OMNI

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Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace and Justice


What’s at stake: “Attempts to remake Afghanistan by military force have resulted in ever more widespread warlordism, and desperate poverty, and bereavement for hundreds of thousands...” Kathy Kelly

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System Change, Not Climate Change

Instead of Defense Department, War Department

Instead of War on Terror, War OF Terror, War to Dominate World

Instead of Taliban, Pashtun/Afghan Resistance to Occupation

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INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN

No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes

By Anand Gopal. Metropolitan Books
Told through the lives of three Afghans, the stunning tale of how the United States had triumph in sight in Afghanistan—and then brought the Taliban back from the dead

In a breathtaking chronicle, acclaimed journalist Anand Gopal traces in vivid detail the lives of three Afghans caught in America’s war on terror. He follows a Taliban commander, who rises from scrawny teenager to leading insurgent; a US-backed warlord, who uses the American military to gain personal wealth and power; and a village housewife trapped between the two sides, who discovers the devastating cost of neutrality.

Through their dramatic stories, Gopal shows that the Afghan war, so often regarded as a hopeless quagmire, could in fact have gone very differently. Top Taliban leaders actually tried to surrender within months of the US invasion, renouncing all political activity and submitting to the new government. Effectively, the Taliban ceased to exist—yet the Americans were unwilling to accept such a turnaround. Instead, driven by false intelligence from their allies and an unyielding mandate to fight terrorism, American forces continued to press the conflict, resurrecting the insurgency that persists to this day.

With its intimate accounts of life in war-torn Afghanistan, Gopal’s thoroughly original reporting lays bare the workings of America’s longest war and the truth behind its prolonged agony. A heartbreaking story of mistakes and misdeeds, No Good Men Among the Living... more

Anand Gopal

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BOOK EXCERPTS
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— 1 —

The Last Days of Vice and Virtue

Early in the morning on September 11, 2001, deep amid the jagged heights of the Hindu Kush, something terrible took place. When teenager Noor Ahmed arrived that day in Gayawa to buy firewood, he knew it immediately: there was no call to prayer. Almost every village in
Afghanistan has a mosque, and normally you can hear the muezzin's tinny song just before dawn, signaling the start of a new day. But for the first time that he could remember, there was not a sound. The entire place seemed lifeless.

The Dogs Are Eating Them Now is a raw, uncensored account of the war in Afghanistan from a brilliant young reporter who for several years was the only Western journalist brave enough to live full-time in the dangerous southern region.

The Dogs Are Eating Them Now is a highly personal narrative of Canada's war in Afghanistan and how it went dangerously wrong. Written by a respected and fearless former foreign correspondent who has won multiple awards for his journalism (including an Emmy for the video series "Talking with the Taliban"), this is a gripping account of modern warfare that takes you into back alleys, cockpits, and prisons--telling stories that would have endangered his life had he published this book while still working as a journalist.

From the corruption of law enforcement agents and the tribal nature of the local power structure to the economics of the drug trade and the frequent blunders of foreign troops, this is the no-holds-barred story from a leading expert on the insurgency. Smith draws on his unmatched compassion and a rare ability to
cut through the noise and see the broader truths to give us a bold and candid look at the Taliban's continued influence--and at the mistakes, catastrophes and ultimate failure of the West's best intentions.

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PRAISE FOR THE DOGS ARE EATING THEM NOW

Praise for *The Dogs Are Eating Them Now*:

- "...the definitive Canadian account of the Afghan war thus far. No one emerges from it unscathed, least of all its author. . ."
  *The Vancouver Sun*

- "It is the most hard-won and heartfelt piece of journalism that exists on Canada's longest war." *The Gazette*

POST-OCCUPATION Post-Invasion/Occupation/Withdrawal/Continuation Chaos and Suffering

Kelly: Obama extends war in Afghanistan

*Kathy Kelly* 12:04 a.m. EST November 25, 2014  [I read an extended version of this article in *The Catholic*](http://www.catholic.com)
President Barack Obama has signed an order to authorize continuation of the Afghan war for at least another year. The order authorizes U.S. airstrikes “to support Afghan military operations in the country” and U.S. ground troops to continue normal operations, which is to say, to “occasionally accompany Afghan troops” on operations against the Taliban.

The administration, in its leak to the New York Times, affirmed that there had been “heated debate” between Pentagon advisers and others in Obama’s cabinet chiefly concerned not to lose soldiers in combat. Oil strategy isn’t mentioned as having been debated, and neither is further encirclement of China, but the most notable absence in the report was any mention of cabinet members’ concern for Afghan civilians affected by air strikes and ground troop operations, in a country already afflicted by nightmares of poverty and social breakdown.

Here are just two events, excerpted from an August 2014 Amnesty International report, which President Obama and his advisers should have considered (and allowed into a public debate) before once more expanding the U.S. combat role in Afghanistan:

In September, 2012 a group of women from an impoverished village in mountainous Laghman province were collecting firewood when a U.S. plane dropped at least two bombs on them, killing seven and injuring seven others, four of them seriously.

A U.S. Special Operations Forces unit was responsible for extrajudicial killing, torture and enforced disappearances during the period of December 2012 to February 2013. Included among those tortured was 51 year old Qandi Agha, “a petty employee of the Ministry of Culture,” who described in detail the various torture techniques he suffered. He was told that he would be tortured using “14 different types of torture.”

These included: Beatings with cables, electric shock, prolonged, painful stress positions, repeated head first dunking in a barrel of water, and burial in a hole full of cold water for entire nights.

He said that both U.S. Special Forces and Afghans participated in the
torture and often smoked hashish while doing so.

Attempts to remake Afghanistan by military force have resulted in warlordism, ever more widespread and desperate poverty, and bereavement for those whose loved ones are among the tens of thousands of casualties.

Area hospitals report seeing fewer IED injuries and many more bullet wounds from pitched battles between rival armed militias whose allegiances, Taliban, government, or other, are hard to determine. With 40 percent of U.S. weapon supplies to Afghan security forces now unaccounted for, many of the weapons employed on all sides may have been supplied by the U.S.

Meanwhile the implications for America’s democracy aren’t reassuring. Was this decision really made weeks ago but only announced now that congressional elections are safely over?

Was a Friday night cabinet leak, buried between official administration announcements on immigration and Iran sanctions, really Obama’s solution to the unpopularity of a decision affecting the lives of so many?

With concern for the wishes of U.S. citizens given so little weight, it is doubtful that much thought was given to the terrible costs of these military interventions for ordinary people trying to live, raise families and survive in Afghanistan.

But for those whose “heated debates” focus solely on what is best for U.S. national interests, here are a few suggestions:

[WHAT IS BEST FOR AFGHANISTAN, THE WORLD, AND THE USA. – D]

The U.S. should end its current provocative drive toward military alliances and encirclement of Russia and China with missiles.

It should accept pluralism of economic and political power in the contemporary world. Present U.S. policies are provoking a return to Cold War with Russia and possibly beginning one with China.

This is a lose/lose proposition for all countries involved.

The U.S. should offer generous medical and economic aid and technical expertise wherever it may be helpful in other countries and thus build a
reservoir of international goodwill and positive influence.

That's something that nobody would have to keep secret.

Kathy Kelly writes for PeaceVoice and co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence.

[Kelly partly concludes *The Catholic Worker* version: “By a resetting of policy focused on cooperation with Russia, China and other influential countries within the framework of the United Nations, the United States could foster international mediation.”]

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**The Afghan War is Not Over: U.S. Ends 13-Year Combat Mission, But 10,000+ Troops Continue the Fight**

The U.S.-led NATO occupation has formally ended its 13-year combat mission in Afghanistan. The move leaves Afghan forces in charge of security, though more than "... Read More →"

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**U.S. Signs Deal for Troops to Remain in Afghanistan**


Raghavan writes: "The United States and Afghanistan on Tuesday signed a vital security deal that allows some American troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond this year, ensuring a continuing U.S. presence in the region."

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**White House quietly sets new Afghanistan withdrawal deadline: Never**

Despite "withdrawal," thousands of U.S. troops to continue occupation.
With no public discussion or explanation, the White House signed a new deal on Sept. 30 with the government of Afghanistan to keep 10,000 U.S. troops occupying the country. There is no plan or timeline for a full withdrawal of U.S. troops — ever.

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ALSO IRAQ

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"No boots on the ground" a lie

Less than one week after the Pentagon generals announced new one-year deployment rotations to the resurrected U.S. war in Iraq “for 10 to 15 to 20 years,” they also created a new Marine Corps unit to fight in Iraq.

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Obama’s Defense Secretary Nominee Is Open to Having More Troops in Afghanistan

by George Zornick

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The Afghanistan War Is Still Raging—but This Time It’s Being Waged by Contractors

by Tim Shorrock
The Worst Narco-State in History? After 13-Year War, Afghanistan's Opium Trade Floods the Globe

In the 13 years since the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the country's opium production has doubled, now accounting for about 90 percent of the ... Read More →

AFGHANISTAN AGAIN A MAJOR OPIUM PRODUCER UNDER WAR LORDS

Afghanistan: The Making of a Narco State

Afghanistan produced 6,400 tons of opium in 2014, about 90 percent of the world's supply.

After 13 years of war, we haven't defeated the Taliban, but we have managed to create a nation ruled by drug lords

By Matthieu Aikins | December 4, 2014

[Aikins explains the extremely complicated political relations and chronology of the major players in Afghanistan since the US invasion. “If you understand the Afghan government as a narco state, then the fact that opium production has actually increased—while the US. spent billions on counternarcots efforts and troop numbers surged—starts to make sense.” The explanation of the results of the “Surge” seems also significantly plausible.]

Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan is named for the wide river that runs through its provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, a low-slung city of shrubby roundabouts and glass-fronted market blocks. When I visited in April, there was an expectant atmosphere, like that of a
whaling town waiting for the big ships to come in. In the bazaars, the shops were filled with dry goods, farming machinery and motorcycles. The teahouses, where a man could spend the night on the carpet for the price of his dinner, were packed with migrant laborers, nishtgar, drawn from across the southern provinces, some coming from as far afield as Iran and Pakistan. The schools were empty; in war-torn districts, police and Taliban alike had put aside their arms. It was harvest time.

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Across the province, hundreds of thousands of people were taking part in the largest opium harvest in Afghanistan's history. With a record 224,000 hectares under cultivation this year, the country produced an estimated 6,400 tons of opium, or around 90 percent of the world's supply. The drug is entwined with the highest levels of the Afghan government and the economy in a way that makes the cocaine business in Escobar-era Colombia look like a sideshow. The share of cocaine trafficking and production in Colombia's GDP peaked at six percent in the late 1980s; in Afghanistan today, according to U.N. estimates, the opium industry accounts for 15 percent of the economy, a figure that is set to rise as the West withdraws. "Whatever the term narco state means, if there is a country to which it applies, it is Afghanistan," says Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies illicit economies in conflict zones. "It is unprecedented in history."

Even more shocking is the fact that the Afghan narcotics trade has gotten undeniably worse since the U.S.-led invasion: The country produces twice as much opium as it did in 2000. How did all those poppy fields flower under the nose of one of the biggest international military and development missions of our time? The answer lies partly in the deeply cynical bargains struck by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai in his bid to consolidate power, and partly in the way the U.S. military ignored the corruption of its allies in taking on the Taliban. It's the story of how, in pursuit of the War on Terror, we lost the War on Drugs in Afghanistan by allying with many of the same people who turned the country into the world's biggest source of heroin.

Nowhere is this more apparent than here in Helmand, where nearly a thousand U.S. and coalition soldiers lost their lives during the war, the highest toll of any province. Helmand alone accounts for almost half of Afghanistan's opium production, and police and government officials are alleged to be deeply involved in the drug trade. But the Afghan government's line is that poppy cultivation only takes place in areas controlled by the Taliban. "There's no opium in the nearby districts," Maj. Gen. Abdul Qayum Baqizoi, who was the provincial police chief at the time, tells me. "The opium is in the faraway areas, and they're not safe for you to visit."

However, on my second day in town, I meet a 28-year-old soft-spoken teacher named Hekmat. He says that he can take me to relatively secure areas in Marjah, just outside Lashkar Gah, where poppy is being grown. His family is involved in the business, he says.
And anyhow, he's free – the students have gone to work on the harvest.

The next day, Hekmat and I cross the broad torrent of the Helmand River and head west, along a smooth stretch of paved road that was once a dirt track studded with roadside bombs. It's hard to imagine now, but Marjah was once the site of one of the fiercest battles of the war, when, in 2010, the Marines air-assaulted into the Taliban-controlled area, braving gun battles and tangles of IED traps amid the mud-walled compounds and orchards. Today, the area is peaceful, the kind of green, flat farmland where you can watch a tree scroll slowly across the horizon as you drive, or a faraway thunderhead mount. The weather is hot, and the air has the nectary scent of early summer. Marjah is crisscrossed by irrigation canals; their banks, bushy with vegetation, sprout pump hoses that shoot down like drinking straws. Half-naked kids plunge from the mud embankment into the cool brown water.

"This area was all controlled by the Taliban until the Marines came," says Hekmat. He smiles fondly. "It was great when the Marines were here." The Americans spent freely, showering the locals with cash-for-work projects and construction contracts, and outfitting a local, anti-Taliban militia that employs child soldiers and imposes a levy on opium fields. We pass a wide scar of cleared ground that had once held a Marine outpost. "But now they're all gone."

Originally an empty stretch of desert west of the Helmand River, Marjah was developed into farmland by a massive irrigation project that began in 1946 and drew support from USAID, as part of the Cold War competition for influence against the Soviets. Nomadic tribes from around the country were resettled here, and its fields became fertile with wheat, melons, pomegranates – and, with the arrival of the wars four decades ago, opium poppies.

Pulling off onto a dirt road, we thread our way between the high mud walls that enclose each family compound here and come to a stop. Hekmat's paternal uncle, Mirza Khan, wearing a robe and a neatly trimmed beard, greets us warmly. Behind him is a field of dull-green poppies, the end result of the tiny black seeds he and his family sowed back in November. "I've been planting this since the time of the Communist revolution," he says.

Mirza Khan's son is standing amid the chest-high stalks, in his hand a lancing tool, a curved piece of wood with four shallow blades on its tip. Lancing is laborious and delicate work; he moves one by one to each bulb, cradling it with his left hand and drawing the blades across it in a diagonal stroke with his right. "You can't press too deeply, or otherwise the bulb dries up after just one lancing," he explains, his hands flicking deftly among the poppy heads. "We're able to come back and lance each of them four or five times."

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The bulbs are lanced in the afternoon, and the milky sap seeps out through the night, thickening and oxidizing into a dark-brown hue. In the mornings, the *nishtgar* go from bulb to
bulb scraping off the sticky resin with a flat blade, which they wipe into a tin can hanging around their necks. Fifteen workers can harvest a productive hectare within a week. When you consider that Helmand alone has at least 100,000 hectares under cultivation, you get a sense of the vast amount of manpower that must be mobilized.

Over the next two days, Hekmat drives me around, visiting the poppy fields. On one three-acre plot, we find half a dozen men at work, overseen by a bent, white-bearded old farmer named Hajji Abdullah Jan. I ask him why he's not worried about getting caught in a secure, government-controlled area like Marjah. "The government has been distracted by the elections," he says, referring to this past spring's presidential contest. "And anyhow, they're corrupt." He and the other farmers I speak to say that they were paying around $40 per acre in bribes to the local police. "Next year, I'll plant twice as much," he says, regarding the field with satisfaction.

Marjah had been largely poppy-free since the arrival of the Marines, due to eradication campaigns and the flood of cash the Americans pumped into the economy. Now that foreign aid has dried up and the government's interest in punishing farmers has waned, people like Mirza Khan and Abdullah Jan followed simple economic logic: Wheat prices were too low to be profitable, so this year, all over Marjah, poppy was being planted.

"NARCO CORRUPTION WENT TO THE TOP OF THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT," WROTE A U.S. OFFICIAL. "PRESIDENT KARZAI WAS PLAYING US LIKE A FIDDLE."

Back at Hekmat's house, I ask his uncle Mirza Khan if he'll show me the results of his harvest thus far. He returns with a polyurethane bag the size of a soccer ball and hefts it onto the carpet. He unwinds a thick rubber strap, and a sour, vegetable odor fills the room. Inside is a mass of raw opium, with a rich brown color and a moist texture, like pulped figs. It's about 10 pounds, a half-acre's yield. "If I'm lucky, I might get 60,000 kaldar for this," he says. That's about $600.

"Do you know how much this is worth on the streets of London?" I ask him. He shrugs, and I make a quick calculation. Ten pounds of opium can be refined into a pound of pure heroin. Cut it to 30 percent purity and sell it by the gram – that's 1,500 grams at a hundred bucks a pop. "This is worth over $150,000."

That's a 25,000 percent markup. We stare at each other for a moment, and Mirza Khan gives a chuckle. He shakes his head in amazement. A future hundred grand sitting in the living room of a guy who doesn't have plumbing, electricity or furniture. Someone between him and that junkie is clearly making a killing.

From the farmers' fields at harvest time, Afghanistan's opium was beginning a journey that would span vast global webs of traffickers, corrupt officials and powerful militant groups. Back
in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, I arrange an interview with a drug smuggler, who insists on meeting in a neutral location; the city is calm, but threats lie close beneath the surface, both from internecine drug-mafia disputes and the Taliban.

At a little teahouse on a quiet street, I'm ushered into a small back room whose walls and carpets vie in griminess, and I am introduced to a stocky middle-aged man with a skullcap and beard. I'll call him Sami. He tells me that he's from the district of Garmsir, near the Pakistani border. When war with the Soviets broke out, he fled the country, along with millions of other Afghan refugees. He grew up in a camp near the border town of Chagai, in Pakistan. After finishing 11th grade, he got work as a driver and began to ply the route from Garmsir to Chagai, smuggling opium through the desert wastes. "There are more than a hundred ways through the desert," he tells me. "The police checkpoints are in one, and the rest of the desert is free for smugglers."

Afghanistan is landlocked, and its borders leak opium like sieves into five neighboring countries. In recent years, the northern route to Russia and Europe via Tajikistan has gained importance, but the southern route through Balochistan still accounts for the largest portion of opium that leaves the country. From there, it is smuggled into Iran, and then onward to the Balkans, the Persian Gulf and Africa. Most of it is destined for Western Europe.

The Balochistan border area between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran is one of the most remote and lawless places on Earth. Two hundred thousand square miles of desert and dune seas are broken only by spindly granitic eruptions; the ethnic Baloch and Pashtun tribes that control the area are heavily armed and have been involved in various kinds of smuggling for centuries. Some are nominally cooperative with the state, while others are engaged with a bewildering mix of insurgent groups: secular Baloch rebels who seek independence from Pakistan, Sunni anti-Iranian groups and a wide array of Islamist militants, including the Taliban. It's a natural haven for illicit activities.

At the center of this world is Baramcha, a smuggling hub on the Afghan side of the border in the Chagai Hills, 150 miles to the south and free of government control since 2001. It functions as a kind of switching station for much of the opium trade. The harvest by farmers like Mirza Khan is consolidated by local traders into larger shipments – ranging from a few hundred pounds to several tons – and sent to Baramcha, where it is purchased by Pakistani and Iranian smugglers who carry it abroad. The big deals are conducted between trusted parties, with money sent via the informal money-trading system known as hawala, which is also a linchpin in global money-laundering circuits. One side pays the hawaladar, who gives you a phone number and a code that, used at a corresponding hawaladar a country or continent away, lets the recipient claim the money. The accounts are settled later.

Baramcha is jointly controlled by the Taliban and a handful of powerful smuggling families, pre-eminent among them that of Hajji Juma Khan, a drug baron who was arrested by the DEA in Jakarta in 2008. Today, his relative Hajji Sharafuddin presides over the smugglers of the town, while the Taliban enforces security. "The Taliban has a court there to resolve people's
problems," says Sami. "The security situation is good for the people living there."

Baramcha was once just a collection of mud-walled compounds, but these days you can find late-model Land Cruisers driving past concrete mansions – this despite sporadic raids and airstrikes by U.S. and Afghan forces. The area is so remote that raiding teams would have to refuel their American helicopters in the desert using fuel bladders parachuted out the back of a cargo plane. "There’s an area of town that we used to call Hajji JMK Village," says a member of Afghanistan's elite commando units who has hit the area a number of times with Marines and British special forces. "It’s like a Sherpur in the desert," he says, referring to a neighborhood in Kabul notorious for its gaudy "poppy palaces" built by the country's warlords. "They had everything out there: generators, appliances, fancy cars. We used to take ice cream out of their freezers."

During the raids, he tells me, Baramcha's inhabitants would flee across the border to Pakistan, where Pakistani forces would line up and stand guard until the Americans left. "The drug smugglers and the ISI are tight together," he says, referring to Pakistan's intelligence service. Sami makes similar claims about Baramcha's leadership. "They have houses on the Pakistani side," he says. (The ISI denies any connection to smugglers or the Taliban.)

The U.N. has estimated that the Taliban makes hundreds of millions of dollars from taxing opium and other illicit activities. But that's only a fraction of the $3 billion that Afghanistan earns from the drug trade. To find the biggest beneficiaries of opium, you need to go from the poppy palaces in Baramcha to the ones in Kabul.

The United States' alliances with opium traffickers in Afghanistan go back to the 1980s, when the CIA waged a dirty war to undermine the Soviet occupation of the country. Though opium had been grown for centuries in Afghanistan's highlands, large-scale cultivation was introduced in Helmand by Mullah Nasim Akhund-zada, a mujahedeen commander who was receiving support from the ISI and the CIA. USAID's irrigated farmlands were perfect for cash-crop production, and as Akhundzada wrested control of territory from the Communist government, he introduced production quotas and offered cash advances to farmers who planted opium.

When Afghanistan descended into a civil war in the Nineties, the Akhundzadas rose as the province's dominant warlords, only to be forced out in 1995 by the rise of the Taliban. Though the fundamentalist movement strictly prohibited drug consumption, the support of wealthy opium traders was crucial to its early success.

In 2000, Taliban leader Mullah Omar banned opium. (Photo: AP)

In the summer of 2000, the country's fundamentalist leaders announced a total ban on opium cultivation, "a decision by the Taliban that we welcome," as former Secretary of State Colin Powell said. It remains a mystery why the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, made the call. But the Taliban enforced his decision with their customary harshness. In Helmand, those caught planting poppy were beaten and then paraded through the village with
their faces blackened with motor oil. The following spring, the only significant opium harvest
was in the corner of the northeast that was still controlled by the Taliban's rivals, the Northern
Alliance. Opium production fell from an estimated 3,276 tons in 2000 to 185 tons in 2001.

Then history intervened. After the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the Bush administration,
seeking a "light footprint," partnered with anti-Taliban warlords, including the Northern
Alliance, to take control of the country. In its quest for vengeance, the U.S. allowed figures
accused of being involved in grave civil-war-era human rights abuses to come to power; these
included people like Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf, whose rival
mujahedeen factions shelled Kabul to rubble and who would later become the country's vice
president and a leading member of Parliament, respectively.

These were the first in a series of decisions that helped revive the Afghan opium economy in
a drastically expanded form. Within six months of the U.S. invasion, the warlords we backed
were running the opium trade, and the spring of 2002 saw a bumper harvest of 3,400 tons.
Meanwhile, the international community and the Afghan government paid lip service to
counternarcotics, with the latter adopting an official strategy that fantasized about opium
production being reduced by 75 percent in five years and eliminated entirely within 10.

Hamid Karzai, who had been plucked from obscurity to serve as president, was busy
cementing, with U.S. acquiescence, a political order deeply linked to the opium trade. In the
north, he wooed the Northern Alliance commanders as partners; in his southern homeland, he
appointed Sher Mohammad Akhundzada as governor of Helmand, the nephew of the now-
deceased Mullah Nasim, the same guy who had first introduced large-scale poppy cultivation
in Afghanistan. "Narco corruption went to the top of the Afghan government," wrote Thomas
Schweich, who served as a senior U.S. counternarcotics official in Afghanistan from 2006 to
2008. "Sure, Karzai had Taliban enemies who profited from drugs, but he had even more
supporters who did." (Spokesmen for both Karzai and current President Ashraf Ghani
declined to comment for this story.)

These were boom times for Helmand's drug smugglers. In Lashkar Gah, I meet a man I'll call
Saleem, a former smuggler who started his first heroin lab in 2002, as a way of moving up the
value chain and expanding his margins. With his pendulous gut and cherubic, rosy-cheeked
face, Saleem looks like Santa's drug-dealing little brother. "Opium takes up a lot of space, and
there's less profit," he says, explaining his decision to go into the manufacturing business. He
and others in the opium trade seemed to inhabit a separate world from the war, one where
money was all that counted. "I have worked in the government-controlled areas, as well as
the Taliban-controlled areas," he says, laughing. "In some places, we could see the Taliban's
checkpoints from the factory. When we were in the government's areas, we paid money to the
local officials."

Saleem sold his heroin to Iranian traffickers in Nimroz, a large, mostly desert province to the
west of Helmand whose economy rests almost entirely on opium. Like other smugglers and
Afghan law-enforcement sources that I spoke to, he describes a system where the police and
local government officials were an integral part of the chain, to the point where the police would often transport drugs on his behalf, especially over the final, most dangerous stretches, where the Iranian border forces were waging a bitter war against smugglers. "We would talk to someone in the government, and that person would take the drugs to the border, where the Iranian smugglers had their own person waiting," Saleem says.

For the first five years, there was little risk involved. Business was good. But international embarrassment was growing over Afghanistan's booming opium production. Law enforcement agencies like the DEA were starting to build up their activities in Kabul. The British, who were set to take over Helmand as part of NATO's- expanding mission, insisted in 2005 that Karzai's pick for governor, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, be removed, after a British-led team raided his compound and discovered nine tons of opium and heroin. (Akhundzada claimed he had seized it from smugglers and was going to destroy it.) A confrontation was brewing between the drug-enforcement community on one side, and Karzai and the Afghan government on the other. But a third force would soon enter the debate: the Pentagon's generals, who weren't going to let concerns over drug trafficking derail their troop surge.

A telling characteristic of the Afghan narco state – and of narco states in general – is how often the fox is selected to guard the henhouse. One drug courier from Helmand was caught with a letter of safe passage signed by the head of Afghanistan's counternarcotics police, Lt. Gen. Mohammad Daud Daud. A convicted heroin trafficker, Izzatullah Wasifi, was appointed by Karzai as the head of an anti-corruption agency. "Karzai was playing us like a fiddle," wrote Schweich, the U.S. counternarcotics official.

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The New Face of Heroin

In the opium-rich south, in addition to Akhundzada in Helmand, Karzai relied on his own half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, to run the crucial province of Kandahar. Wali, who was dogged for years by allegations that he played a central role in the south's drug trade – and who was assassinated in 2011 – insisted on his innocence and, in public at least, U.S. officials claimed there was no hard evidence. But on trips to Helmand and Kandahar, I am told by U.S. and Afghan sources, along with individuals involved in the drug trade, that Wali presided over a system where corrupt officials were appointed to key positions in return for protection payments. "It's the way organized crime works," says a former Justice Department official with extensive experience in Afghanistan. "I don't want to know as long as I'm getting my cut."

"The main police checkpoints in the south on Highway 1 were controlled by Ahmed Wali," an Afghan police official tells me, referring to the road that connects the country's provinces. "Say 20 partners get together to buy a ton of opium in Jalalabad. Between them, they all have
connections to the chiefs of police and governors in each of these districts. They send an agent to the checkpoint who pays off the commander and lets him know which truck to allow to pass."

But even as the scale of the Afghan narco state was becoming apparent, President Obama's surge in 2010 brought a new set of rules. The arrival of tens of thousands of troops and billions in spending might have been a golden opportunity to address the opium problem. Instead, the opposite occurred. The irony of the surge was that the military repeated the same collaborations with the warlords as it had done under the Bush-era light footprint. Whereas the excuse before was that there were too few troops, now it was that there were too many.

Obama had given the military just four years to get 100,000 troops in and out of the country, defeat the Taliban and build a lasting Afghan army and police force. On the ground, American commanders' short-term imperatives of combat operations and logistics trumped other advisers' long-term concerns over corruption, narcotics and human rights abuses, every time. Notorious figures like the president's brother Ahmed Wali were thought to be too crucial to the war effort to be held accountable or replaced.

"Drug control wasn't a priority," says Jean-Luc Lemahieu, who was head of the U.N.'s Office on Drugs and Crime in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2013. "Limiting casualties was, and if that meant engaging in unholy alliances with actors of diverse plumage, such was the case."

According to U.S. officials, a sort of informal bargain was struck at the interagency level: The DEA, the FBI and the Justice and Treasury departments would not pursue top Afghan allies who were involved in the drug trade. Instead, the focus would be on Taliban-linked traffickers. Investigations and prosecutions were to be put on the back burner for now. "They're DEA agents – they want to go out and capture people," says the former Justice official. "The people who got that message took it smartly. There's time – you can wait. The evidence doesn't go away."

"DRUGS WEREN'T A PRIORITY," SAYS THE HEAD OF THE U.N.'S OFFICE OF DRUGS AND CRIME. "LIMITING CASUALTIES WAS, AND THAT MEANT UNHOLY ALLIANCES."

In the meantime, the DEA and the FBI would try to work through the Afghan system by establishing several specialized units within the Ministry of Interior's counternarcotics police. The Afghan personnel were handpicked by their American mentors. They answered directly to Daud's replacement, Gen. Baz Mohammad Ahmadi, a canny political operator who some nicknamed the "Teflon Chameleon" for his ability to sense just how far up the chain of command his teams could target. "I call it the Icarus phenomenon: They know how high they can fly before the sun melts their wings," says the former Justice official.

Initially, that meant busting midlevel officials who had pissed off their political patron. But last
Ahmadi and his U.S. advisers trumpeted the arrest of Hajji Lal Jan, whom officials describe as one of the south's biggest drug traffickers. Originally from Helmand, Lal Jan allegedly made payments to Afghan officials and Taliban commanders alike as he transported vast shipments of opium out of the country. "He was a well-respected businessman, very close to prominent families in Afghanistan, but at the same time, in bed with the Taliban and providing them large amounts of money," says a senior Western counternarcotics official. "There are a lot more Hajji Lal Jans here."

Lal Jan was notorious enough to be formally sanctioned as a "foreign narcotics kingpin" by Obama in June 2011, but he had been living openly in Kandahar city, allegedly under the protection of Karzai's brother. "Wall's death freed space to take him down," the official says. According to U.S. and Afghan officials, as well as court documents obtained by Rolling Stone, in the fall of 2012 several drug traffickers fingered Lal Jan as their boss. On December 26th, 2012, Lal Jan's home was raided by an Afghan police commando unit. Lal Jan escaped, however, and was on the run when he allegedly made a call to the governor of Kandahar, Tooryalai Wesa. "Wesa said he would call Karzai and find out what was happening, and that he should wait," says an Afghan official involved in the investigation. "The surveillance team was monitoring Lal Jan's phone and was able to pinpoint his location and arrest him."

Lal Jan was flown back to Kabul, where a behind-the-scenes struggle occurred over his fate. "It took quite a conversation with Karzai to persuade him to allow the prosecution to go forward," says the senior Western counternarcotics official. "Kandahar Gov. Wesa and a slew of elders pled Lal Jan's case." (Wesa says that Lal Jan's case was handled entirely by the courts and declines to comment further.)

Lal Jan was convicted of narcotics trafficking and sentenced to 20 years in prison. His arrest was held up as an example of the U.S.'s successful counternarcotics program, and evidence that the Afghan government was willing to take steps to curb narco trafficking. "That case was briefed at the White House when Karzai went to visit in January 2013, as one of the major accomplishments of the counter-narcotics effort," says the former Justice Department official. He laughs at how premature their optimism was. "We expect that if it's going to be corrupt, it's going to be corrupt right now. But they're patient."

Instead, what happened next, according to Afghan and U.S. officials, shows how deeply drug
money has penetrated the highest levels of the executive and judicial branches of the Afghan government. On appeal at the Supreme Court, Lal Jan’s sentence was reduced to 15 years. After an order from the Presidential Palace, Lal Jan was transferred to Kandahar, where, on June 4th, a local court ordered him set free, using a provision in Afghanistan’s old criminal code, which provides release for "good behavior" for sentences less than 15 years. Lal Jan immediately fled to Pakistan. "The president issued an order to re-arrest him," says the ex-Justice official. He shakes his head. "That was pretty cynical."

If you understand the Afghan government as a narco state, then the fact that opium production has actually increased –while the U.S. spent billions on counternarcotics efforts and troop numbers surged – starts to make sense. A completely failed state – Afghanistan in 2001 – can’t really thrive in the drug trade. Traffickers have no reason to pay off a toothless government or a nonexistent police force. In such a libertarian paradise, freelance actors – like Saleem, the heroin cook – flourish.

But as the government builds capacity, officials can start to demand a cut. It’s not that there’s a grand conspiracy at the center of government, but rather that, in the absence of accountability and the rule of law, officials start to orient themselves around a powerful political economy. Big drug barons with links to the government take over the trade. People who don’t pay, or who fall out with government officials, might find themselves killed or arrested.

In this light, U.S. counternarcotics programs, which have cost nearly $8 billion to date, and the Afghan state-building project in general, are perversely part of the explanation for the growing government involvement in the drug trade. Even the newly rebuilt Afghan Air Force has been investigated by the U.S. military for alleged trafficking. In many places, the surge had the effect of wresting opium revenue from the Taliban and handing it to government officials. For example, in Helmand’s Garmsir District, which sits on key trafficking routes between the rest of the province and Baramcha, a big Marine offensive in 2011 finally pushed out the Taliban and handed the district back to the Afghan government. The result? The police began taking a cut from those drug routes. "There are families, as in Mafia-style, that have the trade carved up between them, and when some outsider tries to get in on it, they serve him up as a success for drug interdiction," one Western official who worked in Garmsir told me. [To read this excised section go to http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/afghanistan-the-making-of-a-narco-state-20141204 ]

Between the impoverished farmer on one end and the desperate junkie on the other lies a tangled chain of criminals, politicians and drug warriors – the product of a world where drugs are illegal and addicts are plentiful. And with all the corruption and greed that have created the Afghan narco state, it’s hard to imagine the country any other way.

From The Archives Issue 1224: December 18, 2014

Post-Invasion/Occupation/Withdrawal/Continuation Chaos and Suffering continued

Bring the Troops Home
Matthew Hoh’s Petition to President Obama

Dear Friend,

Thank you for taking a moment to sign my petition (see below) and make your voice heard. With your help, we’ve generated over 49,100 signatures! Our goal is 50,000 signatures, which means we only need 900 more!

Please help spread our message. Ask your friends and family on Facebook and Twitter to sign our petition to President Obama!

Now more than ever, it’s critical that President Obama hear from Americans who want to bring all of our troops home from Afghanistan! Amid the current crisis in Iraq, notorious hawk Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and others are using the situation as an excuse to keep our troops trapped in Afghanistan. McCain decried, “I predicted what was going to happen in Iraq. I’m predicting to you now that if we pull everybody out of Afghanistan, not based on conditions, you’ll see that same movie again in Afghanistan.” In reality, Iraq’s civil war has its origins in the disastrous decision of the Bush Administration to launch of an illegal war in 2003. We must recognize that a lasting peace in both Iraq and Afghanistan can only be achieved with political, not military, solutions.

To help us reach our goal, you can also forward the email below or the direct link to anyone you’d like to sign the petition: https://www.credomobilize.com/petitions/tell-president-obama-we-deserve-a-say-in-the-future-of-america-s-longest-war-3.

Thank you for working for peace,

Matthew Hoh, Win Without War

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The email below is from Matthew Hoh, a CREDO activist in Washington, D.C. Matthew started a petition on CREDO Mobilize, where activists can launch their own campaigns for
progressive change. Will you help Matthew pressure President Obama to end America's longest war and bring all our troops home from Afghanistan now by sharing his petition with your friends and family?

Chris Hedges | Pity the Children

Chris Hedges, Truthdig

Reader Supported News, July 1, 2014. Hedges writes: "For the United States, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be over soon. We will leave behind, after our defeats, wreckage and death, the contagion of violence and hatred, unending grief, and millions of children who were brutalized and robbed of their childhood. Americans who did not suffer will forget."

WARS IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ TO COST U.S. OVER FOUR TRILLION DOLLARS

Pierce Nahigyan, News Report, NationofChange, Feb. 18, 2014: Years after the fact, many Americans still don’t know why we entered Iraq or what we are still doing there. We will be paying for this confusion for decades, a debt compounded by a series of poor choices by the federal government. Tax cuts for the wealthy, overseen by the Bush administration, stripped revenue from the federal budget; to fund the war, over thirty emergency bills were passed in the last decade to override its regular spending caps.

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[See Stiglitz and Bilmes, The Three Trillion Dollar War. – D]

TALIBAN DÉJÀ VU


The Taliban has attacked several districts in northern Helmand province, killing Afghan forces and civilians, and seizing areas even before the US forces have withdrawn. The deepening crisis in Kabul is political and military, with Afghan forces struggling to replace the coalition
troops and to bring together diverse war lords and politicians to form a unified government. This is an old pattern, from the King to war lords to the Russians to the war lords to the Taliban (Pashtuns) to the foreign occupation, Kabul rising and falling and rising. Now the Taliban (fundamentalist Pashtuns whose homeland is on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border) seek again to conquer Kabul’s warlord allies (the US the Chief War Lord) and finally the Kabul Castle, to resume their rule that was ended by the 2003 US invasion. --Dick

PETITION FROM ANN WRIGHT (Col., ret.)

The email below is from former United State Army Colonel Ann Wright, a CREDO activist in Honolulu, Hawaii. Ann started a petition on CREDO Mobilize, where activists can launch their own campaigns for progressive change. Will you help Ann pressure Fox News to stop its shameless attacks on Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl by signing her petition and sharing it with your friends and family?

Dear Dick,

As soon as news broke that Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl had been released from captivity by a Taliban-aligned terrorist network and would be returning home to the United States, Fox News initiated a vicious smear campaign to discredit him. Fox hosts and contributors have suggested that Bergdahl is un-American, implied that he should be shot or hung, and said that his father looks like a member of the Taliban.

We have to speak out now to stop these shameless attacks. That's why I started my own campaign on CREDOMobilize.com, which allows activists to start their own petitions. My petition, which is to Fox News, says the following:

We call on Fox News to stop attacking Sgt. Bergdahl, and instead focus on the reasons why he was displeased about the actions of the United States in Afghanistan — torture, indefinite imprisonment, assassin drones, night raids, billions of dollars missing, sole source contracts. We call on Fox News to join us in supporting Bowe Bergdahl and his family during these tough times.

As a retired U.S. Army Colonel, I know that no U.S. soldier should ever be left behind. Before he left his base in Afghanistan, Bergdahl had expressed serious concerns about the military actions of the United States in Afghanistan — concerns that are now shared by the majority of Americans and many other soldiers. That's why Fox News is so intent on
attacking him.

Some soldiers who had the concerns similar to Bergdahl's went AWOL upon returning home or filed for conscientious objector status, while most held their criticisms to themselves. Sergeant Bergdahl realized five years ago what the majority of Americans now acknowledge — that U.S. involvement in Afghanistan must end. Now, as Sergeant Bergdahl readjusts from five years of captivity by the Taliban, Fox news has been leading the charge to demonize him.

Fox News is one of the media organizations that led the charge into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, putting our soldiers in harm’s way. Now it is turning its back on a young man who was held as a prisoner of war for five years after serving his country.

Thank you for your support.

Colonel Ann Wright

The Dog Killer: Is our war in the Middle East having a ripple effect in Northwest Arkansas?
Richard S. Drake/August 29, 2014
http://www.arktimes.com/blogs/streetjazz/

When she heard the news of his arrest, she was thunderstruck. As she told a reporter from KFSM, “They said ‘animal cruelty’ and I said ‘what, you’ve got to be crazy.’” She added that he had animals in his own home.

John Christopher Short of Fayetteville was arrested this week on suspicion of aggravated animal cruelty. It seems that a dog which had belonged to his girlfriend died some months ago under conditions which can only be described as suspicious.

The dog Esther’s rear left leg was fractured, an injury so severe that its left leg had to be amputated. Even that was not enough to save her life, though.

Soon after, his girlfriend took in a new puppy, Hector, to replace - what a stupid word to use - Esther, her dead dog.

According to the police report, the woman came home from work one day only to find her new puppy dead. Short is said to have told her that “It is not breathing.”
He added that he thought the puppy was dead.

Hector was indeed dead, the victim of multiple skull fractures.

I don't know John Christopher Short, and I don't know anything about him, save for what I have heard on the news.

But this is what I do know about John Christopher Short, and I will tell you in the reverse order that KFSM told the story.

In 2005, Sergeant Short was in Afghanistan, when his Humvee was hit by an IED. Besides having his own leg amputated, according to his aunt, in addition to undergoing several surgeries on his elbow, he suffered a traumatic brain injury.

Returning stateside, Short has been no stranger to legal troubles.

In the past two years, two women have filed protection orders against him.

In February of this year he entered a plea of guilty to assault and domestic battery.

In 2012, he shot and killed a man while struggling over a gun at his home. No charges were ever filed in that case.

So, just who is John Christopher Short? A violent man, evidently, but at least one relative loves him and has nothing but kind words for him. Is it possible she sees only the man who left for war, but not the man who returned?

Was he always the man he is today?

Or is John Christopher Short just another cast-off from a terrible war, a man whose victims in peace time are like the fast-moving ripples in a pond?

rsdrake@cox.net
May 29, 2014  The email below is from Matthew Hoh, a CREDO activist in Washington, D.C. Matthew started a petition on CREDO Mobilize, where activists can launch their own campaigns for progressive change. Will you help Matthew pressure President Obama to end America's longest war and bring all our troops home from Afghanistan now by signing his petition and sharing it with your friends and family?

Sign the petition: Bring all American troops home from Afghanistan now.

Dear Dick,

Almost five years ago, I resigned from the State Department over America's failing war in Afghanistan. As a veteran of the Iraq War, I fail to see either the value or the worth in continuing to risk America's blood and
treasure in Afghanistan on our longest war.

Today, after President Obama announced this week that nearly 10,000 troops will remain in Afghanistan next year and many won't be home until 2017, I am left with the exact same feeling.

It's long past time to say enough is enough. It's time to bring all our troops home, now. That's why I started my own campaign on CREDOmobilize.com, which allows activists to start their own petitions. My petition, which is to President Obama, says the following:

It's long past time to end America's longest war and bring all our troops home now from Afghanistan.

Tell President Obama: End America's longest war and bring the troops home now.

By continuing the war in Afghanistan for more than two more years, President
Obama’s plans ignore the simple truth that there is no military solution to the challenges that remain in Afghanistan. **There is nothing that 10,000 troops will do in two years that 100,000 could not do in the past 13.**

And while we are particularly concerned about the fate of women and girls in Afghanistan, there is no indication that a continued U.S. occupation would make a positive outcome for women possible.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan, now in its 13th year, has cost our nation dearly. **More than 2,300 Americans – over 1,600 alone since I resigned in 2009 – and tens of thousands of Afghans have lost their lives.** Many, many more have been wounded and will bear the scars of battle for decades to come. Like the Iraq War, Afghanistan has been financed on our nation’s credit card, adding nearly $800 billion to our debt, with billions more to
come. And yet the war is not yet over.

The U.S. intervened in Afghanistan after the attacks on September 11. Al Qaeda's leadership was driven from Afghanistan more than a decade ago, and Osama bin Laden has been dead for more than three years. Yet the war drags on. Our men and women in uniform have done everything asked of them, and now they deserve to come home. As President Obama has said himself, a lasting solution to nearly four decades of conflict in Afghanistan will depend on Afghans and their neighbors reaching political settlement, not U.S. military personnel.

Together, we can stand up and say that two more years of war is two years too many.

Will you join me and add your name to my petition urging President Obama to bring all American troops home from Afghanistan now?

Thank you for your
Reporting Afghanistan and Pakistan in the *Arkansas Democrat/Gazette* 2012


**Tom Engelhardt | Washington's Wedding Album >From Hell**


Engelhardt writes: "The headline - 'Bride and Boom!' - was spectacular, if you think killing people in distant lands is a blast and a half. Of course, you have to imagine that smirk line in giant black letters with a monstrous exclamation point covering most of the bottom third of the front page of the Murdoch-owned *New York Post.*"

[READ MORE](#)

**Juan Cole | The Real Reason Obama Is Leaving 9,800 Troops in Afghanistan**

*Juan Cole, Informed Comment*, Reader Supported News, May 27, 2014

Cole writes: "President Obama on Tuesday morning announced the end of the Afghanistan War on December 31, 2016. He envisions about 10,000 US troops there through 2015, then 5,000 in 2016, then virtually none except to guard the Kabul embassy in 2017."

[READ MORE](#)
PAKISTAN


Ahmad’s introductory summary of Pakistani history, the country’s ongoing conflict with India, and the crucial role played by Kashmir is especially worth reading; on the other hand he he pays little attention to crucial Pashtun history in explaining Pakistani military. --Dick

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END AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN NEWSLETTER #22

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Dick Bennett

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