

Blair's latest expedition is a Lawrence of Arabia fantasy

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The occupation of Afghanistan served only to turn the Taliban from opponents to supporters of the opium trade

At last, the war on terror meets the war on drugs. The British government has Osama bin Laden in the same frame as an 11-year-old girl on a Glasgow street. Politics is truly holistic.

Yesterday's London conference on Afghanistan purported to search for a "five-year plan" for the country. Such a search has only one destination, opium. This is not some minor byproduct of the great war on militant Islam. Opium constitutes over a third of Afghanistan's gross domestic product and virtually all its recordable exports. Everyone is involved in the business, from warlords to the resurgent Taliban to members of Hamid Karzai's government. Since the US and Britain seized the country in 2001, 87% of world trade in opium is ascribed to Afghanistan, mostly consumed by western economies.

Iraq since its occupation has yet to produce as much oil as it did under Saddam Hussein. The US cannot find petrol even for Iraq's cars. By contrast, Afghanistan's opium output is breaking all records. This year's crop is expected by the UN to top the 1999 record of 4,500 tonnes. Britain's Department for International Development has been "in the lead" on Kabul's drugs policy since 2002. The policy has enriched tens of thousands of Afghans, tax-free, and must be the jewel in the British aid crown. The victims are on Glasgow housing estates.

The talk in London yesterday was of punishing Afghans for growing so successfully what Britons consume so eagerly. When the Taliban were in charge things were different. The regime stopped virtually all poppy cultivation in 2001, a fact verified by UN monitors. Output that year was negligible. The Taliban's Mullah Amir Mohammed Haqqani pleaded at the time for western aid for distressed farmers, whose income from substituted wheat and vegetables was a quarter that from poppies. But he declared that "whether we get assistance or not, poppy growing will never be allowed again in our country." There is no evidence that this ascetic policy was not sincere.

The Taliban were effective. The price of opium in dealers' warehouses promptly rose tenfold. Heroin became expensive on European markets and consumption slackened. Had Afghan supply collapsed, production would have shifted elsewhere, assuming demand remained high. But had demand been attacked at just that moment of high prices, there was a brief window of opportunity to curb the heroin pandemic. There was even talk of legalising an Afghan crop for medicinal morphine, as with crops in Turkey and India.

Instead British and US policy towards Afghan opium after the 2001 invasion was totally cynical. As a covert reward to the warlords for supporting Karzai, the

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occupiers turned a blind eye to the 2002 replanting. Since the market for any unregulated global product tends to be near perfect, the prospect of rocketing profits brought an unprecedented acreage of Afghanistan into production. Twenty-eight of 32 provinces were instantly under cultivation. Refining factories were set up, keeping more profit in the country and creating jobs. Europe was soon swamped with cheap heroin. A Glasgow 11-year-old could buy it for £10 a packet. Afghanistan's economy is now wholly reliant on opium as a result of the west's ending of Taliban crop suppression and refusal to curb consumption. The policy was deliberate.

Britain is now pretending otherwise by sending the army to Helmand province, Afghanistan's poppy-growing area. Its Herculean objective is to stamp out both the opium trade and Taliban infiltration. According to the defence secretary, John Reid, the war on terror is "absolutely interlinked to countering narcotics". By eradicating poppies in Helmand, Britain hopes to drain the swamp on which terrorism floats.

This policy was enunciated last November by the US in Kabul, even as they tolerated the opium warlords in the north. Troops would sweep south, eradicating 25% of the potential harvest with Colombia-style crop spraying. The US state department is already advertising for "aviation eradication officers". This is despite the reported view of the UN in Kabul that the last £65m spent on eradication had "absolutely no impact" on poppy output. Reid is about to blow another £20m on it.

The occupation of Afghanistan has achieved the near impossible. It has turned the Taliban from opponents to supporters of the opium trade. This means that British troops will face a lethal alliance of growers, druglords and suicide bombers as they try to defy the global market economy. A local anti-narcotics policeman gets \$90 a month if he is lucky. A kilo of refined heroin at the Afghan border is about \$900. The task of Britain's air assault brigade is somehow to reverse that tenfold differential.

The only possible consequence of the Helmand expedition is to drive growers and profiteers further into the arms of the Taliban. This will subsidise anarchy in a part of the world where the west has never been able to assert its will. Government policy is handing the region to terrorism on a plate. It is pursuing a vicious circle.

The irony is that Afghanistan does offer a sort of chance to resolve the so-called wars on terrorism and drugs. The booming market for opium is fuelled by demand in Europe. This was stimulated in Britain by the worst act ever passed by parliament, the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. By outlawing heroin supply under prescription it boosted consumption from some 1,000 registered users before the act to an estimated 300,000 users today.

If the government tackled demand by repealing the 1971 act and replacing imprisonment with treatment, demand would be bound to fall. If demand fell, so eventually would the price differential between poppies and other crops. Afghan growers could more easily be weaned onto alternative crops, a task impossible at present prices. They would be less in need of Taliban protection from British troops and the Taliban would have less money to splash on suicide bombers and al-Qaida donations. Counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism would describe a virtuous circle.

Tony Blair said he would not "walk away" from the opium issue. But he is walking away. Lost in some Lawrence of Arabia fantasy, he is walking the fields of Helmand when he should be patrolling the streets of Glasgow. Offered a virtuous circle, he has opted for a vicious one.

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LMAO@ Lost in some Lawrence of Arabia fantasy.

I'm so glad I found an interest in politics. The way they perform, and the things they get up to sure beats the comedy programs on TV.

Lord Cerne Abbas

We shall go on to the end, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then we would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old."

To rebel is right, to disobey is a duty, to act is necessary !

<http://www.velocerautor.free-online.co.uk/identity.html>

<http://www.velocerautor.free-online.co.uk/mylinks.html>

<http://lordcerneabbas.blogspot.com/>

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