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The Other War

Why Bush's Afghanistan problem won't go away.

by Seymour M. Hersh

In December, 2002, a year after the Taliban had been driven from power in Afghanistan, Donald Rumsfeld gave an upbeat assessment of the country's future to CNN's Larry King. "They have elected a government. . . . The Taliban are gone. The Al Qaeda are gone. The country is not a perfectly stable place, and it needs a great deal of reconstruction funds," Rumsfeld said. "There are people who are throwing hand grenades and shooting off rockets and trying to kill people, but there are people who are trying to kill people in New York or San Francisco. So it's not going to be a perfectly tidy place." Nonetheless, he said, "I'm hopeful, I'm encouraged." And he added, "I wish them well."

A year and a half later, the Taliban are still a force in many parts of Afghanistan, and the country continues to provide safe haven for members of Al Qaeda. American troops, more than ten thousand of whom remain, are heavily deployed in the mountainous areas near Pakistan, still hunting for Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader. Hamid Karzai, the U.S.-backed President, exercises little political control outside Kabul and is struggling to undercut the authority of local warlords, who effectively control the provinces. Heroin production is soaring, and, outside of Kabul and a few other cities, people are terrorized by violence and crime. A new report by the United Nations Development Program, made public on the eve of last week's international conference, in Berlin, on aid to Afghanistan, stated that the nation is in danger of once again becoming a "terrorist breeding ground" unless there is a significant increase in development aid.

The turmoil in Afghanistan has become a political issue for the Bush Administration, whose general conduct of the war on terrorism is being publicly challenged by Richard A. Clarke, the former National Security Council terrorism adviser, in a memoir, "Against All Enemies," and in contentious hearings before the September 11th Commission. The Bush Administration has consistently invoked Afghanistan as a success story—an example of the President's determination. However, it is making this claim in the face of renewed warnings, from international organizations, from allies, and from within its own military—notably a Pentagon-commissioned report that was left in bureaucratic limbo when its conclusions proved negative—that the situation there is deteriorating rapidly.

In his book, Clarke depicts the victory in Afghanistan as far less decisive than the Administration has portrayed it, and he sharply criticizes the Pentagon's tactics, especially the decision to rely on airpower, and not U.S. troops on the ground, in the early weeks. The war began on October 7, 2001, but, he wrote, not until seven weeks later did the United States "insert a ground force unit (Marines) to take and hold a former al Qaeda and Taliban facility. . . . The late-November operation did not include any effort by U.S. forces to seal the border with Pakistan, snatch the al Qaeda leadership, or cut off the al Qaeda escape."

Clarke told me in an interview last week that the Administration viewed Afghanistan as a military and political backwater—a detour along the road to Iraq, the war that mattered most to the President. Clarke and some of his colleagues, he said, had repeatedly warned the national-security leadership that, as he put it, "you can't win the war in Afghanistan with such a small effort." Clarke continued, "There were more cops in New York City than soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan. We had to have a security

presence coupled with a development program in every region and stay there for several months.”

In retrospect, Clarke said, he believes that the President and his men did not respond for three reasons: “One, they did not want to get involved in Afghanistan like Russia did. Two, they were saving forces for the war in Iraq. And, three, Rumsfeld wanted to have a laboratory to prove his theory about the ability of small numbers of ground troops, coupled with airpower, to win decisive battles.” As of today, Clarke said, “the U.S. has succeeded in stabilizing only two or three cities. The President of Afghanistan is just the mayor of Kabul.”

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Collins, a Pentagon expert on Afghanistan, acknowledged that it was only in the past several months that “significant money began to flow” into Afghanistan for reconstruction and security. “We found in the security area we were doing the right thing, but not fast enough,” he told me. The resurgence of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Collins said, did not begin until early last year. “They began to realize at the end of 2003 that the key is not to fight our soldiers but U.N. officials and aid workers.” In the long run, Collins added, “these tactics are self-defeating—in Afghanistan and in Iraq.”

Clarke’s view of what went wrong was buttressed by an internal military analysis of the Afghanistan war that was completed last winter. In late 2002, the Defense Department’s office of Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SOLIC) asked retired Army Colonel Hy Rothstein, a leading military expert in unconventional warfare, to examine the planning and execution of the war in Afghanistan, with an understanding that he would focus on Special Forces. As part of his research, Rothstein travelled to Afghanistan and interviewed many senior military officers, in both Special Forces and regular units. He also talked to dozens of junior Special Forces officers and enlisted men who fought there. His report was a devastating critique of the Administration’s strategy. He wrote that the bombing campaign was not the best way to hunt down Osama bin Laden and the rest of the Al Qaeda leadership, and that there was a failure to translate early tactical successes into strategic victory. In fact, he wrote, the victory in Afghanistan was not, in the long run, a victory at all.

Last month, I visited Rothstein in his office at the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, where he is a senior lecturer in defense analysis. A fit, broad-shouldered man in his early fifties, he served more than twenty years in the Army Special Forces, including three years as the director of plans and exercises for the Joint Special Operations Command, at Fort Bragg, before retiring, in 1999. His associates depicted him as anything but a dissident. “He puts boots on the ground,” Robert Andrews, a former head of SOLIC, told me, referring to Rothstein’s missions in Central America, for which he earned a decoration for valor, and in the former Yugoslavia. Rothstein agreed to speak to me, with some reluctance, only after I had obtained his report independently, and he would not go into details about his research. “They asked me to do this,” he said of the Pentagon, “and my purpose was to make some things better. All I want people to do is to look at the paper and not at me. I’ll tell you the good and the bad.”

The report describes a wide gap between how Donald Rumsfeld represented the war and what was actually taking place. Rumsfeld had told reporters at the start of the Afghanistan bombing campaign, Rothstein wrote, that “you don’t fight terrorists with conventional capabilities. You do it with unconventional capabilities.” In December, the Taliban and Al Qaeda retreated into the countryside as the armies of the Northern Alliance, supported by American airpower and Special Forces troops, moved into the capital. There were many press accounts of America’s new way of waging war, including well-publicized reports of American Special Forces on horseback and of new technologies, like the Predator drones. Nonetheless, Rothstein wrote, the United States continued to emphasize bombing and conventional warfare while “the war became in-

creasingly unconventional,” with Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters “operating in small cells, emerging only to lay land mines and launch nighttime rocket attacks before disappearing once again.” Rothstein added:

What was needed after December 2001 was a greater emphasis on U.S. special operations troops, supported by light infantry, conducting counterinsurgency operations. Aerial bombardment should have become a rare thing. . . . The failure to adjust U.S. operations in line with the post-Taliban change in theater conditions cost the United States some of the fruits of victory and imposed additional, avoidable humanitarian and stability costs on Afghanistan. . . . Indeed, the war’s inadvertent effects may be more significant than we think.

By the end of 2001, the Afghan war had essentially become a counterinsurgency. At this point, it was important to turn to a specific kind of unconventional warfare: “The Special Forces were created to deal with precisely this kind of enemy,” Rothstein wrote. “Unorthodox thinking, drawing on a thorough understanding of war, demography, human nature, culture and technology are part of this mental approach. . . . Unconventional warfare prescribes that Special Forces soldiers must be diplomats, doctors, spies, cultural anthropologists, and good friends—all before their primary work comes into play.”

Instead, Rothstein said, “the command arrangement evolved into a large and complex structure that could not (or would not) respond to the new unconventional setting.” The result has been “a campaign in Afghanistan that effectively destroyed the Taliban but has been significantly less successful at being able to achieve the primary policy goal of ensuring that al Qaeda could no longer operate in Afghanistan.”

Rothstein wrote that Rumsfeld routinely responded to criticism about civilian casualties by stating that “some amount” of collateral damage “is inevitable in war.” It is estimated that more than a thousand Afghan civilians were killed by bombing and other means in the early stages of the war. Rothstein suggested that these numbers could have been lower, and that further incidents might have been avoided if Special Forces had been allowed to wage a truly unconventional war that reduced the reliance on massive firepower.

The Administration’s decision to treat the Taliban as though all its members identified with, and would fight for, Al Qaeda was also a crucial early mistake. “There were deep divisions within the Taliban that could have been exploited through a political-military effort which is the essence of unconventional warfare,” Rothstein said. “A few months of intensive diplomatic, intelligence and military preparations between Special Forces and anti-Taliban forces would have made a significant difference.”

Instead, Rothstein wrote, the American military campaign left a power vacuum. The conditions under which the post-Taliban government came to power gave “warlordism, banditry and opium production a new lease on life.” He concluded, “Defeating an enemy on the battlefield and winning a war are rarely synonymous. Winning a war calls for more than defeating one’s enemy in battle.” He recalled that, in 1975, when Harry G. Summers, an Army colonel who later wrote a history of the Vietnam War, told a North Vietnamese colonel, “You never defeated us on the battlefield,” the colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

Rothstein delivered his report in January. It was returned to him, with the message that he had to cut it drastically and soften his conclusions. He has heard nothing further. “It’s a threatening paper,” one military consultant told me. The Pentagon, asked for comment, confirmed that Rothstein was told “we did not support all of his conclusions,” and said that he would soon be sent notes. In addition, Joseph Collins told me, “There may be a kernel of truth in there, but our experts found the study rambling and not terribly informative.” In interviews, however, a number of past and present Bush Administration officials have endorsed Rothstein’s key assertions. “It wasn’t like he made

it up,” a former senior intelligence officer said. “The reason they’re petrified is that it’s true, and they didn’t want to see it in writing.”

The high point of the American involvement in Afghanistan came in December of 2001, at a conference of various Afghan factions held in Bonn, when the Administration’s candidate, Hamid Karzai, was named chairman of the interim government. (His appointment as President was confirmed six months later at a carefully orchestrated Afghan tribal council, known as a Loya Jirga.) It was a significant achievement, but there were major flaws in the broader accord. There was no agreement on establishing an international police force, no procedures for collecting taxes, no strategy for disarming either the many militias or individual Afghans, and no resolution with the Taliban.

Then came Iraq. In interviews with academics, aid workers, and non-governmental-organization officials, I was repeatedly told that, within a few months of the Bonn conference, as the United States began its buildup in the Gulf, security and political conditions throughout Afghanistan eroded. In the early summer of 2002, a military consultant, reflecting the views of several American Special Forces commanders in the field, provided the Pentagon with a briefing warning that the Taliban and Al Qaeda were adapting quickly to American tactics. “His decision loop has tightened, ours has widened,” the briefing said, referring to the Taliban. “He can see us, but increasingly we no longer see him.” Only a very few high-level generals listened, and the briefing, like Rothstein’s report, changed nothing. By then, some of the most highly skilled Americans were being diverted from Afghanistan. Richard Clarke noted in his memoir, “The U.S. Special Forces who were trained to speak Arabic, the language of al Qaeda, had been pulled out of Afghanistan and sent to Iraq.” Some C.I.A. paramilitary teams were also transferred to Iraq.

Meanwhile, the United States continued to pay off and work closely with local warlords, many of whom were involved in heroin and opium trafficking. Their loyalty was not for sale but for rent. Warlords like Hazrat Ali in eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border, and Mohammed Fahim had been essential to America’s initial military success, and, at first, they had promised to accept Karzai. Hazrat Ali would be one of several commanders later accused of double-crossing American troops in an early, unsuccessful sweep for Al Qaeda, in 2002. Fahim, now the defense minister, is deeply involved in a number of illicit enterprises.

The Bush Administration, facing a major war in Iraq, seemed eager to put the war in Afghanistan behind it. In January of 2003, Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, made a fifteen-hour visit to Kabul and announced, “We’re clearly moving into a different phase, where our priority in Afghanistan is increasingly going to be stability and reconstruction. There’s no way to go too fast. Faster is better.” There was talk of improving security and rebuilding the Afghan National Army in time for Presidential and parliamentary elections, but little effort to provide the military and economic resources. “I don’t think the Administration understood about winning hearts and minds,” a former Administration official told me.

The results of the postwar neglect are stark. A leading scholar on Afghanistan, Barnett R. Rubin, wrote, in this month’s *Current History*, that Afghanistan today “does not have functioning state institutions. It has no genuine army or effective police. Its ramshackle provincial administration is barely in contact with, let alone obedient to, the central government. Most of the country’s meager tax revenue has been illegally taken over by local officials who are little more than warlords with official titles.” The goal of American policy in Afghanistan “was not to set up a better regime for the Afghan people,” Rubin wrote. “The goal instead was to get rid of the terrorist threat against America.” The United States enlisted the warlords in its war against terrorism, and “the result was an Afghan government created at Bonn that rested on a power base of warlords.”

One military consultant with extensive experience in Afghanistan told me last year, “The real action is at the village level, but we’re not there. And we need to be there 24/7. Now we are effectively operating above the conflict. It’s the same old story as in Vietnam. We can’t hit what we can’t see.” He added, “From January, 2002, on, we were in the process of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.”

Last summer, a coalition of seventy-nine human-rights and relief organizations wrote an open letter to the international community calling for better security in Afghanistan and warning that the Presidential elections there, now scheduled for September, were imperilled. The letter noted, “For the majority of the Afghan people, security is precarious and controlled by regional warlords, drug traffickers or groups with terrorist associations. The situation is getting worse, and there is no comprehensive plan in place to halt the spiral of violence.” Statistics compiled by CARE International showed that eleven aid workers were murdered in four incidents during a three-week period ending early last month, and the rate of physical assaults on aid workers in Afghanistan more than doubled in January and February compared with the same period in the previous year. Such attacks, a CARE policy statement suggested, inevitably led to cutbacks in Afghan humanitarian and reconstruction programs. In early 2003, for example, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, there were twenty-six humanitarian agencies at work in Kandahar, the main Afghan city in the south. By early this year, there were fewer than five.

Even one of the most publicized achievements of the post-Taliban government, the improvements in the lives of women, has been called into question. Judy Benjamin, who served as the gender adviser to the U.S. Agency for International Development mission in Kabul in 2002 and 2003, told me, “The legal opportunities have improved, but the day-to-day life for women, even in Kabul, isn’t any better. Girls are now legally permitted to go to school and work, but when it comes to the actual family practice, people are afraid to let them go out without burkas.” Conditions outside Kabul are far worse, she said. “Families do not allow females to travel—to go to jobs or to school. You cannot go on many roads without being held up by bandits. People are saying they were safer under the Taliban system, which is why the Taliban are getting more support—the lack of safety.”

Nancy Lindborg, the executive vice-president of Mercy Corps, one of the major n.g.o.s at work in Afghanistan, had a similar view. Outside of Kabul, she said, “everywhere I go, from Kunduz to Kandahar, I see no change for most women, and security for everybody has fallen apart since November of 2002.” The Pentagon’s announcements of increased commitments to security and reconstruction were increasingly seen “as a big charade,” Lindborg said. “The United States has left Afghanistan to fester for two years.”

The humanitarian community is not alone in its concern. In February, Vice-Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, acknowledged during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing that the growing Taliban insurgency was targeting humanitarian and reconstruction organizations. Over all, he said, Taliban attacks had “reached their highest levels since the collapse of the Taliban government.”

Heroin is among the most immediate—and the most intractable—social, economic, and political problems. “The problem is too huge for us to be able to face alone,” Hamid Karzai declared last week in Berlin, as he appealed for more aid. “Drugs in Afghanistan are threatening the very existence of the Afghan state.” Drug dealing and associated criminal activity produced about \$2.3 billion in revenue last year, according to an annual survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, a sum that was equivalent to half of Afghanistan’s legitimate gross domestic product. “Terrorists take a cut as well,” the U.N. report noted, adding that “the longer this happens, the greater the threat to security within the country.”

The U.N. report, published last fall, found that opium production, which, following a ban imposed by the Taliban, had fallen to a hundred and eighty-five metric tons in 2001, soared last year to three thousand six hundred tons—a twentyfold increase. The report declared the nation to be “at a crossroads: either (i) energetic interdiction measures are taken now . . . or (ii) the drug cancer in Afghanistan will keep spreading and metastasise into corruption, violence and terrorism—within and beyond the country’s borders.” Afghanistan was once again, the U.N. said, producing three-quarters of the world’s illicit opium, with no evidence of a cutback in sight, even though there has been a steady stream of reports from Washington about drug interdictions. The report said that poppy cultivation had continued to spread, and was now reported in twenty-eight of the nation’s thirty-two provinces.

Most alarmingly, according to a U.N. survey, nearly seventy per cent of farmers intend to increase their poppy crops in 2004, most of them by more than half. Only a small percentage of farmers were planning any reduction, despite years of international pressure. Many of the areas that the U.N. report identified as likely to see increased production are in regions where the United States has a major military presence.

Despite such statistics, the American military has, for the most part, looked the other way, essentially because of the belief that the warlords can deliver the Taliban and Al Qaeda. One senior N.G.O. official told me, “Everybody knows that the U.S. military has the drug lords on the payroll. We’ve put them back in power. It’s gone so terribly wrong.” (The Pentagon’s Joseph Collins told me, “Counter-narcotics in Afghanistan has been a failure.” Collins said that this year’s crop was estimated to be the second largest on record. He added, however, that the Afghan government is planning to “redouble” its efforts on narcotics control, and that the Pentagon is “now putting more money into it for the first time”—seventy-three million dollars.)

The easy availability of heroin also represents a threat to the well-being of American troops. Since the fall of 2002, a number of active-duty and retired military and C.I.A. officials have told me about increasing reports of heroin use by American military personnel in Afghanistan, many of whom have been there for months, with few distractions. A former high-level intelligence officer told me that the problem wasn’t the Special Forces or Army combat units who were active in the field but “the logistical guys”—the truck drivers and the food and maintenance workers who are stationed at the military’s large base at Bagram, near Kabul. However, I was also told that there were concerns about heroin use within the Marines. The G.I.s assigned to Bagram are nominally confined to the base, for security reasons, but the drugs, the former intelligence officer said, were relayed to the users by local Afghans hired to handle menial duties. The Pentagon’s senior leadership has a “head-in-the-sand attitude,” he said. “There’s no desire to expose it and get enforcement involved. This is hard shit,” he added, speaking of heroin. The Pentagon, asked for comment, denied that there was concern about drug use at Bagram, but went on to acknowledge that “disciplinary proceedings were initiated against some U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan for suspected drug use.” Asked separately about the allegations against marines, the Pentagon said that some marines had been removed from Afghanistan to face disciplinary proceedings, but blamed alcohol and marijuana rather than heroin.

The drug lords traditionally processed only hashish inside the Afghan borders, and shipped poppies to heroin-production plants in northern Pakistan and elsewhere. A senior U.N. narcotics official told me that in the past two years “most of the heroin has been processed in Afghanistan, as part of a plan to keep profits in-country.” Only a fraction of what is produced in Afghanistan is used there, the officer said. Nonetheless, a U.S. government-relief official told me, the “biggest worry” is that the growth in local production will increase the risk of addiction among G.I.s. A former C.I.A. officer who served in Afghanistan also said that the agency’s narcotics officials have been independently investigating military drug use.

Afghanistan is regaining the Bush Administration's attention, in part because the worsening situation in Iraq has increased the need for a foreign-policy success. State Department and intelligence officials who have worked in Kabul said that it is widely understood that Afghanistan's Presidential and parliamentary elections, which had already been rescheduled, must be held before the American Presidential elections, on November 2nd. The upside to the political timetable has been a new commitment of American reconstruction funds—more than two billion dollars, a fourfold increase over the previous year—for schools, clinics, and road construction in Afghanistan. Richard Clarke wrote in his memoir that initially the aid funds were “inadequate and slowly delivered,” and far below the thirteen hundred and ninety dollars per capita that was spent in the first years of the rebuilding effort in Bosnia and the nearly twenty billion dollars now earmarked for Iraq. At one point in 2002, American aid funds for Afghanistan came to only fifty-two dollars per person. “Why are we getting aid money now?” the U.S. government-relief official said to me, with a laugh. “We've been asking for two years and no one in their right mind thought about getting all this.”

In insisting on holding elections by the fall, the Administration is overriding the advice of many of its allies and continuing to bank heavily on Hamid Karzai. (As of this spring, an estimated ten per cent of eligible voters were registered.) Last week, the international conference in Berlin bolstered Karzai's regime, and his election prospects, by promising to provide more than four billion dollars in aid and low-cost loans in the next year—although that figure includes more than a billion dollars previously pledged. Half of the contributions came from the Bush Administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Karzai for having turned Afghanistan from “a failed state, ruled by extremists and terrorists, to a free country with a growing economy and emerging democracy.”

Nonetheless, in interviews for this article, Hamid Karzai was consistently depicted by others as unsure of himself and totally dependent on the United States for security and finances. One of Karzai's many antagonists is his own defense minister, Mohammed Fahim. Last year, the Bush Administration was privately given a memorandum by an Afghan official and American ally, warning that Fahim was working to undermine Karzai and would use his control over money from illegal businesses and customs revenue to do so. Fahim was also said to have recruited at least eighty thousand men into new militias.

The United States' continuing toleration of warlords such as Fahim and General Abdul Rashid Dostum—an alleged war criminal and gunrunner who, after being offered millions of dollars by Washington, helped defeat the Taliban in the fall of 2001—mystifies many who have long experience in Afghanistan. “Fahim and Dostum are part of the problem, and not the solution,” said Milt Bearden, who ran the C.I.A.'s Afghan operations during the war with the Soviet Union. “These people have the clever gene and they can get us to do their fighting for them. They just lead us down the path,” Bearden said. “How wonderful for them to have us knock off their opposition with American airplanes and Special Forces.”

The wild card in the election planning may be the Taliban. The former Taliban foreign minister, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, who spent months in American custody, has repeatedly offered to open a channel to the Taliban leadership for extended talks. “But the Administration only wants to get help in finding Osama bin Laden,” a Democratic Senate aide said. “Its only concern is tactical information.” Meanwhile, the Taliban's influence has grown throughout the south and east of Afghanistan, in defiance of—or, perhaps, because of—continued American air and ground assaults, which inevitably result in civilian casualties.

In an effort to strengthen Karzai, the American military command has tried to reduce its own reliance on some regional warlords. The most recent target was Ismail Khan, the popular independent governor of Herat, a large province in western Afghanistan, adjacent to Iran. Khan, a bitter enemy of the Taliban, supported the initial American in-

vasion of Afghanistan after September 11th. He has since defied the central government and refuses to hand over to Kabul most of the tax and customs revenue. (Herat is an ancient trade center.) Kahn personifies how difficult it is for the U.S. to separate its enemies from its allies in Afghanistan. “If Mohammed Fahim is a government minister and Ismail Khan is a warlord,” one American official told me, “you’re abusing the language.” The official’s point was that Khan has provided better security and more stability for the local population than is found in other Afghan provinces, and international observers believe that he would probably win a provincial election. But he treats Herat as a private fiefdom, and has alarmed many in the Bush Administration with his vocal support of Iran; last fall, he was quoted as calling it “the best model of an Islamic country in the world.”

One regional expert told me that Karzai—who was always apprehensive about Ismail Khan—raised the question of how to remove him last spring, during a brief visit by Donald Rumsfeld to Kabul. “He asked Rumsfeld for his support,” the expert recalled. “Rumsfeld wished him good luck but said the United States could not get involved. So Karzai got cold feet.” The issue was revisited again in February, a former C.I.A. consultant told me, by the American military command at Bagram. Sometime that month, the American command put out a request to its intelligence components for a new operational plan for Khan. The former C.I.A. consultant learned from within the intelligence community that there was agreement that Khan had to be neutralized. Asked what that meant, he said that he was told “Khan had to be eliminated—we’ve got to end his influence.” (The Pentagon denied that there was such a plan.)

On March 21st, an armed conflict erupted in Herat between Khan’s forces and those loyal to the central government. Accounts of what happened vary widely; it was not immediately clear who started what. According to an account by U.N. workers in Afghanistan, filed to headquarters in New York, tensions had been mounting between Khan and one of his bitter rivals, General Abdul Zaher Naibzadah, over control of the Afghan military’s Herat garrison. Khan’s son heard reports that there had been an assassination attempt on his father, and drove to the General’s house, where Naibzadah’s bodyguards gunned him down, along with others. According to the U.N. dispatch, Ismail Khan took violent revenge on his attackers, burning down the local headquarters of the Afghan militia and killing scores. Some press accounts put the death toll of the subsequent daylong battle at a hundred or more; other accounts, emanating from Kabul, said that fewer than two dozen were killed. The U.N. account included reports that a personal phone call from Karzai to Khan was necessary to defuse the situation. In the next days, a division of the Afghan National Army, sent by the central government, moved into Herat to restore order.

There is no evidence that the American commanders were involved in any attempt on Khan’s life, the former C.I.A. consultant told me. But, according to some officials, Americans were attached to Afghan military units that were present in Herat. “We clearly had embedded American trainers and advisers with the Afghan troops,” the consultant said. “They knew what was going on.” The result, the U.N. reported, was that Khan “may become even more intractable in his dealing with the central government.” The American-endorsed plan to challenge Khan’s leadership and strengthen Karzai’s national standing inside Afghanistan, it seemed, had served to make Khan a more determined enemy.

The U.S. government-relief official told me of spending weeks last year travelling through Afghanistan—including the south and the east, areas with few ties to the central government in Kabul. “They’d say, ‘We don’t like the Taliban, but they did bring us security you haven’t been able to give us,’” the official said. “They perceived that we were allied with the bad guys—the warlords—because of our war on terrorism.” The official recalled being asked constantly about the American war in Iraq. “They were

concerned about Iraq, and wanted to know, 'Are you going to stay?' They remembered how we left"—after the American-sponsored defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. "They'd say, 'You guys are going to leave us, like you did in 1992. If we had confidence in the staying power of America, we'd deal with you.'" The official concluded, "Iraq, in their mind, meant that America had bigger priorities."

One U.N. worker who is helping to prepare for elections in Afghanistan told me that American aid funds now headed into Afghanistan, whatever the Administration's motives, are essential for the country's future. "We've got a golden window of opportunity that will close on November 2nd." It's a cynical process, he added. "A key factor in holding the election will be the non-interference of the various drug-dealing warlords around the nation, and stemming the drug trade will not be a priority." The message he's getting from the warlords, the U.N. worker said, was that if the U.S. attempted a "hard and heavy" poppy-eradication program, the warlords would disrupt the elections.

The U.N. worker said that President Karzai was perceived as "a weak leader with very little street credibility." He told me that, again and again, when he met with village elders, as part of his work, "the old people say, 'Hamid is a good man. He doesn't kill people. He doesn't steal things. He doesn't sell drugs. How could you possibly think he could be a leader of Afghanistan?'"