

DEFEATING THE TALIBAN: ONE JOKE AT A TIME

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THROWING SHOES AT THE PRESIDENT

While there were many reasons for the Republican loss in the 2008 election, one reason was the ridicule poured on former President George Bush. Whether by Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*² or Will Ferrell³ impersonations, few could see Bush in any serious light. He had become a comic figure, even tragic, such that a journalist in Iraq could consider throwing his shoe at him. The story of "most powerful person on the planet" had been transformed into "inept leader."

In the May issue of *Time Magazine*, Michael Grunwald reflects on the future of the Republican Party and asks, "Is the party over?"⁴ Who can take them seriously, he argues, when some of their leaders believe the Earth is cooling. The mockery began, argues Grunwald, when GOP leaders, to counter President Obama's figures, released their own budget figures. Unfortunately, they did not provide any numbers, data, in their budget.

While the Republican Party may rebound if the Democrats overreach themselves, fail miserably in Pakistan and Afghanistan and if the recession becomes system⁵ threatening, right now the terms of the policy debate are being discussed within Democrats' terms. They are defining the agenda.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd used this approach to unseat John Howard. Instead of debating policy, which he understood would turn the Australian public off – seeing labour as overly intellectual - he focused on constructing Howard as out of touch, and indeed dangerous for Australia's future. When asked about Howard, Rudd remarked, "He used to be captain average, now he is just an extremist." The damage was done and then Rudd could move to a serious discussion of policy differences. But first he had to reframe the debate.

TALIBANIZATION

Far, far away from Washington and Canberra in another land, the opposite is occurring. It is the Pakistan government that is mocked, the President Asif Zardari still seen by many as Mr. 10% and by most as a lackey of the Americans, Barak Hussain Obama notwithstanding.

Pakistanis do not wish to fight their own; they especially do not wish to fight fellow Muslims.⁶ The Taliban, many believe, are pure, virtuous, fighting the good fight. And

when evidence to the contrary is given, most Pakistanis assume the ubiquitous foreign hand theory. It must be the Indians. We are innocent, they seek to destabilize us. The basic tenet of social science – correlation is not causation – is forgotten; perhaps never even learned. Moreover, the strategic discourse – seeing all reality as conspiracy based ...hidden motives, agents, and governments secretly trying to defeat each other – dominates. Acting in ways to lead to a better society, better health outcomes, increased prosperity, greater community, are mirages. South Asian history from the Aryan invasion to Partition has been brutal. Thus, it must be them. It cannot be us. Given that we need to ensure that there are more of "us" than "them," even if the "us" includes the barbarism of the Taliban.

Creating change in a cynical population will not just result from financial promises, since that is what citizens believe governments do to placate them – promise money. And if the money – schools, roads and water projects – is delivered, more money continues to create a feudal dependency relationship, instead of feudal lord it is now the Islamabad government – a classic child/parent bonding pattern (earlier it was the British). Dependency relationships do not create long term economic development, innovation, and certainly not enhanced equity.

Fighting and defeating the Taliban militarily is unlikely as well. They are not trained in classical war – military formations in a land war with clear command control via a governmental hierarchy and bureaucracy with the goal of holding territory. Rather, their training is in guerilla tactics. Moreover, along with Al-Qaeda, they lead globally in organizational innovation. Their organizational structure is more viral and mobile than fixed. By being peer-to-peer focused with some degree of command control they can quickly morph, being highly agile and flexible. They also have ideology on their side believing that they are destined to win. Finally, they are fighting in their own territory.

Sri Lanka's recent military success in defeating the LTTE should not be considered as a hopeful sign for Pakistan. Sri Lanka succeeded because the Tamils had nowhere to hide. The Taliban can hide in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in mountains and households. Certainly Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri know how easy it is to disappear. And Sri Lanka did not have to worry about civilian casualties whereas Pakistan and NATO must be concerned about every civilian death.⁷ Finally, the Tigers lost as they moved from being a guerilla army to a conventional nation-state holding land. The Taliban (here including Al-Qaeda) are unlikely to be able to hold any territory, but they are able to hold Pakistan, and indeed the entire world at ransom.

ASABIYA

Ibn Khaldun, ⁸14th century founder of sociology, wrote that it is *asabiya* or unity gained through struggle that forms the glue of long term successful governance. Away from the corrupt cities, the Bedouins toil in the desert or mountains fighting the harsh elements. This struggle creates an ideological community, a profound solidarity. They become brothers in the war. And religion adds the final aspect to *asabiya*.⁹ They become an

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unstoppable force, knocking at the doors of civilization, unable to build but certainly able to destroy.

With asabiya on the side of the Taliban, what hope does NATO have of defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan or in Pakistan?

And yet this is what they said about General/President Zia-ul Haq, that he would rule forever. He governed Pakistan with an iron fist, was the true father of the Mujahideen that fought and defeated the Russians, of which the Taliban are the bastard children (and like all the ignored, they desperately seek attention).¹⁰ Most believed the General would last forever. Yet there was one writer, Syed Abidi,¹¹ who argued that one way to judge if a regime is about to fall is to listen and observe how the masses talk about their leaders. He argued that ridicule was one indicator that a regime was on its way out. Before Zia's death in a mysterious plane crash, Abidi in his field work recounts the following jokes.¹²

In the first, the President Zia is in Paris for a conference where he sees a Pakistani women dressed in Parisian attire. He asks one of his men to tell her that the President wants to see her. At the hotel, the President invites her to his room where he chastises her for wearing foreign clothes. He tells her to take off her french coat. She does. "As a Muslim woman, how dare you wear a skirt. Take it off," he says. She does. "Don't you know about Islamization in Pakistan, how you dare wear such frilly underclothes. Take them off." She does and stands there naked in front of the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. "Now come embrace Islam," he says with his arms outstretched.

Clearly the alleged purity of President Zia-ul Haq was being questioned. The citizenry understood that he was buttressing the Islamic right wing so that he could stay in power ...¹³

In another telling popular joke from the 1980s, both the Ayatollah Khomeini and General Zia have an audience with Allah, each being allowed one question. Khomeini asks if the Islamic revolution in Iran will be successful. "Not in your lifetime," responds Allah. "And in Pakistan," asks General Zia. "Not in My lifetime," says Allah.

Everyone knew General Zia's Islam was sham, a strategy. Not so with the Taliban. They appear to be above mockery. Perhaps it is time to use humor to dislodge their claim to purity, their claim to be God's warriors. Richard Holbrooke commented in early May that beyond killing there was an important battle of communication. As he says: "The Taliban have unrestricted, unchallenged access to the radio which is the main means of communication in an area where literacy is around 10 percent for men and less than five percent for women."¹⁴

Holbrooke has wisely asked for funding to counter Taliban communication supremacy. But what should be broadcast?

The answer to this comes from Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner in their *Freakonomics: A rogue economist explores the hidden side to everything*.¹⁵ Levitt and Dubner demonstrate how mockery became the decisive tool in defeating the rise of KKK after World War II. Intending to defeat bigotry, one citizen, Stetson Kennedy, decided that he could de-legitimize the KKK. It was exposure to the Klan at an early age that helped him make his ideological decision. His family's maid, "who had pretty much raised Stetson, was tied to a tree, beaten, and raped by a gang of Klansmen. Her offense: talking back to a white trolley driver who had short-changed her."

This is a lesson the Taliban have learned well in South Asia – do not tolerate any challenge to authority especially by females. Stetson infiltrated the Klan and learned their success. First lynching worked, as this threat kept the black population in fear. The Taliban have used a similar strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, most recently in Swat. Once Stetson had figured out the culture of the Klan – codewords, rules, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, he embarked on a mission to expose them. He first tried to expose their financial base. Then he would tip off leaders of Klan activities. But ultimately, Stetson, writes Levitt and Dubner, felt as if these were merely throwing pebbles at a giant. Finally a new idea came to him, he chanced upon the Superman radio show ... he passed on all his secret information (on handshakes, what they called the Klan Bible – the Kloran, interestingly enough) to the producers, who had Superman take on the Klan.

Writes Levitt:

One Klan member coming home from a meeting saw his young kids playing in the street. When he asked them what they were doing, he said they were playing a new type of game, like cops and robbers but called, Superman against the Klan. He said: they knew all our secret passwords and everything ... I never felt so ridiculous in all my life. Historians now consider the work of Kennedy as the "single most important factor in preventing a postwar revival of the KKK in the North. (65)

Unfortunately, while having some short-term military success, current NATO/American tactics of using drones to kill Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders positions Americans as cowards. Write Bobby Ghosh and Mark Thompson in their article, "The CIA's silent war in Pakistan".¹⁶

Ordinary Pakistanis ... remain unconvinced that the campaign [using drones] serves Pakistan's interests. The drones feature in anti-US and anti-Zardari graffiti and cartoons, and are the punch line of popular jokes about American impotence or cowardice: Asked why she's ditching her US boyfriend, a Pakistani woman says, "He shoots his missile from 30,000 ft."

THE WAY FORWARD

While humor, mockery must be a central tenet of any long term strategy against the Taliban, the way forward in Pakistan and Afghanistan is, of course, multiple.

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First, protect those who are willing to stand up to the Taliban.

Second, turn those who are killed, such as the journalist Mosa Khankhel of Geo TV, into heroes.¹⁷

Third, develop radio shows, TV shows, cartoons that show the Taliban not as courageous heroes fighting for the nation, but as those bankrupting the nation, driving away investment, taking away jobs, removing the ability of women and children to learn – driving Pakistan into poverty just as the same time India rises to world stature. "Does Pakistan wish to be the beggar, while India becomes the feudal lord," is the scenario that needs to be told.

Fourth, over time once this has worked, then one can show their atrocities. Says Supreme Court Advocate, Aitzaz Ahsan, "the whole nation needs to see ... the floggings, the digging up of the graves of our saints, the burning of our girls' schools."¹⁸ However, if images of their atrocities are shown first, then cognitive dissonance will result, and the population will see it as Pakistan government, American or Indian propaganda.

Fifth, create an understanding of social science,¹⁹ that is, challenge the world of conspiracy theories with basic knowledge of causality, validity, and reliability but, more importantly, go to a root understanding of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are created by the powerless, those who feel overwhelmed by processes they cannot understand, that they do not have the tools to understand.

Sixth, continue to support democracy but not just at political levels but economic levels too – micro credit, cooperatives, for example. Remember: it is illiteracy and unmet expectations (poverty in one area, incredible wealth in another) that create the recruiting grounds for the Taliban.

Seventh, frame the debate within the terms of the syncretism of Pakistani Islam. Currently, the Taliban and other extremists create the framework; they use their myths and metaphors to define reality.²⁰ As physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy, argues, "Many fear that to be seen to protesting against the extremists would be seen as protesting against Islam."²¹ As long as the Taliban control the framework, other measures will fail since Pakistanis do not wish to fight against muslims. Within the conspiracy framework, the Taliban need to be constructed as outsiders. But over time, this will not work since the self-other division leads to long lasting problems of identity. Other frameworks are required. Currently, the strategy is to see them as anti-national. This may be enough but most likely language from Islamic history will be required. Stories of other Islamic groups who stopped the rise of Islam through extremism need to be told. And: the state needs to show and demonstrate that it is pro-Islam, pro-Pakistan, anti-Taliban and neutral towards the West.

Eighth, military action should be, and this is crucial, led by a female general. There is considerable Islamic history that tells the stories of valour of women. Fatima Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*²² stands out. Mernissi starts with Benazir Bhutto and then goes backward in time telling us of the heroism of, for example, Sultana Radiyya (Delhi, 1236) and of Shajarat al-Durr (Egypt, 1251). More recently there was Malalai, an Afghan woman

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who led soldiers into battle in the second Anglo-Afghan war.²³ An all-women's army would be better, but that is unlikely. In either case, a woman general would challenge at a profound level the Taliban's disowning of gender. And every skirmish, battle won, would dishonor the Taliban amongst the other tribes. They would not be able to epistemologically survive. Once epistemology is challenged then ontology is easy.

ONE JOKE, ONE FRAME AT A TIME

The Taliban will disappear when they have been de-legitimized.²⁴ This will not happen through war but by reframing this battle, taking back the terms of the debate, moving from extremist to syncretic Islam. Humor can be an outstanding strategy in communicating that the Taliban's vision of the future is not in the interests of 99% of Pakistanis and the world. Being mocked is what the Taliban are deathly afraid of (not death). As religious warriors they wish to be respected, seen as strong and as virtuous, brave in the face of every obstacle. They are not. A new story has to be told.²⁵

¹ I wish to thank Susan Deckhard and Dr. Patricia Kelly for editorial assistance.

² <http://www.thedailyshow.com/>. Accessed May 22, 2009

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOjfxEejS2Y>. Accessed May 22, 2009.

⁴ Michael Grunwald, "Is the Party Over?," *Time* (18 May 2009), 18-23.

⁵ As in the world capitalist system.

⁶ Indeed, food, housing, education, peace and dignity are far more important. Ultimately, it is not about victory and defeat but about creating a better society, a deep rooted culture of peace and inclusion.

⁷ NATO answers to its constituent governments and the citizens who elect them not to mention the world press. Pakistan must answer to its citizens. Collateral damage only convinces most Pakistanis that this is not their fight but an American and European issue.

⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*. trans. Franz Rosenthal. N.J. Dawood, ed. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1967.

⁹ Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah, *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*. Westport, CT, Praeger, 1987. See Section 2, Sohail Inayatullah, Ibn Khaldun.

¹⁰ A Jungian reading is obvious. Al-Qaeda and Taliban are the disowned selves of the modernists. As they sought to shed religious history and join the linearity of secular progress, leaving behind religion, the disowned has come back, as it tends to, in pathological forms. For more on this, see Hal and Sidra Stone, *Embracing Our Selves*. Novato, California, New World, 1989.

¹¹ Syed Abidi, "Social Change and the Politics of Religion in Pakistan." Honolulu, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hawaii, Department of Political Science, 1988.

¹² Sohail Inayatullah, "Mullahs, Sex, and Bureaucrats: Pakistan's Confrontations with the Modern World," in Deepika Petraglia-Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, eds., *Between the Lines: South Asians In/On Postcoloniality*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1996, 125.

¹³ Syed Abidi, "Social Change and the Politics of Religion in Pakistan." Honolulu, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hawaii, Department of Political Science, 1988.

¹⁴ Paul Eckert, "Information war key to USA Pakistan strategy: envoy."

http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20090512/pl_nm/us_pakistan_usa_envoy_1. Accessed May 13, 2009.

¹⁵ Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A rogue economist explores the hidden side to everything*. London, Alan Lane, 2005.

¹⁶ Bobby Ghosh and Mark Thompson, "The CIA's silent war in Pakistan," *Time* (1 June 2009), 22. Not to mention the jihadi recruits the Taliban gains from every strike gone wrong.

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¹⁷ Zein Bazrawi, "Journalist killed in Taliban Region." www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/02/18/pakistan.journalist/index.html?eref=time_world. Accessed May 20, 2009.

¹⁸ Aryn Baker, "The Nation that Failed itself," *Time* (25 May 2009), 17.

¹⁹ See the Council of Social Sciences in Pakistan. <http://cospak.org/>. Accessed 23 May 2009.

²⁰ For this approach to strategy, see Sohail Inayatullah, ed., *The Causal layered Analysis Reader. An Integrative and Transformative Method*. Tamkang University Press, Tamsui, Taiwan, 2004. and: <http://www.metafuture.org/causal-layered-analysis-papers.html>. For a similar approach, see George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*. Melbourne, Scribe, 2004.

²¹ Aryn Baker, "The Nation that Failed Itself," *Time* (23 May 2009), 14-17.

²² Fatima Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

²³ <http://www.garenewing.co.uk/angloafghanwar/biography/malalai.php>. Accessed May 22, 2009.

²⁴ A similar process occurred in the former Communist world. Most recently in the non-violent overthrow of the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic. Daily protests mocking the dictator were instrumental in his downfall. See the film, *Bringing down a dictator*. Directed by Steve York. Available at: <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/index.php>

²⁵ As a brilliant resource of old stories, see Aisha Ahmad and Roger Boase, *Pashtun Tales from the Pakistan-Afghan Frontier*. London, Saqi Books, 2009.