

In the Matrix, You Mess Up Foreign Policy

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By Carne Ross

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Observing the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan, former policy maker Carne Ross realised there was a malaise underlying government action

In the sci-fi film *The Matrix*, the rebel leader Morpheus offers the young hero a choice. If he wants to see reality he should take the red pill; if he wants to continue living in an illusion he should take the blue. This being the movies, the hero takes the red. The world as we know it disappears. It is replaced by a wasteland under black skies. Morpheus tells the hero that this is the desert of the real.

Governments affirm their necessity and effectiveness with continual doses of the blue pill of illusion: they tell us everything is all right, that they have matters under control. But every now and then we can take the red pill and allow ourselves to see the world as it really is. We are at that rare moment in history when the blue pills are not working. In Iraq and Afghanistan we can see the desert of the real.

Even before leaving the Foreign Office after giving evidence to the Butler inquiry in 2004, I had been pondering what was wrong with my work. The more I looked back on this experience, which culminated in the crises of Iraq and Afghanistan, the more it seemed clear to me that the current disasters are manifestations of a deeper malaise in the way that foreign policy is made, indeed in the way that we think about foreign policy — we, the public, as well as government.

Both of us, governors and governed, rely on an easy myth, a piece of theatre. This is that governments, in the form of foreign ministries and diplomats, understand the world, can interpret its signs and correctly formulate policy in response. This is an illusion.

Among the officials dealing with Iraq in the prewar years, including me, there was a belief (although never a certain knowledge) that there were some weapons of mass destruction, WMD, but not much and certainly not enough to comprise a threat. Our information was totally inaccurate.

When I helped to make policy on sanctions against Iraq in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we were similarly mistaken. We massively underestimated the revenue that the Saddam Hussein government was gaining illegally from sanctions-busting oil exports. Separated from the everyday reality of life in Iraq (I was 5,000 miles distant at the British mission to the United Nations), we were able to ignore the facts that sanctions were punishing ordinary Iraqis, not the government. Instead, we selected facts from UN reports which

suited our version of events that damage to Iraq's civilians and infrastructure was Saddam's fault. It was, in part, but not in toto.

The truth was that without embassies on the ground, and with little inclination to seek out objective accounts which might contradict us, we did not know the reality. But this did not prevent ministers claiming the "facts" in the public narrative.

After the allied invasion of Afghanistan in 2001-2, I spent six weeks at the British embassy in Kabul. Afghanistan then was very insecure (it is worse today). Diplomats could travel nowhere without heavily armed protection. Appointments could be made only with those contactable on rare satellite telephones. Britain, through its association with the Americans, represented the new power dispensation. It was unsurprising therefore that those we met told us, in general, what we wanted to hear.

What we wanted to hear was that "Afghans", who in reality comprise a highly heterogeneous, barely unified nation, wanted democracy, embodied in the loya jirga process, or "democracy Afghan-style" as some westerners chose to call it. This was the reality that I and others wrote up in our telegrams back to London, from behind many walls and coils of barbed wire to protect us from the other Afghanistan which was less interested in this discourse than we were.

The UN mission included officials who had spent many years in Afghanistan and spoke the local languages (our embassy had one interpreter). Less bound by the restrictions of security than we were, they would tell us that some of the warlords from the Northern Alliance with whom we had associated ourselves, and in many cases had bought off, were busy securing new drug routes and terrorising the public.

The UN special envoy wearily told us that ploughing in the poppy fields would never work, while eager British officials were paying the warlords to do just that. An SAS officer told us that US tactics of killing as many "AQT" (Al-Qaeda and the Taliban) as possible were establishing a perpetual cycle whereby jihadist militants came to Afghanistan to fight the Americans, who were duly obliging: everyone was getting what they wanted, so it would continue indefinitely. The officer's preferred strategy to win over the local people with contact and aid, to isolate the militants, was being ignored, he politely complained.

These observations were not headlined in our telegrams back to London, although we may have briefly alluded to them. In the headlong, emotional and vengeful rush of post9/11 war-making, brave and rare was the diplomat or ambassador who dared to question London's policies.

Today there are more allied troops in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban, or the Pashtun militants or whoever they are, than there were when I was there in 2002. Last year was the worst year for allied casualties since the overthrow took place. It was also a record-breaking year for opium production.

The common thread of these missteps is that policies are decided by small groups of officials and ministers based upon very partial (in both senses of the word) accounts of reality, abstractions several removes from the facts. They are not bad people. They are intelligent and take their work seriously. But they make mistakes. Indeed, it is impossible for them not to make mistakes.

Yet there is a deep reluctance to examine our own failings. In the circles of those who govern and those who know them, there is a profound conceit: that People Like Us don't do bad things.

When my evidence to the Butler inquiry was recently published surreptitiously by the Commons foreign affairs select committee, in an untitled annex to an unrelated report, those newspapers which noticed reported that it stated that "Blair must have known there were no WMD in Iraq". This exaggeration was repeated by the BBC, even though nowhere in the document is such a claim made. But who cares, since no one had read it?

And what of us, in whose name all this is perpetrated? For all but a small minority — the families of soldiers, a discouraged band of activists — Britain's wars and the mess they have made of other people's countries are merely the stuff of dinner-party chatter or muttered complaints in front of the evening news.

A former colleague, now a senior official in the Foreign Office, told me recently that in 30 years of diplomacy he had never seen so many critical foreign policy problems at once in which Britain was irretrievably entangled. But incredibly, he remarked as he gazed out at shopping crowds on the street, life goes on as normal. No one seems to mind.

The world of the 21st century is a turbid and complicated place. We can no longer afford the simplifications, abstractions and inevitable mistakes of the closed box of policy making. We cannot rely on government to sort it out for us.

This a rare moment for change. Parliament must be given intrusive power over policy — above all war-making — and budgets. Officials from within the closed box should be named, questioned, praised when deserved and, when necessary, held accountable.

Something deeper and more difficult is also required. Instead of projecting our own designs on others' reality, even when we barely know it, we might try to take more account of how they see their affairs.

Iraqis and Afghans are already paying the price for our failures. Even today their suffering plays little part in our considerations of policy, as we debate who to blame for the past and how to extricate ourselves in the future. But for our sake as well as theirs, we must stop taking the blue pill and try to see the world as it really is, rather than as we and our government wish it to be.

Carne Ross is director of Independent Diplomat, a diplomatic advisory group. His book, Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite, is published by Hurst & Co on Thursday.