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English 101 Section 10

11 December 2009

### The War in Afghanistan

For the past three days the sound of war has echoed throughout my house. The videogame "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" just came out, and my roommate has been glued to the TV screen ever since he returned from Wal-Mart, game in hand. Whenever I enter the room he is doing something outlandish; running a gauntlet of explosions, driving a snowmobile through a hail of gunfire, or parachuting out of the back of a C-47. The sounds and images I witnessed in the Frontline documentary of October 28, 2008 titled "The War Briefing," looked nothing like my friend's heroics. The film intermingles overarching geopolitical briefings with personal over-the-shoulder experiences of American troops on the ground. In one of these personal stories a soldier, only twenty years old, is shot in the neck. As the camera fades in a transition, the narrator notifies the audience that the soldier "didn't make it."

I must admit, watching the documentary was not easy. At one point in the program an interviewee calls the conflict in Afghanistan the "forgotten war." The sad truth is that for many Americans, that characterization is accurate. The war can seem far away for most of us. It is easy to forget about what is going on when the world at home is so different from the brief news updates on the war's progress. The footage in the Frontline documentary showed the reality of the war in Afghanistan in a way that is sorely missing from the nightly news. I watch CNN on a regular, almost daily basis. Whenever Afghanistan is mentioned, they use the same ten-second clip of US soldiers running and firing their machine guns. This clip does not show a single casualty. The images in the Frontline documentary were far more explicit. There are a number of images that were taken during the aftermath of a car bomb in Pakistan. The film accurately depicts the carnage that both sides have suffered. These images go a long way towards making

the conflict real for the people who are not there. With this realization, the viewer inevitably begins to wonder why the war is going on in the first place.

As I watched the program, I began to formulate the beginning of an answer to this question. The first thing anyone thinks of when Afghanistan is mentioned is the attacks of September 11, 2001. I, like many Americans, remember that day in minute detail. I was hiking out of the Olympic Mountains with my high school football team (we had been dispatched to the hills for a camaraderie building backpacking trip) when an elderly couple stopped us on the trail. With worried looks they told us that "the United States is under terrorist attack." We didn't believe them. It couldn't be true, they had to be joking. When we reached the trailhead, we entered a world that was entirely different from the one we had left a few days earlier. The war in Afghanistan began shortly thereafter as vengeance for the atrocities committed at the World Trade Center. Vengeance, however, is too simple an explanation for what is going on in Afghanistan. Watching the documentary revealed a complex web of social, economic and political forces which shape the conflict.

Afghanistan is a culturally diverse place. Each area has its own specific dialect and therefore the international borders often mean very little. This has made the war difficult for the American forces because communication with the local population is almost impossible. One scene of the documentary focuses on this aspect of the war. The camera records a marine attempting to talk with a group of villagers. Communication quickly breaks down because the interpreter doesn't speak the local dialect. With so many regional dialects, it is hard to have interpreters for every region. The documentary did a good job of showing just how difficult it is to try and talk with someone who speaks a different language. In addition to the language barrier, the film also showed the vast difference between a modern American and a tribal Afghan. One soldier remarked that the locals probably thought that the Americans looked like something out of Star Wars. Most Americans, having grown up on a steady diet of video games like the aforementioned shooter, probably can't even begin to contemplate the nature of a tribal worldview. The disconnect goes both ways. This is a troubling realization because, as the film illustrates, victory in Afghanistan will require the hearts and minds of the local people.