

EPILOGUE: THE ZARDARI INTERREGNUM

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As I described earlier, General Pervez Musharraf acted swiftly and ruthlessly when he seized power to become Pakistan's fourth military dictator in October 1999 and proclaimed himself chief executive of Pakistan. Now, as I write the final words of this book, he has lost the confidence of two key board members—the United States and the Pakistan army, majority shareholders of Pakistan plc—and he accepted that his time had come. On August 18, 2008, after a rambling, incoherent address to the nation, replete with the most puerile self-justifications, he resigned. Had he done so when his term expired he would have spared the country some pain and me the task of writing an epilogue. But he was too seriously afflicted with the power disease and his mind remained impenetrable to the tormented cries from below.

As the country celebrated its sixty-first birthday on August 14, 2008, it became obvious that its official president had become completely isolated. To his chagrin, Pervez Musharraf was not allowed to take the salute at the official parade marking the event, while state television discussed plans to impeach him. Pakistan's venal politicians decided to move against him after the army chief, Ashfaq Kayani, let it be known that there would be no military action to defend his former boss.

Washington followed suit. In Kayani they have a professional and loyal military leader who they imagine will do their bidding. Earlier John Negroponte had wanted to retain Musharraf as long as Bush was in office, but they decided to let him go. Anne Patterson, the U.S. ambassador, and a few British diplomats working under her tried to negotiate a deal on behalf of Musharraf, but the politicians were no longer prepared to play ball. They insisted that he must leave the country. Sanctuaries in Manhattan, Texas, and the Turkish island of Büyükada are being actively considered. Ideally, the general would like a large estate in Pakistan, preferably near a golf course, but security considerations alone would make that unfeasible. There were

three attempts on his life when he was in power and protecting him after he goes would require an expensive security presence. Now he is going in disgrace, abandoned by most of his cronies who accumulated land and money during his term and are now moving toward the new powerbrokers. Amid the hullabaloo there was one hugely diverting moment involving pots and kettles: Asif Zardari, the caretaker-leader of the Peoples Party who runs the government and is the second richest man in the country (from funds he accrued when his late wife was prime minister), accused Musharraf of corruption and siphoning U.S. funds to private bank accounts. It is difficult for citizens to forbear inquiring by what black arts did Zardari (from a family bereft of wealth) acquire such an ample fortune. Their suspicions are severe and reasonable.

A small mystery remained. Why did the United States suddenly withdraw support from Musharraf? An answer was provided by Helene Cooper and Mark Mazzetti in *The New York Times* on August 26, 2008. The State Department, according to this report, was not in favor of an undignified and hasty departure, but unknown to them a hard-core neo-con faction led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to the Security Council, was busy advising Asif Zardari in secret and helping him plan the campaign to oust the quondam general:

Mr. Khalilzad had spoken by telephone with Mr. Zardari, the leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party, several times a week for the past month until he was confronted about the unauthorized contacts, a senior United States official said. Other officials said Mr. Khalilzad had planned to meet with Mr. Zardari privately next Tuesday while on vacation in Dubai, in a session that was canceled only after Richard A. Boucher, the assistant secretary of state for South Asia, learned from Mr. Zardari himself that the ambassador was providing "advice and help."

"Can I ask what sort of 'advice and help' you are providing?" Mr. Boucher wrote in an angry e-mail message to Mr. Khalilzad. "What sort of channel is this? Governmental, private, personnel?" Copies of the message were sent to others at the highest levels of the State Department; the message was provided to *The New York Times* by an administration official who had received a copy.

Khalilzad, an inveterate factionalist and a master of intrigue, had implanted Hamid Karzai in Kabul (with dire results as many in Washington now admit) and was livid with Musharraf for refusing to

give 100 percent support to his Afghan protégé. He now saw an opportunity to punish Musharraf and simultaneously try to create a Pakistani equivalent of Karzai. Zardari fit the bill perfectly. He is well suited to being a total creature of Washington. The Swiss government helpfully decided to release millions of dollars from Zardari's bank accounts that had, till now, been frozen. Like his late wife, Zardari, too, is now being laundered, just like the money he made when last in office as Minister for Investment. This weakness will make him a pliant president of Pakistan. Khalilzad, no doubt, argued that a puppet civilian is easier to manipulate than a retired general. But were Zardari to permit U.S. ground troops to enter the Frontier Province on search-and-destroy missions, his career would be short-lived and leave the Pakistan army close to a breaking point.

How would the Sharif brothers deal with the crisis? They made it clear that they would not compromise on restoring the judiciary to its previous status. Zardari and his cronies seem equally convinced by the opposite. They are only too happy to work with Musharraf's tame judges. Some of the latter are now denouncing the chief justice as not hailing from a proper class. Unlike them, he is the son of a lowly policeman and thus prejudiced against privilege. The widower and the general share an aversion to honest judges.

It is pointless to speculate whether Musharraf would have lasted nine years had it not been for 9/11 and the war on terror. A previous dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), had similarly become a vital cog in the imperial war machine during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The monsters spawned then were the perpetrators of the assault on the Pentagon in 2001. Poor Musharraf and his generals had to unravel the only victory the Pakistan army had ever won: the conquest of Kabul via the Taliban. In a complete about turn, Pakistani military bases were made available to the United States to occupy Afghanistan.

Ever since Zia's dictatorship, the soldiers had been inoculated with Islamist ideology. After 9/11, Musharraf was telling the same soldiers the target had been changed. They had to kill "terrorists," i.e., other Muslims. It almost cost him his life (two assassination attempts came close), but he remained loyal to Washington and vice versa. His Western allies saw no contradiction in backing a general when "democracy and human rights" were the virtues preached to the rest of the world. Warring against the jihadis made him unpopular with the soldiery and junior officers, who began to resign in droves.

As described earlier, it was his clash with a turbulent chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who had begun to issue judgments favoring victims of state brutality and corruption and the

disappearances of citizens in the name of the war on terror. The chief justice was sacked and angry lawyers began a campaign for his reinstatement. Musharraf backed down, only to impose a state of emergency and sack him and other judges again.

Had this happened in a country not favored by NATO (for example, Venezuela), all hell would have broken loose. Not in this case. In January 2008, the chief justice wrote to Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown, Condoleezza Rice, and the president of the European Parliament.

The letter, which remains unanswered, explained the real reasons for Musharraf's actions:

At the outset you may be wondering why I have used the words "claiming to be the head of state." That is quite deliberate. General Musharraf's constitutional term ended on November 15, 2007. His claim to a further term thereafter is the subject of active controversy before the Supreme Court of Pakistan. It was while this claim was under adjudication before . . . the Supreme Court that the general arrested a majority of those judges in addition to me on November 3, 2007. He thus himself subverted the judicial process, which remains frozen at that point. Besides arresting the chief justice and judges (can there have been a greater outrage?) he also purported to suspend the constitution and to purge the entire judiciary of all independent judges. Now only his hand-picked and compliant judges remain willing to "validate" whatever he demands. And all this is also contrary to an express and earlier order passed by the Supreme Court on November 3, 2007.

There is never a dull moment in the country. As it moved from a moth-eaten dictatorship to a moth-eaten democracy, the celebrations were muted. Many citizens wondered whether the change represented a forward movement at all.

Since the February 2008 elections the moral climate has deteriorated still further. All the ideals embraced by the hopeful youth and the poor of the country—political morality, legality, civic virtue, food subsidies, freedom, and equality of opportunity—once again lie at their feet, broken and scattered. The merry widower and his men are extremely unpopular. The worm-eaten tongues of chameleon politicians and resurrected civil servants are on daily display. Removing Musharraf has not won Zardari the badly needed popular support that he craves. He indicated his support for U.S. strategy by inviting Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai to attend his inauguration, the only foreign leader to do so. Twinning himself with a discredited satrap in Kabul may have impressed some in Washington, but it only further decreased support for the widower Bhutto in his own country.

Musharraf's departure highlighted other problems that confront the country, which is in the grip of a food and power crisis that is creating severe problems in every city. Inflation is out of control. The price of gas (used for cooking in many homes) has risen by 30 percent. Wheat, the staple diet of most people, has seen a 20 percent price hike since November 2007 and while the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization admits that the world's food stocks are at record lows there is an additional problem in Pakistan.

Too much wheat is being smuggled into Afghanistan to serve the needs of the NATO armies. The poor are the worst hit, but middle-class families are also affected and according to a June 2008 survey, 86 percent of Pakistanis find it increasingly difficult to afford flour on a daily basis, for which they blame their own new government.

Other problems persist. The politicians remain divided on the restoration of the judges sacked by Musharraf. The chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, is the most respected person in the country. Zardari is reluctant to see him back at the head of the Supreme Court. A possible compromise might be to offer him the presidency. It would certainly unite the country for a short time. And there is the army. In July 2008, the country's powerless prime minister, Yousuf Gilani, went on a state visit to the United States. On July 29, he was questioned by Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations:

HAASS: Let me ask the question a different way then [laughter],

beyond President Musharraf, which is whether you think now in the army there is a broader acceptance of a more limited role for the army. Do you think now the coming generation of army officers accepts the notion that their proper role is in the barracks rather than in politics?

GILANI: Certainly, yes. Because of the February 18 election of this year, we have a mandate to the moderate forces, to the democratic forces in Pakistan. And the moderate forces and the democratic forces, they have formed the government. And therefore the people have voted against dictatorship and for democracy, and therefore, in future even the present of—the chief of the army staff is highly professional and is fully supporting the democracy.

This is gibberish that convinces nobody. Over the past fifty years the United States has worked mainly with the Pakistan army. This has been its preferred instrument, even though it appreciates a civilian counterforce to further pressure the military. The change in Pakistan was considered necessary so that nothing else changed. The question being asked is how long it will be before the military is back. The tragic circle of Pakistani politics shows no signs of being squared.

After the fall of Musharraf, demands to reinstate the chief justice grew even more vocal. They were resisted by Zardari and his supporters. Finally the new dispensation behaved as it had done in the past and withdrew all support from the chief justice while simultaneously breaking the unity of the judiciary and waning a whole group of judges who had hitherto been disaffected away from the chief justice. There were angry scenes in Islamabad where lawyers tore down posters with Zardari's image and burned a makeshift effigy.

When I was in Lahore in February 2009, the lawyers were threatening a new set of public demonstrations and planning a long march from Lahore to Islamabad, but my own impression was that a great deal of steam had gone out of the movement. Where Musharraf had failed to tame the judges, his civilian successor appeared to have succeeded. A month later, Aitzaz Ahsan, an important leader of Zardari's party who had backed the judges and insisted both at home and in Washington that an independent judiciary was vital to the country's future, had been expelled by the party's Central Executive Committee.

On the domestic front Zardari and his government demonstrated that they had learned nothing and forgotten nothing from their previous stint in office. In other words, the loss of power was the

worst of misfortunes only because it meant the loss of money. For the ruling elite—military and civilian—an umbilical cord made of piano wire ties power to the accumulation of wealth. Barely a year in power, Zardari is up to his old tricks again and instances of unrelenting avarice are commonly cited. Alas there are few, if any, respectable members of the National Assembly or senators from the Peoples Party capable of mounting a challenge to the designs of old corruption that dominates the organization. There is no sense of honor in politics anywhere. It would be overoptimistic to expect it to mushroom suddenly in Pakistan. Most parliamentarians, if not awed by the frown of power, can be bought with foreign bank accounts.

Meanwhile the social infrastructure of the state has virtually collapsed: food shortages are combined with those of water and electricity, crime is at an all-time high, and living conditions for the vast majority of Pakistanis have reached exploding point. Karachi, the country's largest city, is reminiscent of Naples. It is run by a secular party (MQM) in alliance with Zardari's local cronies. It uses violence to preserve its power and protection rackets on every level to keep itself in funds. The populace, helpless and crushed, alternates between rage and grief. It is not strong enough to impose its own will on the situation. This is the sort of vacuum that creates an opening for religious warlords in the North-West Frontier. All they offer is a life dominated by their particular interpretations of Islamic law. Against this a government that has no plan to improve the lives of its people can offer nothing. It realizes that killing more people is creating dissension inside the army and so it capitulates.

Much of the attack on the religious warlords centers on their attitude toward women. If it were only them Pakistan's problems on gender disparities would not be so great. But the traditional tribal solutions favored by Baitullah Masood and Fazlullah in the Swat/Malakand area of the North-West Frontier Province are simply a variant of what exists elsewhere in the region.

On the face of it, the South Asian subcontinent has a surprisingly good gender-power ratio: More women leaders than any other part of the world and four states personified by strong women. India and Pakistan have had a woman prime minister each—Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto—although both were tragically assassinated by political opponents; Bangladesh has had two—Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed—the latter was reelected in January 2009; Sri Lanka has had a woman president as well as a prime minister—Sirimavo Bandaranaike and, later, her daughter Chandrika. But most of these powerful godmothers did little to improve the condition of their sisters. Much of South Asia remains time-warped, the least gender sensitive region in the world with the partial exceptions of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where there are more literate women than men. In Pakistan, gripped by a severe economic crisis and spillage from the war in Afghanistan, attacks on women have become more frequent.

As far back as the twelfth century, the Spanish Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd—known to the Latin world as Averroes and disliked by fundamentalist clerics of every stripe—bewailed the status of women, arguing against societies that denied half their population equal rights and were, as a result, destined to petrify:

In these (our) states, the ability of women is not known, because they are merely used for procreation. They are therefore placed at the service of their husbands and relegated to the business of procreation, child rearing, and breastfeeding. But this denies them their other activities because women are considered unfit for any of the human virtues.

He knew. From his perch as a *qadi* (senior judge) in Córdoba and Seville, he observed how privileged women belonging to the nobility could override societal norms, preside over salons, flaunt their lovers in public, and write erotic poetry. It was the fate of the majority of women that concerned him. Times have changed for women, at least in his part of the world, though Spain remains divided: Pedro Almodóvar versus the Church. The feminist heaven-stormers of the

seventies, who proclaimed the freedom of the heart and the liberation of the body did leave an impact, but unevenly and not everywhere. A thousand years after Ibn Rushd's complaint, the condition of women in large parts of South Asia continues to deteriorate.

An old Telugu proverb from South India—"bringing up a girl is like watering the plant in your neighbor's garden"—applies to the entire subcontinent: Class, caste, tribalism, tradition, religion all help to institutionalize elite rule as patriarchy. "Honor" killings are usually family murders reported irregularly in the Pakistani press. A parent or a brother decide to punish a daughter or sister who defies social norms by a refusal to do their bidding and marry a man they have chosen for her, or if, after a violent and bloody marriage, she decides to divorce her husband. Family "honor" is preserved by her. The killer is usually acquitted by a male judiciary incapable of defying tradition. More than a hundred such murders were officially reported in 2008: all 107 victims were women, fifty-four of whom were married.

Dowry deaths—where the husband's family pockets the dowry and burns the bride—have long been common in Northern India. Until 2005 Nepal had institutionalized a unique form of discrimination against women: menstruating Hindu women were locked in cowsheds, subjected to verbal abuse, and given unhygienic food until they were "clean" again, a torture that lasted four days.

On rare occasions when legal protection becomes impossible, even in Pakistan, the killer-patriarchs throw themselves into the receptive arms of obscurantism. And why not? Each of the three monotheist religions lays down vicious punishments against adultery. The book of Leviticus (20:10) stipulates that both "the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." The Koran has nothing original to add. Not that the monotheists are alone in subjugating women. Hindu custom once decreed the "self-immolation" of widows on the funeral pyre where their dead husbands were cremated. Had Lord Bentinck not banned the procedure in the mid-nineteenth century many a forlorn widow would, no doubt, have mounted the funeral pyre. The Hindu tradition still frowns on widow remarriage. Hindu fundamentalists have attempted to revive the custom, but with limited success.

Pakistan has the unique distinction of being the only South Asian country where it's legal to discriminate against women. This was institutionalized via a set of constitutional amendments during the period of General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, which brutalized the country's political culture: there were public hangings and floggings of

criminals and dissidents. In 1979 the “Hudood Ordinance” repealed previous laws relating to rape. General Zia was determined to “Islamize” the country, and together with the creation of jihadi groups to fight Charlie Wilson’s war in Afghanistan measures were taken on the domestic front that have proved difficult to reverse. A raped woman could no longer testify against her violator because she was now considered only half a witness. Four adult males were required to corroborate her evidence. By alleging rape, which she was not in a position to prove, the woman admitted to intercourse rendering her liable to prosecution. Add to this the fact that sexual assaults on women are an everyday crime: the Human Rights Commission estimates a rape every three hours. Today, more than 50 percent of women in prison are those accused of adultery (i.e., unproven rape) and are awaiting verdicts. Many of them languish in jail for several months and sometimes years before their case is heard. Acquittals are rare and the most lenient sentence is a year in prison.

Often poor women, who go to a police station and charge a man with rape, are subjected to further sexual abuse by the police, incidents of which multiplied dramatically after the “Islamic laws” were promulgated. Neither Benazir Bhutto nor General Musharraf managed to repeal the anti-women ordinances when they were in power. This gives a carte blanche to honor killers and anyone else. As social and economic conditions deteriorate for a vast majority of the population, women become even more vulnerable.

The treatment of women as subhuman can also be seen in the statistics related to acid and kerosene burn victims. Young girls and women between the ages of fourteen to twenty-five are the usual target of this particular crime. The aim is to disfigure the face and burn the genital region. The reasons vary from case to case: jealousy, imagined infidelity, economic need to get a new bride and dowry, wives refusing sexual favors, and so on. The situation was so bad that the Depilex Smileagain Foundation was created in 2003 as a support group for women who are victims of this type of violence. A few years ago, the Human Rights Commission based in Lahore noted that:

Woman’s subordination remained so routine by custom and traditions, and even putatively by religion, that much of the endemic domestic violence against her was considered normal behavior. . . . A sample survey showed 82 percent of women in rural Punjab feared violence resulting from husbands’ displeasure over minor matters; in the most developed urban areas 52 percent admitted being beaten by husbands.

These statistics indicate that the problem transcends class. It is not the case that the rich and nouveau riche layers are, in general, any more enlightened when it comes to women. For instance, an odious custom in the southern province of Sindh that is restricted to the landed gentry involves marrying off young women to the Koran. This has no religious or legal sanction whatsoever and is denounced by both clerics and liberal reformers, but it occurs nonetheless. Reformers believe that such marriages are not uncommon. There is a proper ceremony. The young bride is ritually bathed after which her husband, the Koran, is put in front of her. She will have to read it every day. Statistics are unavailable, but the practice was highlighted a few years ago. In 2005, Qaisra Sharaz published her novel *The Holy Woman*, which narrates the story of a young, educated, highly intelligent woman married in this fashion. The reason for these “marriages” is simple. It’s a male device to prevent a sister or daughter from taking her share of the property when she weds. Leading members of Parliament, including the ruling Peoples Party of the Bhutto family, indulge in this grotesque perversion though they try to keep it secret. There have also been reported instances of women being married to trees, which is only marginally less repulsive.

The political resistance has been episodic and the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) created in the eighties was vociferous but confined to educated, middle- and upper-middle-class women, who are relatively privileged. There are numerous examples of strong and powerful women, young and old, who battle against prejudice.

The feminist poet Fehmida Riaz turned the literary world upside down by her outraged defiance of the state. In her public statements and her writings she denounced the political and religious elites for justifying the subjugation of women. As a result she had to leave the country for a while. I once asked her to explain the anger. With a smile half-friendly and half-ironic, she replied, “I’m not, but many women are burdened with sour-faced husbands of foul disposition, permanently grouchy and jealous, suspicious, dull, lazy in the house, and violent at every possible opportunity. They see women as a necessary evil.”

The women in her poetry were not beautiful objects created for lusting males, but feisty and independent humans in their own right, with their own desires and needs, many of which were unrelated to men. Her poetry remains a testament to women’s anger as in “She Is a Woman Impure”:

*She is a woman impure
Trapped in the cycle of blood*

*In the chain of years and months
Burning in the fire of lust
Seeking her pleasures
Mistress of the devil
Following his ways
Towards that elusive goal
Which has no route
That meeting of light and fire
Which is so hard to find.
Boiling blood inside her veins
Has torn her breasts,
The thorns on her way
Have severed her womb,
On her body's shame
There is no shade of sanctity,
But, O gods who rule this earth,
You shall never see
This woman impure
With a prayer on her lips
As a supplicant at your door.*

Another public, though less vociferous, critic is the artist Shahzia Sikander (some of whose work can be seen at the Whitney Museum in New York). Her grandfather was a strict Wahhabi, but she was lucky. He was unusual in believing that “women should be nurtured, be heard, and be financially independent.” Her family provided her with an education that allowed her to end up at the National College of Arts in Lahore where she blossomed under the care of intelligent teachers and is today one of a number of gifted artists being produced in the country. Her inspiration comes from the tradition of Mughal miniatures, which were often explicit in portraying lovers, but she subverts tradition through humor, as in her painting “What Is Under the Blouse? What Is Under the Dress?”

What of the honor killings where a woman can be bumped off at will by her male relatives or her in-laws? Some of the recent cases have been horrific, but even if we double the reported incidents the figures would reach six hundred women killed each year. Horrific though this is, it pales when compared to the fact that every twenty minutes a young mother dies because the health facilities are primitive. According to health workers, between twenty-five and thirty thousand women lose their lives each year because Pakistan lacks a basic social infrastructure, a view confirmed by a special study carried out by the Harvard School of Public Health. It was confirmed a few

weeks ago while I was in Lahore and was told by a health inspector that there is fungus on the walls in the only operating room of the government-owned Mayo Hospital. There is no running water either. A water carrier comes in when required and doles it out from an oilskin just as his forebears once did in medieval times.

How is one supposed to begin to put a stop to all this? Charity and NGOs are not the solution. Many in Pakistan feel used by the United States and offers of help on this front are perceived with suspicion. However, Bangladesh (once part of Pakistan) has demonstrated how gains can be made.

The female literacy rate in Bangladesh is over 49 percent, while male literacy is a few points lower at 47 percent. The reason is simple. For the past few decades, particular emphasis has been placed on female education, as part of population control policy, health improvement, and gender empowerment efforts. When women acquire literacy, they tend to have fewer children. Also, the family's health improves when the mother is educated and a breadwinner. The mother is regarded as the most central figure in a family. Men often abandon the family or are more likely to breakdown in a crisis situation, but the mother is the one who holds the family together and is the primary nurturer. The birth rate is now down to 2.7 percent from 6.2 percent in the seventies according to the CIA World Factbook.

In other words, what is required is political will and social expenditure on a level that matches military spending to lay the foundations of a modern society whose citizens can enter this century. Of the \$11 billion provided by the United States to Pakistan since September 2001, \$8 billion was spent on armaments and \$100 million supposedly went to education and even less on health. And that, incidentally, is the only way to reduce and possibly eliminate the influence of religious extremists, some of whose more crazed adherents are currently hard at work razing girls' schools to the ground in the beautiful valley of Swat.

At a recent wedding in Lahore, where both bride and groom belonged to the super-rich, millions were expended on flying in European food from Dubai. The decorative theme was the Palace of Versailles during Marie Antoinette's time. And this in a country where 60 percent of children who survive are born either moderately or severely stunted. The condition and treatment of women is but one outcome of the permanent social crisis that afflicts the country.

While some inside his own party see Zardari as a petty usurper, as long as he has the backing of the U.S. embassy his position is considered impregnable. The reason for U.S. support is hardly a secret. Washington needed an instrument, however crude, as a fallback against total reliance on the military. It's their bad luck that the only person on offer was the discredited husband of a slain politician, but he will be used until it is time for him to be discarded. As I have argued throughout this book, it was always thus. The past, the present, the future is mortgaged to Washington. And when the latter is engaged, directly or indirectly, in the region, its demands become ever more unreasonable and are not amenable to the inquisition of truth. American foreign policy determines the domestic and external relations of Pakistan. The war in Afghanistan has now moved center stage. And so has Pakistan. There is a new U.S. administration. What will or should change? To recapitulate: Afghanistan has been almost continuously at war for thirty years, longer than both World Wars and the American war in Vietnam combined. Each occupation of the country has mimicked its predecessor. A tiny interval between wars saw the imposition of a malignant social order, the Taliban, with the help of the Pakistani military and the late Benazir Bhutto, the prime minister who approved the Taliban takeover in Kabul.

It is no secret that over the past two years, the U.S.-NATO occupation of that country has run into serious military problems. Given a severe global economic crisis and the election of a new American president—a man separated in style, intellect, and temperament from his predecessor—the possibility of a serious discussion about an exit strategy from the Afghan disaster hovers on the horizon. The predicament the United States and its allies find themselves in is not an inescapable one, but a change in policy, if it is to matter, cannot be of the cosmetic variety. I have been criticized for preaching to the damned and warned that it is to labor in vain, but what if it is? Anything that can help to bring war and occupation to an end and save human lives is worth the effort.

Washington's hawks will argue that, while bad, the military situation is, in fact, still salvageable. This may be technically accurate, but it would require the carpet-bombing of southern Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, the destruction of scores of villages and small towns, the killing of untold numbers of Pashtuns, and the dispatch to the region of at least 200,000 more troops with all their attendant equipment and air and logistical support. The political consequences

of such a course are so dire that even Dick Cheney, the closest thing to Dr. Strangelove that Washington has yet produced, was uncharacteristically cautious when it came to suggesting a military solution to the conflict.

It has, by now, become obvious to the Pentagon that Afghan president Hamid Karzai and his family cannot deliver what is required, and yet despite the bipartisan character of the Obama presidency, it is probably far too late to replace Karzai with the former UN ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. On his part, fighting for his political (and probably physical) existence, Karzai continues to protect his brother Ahmad Wali Karzai, accused of being involved in the country's staggering drug trade, but has belatedly sacked Hamidullah Qadri, his transport minister, for corruption. Qadri was taking massive kickbacks from a company flying pilgrims to Mecca. Is nothing sacred? In her confirmation testimony to the U.S. Senate, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted that Afghanistan was a narco-state and made little effort to conceal who was responsible. Karzai's days may be numbered.

Of course, axing one minister is like whistling in the wind, given the levels of corruption reported in Karzai's government, which, in any case, controls little of the country. The Afghan president parries Washington's thrusts by blaming the U.S. military for killing too many civilians from the air. The bombing of the village of Azizabad in Herat province in August 2008, which led to ninety-one civilian deaths (of which sixty were children), was only the most extreme of such recent acts. Karzai's men, hurriedly dispatched to distribute sweets and supplies to the survivors, were stoned by angry villagers.

Given the thousands of Afghans killed in recent years, it is small wonder that support for the neo-Taliban is increasing, even in non-Pashtun areas of the country. Many Afghans hostile to the old Taliban still support the resistance simply to make it clear that they are against the helicopters and missile-armed unmanned aerial drones that destroy homes, and to "Big Daddy" who wipes out villages, and to the flames that devour children.

In February 2008, Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell presented a bleak survey of the situation on the ground to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence:

Afghan leaders must deal with the endemic corruption and pervasive poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. Ultimately, defeating the insurgency will depend heavily on the government's ability to improve security, deliver services, and expand development for economic opportunity.

Although the international forces and the Afghan National Army continue to score tactical victories over the Taliban, the security situation has deteriorated in some areas in the south and Taliban forces have expanded their operations into previously peaceful areas of the west and around Kabul. The Taliban insurgency has expanded in scope despite operational disruption caused by the ISAF [NATO forces] and Operation Enduring Freedom operations. The death or capture of three top Taliban leaders last year—their first high-level losses—does not yet appear to have significantly disrupted insurgent operations.

Since then the situation has only deteriorated further, leading to calls for sending in yet more American and NATO troops—and creating ever deeper divisions inside NATO itself. In recent months, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British ambassador to Afghanistan, wrote a French colleague (in a leaked memo) that the war was lost and more troops were not a solution, a view reiterated recently by Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, the British defense chief, who came out in public against a one-for-one transfer of troops withdrawn from Iraq to Kabul. He put it this way:

I think we would all take some persuading that there would have to be a much larger British contingent there. . . . So we also have to get ourselves back into balance; it's crucial that we reduce the operational tempo for our armed forces, so it cannot be, even if the situation demanded it, just a one-for-one transfer from Iraq to Afghanistan, we have to reduce that tempo.

The Spanish government is considering an Afghan withdrawal and there is serious dissent within the German and Norwegian foreign policy elites. The Canadian foreign minister has already announced that his country will not extend its Afghan commitment beyond 2011. And even if the debates in the Pentagon have not been aired in public, it's becoming obvious that, in Washington, too, some see the war as unwinnable.

Enter former Iraq commander General David Petraeus, center stage as the new CENTCOM commander. Ever since the “success” of “the surge” he oversaw in Iraq (a process designed to create temporary stability in that ravaged land by buying off the opposition and, among other things, the selective use of death squads), Petraeus sounds, and behaves, more and more like Lazarus on returning from the dead—and before his body could be closely inspected.

The situation in Iraq was so dire that even a modest reduction in casualties was seen as a massive leap forward. With increasing

outbreaks of violence in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, however, the talk of success sounds ever hollower. To launch a new “surge” in Afghanistan now by sending more troops there will simply not work, not even as a public relations triumph. Perhaps some of the one hundred advisers that General Petraeus has just appointed will show this to him in forceful terms.

Barack Obama would be foolish to imagine that Petraeus can work a miracle cure in Afghanistan. The cancer has spread too far and is affecting U.S. troops as well. If the American media chose to interview active-duty soldiers in Afghanistan (on promise of anonymity), they might get a more accurate picture of what is happening inside the U.S. Army there.

I learned a great deal from Jules, a twenty-year-old American soldier I met recently in Canada. He became so disenchanting with the war that he decided to go AWOL, proving—at least to himself—that the Afghan situation was not an inescapable predicament. Many of his fellow soldiers, he claims, felt similarly, hating a war that dehumanized both them and the Afghans. “We just couldn’t bring ourselves to accept that bombing Afghans was no different from bombing the landscape” was the way he summed up the situation.

Morale inside the army there is low, he told me. The aggression unleashed against Afghan civilians often hides a deep depression. He does not, however, encourage others to follow in his footsteps. As he sees it, each soldier must make that choice for himself, accepting with it the responsibility that going AWOL permanently entails. Jules was convinced, however, that the war could not be won and did not want to see any more of his friends die. That’s why he was wearing an “Obama out of Afghanistan” T-shirt.

Before he revealed his identity, I mistook this young soldier—a Filipino-American born in Southern California—for an Afghan. His features reminded me of the Hazara tribesmen he must have encountered in Kabul. Trained as a mortar gunner and paratrooper from Fort Benning, Georgia, he was later assigned to the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg. Here is part of the account he offered me:

I deployed to southeastern Afghanistan in January 2007. We controlled everything from Jalalabad down to the northernmost areas of Kandahar province in Regional Command East. My unit had the job of pacifying the insurgency in Paktika, Paktia, and Khost provinces—areas that had received no aid but had been devastated during the initial invasion. Operation Anaconda [in 2002] was supposed to have

wiped out the Taliban. That was the boast of the military leaders, but ridiculed by everyone else with a brain.

He also spoke of how impossible he found it to treat the Afghans as subhumans:

I swear I could not for a second view these people as anything but human. The best way to fashion a young hard DICK like myself—DICK being an acronym for ‘dedicated infantry combat killer’—is simple and the effect of racist indoctrination. Take an empty shell off the streets of L.A. or Brooklyn, or maybe from some Podunk town in Tennessee . . . and these days America isn’t in short supply. . . . I was one of those No Child Left Behind products. . . .

Anyway, you take this empty vessel and you scare the living shit out of him, break him down to nothing, cultivate a brotherhood and camaraderie with those he suffers with, and fill his head with racist nonsense like all Arabs, Iraqis, Afghans are Hajj. Hajj hates you. Hajj wants to hurt your family. Hajj children are the worst because they beg all the time. Just some of the most hurtful and ridiculous propaganda, but you’d be amazed at how effective it’s been in fostering my generation of soldiers.

As this young man spoke to me, I felt he should be testifying before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The effect of the war on those carrying out the orders is leaving scars just as deep as the imprints of previous imperial wars. Change we can believe in must include the end of this, which means, among other things, a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Earlier I have argued that it is necessary to involve Afghanistan’s neighbors in a political solution that ends the war, preserves the peace, and reconstructs the country. Iran, Russia, India, and China, as well as Pakistan, need to be engaged in the search for a political solution that would sustain a genuine national government for a decade after the withdrawal of the Americans, NATO, and their quisling regime. However, such a solution is not possible within the context of the plans proposed by both present Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and President Barack Obama, which focus on a new surge of American troops in Afghanistan.

The main task at hand should be to create a social infrastructure and thus preserve the peace, something that the West and its horde of attendant nongovernmental organizations have failed to do. School buildings constructed, often for outrageous sums, by foreign companies that lack furniture, teachers, and kids are part of the

surreal presence of the West which cannot last.

Whether you are a policy maker in the next administration or an AWOL veteran of the Afghan war in Canada, Operation Enduring Freedom of 2001 has visibly become Operation Enduring Disaster. Less clear is whether the Obama administration can truly break from past policy or will just create a military-plus add-on to it. Only a total break from the catastrophe that George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld created in Afghanistan will offer pathways to a viable future.

For this to happen, both external and domestic pressures will probably be needed. China is known to be completely opposed to a NATO presence on, or near, its borders, but while Beijing has proved willing to exert economic pressure to force policy changes in Washington—as it did when the Bank of China “cut its exposure to agency debt last summer,” leaving U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson with little option but to functionally nationalize the mortgage giants—it has yet to use its diplomatic muscle in the region.

But don't think that will last forever. Why wait until then? Another external pressure will certainly prove to be the already evident destabilizing effects of the Afghan war in Pakistan, a country in a precarious economic state, with a military facing growing internal tensions, the reasons for which are obvious.

Globalizers often speak as though U.S. hegemony and the spread of capitalism were the same thing. This was certainly the case during the Cold War, but the twin aims of yesteryear now stand in something closer to an inverse relationship. For, in certain ways, it is the very spread of capitalism that is gradually eroding U.S. hegemony in the world. Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin's triumph in Georgia was a dramatic signal of this fact. The American push into the Greater Middle East in recent years, designed to demonstrate Washington's primacy over the Eurasian powers, has descended into remarkable chaos, necessitating support from the very powers it was meant to put on notice.

In June 2008, two F-15 bombers dropped five-hundred-pound bombs in Pakistan killing eleven soldiers and a major from the Frontier Corps. The Pentagon described the action as “a legitimate strike in self-defense,” leading Brian Cloughley, an extremely conservative historian of the Pakistan army (and a former commandant of the Australian Psychological Operations Unit in Vietnam) to write:

One can only regard such utterances with contempt, because those

who spoke in such a way, and those who ordered them to say what they did, have no concept of loyalty to a friendly country. Nor, for that matter, do they take the slightest heed of international law and custom. The Pentagon quickly distributed a video showing an attack that was said to be a strike on an “enemy” position. There was no indication of where it was, when it was, what ordnance was used, or results of the attack. It was a fatuously amateur exercise in attempted damage control. And of course, later, in the inevitable reassessment (for which read: “We’ve been found out and had better think up a more believable version of the lies we told”), it was revealed that “a U.S. Air Force document indicates bombs were dropped on buildings near the border, and Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman conceded there may have been another strike that occurred ‘outside the view of the drone’s camera.’”

Zardari’s ambassador in Washington, Husain Haqqani, merely denied that the air strikes had been intentionally hostile and stressed the “improving” partnership between the two countries. Cloughley’s links to GHQ in Islamabad stretch back several decades and it was clear he was giving the view of many senior officers in the Pakistan army, men who fear that such actions and the alliance with Washington will undermine the much-vaunted unity of the military high command, with unpredictable and dangerous consequences.

The key to Pakistan, as always, is with the army. If the already heightened U.S. raids inside the country continue to escalate, that much-vaunted unity of the military high command might come under real strain. At a meeting of corps commanders in Rawalpindi on September 12, 2008, Pakistani Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kayani received unanimous support for his relatively mild public denunciation of the recent U.S. strikes inside Pakistan in which he said the country’s borders and sovereignty would be defended “at all cost.” How can they be if the country’s sovereignty has already been so severely breached. All the official complaints and pleas to the United States by generals and politicians regarding the drone warfare and civilian casualties are essentially designed for public consumption inside Pakistan. This has become even more obvious once Senator Dianne Feinstein revealed in February 2009 that the drones were being dispatched from military bases inside Pakistan. Within weeks their location had been identified via Google Earth and was widely circulated in cyberspace.

There are three interrelated power blocs in Pakistan. Of these the U.S. lobby is the most influential, the most public, and the most hated. It is currently running the country. The Saudis, who use a

combination of wealth and religion to get their way, are second in the pecking order and less unpopular. The Chinese lobby is virtually invisible, never interferes in internal politics, and for that reason is immensely respected, especially within the army; but it is also the least powerful outside military circles. During the last years of the Cold War, the interests of the three lobbies coincided. Not now. The war on terror has changed all that.

What is missing is a Pakistan lobby, a strong group within the ruling class that puts the interests and needs of the country and its citizens above all else. A survey carried out last May for the New America Foundation revealed that 28 percent of Pakistanis favor a military role in politics, as compared to 45 percent in August 2007; that 52 percent regard the United States as responsible for the violence in Pakistan; and that 74 percent oppose the war on terror in Afghanistan. A majority favors a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Eighty percent hold the government and local businessmen responsible for food scarcity and only 11 percent see India as the main enemy. Here we have the basis for a dual settlement, but none of this appeals to the country's rulers who prefer to live in a bubble. The problem with bubbles is that they burst. Zardari's Pakistan will stumble on, its people trapped between the hammer of a military dictatorship and the anvil of political corruption, but for how long?