

AFGHANISTAN AS NARCOSTAN AS WELL AS JIDADISTAN

The situation in Afghanistan, five years after the U.S.-lead invasion, is looking mighty grim. Instead of helping one weak government get back on its feet, the Bush administration is now responsible for two failed states that are now breeding grounds for Islamic militants.

Casualties among American and NATO troops are up 22 percent. Canadian forces alone lost 22 soldiers this summer. Already this year, an estimated 3,000 Afghans have been killed. Some of the 3 million Afghans who gratefully returned to their homes after the defeat of the Taliban are now leaving again. Nearly 200,000 people have been displaced by the new fighting.

Afghani farmers have just harvested the largest ever opium crop, from which Taliban middlemen and drug lords have profited handsomely. Just as cocaine eradication programs in South America have backfired, so has the destruction of poppy fields, with no reasonable substitute crops, drawn farmers back to opium and back to the Taliban. Afghanistan is on the verge of becoming an ungovernable narcostate.

It is primarily drug money that supports Islamic militants who now control 20 districts in four southern provinces. The Taliban is able to pay its soldiers \$5 per day, twice the salary of the fledgling Afghan army. In addition to hit and run attacks, the Taliban have learned to employ another terribly effective weapon: the suicide bomber. In 2002 there were only two such attacks, but today there are almost seven per month. On September 18, 2006, two U. S. soldiers were killed by a truck bomber only one block from the American embassy in Kabul. Some commentators are describing the situation as the "Iraqization" of the insurgency, although some Taliban appear to reject suicide attacks as counterproductive.

Reconstruction money that should have gone to Afghanistan went to Iraq, where, because of mismanagement by Republican cronies, most of it was lost in projects that were not completed because of corruption and incompetence. Afghanistan has

received less U. S. reconstruction aid than any other recent nation building effort. Each Afghani has received an average of \$67 in aid compared to \$249 per capita in Bosnia.

Bush had good reason to invade Afghanistan, because we knew that Osama bin Laden planned the 9/11 attacks, and we knew that he and his followers had sought refuge with the Taliban. Because of these facts we had strong international backing for this military operation. In fact, NATO is leading the counter insurgency effort there today.

Instead of finishing the mission with a focused effort to apprehend bin Laden, Bush lost his focus and pulled out troops and equipment to invade Iraq. Furthermore, there was never an effort to pacify and secure the south where the Taliban had its base of support. An article in *U. S. Today* states that NATO forces are "walking up to a situation where they might fail because the U. S. didn't invest enough troops and money to create stability and a non-opium economy" (10/5/06).

Attacks near the border with Pakistan have tripled because the Taliban and Al Qaeda members have enjoyed safe haven in the lawless province of Waziristan, which now has the nickname Jihadistan. The militants have also found friends in Pakistan's southwest region and the border town Chaman is a major jihadi headquarters immune from NATO attack.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, a military dictator, has withdrawn his troops from Waziristan where 500 of them have been killed by Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. Musharraf claims that the tribal leaders there promised him that they would crack down on these "miscreants," the favorite English word for bad guys in South Asia. That promise has been broken and that jihadists there can now concentrate their full efforts on supporting the Taliban across the border.

Musharraf has been, to say the least, an unreliable ally in the war on terror. Since 1999 the U. S. has given Pakistan and ill earned \$4.5 billion in economic and

military aid. Musharraf has been successful in capturing some top Qaeda leaders, but he stubbornly refuses to believe the consensus view that bin Laden is hiding in or around the Pakistani city of Quetta. When Bush boasts that he and Musharraf are "on the [terrorist] hunt together," he must have had his Vice President's advice about safe hunting partners.

Musharraf has been especially shifty with regard to the Taliban, who were initially supported by Pakistan's spy agency. Many of the Taliban fighters were trained in religious schools in Pakistan, and the Taliban continues to have strong support among conservative Pakistanis, especially the Pashtun tribe of which most of the Taliban are members. For nearly 30 years, since the U. S. support for Islamic militants against the Soviets in Afghanistan, Northwest Pakistan has been a center for not only arms smuggling but arms manufacture as well. Pakistani gunsmiths produce very good copies of the Russian AK-47, the most popular automatic rifle in the world.

NATO forces have been successful in killing hundreds of Taliban fighters, but the survivors hide their weapons to fight another day along with eager new recruits. NATO commanders now realize that they have to follow the clearing of a village with improvement in security and living conditions or the militants will simply come back again. This constructive policy may have come too late, just as it has in Iraq.

The Pashtuns, who make up most of the Taliban today, have a reputation for courage and violent resistance, which for centuries has served them well in defending themselves against invading armies coming over the Hindu Kush from Central Asia. They and other tribes actually defeated the British in the 1850s and the Soviets in the 1980s. In 1930 tens of thousands of these fierce Pashtuns, under the leadership of the "Frontier Gandhi" Abdul Ghaffar Khan, used their martial discipline to resist the British nonviolently for 17 years. The British killed and tortured them unmercifully but they did not defeat them.

Ghaffar Khan's political descendants belong to the Awami National Party, which unfortunately has been marginalized by the resurgence of Pakistan's radical Islamist parties. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there arose another Frontier Gandhi who would lead Afghanistan and Pakistan to a brighter future?