

Impressions of Afghanistan in August 2010

One of the advantages of being an “old hand” in the Middle East or Central Asia is that almost anything one does conjures up memories that make for interesting contrasts. My first visit to Afghanistan back in 1962 began by car, driving up the Khyber Pass from Pakistan. I was accompanying Governor Chester Bowles, then “the President’s Representative for Europe, Asia and Latin America,” that is, the holder of a title but with no real authority. As befit his title, we had an American military airplane but, as governed by the reality of his lack of power, it had broken down. So we drove. I liked that better since I had poured over Kipling as a boy, and the Khyber was, of course, where the wild tribesmen hung out.

They still do. We didn’t then see any of them, but read the signs of the passing of the British and Indian regiments carved into the rocks. It was a wonderful way to reach Kabul. And it was a portent of the future.

In those days, Kabul was a rather sleepy little city of about 50,000, roughly the size of the Fort Worth, Texas into which I was born. Fort Worth was cleaner but Kabul was far more interesting. And it had the most marvelous rug stores. It was also the jumping off place for my 2,000 mile trip around the country by Jeep, horseback and the occasional plane. I fell in love with Afghanistan from the first. To me it is “the wild East.”

My second visit was a decade later. Kabul had hardly changed but the regime had. Afghanistan was in a sort of golden age of reform. Everyone was full of hope. The markets were full of furs, rugs and the melons Babur Shah thought worth more than all of India, Hippies, then known as “world travelers,” flooded into the country equipped with their parents’ credit cards to the delight of local merchants. But what was really impressive was the university. Filled with earnest young men and bright, alert and daringly dressed young women, it had an air of excitement.

Today’s entry into Kabul is not less exciting but is stunningly different.

The “advised” way to go these days is by air from Dubai. The take-off point is Dubai airport which is a huge shopping mall, almost entirely manned by Filipino expatriates, with attached airlines from every part of the world. So large is the terminal that I was taken from the lounge of the feeder airline, Safi, to the gate by one of those little electric carts that are now standard airport transport. Even the speedy cart took a quarter of an hour to make the trip.

Settling back in my seat on the Safi plane, a modern Airbus with pilots of dubious background (one moved over from, as he put, “Libya, you know Qaddafi”) I flipped through the airline magazine. There, instead of the usual ads for perfume and watches, were advertisements for fully armored cars

You are moving in a dangerous region, you find yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time, within a matter of seconds; your vehicle has become a target. Not a problem if you have to have an armored vehicle from GSG...GSG’s armoring provides you with valuable time, enough for you to grasp the situation, assess the threat and be able to react appropriately.

German Support Group.com.

If this did not make you want to rush to Afghanistan, the airline magazine also provided enticing pictures of shattered buildings.

My reading complete, I was ready for Kabul's "International Airport." It was even more spartan than the airport I knew in the 1970s, but this time, as we moved toward the terminal, we paraded past dozens of planes of other airlines. To judge by the tarmac, it was bustling. What was particularly striking was that Kabul is the "hub" of a United Nations virtual airline of helicopters and jets. And, although the Americans run a far larger airport at Bagram, their planes and particularly their jets, overflow into Kabul. Nothing like that was to be seen in my earlier trips.

When we got into the terminal, I found the Afghans to be still the same polite and welcoming people I had known in previous trips. Then signs began to appear of the ugliness of civil war. I would see many such signs in the days ahead, but a hint came in the first minutes. I was met outside the customs by an American embassy expediter. He had been expecting me, he said. We shook hands; then he sat down. Or rather squatted since there were no chairs. Why were we not walking out to the car? I waited for him to speak, but he just motioned me to sit. Slightly annoyed, I asked what we were waiting for. He replied that he had seven other arriving Americans to escort into Kabul. They were just a trickle in the daily flood. Indeed, it appeared that half Kabul was made up of new American arrivals. However, the expediter, seeking to assuage my impatience, rather proudly said that I had been honored with a special car. Then why, I asked, could I not just get in and go. "Ah," he said, "it is not that easy." It turned out that not even embassy cars were allowed to within about two hundred yards of the terminal, so everyone had to walk from the exit to the guarded car park. And, naturally, as "nature" is defined these days in Kabul, one could not do that without an escort.

First lesson: nothing in Afghanistan is easy.

Before I got to Kabul, I had received an email from the escort officer assigned to me, saying that since Kabul is a "high danger" area, the embassy wanted me to rent from a private security company known as "Afghan Logistics" an armored Toyota "4 Runner" and hire both an armed security guard and a bullet proof vest at 20,000 Afs (roughly \$450) daily. I was to be reassured that the rates included the driver's salary, fuel and taxes. No bullets were stipulated. I guess they were extra. However, the daily rate was only for 8 hours and overtime was at double rate, Kabul being presumably more dangerous at night. But my embassy escort officer said, these arrangements were both necessary and standard procedure, and with them I would thus be reasonably well protected.

I declined. My doing so was not a sign of bravery but a calculation that such a display would mark me as a worthwhile target.

Flashing through my mind were memories of experiences in other "high danger" areas. I had arrived in Algiers in 1962 shortly before the return of President-designate Ahmad Ben Bella (and met him at the airport with our ambassador-designate). During that confused and nearly frantic week, when the French had more or less completely pulled out and the "external" army of the Provisional Algerian Government had not yet taken over, the "internal" or *wilayah* guerrillas were not only settling scores with the French and the Algerians who had collaborated with them, but also with one another. The *wilayah* underground fighters were impressive fellows; they had fought an army 30 times their size and had worn it down, but almost none of them could read. So documents were more

objects of suspicion than passes. A smile and a handshake were better than passports. But many people, particularly those associated with the *Organisation Armée Secrète*, had little experience in smiling and if their hands shook it was because they were carrying heavy weapons. Not surprisingly, CIA sources indicated that in those few days some 16,000 people were “disappeared.” Yet, I felt safe walking around the city. Two years later in Saigon, I watched a fire-fight one night from the Embassy roof, standing next to former Vice President and then Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Everyone even then knew that the Viet Minh “owned the night.” But, during the day, I felt no hesitation in walking about the city.

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Kabul today provides a very different experience from those. First of all, signs of danger are all about. Thousands of armed private security guards from many nationalities as well as Afghans are scattered throughout the city on virtually every block. Cars are checked at intersections by Kalashnikov-wielding Afghan policemen or men who I assumed to be police although some I saw were not in anything resembling a uniform. Never mind the “bad guys,” gun toting policemen, many said to be high on drugs and virtually all untrained, were enough of a menace.

Most Kabulis feel that menace, since Kabul is said to be now under the control of President Karzai’s police, and the police are rough with civilians and often shake them down. But the 140,000 American and American-led troops and the scores of thousands of mercenaries and private security guards pay no attention to the police. Nor, as I was to find, do various privileged Afghans. Anyone who counts has his own private army. So, taken as a whole, the 50,000 or so “security” forces constitute a new virtual nation – or actually nations, plural -- as they come from everywhere, Gurkhas from Nepal, Malays, Samoans, various Latinos and Europeans with a mixture of what looked like a delegation from an American weight-lifting club -- alongside of Afghanistan’s already complex mix of nations.¹

President Karzai would like to rid Afghanistan of the “private security forces,” whom he accuses of fostering corruption and committing human rights violations. He announced as I began my tale on August 17 that he will abolish these private armies within four months, withdrawing their visas, expelling them and closing down the 50 or more firms that hire them, but he probably cannot. They are “embedded” with our military and with all the diplomatic missions and the Afghan power elite.

Without any sense of irony, diplomats and generals admit that they do so actually to protect their own officials and even their soldiers. Our ambassador, to cite one example, travels with a guard of contracted security guards rather than one of Marines who, in my days in government, were charged with guarding the embassies. British Deputy Ambassador Tom Dodd told me, with what I thought was a flash of pride, that the British had a ratio of 1 mercenary for each Englishman whereas the American ratio was 3 to 1. The numbers are so large, I asked him to account for them. “Money,” he replied. “They are cheaper than regular soldiers.”

¹ The Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Aimaqs, Kirghiz, Nuris, Baluchis and others; no one group is the majority of Afghans. They tend to be grouped in discrete areas, but there is much mixing, particularly here in the capital, but throughout the country. This would make any notion of the division of Afghanistan along ethnic lines either impossible or would cause horrible suffering.

I find that hard to believe. It must be a toss-up. Each soldier costs us \$1 million a year, but foreign (as distinct from Afghan) mercenaries earn \$1,000 or more day just in salaries, not counting housing and food, transportation several times a year back and forth to their homes and, perhaps most significant, life insurance.

So much for the foreigners, so why do Afghans hire bodyguards? Partly prestige, no doubt, but also because of a genuine fear of private vendetta or assassination by one or other of the scores or even hundreds of warlords. These men cannot, or at least do not, trust the regular police to protect them. Having a dozen or so gunmen is also the road to riches. And, most believe, it is the best way to stay alive to enjoy those riches.

But it isn't just the rich and powerful whose *condottierri* lord it over the ordinary Afghans: assorted other gunmen, including unemployed young men and even off-duty policemen, routinely shake down passers-by, shop keepers and even households. Scruffy fellows they may be, but loaded down with Kalashnikov machineguns, grenades and pistols, and cavalier about reading government documents, they pose an implicit threat to almost everyone. The "on-duty" police can do nothing about them because no one can tell who they are or who stands behind them – ministers, heads of government departments, bigger warlords or the Taliban.

Let me dilate on that. We think of the Taliban as a coherent unit. No doubt it is partly that. But it is diversified in command structure because of the weakness of their embattled communication system. So whatever the "center," which is presumed to be far away in Quetta, Pakistan, decides may not be known in a timely fashion, if at all, by more or less isolated cadres. Moreover, the organization has many, perhaps not always wanted, part-time volunteers. Although they may operate in the name of the Taliban. Many of these people are not auxiliaries but opportunists. Because of an insult or the presence of a target, groups of young thugs often carry out assaults or kidnappings on their own. Such events are different from the well-planned attacks (like the one on this hotel a few years ago) involving suicide bombers and commando units. The aim of the independents is not political; it is either revenge or money, or both. This makes their danger unpredictable.

Unpredictable it is but it is more or less ever-present. It comes not only from these casual thugs, the Taliban or even other major insurgent groups. Indeed, almost anyone with enough money or willing kinsmen can set himself up as a "power broker." A *Washington Post* reporter earlier this month wrote about what must be a fairly typical minor strongman whom she described as "an illiterate, hashish-producing former warlord who directs a semiofficial police force...he is also a key partner of US forces." He has 40 "soldiers" and rules only about 4 square miles. So you have all the elements: drugs, protection money, command over a small piece of the supply route – and alliance with US forces.

Groups like this are all over the country and in the aggregate the payoff to them is huge. An American Congressional investigation entitled "Warlord, Inc., Extortion and Corruption Along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan," published in June this year, showed that to implement a \$2.16 billion transport contract the US military is paying tens of millions of dollars to warlords, corrupt public officials and (indirectly) the Taliban to ensure safe passage of its supply convoys throughout the country." Dexter Filkins of *The New York Times* (who incidentally won a George Polk Award) put it bluntly, "With U.S. Aid, Warlord Builds an Afghan Empire." He described "an illiterate former highway patrol commander [who] has grown stronger than the government of Oruzgan Province, not only supplanting its role in providing security but usurping its other functions, his rivals say, like appointing

public employees and doling out government largess. His fighters run missions with American Special Forces officers, and when Afghan officials have confronted him he has either rebuffed them or had them removed.” How did he do it? Money. Filkins points out that his company charges \$1,200 for each NATO cargo truck to which it gives safe passage and so makes about \$2.5 million a month. How does he get away with it? As Filkins wrote, “His militia has been adopted by American Special Forces officers to gather intelligence and fight insurgents.”

Afghanistan today is somewhat like medieval Italy, a land of warlords. The big ones are just the more impressive of them. They are known to work with or at least around the police or even, themselves, may be part-time members of the police force and/or private security details. I imagine that every Afghan knows who’s who in his neighborhood, but an outsider can easily blunder into a messy situation. Canny outsiders, like the members of the resident press corps, as Dexter Filkins later told me, feel relatively safe because they know where not to go.

In two ways, this is a very old system in the Middle East. In the cities, merchants kept a sort of peace because they wanted people to visit their shops, but Nineteenth century European and native travelers in outlying areas often “rented” free passage from local lords. Payment for passage is common – and very profitable, as the Congressional study made clear -- today in Afghanistan. Trucks moving fuel or supplies, even for the American Army, almost anywhere in the country do so by paying off the local strongmen. The American command is criticized for this practice, but it is notable that even when they supposedly ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban engaged in the same practice. What is new is that this system has spread to the cities. Even restaurants are fenced in with huge concrete walls and steel gates and “rent” protection.

I went Thursday evening to a little Lebanese restaurant called “The Taverna” for dinner with Dexter Filkins. I found it to be packed with people. The owner happened to be from the Lebanese Shuf mountains. On a silly impulse, I asked him if he were a Junbalti or a Yazbaki. He looked astonished and asked how I knew of such things. When I replied that I had written a book on his land, he sent over dish after dish, “on the house.” Nevertheless, the meal was fairly expensive. The reason was obvious: four armed men, in fact moonlighting policemen, were guarding the entrance. They are the new thing – not bouncers but “doorstops.”

The biggest doorstop of all, of course, is the American embassy. Embassy is hardly the right word. It is a vast urban fortress, a city in its own right. Indeed, it is now the largest in the world with roughly 1,000 civilians and is flanked by a military garrison that is far larger and a comparable but unmentioned CIA complex. The American “city” has its own water purification and electrical system, roads, dormitories, offices, shops, coffee houses and an “eating facility.” (It would be libelous to call it a restaurant). Virtually every piece of the American bureaucracy – representatives of more than 60 agencies -- is in residence. And by residence I mean working, eating, sleeping, exercising, and being entertained. I spoke to several people who had left the grounds only a few times in their one- or two-year tours of duty. They are not allowed to walk anywhere in Kabul (or elsewhere) but must go only in armored cars, wearing a full suit of body armor and helmet.

The Embassy compound is less than a mile from the airport, but to get there is to run an obstacle course through a man-made valley of high, concrete blast walls. Every few yards is a steel telegraph poll to be raised, a group of security guards to be satisfied, a guard

dog to sniff the car's contents, a mine detector to be run under it. Then, as each barrier is passed, the driver zigzags, like a giant slalom skier, around massive concrete blocks to the next check point. I counted half a dozen. At each check point the identification procedure starts all over again to satisfy a new group of sober-faced, heavily-armed mercenaries. I particularly noted that in addition to their weapons, each man carried in his flak jacket at least a dozen extra clips of bullets – ready, no doubt for a prolonged siege. Overhead, a sausage-shaped balloon equipped with sensors keeps watch on the entire city and helicopters circle frequently. Armored cars and machinegun nests are discretely scattered about. No wonder the Afghans believe they are under occupation and that the Americans intend to stay. Not your typical happy neighborhood.

I had been invited to spend my first night as a guest of Ambassador Lt. General (rtd.) Karl Eikenberry and his charming wife, Ching. I will come back to them in a few moments, but I want first to continue with the physical aspect of life in Kabul.

Since Senator John Kerry had swooped in, unannounced until the last minute, I had to move over to a hotel on the morning of my second day in town. Getting there was not easy, but (obviously to clear the way for the Senator – my threat to become Republican did not save my bed) the embassy “speeded” me on my way in an armored car with an American-employed Afghan guide.

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Muhammad Naeem Anis is a graduate student of law in Kabul University who works for the US AID mission, As we drove toward the hotel along the nearly empty Kabul River, he pointed out the window at the swirling, densely packed, but surprisingly polite mass of people, many obviously poor but to my eye with no beggars among them, and said, “this is our problem...”

My first thought was that he meant that they or we were in peril from the chaotic torrent of trucks and cars. That seemed a good guess since many showed the scars of previous encounters. Then I thought he might have meant that we could be caught in a riot, like an Embassy car, driven by contractors from the mercenary firm DynCorps, was last month, killed four people. In that instance the latent anger of the Afghans boiled over with a crowd shouting “death to the Americans.” We might be lynched if we ran over one of the pedestrians. That also seemed highly likely. It was obvious that anger was there, just under the surface and that it could easily be set off.

The explosive mixture as at hand: Neither pedestrians nor cars paid any noticeable attention to one another. No give was offered at any point by anyone, but somehow each driver knew when he was defeated just before a collision would have happened. The men and often-*burque*-ed women pedestrians performed as though in a Spanish bullfight. The “bulls” tore along, dashing around or between one another when they could, diving into temporary gaps, passing on both sides without any notion of on-coming traffic or of the presumed lanes into which the road might be divided, while the pedestrians, like toreadors, nimbly dodged in and out (of if old, blind or one-legged as a number I saw were, entrusted themselves to God's mercy). Accidents were surprisingly few; I saw only two in a quarter of an hour. Sitting often in jams when traffic congealed with both streams head to head with one another, it struck me that if the Taliban attacked, they would have no chance to get away. Traffic may be Kabul's most effective security force.

But I was missing Mr. Anis's point. He was giving me my first lesson in Afghan politics. It wasn't traffic regulation but the rule of law that he was thinking about. He went on: "...we have laws, very good laws, but no means of enforcing them. These people," he gestured toward the closed and locked window, "don't even know that we have a constitution and certainly don't know what their rights are, while the rich and powerful, who do know that we have a constitution and laws, don't pay any attention to them. They just do what they want and take whatever they like. And there is no one to stop them."

I asked if this was also true in Taliban-controlled areas. Without the slightest hesitation, he said, "no. It is not. There is no corruption where the Taliban are in control."

When we arrived outside the Serena hotel (which incidentally is owned by the Aga Khan), we were stopped by the first group of armed guards outside its battlements. They were more tightly spaced but even more impressive than those at the embassy. Blankly before us was a wall made of a 30 foot-high steel gate. As we were identified by a group of guards, the gate was slid back on its rollers. Slowly we drove in. There we were stopped by a steel poll and faced a second high steel gate. Then the outer gate was rolled shut. There was just enough space between them for a large car. Locked securely from behind, the car was checked with a mine detector for bombs. Then the pole was raised and the second steel gate was opened. We were in, or at least the embassy armored car was in. Then the steel panel at the rear of the car was opened to reveal my suitcases which, in turn, were passed through a detection system. My little camera was particularly worrying to the security guard, but finally he shrugged and let it (and me) through.

Then to the "front desk" to register. Despite the view through the glass window of the dozen or so guards, laden with their weapons, milling around the driveway and five others more or less discretely, but with bulging double-vented suit coats, standing around the hall, everything began to seem just like a normal hotel. Except, as I scanned the parking lot, I could see that the gates were fixed to even higher concrete walls. They were, I guessed, 40 to 50 feet high. I would later have a chance to see that the whole hotel and its charming Persian-style garden, an area of perhaps ten acres, was surrounded by a similar wall of which most was capped with additional barriers or razor wire. The Serena Hotel, whatever else it may be, is a castle.

Mr. Anis accompanied me to my room. I thought this showed a somewhat excessive concern for my security since we were surely as safe as walls and gates and guards could make us, but his move turned out to have another meaning -- as so much in Afghanistan these days seems to have. This is Ramadan, the month of fasting, and Mr. Anis could not eat or drink in public so he asked, rather sheepishly, if I would be so kind as to order him a sandwich and a Coca-Cola in the privacy of my room.

I was glad I did because this gave us a chance to talk rather more freely than in the embassy car which, I presume he thought was bugged. He told me that while the Shiis, of which sect he belonged, also keep the fast of Ramadan, he did not. He did not explain but from other experiences I gather this was in part his way of saying that he was a modern, educated man.

As we waited for the sandwich, he told me a bit about his life. He could not, he said, admit that he worked for the Americans. And certainly not for the Embassy. So he told his family that he worked for a private construction firm. He was afraid to visit his native province, in the Tajik area, because even a Tajik relative might denounce him to the Taliban

for collaboration with the Americans. However, he said, since his wife was from the same area, he sometimes had to return, but he dreaded each visit.

I asked about his roots. His father, he said, had been a doctor who was chased out during the Russian occupation; so Mr. Anis grew up a refugee camp in Peshawar like hundreds of thousands of other Afghans. When the Russians pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, his family moved back and settled in Kabul. Since Kabul has grown from a city of about 50,000 in 1980 to 5 million today, his is a common experience.

I shamelessly used our wait for the sandwich and coke to pursue our talk in the car about the rule of law. What about property? I asked.

“There is no security in property,” he said. “If a person owns, for example, a house, and the local strongman wants it, he just tells the owner to get out. The owner has no choice. If he does not obey, he is apt to be beaten or killed. There is no recourse through government even if the owner has all the proper papers.”

But much “private” property, he explained, is not registered. It is either what people took over during the civil wars or is owned by custom, perhaps generation after generation. Under the circumstances of lawlessness, however, the distinction between registered and unregistered property is meaningless since neither can be upheld by any authority.

This is true, he continued, even of government property. If the “intruder” is powerful enough, that is well enough connected to one or other of the inner circle, he can simply take over government lands or buildings. Then even government officials can do nothing to make him vacate. In fact, he may be a minister himself, a member of the “inner circle.”

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The inner circle includes but is not limited to the Hazara Vice President, Karim Khalili; Kabir Mohabat, an Afghan with American citizenship; “Marshal” and now Vice President Muhammad Qasim Fahim, a Tajik; and “Marshal” Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord who disdains any government post but is the President’s “right hand;”² Zara Ahmad Mobil who ran what is regarded as the most corrupt organization in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Interior, and (as an editorial in *The Guardian* put it) “is now in charge of the opium industry;” and, of course, the Karzai family. In their meeting with Senator John Kerry, the American press corps bluntly described the regime as Afghanistan’s native mafia.

President Karzai was himself described, in two dispatches in November 2009 from our Ambassador to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (which were leaked to *The New York Times* and published in January 2010), with great diplomatic caution, as “not an adequate strategic partner.” From what I heard from the press, President Obama was very disturbed by the report and urged that the ambassador work more closely with General McChrystal.

² Dostum deserves an Olympic gold medal for opportunism. A leader of the Uzbek people of the North, he fought the Russians, then joined them to fight the insurgents; then he joined the insurgency to fight the Russians; next he joined the Taliban; then he switched sides again to join the anti-Taliban “Northern Alliance” and is infamous for suffocating in steel lift vans in the sweltering summer captured Taliban soldiers. Now – for how long? – he is a supporter of President Karzai.

Ambassador Eikenberry points out that President Obama is right: since Karzai is the president of Afghanistan, we must find means to work with him. In short, as I infer – but I do not know if Eikenberry agrees with me -- we are in a position not unlike the one we faced in Vietnam.

As a general, Eikenberry was a previous commander of the then smaller American force in Afghanistan. Prior to that he was the military attaché in the American embassy in Beijing, under my friend Ambassador Chas Freeman. Eikenberry's charming wife, Ching, is from China's far northeast.

A scholarly, intelligent, hard-driving and honest man, Eikenberry tries to be optimistic; that goes with the job. He has to be optimistic no matter what he feels to keep up the spirits of his staff, but in his confidential dispatches of last November, he wrote, "The proposed troop increase [the "surge"] will bring vastly increased costs and an indefinite, large-scale U.S. military role in Afghanistan, generating the need for yet more civilians. An increased U.S. and foreign role in security and governance will increase Afghan dependency...and it will deepen the military involvement in a mission that most agree cannot be won solely by military means...Perhaps the charts we have all seen showing the U.S. presence rising and then dropping off in coming year in a bell curve will prove accurate. It is more likely, however, that these forecasts are imprecise and optimistic."

Here I do not want to go into detail on our private talk on the Embassy roof, which lasted until midnight, because I am writing a paper for him, based on my study and my talks here, on what I think we must now do. Let me just say that from what I heard from all my other informants, I would be surprised if he has changed his November assessment. Indeed, all the knowledgeable people with whom I have talked believe the situation is far more dire now than last year. It is not just the statistics on casualties and wounded, although they show an accelerating downward trend and the wounded, in particular, are much more numerous than is reported and their wounds are both more grievous and much more expensive to compensate for. (A person with a head injury will cost the Treasury over his lifetime about \$5 million in medical bills. Such costs are not figured into the figures given out by the Defense Department on the cost of the war.) But, it is clear that we do not have a coherent or long-term strategy and are trying to make up for that deficiency by throwing money – and people – into the fray more or less without any way of judging whether they help achieve or prevent us from achieving our vague objectives. Meanwhile, the Afghans appear to be sick and tired of Americans.

So back to my first informant, Mr. Anis. When I asked him about the local feeling toward the Americans he was so guarded that I did not press my question. All he felt he could say was that there are too many and their constant presence and display of power are galling. But Ambassador Eikenberry, he said, was personally very popular. Why? I pressed. "He goes everywhere without a big escort, and the Afghans like that," was his reply. Eikenberry later told me that he tried to appear often even in the supposedly unsafe market area with only a couple of bodyguards whom he kept as unobtrusive as possible. I don't know whether the Afghans admired his bravery or were just happy that he was not flaunting his power. But, whatever the reason, I was to hear repeatedly that he is indeed popular.

In my day with him, I was astonished by his performance. It was the very embodiment of the Washington adage: "the urgent drives out the important." Managing his vast staff, including four subordinate ambassadors (talk about bureaucratic inflation – I

have never heard of an American embassy with more than one ambassador!), over 60 US agencies (over many of which he is not in ultimate command) and a thousand people, meeting daily with General Petraeus and his senior officers, holding frequent conferences with the Afghan press and influential Afghans, giving sometimes several speeches a day, escorting and briefing visiting VIPs like Senator John Kerry, meeting with, listening to and admonishing President Karzai, and touring the ubiquitous trouble spots and even, while I was there, walking the four-mile perimeter of the embassy walls to personally check out the security arrangement, he is run ragged. I sat in on the briefing of his “country team.” There he was the coach, trying to build morale; the teacher, urging the men and women from agencies not under his control to get “out into the field” and to show more sensitivity to the Afghans; and the diplomat, complimenting each person by name for some act he had heard about. It was a remarkable performance. Then he rushed off to meet Kerry, flew with him to a remote post, assembled the American press corps for a briefing, and in the evening held a dinner for the entire Afghan television station owners and reporters at which he gave another speech. As I chided him, he never has time to sit back and think about what all our frantic activities are really all about. He must have been alarmed to hear Senator John Kerry say in an interview here in Kabul on August 19, “We have to remember that this is the beginning, just the beginning...” After nine years!

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From reflecting on our, the American, problems, I went to pay a call on Dr. Sima Samar. She is the head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and a highly articulate, intelligent and well informed person. She also must be physically and morally brave because the environment in which she operates is incredibly difficult and she has not real power.

As I was getting used to doing, I arrived at her office gate which, like so much of Kabul today, is massive and steel. A peep hole, like one might see on the cell door of violent prisoners in a jail, was pushed open several inches so I and my embassy guide could be scrutinized. Several minutes passed. Then a section of the massive gate was swung open to let the two of us inside. Once we were identified, the full gate was swung back to enable our embassy car, also identified, with suitable painted messages and a sort of inside license plate in place of a sun visor, to be driven in. Then the gate was rolled shut.

As in most of the other buildings, heavily armed – Kalashnikov automatic rifles, hand grenades, pistols, flak jackets, helmets, radios, etc. – guards eyed us balefully. They were Afghans. Then an unarmed civilian appeared, half bowed, shook hands and said *hoda hafez*. Turning, he led me, but not my Afghan companion Mr. Anis, up a narrow flight of stairs onto a non-descript and rather threadbare landing. It was in stunning contrast to the massive “security” outside. My first thought was ‘all this protection for so little!’

Then Dr. Samar emerged, seized my hand and led me into her crowded office. She is an impressive woman, bright eyed, with a ready smile, of (I guess) 60 years. She had somehow read about me so our preliminaries were very brief, just the mention of mutual friends, particularly the grand lady of Afghanistan Nancy Dupree, who had urged me to see her. Then without the usual offer of tea (since it is Ramadan), we got down to business.

The situation here, she said, is really neither black nor white. In some ways it is better than it was a few years ago, but the real opportunity was missed in 2002 when the Taliban had been defeated. Had a relatively small American force been left here then, an

acceptable level of security could have been created and maintained. Today, she went on -- as I found in most of my talks, everyone began on an optimistic note and soon this faded into a somber mood -- today, the real casualty is hope. People today do not believe that an acceptable level of security can be achieved.

The fundamental problem, she said, is the warlords. They are so deep into the drug trade, are making so much money, and are so tied into the government at the very top that there is little hope for any sort of reform. Putting in more troops will not accomplish anything.

But, then, to my surprise, she went on to say that the Afghan army and police force are really improving. They need time. Will they get it? She asked me. I said that I doubted that, despite US government statements, the American commitment was open-ended. Indeed, America itself is so beset by financial problems that the mood is shifting. She nodded and sighed.

Then our conversation virtually began anew. From warlords and improvement of the security forces, she shifted to what obviously is the bottom line: the issue of corruption. Can the regime survive? Many people here -- but not she, she matter-of-factly said -- have dual nationality. They send their children abroad, a son in England, another or a daughter in the US or Canada, etc. -- and perhaps their wives as well. They also send along with them or at least to foreign banks as much money as they can. The reason why they do is simple, they have little trust in the existing government and less in the future. Why not? She asked. They have nothing to fall back on. What they are doing is personally prudent even if it is nationally disastrous.

As I listened, my mind went back to Vietnam. Afghanistan is in so many ways Vietnam *redux*. Everyone is preparing his bolt hole and wants to be sure that it is well padded with money. Afghan Minister of Finance Umar Zakhilwal admitted that during the last three years over \$4 billion -- *billion* -- in cash had been flown out of Afghanistan in suitcases and footlockers (like I thought only Mexican drug dealers used) destined for private accounts or persons abroad. While money in those amounts has a serious effect on the faltering Afghan economy, what is even more important is that it shows that commitment to this regime and to Afghanistan is fragile and declining among the inner circle, Afghanistan's power elite.

Back to Dr. Samar. What else, could she put her finger on? I asked.

"Foreign corruption," she said. "Oh, of course, it is not the same kind. But when a contract is awarded to a foreign company and it then either does a bad job or does not finish its work and yet exports 80% or 90% of the contract funds, is that not also corruption? We would understand even 50% but few take that little. Is that not corruption too? But you Americans pay little attention to it; yet it serves as a model for our people.

"Even when corruption is not involved," she continued, "there are two tendencies that undercut the benefit your actions might have brought. The first is the use of machines. Of course, I know," she went on, "machines are faster and may even do a more beautiful job, but they displace labor. And unemployment is one of our most serious problems. It would be far better to use shovels and give people jobs.

"Also bad is the tendency of your contractors to draw on labor from outside the place where a project is undertaken. Of course, contractors draw on the cheapest source of

labor. So they might use Tajiks to do a project in a Hazara area, for example. Then the local people have no sense that it is theirs. We see this often. But, if a road, for example, is built in a village by local people, they feel it is somehow theirs and will take care of it. But Americans show no sensitivity to Afghans and their way of living.”

Nothing was to be gained, she said, by adding more troops. There are already probably far too many. Each new soldier gives rise to a new Talib. And troops do not address the core issue.

But, she was not in favor of a total withdrawal at this time. Time, she said, must be given to enable the police force, at least, to improve. That, she agreed, was not much solace but it was the best that could realistically be offered from here.

* * *

I next went to see the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, the former German Ambassador to Iraq, Martin Kobler. His immediate superior, Steaffan de Mistura, a friend of my good friend and neighbor, Samir Basta, who was his boss had told me that he is an excellent man and here, I found he is said to be one of the best informed men in town. Unfortunately, he was away on leave, so Ambassador Kobler filled in.

Ambassador Kobler’s headquarters, UNAMA, was understandably under massive protection. No UN person could forget the killing of the UN team in Baghdad, including my dear friend, Nadia Younes, who had just been appointed Assistant Secretary General for the UN General Assembly. How and why this tragedy happened is a story I will tell at another time, but here it is memorialized in concrete, steel and a small army of guards.

Ambassador Kobler launched into our talk by emphasizing how the UN people moved out around Afghanistan. He did not say it, but almost everyone else I spoke to did: the Americans stay huddled in their compounds. Even when they are in “the field,” they don’t get out and around very much. It is mainly to move its workers around that the UN maintains the “airline” I saw when I landed in Kabul. Kobler himself, he said, tries to make at least one trip a week, often two, outside of Kabul to one or more of the 40 some odd project headquarters the UN maintains.

Like most of the officials I met, Kobler started rather sanguine about the current situation, but slowly retreated into major worry about how to reconcile the two and contradictory objects of the essentially American policy -- the thrust to build up a central authority (which, as he said, violates the national genius of the Afghans) while working with the manifestations of local autonomy (which is the Afghan tradition). The Americans, he commented, are trying to swim against the tide of Afghan history by their emphasis on central authority. Afghanistan always had a weak central authority that allowed the provinces much freedom of action.

But the Americans are even carrying out their own policy ineffectively, he said. About 80% of all aid funds flow outside the control of the central government so effectively the American program (as in Vietnam) substitutes itself for the central government and so in the eyes of the public diminishes it. Later I was to hear from the director of our AID program, Earl Gast, that actually 92% of aid money bypassed the central government. It was now down to 80% and his, Gast’s, objective was to reduce it to 25%. It is cleaner that way, of course, but it shows Afghans that they do not have a government other than us.

Kobler continued: since the American military has virtually all the disposable money, and the Afghans regard America as intending to dominate the country into the future, they regard all foreign aid efforts as a tactic of the war -- as General Petraeus is endlessly quoted as saying, "money is my main ammunition."

These thoughts led us into the issue of Afghan traditions versus ours. To work here in any capacity, he said, we must be sensitive to Afghan traditions, which we often are not. Every time our soldiers bang on a door, or break it down, and enter a house to search for an insurgent, going into the women's quarters and even checking on, or otherwise manhandling, the women and children and opening up their private closets etc., which they feel they must do as an insurgent who might kill an American the next day, may be hiding there, the soldiers (or more likely the Special Forces) inevitably lose that family to the Taliban or at least make them hate the Americans.

But, at the same time, he went on, we must stand up for the values we hold. We do and must absolutely oppose such awful acts as stoning to death people who violate *Sharia* laws. There can be no give on this issue.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of information Kobler gave me was on the Taliban reaction to last week's UN Report on Taliban killing or injuring Afghan civilians. Although the Taliban denounced the report, and the UN for making it, their press release contained what Kobler thought was a major new development: they called for the creation of an international tribunal including the Taliban to investigate the charge. Kobler rightly saw this as a ploy to give the Taliban a sort of recognition as a quasi governmental "player," but admitted that it may have lifted the veil slightly on a form of cooperation. He said, of course, the Americans and the UN would not agree.

I objected, wondering if there were not a way to use this demarche. Perhaps we should remember, I said, a precedent of the Algerian war. I laughed and said that of course no one remembered any precedents from previous wars. He (and later others including the Russian ambassador) agreed. Everyone said that at the start of each new year we throw away all our memories of the actions and reactions of the past year and start all over again.

But what did I have in mind? He asked.

It was not a complete analogy but some adaptation from the Algerian war might be useful to consider. Toward the end of the Algerian war of independence, America had a crippling diplomatic problem: we were closely allied to France which was fighting the Algerians, but we were emotionally on the Algerian side and thought that, in any case, they would prevail. The State Department was torn apart: the European Bureau wanted to have nothing to do with the Algerians while the African Bureau was keen to recognize them. President Kennedy hit on a typical Kennedy solution: use the family. He sent Jackie Kennedy's half brother, Hugh Auchincloss, up to New York to hang out at the UN. He had no official title, but he was to be there as a friendly presence. Identified as he was with JFK, his job was to make representatives of the Provisional Algerian Government which had observer status at the UN, feel welcome. I wondered if some sort of adaptation might open up contacts with the Insurgents. Was there no way that at least the beginnings of foundations for future bridges might be laid? He said he doubted it.

* * *

From each of my forays, I found it a relief to return to the hotel. Again, tradition. Inside the forbidding walls was a delightful “Persian” garden, where two fountains played into water channels which were flanked by beds of roses. I felt back in “my” Middle East. Alas, the one of fading memory. Then, I had dinner in the hotel courtyard, listening to traditional Afghan music. Suddenly came the distant call to prayer. The drummers were silenced, but the moment the call ended, they took up their drums, not concerned about prayer time but only about the announcement of prayer. The Taliban would have been outraged. And, as the Russian ambassador later told me, the ambassador from the United Arab Emirates certainly was: the accent in Arabic was terrible and the several calls to prayer across the city paid no attention to timing. In the UAE, he said, they pushed a button and the whole country heard one call!

At noon the next day, I drove over to the British embassy to see Deputy Ambassador Tom Dodd. To say the least, this is an unusual British embassy. It is the UK’s largest, although dwarfed by the American establishment. It echoed the Americans in its elaborate security but, to me more striking, was the abrasion of Foreign Office formality. The email I received from one of the clerks setting up the appointment was addressed, “Dear William,” and saying that “Tom” would be happy to see me. I thought how the British ambassador I had known of old would be turning in their graves.

Mr. Dodd – Tom – is a new arrival, and not, I inferred from his rather vague remarks about his background, a regular Foreign Office man. He was indeed a civil servant but of what kind I could not tell. He was more optimistic than most of those I met. He said that while the situation in Kandahar was the worst, some of the other cities, such as Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Kunduz, were better. What distinguished them? I asked. He said it was simply that the local warlords were more willing to share their loot with their followers. So there was a sort of “trickle down effect,” but in Kandahar the President’s half-brother was stingy. I laughed to think how the phrase “trickle down,” coined by my former colleagues, the Chicago economists, was applied to Afghanistan “security.”

Not noticing my reaction, he said that if the programs of his government, the US and the Afghans have five years, the situation in Kandahar would be better.

Not much gain for five years in that word “better,” I replied. Moreover, I thought a more realistic time frame was 6 months to a year. And I pointed out how a number of the very people who fervently advocated the war, like Richard Haass, the current president of the Council on Foreign Relations, have now turned against it. As he wrote in *Newsweek* two weeks ago, “We can’t win and it isn’t worth it.” I didn’t feel that this registered.

When he got on to the military aspects, Dodd said he did not interface with Petraeus, but he went on to say one positive and one negative thing: the positive thing is that apparently there are many fewer Special Forces night raids, although, he said, he is not privy to them. (That too rather surprised me. As the UK’s acting senior representative, I should have thought he needed to be privy to everything that affected the UK’s position.) The negative thing is that the policy of killing off the Taliban old guard (he pointed out that here “old” means 50) is bringing forward younger and more violent men who have none of the experience or subtlety of the older generation. This cannot be good, he said. I would later hear much the same from a former senior Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef, although he would tell me that much of the old guard is still alive and in command.

One interesting aspect of the government of Karzai, Dodd said, is that he can pick up a mobile phone and call almost anyone in the country and connect within half an hour, and, he said, “the Afghans love to talk.” So presumably Karzai is in contact almost continuously with people all over the country.

Despite the fall in public support in the UK for the British position here, he said, Britain has a more important stake than America since it has about 1 million Pakistani and 3 million Indian residents/subjects in the UK. But, he said, with I thought something like wry amusement, in the event of any sort of settlement, interim or otherwise, “Britain has no money for projects of any magnitude. When it leaves, as it inevitably must, it will be able to maintain its special forces and a training mission for the army or police. Nothing more.”

When we got onto the cost of the war, to my surprise, he misspoke or was totally misinformed: he said that the American war effort here was, after all, “cheap.” I must have looked astonished because he went on to clarify his remark: it was only \$7 billion a year. That is even less than the published figure – perhaps half the real cost – not for a year but for a month.

* * *

Speaking of money leads me to my meeting the next day, Wednesday, August 18, with US AID Mission Director Earl W. Gast, America’s senior man on the Afghan economy.

Gast was refreshingly candid. Also relatively new to his job, he was proud of what he was doing. His favorite program, he said, was the “Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Program,” which is described as “the largest development program in Afghanistan and a flagship program of the Afghan government.” It was begun in 2003 and claims to have financed over 50,000 projects in all of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. In the words of its MIT-led evaluation, the program “is structured around two major village-level interventions: (1) the creation of a gender-balanced Community Development Council (CDC) through a secret-ballot, universal suffrage election; and (2) the disbursement of grants, up to a village maximum of \$60,000, to support the implementation of projects selected, designed, and managed by the CDC in consultation with the village community. NSP thus seeks to both improve the access of rural villagers to critical services and to create a structure for village governance on democratic process and the participation of women.”

Nation building in high gear! But as a jaded old hand in reading government handouts, I asked Gast if it really made any difference. By way of a reply he gave me the report of a study group sponsored by MIT under contract to AID. The contractors did a random survey in 250 areas and gave a mixed report. Their report was, indeed, the opposite of what I would have expected: they found a strong impact on selected aspects of village “governance” but none on economic activity. Reading closely both what they said and what they did not say, however, I doubted that the program had much impact on anything except on our feeling that we were doing something.

Doing something, Gast said, was his major problem. He is under intense pressure from Washington to show actions of almost any sort.

Before he arrived, he said, one of the big efforts at doing something was down in the newly conquered province of Marja. The US military had run the Taliban out -- or so they thought -- and General McChrystal was bringing in a “government in a box.” Perhaps the most important piece “in the box” was to be the creation of jobs. So AID set up a program to

hire 10,000 workers – virtually all the adults in a local population of about 35,000 people – but only about 1,000 took up the offer. Why? The answer was simple: the local people knew more about guerrilla warfare than the American army did. From years of experience, they knew that the guerrillas had done what guerrillas are supposed to do, fade away when confronted with overwhelming force and come back when the time is right. They are back. And, as other insurgents have done in all the insurgencies I studied in my *Violent Politics*, they have punished those they regarded as traitors. The 9,000 Afghans who turned down the AID offer were what we would call “street smart.”

* * *

Did we learn anything from this experience? To get another opinion, I met with Dexter Filkins, an “old” – that is not in my terms but at least a decade old -- Middle East hand, who has spent years in repeated assignments here, in Iraq, India and Pakistan and who is one of the few who really gets about the country, on his own, not “embedded,” and not loaded down with flak jacket, body guards and minders. He is just young enough and daring enough to see a different picture, I thought. I was right.

First, he said, the Kandahar operation is already in full swing. It isn’t just the assassination squads of the “Special Ops” (aka Special Forces) but large-scale regular army action although the Military here, known as ISAF, are not talking about it. And it is essentially, as I wrote in June on “changing the guard but not the drill,” the same as the Marja operation, just bigger. The failed Marja campaign is the template for the Kandahar campaign. And it too will fail, Filkins predicted.

Filkins said that Petraeus was essentially trying to apply what he did in Iraq to Afghanistan without much thought that the two countries are very different. I disagreed, as I have in print: Petraeus is replaying not only what the Americans did in Vietnam but even the French in Vietnam.

But to my surprise, Filkins was relatively complimentary about the military high command and particularly about Petraeus. What he found most favorable was that, unlike all the civilians holed up in the embassy fortress, the military get out into “the field.” Had Ambassador Eikenberry heard this, he would have agreed. Much of his admonition to the members of his Country Team meeting was to get out and see.

But, is this really such a good idea? I wonder. Almost everyone with whom I spoke mentioned how disturbing it was to the Afghans to see so many Americans. True, there are large areas of the country with no American military or civilian presence, but from Kabul west, south and east, Americans are thick on the ground. Would adding more be beneficial? And particularly adding more when decked out in helmets, flak jackets and goggles – like my escort officer, a nice American woman – had to wear even up in the supposedly “secure” northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Not speaking any of the local languages, almost entirely new to the country (very few have little preparation before they come, stay here longer than a year and have little contact or, apparently, interest while they are here) and prone to tell the locals how to manage their lives, they conjure the phrase common among even our close friends and allies, the English during World War II, about the Americans, “over sexed, over paid and over here.”

* * *

To get a non-American and “historical” view on foreign intervention in Afghanistan, I arranged to have a dinner and long talk with Russian Ambassador Andrey Avetisyan. Since we had not met before, I asked him to tell me about himself. He is a Pashto language specialist who has served in the Russian Foreign Office, in Belgium and for three stints here including once during the Soviet occupation. I met him courtesy of my old friend Evgeny Maksimovich Primakov, the former Russian Foreign Minister, Director of the KBG and Prime Minister.

Avetisyan and I covered much the same ground as I did my previous talks with, obviously, different angels of vision. I will report only the differences here.

Avetisyan was quite categorical in saying that there was no hope of winning the war militarily. Then he went into a bit of the history of the Soviet campaign. Two things he particularly singled out were ones that, he thought, the Russians did rather better than the Americans. First, they separated economic and military actions. Their “civic action” projects, unknown to most outsiders, actually accomplished a great deal. We discussed my favorite, the vast plantations of olives and the production of oil (both casualties of the civil wars in the 1990s) of which the memory lingers to this day. He is often approached, he said, by Afghans, even former anti-Russian fighters, who compare the Russians favorably to the Americans.

The second aspect of the Russian economic program he thought was better was that they did not provide cash to the Afghans. Of course, he said, they paid salaries, but they brought in the equipment that was needed and paid, directly, for work done with it. So, he believed, the problem of corruption of the Afghan government then was far less than today.

The military policy of the Americans, he said, was roughly comparable to the Russian. That is, except that it was more simple then: you either fought or you collaborated. Today, the mixing of civic action, counterinsurgency, military occupation and special operations makes a complex combination. However, reliance on the military did not work for the Russians and, he believed strongly, would not work for the Americans today.

What about the Russian involvement today? I asked.

There are two aspects, he replied. First, the Russians are worried about the Central Asians and Caucasians who have come to fight for the Taliban. What are they going to do when they go home? He wondered. “Some people,” he said, “think that they will have just grown old and become tired of war. But I am not so sure.” They are hardened veterans, and maybe they will take home what they learned here. The second aspect, he said, is that if the Taliban win, they and their version of PanIslamism will make an impact on the republics of former Soviet Central Asia.

I laughed and said, “the Domino theory in reverse.” He nodded.

“However,” he continued, “wherever the al-Qaida people are today, it is important to remember that they were involved here before the Taliban arrived. The Taliban found Usama bin Ladin already here. I suppose their getting together was a matter of money. The Taliban had almost none and the Saudis had a lot. It was a natural alliance.”

I commented that I understood that about a year ago, the Taliban put Usama under what I guessed could be called “cave arrest.” Avetisyan laughed and said “there are many reports.” Unquestionably, there have been severe strains in their relationship. I do not think that they will exercise major influence on the Taliban. Nor will the Taliban give them a free hand.

Returning to my major interest, I pressed about how and when one could think of getting out. He said that it would take at least 5 years to develop an Afghan army, and that to get out quickly now would probably plunge the country back into civil war.

I pursued the point. Should we consider early negotiations or wait? He replied that to negotiate now would be difficult because the Karzai government is so obviously weak. The Taliban, he said, have their men in every office of the government and there are no secrets from them. I mentioned that after the Vietnam war ended, we discovered that the South Vietnamese President’s chief of office admitted to having worked for the Viet Minh throughout the war. “Well,” he said, “it is even more pronounced here. The Taliban are everywhere.”

I mentioned that I was hearing that there are three options: get out now or very soon; pull out the main military forces but leave behind “Special Ops” forces; or negotiate.

He replied that, of course, we must negotiate. Indeed, he said, his information was that it was now on-going among the Afghans, but that the Pakistanis were disturbed when the Afghans tried to do it alone. He mentioned the Pakistani arrest a couple of months ago of two senior Taliban who were involved in negotiations. (This was reported and variously interpreted in the Western press.) But we could and must help the negotiation process, he said. He felt that in the context of negotiation, it would be possible to begin to pull out, but that it should not be precipitate.

The worst of all, he said, was what I had set out as the second option: to take out the regular military and leave behind the Special Forces which operate like the Soviet *Spetsnaz*. It would be far better to keep the regular army even at the high point it has reached (which is larger than the Soviet force level) than to rely on the Special Forces. The Special Forces are particularly hated by the Afghans, as were the *Spetsnaz*, and, actually, are responsible for most of the really glaring abuses here. They would ruin what reputation we have left. That would not be good for anyone, Russia included.

I remarked that of course we could not control negotiations. He agreed and said that he thought the Afghans could handle that when they decided that they had to.

Could we not create that condition? I asked. That is, by setting a firm date for withdrawal? That would not undercut our position or markedly affect the Taliban strategy. After all, I pointed out, assuming that they are reasonably in touch with the outside world, the Taliban leaders will know that support for continued military action here has dropped to near zero in much of Europe and is in free fall among those Americans who previously were the war’s main advocates. As an example I mentioned the recent *Newsweek* article by Richard Haass (the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, which I have mentioned above) under the title, “We can’t win and it isn’t worth it.”

What setting a date would do, I argued, would take us to the position he had just mentioned the Russians were careful to create, separating the economic from the military policy. The purpose of what I had in mind, I went on, was to change the “political psychology” of the war. Then, or gradually, village *shuras*, *jirgas* or *ulus* would come to see that the opening of a clinic or building a canal was not a tactic in the war. Rather, it was a benefit to the villagers. They would want those things and would protect them. Then, if the Taliban opposed, they would lose the support of the people. He said that he absolutely agreed with this. “It is the only way.”

I then laid out what I would like to see happen here: the reassertion, with suitable modifications, of the traditional idea of the state. That is, a central government with sufficient military power to protect itself and punish aggression but with most emphasis on the economic and cultural means of integration. For example, using foreign aid, controlled by the central government through something like the American Corps of Engineers to undertake the major infrastructure projects. Under this arrangement, the central government would control foreign affairs including the generation of foreign aid while the provinces would handle their local affairs in accordance with their cultural traditions. Over time their policies would be influenced or swayed by the central government through the offer of opportunities for technical training and education and funding for development projects. Fairly rapidly, I thought, people in the provinces would be attracted to the things the central government could offer. Again, he agreed, saying that is the only real hope for the country.

“One can see,” he amplified my thought, “that we have done far too little on education. There is no point in doing more big projects if the Afghans do not know how to handle them and do not regard them as their own.”

We finally came to an issue on which he thinks we could beneficially cooperate. The Salang Pass through the Hindu Kush mountains needs to be rebuilt. It is the only feasible, economically viable passage between Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. It would enable the Afghans to ship their goods more cheaply to the outside world. It also is the supply route for the American army. And, perhaps most important of all, it could be a joint Russian-American project which would both symbolize and effect the transition from the still-remembered Cold War to a new era of peace and stability. I promised to discuss it both with our AID director here and with friends in Washington. I think it could really be the best thing to come out of Afghanistan in many years.

* * *

Sadly, I was not able to see either the former Minister of Finance, Ashraf Ghani, or the current Minister of Finance, Omar Zakhilwal, both of whom are out of the country. Ghani, I am told, really ran Afghanistan for several years until President Karzai became jealous and decided to get rid of him. Zakhilwal, I was told, is not of his caliber but is also an able and intelligent man. As people here said – a threat or a promise, I am not sure – “next time.”

Always seeking balance in what I was hearing, I arranged to have dinner with the Afghanistan correspondent of *The Guardian* and *The Economist*, Jon Boone, and the correspondent for *The Times*, Jerome Starkey, at a little restaurant with banquets in place of tables and chairs, the Afghan style, called “the Sufi.” I was wary about going there because

the name *sufi* means “woolen” and is applied to that group of Muslims who most closely resemble the mendicant followers of St. Francis of Assisi – and they certainly did not care much about the quality of their food! It actually turned out to be a very pleasant place – that is, after one passed through a cordon of armed guards and the metal detector -- with an Afghanesque seating arrangement on rugs with cushions. But after an hour, I began to feel my legs, tucked up underneath me, grow numb. No longer am I the man who rode a camel across Arabia! I could not be sure quite what I was eating in the dim light, but the food, very Afghan, was very tasty. Anyway, I was not there for the food but to listen to their opinions on the current situation.

Their opinions differed. Boone, an Oxford man who has been here three years, thought that any serious move toward evacuation would throw the country back into civil war while Starkey thought that a descent into civil war much less likely and that, since leaving would happen anyway, it was a good idea to begin negotiation soon. Both agreed that the current government is hopelessly corrupt and not really reformable. Boone placed his hopes on the police, which he thought would take five years to get in shape. He thought parts of the army, particularly the Afghan Special Forces, some of whose officers had been trained at Sand Hurst, were relatively sound, but only in the officer corps. The regular soldiers, he and Starkey agreed, were at best unmotivated and at worst would swing quickly to the Taliban.

Both commented on the massive flight of money, which I have discussed above. Boone remarked that the amount being exported shifted, depending on the Afghan evaluation of the length of the American commitment. He also pointed to an aspect of the Karzai policy I had not been aware of: the government goes into the market place, here literally a market place, once a week and buys up Afghan currency (Afs) with dollars. This has the effect of driving up the price of the local currency, and so enables those who want to take out dollars to buy them more cheaply and giving them a profit even before the money gets abroad. In short, Afghan government financial practice was subsidizing the flight of currency to the benefit of the inner circle and the warlords.

What do the Americans know about this? I asked. Probably everything, both men replied, but this thought led them to comment on the fact that practically no American ever leaves the Embassy compound. That was only in part a criticism as both Boone and Starkey men thought it was probably better that the Americans were less evident because, decked out in their body armor and helmets and surrounded by guards, they were not popular. Both said the most disliked were the Special Forces (aka “Special Ops”) who are believed to carry out at least a thousand raids a month (!) and often with considerable brutality and always with little regard for Afghan customs. Both remarked that until WikiLeaks published some of records, no one even here had any idea about the scale or impact of this intrusion. Both regarded these raids as a major cause of hatred of Americans and a great danger to the American strategy.

My last journalist contact was Joshua Partlow of *The Washington Post*. He very kindly invited me to his house – which he more or less inherited when an attack on the UN guest house induced the UN to make all of its personnel leave outlying houses. The house, by American standards, was modest, but like all the buildings I entered, it mustered its complement of armed guards and the double door entry. As I walked in, I mused on what percentage of our income is today devoted to “security.” Here in Afghanistan, it must just about match the amount paid out in bribes.

As I walked into the living room, I saw a huge double bass in the corner. How wonderful, I thought, for a young reporter way off in the Wild East to have brought this monstrous fiddle with him. What a task that must have been! He must be really devoted to music. When I asked, he laughed and said, no, he did not play and did not even know where the fiddle came from. It was in the house when he moved in, perhaps abandoned by some previous occupant. Now, he said, it was just decoration.

Partlow shared the house with several other people including another *Washington Post* reporter, David Nakamura and, Victoria Longo, a young woman working at the UN office here. Also joining us for dinner were Keith Shawe, a English botanist who worked for The Asia Foundation, an organization that was already active in Afghanistan when I first came here in 1962, and a young Chinese-American women, fresh from working at the USAID mission in Kandahar.

To my astonishment, Partlow produced a rare bottle of wine, and powered by the unusual event, we unraveled the Afghan predicament. Of course, that meant going over much the same ground as all my other conversations, violence, corruption, the question of how much or little the official Americans saw or understood of the country, and where this is all heading. In summary, I found that they were just as pessimistic as the better informed of my other contacts. The young Chinese-American woman, Bayfang, had worked as a reporter before joining AID to work in Kandahar. So she had experienced both the freedom of the reporters and the “security” of the officials. She remarked on how hard it was to get permission to go out of the guarded compound where, as in Kabul, all the official Americans lived, and then only in body armor and with guards. No wonder, she said, the Americans could not understand the country. They hardly saw it. The reporters, of course, used local transport, mainly taxis, and usually went by themselves to call on Afghans or foreigners in pursuit of their stories. The evening turned into a sort of college bull session. They were all pessimistic. Things are going down hill.

* * *

Now I have the last and most interesting of all my talks now to relate. Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef was the Taliban’s head of the central bank, deputy minister of finance, acting minister of defense and ambassador to Pakistan. In short, he was one of the most important men in the Taliban establishment. When Pakistan withdrew its recognition of the Taliban government in 2001, he was abducted and packed off to Bagram prison, to another prison in Kandahar and finally to Guantánamo. Among them, as he recounts in his autobiography, *My Life With The Taliban*, he was humiliated, repeatedly tortured, almost starved, sat upon, spat upon, cursed, almost always deprived of a chance to pray, had his Qur’an sullied and deprived of sleep for days on end. Finally after four years he released in 2005 without charges and allowed to return to Afghanistan. He now lives, more or less under house arrest, in Kabul.

Arranging to see him also brought back memories for me: many years ago in Cairo, I met and got to know Prince Abdul Karim al-Khatabi, the leader of the failed *Rif* war of liberation against the Spaniards and the French. He too was packed off to exile and held incommunicado by the French during the entire period of World War II. Khatabi’s and Zaeef’s lives and personalities and social background were very different, as were their experiences – Prince Abdul Karim was treated with respect whereas Mullah Abdul Salam

was tortured -- but both were leaders of their national revolts. So, I approached this opportunity with excitement. I thought I could learn a great deal from him.

By taxi, I went to see Mullah Abdul Salam with a translator. It took about an hour to reach his neighborhood. We wandered about for a long time, unable to find the house. The district had been virtually destroyed in the civil war and the area where his house showed all the effects of both war and Afghan poverty. The streets were flanked by the usual open sewers (*juis*) and almost blocked by rubbish and the remains of collapsed buildings.

When we arrived, I went into the doorway past the usual collection armed guards and up a modest flight of cement steps, then, as custom required taking off my shoes, I went into Mullah Abdul Salam's bare, but sofa-encircled reception room.

Rising, Mullah Abdul Salam greeted me shyly. I was not surprised. After all, I was an unknown American and from his book and the comments of my journalist friends, I expected that he would be at least wary if not hostile. I wasn't sure what language we would use so I said to my translator to say how much I had looked forward to meeting him after reading his book. The translator spoke a few words to him, paused and then said, "sir, he wants to speak in English." Since Pashto is Zaeef's native language, my Farsi speaking translator was perhaps in as weak a language position as I. So, during our talk, we went back and forth between English and Arabic which, as a religious scholar, he spoke very well.

Mullah Abdul Salam is now 42 years old and was born in a village near Kandahar. His father was the imam of a village mosque and the family, probably even more than any of his farming neighbors, was very poor. His mother died when he was a baby, of what he does not know, perhaps in childbirth. His older sister died shortly thereafter and his father, when he was still a child. As he recounts in his autobiography, his youth was grim. He was shunted from one relative to another and had to struggle for the little education, both religious and secular, he got.

When the Russians invaded in 1979, he joined the great exodus of millions -- ultimately 6 million or about one Afghan in each two -- to Pakistan where he lived in several of the wretched refugee camps. At 15, he ran away from "home," if one can call a refugee tent that, joined the resistance against the Soviet invasion, fought as a guerrilla, was caught in some nine ambushes and was severely wounded. During this time, he joined the Taliban, as he told me, because it was more honest, less brutal and more religious than the other resistance groups. By the time, he joined it, Mullah Muhammad Umar had become the Taliban leader. At the end of the Soviet occupation, the various guerrilla factions split, fought one another and, in the desperate struggle for survival, becoming "warlords," preyed upon the general population. Meanwhile, the leaders of the Taliban, as he recounted, had stood down or, more accurately, had returned to their schools and mosques. Finally, in reaction to the warlords' extortions, rapes and murders, the Taliban coalesced and reemerged. Then began a period of negotiation, missionary activity in the name of Islam and finally fighting that led the by-then greatly expanded Taliban into control of most of Afghanistan and catapulted Mullah Abdul Salam into its most difficult civil tasks.

Today, those difficult times, and his even worse years in prison, hardly show. He has just been removed from the UN and US "blacklist," and now, as I found, lives modestly in Kabul. He is a big man, not fat but portly, with penetrating black eyes and a modest black

beard. I was at some pains to establish at least the beginnings of trust between us and must have succeeded because we spoke with some humor (always a good sign) and candor. In our talk, I found no sign of animosity toward me or even, as I expected from his autobiography, toward America and Americans.

After preliminaries, I asked what he saw ahead and how the Afghan tragedy could be solved.

In reply, he said, "it is very hard to devise a way, but we should know that fighting is not the way. It won't work. And it has many bad side effects such as dividing the people from the government."

Given his background I was surprised by his concern for Karzai's government. But as we talked, it was clear that he was thinking in terms broader than Karzai. He meant that the Afghans must have an accommodation to government, *per se*, if they are heal their wounds and improve their condition.

The only realistic way ahead, he went on, "is respect for the Afghan people and their way whereas America is now relying wholly on force. Force didn't work for the British or the Russians and it won't work for the Americans."³ The word "respect" often figured in his remarks, as from my study of Afghanistan and the Arabs and Iranians, I knew it would.

But instead of working toward peace, he said and I paraphrase, America has created obstacles to peace which only it can remove. But here, he said, was a complete block: America has put the Taliban leaders on a black list, a "wanted" list, and they know that they will be killed if they surface to negotiate. Without their removal from the "capture or kill" list and a guarantee of safety from kidnap or murder, they cannot negotiate; trying to make contact with the Karzai regime is sure to get them killed. Perhaps they have even tried. He said that he did not know if Karzai and any of the Taliban leadership were in contact, but under these circumstances, he doubted it. While he admitted (and the Taliban have announced) that he is not authorized to speak for Mullah Muhammad Umar, he thought that the American troops did not need actually to pull out before negotiations could begin. If it was certain that they were going to do so, then negotiations could be got underway. That seemed to contradict some of the Taliban pronouncements, demanding withdrawal before negotiation, but it is, I believe, itself a negotiable issue.

So how do the Taliban see a post-US-controlled Afghanistan? I asked.

He replied that "it all depended on how it comes about. If it comes through negotiation, then probably the Taliban will be content with genuine participation in the government, but if it comes through force, then the Taliban will take everything."

³ I doubt that Mullah Abdul Salam could have heard it, but his opinion was borne out by the commander of one of the US strike forces in southern Afghanistan, Lt. Col. David Flynn, a career officer who also had served in Iraq. He told a reporter from *The Mclatchy Newspapers* on August 19, "We've killed hundreds and thousands of Taliban over nine years, and killing another thousand this year is not going to be the difference."

I asked about what he has been doing since his autobiography was translated. He perhaps did not quite understand my question and said that he was in Guantánamo until he was released. He suddenly asked me how old I am and, when I replied with my august status, he said “good. There was a man in Guantanamo who also was old and he was gentle with me. The younger men were not.”

That brought up the question of the American policy of targeting and killing the leadership. I said that I thought that such actions would open the way for younger, more radical men. Yes, he agreed, that would certainly happen but the senior, “old,” leadership is still intact, living, he said, off somewhere in Pakistan. The usual guess is in the city of Quetta, which historically was a part of Afghanistan.

I turned to the issue of al-Qaida saying that their activities, their composition and their relationship with the Taliban were what really interested most Americans. He confirmed what the Russian ambassador had told me: Usama bin Ladin was already operating in Afghanistan before the Taliban came into power. Of course, Mullah Abdul Salam said, almost echoing the words of the Russian ambassador, the Taliban needed money and Usama was almost the only available source. All the Afghans, Mullah Abdul Salam emphasized, have the tradition of granting sanctuary (*melmastia*) to a guest. It is mandatory. Moreover, Usama was the enemy of the enemies of the Taliban. So there was an understanding. But after 2002, he said, “that understanding lapsed, asylum for Usama was withdrawn and the Qaida fighters, including Usama, are no longer in Afghanistan. [American military and intelligence sources have publicly confirmed this.] They will not come back. The Taliban will not allow them to return.”

When Mullah Abdul Salam returned to Afghanistan, he said, he three times met with President Karzai who asked him to participate in the great national assembly, the *Loya Jirga*. He said he told Karzai that it was not proper to have a *Loya Jirga* during occupation by foreign forces and urged him not to hold it. He also told Karzai, he said, he personally could not, under the circumstances, participate.

I asked if he saw Americans. Yes, he replied an American general once came to call on him, asking what was the best way to arm Afghans to fight the Taliban.

He didn’t laugh, as I expected he would.

What about the American aid program? I asked. Granting aid, he said, had a bad effect “because it split families. If a man took American money, making him a traitor to Afghanistan and to Islam, his own brother was apt to kill him.” But, I said, in other circumstances would it not be good? “Oh, certainly,” he replied. So, I added, then we must change the circumstances. He nodded.

Musing, he said he was often asked to compare the Russians and the Americans. On the good side, he said, the Russians came by invitation from an existing government whereas the Americans invaded. But, on the bad side, the Russians were far more brutal than the Americans, bombing whole villages, killing perhaps a million people. On their side, he went on, the Americans at least brought the UN with them and that was a good thing for Afghanistan. The Americans, however, were here only in opposition to the Russians and when the Russian threat ended they left. I was surprised by what I inferred was almost nostalgia in his remark. It was nearly what I had heard from Dr. Samar on the role America could have played in 2002.

I then raised the issue of the brutality of the Taliban. I did not mention the recent UN report on the injuries inflicted by the Taliban on Afghan civilians as I am sure he would think that these are inevitable in a guerrilla war. Instead, I raised the issue of the execution by stoning of an Afghan woman. I remarked that such barbaric practice gave a horrible image of the Taliban even though such execution was authorized by both the Old Testament and the Qur'an. But we no longer believed in it. Can the Taliban modernize? I asked.

He shrugged. "What can you expect now? The Taliban are completely isolated, under constant attack, and naturally this throws them back onto old ways. They cannot afford to relax even on such matters."

I asked about his own religious observance. It being Ramadan, he was of course fasting. I asked if he went to the little mosque I had seen nearby in his capacity as a mullah. Oh no, he said, he was not allowed to for his own safety. That remark also surprised me. Was he afraid of the Taliban? I asked. He rather ducked that question, saying only that he did go to the mosque for the Friday congregational prayer. But, although he did not specify, it was clear that in the circumstances of Afghanistan today, as I saw everywhere I turned, almost anyone of any standing was unsure where danger might arise. Also, the government would probably not approve his attendance at a place where he might influence the population. Better to pray at home.

He said he has written a second book, also in Pashto, somewhat like his first. The publishers of his autobiography, he said, refused to pay him royalties as he was on the black list. So he asked that they just hold the money, but, in the end, they refused to give him anything. I suggested that he should write an article on how to end the war and plan to contact Rick MacArthur to see if *Harpers* would be interested.

Abdul Salam has been invited, he said, by the European parliament to visit Europe. But he had not applied for a visa. He said he had only recently been free to do so, and he had to remember that he was a guest in the country and must not do anything that might embarrass his hosts. [WRP: I have discussed elsewhere the limits of refuge and the control of "guests."]

As I was leaving, he said that he was expecting the German ambassador. And, indeed, as I went out, there were four big armored cars with a dozen or so men armed with wicked looking machineguns, eyeing me suspiciously, and a small group of German diplomats, waiting to go in.

I was amused that they did not even look sheepish when, by myself without armed guards, I walked passed them to my taxi.

William R. Polk
August 24, 2010
Kabul, Afghanistan

