an oil deal, or a carpet of bombs. That's what the book alleges.

Zahn: Well, I know you're going to be doing your own independent homework on this...

Butler: Yes."

* * *

Mr. Butler's reference, cautious to the point of being cryptic, to Central Asian oil and a pipeline through Afghanistan deserves an early explanation, if only to emphasise the inter-relations between the Bush Administration and oil men - and women.

Oil companies often share board members with the media.

For example, at the time of the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, a member of American On Line/Time-Warner's board of directors, Carla Hills, was also sitting on the board of directors of Chevron. She was the first President Bush's trade representative. On the board of directors of Exxon-Mobil sat J. Richard Munro, former chairman and C.E.O. of Time-Warner.

The director of Texaco - which had just merged with Chevron, former senator Sam Nunn, was also on the board of directors of General Electric - the nation's sixth largest defence contractor. Texaco board of directors member Charles Price sat on *The New York Times/Boston Globe* board of directors. A member of the *Dow Jones/Wall Street Journal* corporate board, Rand Araskog, also sat on the board of directors of Shell Oil.

The connections of the Bush Administration with big oil hardly needed mentioning. Most notably, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice had come from the board of directors of Chevron - which has a tanker named for her, and Vice-President Dick Cheney - who had been Secretary of Defence during the first Bush presidency - was chairman and C.E.O. of Halliburton, which provided construction and maintenance services to the oil and other energy industries as well as field support to the military. True, he had sold most of his stock when he made himself Bush's running mate, but he retained about US$ 8 million in stock options and continued to receive up to US$ 1 million a year in 'separation pay'. Over 200 former employees of Enron, the fabulously cynical and corrupt energy broker based in Texas, had found jobs in the Bush Administration. A significant investor in President Bush's early oil ventures was of course the bin Laden Group, a multinational construction conglomerate based in Saudi Arabia. The bin Laden Group had also invested in The Carlyle Group, a global investment firm headed by James Baker - the elder Bush's Secretary of State, and Frank Carlucci - Secretary of Defense under Reagan and a close friend of Donald Rumsfeld, at the time Secretary of Defense.

All of those oil companies, with important ties to the U.S. media, had interests in the Middle East crucial to their profits.

Among those companies was Unocal, the major player in a January 1998 agreement with the Taliban to build a natural gas pipeline across Afghanistan. Of course, it should be remembered that the American administration, through the C.I.A., had covertly funded the Taliban to bring stability for the pipeline deal. In December 1998, the Americans had put the

project on hold "until an internationally recognised government was in place." Unocal had been running its own political action committee and was a major donor to the Republican Party. The company spent about US$ 1.5 - officially - million every year for lobbying.

Robert Oakley, U.S. ambassador to Pakistan in the 1980s and instrumental to the C.I.A. support of the Afghan *mujahideen* - in which Osama bin Laden had become a commander, in 2001 was working for Unocal.

Another of the *mujahideen* leaders, Hamid Karzai, was the main intermediary between the them and the C.I.A.. He later would become a top advisor to Unocal and after the ending of Taliban rule in Afghanistan would be installed as prime minister.

Henry Kissinger was also working for Unocal.

The Secretary of the Air Force under the elder George Bush, Donald Rice, who had been for a time president of the military think tank RAND, was on Unocal's board of directors. He had earlier served in the U.S. Defence Department as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Resource Analysis and Director of Cost Analysis. Another board member was Charles Larson, former commander-in-chief of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Command.

Finally, a former RAND employee and Unocal advisor Zalman Khalilzad was the National Security Council's advisor for southwest Asia. Afghanistan-born Khalilzad had been an advisor to the State Department in the 1980s and was a close associate of Vice-President Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz. On 31 December 2001 Khalilzad would become special envoy to Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union had estimated that Afghanistan was sitting on 5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 95 million barrels of oil, and 400 million tons of coal. Unocal had stated that "Afghanistan's ... potential includes proposed multi-billion-dollar oil and gas export pipelines."

The vice president of Unocal had testified in 1998 to a U.S. House committee about the importance of stabilising the potential oil fields of Central Asia and that the best pipeline route for transporting their oil would be across Afghanistan to the Pakistani coast. A cheap

supply of natural gas was needed by a huge Enron-built power plant in Dabhol, on the west coast of India.

Ties between the Bush White House and the oil industry were so close that winners of a competition organised by Unocal won a prestigious visit to the White House to receive an award from President Bush himself.

On 10 December 2001 the *Boston Herald*, in an article titled *U.S. ties to Saudi elite may be hurting war on terrorism*, disclosed that "On at least one occasion, in December 1997, Unocal officials played host to high-ranking Taliban leaders in Texas. The American oil executives reportedly wined and dined them and took them on a shopping spree." and that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had been offered more than US$ 100 million a year by the American oil industry to submit to the pipeline project without a fight.

The United States invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, ostensibly to pursue al-Qaeda, held responsible for the 11 September 2001 outrages in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. From the very beginning the invasion appeared as an act of mis-directed revenge, because the majority of the plane hijackers were Saudis, and the nervous centre of the operation was Hamburg, Germany. There is no evidence linking Afghanistan with the attacks. There are some indications that, under certain conditions, the Taliban offered to deliver up Osama bin Laden to the United States months before and even one month after it began the invasion. The offers were rejected. The reason for such a rejection is suspect.

On the evening of 11 September President Bush declared, with calculated fury: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." What he outlined that night from the Oval Office "committed the United States to a broad, vigorous and potentially long war against terrorism, rather targeted retaliatory strike."

Blind revenge was obviously preferred. But revenge is not a legal ground for going to war, which is a crime under the United Nations Charter unless a) for self-defence or b) under U.N. Security Council authorisation. There was no legal basis for the invasion: neither U.N. Resolution of the Security Council 1368/12.09.2001 nor U.N.S.C. Resolution 1373/28.09.2001 authorised it.

Australia joined in the war between October and December 2001. The prevailing, current 'reason' is still based on 'the national interest' and 'solidarity with an ally.' Intervention was deemed authorised by the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) Treaty, presumably art. IV, by which "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security."

Australia's presence in Afghanistan is in violation of art.2(4) of the U.N. Charter, whereby: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." Nor does Australia's action meet the letter and spirit of art.51: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security."

Time has revolved the 'reasons' for Australia's intervention, from 'solidarity with our great and powerful friend the U.S.', 'obligations under ANZUS', a sharing of 'self-defence', to 'the capture of Osama bin Laden', 'the pursuit of Taliban', the 'war on terror', 'avenging the victims of Bali outrage', 'establishing freedom', 'honouring human rights', 'liberating Afghan women', 'supporting free elections', 'training the Afghan National Army'. They are all *ex post facto* rationalisations. Nor can they be justified with that mysterious, never defined *passe-partout* which is 'the national interest'.

In fact and in law, nothing, not even the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force in December 2001, could 'cure' that initial violation of the law. Afghanistan is now devastated, its people systematically killed, its democracy non-existent, its impotent 'government' recognisably corrupt.

There has never been a debate in the Australian Parliament on the reasons for the intervention until the one which was held during the last two weeks of October 2010. Then proceedings were opened with a 19 October Ministerial Statement by the newly-chosen Prime Minister, Ms. Julia Gillard.

The Prime Minister directed herself to five fundamental questions: why is Australia involved; what is the international community seeking to achieve and how; what is Australia's mission; what progress is being made; and what is the future of Australia's commitment.

The Prime Minister answered the first question by emphasising that there are two Australia's "vital national interests" involved in Afghanistan: 1) to make sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists and 2) to stand firmly by Australia's alliance commitment to the United States. There was no elaboration on these two points. "Al-Qaeda has been dealt a severe blow. But al-Qaeda remains a resilient and persistent network." She added, ominously: "We are working to counter the rise of affiliated groups in new areas, such as Somalia and Yemen, and violent extremism and terrorist groups in Pakistan."

Al-Qaeda remains the enemy. How it came about, who financed, armed and sustained it and for what purpose was beyond the scope of the 'debate' - and remains now.

In her subsequent New Year's message the Prime Minister reassured Australians that her government would "persevere in the mission in Afghanistan." The terms of that mission had been outlined in the remainder of the 19 October Ministerial Statement.

Between those dates, 19 October and 31 December 2010, certain events occurred. To begin with the threats from *al-Qaeda*, as early as 27 June 2010 the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency acknowledged that *al-Qaeda*'s presence in Afghanistan is now "relatively small." He added: "I think at most, we're looking at maybe 50 to 100, maybe less. It's in that vicinity." and that "There's no question that the main location of al-Qaeda is in

tribal areas of Pakistan." Nevertheless, the Prime Minister proceeded in her Statement to link the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania to those in Bali on 12 October 2002 and 1 October 2005, and with the 9 September 2004 bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. No forensic evidence has been established of a connection with *al-Qaeda* in any such cases.

Moving forward to deal with the aims and new strategy of the international community, the Prime Minister stated that "Australia's contribution increased from October 2008 ... as [it] took a growing role in training and mentoring in the southern province of Uruzgan." But "the international counter-insurgency mission was not adequately resourced until 2009", when "[in] December ... President Obama announced a revised strategy for Afghanistan and a surge of 30,000 US troops. N.A.T.O. has contributed more. So has Australia." There is a certain automatism there; Australia, unarguably a client state of the United States, is not a party in N.A.T.O.

The Prime Minister expressed her confidence that "now we have the right strategy, an experienced commander in General Petraeus and the resources needed to deliver the strategy."

Australia's key role in "the mission" was declared that of "training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army in Uruzgan." which was "expected to take two to four years. And President Karzai has said the Afghan government expects the transition process to be complete by the end of 2014." Still, "The international community will remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014. And *Australia will remain engaged*." [Emphasis added]

So, there it is - Australia's 'policy' about Afghanistan: the purpose, "training and mentoring the 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army in Uruzgan"; the prospective, to remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014. It is all that simple, fundamental, basic - like an article of faith, the simplistic repetition by a prostrating, mindless servant ?

Nothing was given to specifics: not the long-emerging purpose of the invasion - that of securing the exploitation of the Central Asian basin oil, not the long-delayed construction of a 1,700 kilometre pipeline from Turkmenistan to a warm-water, deep-sea port at Gwadar in the

Baluchistan province of Pakistan, not the need to secure the pipeline from terrorist attacks for which an army of 7,000 troops is to be permanently stationed in three countries, not who will guard the guardians, *et cetera*. The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the establishment of bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to support the war, could give the United States greater freedom to construct the pipeline across Afghanistan to Pakistan and the Arabian Sea - a route some oil strategists favour in order to bypass both Iran and Russia and link Central Asia directly to Western corporations and markets. Those new Central Asian bases were also intended to place American forces in close proximity to the new Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, running from the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean; oil analyst Daniel Yergin called it "one of the linchpins of world supply and energy security in the years ahead."

Later on in her Statement the Prime Minister expressed the conviction that, though "the challenges are huge" she was able to "report tentative signs of progress to date." Progress has been the *Leitmotif* of anyone reporting on Afghanistan during the past eleven years. Ms. Gillard is no exception. It is perhaps understandable that the Prime Minister should prefer the view of U.S. Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He would again declare on 14 December 2010 that, "Though the last of the surge troops only reached Afghanistan [the previous month], they [were] already achieving success." He attributed that to the surge of 30,000 more U.S. service members, while "NATO and other coalition nations added another 10,000."

That was the view of the military. Different views were put forward by two assessments prepared by U.S. intelligence organisations and tabled before the Senate Intelligence Committee. The reports presented a gloomy picture of the Afghanistan war, contradicting a more upbeat view expressed by military officials as the White House was preparing to release a progress report on the conflict. The classified reports contended that large swaths of Afghanistan are still at risk of falling to the Taliban, according to officials who were briefed on the National Intelligence Estimates on Afghanistan and Pakistan, which represent the collective view of more than a dozen intelligence agencies. National Intelligence Estimates make use of analysis and information from all the intelligence agencies, including those which are part of the Pentagon. The reports also said that the Pakistan's government remains

unwilling to stop its covert support for members of the Afghan Taliban who mount attacks against U.S. troops from the tribal areas of the neighbouring nation. The officials declined to be named because they were discussing classified data.

As at 21 October 2012 the Australian Defence Force had suffered 39 operational deaths in Afghanistan. Two hundred and forty two A.D.F. members had been wounded in action in Afghanistan, as at 16 October 2012.

Recently, many of these deaths and wounding had been caused during what have been defined as 'green-on-blue' attacks, those carried out by Afghans whom the Coalition partners are supposed to be training before the end of 2014, when - nominally - all invading forces would leave. Seven Australians have been killed in 'green-on-blue' attacks; they have increased in recent times.

The 'green on blue' attacks - which had claimed three Australian lives in one incident in August 2012 - were at the front of the Australian Prime Minister's mind while speaking with President Karzai during a surprise day's visit to Afghanistan before going to India. The Afghan President assured Ms. Gillard that all efforts were being made to prevent 'insider' attacks from rogue Afghan troops on Australian soldiers.

The Prime Minister told a news conference that she had spoken to President Karzai about Australian concerns and "sought an assurance from him that everything that can be done is being done." She had canvassed the steps being taken by Afghan forces to deal with the insider attacks. The Prime Minister also raised the issue with the governor of Uruzgan Province, where the Australian troops are based.

"Clearly these have been tragic and disturbing incidents. They are designed to corrode morale and everything needs to be done on the Afghan side to deal with the possibility of insider attacks." said Ms. Gillard.

Meanwhile, the assailant who had killed the three Australians was still being hunted. In the days after the incident there was some tension between Australian and Afghan authorities, when President Karzai said that Australian military personnel did not have permission for a

raid in which an old man and his son had been killed. The Australian government said that the raid had been authorised and those killed were linked to the insurgents.

During her visit, Ms. Gillard received briefings from General John Allen, commander of the International Security Assistance Force, and from Australian senior military officers. "I've been very clearly told that *the mission we defined for ourselves is on track*." Ms. Gillard said. [Emphasis added] The "mission being on track" has become a *mantra* from the Australian government.

The Prime Minister said that General Allen had indicated to her that "there are still two years in front of the mission for getting the Afghan National Army and National Police fully up to speed. That's two fighting seasons in which they will increasingly be operating independently."

Ms. Gillard said that it was anticipated that the troops being trained by Australia would be able to operate independently by the end of this year. After addressing and mingling with hundreds of Australian troops at the Tarin Kowt base, Ms. Gillard said that despite the heartache of losses, morale was good. Apart from wanting to thank the troops, she said the other reason she had visited Afghanistan was to check progress on handing over responsibility to the Afghan forces and Australia's role beyond 2014 - the general end of the transition. She told the troops: "We are doing the planning now, not only for how transition will roll out, but how our engagement will be here in the days that lie beyond 2014. So I wanted to be in-country to do some of that work and that's very important to our future planning."

An Australian military officer, Brigadier Roger Noble, who is in a senior position with I.S.A.F., gave an upbeat assessment of the progress being made in a separate briefing for journalists accompanying the Prime Minister. The Afghan army was increasingly capable, while the violence was increasingly occurring away from the major population centres. Using surveys and other material, the Coalition is convinced that more than 80 per cent of the population is against the return of the Taliban.

Brigadier Noble said that the "great irony" of the 'green-on-blue' attacks "is that in some ways it's driven us [Australian and Afghan forces] closer together" - from the top of the

structure right down to the soldiers on the ground. Nevertheless, pessimistic assessments of the future had come recently from the International Crisis Group and from the departing head of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan, Reto Stocker.

Brigadier Noble highlighted corruption as "the number one issue in Afghanistan." The Prime Minister pointed to President Karzai's anti-corruption decree and said: "We will continue to speak out for the need for transparency and progress in governments here in Afghanistan."

Australia's latest fatality in Afghanistan says more about the war than the government's official narrative would dare reveal.

When a soldier is killed in Afghanistan, there are a lot of things people at home are not told. What people *are* told are platitudes, softened by euphemism and obscured by jargon. Maybe these are the only words left, when politicians and generals try to explain to a sceptical and indifferent public why a soldier has met a sudden violent death while carrying out government policy. And here are the usual, solemn, hieratic faces; and the usual words of empathy for the families; and all together a sense of contrived, collective pain expressed with a sickening, but solemn, sense of insincerity - that the matter should be disposed of as quickly as possible because there are 'affairs of State' to attend to. Of course, medals are conferred, flowers are placed on coffins, prayers are said - regardless of whether the dead soldier was a believer or not, and always on the assumption that he was a Christian.

At every one of these ceremonies the dead soldier is praised for his valour, his willingness to sacrifice his life for his 'mates' *et cetera*, and boring *et cetera*.

This is anyway how those who sent those soldiers want them to have been. All this momentarily comforts the celebrants of such sacrifice.

Nobody really says that so-and-so was killed while Australian representatives repeat *ad nauseam* that most of the troops will be home by the end of 2014, because 'Afghan forces are almost ready to take charge; Australian troops are there to mentor, not lead; and that security has improved.'

Every new death is a nuisance: it confuses 'the official narrative'. What is not said, and further confuses those who ask questions, is the fact that some of Australian Special Forces

will remain behind, in an open-ended commitment lasting years and which is likely to mean more deaths.

If Australian troops are pulling out, why are the soldiers still being killed while leading operations ? And why, eleven years into the war, are Australians people being told less, not more ? Until last year, the government routinely released the results of every official inquiry into Australian fatalities - not any more. The government says this is to protect the privacy of families, something which in the past was done by censoring sensitive passages. Perhaps the judgment is that the public cannot be trusted with even the outlines of the truth.

Euphemism and obfuscation usually shroud what soldiers do, and maybe Afghanistan is no different from all other wars - perhaps only in length. Even Australian regular troops, uncloaked by the aura of secrecy which surrounds Special Forces, engage in intense clashes which leave dead 'guerrillas' scattered in Afghan fields and orchards. These encounters, too, go unreported, while Australian government and military pretend that they do not keep a tally of the 'enemy' dead and certainly will not release the body count because they say it is not a measure of success. The policy has been rendered famous in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when, the U.S. military adopted an official policy of not counting deaths. "We don't do body counts." General Tommy Franks, who directed the invasion, said.

There is propaganda, or what is known as the 'battle to control the narrative'. So people are told that Afghan forces are ready to take the lead; that the Taliban leadership is 'degraded' by the relentless shock of 'targeted' Special Forces operations; and that the Coalition is not retreating according to a political timetable, naaahhh - the Coalition is 'transitioning' to Afghan control.

Insisting on 'the narrative' can have farcical consequences. Early in 2012 human rights and aid groups in Kabul warned that the new part-time Afghan police units being promoted by Coalition forces were in fact a threat to the civilians they were meant to protect. In reply a senior Australian officer told the groups that their complaints "risked undermining confidence in the police."

There is no easy way out for Australian soldiers or government, so the higher one gets, the shakier 'the narrative' becomes. The Prime Minister said that Australia went to Afghanistan

to ensure it is not a haven for terrorists, even though the prime, real 'reason' Australia went there, and stays there, is its alliance with the United States. This could be, if true, a legitimate strategic justification, but it does not seem a compelling *human* reason for 39 dead and about 250 wounded.

The truth may come from unexpected sources - certainly not from the government.

Thus, early in June 2012, the moment of crystalline clarity on Afghanistan came in the testimony of the Australian Government Overseas Aid Programme, when AusAID director general Peter Baxter declared before a Senate Estimates Committee:

"We ... take account of the fact that the government has always said publicly that the time for transition will come in 2014, when the Afghan national security forces take the lead for providing security throughout the country. When that happens in Oruzgan province, and if the Australian forces leave the province as is planned, *we will run our programs from Kabul rather than retain a physical presence in Oruzgan province. Certainly, without the provision of force protection - the physical presence of the Australian defence forces in Oruzgan province - we will not be able to continue to operate as we do now*." [Emphasis added]

On the other hand, Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith tell Australians how well everything is going 'in transition' to an effective Afghan government security capability by 2014.

But the bitter truth is otherwise: Afghanistan is shaping up as a failed war.

The best forecast is that the corrupt and ineffective government of Hamid Karzai and his successors will hold on for a while, propped up by billions of dollars of aid coming from the Americans and others, including Australians.

The American administration plans to maintain a substantial military presence in Afghanistan: 20,000 or so members of the Special Forces. No doubt President Obama will irresistibly call for an Australian contribution. And what government would dare to say no ?

But such Special Forces will have a yet unforeseeable function, which will certainly not be that of being displayed out in the provinces underpinning the authority of the so-called central government.

What may follow even a partial withdrawal of the Coalition forces could be a renewed civil intertribal fighting, a civil war, a possible return of the Taliban, maybe under a different name. It is very hard to predict anything.

Australian government and opposition have gone almost full circle - from the destruction of *al-Qaeda*, to punishing the Taliban, to providing security, to protecting women and girls, and now to mentoring the Afghan forces and providing civilian development. Because of that confusion, Australian contribution, even given the limitations of it, has been largely insignificant, other than for securing the favour of a Great and Powerful Friend. There is a word for that.

Naturally, all appearances are protected by the rhetoric of public statements.

On 31 October 2012, before the closing of the current parliamentary session, the Prime Minister delivered herself to some such exercise in fanciful statements. She was aware that the ambassador from Afghanistan was in attendance in the gallery.

Ms. Gillard began by reminding the House that "Eleven years ago, under Taliban rule, terrorists trained freely in Afghanistan to kill Australians and to attack our ally the United States. Today, international terrorism finds no safe haven in Afghanistan." The Prime Minister was speaking as if it were natural that Australian Armed Forces should be in Afghanistan !

Ms. Gillard went on to detail Australian "commitment in the coming year and *in the years ahead*." [Emphasis added]

The Prime Minister moved to deal with "the facts on the ground in Afghanistan today. Three of the five tranches of Afghan provinces and districts have begun transition. All the provincial capitals and 75 per cent of the country's population are in areas where the Afghan National Security Forces lead on security. The ANSF are close to their full surge strength of 352,000. They lead on more than 80 per cent of all security operations and make up more than three-quarters of all uniformed personnel in the country."

On 14 October, during her surprise visit to Kabul, the Prime Minister had met General John Allen, the I.S.A.F. Commander. "He is pleased with what he sees as the ANSF continues to demonstrate this increasing capability and capacity. With two years remaining before the end of transition, he is confident that ISAF's mission will conclude with the ANSF well prepared to maintain long-term security in Afghanistan. The Minister for Defence will also update the parliament on detailed developments in Afghanistan. "

With the usual optimism and in the jargon of public statements, "We can and should conclude that today, across Afghanistan, *the process of transition is on track*. In Uruzgan province, where Australia's efforts are centred, transition commenced on 17 July of this year and will follow this model. These are the facts on the ground there." [Emphasis added]

As transition proceeds in the Uruzgan Province, Australia will adjust its "military and civilian posture there. Our main focus will be at Brigade Headquarters and the provincial Operations Coordination Centre. The ADF will advise and train the Afghan National Army's logistics, engineering and other combat support elements. Our Mentoring Task Force will shift to a smaller advisory task force model, we will cease routine partnered operations at the kandak level and our presence will consolidate in the multinational base at Tarin Kot."

Ms. Gillard sounded a warning: "Let me emphasise that this shift in posture, likely to occur around the end of the year, is not the end of our combat operations in Uruzgan. Our Special Operations Task Group will continue to operate against the insurgency and our advisory task force will retain a combat-ready capability. This is the course of transition in Uruzgan." On 18 October 2012 Australia assumed command of Combined Team-Uruzgan. The Australian Forces will oversee "the critical phase of transition in the province." They will take account of the conditions on the ground and the evolving capabilities of the 4th Brigade. The shift in Australia's posture is intended to be gradual and measured, closely aligned with the broader I.S.A.F. transition strategy and consulting closely with Afghan and provincial authorities. This is the key judgement which will be before Australia in the year to come: judging the progress of transition and delivering the phases by which it is completed.

Having portrayed such rosy picture, the Prime Minister continued: "When I addressed the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in April, the government's view was that, once started, transition in Uruzgan should take 12 to 18 months and that, when transition is complete, the

majority of our troops will have returned home. Six months on, and three months in to transition, our analysis is that this remains the case."

"As we begin detailed planning for [transition's] final phases, which of course remain some time off, *it is likely that we will identify the need for some additional personnel and resources to complete those final phases of practical extraction and repatriation.* [Emphasis added. Interesting ! In order to withdraw the troops, more troops will be necessary !] We will apply the lessons of previous operational drawdowns to ensure stability and security through the whole period. And, when transition in Uruzgan is complete, we will remain committed to the ISAF strategy for nationwide transition, advising the ANSF as they develop their command and logistics capabilities and providing institutional training."

The Prime Minister devoted some time to praising the work of the Australian Federal Police in training the Afghan National Police at the Police Training Centre at Tarin Kot. She then noted that "As transition proceeds, our future effort will focus on leadership training and strategic advisory support at the national level. This will help the Afghan National Police manage their own transition: from paramilitary activity as part of the counterinsurgency, to a constabulary force performing conventional civilian policing roles.

Our development aid effort will continue. Australian aid is making a real difference to the lives of the Afghan people, and helping their nation on the path to development and peace." In Uruzgan, "the Australian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team does great work: contributing to a sixfold increase in the number of schools operating, tripling the number of active health facilities and supporting a stronger provincial administration. As transition proceeds in Uruzgan, our aid workers and diplomats will continue their important task. This will be the work of transition through the year ahead."

The Prime Minister spoke at length of the threat posed to the Australian 'mission' by the emerging insider attacks - the 'green-on-blue' of recent times.

"In my discussions with President Karzai this month - she said - it was clear to me that he understands the threat these attacks pose to our mission. In my discussions with General Allen, he expressed his personal sympathy for Australia's losses. He was also just as conscious as our own commanders of the need for the right mix of force protection measures. ... Australia is not alone. Many of our international partners have also suffered casualties.

Overnight, we received reports of an insider attack on British troops in Helmand province. Indeed, insider attacks have targeted Afghan troops in even greater numbers than international troops.

This is how we are protecting our troops. First, in order to know how best to counter the threat, our commanders have analysed the attacks and their circumstances. Each attack has specific motivations and specific circumstances. We must understand them to defeat them.

Second, in the wake of the insider attack on 29 August this year, we reviewed force protection to counter the risks of insider threats. Naturally, we do not publicly detail the nature of these. The government continually reviews the professional advice on force protection measures to ensure the risks of such attacks are minimised: I am confident that we are doing all that we can.

Third, the Afghan government has now been conducting biometric screening and other information gathering for all ANSF recruits for two years. Recruits are subject to an eight-step vetting process, supported by information sharing and overseen by the international force. The Afghan Ministry of the Interior, along with coalition partners, works to identify insurgent sympathisers and subversive elements within the security forces. These are important countermeasures.

We know it would be a strategic mistake to overestimate the enemy's strengths or achievements. To see an adversary's hand where it may not exist only enhances the propaganda value of an attack. This difficult military environment and determined insurgent enemy breeds asymmetric threats - spectacular attacks, roadside bombs, insider attacks - often designed to influence international opinion. We know the impact of these attacks on the troops and their units, on their families and on the Australian public is very significant. Australia has suffered four insider attacks in all so far, with seven killed and 12 wounded. The greater strategic threat of insider attacks comes not from the attacks themselves, but from the risk that we respond to them wrongly.

The best evidence that we will prevail against the threat from insider attacks is this: we have not allowed it to disrupt our training and operations with the 4th Brigade. Every day, our troops and police, diplomats and development advisers get on with the job. I saw them during my most recent visit to Kabul and Tarin Kot on 14 October and I can tell the House this: their

courage will not fail. They are getting the job done every day. And they are determined to complete their mission of training and transition."

Moving forward before dealing with the programme for next year and 2014, the Prime Minister told the House:

"2012 has brought important progress in Afghanistan. It has also brought important decisions on our future course there. As a partner of Afghanistan, as a member of ISAF and now as a member of the UN Security Council, Australia will be an active participant in this planning in the coming year. In May, when President Karzai and I signed a Comprehensive Long-Term Partnership agreement, Australia joined a growing group of countries, including the United States, India and China, who have partnerships with Afghanistan to help consolidate and build on the gains of the past 10 years. The Chicago NATO-ISAF Summit set milestones for transition and agreed to a new NATO training mission post-2014. The Tokyo Conference saw international agreement to an aid and development plan and specific pledges of support."

A war-weary United States was facing off with wary N.A.T.O. allies in Chicago about money and support for Afghanistan after U.S. combat troops withdrawal. The issue for N.A.T.O. members was clearly who would pay Afghan forces after N.A.T.O. left in 2014. That question had topped the agenda when N.A.T.O. representatives met in Chicago on 20 and 21 May 2012. What was going to happen in Afghanistan after American and Coalition troops left ?

To be sure, it was contemplated that some troops from N.A.T.O. countries would be likely to stay behind after 2014 - both to train Afghans and act as a hedge against the Taliban's return. The summit would have tried to iron out some of those details.

But perhaps even more crucial - certainly for Afghanistan itself - was the question of who would foot the bill for Afghans to protect themselves. Afghanistan does not have remotely enough money to defend itself. Left alone, it could afford to pay about 30,000 soldiers and police officers. As at May 2012, and with international aid, it had more than 300,000 - a figure which some experts say is too low.

As a result, much of the Chicago summit was meant 'to pass the hat' for Afghanistan. With N.A.T.O. countries war-weary and economically strapped, the commitment was certainly not exactly to fill that cup to overflowing.

The situation pointed to a N.A.T.O. role in Afghanistan which would continue for years after the end of the international combat mission in 2014, but at a much-reduced and still uncertain level. This suggested that for all the heady words spoken by N.A.T.O. leaders, funding and troop pledges for an event still two years away were likely to remain vague.

The two-day meeting would be something of a tin-cup exercise and should give the attendees some idea of what the N.A.T.O. Coalition countries' post-2014 commitments to Afghanistan would look like.

In a clear reflection of this reduced commitment to Afghanistan, the gathering was expected to endorse the scaling back of the Afghan National Security Forces. Army and national police forces once envisioned to hover around 350,000 personnel for years after N.A.T.O.'s departure were seen as gradually scaling back to something over 200,000 by 2018. The aim is to reduce the size of the Afghan forces to make them more affordable.

Pre-summit discussions among N.A.T.O. countries resulted in a consensus which foresaw the United States picking up the largest part of the cost, with other countries making up the rest. That U.S. share was expected to be about US$ 2 billion a year, with other countries making up the difference of an annual bill of about US$ 4 billion. President Karzai had indicated that he did not think that the US$ 4 billion would have been enough. During the Obama ordered surge, the United States were spending about US$ 100 billion a year to maintain its force of 100,000 troops.

In the circumstances, it was expected that the pledges would remain general, in part because countries were reluctant to make specific funding commitments for what was still a few years off. Moreover, N.A.T.O. countries were concerned that promised gains in Afghanistan had not materialised.

"The thinking was that the US surge would kick the stuffing out of the Taliban, they would thus be on the road to defeat, and we'd be handing off a much simpler job." said Stephen Biddle, senior fellow for defence policy at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. "Instead, in 2015 we'll be handing off a stalemate and a war that in fact is not going to be ending anytime soon."

Looking to a day when "the Afghan war as we understand it is over." President Obama met on 20 May 2012 with President Karzai to discuss N.A.T.O.'s withdrawal from that strife-torn country by the end of 2014.

President Obama, who has put the draw-down of combat troops at the heart of his foreign policy, declared that "the world is behind the strategy" of giving Afghans control over their own security, but stressed that "now it is our task to implement if effectively."

Karzai, who aimed to secure billions of dollars in long-term aid for his country's military and economy, said he looked forward to a day when "Afghanistan is no longer a burden on the shoulders of our friends in the international community, on the shoulders of the United States and our other allies."

For the time being, he was bringing to President Obama and to the people of the United States "the gratitude of the Afghan people for the support that American taxpayers' money has provided Afghanistan over the past decade and for the difference that it has made to the well-being of the Afghan people." Karzai told Obama.

The two leaders met on the sidelines of a high-stakes N.A.T.O. summit consumed by the question of the alliance's withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, and its role beyond that date. Obama has made it known he wanted the gathered leaders to sign off on a plan to hand over combat duties to Afghan forces in 2013.

"There will be no rush for the exits." N.A.T.O. Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told reporters as the summit opened, saying the alliance's plan was sound and vowing "to see it through to a successful end."

President Obama was pressing N.A.T.O. leaders to flesh out their own commitments to Afghanistan - both in terms of troops and money - until 2014 and beyond. Specific dollar amounts were not expected in Chicago, but a July donors conference in Tokyo would have spelled those out. The price tag for Afghan forces after 2014 was estimated to be US$ 4.1 billion per year. Afghanistan was expected to pay US$ 500 million of that. Karzai said that his country needed at least US$ 10 billion per year in overall aid through 2025.

President Obama was looking ahead to a future "in which we have ended our combat role, the Afghan war as we understand it is over, but our commitment to friendship and partnership

with Afghanistan continues" and evoked "a shared vision that we have in which Afghanistan is able to transition from decades of war to a transformational decade of peace and stability and development." He underlined "the enormous sacrifices that have been made by the American people, most profoundly by American troops, as well as the troops of our other coalition partners" and said that Americans "recognize the hardship that the Afghan people have been through." ... "The loss of life continues in Afghanistan. There will be hard days ahead. But we're confident that we're on the right track." he said.

"Afghanistan is fully aware of the task ahead and of what Afghanistan needs to do to reach the objectives that we all have, of a stable, peaceful and self-reliant Afghanistan. In the meantime, until then, thank you for your support." Karzai said. [Karzai had given a somewhat different assessment of Kabul's relationship with Washington at a December 2008 joint press conference with then-President George W. Bush. "Afghanistan will not allow the international community leave it before we are fully on our feet, before we are strong enough to defend our country, before we are powerful enough to have a good economy, and before we have taken from President Bush and the next administration billions and billions of more dollars - no way that they can let you go." Karzai said, to nervous laughter from the audience.]

"The coming year - the Australian Prime Minister told Parliament on 31 October 2012 - will ... bring important preparations for the period after transition is complete. When transition is complete across Afghanistan at the end of 2014, the government of Afghanistan will have full responsibility for security.

The broad outlines of a comprehensive framework for supporting Afghanistan beyond 2014 are now agreed. There will be substantial international financial support to sustain strong Afghan defence and police forces. The international community is looking to commit US$ 3.6 billion each year from 2015 to 2017. As I announced in Chicago, Australia is contributing US$ 100 million in three years. There will be a new NATO-led mission after 2014 - not for combat, but to train, advise and assist the ANSF. Australia will make a contribution to this mission including through the Afghan National Army Officer Academy.

To guard against any possibility of a return of international terrorism in Afghanistan, I expect the United States and Afghan governments to discuss possible future arrangements for counter-terrorism training and operations."

As for the future, Ms. Gillard gave a firm indication of a strong commitment beyond 2014: "As I have stated previously, *the Australian government is prepared to consider a limited Special Forces contribution, in the right circumstances and under the right mandate.* [Emphasis added]

There will be substantial international development assistance and support for Afghanistan's economic and social development: the ultimate proof against conflict and instability. At Chicago, I pledged Australian development assistance to Afghanistan will rise from A$ 165 million in 2011-12 to A$ 250 million by 2015-16, as part of the international community's commitment to provide US$ 16 billion over four years from 2014."

The *Leitmotif* of the Australian 'national interest' returned at this point of the Ministerial Statement of 31 October 2012.

"Beyond 2014, Australia will still have a national interest in denying international terrorism a safe haven in Afghanistan. It will still be in our national interest to remain part of the broad international effort to support Afghanistan - and to ensure the Afghan government remains an active partner. At Tokyo, Australia joined in the Mutual Accountability Framework, by which the Afghan government made important commitments in this respect.

Through our aid program we will encourage the Afghan government to fulfil its reform commitments."

Speaking of a Kabul government, led by a corrupt person and supported by people deeply committed to corrupt practices, the Prime Minister said: "It must strengthen governance, combat corruption, promote the rule of law and uphold the rights and freedoms for Afghan men and women guaranteed in the Afghan constitution.

We will also help the Afghans prepare for the 2014 presidential elections. I welcome the Afghan government's commitment to announce the elections time line soon."

What Ms. Gillard was expecting from the 2014 elections was something almost unrealistic as the upholding of the rule of law. She called for: "Credible, inclusive and transparent elections, following the presidential elections of 2004 and 2009 and the parliamentary elections of 2005 and 2010, are among the most important signs of Afghanistan's decade-long transformation. So our aid will support the electoral process."

Then, there followed another flight of absolute fantasy: “With Afghanistan firmly responsible for the security of its sovereign state after 2014, international, political and diplomatic efforts to support peace and stability in Afghanistan and in its region will be central. We will continue to support an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process of peace building which protects the gains of the past decade in areas such as democracy and human rights, including the rights of women and children. We support reconciliation and the reintegration of insurgents who are prepared to lay down their arms, renounce violence, cut ties with al-Qaeda and respect the Afghanistan constitution.

The constructive engagement and support of Afghanistan’s neighbours, in particular of Pakistan, is also essential over time. For instance, the Istanbul process to strengthen trade links and tackle common security concerns through what is known as the 'Heart of Asia' region is an important international initiative. In a conflict-riven region, there is growing recognition from regional leaders that all have a long-term interest in a secure, stable, self-governing Afghanistan. I welcome the comments of the President of Pakistan that his country respects and supports reconciliation and peace efforts by the government of Afghanistan. I also welcome the Pakistani government’s direct appeal to the Taliban to participate in these reconciliation and peace efforts. We will work with Afghanistan - and with Pakistan - in those areas where our best judgement is that cooperation against terrorism which threatens both states is effective and real. And we will do whatever else we judge best makes a difference in this difficult and sensitive task.

Our progress since 2009, our plans through to 2014 and beyond, should give Australians cause for measured confidence and resolve. We are part of a sound international strategy: transition to Afghan-led security, then support to Afghanistan for development and peace. Our contribution today is proportionate to our own interest and to the contribution of our allies and the world: our troops number around 1,550 out of a 100,000-strong coalition force, supporting a near 352,000-strong ANSF. Our mission in Uruzgan is clear and achievable: to prepare the 4th Brigade for a handover of full security responsibility.”

There was one more repetition of an old and over-used *cliché*: “Our commitment to Afghanistan is in Australia’s national interest. We are there to deny international terrorism a safe haven, to stand firm with our ally the United States.”

"In Afghanistan and in Uruzgan, we see progress, but of course it is not perfect. We know this - I know this - and our plans reflect this. Throughout the three years of the new international strategy, the international coalition and the Afghan government have held a very realistic view of the evolving environment and changes in the nature of the insurgent threat.

We know that as Afghan forces increasingly take the lead through 2013, the Taliban will seek to test them. We know that not every valley or village in Uruzgan or Afghanistan will be peaceful or free from insurgency. There will be difficult days ahead, setbacks in the transition process, days when our resolve will be tested.

We will stand firm."

At this point there was a gratuitous assumption: that Afghanistan was a bed of terrorism in 2001, followed with an identification between the United States and Australia in 2001: "As a nation, we have a job to do. It is a difficult and dangerous one and we are determined to complete it - not to make things perfect, but to ensure that Afghanistan will never again be what it was in 2001: a place where terrorists trained and prepared to attack us. Across Afghanistan, the national government and the Afghan and international forces are making progress in transition." [*Transition* - the word would be employed twenty seven times !]

Against that possibility, Australians "are preparing for the future beyond 2014."

The Prime Minister concluded her Statement by naming some of the soldiers recently died, and evoked the words of the poet John Manifold who wrote of the 'cairn of words' we build over our silent dead - a cairn being a heap of stones piled up as a memorial. Yes, of course, all soldiers' deaths are alike and worthy of respect, but often political representatives find it convenient to confuse people who died in defence of their country and people who died invading other countries; it serves to shift responsibility.

The Prime Minister had been particularly shocked by the loss of three soldiers on 29 August 2012, followed by another killing of two soldiers in 'green-on-blue' attacks. She did not spend time to analyse the possible causes of such resentment by people whom she thought should be generous for the presence of Australians.

According to data from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a non-partisan policy institute in the United States, such attacks 'from within' have already accounted for 14 per

cent of Coalition casualties in 2012. The figure has steadily increased from 6 per cent in 2011, 3 per cent in 2010, 2 per cent in 2009 and less than 1 per cent in 2008.

The figures show that there have been 55 attacks since the start of 2008, with 29 in 2012, and they have resulted in the deaths of 109 troops and left another 85 wounded.

Out of increasing concern about 'green-on-blue' attacks, N.A.T.O. had ordered its soldiers to carry loaded weapons at all times. N.A.T.O. announced at the end of August 2012 that a quarter of the recent attacks have been carried out by Taliban and other militant plants within Afghan security forces, while President Karzai put the blame on foreign spies attempting to sow distrust between native and 'western' forces.

But the main cause of such incidents may in fact be cultural misunderstandings and distrust. On 27 August 2012 the Pentagon released the results of its investigation into the burning of a large number of copies of the *Qur'an* in Afghanistan in February, an incident which inflamed tensions between N.A.T.O. and Afghan forces.

Such events offered a sobering picture of the kind of distrust and cultural misunderstanding between Coalition and Afghan forces which, in the case of the *Qur'an* burnings, led to deadly riots in Afghanistan. More generally, they helped to explain the growing number of so-called 'green-on-blue' incidents.

On his part General John Allen acknowledged - and most outside experts concurred - that most of the 'insider attacks' appear to be the result of growing resentments and frictions which build up as more recruits from a very conservative society are in close contact with the often young military personnel of a different culture.

The Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representative rose "to support the comprehensive statement of the Prime Minister and [to] welcome this chance to express the coalition's support for our continuing military commitment to Afghanistan."

* * *

All this talk, this false reading of history, this shameless repetition of fundamental lies, about 'the situation improving after a difficult year' - and this being repeated from year to year,

'transition being on track', this sombre acknowledging of the 'ultimate sacrifice', this *clichéd* patriotism, this cheap rhetoric clash with the facts of the situation as it exists on the ground.

The fact is that when military advisers to the Afghan Army approach their trainees, they keep their body armour on and their weapons loaded.

The record for the year as at the end of September 2012 is that Afghan soldiers and police officers have gunned down 51 American and troops, and now no one is taking chances.

And yes, of course, there was progress of a sort, but all relatively slow and substantially unreliable.

Despite a more than a decade-long, US$ 33 billion American and Coalition effort to build the military and the police, Afghanistan's security forces "continue to confront challenges, including attrition, leadership deficits and limited capabilities in staff planning, management, logistics and procurement.", according to an April 2012 review of Afghan security by the Pentagon.

The army was improving - the report said - pointing to the fact that 13 of the Afghan Army's 156 battalions were now rated by the Coalition as "independent with advisers" - up from one in 2011. The ranking is the highest given by the Coalition.

And, as for the top brass, even the short memory of Australians and their government would be able to remember that, during the period of their latest engagement in a very long war which was lost by 'the West', Vietnam, the generals never admitted that a mission was impossible; they only claimed that they needed to have more troops, new tactics, and more time. With that, 'progress was on track'.

As for Afghanistan, even the Australian government would remember that at one point, not really too distant in the past, General Stanley A. McChrystal, the 'released' Commander of I.S.A.F. as well as Commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, with the implicit consent of Centcom commander General David Petraeus - now also ignominiously departed - had publicly declared in the autumn of 2009 that he needed 40,000 more troops. He was to hold the post briefly, from 15 June 2009 to 23 June 2010.

Because he had transferred his total unscrupulousness in the butchery of Afghanistan to the realm of Washington politics by his unflattering remarks about member of the Obama Administration, the President would 'accept his resignation'.

Maybe President Obama might have been reluctant on appointing McChrystal in June 2009 as commanding general, with decades in the Special Forces - the 'take no prisoners' troops - and a row of medals on his chest, to tell the general: "I have not spent any time in Afghanistan and have never served in the army, but I can tell you that you are wrong. You will not defeat the Taliban, additional troops will be a waste of time and I reject your blood-drenched counter-insurgency theory. Instead, we will reduce our troop presence. And as the situation deteriorates in southern Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Taliban increase their control and the Republicans mock me for my weakness, I will take the full blame for having over-ruled my general's advice."

That would have been understandable, if not likely. The rhetoric so profusely dispensed by Prime Minister Gillard in October 2012 could take a lesson from that hypothetical position of President Obama.

Even Australian politicians should know - and above all should publicly acknowledge and thus inform their indifferent populace - that the real mission in Afghanistan has nothing to do with 'building democracy'. Democracy is not built by a military occupation of foreign armies supporting a corrupt regime.

If that truth is accepted for a moment, then the anguishing question is: have 3,226, of whom 39 Australians and 2,153 Americans - as at 13 November 2012 - died in vain ?

The American press was eager to point out the figures as at mid-October 2012: U.S. soldiers fatalities were then up 410 per cent under Obama - an average of 401 U.S. soldiers per year under Obama as against 79 per year under Bush. As to the wounded, U.S. soldiers were up nearly 1,200 per cent under Obama. - an average of 4,010 U.S. soldiers per year under Obama against 330 per year under Bush. More tragically, U.S. soldier suicide rates have increased to levels never seen before. This began when Obama took over as Commander-In-Chief in 2009. An article of January 2010 describes the 2009 suicide rate as follows: "…the toll of military suicides last year was the worst since records began to be kept in 1980."

Long term, the numbers of American dead, wounded and dollars allocated as a result of the war are staggering:

- more than 2,000 dead American troops, and over 1,000 Coalition troop fatalities.

- 18,000 wounded N.A.T.O. troops.

- 1,600 American amputees - from Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

- hundreds of thousands of veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder.

- US$ 1.2 trillion - US$ 2 billion per week - spent in the war.

- at least US$ 55 billion in estimated American veteran health care costs ahead, as thousands of them continue to wait for benefits to materialise.

President Obama, members of Congress and Pentagon officials, Prime Minister Gillard, members of the Australia Parliament and top brass at the Australian Defence Force can posture about the sacrifices of troops in the war and how all people must support them now more than ever. Such declarations are an insult to anyone who was sent to that quagmire and now must deal with what is too often the shattered wreckage that is post-war life. What do American veterans receive when they return from the war ? The backend of a 800,000-plus backlog of other veterans waiting for disability benefits; in America the average wait for a response to a disability claim is about 260 days. In addition, the rates of military suicides, homelessness and unemployment are all at or near record highs. It is tragic what many veterans face upon return. If government officials - both in the United States and in Australia - were to put as much effort into caring for troops' well-being after returning from wars as they do for exploiting them before and during combat, these problems would not be so monumental.

And then, of course, there are the Afghan victims - by the hundreds of thousands, and millions of refugees.

On the most recent day when Americans stop every activity to remember the sacrifices made by their troops, new figures as at the end of May 2012 revealed the terrible toll of war is now leaving nearly half of all veterans filing for disability benefits.

The nation's newest veterans are the most medically and mentally troubled generation of former troops in history, with a staggering 45 per cent of the 1.6 million veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seeking compensation for injuries that they say are service-related. That is more than double the estimate of 21 per cent who filed such claims after the Gulf war in the early 1990s, top government officials said. These new veterans are also claiming eight to nine ailments on average, and the most recent ones over the last year are claiming 11 to 14. By comparison, Vietnam veterans are currently receiving compensation for fewer than four, on average, and those from the second world war and Korea, just two.

It is unclear how much worse off these new veterans are than their predecessors.

Many factors are driving the dramatic increase in claims - the weak economy, more troops surviving wounds, and more awareness of problems such as concussions and p**ost-traumatic stress disorder**. Almost one-third have been granted disability so far.

But there are other disabilities for which the new veterans are claiming benefits. Thus, over 400,000 new vets have mental health issues; more than 1,600 of them have lost a limb, many others have lost fingers or toes; at least 156 are blind and thousands of others have impaired vision; more than 177,000 have hearing loss and more than 350,000 report tinnitus or ringing in the ears; thousands are disfigured, as many as 200 of them requiring face transplants. Government officials and veterans' advocates say returned servicemen who were working but lost their jobs or can not find employment are increasingly seeking benefits. Payments range from US$ 127 a month for a 10 per cent disability to US$ 2,769 for a full one.

Then there is the financial cost of the war.

Here some figures are not likely easily to come by - the money spent and for which the C.I.A. need not account.

The Congressional Research Service has estimated that the dollar cost of the war to the United States alone is over US$ 527 billion through FY2012, and the office of the **Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction** has estimated that the United States and its allies will have spent some US$ 73 billion on aid alone - much of it again with little lasting benefit. Similar cost estimates are lacking for Pakistan, but they have also taken significant casualties and received substantial amounts of American aid. The war has consumed US$ 57 billion in American development aid. The U.S. military has spent more than US$ 527 billion trying to subdue and secure one of the most invaded countries in human history.

The Pentagon alone has sunk US$ 330 billion into Afghanistan. While lawmakers are loathe to be seen as letting the troops down, support for future spending of that order is all but inconceivable.

Fiscal pressures are compounded by Congress' mounting exasperation with what they see as Karzai's erratic behaviour and with growing recognition that Pakistan may never cooperate as desired against militants fuelling violence in Afghanistan.

The conflict has been grinding on in the background, costing about US$ 2 billion per week. The question comes easily: what would US$ 2 billion per week look like in American devastated communities, for schools, in creating jobs or in caring for the elderly ?

In cold cash, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost American taxpayers US$ 1.4 trillion. But that is only a down payment, according to the Congressional Budget Office, which estimates that the cost of health care for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans will reach between US$ 40 billion and US$ 55 billion.

Will the Prime Minister of Australia ever have time to read what now retired General John Cantwell had to say in an October 2012 article by the title *They died in vain*.

General Cantwell was from January 2010 to January 2011 the National Commander of Australian defence forces in what is commonly referred to in official circles as 'the Middle East Area of Operations'. As such, he was responsible for a portion of the globe slightly larger than Australia, although his observations refer mainly to the Province of Uruzgan.

A career military, he had gone to Afghanistan optimistic. He was "sure that [Australia's] campaign to defeat the Taliban and to help to train the Afghan army was both right and achievable."

But in Afghanistan he was "crushed by sadness at the loss of too many good men, disheartened by the incompetence and corruption of the Afghan government, and fearful that all the blood and tears expended would be wasted. Eighteen months later, the situation hardly appears better. The Afghan government is ineffective as ever, the Taliban remains a serious threat to security and now our troops confront a disturbing threat from within the ranks of the Afghan soldiers they are trying to train."

Of the country itself, General Cantwell writes that: "[It] is a basket case, riven by tribal and ethnic enmity, pray to the criminality associated with being the world's number one opium producer, and plagued by dysfunctional governance."

Furthermore, "it still has one of the world's highest infant mortality rates, an abominably low life expectancy, appalling levels of illiteracy, chronic health problems," and "the fate of Afghan women and girls remains one of subjugation and disentitlement."

Of the government he writes: "It beggars belief that Hamid Karzai, the bent and ineffectual president, could unite and lead the country if his illegitimate government were not propped up by the West."

The Afghan army, despite "tremendous efforts by Coalition trainers ... remains a force lacking quality leadership, in possession of only basic equipment and skills, and poorly motivated." And later on: "It would take years, *years*, more training to get the Afghan army to a state of real competence." [Emphasis in original]

As for the police service, "intimidated by the Taliban and undermined by corruption and poor discipline, ["it is highly unlikely that"] it will ever bring law and order to backwaters like Uruzgan."

Of the future ? In many ways, an active insurgency is the least of Afghanistan's problems.

Also, there is no prospect that Pakistan will stop harbouring and supporting the Taliban any time soon. A Pakistani general in the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, the

infamous I.S.I., once said to [General Cantwell]: “Pakistan and Afghanistan will still be neighbours long after the international community has had its fill and leaves. The Taliban will also still be there when you all go home.”

General Cantwell diffusedly criticised Australia’s assuming leadership in Uruzgan, that he had in fact advocated, but which was carried out reluctantly, poorly, at the wrong time, and in a way which embarrassed the troops on the ground. The United States took over, Australian officers simply turned to serve them.

And why should “a military man, a combat commander, and all that hairy-chested stuff” like himself - asked General Cantwell - be saying such things ?

“It’s because there is absolutely nothing in Afghanistan worth dying for, a part perhaps the act of saving another Australian’s life. [Thirty-nine] deaths are enough. I say this because I have seen, firsthand, what our war in Afghanistan costs.”

To conclude with the words of General Cantwell, “Despite the tired platitudes offered by the prime minister and her disenchanted defence minister about ‘staying the course’ in Afghanistan, it is impossible to justify any of the Australia lives already lost in Afghanistan and those that may yet to come.”

And the comments from one of the ‘stay-at-home Crusaders’ ? General Cantwell is “suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.” and “In July last year, he spent a week in a psychiatric ward and acknowledges that he is ‘officially mentally unwell’.”

The U.S. troops surge in Afghanistan ended at mid-September 2012. It was the responsibility of General John B. Allen, Commander of the N.A.T.O. and I.S.A.F. on whom Prime Minister Gillard would repeatedly wax so lyrical, lately in her Ministerial Statement of 31 October 2012. The conclusion was that conditions in Afghanistan are mostly worse than before it began. It was one which would not come from anti-war advocates, but relied on data released recently by the N.A.T.O. command.

According to most of the yardsticks chosen by the military - and not all - the surge fell short of its stated goal: stopping the Taliban’s momentum.

N.A.T.O. command noted that 'enemy' attacks from January to August 2012 were slightly lower, by 5 per cent, from that period last year; and that the past two Augusts showed a reduction in attacks of 30 per cent. But the more relevant comparison was to 2009, when Afghanistan looked like such a mess that President Obama substantially increased troop levels. And compared to 2009 Afghanistan still does not look improved.

Some details were significant: in August 2009 insurgents had attacked U.S.-and allied troops approximately 2,700 times. In August 2012 they attacked just short of 3,000 times. In August 2009 insurgents used just under 600 homemade bombs on U.S.-and allied forces. They used just over 600 homemade bombs on U.S.-and allied forces in August 2012.

Now that the surge was over, debate on what it added up to had begun. The end of direct U.S. combat in Afghanistan is scheduled for 2014, although the United States plans to keep substantial forces in Afghanistan beyond then. Meanwhile, the pathway 'out' of Afghanistan, training Afghan forces, is imperilled by some Afghan troops turning their guns on their U.S. and allied mentors.

With the surge of American troops over and the Taliban still a potent threat, American generals and civilian officials acknowledge that they have all but written off what was once one of the cornerstones of their strategy to end the war: bringing the Taliban to a negotiation table.

The once ambitious American plans for ending the war were now being replaced by the far more modest goal of setting the stage for the Afghans to work out a compromise among themselves in the years after most 'western' forces depart, and to ensure that Pakistan is party to any eventual settlement. Military and diplomatic officials in Kabul and in Washington said that despite attempts to engage directly with Taliban leaders this year, they now expect that any significant progress will come only after 2014, once the bulk of N.A.T.O. troops have left.

The failure to come to meaningful talks with the Taliban underscores the fragility of the gains claimed during the surge of American troops ordered by President Obama in 2009. The 30,000 extra troops had won back territory held by the Taliban, but by nearly all estimates had failed to deal a crippling blow.

Critics of the Obama Administration say the United States also weakened its own hand by agreeing to the 2014 deadline for its own involvement in combat operations, voluntarily ceding the prize the Taliban has been seeking for over a decade. The Obama Administration defends the deadline as crucial to persuade the Afghan government and military to assume full responsibility for the country, and politically necessary for Americans weary of what has already become the country's longest war.

All American commanders, from McChrystal, to Petraeus and now to Allen, have often repeated that the United States "is not going to kill its way out of Afghanistan." They have said that the Afghanistan war, like most insurgencies, could only end with a negotiation.

Now American officials say they have reduced their goals further - patiently to laying the groundwork for eventual peace talks after they leave. American officials say they can only hope that the Taliban will find the Afghan Army a more formidable adversary than they expect and be compelled, in the years after N.A.T.O. withdraws, to come to terms with what they now dismiss as a 'puppet' government.

The United States has not given up hoping on successful talks before that time. It agreed in September 2012 to set up a committee with Pakistan which would vet potential new Taliban interlocutors, and the Obama administration is considering whether to revive a proposed prisoner exchange with the insurgents which would reopen the preliminary discussions which had collapsed in March.

However, those are both seen as long-term efforts.

Bringing Pakistan into the search for Taliban contacts is also an uncertain strategy, American officials said. The details of the new vetting committee have yet to be worked out, and "if we are depending on Pakistan, it comes with an asterisk" one of the officials said. "We never know whether they will see it through."

The American shift towards a more peripheral role in peace efforts represents another retreat from Washington's once broad designs for Afghanistan, where the surge, along with a sharp escalation of night-time raids by Special Operations Forces against Taliban 'field commanders', were partly aimed at forcing the Taliban into negotiations, making a 'western' withdrawal more feasible.

With the end of this year's fighting season, the Taliban have weathered the biggest push the American-led coalition was going to make against them. A third of all American forces left by October 2012 and more of the 68,000 remaining may leave next year, with the goal that only a residual force of trainers and special operations troops will remain by the end of 2014.

Public statements by the Taliban could be taken as expression of defiance, even of mocking the attempts of the United States and of the followers in the Coalition. The Taliban issued a statement claiming that N.A.T.O. forces are "fleeing Afghanistan" in "humiliation and disgrace."

"With the help of Allah, the valiant Afghans under the Jihadi leadership of Islamic Emirate defeated the military might and numerous strategies of America and NATO alliance." the Taliban said in a statement issued on the eleventh anniversary of the invasion, 7 October 2012.

This year official statistics showed that deaths in the Afghan security forces are running five times higher than those for N.A.T.O., as the Afghans take on increasing responsibilities before the 'western' withdrawal.

The United States and N.A.T.O. position was that the Afghan forces will be capable of taking over the fight against the Taliban after 2014, but many analysts predict a bloody new multi-factional civil war.

When President Obama announced a 2014 withdrawal - sort of, as it turned out - he said: "We've now accepted that strategically we've gotten all we can." out of Afghanistan. "We now have a path out that we've committed to." he added. And he went on: "We're trying to leave, and have sufficient resources to cover our withdrawal. There's nothing particularly ennobling in that, or anything that makes you feel good, but at least we're leaving."

Prime Minister Gillard followed in the steps - of course.

Meanwhile, quite likely, 'western' soldiers will be killed in Afghanistan every day. People with good memory could reminisce Senator John Kerry's famous lament of Vietnam, in a 1971 testimony, almost four years before the final retreat from that devastated country and

the obvious defeat suffered by the United States. Asked Senator Kerry: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake ?"

Another important question is: what will 'the West' leave behind ?

Here is what the highly respectable International Crisis Group - an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict the President and Chief Executive of which from January 2000 to July 2009 was the former Australian Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans - had to say.

In the executive summary of a report issued on 8 October 2012 from Kabul and Brussels and titled *Afghanistan: The long, hard road to the 2014 transition* the Group wrote:

"Plagued by factionalism and corruption, Afghanistan is far from ready to assume responsibility for security when U.S. and NATO forces withdraw in 2014. That makes the political challenge of organising a credible presidential election and transfer of power from President Karzai to a successor that year all the more daunting. *A repeat of previous elections' chaos and chicanery would trigger a constitutional crisis, lessening chances the present political dispensation can survive the transition. In the current environment, prospects for clean elections and a smooth transition are slim. The electoral process is mired in bureaucratic confusion, institutional duplication and political machinations.* Electoral officials indicate that security and financial concerns will force the 2013 provincial council polls to 2014. *There are alarming signs Karzai hopes to stack the deck for a favoured proxy.* Demonstrating at least will to ensure clean elections could forge a degree of national consensus and boost popular confidence, but steps toward a stable transition must begin now to prevent a precipitous slide toward state collapse. Time is running out.

Institutional rivalries, conflicts over local authority and clashes over the role of Islam in governance have caused the country to lurch from one constitutional crisis to the next for nearly a decade. As foreign aid and investment decline with the approach of the 2014 drawdown, so, too, will political cohesion in the capital. To ensure political continuity and a stable security transition, action to correct flaws in the electoral framework and restore credibility to electoral and judicial institutions is needed well before the presidential and provincial council polls. Tensions have already begun to mount between the president and the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of the National Assembly), as debate over electoral and other

key legal reforms heats up. Opposition demands for changes to the structures of the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and an overhaul of the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) election mechanism have become more vigorous by the day.

There is also, as yet, no sign of an agreement on the timing of the 2014 elections or the following year's parliamentary elections, though President Karzai insisted on 4 October that the former would be held on time and "without interruption". The IEC has hedged on publicly announcing the planned postponement of the provincial council polls, for fear that such an announcement could deepen the political crisis. At a minimum, the IEC must announce a timetable and a plan for the 2014 elections that adhere closely to constitutional requirements by December 2012, and a new IEC chairman must be selected to replace the outgoing chairman, whose term expires in April 2013, as well as a new chief electoral officer.

It is a near certainty that under current conditions the 2014 elections will be plagued by massive fraud. Vote rigging in the south and east, where security continues to deteriorate, is all but guaranteed. High levels of violence across the country before and on the day of the polls are likely to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands more would-be voters. The IEC will likely be forced to throw out many ballots. This would risk another showdown between the executive, legislature and judiciary. Under the current constitution and electoral laws, the government is not equipped to cope with legal challenges to polling results. Nearly a decade after the first election, parliament and the president remain deeply divided over the responsibilities of constitutionally-mandated electoral institutions. The IEC, its credibility badly damaged after the fraudulent 2009 and 2010 elections, is struggling to redefine its role as it works to reform existing laws. There is also still considerable disagreement over whether the ECC should take the lead in arbitrating election-related complaints.

It will be equally important to decide which state institution has final authority to adjudicate constitutional disputes before the elections. The uncertainty surrounding the responsibilities of the Supreme Court versus those of the constitutionally-mandated Independent Commission for the Supervision of the Implementation of the Constitution (ICSIC) proved to be a critical factor in the September 2010 parliamentary polls. The Supreme Court's subsequent decision to establish a controversial special tribunal on elections raised serious questions about its own impartiality. Institutional rivalries between the high court and ICSIC have increased

considerably since then, with the Wolesi Jirga aggressively championing the latter's primacy in opposition to the president.

The tug of war between these two constitutionally-mandated institutions has extended to Supreme Court appointments; two of nine positions on the bench are held by judges whose terms have already expired, and the terms of three more expire in 2013. The ICSIC faces similar questions about its legitimacy, since only five of its required seven commissioners have been appointed by the president and approved by parliament. Ambiguities over the roles of the Supreme Court and the constitutional commission must be resolved well before the presidential campaign begins in earnest in early 2013. An important first step would be to appoint the required judges and commissioners.

Institutional rivalry between the high court and the constitutional commission, however, can no more be resolved by presidential decree than it can by a simple parliamentary vote. Constitutional change will ultimately be necessary to restore the Supreme Court's independence and to establish clear lines of authority between it and the ICSIC. Even if wholesale constitutional change is not possible in the near term, legal measures must be adopted within the next year to minimise the impact of institutional rivalry over electoral disputes and to ensure continuity between the end of Karzai's term and the start of the next president's term.

Although Karzai has signalled his intent to exit gracefully, fears remain that he may, directly or indirectly, act to ensure his family's continued majority ownership stake in the political status quo. This must be avoided. It is critical to keep discord over election results to a minimum; any move to declare a state of emergency in the event of a prolonged electoral dispute would be catastrophic. The political system is too fragile to withstand an extension of Karzai's mandate or an electoral outcome that appears to expand his family's dynastic ambitions. Either would risk harming negotiations for a political settlement with the armed and unarmed opposition. It is highly unlikely a Karzai-brokered deal would survive under the current constitutional scheme, in which conflicts persist over judicial review, distribution of local political power and the role of Islamic law in shaping state authority and citizenship. Karzai has considerable sway over the system, but his ability to leverage the process to his advantage beyond 2014 has limits. The elections must be viewed as an opportunity to break with the past and advance reconciliation.

Quiet planning should, nonetheless, begin now for the contingencies of postponed elections and/or imposition of a state of emergency in the run up to or during the presidential campaign season in 2014. The international community must work with the government to develop an action plan for the possibility that elections are significantly delayed or that polling results lead to prolonged disputes or a run-off. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) should likewise be prepared to organise additional support to Afghan forces as needed in the event of an election postponement or state of emergency; its leadership would also do well to assess its own force protection needs in such an event well in advance of the election.

All this will require more action by parliament, *less interference from the president* and greater clarity from the judiciary. Failure to move on these fronts could indirectly lead to a political impasse that would provide a pretext for the declaration of a state of emergency, a situation that would likely lead to full state collapse. Afghan leaders must recognise that the best guarantee of the state's stability is its ability to guarantee the rule of law during the political and military transition in 2013-2014. If they fail at this, that crucial period will at best result in deep divisions and conflicts within the ruling elite that the Afghan insurgency will exploit. At worst, it could trigger extensive unrest, fragmentation of the security services and perhaps even a much wider civil war. Some possibilities for genuine progress remain, but the window for action is narrowing." [Emphasis added throughout]

The International Crisis Group made a series of recommendations directed to the Independent Elections Commission, to the Parliament, to the international community, in particular the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, the International Security Assistance Force and other main donor institutions.

Speaking from Kabul, Ms. Candace Rondeaux, the Group's senior Afghanistan analyst, confirmed that "There is a real risk that the regime in Kabul could collapse upon NATO's withdrawal." ... "The window for remedial action is closing fast." ... "The Afghan army and police are overwhelmed and underprepared for the transition." ... "Another botched election and resultant unrest would push them to breaking point." ... "Today you have an economic crisis which is growing by the day, and there is a lot of fear among Afghans over the future of President Hamid Karzai's regime, and no one knows what is going to happen." ... "Instead what you have are the gears of transition working in reverse against the gears of transformation." ... "Everyone was hoping that 2014 would be the dawn of the

new age politically for the country. Now there is a great deal of concern that these elections may not even happen."

Both Karzai and the parliament have failed to take any serious steps towards preparing for a clean vote, Ms. Rondeaux said. "Karzai seems more interested in perpetuating his own power by any means rather than ensuring credibility of the political system and long-term stability of the country."

Karzai is constitutionally required to step down at the end of his second term in 2014, and has said he will do so, but there are growing fears that he might try to manipulate the polls to ensure the election of an ally, possibly one of his brothers.

"The danger is Karzai's top priority is maintaining control, either directly or via a trusted proxy." Ms. Rondeaux said. "He and other leading members of the elite may be able to cobble together a broad temporary alliance, but political competition is likely to turn violent on the heels of NATO's withdrawal." There was a strong possibility that Karzai will declare a state of emergency as a means of extending his power, which would accelerate state collapse and likely precipitate a civil war. "If that occurs, there would be few opportunities to reverse course in the near term. Securing the peace in Afghanistan would then remain at best a very distant hope." Ms. Rondeaux said.

The International Crisis Group is not alone in predicting trouble ahead. Gilles Dorronsoro, an Afghanistan expert with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, also forecast renewed strife and even a Taliban return to power. "After 2014, the level of US support for the Afghan regime will be limited and, after a new phase in the civil war, a Taliban victory will likely follow." Dorronsoro wrote in a recent analysis.

This sort of forecast contrasts sharply with assurances of a secure Afghan future by 'western' governments desperate to get out of the long war; but gloom is widespread.

Similarly, the outgoing head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Afghanistan said on the same day the Group's report was issued that for ordinary Afghans the conflict had become worse during his seven years in the post. "I am filled with concern as I leave this country." Reto Stocker said. "Since I arrived here in 2005, local armed groups

have proliferated, civilians have been caught between not just one but multiple front lines, and it has become increasingly difficult for ordinary Afghans to obtain health care."

The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has brought a humanitarian crisis for civilians and diminished hopes for the future, the International Committee of the Red Cross stated on 8 October 2012. "There have to be some things that are off limits, and interfering with health care is one of them. Attacks on health-care staff, vehicles and facilities cannot be considered part of the ordinary conduct of war. Health care must remain available to everyone who needs it. It must be provided impartially, on the basis of medical considerations only."

Stocker described a grim future for Afghan civilians, as they face a plethora of disasters. "People are not just suffering the effects of the armed conflict. Hardship arising from the economic situation, or from severe weather or natural disaster, has become more widespread, and hope for the future has been steadily declining."

The assessment from one of the largest humanitarian charities in Afghanistan sharply contradicts N.A.T.O. claims of progress in the 11-year campaign to defeat the Taliban and rebuild the country.

Stocker's remarks followed a recent rash of similarly bleak forecasts for Afghanistan's future as N.A.T.O. troops withdraw and prepare to hand over security duties to Kabul by the 2014-end.

With the Taliban undefeated and the government weak and corrupt, many Afghans are acutely concerned that the country could again plunge into civil war as thousands of N.A.T.O. troops leave. Stocker spoke on the same day that an International Crisis Group report warned that the Afghan government may fall apart as early as 2014.

Karzai's spokesman dismissed the International Crisis Group's report as "baseless". On the previous week the Afghan president had faced many predictions of chaos. Exasperated, he accused the international media of waging "psychological warfare" against his government. The doom-mongering was to put pressure on him to accept permanent United States military bases, he said.

Politicians in the Coalition still hoped that, by continuing to fund the Afghan forces and administration and by keeping a scaled-down deployment of 10,000 to 20,000 N.A.T.O. troops after 2014, it can still prop up the country.

Early in 2012, in Tokyo donors had promised civilian aid worth US$ 16 billion over the next four years and N.A.T.O. was trying to find another US$ 4 billion a year for the police and army.

The Afghan government was quick to label the predictions "nonsense and garbage". ... "Our nation was not born in 2002. We have a history of 5,000 years. We have fought against superpowers in the past. Our national police and army are ready to defend the country's soul and sovereignty." a statement said. The government statement asserted that forthcoming polls would be "free and fair and without any foreign interference." The government spokesman added that if the international community fulfilled its pledges of future support, N.A.T.O.'s withdrawal in 2014 would not make any difference.

Comments by cabinet ministers which were endorsed by President Karzai and reported by Afghan news agencies made clear that the most proximate concern for the government and especially Karzai was the negotiation of a bilateral security agreement with the United States for after 2014. The Afghan government appears to believe that there is a plot by the United States to weaken Afghanistan's standing in order to gain leverage in the negotiations.

"The U.S., by using the press, is waging a psychological war to attain the security agreement, and the published report and views of the International Crisis Group is part of this effort, and it is fully against existing realities in the country." said a report on the cabinet comments by the semi official government news service *Bakhtar*. The cabinet believes that 'western' news and research organisations "are aiming at creating concern and distrust among the people of Afghanistan." the *Bakhtar* report said.

A former spokesman for Mr. Karzai, Waheed Omar, said that many ministers believe that "the Western media is a tool of their governments' foreign policy and that the I.C.G. is not independent and that they are depicting Afghanistan's situation as grim so as to put the Afghan government in a position where it has to accept a security agreement that is more in America's interest than in the interest of Afghanistan."

The tone echoed Karzai's news conference during the course of which he had made similar accusations.

These reports in part were seen by Karzai as an affront, and that 'narrative' has been taken up by many others in the government, Afghan and 'western' analysts said. It is also an expression of frustration with the 'West' 's frequent criticism of the Afghan government.

In the upper house of Parliament, lawmakers on 9 October denounced the Group. "The I.C.G. report is shameless interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, and they want to start a psychological war against our people." said Senator Gulalai Akbari from Badakhshan Province in the country's north. Some lawmakers demanded an apology from the organisation; another said that "the hands working behind the scenes to devastate and destroy Afghanistan must be cut off." according to a rough transcript of the session prepared by the United Nations.

While the Group's report was bleak in tone, it was hardly different from other reports which have been released over the years and which trace the enormous difficulties that the Afghan government needs to overcome for the country to hold together. A report released in September by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, titled *Waiting for the Taliban in Afghanistan*, predicted at least as desolate a future, including the return of Taliban control in large swaths of the country and the likelihood they soon would be able to muster substantial forces and wrest control of some district centres from the government.

On his part N.A.T.O. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that he did not share the I.C.G.'s negative assessment. He told the B.B.C. that he was confident the Afghan security forces would be able to take charge after 2014.

Local news outlets in Kabul denounced 'western' research organisations and news media, and blasted them as spies and political agents. Under a photograph of Candace Rondeaux, the headlines in the newspaper *Weesa* screamed: "The head of the International Crisis Group in Kabul is doing espionage here." The paper is supported by expatriate Afghans, and its editor describes himself as independent.

Some Afghan analysts said they thought that the government was overreacting rather than taking concrete steps to try to avert the worst predictions. "I don't think that this or any

other report which follows it will have any negative impact on the self-confidence of the people of Afghanistan." said a well-known political analyst in Kabul. "The Afghan people already knew about the things which are described in the I.C.G. report." he said. "Unless the Afghan government brings the necessary reforms and gets a national and international agreement on peace talks, the transfer of power and elections, Afghanistan will descend into chaos."

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