

Q & A

Bush's Afghanistan Problem

Seymour Hersh discusses warlords, drug runners, and the hunt for Al Qaeda

By Amy Davidson

This week in the magazine and here online, in “The Other War” (see Fact), Seymour M. Hersh reports on why the situation in Afghanistan is going badly. Here he talks to *The New Yorker's* Amy Davidson about drug runners, warlords, and how the hunt for Al Qaeda went wrong.

Q: In your piece in the magazine this week, you write that there's a gap between the portrayal of the war in Afghanistan and the reality. How so?

We've come to think of Afghanistan, as Richard A. Clarke, the former counter-terrorism chief, told me in an interview, as a sort of a backwater, as old news. But the war is still going on there. There's the same pattern as in Iraq. We won a battle; we drove the Taliban away from the major cities, like Kandahar and Kabul, but they live to fight another day. By the way, for centuries that's been the way. The tough guys in Afghanistan have always fought by retreating—in the face of the British, farther back in the case of Alexander the Great—and then fighting a bitter war of insurgency. What we have now is that much of the south and the east of Afghanistan, including the areas that border Pakistan, is essentially wild territory, in the sense that there is no central control. The President we installed, Hamid Karzai, is certainly a decent man, but his power is limited to the capital, Kabul. Clarke described him to me as a “mayor of Kabul.” And in the south and the east, the Taliban and some Al Qaeda still exist. In fact, in some provinces, if there's any particularly powerful political group, it's the Taliban. One of the things that Karzai himself said last week, at a conference in Berlin, is that Afghanistan is in danger of becoming a failed state, in large part because of the power of regional warlords and the narcotics trade.

Q: You write that the Pentagon, at least, has heard this before—including in an internal report it commissioned.

At the end of 2002, somebody in the office of Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict asked Hy Rothstein, an expert in unconventional warfare and a veteran of the Special Forces, who now teaches at the Navy Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, to do a military study of what happened in Afghanistan. They decided that he would look at the unconventional side of the war. As part of his research, he went to Afghanistan, and spent a lot of time in the field with various commanders and troops. And his report, when it was delivered in January, was a quite devastating account of a war that wasn't won, and why it wasn't won, and why it's not going to be won unless significant changes are made by the leadership of the Pentagon.

Q: Afghanistan was supposed to be the model of a new kind of war. Why wasn't it?

One of Rothstein's main points was that Donald Rumsfeld and the President kept on talking about waging this new kind of war, an unconventional war, and using Special Forces in a new way, but, in reality, it was just the same old thing. Unconventional forces were used in a very conventional way. Basically, it was a combination of a lot of air power and a lot of overwhelming force: when we thought we had enemies somewhere, we would just pour in the guns. And his point was that, to really go after an entrenched, complex terrorist organization, you have to be much more subtle, and you must win the support of the people, who will then turn in the terrorists among them. And the kind

of tactics we have been using—and we also see this in Iraq—can be counterproductive. Overwhelming force leads to civilian casualties.

Q: What happened to the report?

Essentially the paper was confined to bureaucratic limbo. The message Rothstein got from the Pentagon was that he had to soften the conclusions and turn it in again. He was also told to cut it back drastically. And right now he's waiting for some notes from the Pentagon that may or may not come. What makes that document so interesting to me is that it reflects what I've heard privately from aid people, other government people, intelligence people, and special-operations people. But here it was in writing, which might make it harder for the Administration to walk away from it. But, for the moment, it's just another example of beheading the messenger.

Q: Speaking of beheading messengers, as you mentioned, you spoke to Richard Clarke for this piece. What did you think of his book, and of the Administration's reaction to it?

The thing that I found most compelling about his book and his testimony wasn't about September 11th, because—and he'd be the first to tell you—there was no smoking gun, there was no document that said, "Look out, beware of September 11th." But what was significant about his testimony in particular was his notion that the reason they didn't pay attention after September 11th was the focus on Iraq. From very early on, Clarke said, Iraq was what the Administration was interested in, instead of dealing with the real war on terror and the real problems of how to go after Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Instead, they went after Iraq. And what he and I talked about for this piece was how, as he saw it, the same preoccupation with Iraq diminished our operations in Afghanistan after we "won" the war.

Q: One of the most disturbing parts of your piece has to do with drugs. What's happened to the heroin business in Afghanistan?

There has been a lot of talk from the Administration about eradicating drugs, dealing with the drug problem. The fact is that the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime recently reported that not only did the number of fields used to cultivate poppies—the raw ingredient for heroin—grow to near-record levels in 2003, but, according to surveys of farmers, seventy per cent expect to grow even more next year. Much of that is taking place in areas in which the U.S. has a major military presence. The Taliban, awful as they were, hated drugs, and in their last year in power heroin production had fallen to a hundred and eighty-five metric tons; last year, the number was thirty-six hundred.

Q: Almost a twentyfold increase.

That's right. And to the credit of the Pentagon, I must say, there are people there who recognize that there has been a failure on our part, and that something needs to be done about it.

Q: What about American soldiers? You write that there are concerns about their well-being, given the glut of drugs in the area.

I've been told for more than a year that there were problems of heroin use, in particular among the rear-echelon soldiers in Afghanistan, and that it was a problem that was simply being buried by the leadership. In my reporting, I was also told that there had been a problem with some of the Marines. And the Pentagon, when they were asked for comment, acknowledged that there had been problems with some U.S. military personnel for suspected use, though in the case of the Marines, at least, they said that it was marijuana, not heroin. A lot of hashish is also produced in Afghanistan.

Q: Is this partly a morale problem? After all, there are a lot of American soldiers confined to bases in distant countries, and the end is not clearly in sight.

I think that for the longest time, the morale, certainly among the officers, stayed high, because it was a chance to do what they do, which is wage war—run a battalion, run a company, demonstrate coolness under fire, and get promoted. But things have gotten very much out of control. For instance, there's a whole new wave of soldiers in Iraq. There is a lot of shooting, and a lot of uncertainty about the targets. I don't think that you can entirely separate the anger at American soldiers that the public is increasingly displaying—Fallujah's an extreme example, but it's also present elsewhere—from the way we operate, with massive displays of force. Look, there's a lot more talking going on than people know. This is not a popular war, not among the soldiers—which is a separate issue from whether they're doing their job—and not among the senior officers.

Q: That brings up a larger point. You speak to people at all levels of the military. Should soldiers complain about how they're used—should soldiers be talking to reporters at all?

Hell, yes. There's no question. We have a strong notion of civilian control, and the officers aren't inclined to go public, and not just because that would be a career ender. But this is a very unpopular war within the military, much more than any journalist can convey. Still, they're professional soldiers and they do their job. I saw it with Vietnam; at a certain point, the war just became so unpopular among the military. And that's worth knowing.

Q: You mentioned Fallujah. What do you think about the news from that city this week?

With the caveat that Fallujah is special because it is a place of enormous tension, I think that we're going to see much more of the same. On the same day that those American security guards were killed—and, by the way, that's an interesting development, using private security guards; these are not the first who have been killed—five soldiers were also killed. The ball, in a sense, is in the hands of the insurgency. Several months ago, we were still being told by our military leadership that we were going to be aggressive and go after insurgents and hunt down the cells. Based on the reports we're getting, we've stopped most of those operations, both because of the danger and because the idea of going after a specific people in the insurgency is sort of beside the point now—in some places, almost everybody is in the insurgency now. It's spread out.

Q: One more question about Fallujah. You're a print journalist, and so you don't face the same dilemmas, but what do you think about the decision by many broadcasters to show extremely graphic images of war—like those bodies hanging from the bridge?

I think that if there's a problem in America, it's that we don't see enough of those pictures. That is the reality. One of those bodies could be my child or your child, our family members. You know, we've got the soldiers over there. We want to know what's going on. If we don't know what's going on we can't respond to it. And there shouldn't be a filter. There are exceptions, obviously, for classified information and for information that's relevant to the security of our country or our troops. But generally there should never be a filter between what the reality is and what we're seeing—particularly when we're sending people into combat.

Q: Speaking of filters and information, you write that the timing of the Afghan Presidential election has been dictated in part by the American Presidential election. What role will Afghanistan play in November?

What I've heard is simply this. The Administration, faced with a problem in Iraq that isn't going to go away and is not going to get better, determined last year that we would finally begin to spend some of the money that should have been spent right away in Afghanistan, and we've committed \$2.2 billion for the coming year, and we'll probably

pledge a little more next year. This is seen as an effort to make the best case for the success of Bush's policy of preemptive war. And as part of that, there is tremendous pressure to ensure that the Presidential elections in Afghanistan, which were scheduled for June of this year but are now scheduled for September, will take place, along with parliamentary elections. The idea is that the White House will be able to say, "Look, we can make democracy, we took, we went to Afghanistan, we've got the war, and it's now a democratic country; it'll happen in Iraq, too." I just don't know if it's possible.