

# How to “Win” In Afghanistan? (And How to Persuade a Sceptical Public)

[James Gray](#)

**T**here is a churn of emotions among the people of my constituency in Wootton Bassett as we stand in the High Street week by week; paying our silent tributes to the returning bodies of our servicemen. Great sorrow, of course, for the young life that has been snatched away, and for the grieving relatives and friends; immense pride at the very professional job which our troops are doing in Helmand; desperation that this Government has failed to reinforce them properly or give the soldiers the equipment that they need and deserve; and some secret pride at the way that this little market town has led the nation and the world in grieving and honouring our dead.

But even a good proportion of the very patriotic people of Wootton Bassett are also quietly despairing at whether or not the war can be “won” and are calling for our troops to be withdrawn. In that, as in their grief, they are broadly representative of the wider electorate. “Why are we in Afghanistan?” They ask; “Can we win?” “How long will it go on for?” “How many more must die?” “If the Russians couldn’t do it how can we? And if we have to do it why can’t we properly resource it?” Unless those questions can be quickly and clearly answered, then there is a good chance of diminishing public support and thereafter

diminishing political support; this ultimately risks a Vietnam-type enforced withdrawal and humiliation. That, in my view, would not only be a wicked waste of those young lives we have already lost; but it would also be a disaster for the peace and security of the globe. So what has caused that public unease, and what can we do about it? There are four main parts to this.

First of all, no one really seems to know why we are in Afghanistan, nor do they know what we are trying to achieve. In that, the situation is reminiscent of the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, when the Government variously said that the invasion was to:

- Eliminate al-Qaeda after 9/11, despite the fact that AQ had no connection with Iraq
- Destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, despite the fact that most people suspected that Saddam didn’t have any
- Stop human rights abuses by Saddam Hussein’s regime, despite the lack of any legal justification for an invasion to do so
- Establish western-style democracy and a free market economy in Iraq as part of a neoconservative crusade

At that time (and since) Labour were too afraid of public opinion to admit the real

reason: they were seeking regime-change in support of our allies, the Americans, and that incidentally it was also about the Bush family’s uncompleted business from the first Gulf war, including securing US oil supplies. AQ, WMD, Human rights abuses, all these were camouflage for the real, and barely justifiable, reason for the invasion on March 20th, 2003.

Much of the same muddle is evident in Afghanistan. When I visited there recently, a very senior officer concluded his powerpoint presentation with a photograph of two Afghan girls on their way to school:

“And that,” he said, “is why we are here. Ten years ago they could not leave the house; today they are at school.”

“Thank you, Brigadier,” I rather rudely intervened, “but can you just remind me which part of international law permits us to use 80,000 troops to improve the educational status of women? And if you can, am I right in thinking that we must now invade Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and a host of other places across the globe to improve their educational inclusivity?”

“Err...No...” he spluttered “But it’s... err... symbolic.”

“So why are we here?”

“Err... isn’t that a matter for you politi-

cians? I'm just a soldier carrying out your orders."

Well, what commander on the ground would ever previously have been forced to admit that he had no really clear idea of why he was doing what he was doing in a theatre of war? His confusion is symptomatic of a wider malaise, and of a strategic failure at the highest levels of Government.

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A number of justifications for our actions in Afghanistan have been mooted over the last six or seven years:

- We are there to "ensure the homeland security of the United Kingdom" (about which more below)
- It is a "counter-insurgency" campaign. But the insurgents are largely fighting against us because we are increasingly viewed as an occupying force. If we were not there, the insurgent violence would at least be much reduced. Maybe counter-insurgency would be better left to intelligence and special forces?
- That, especially in the run-up to the Presidential elections, we are there to establish some kind of western-style democracy of which Guildford would

not be ashamed. If so, then by whose authority or invitation? Do the Afghan people really need it or want it? And anyhow, is it even remotely feasible in the tribal amalgam which is historic Afghanistan?

- We are there to rebuild the infrastructure of a country devastated by decades of warfare. This is laudable enough, but largely unachievable. Regardless, who invited us in to do so?
- It is about poppy eradication. But even if it were, and we were 100% successful, would we then invade whichever country then became the main supplier of the west? Dealing with drug addiction must start at home. It must be demand driven rather than supply-eradication driven if it is to stand a chance of success.

The fact of the matter is that, exactly like Iraq in 2003, these justifications are little better than camouflage for our real aims; or at best they are incidental benefits flowing from the campaign. As justifications for war they are mainly pretty half-baked, un-thought through, hard to justify under international law, and anyhow largely unachievable. The fact is that Labour suffers from the same old pacifist predilections that they always have always had. This makes it impossible for them honestly to lay out the true and war-like reasons for conflict, preferring to bury it under cuddlier-sounding New Labour rhetoric about gender balance and human rights. Remember John Reid's hope that we might leave Helmand without a shot being fired?

Well, several million shots later: why can't they just tell the truth? The fact is that we are in Helmand to kill the bad guys, and that the world won't be safe until we do. The reality is that we are there for one thing and one thing only: the final and complete eradication of al-Qaeda: the destruction of its physical infrastructure, the eradication of its

command and control structures and the death of its leadership. That is what Operation Panthers Claw, and the Pakistani operations in the Swat Valley are all about.

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The second inescapable reality is that we cannot accomplish any of this unless we are prepared to make the resources available to do so. The recent spat over helicopter numbers was a disgrace. It is clear that a number of our casualties were caused by roadside bombs which would have been avoided had we had more helicopters to use. On a recent visit, I was ferried around in an American Black Hawk helicopter, as was that brave and outspoken Chief of the General Staff, Sir Richard Dannatt. I passed lines of battle-ready troops on the way to the helipad in Lash Kar Gah, and I was told that they were awaiting helicopter transport up to their forward operating bases, and that if it didn't turn up soon they would just go back to their barracks and come back tomorrow in the hope of a passing Chinook. What a way to run a war. It is also true that three years ago we were engaged in a war on two fronts, with 6000 troops still in Iraq. That is no longer the case, and it would be possible to put a force of at least 10-11,000 British troops in Afghanistan without worsening the over-stretch of

our armed forces. If we are going to do the job required, then we need the people, the equipment and the investment to do it. That is what Dannatt was saying, and that is why he sacrificed his well-deserved promotion to Chief of Defence Staff by doing so. Someone should ask Gordon Brown how many formal meetings he had during General Dannatt's three year term of office as CGS. The answer, I hear, is precious few. And as the role of the Secretary of State for Defence has apparently been downgraded, we really have to ask: Is this any way for a PM to run a war?

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The third inescapable reality is that this is not about Afghanistan alone. It is about all of the Pashtun areas in the south of Afghanistan and the north west of Pakistan. There is little purpose in driving our AQ enemy over the border into the tribal areas of Pakistan, declaring it to be a good job well done and then packing up and going home. We have to defeat AQ and those elements of the Taleban and Islamic fundamentalists of all sorts who are supportive of them. We can only do that fighting in coordination with a stable and determined Pakistani army and

intelligence service, the ISI. We need joint operations against the enemy in Waziristan, Baluchistan, the Swat Valley and the FATA. We need continuing CIA-inspired drone strikes in cooperation with our Pakistani allies, while remaining sensitive to the risk that they may be counter-productive and that they are currently neutralising a fairly small proportion of their targets. We need to agree with Pakistan who the enemy really is, kill those Taleban opposed to us, and enter into sensible discussions with the many groups that constitute the Taleban (both Afghan and Pakistani) whose support we will need in order to reach an end-game. We need to support Pakistan and India in their attempts to heal the running sore of Kashmir, which apart from anything else would release Pakistani forces from the Indian border and free them to fight in the North West Frontier Provinces. We must spare no diplomatic efforts to ease Indo-Pakistani tensions and do all we can to shore up the regime in Pakistan. Who knows what would happen to the nuclear capability of Pakistan should it become a failed state? Nukes in the hands of forces sympathetic in any way to AQ would be a catastrophe, not least because it would risk a pre-emptive strike by India.

And the fourth reality is that we need an end-game. We need to know what we are trying to do: defeat the Taleban and AQ in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. We need the men and equipment to do it successfully (and it is high time that our NATO partners stepped up to the mark just a little bit more); and we need to know how we will judge success or failure when it is all over. It may not be a war we can "win" but it is without doubt a war we cannot afford to "lose".

Only when the people of Wootton Bassett are given the straightforward and robustly expressed answers to these questions, as I have tried to lay out, will they start to attend the very

moving repatriation ceremonies down their High Street not grieving and asking "Why?"; but grieving and thanking our boys and their families for giving up so much not in vain, but in pursuit of an enemy whose survival would threaten the peace and security of the globe. ■

## Biography

James Gray is the Conservative MP for North Wiltshire and a former Shadow Defence Minister. He was a member of David Cameron's Policy Group on Defence and Foreign Affairs, is a graduate of the Royal College of Defence Studies where his thesis "Crown vs Parliament: Who decides to go to War?" was published in the Seaford House papers, 2003, and is Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Army.