

# Flirting with Afghanistan

## Dispatches from the frontline

by Paul Avallone

(Photographs by the author)



### Khowst province, August 2008

"Seven day shit suit" is what some American soldiers back in the first couple of years of the war would call the Afghan male garb. You've seen the outfit—real thin, lightweight cotton cloth, the same color top and bottom, loose and baggy everywhere, with the shirt tails, both rear and front, hanging down to the knees. The real name for the clothes is *shalwar kameeze*, or some such spelling, but I have never heard a soldier use that term. *Shalwar kameeze*?

Come on, to a GI that's two strange words that mean nothing, describe nothing. "Seven day shit suit," on the other hand, is sort of accurate and gaily colorful, and the S's roll off the tongue with the playful childhood singsong of "She sells sea shells."

The way the soldiers saw it, based on the filthiness of the clothes in an environment of dirt and mud, the Afghans wear the outfit at minimum for seven days

and, as a GI might say, "they shit in 'em." Well, not exactly in the pants, as if in a diaper, but when not at home in the comfort of their houses, with public toilets not just rare but very rare, the people do their business, both No. 1 and No. 2, just off the streets, in empty lots, in alleys, in the fields, and just in any spot of the great expanse of sand, dirt and rock



Hanging around a village store.

that is most of the country. Out in the open. Nothing wrong with that; when a guy's gotta go, a guy's gotta go. Here's the rub: the men squat for both No.2 and No. 1, defecation *and* urination. Yep, squat for both. And the long

shirt tails of the top both front and back work splendidly for this because anyone by chance catching sight of a man in the act can't tell which one the guy's doing, 2 or 1.

Wear the suit, as I have at times when futilely attempting to blend in for security reasons, and you'll find that No. 1 is nearly impossible to do while standing, the normal Western style, because there is no zipper in the baggy, billowing, loose pants and, cinched tight against the waist with a rope—yes, rope, not belt—when loosened, if not held up with one's hand, the pants will fall to one's ankles, and then everything is displayed for all the world to



Suspected Taliban.

see. Standing, it's a struggle to both lower the waist of the pants below the penis, yet holding it up from falling to one's ankles, while trying to hold the long front shirt tail up

and away, and still manage an aimed spray without wetting oneself. Phew...!

Easier to squat, as the pants have nowhere to fall and the shirt tails hang on their own, as curtains, if you will, keeping all body parts and all one's business hidden from the public. Only the dirt, stones and little rocks see and know what's going on directly above them. And the men will then, completing No. 1, wipe or dab away the last little penile



drips and dribbles with a little rock or stone at hand right there on the ground off the path, in the lot, alley or great expanse of desert. If the women dab with a rock, I have no idea, as a Western man is not allowed to even recognize the existence of women in the Afghan culture, let alone know anything about them, but that's a whole 'nuther matter altogether. To an Afghan man, my mere mention of Afghan women—they who must not exist in my vision or my imagination but only as shapeless blue blurs passing by—I risk bringing shame upon the culture simply by bringing them up.

Shame, one learns quickly in Afghanistan, is a huge part of the culture. It is shameful, for example, for a man in public, squatting on his haunches or sitting, to show his crotch, even hidden under the billows of those loose pants. That's where, again, the



seven day shit suit suits nicely; the long front tail of the shirt hangs down, being another layer of coverage. No crotch shown, no shame. And that's a minor shameful sin compared with one rivaling even the shame of having one's young wife's face seen—yes, just seen, as that non-existent blue blur then becomes a real person—by a non-Muslim Westerner.

That cultural sin we all know of (but don't mention), but the other, nearly equally shameful one is not in the cultural custom handbooks I've seen, nor is it brought up or mentioned among Afghans. It is an Afghan's shame of.....a public display of.....flatulence. And I'm not joking here. Even one little tiny little almost unheard *ppt*, among

Afghans it is just not released. And failing there, doing it, *ppppting*, is not just an embarrassment as it is in America among polite company or one's parents or girlfriend, or at the dinner table, or at a White House state dinner. It may still be



From her earliest age, a girl instinctively covers her mouth in front of a male (in this case me the photographer), while the boy, perhaps her brother or a cousin, reaches to pull her away from being photographed.

an embarrassment in America to let one rip, but Eddie Murphy and his gang, centering entire movies on extended fart scenes, have helped take the bite out of any shame.

In America, public flatulence is a rite of passage for junior high boys, a societal rebellion in college dorms, a return to childhood innocence on hunting and fishing outings, and it's so common in the Army that a sleeping bag has for decades been called a "fart sack." In Afghanistan children are taught the shame from early on, with stories like that of the rich man who was entertaining guests when one of his young sons, bending over pouring chai, released a fart. The rich man was so ashamed in front of his guests that he wished aloud that his son were dead, and the son, so ashamed of his own action and of his having so shamed his father, at that very moment keeled over completely, flat onto the floor, dead as a doornail. The children learn of a young husband who one night, by



accident, farts in front of his wife and is so ashamed of himself that he leaves the house and leaves the village, and he does not return for fifteen years, whereupon his now teenage son asks where he has been all this time, and the mother admits that his father, her husband, left for shame of farting in her presence, and the father is so ashamed at the revealing that he leaves again and never returns.

In the present day, in answer to my inquiries to the veracity of these morality tales, an interpreter ("terp") related to me of a time he was at a shura, or council, translating for the U.S. Army unit and the local village elders, and the American sergeant was ensuring the villagers that his soldiers, his unit, could control the region and provide security for the villagers, when he let out a fart, *pppppt*, and the head elder told his companions, in Pashtu, untranslated, in mocking scorn, "How can he control anything when he can't even control his own farts?" And not a word that sergeant said that day or at other engagements had a shred of meaning to the Afghans.



And what's all that got to do with Afghanistan? It is Afghanistan. A slice of the real Afghanistan, not the fuzzy enigma pitched to a busy, complacent American public as a noble place that can be transformed with blood and dollars from an 7th century wasteland into a modern Garden of democratic Eden. Pitched, yes, as in sold, as in sweet-talked, as in pulled-the-wool-over-the-eyes, for the purpose, most naturally, of justifying all that blood and treasure being squandered.

Before 9-11, Afghanistan was of little importance to America the country and even less to the people. I would guess that not more than a handful of Americans could actually pinpoint it on a blank map before 9-11. I being one

of that big, ignorant majority. It's a country that Americans then might have simply known as Russia's Vietnam and that distant land of that exotic looking, intense-eyed girl on the cover of *National Geographic*. Russia is long gone, that exotic girl is now a woman under a burqa, and the U.S. and its NATO partners are settled into an intensifying holding action that, until recently, the American media and public have had limited interest in, accepting and echoing the pitch (or sweet talk, etc.) that it is "*the good war*," "*the right war*," the well spun "*noble enterprise*." When the media did pop up now and then with some concern, they coined the phrase and called this conflict "The Forgotten War," in stark contrast to that big ugly mess that became the Iraq War, and they would repeatedly state matter-of-factly that the Bush Administration outright neglected Afghanistan for Iraq. True or not, that became the mantra. "Neglected," which led to "forgotten."

As for Iraq, unlike Afghanistan, that war was



American sergeant searches Taliban killed in air strike.

a big land battle to begin with (which makes for good video and print), and it turned out to have been fought under false pretenses and nearly turned victors into the defeated. Tinged, in particular, with the bile aftertaste of those false pretenses, along with the ever multiplying American death toll year in and year out *after* "mission accomplished," the war was a natural headline maker. Afghanistan, on the other hand, had been won, more or less, easily, and with that one-scene drama all played out, all eyes turned to and became transfixed on that growing three-act disaster of Iraq.

## That Crazy Uncle in the Attic

It is easy to see how the on-going but quiet war in Afghanistan became to Americans like that crazy uncle in the attic. You can't throw him out into the streets, you can't put him in an institution because he's not that crazy, and you've got to feed him and

make sure he's got clean clothes and bathes every now and then, but you don't really talk about him among family, and when guests come over, they all know he's up there, but no one mentions him. He's there, he's not going anywhere, he's family so you hope he'll get better on his own, but you know he really won't, and there's nothing you can do but take care of him. And not have to be reminded of him. Afghanistan. Not forgotten, not



An American Army officer (with two Afghan soldiers and an interpreter) holds an outdoor shura in a rural village. Note: No Afghan females allowed.

neglected; rather, a pesky nuisance we tune out because we know that there are no painless, immediate, permanent, satisfying, good solutions to it and it's going to be around for a long long time. Tuning it out just makes enduring it all that much more easy.

Every once in a while, a Seal team gets whacked in the mountains and their rescue helicopter gets shot down, with all sixteen aboard also dying, or the opium harvest comes in again as a "bumper crop," or someone tries to kill Karzai, or the Marines land in Helmand province, or nine GIs are killed when a remote outpost is nearly overrun, or the U.S. presidential candidates start upping the ante on how many more combat brigades they're going to throw into the pot, and the Afghan war becomes suddenly remembered and talked about and difficult to tune out. As if that uncle has started ranting and now screaming, and stomping the floor, and even throwing wads of feces down the stairs. But like before, after a short while, he'll calm down, he always has and always does. He will.



We hope. And we can sort of pretend he's not there again.

If only it were only a crazy uncle. It has been nearly seven years now that America has been in Afghanistan and, increasing on both counts the past three, for seven years spilling our sons' blood into the dirt, while throwing our own billions of dollars down a bottomless, and probably dry, well. As the greatly unchallenged political and media chorus now seems to be demanding more in both sons and dollars, isn't it long overdue that we climbed those stairs, unlocked that attic door and, though it may be unpleasant to look, honestly appraised that uncle once and for all, starting perhaps with his loose, filthy garb and all that it implies about who he is?

## Hello, Afghanistan

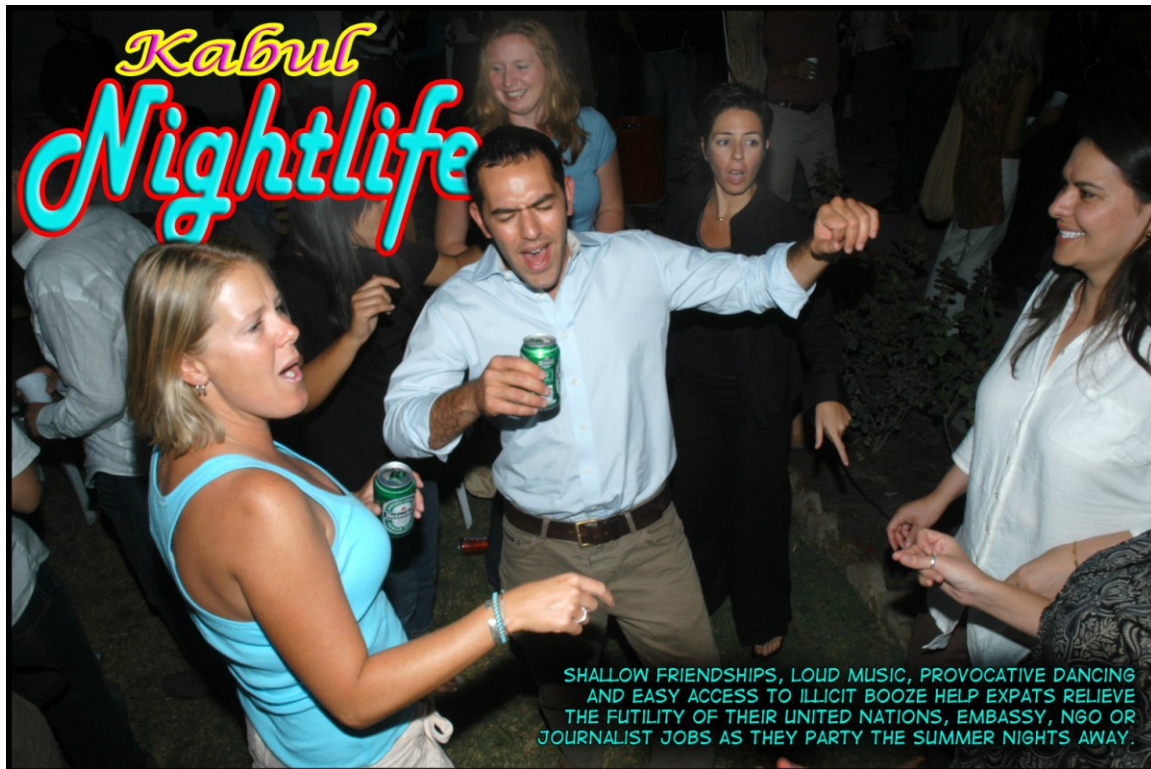
My first experience in Afghanistan was in 2002-03 when I deployed as a Green Beret with the U.S. Army. My team operated in the east in Nangarhar province, famous then for its opium poppies, for the Khyber Pass, and for its Tora Bora mountains in which a short while earlier the U.S. had lost bin Laden. For the most part, Afghanistan had been tamed a year after 9-11, and it was a quiet time, which we filled by hunting the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, while busting opium processing rings and feasting with our Afghan militia, our companion terps and their families (that is to say, the male members), the various local warlords and even the governor now and then.



U.S. Army Special Forces in an opium poppy field.

I returned to Afghanistan mid-2005 and stayed eighteen months, through all of

2006, as a civilian working semi-black-ops in intelligence, operating out of Kabul, with a foot in all worlds: local Afghan politics/warlords, U.S. military, U.S. and Nato diplomat, which was heavy on the embassies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). That was a safe, free-wheeling time in the capital among the ex-pats. Now and again, I'd pop over east to Nangarhar to see old friends and warlords, with nary a care in the world. The money was great, the ex-pat social life was like a summer camp, but the work was boring and inconsequential, so I gave it up and embedded with the U.S. Army as a freelance



journalist. Not with the Green Berets, as my prior status as one did not then, nor now, seem to matter; they just don't want any journalists snooping around, period. The U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division was running the conventional side of the military ops then, and it is with their units that I embedded.

It is the 101st Airborne Division running the U.S.'s Regional Command East (RC East) since March of this year, and it is with them that I came over for this third time. Again, as an embedded journalist—a writer and photographer, really, not a deadline reporter.

I'll admit to never having been to the north, centered in Mazar-e-sherif, nor to the

west, centered in Herat. The east and south, where the majority population (best estimate, 60%) Pashtun are, and Kabul as well, I know. As the minority ethnic groups, the Tajik might argue differently, the Uzbeks as well, though the Hazaras have never seemed to have any voice at all, but the adage, "*As the Pashtuns go, so goes Afghanistan*," is far



more accurate than accepting as viable dominant alternatives the exceptions such as a Tajik warlord Massoud or an Uzbek warlord Dostum. The Tajiks may think they are the rightful rulers simply from an historical perspective, the Uzbeks just want power, the Hazaras work hard and dream that someday they

will be considered on par ethnically with the others, but it is the Pashtuns who dominate by sheer numbers and hardened cultural traditions. The Pashtuns *are* the east and south, and that's the Afghanistan that I know first-hand. The Taliban originated within the Pashtuns, and still today Talibs are mainly Pashtuns, whether Afghan or Pakistani, headquartered and infiltrating from the western, so called "lawless" Pashtun territories of Pakistan.

The present rising insurgent war is more than just Taliban fighters, though, with Haqqanni and Hezb-e-Islami factions as well as al-Qaeda, which includes Arabs, Chechens, Turks and what-have-you, and the U.S. and NATO have struggled to find an all-inclusive, one-fits-all, catchy label for them. Last year it was "ACM," for anti-coalition militants—the



coalition being the U.S., its NATO partners and the Afghans. As the insurgency and fighting have increased and more American and NATO soldiers are deploying and dying, in an irony, in Big Brother double-speak, in an attempt to "*put an Afghan face on it*," the official term for the enemy is now "AAF," for anti-Afghan forces. It is as if by labeling



the opposition in such a misleading, watered-down term, the military officers and diplomat bureaucrats who came up with this sham can deny the reality that it is the American, the British, the Canadian, the Dutch, the Pole, the French, the Romanian and other Western nations' soldiers who are doing the majority of the fighting, and it is those same Western powers whom the AAF are targeting because they know that if they can run the West out, the Afghans will collapse completely under the Taliban's fiercer, more passionate, more disciplined jihad. In a second irony, while taking themselves out of the enemy's label, the Western powers are trying to sell their own publics on the necessity of increasing their troop deployments to the war.



Double-speak, triple-speak, quadruple-speak, it makes no sense. ACM and AAF are such nebulous, passive terms, it makes me question whether their usage isn't to take the war out of the war. "Taliban" says something. "Al Qaeda" says something. Talibs are



Captured Talib awaiting transfer.

the long black-turban, long scraggily-bearded men with guns on the back of white Datsun pickup trucks, sneering, vile, and running through our brains are jumpy videotape images of them putting the muzzles of Kalashnikovs to blue

burqa-cloaked women's heads and blowing them away. Al-Qaeda fly planeloads of people into World Trade Centers and with ancient curved swords chop heads off of

Daniel Pearls. With the words Taliban and al-Qaeda we have an immediate, strong sense of "warrior," "violent," "vicious"—an enemy, meaning a war being fought. Anti-coalition militants? Anti-Afghan forces? ACM and AAF? What are we talking here, where's the sense of war?



ANA soldier. (Note the pure craftsmanship of the mortarless rock wall, a feature throughout the country.)

In the Vietnam War, for instance, "VC" and "NVA" meant something; there was a stark essence of violence in them, and forty years later they still connote warriors, fighters, an enemy, a killing enemy, to respect and fear. Here yesterday it was ACM,

today it's AAF, what tomorrow? "Anti-coalition militants" may be a proper scholarly-discourse label for the collection of groups trying to overthrow the government here, and "anti-Afghan forces" may be a half accurate description, but neither comes down and hits the nail smack on the head, in one word—short, sweet, meaningful—as "Taliban" does.

And should the Afghans and their coalition Western partners lose the war, it will be they, the Taliban, not the ACM or AAF, in their long black turbans and long beards, once again running the show here. And there is no way then that they'll call their soldiers



Village elder during a shura with American Army officers.

"militants" or "forces"; they will be an "army," which is what perhaps we should call them today. As for them actually winning on down the road a bit, estimates say the

Taliban number 25,000 here in Afghanistan this summer, and, though no match in numbers, weaponry and assets against the coalition, with an endless pipeline of men and materiel through Pakistan, they are not losing.

That should be repeated: They are not losing.

Employing classic guerrilla tactics of small units, as small as cells, attacking in their time and place of choosing in sharp, violent, deadly pinpricks against a thinly spread coalition, by killing enough British, Canadians, Dutch, Poles, French and Americans—as crass as that may sound—the Taliban believe they can get those representative democracies to referendum what so many others in the past have declared, that *This place and these people just ain't worth it.*



## Easy War Turning Bad

Oh, for a return to those halcyon days of the first couple of years of the war, when there was no thought at all about the possibility of losing or the Taliban ever managing a comeback. Then again, we were just a lone Green Beret team in a big province, and with our hundred-plus militia of Afghan fighters culled from the best of the local warlords' armies (for a price to the warlords, of course, from an unlimited CIA stash of cold cash), we had complete control. As operators on the ground, our concern was not our Washington, D.C., leaders' big-geopolitical strategic picture that should have been taking into



account the possibility of a very wounded Taliban recovering then resurging then swarming back in one day. Did they take that into account? It sure doesn't look like it.

Back in 2003, the sum total in the country, all American military



U.S. Special Forces interrogate a suspect during a cache raid in the early days of the war.

personnel—Army infantry, Green Berets, Air Force, Delta, Seals—numbered less than ten thousand. Had someone said that within a few years the Taliban would outnumber our 2003 forces by more than two to one at twenty-five thousand, we would have laughed it off, not imagining it even remotely possible. Then again, all we had to go by was the little picture of Nangarhar.

It was mid-2006 when the honky-dory here turned dicey. Contrary to popular



Afghan National Army soldier.

media opinion then, the Bush Administration had not really neglected Afghanistan, unless you consider neglect to be a doubling of the under-ten-thousand-strong 2003 force to twenty thousand by 2006. At the same

time, the NATO mission, called the International Security Assistance Force (or, ISAF, pronounced "I-saf"), had doubled its 2004 numbers to twenty thousand. It was then in 2006 the Bush Administration's intent to turn the entire conventional part of the war over

to NATO/ISAF, with a U.S. pullout to begin in the autumn.

The start of 2006 had the U.S. turning control to ISAF of Regional Commands



North and West, the two non-Pashtun, relatively untroubled areas. In the spring it turned control of the more hostile, Pashtun RC South to ISAF, with the Dutch taking responsibility of Uruzgan province, the Canadians taking Kandahar province and the British

taking neighboring Helmand. To understand the prevailing attitude about Afghanistan at the time, it should be noted that it was just prior to the British deployment that then Defense Minister John Reid told the press, "We are in the south to help the Afghan people construct their own democracy. I would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing a shot, because our job is to protect the reconstruction." Man, if a guy ever had to eat his words...

By summer, shots had been fired and were being fired. So much so that the Canadian Parliament came one vote shy of pulling out of its ISAF commitment. As for the British press, they were having a field day. As for John Reid, he'd last less than a year longer, and his "without firing a shot" comment still brings out the mockery in the British press.



As for the Taliban and their surprising summer offensive, in hindsight it was



probably their single biggest strategic blunder. They should have waited a year and allowed the Brits and Canadians and ISAF to get comfortable and complacent throughout the summer, because in September the U.S. was to turn RC East over to ISAF, thereby giving the entire mission command to NATO and beginning its own withdrawal, with



Fruit sellers marketplace in Kabul.

plans to leave only air assets and special forces, about 8,000 troops. Had the Taliban waited, by spring 2007 they could have launched a massive offensive against what would have been then an entirely-NATO commanded mission, and that fragile, sickly coalition would have either collapsed under the political strain of so many casualties and deaths or begged the U.S. to come back in and help. And Bush could have put blame for the failure



Ministers of the Afghan government at a dinner at the deputy speaker of the parliament's Kabul residence.

squarely on NATO and either demanded that NATO pony up the forces to take care of it on its own or shamed NATO into an eternal gratitude by deploying massive American forces to pull ISAF's ass out of the wringer.

As it was,

technically the U.S. did turn command of RC East over to ISAF in the fall of 2006, but it was a tacit, in-name-only changeover. American troops did not leave; their numbers only increased. The two-star American generals who have commanded RC East since then



may have technically fallen under the ISAF commanding general, but if that general has not been an American, you can take it to the bank that for the American two-star, with his own career staked on his decisions and performance, RC East is his to command, no one else's.

Today, the summer of 2008, the U.S. has over 35,000 troops in the country, and NATO about twenty thousand. Now-retired John Reid took a lot of hits, and still does, for his assessment back in 2006, but he was not completely wrong for the time. Then the war was a holding action, with an American and ISAF strategy to provide a layer of security, financial assistance and infrastructure building to a brand new Afghan



Canadian troops during Memorial Day ceremonies at Kandahar Air Field.

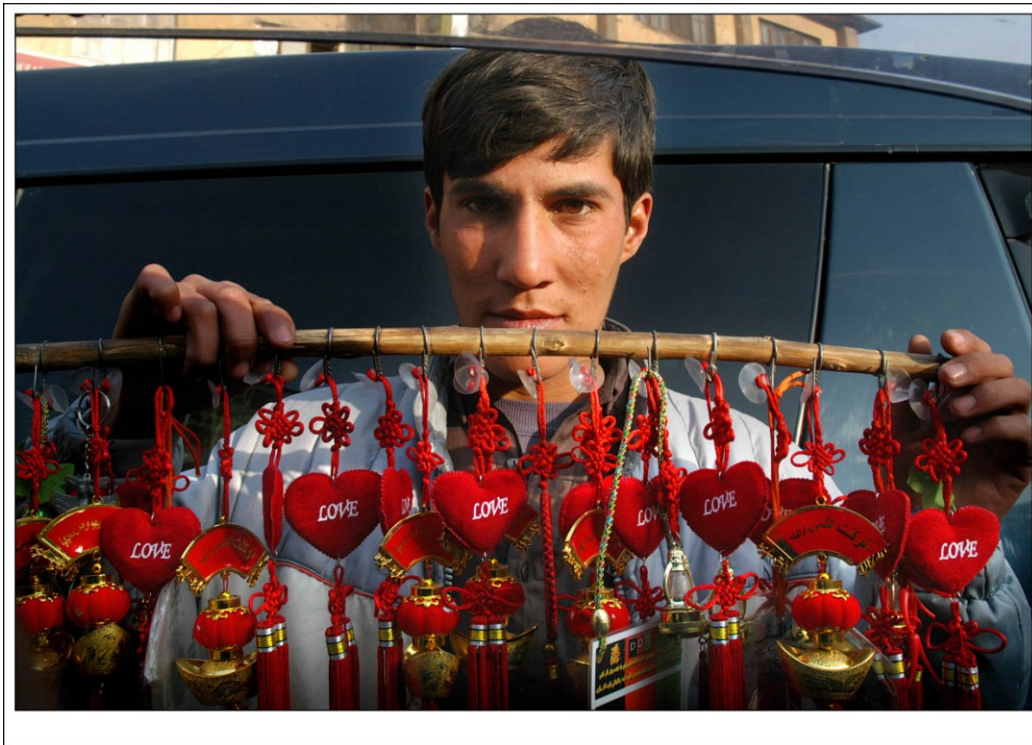
government until the Afghan security forces were built up and could take over. A holding action, no longer an all-out war, and without the consideration of the volume of the Taliban rebuilding in Pakistan nor a realistic consideration of how inadequate the Afghan security forces would be once trained up and deployed into action. Nothing was going to happen overnight, everyone



General Tommy Franks briefs reporters at Bagram Air Field in 2002, when the war was "won".

knew that, and there was time, plenty of time, as there wasn't really much of an insurgency then, or so it seemed, and again, perhaps most importantly, no one seemed to take special concern about what was happening right across the border in Pakistan.

By now we know that there will be no return to those halcyon early years, and there are some who might steal a thought from the American Civil War scholar Shelby Foote, who said that in years past every Southern schoolboy would daydream that Pickett had disobeyed General Lee at Gettysburg and had never made that fatal charge, which sealed the Confederates' fate. Today it might be a daydream, but had the Taliban only held off their offensive for a year, America would have been more or less gone and the blame for this ever-worsening fiasco would be at NATO's feet. Yeah, free of Afghanistan, no wacky uncle in the attic...boy, is that a dream.



### **To the Vanquished Goes the Spoils, From the Victor Comes the Cash**

No rational American would argue with the initial justification for the sacrifice in life and treasure—in blood and dollars—in Afghanistan as the Taliban government then harboring al-Qaeda was given the opportunity to hand over our self-described enemies and refused. The American invasion that followed was light, quick and nearly painless, with the routed Taliban and al-Qaeda not killed or captured managing to flee to the safety of Pakistan. Which, a couple of centuries ago might have been the end of the story. In that earlier, less enlightened time, a superpower such as America would have then



declared the land a colony and subjugated the people. Or, as in this instance in Afghanistan, wise commanders and civil servants on the ground would have appraised the situation and then informed the leaders back home that there was nothing of the land worth colonizing and even less of the people worth the effort to attempt to subjugate.



One should wish for those less enlightened times, for this 21st century moral standard of vanquishing now requires that the victor humble himself to the vanquished, while molding the population into a freedom-loving, equality-based, uncorrupted democratic republic Garden of Eden, with a strong standing army, double-laned paved highways, countless schools and medical clinics, 24-hour electricity and, heck, why not just throw in a Coca-Cola factory or two. In Afghanistan it was all part of that holding action. Just give it time. *"Golly gee willikers, Maude, it worked in Germany and Japan."* There's a TV playing here, with the *tic toc, tic toc, bing, go the Jeopardy timer and bell, and, "The answer is," corrects Alex Trebek, "What Is, Rebuilding."*

Rebuilding. Re. R-E. As were the cases with both Germany and Japan post-World War Two. They both had been literate 20th century economies before the war, with physical and educational foundations and structures upon which to re. There is no re in



America and Nato constructed district centers throughout the country in a futile effort to establish effective, uncorrupt local governance.



Afghanistan. There was no 20th century economy, nor were there any physical and educational foundations upon which to build a modern state before even the Russian invasion of 1979 began the 25 years of war, never mind before 9-11. Sure, the Western victors here in their enlightened paternalism have established provisional reconstruction teams (PRTs), but it's all construction, from scratch, without the re. Be honest and call them PCTs. High-degreed State Department careerists might scream in rebuttal, *"You're wrong, dead wrong! Kabul in the 1960's was the Paris of Central Asia!"*



Typical mud compound (qalat).

First, that's an insult to Paris; second, Kabul's slight renaissance then was due largely to the Cold War competition between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., who were both throwing money and projects around in an attempt to win influence in a mostly influence-less land. Then, what the Cold Warriors built, left intact by the departing Russians in the late 1980's, was destroyed by the competing mujahedeen warlords—guys like the Tajik Massoud and Uzbek Dostum—who preferred no one having anything if it could not be themselves having everything.

So, again, where is the R-E in Afghanistan? I look at the letters, I look at the alphabet, I look in the dictionary for a misspelling, then I remember a fellow soldier

during that "shit suit" era once remarking, "You know, if it wasn't for the internal combustion engine, these people would be back in the seventh century." Worse, they did not invent the engine, they did not improve the engine, and they don't even manufacture the things. I am neither an anthropologist nor historian, but for the life of me I cannot figure out one thing, not one tangible thing, that the Afghan people have created, discovered, invented or brought to the world. Which in itself is not crime. A person, a society, a country, should be free to



U.S. Special Forces soldier in early days of the war.

achieve or not achieve, progress or not progress, have electricity or not have electricity. They should be free to relax away a morning, an afternoon and an entire evening just hanging out with the guys drinking chai. No negative judgment assessed against them. No forced achievement thrust upon them. *"This land is your land, This land is my land,"* is good enough for Americans, why can't we allow it to be good enough for, hmmm, let's see...*tic toc, tic toc, bing!* *"The answer is: Who are Afghans."*

## Afghanistan For Dummies

Yes, it is their land, this Afghanistan, and that the Afghans would choose to make so very little of a land that holds less than minimal mineral wealth, just slightly more arable agricultural potential, and thin, almost nude forests only at the higher altitudes should be their choice, not ours. Not NATO's. What is it our business to re, or without the re simply c? Which begs the question, Why are we any longer in Afghanistan? We threw out the Taliban, we set up a federal government and have given it the building blocks to form its own security forces, so why are we still here? Just because the Taliban once allowed the terrorist al-Qaeda its hospitality, the Taliban themselves were not terrorists, and I would argue, they still aren't. Afghanistan was their country, and they want it back, which in my book, agree or disagree with their platform or philosophy, is a pretty damn

legitimate reason for an insurgency. But, if the Taliban are allowed back they will

establish "*Terrorist training camps, and we can't allow the terrorists to have them in Afghanistan*"

is the slogan pitched as if it were written in stone. And that is a half-truth that, used as the single overriding



ANA soldiers.

justification for our expenditure of blood and dollars here, is a vile deception, because the ones hocking the enterprise on such blatantly illogical reasoning have to know the falsehood in their argument and must go to sleep every night smirking, gloating that they have been allowed to get away with their disingenuous spin unchallenged for so long.

The terrorist training camps are no longer in Afghanistan. They are in Pakistan.

There is no disputing those two sentences; everybody knows they are true.



Amputee clinic in Jalalabad.

Whatever backdoor strategic political maneuvering and diplomatic shell games being played between Washington, D.C., and Islamabad to deal with the truth—headline: *The Terrorist Training Camps*



*are in Pakistan*—are obviously not working, because the camps are still there and the Taliban, al-Qaeda, etc., keep recruiting, growing and waltzing from those camps right across the border into Afghanistan, waging an ever increasingly successful insurgency.

Strategically, politically and diplomatically it's a mess. The U.S. fears invading our "ally" Pakistan, which could well lead to an Islamic jihadist overthrow of that iffy government, and then what would we have—a nuke bomb-armed jihadist state? At the same time, Pakistan enjoys the idea of having an unstable neighbor that the Taliban create crossing over and fighting in Afghanistan. The Afghans, there is no debating this, hate the Pakistanis and



dream of a day when they have retaken for themselves their Pashtun lands made a century ago part of Pakistan when the British arbitrarily drew the border. Now, if you're Pakistani, and you've got a neighbor right next door who hates you and wants to snatch away half your country, wouldn't you want to keep that neighbor unstable and weak? Did



I mention?—it's a mess.

If it is terrorists we're after and their training camps we want to eliminate, since we can do neither, and are doing neither, in Pakistan itself, might not it be more practical to pull out of Afghanistan completely—lock, stock and barrel, with the caveat that, *Hey, Afghans, it's your place to do with as you like, but if we see terrorist training camps from our super-duper spy satellites, we're going to cruise-missile and*

*B-2 bomber them to smithereens*—and let the terrorists stream in and set up shop, and kabloom kablowlie, there they go, lots of dead terrorists! Something we can't do right now in Pakistan.

As it stands today, with a combined NATO/U.S. force of over 50,000 here in Afghanistan, the terrorists are free and secure to establish and build up training camps—heck, why not whole jihadist armies?—in Pakistan. And everybody knows it. So, is it ignorance or vile deception that has our American leaders continue to justify our own



Americans on patrol.

35,000-plus in Afghanistan as a frontline against the re-establishment (there now, re is put to an accurate use) of terrorist training camps here? I'm a nobody from nowheresville, with no college

diploma, no State Department experience—I was enlisted, not even an officer, in the Army, for Pete's sake—and I've never read de Tocqueville, Machiavelli, Sun Tzu, Aristotle or Will & Ariel Durant, and I would stake my above-average IQ (as measured by military entry tests, not real IQ ones) on the fact that those leaders are a lot smarter than me (or, than I am), so, if even I can see the truth, it cannot be ignorance that has our leaders firm in their justification, and thus it must be vile deception.

What would make that deception all the worse would be that the leaders' training camp justification/slogan is just a way of avoiding a referendum by the American public on the real reasons for our continued presence here, which, as I've heard argued, is a Risk board game-like strategy of having a foothold, bases, a hegemony in Central Asia. That of a great power extending itself, requiring strongpoints from which to logistically and



tactically maintain its sphere of influence. Perhaps, simply, having the United States Army, Air Force and Marines on Iran's eastern front. If that big-picture strategy is, and



ANA with RPG.

our leaders are not arguing it to be, the real reason for our blood and treasure being squandered here, it is a disrespect that our leaders are showing us that we are not smart or wise enough to understand or accept it as valid reason, or it is an acknowledgement that, post the Gulf of Tonkin, post the dominoes

of Vietnam, post the WMDs of Iraq, we *are* smart enough to understand it completely to be tragically flawed reasoning, and they don't trust us *not* to reject it. And reject them.

Leaders, politicians, don't easily accept rejection, so we are beginning to hear another justification for being here—that Afghanistan is a battle "on a frontline of the War on Terror." *Ehhhhhhh goes the buzzer, and "Wrong answer," says Alex.* Terror is a concept, and wars are not fought against concepts. What, how? Does one throw into battle the concept of happy-go-lucky against terror? In World War Two it wasn't Nazism that was fought, it was the Nazis. You can't beat Nazism in a physical war without going after and wiping out the Nazis. Terror is no different, but if one argues that America must remain in Afghanistan because it is "a frontline on the War on Terrorists," that then raises the question that no one really wants to answer:

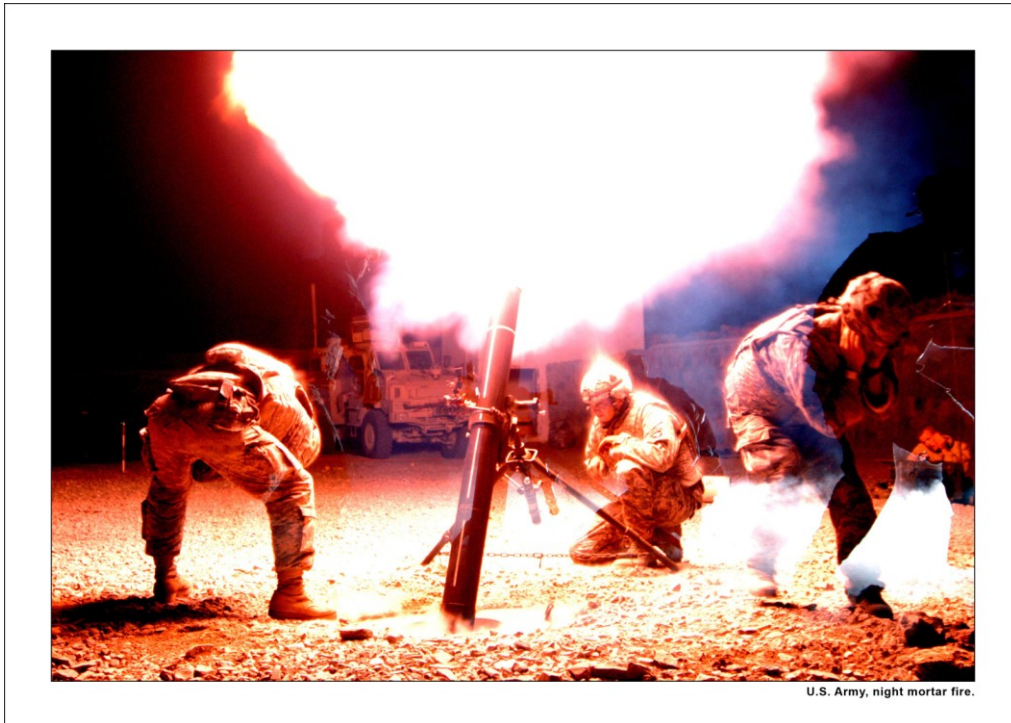


Villagers serving American soldiers chai.



Who are the terrorists? *Tic toc, tic toc, bing! Silence, dead air. Why, wouldn't you know it, Jeopardy's gone to a commercial break.*

While Alex is out, how about this, here's a cheery thought: A terrorist is grandma Mabel Dot McCoy from Sparta, Wisconsin, on her way to Denver to visit the kids and grandkids for Thanksgiving....being strip-searched at the airport security checkpoint.



Less cheery is to admit that all the terrorists that seem to have their crosshairs on the Western democracies and cultures just happen to be Muslims. Hmmmmmm, you don't say? You do, and you'd have to conclude the barely mentionable—*We're fighting Muslim terrorists?* Yikes, back up! We can't bring religion into it—separation of church and state, all religions are created equal—we start defining the terrorists for their own declared Islamic jihadist *holy war* on us—they are *terrorists*, real people, declaring and fighting that war, not mere concepts, *terror* or *terrorism*—why, that's racism, or religionism, or some kind of –ism of the unfairly judgmental sort. And in modern Western culture to be judgmental is judged to be the worst, the most sinful, the most immoral culturally Neanderthal of personal characteristics.

So, we fight in Afghanistan as a battle on the frontline in the War on Terror, or, on an even grander scale, in the Global War on Terror, or GWOT for short, and in



CH-47 Chinook. The lifeblood of the US infantry in the war.

refusing to define our enemy we then commit a cardinal error in a nation's execution of war. One would think that a nation would have learned after having committed the same error in a previous war less than fifty years earlier. Yes, in the

Vietnam War. By 1967 everyone knew that the war there was no longer between the home-grown Viet Cong guerrillas and the South Vietnamese government and its American sponsors. The enemy was the North Vietnamese. Invaders. Regardless the rightness or wrongness of their cause, it was an invasion, and the Americans were fighting it. As an invasion. Fighting them. In South Vietnam.

I have not read Sun Tzu but have heard of and accept completely his theory that in warfare *one must strike at the heart of his enemy*. A body dies without a working heart. A strike at the heart is a killing blow. A strike at the heart is not a bomb-drop here a bomb-drop there, a truce, a bomb-drop, putting off-limits the Russian freighters in the Haiphong Harbor unloading SAM missiles, more bombs here, more there, a truce. Whether or not back then America was willing to recognize and define the true enemy, regardless of the geo-political fears and cautions dictating our behavior, we did not strike at the heart of the enemy, and we lost. We did not invade the North, we did not bomb their dikes, we did not nuke 'em to the Stone Age. Insane, immoral, isn't all war?

I don't know if it's one of Sun Tzu's principles in the art of war, but it's common



sense: One does not go to a fight, whether it's in the playground, the sandlot, the alley, the bar—wherever—unless one is willing to bring his all and is prepared to lose his all. Lose everything. Have his hair pulled, groin kicked, teeth knocked out, eyes gouged out, and ribcage crushed to powder by a guy or guys who are just bigger and tougher and meaner than oneself. Or give it right back to him or them. If you're not prepared for both, don't go. If you do head that way, you had better have weighed every conceivable pro and con and have concluded that a total loss, your disfigurement, injury or death, is worth it. And you had better know just exactly who the hell your enemy is. And had better to have judged the fight as warranting your striking at his heart, as he, by God, will be doing the same to you. Striking at the heart.



The Vietnam War was a failed strategy for America, but just fifteen years later, recognizing and defining the real enemy and striking at its heart,

America pulled off a brilliant victory in El Salvador. With, of all things, congressional peacenik restrictions on warfare that limited the number of American troops in the country to a pinhead sized fifty-five. Fifty-five. Two numbers. 55—it's not a misprint. What started as an internal guerrilla civil war within El Salvador, the American leaders and commanders soon enough recognized as a proxy war fought with men and materiel from Nicaragua, most coming through Honduras. When closing the porous borders proved impossible, America formed the Nicaraguan refugees living in Honduras into an army, the Contras, and sent them into their homeland Nicaragua. An invasion. Striking at the heart of the enemy. And it worked. Nearly overthrown by the Contras, the communist



Nicaraguan government negotiated a peace, and suddenly, the civil war in El Salvador was over. No bombing of dikes, no nuking to the Stone Age, but, at the same time, accurately measuring the value of victory or defeat, and precisely defining the enemy then striking at his heart.

## Questions, We Don't Need No Stinkin' Questions

So, why are we in Afghanistan? Who is our enemy? How much do we value his defeat? How much are we willing to sacrifice for his defeat? How will we know when he is defeated? Where is his heart, and how do we strike at it to kill him?

I'm just a regular-joe voter, who won't even be voting this year because there is no way to get me an absentee ballot way over here and get it back in time to be a counted vote, and I'm sure not privy to National Security Council White House briefing notes, nor CIA analyses, nor Pentagon and CentCom conference calls, nor closed-door congressional Foreign Affairs Committee hearings, nor ISAF memos to the commanding American general here and his right back at them, nor Obama's or McCain's advisors' whispers of the real reasons behind the candidates' foreign policy positions, but I haven't heard one word out loud from any of these leaders that truthfully, rationally, raises or attempts to answer those questions.



Now, were these same leaders, both left and right and in the media, to admit that *Look, we blew it with the WMDs in Iraq, but we're there now and we're stuck because, in a nutshell, the place has got oil and lots of it, the gas-guzzling, air-conditioned, energy demanding American public, with \$5/gallon gasoline and \$8/gallon milk, might not be comfortable with the morality of "War for Oil," but they'd buy it. And then demand of their leaders accountability for their twenty-year energy policies of ignoring a growing China and India while restricting our own homegrown product production, and they*

would demand instant drilling-based resource enhancement and government-sponsored Manhattan Project-type initiatives into alternative energy sources to sooner-rather-than-later make imported oil irrelevant.

Big-picture for Iraq—Iraq now, not Afghanistan—talk all you want about *"democracy"* and *"containing Iran"* and *"bases in the Middle East"* and *blah blah blah*—it's oil. For Afghanistan... Where's the oil?

Oh, didn't anyone mention it? There is no oil in Afghanistan. Sure, there was lots of excited blabber here a few years ago about the possibility of bringing Kazakhstan oil in a pipeline through Afghanistan down to the Indian Ocean. That sounds like a pretty good reason for a strong U.S. military presence in a stable Afghanistan, but I haven't been hearing any of that talk recently. Maybe because everyone realized that the pipeline is impractical because of the cost of securing it alone.

This place would have to be one very stable country to not have the thing blown up here and there on a daily basis. And, even with a heavily-armed Afghan National Army (ANA) guarding the length, with the country's



ANA on patrol with Americans.

cultural acceptance and encouragement of corruption—*baksheesh*—each little guard post and each individual guard would be selling spigot rights, and the line would be tapped into the entire length, so that the drips that came out going into the ocean tanker at the port end would be so miniscule that they could be dabbed away with one of those little penile piss-dribble wipe stones.

Since there's no oil to be fighting for, and since, with the increased Taliban insurgency this year, the word is finally now being widely broadcast that the insurgents are coming across from their Pakistan-based training camps, another argument is coming

out between the lines, and it too fails to define the enemy, judge the value of the fight, lay out an end-state, or rationalize an aim for the heart.

This undercover argument says that America owes it to Afghanistan to rebuild it because America, after helping the Afghans defeat the Russians, left the Afghans—*"neglected"* them—to make something of their country all by their little ol' warring,



American soldiers on patrol.

helpless selves. It was our neglect, it is argued, that allowed Afghanistan to fall into chaos, which led to the Taliban taking over, which led to al-Qaeda being welcomed in, which led to 9-11, etcetera. The argument is based in part on guilt-trip, part on practicality. The poor country

needs our help to avoid chaos; chaos will allow al-Qaeda a stronghold again. And in rebuilding, to rebuild we must at the same time secure the country—"hold it," if you will—against an internal/external insurgent enemy.

Isn't it a bit presumptuous of us to believe that the Afghans would think that they needed us or would ask for our help? Say what I will about the Afghan culture, and a lot of it is not good, but I will give it this much: The people are extremely proud and self-

reliant, and they neither like to be told what to do nor told what they need and surely don't like to be told what they need to do. Don't misunderstand, the Afghans are shameless in asking for and taking whatever one has—a stick of gum, a cookie, a pen, a well, a road,



No American soldiers were seriously injured in this roadside bomb.



a school, a hospital, a factory, a hydroelectric dam, a box of cookies, two pens, three pens, an MRE, a Humvee, a thousand Humvees, four pens, a case of MREs, a pallet of bottled water, a jingle truckload of bottled water, a fleet of brand-new Ford Ranger pickup trucks for their ANP, fifty thousand BDU uniforms for their ANA, a hundred thousand Kalashnikov rifles—but they are too proudly independent to allow there to be any strings attached to their taking. Any, period, end of discussion. You want to give it to them, give it—ask for nothing in return. Because you're not going to get it. It works both ways; when an Afghan gives he has no strings attached and expects nothing in return. Giving, sharing, hospitality is a part of his culture, and it is a shame for an Afghan not to offer, and as shameful to add strings to the offer.

Americans gave to the Afghans Stinger missiles and the training in their employment to defeat the Russians, but that's where the American influence would end, regardless if America had followed the Stingers with dollars, well diggers, State Department advisors and brigades of the 82nd Airborne. Don't accept that? Thirty-five thousand

deployed U.S. soldiers presently in-country later, along with more than 150 billion dollars burned over time, as well as road-pavers, well-diggers



and who-knows-how-many State Department advisors, and in 2008 we've got an increasingly aggressive and successful Taliban insurgency against a weak, corrupt federal government that is still standing only because it's backed by those 35,000 GIs and another 20,000 from NATO. What the hell do you think we could have done in the early 1990's to have kept chaos from reigning? How many American troops would we have had to have

deployed over here then?

It is the Afghans and their culture that is solely to blame for their decline into chaos after the Russians picked up and took their marbles home. The Afghans are a warrior culture, no denying it, and a people who can be rallied to unify to fight an invader



and, once the invader is thrown out, they explode into their own tribes to fight each other. That that American aid (the Stingers, etc.), in a clever move in Cold War Risk, was key to the mujahedeen victory over the Russians, does not mean that America was any more responsible for the aftermath than France, helping us throw out the British in our revolution, would have been responsible to ensure that afterwards Massachusetts didn't attack Rhode Island and George Washington didn't lob cannon balls John Adams' way.

It may be a harsh, harsh, harsh reality to admit, but Massoud, Dostum, Hekmatyar, Abdul Haq and the rest of the warlords were not and are not any George Washingtons or John Adams'.

It may be harsher still to declare, in these times of Western non-judgmentalism,

that the Afghan culture is on a moral par—or, even, on a practical life-sustaining par—with that of America and the West.

With no viable argument for American economic self-interests in Afghanistan, (such as oil), none to sustain any longer the terrorist training camps rationale, (their camps are in Pakistan), and none given rationalizing for a strategic geo-political stronghold in the area, (Iraq will have to do, as it does have the oil), as both presidential candidates Obama and McCain are one-upping each other in increasing, almost to doubling, the American military in the country, I expect that the sloganeering justifications to be coming our way now will be emotionally based, heart-string arguments playing on an American guilt for past neglect and the overall generosity and kindness of a modern, rich American nation to a 7th century, impoverished, shambled one.



Firewood for sale.

There are more poor or impoverished countries and peoples in the world than wealthy ones, and Americans instinctively know that giving to each and every one as we're presently giving to Afghanistan—thirty-five thousand troops and about thirty-five billion dollars a year—would bring our own country into shambles and ruinous poverty. A hundred countries could properly demand what the Afghans are getting from us. Choices must be made then. The crazed uncle in the attic, remember?



Until now, we've assumed that guy up there to be an uncle, but he may not be. He may be a vagrant who climbed the trellis, broke the window and just staked himself a



comfortable spot out of the rain and cold. He's getting louder, we know that. We're sending up food now six times a day, and double portions each time, and the tray's always coming down empty. Our house cat's been missing since last week, and we haven't seen Rex the Black Lab since Tuesday, and something is

starting to smell like dead meat from up there. What is he doing up there, really? Who, really, is this man? Blood relative or street vagrant? We don't really know, but one thing we sure do know is, for all we've done and are doing for him, we've yet to hear a thanks.

Then again, remember, what one gives to Afghans one gives with no strings attached, even that bare-hair-thin string called a thank-you. Afghans make marvelous, generous hosts but extremely demanding and taking, ungracious guests. And, in an insane



irony, turning the uncle-in-the-attic metaphor upside-down, diplomatically we the Americans and NATO are the "invited guests" here and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) is the host, yet we're doing all the giving and they all the taking.

Hot damn, if there were a hint of

thankfulness in the Afghan culture (to anyone but Allah), instead of those five-times-a-day prayers just to Allah, the Afghans would reserve one, just one, to say *Thank you, Osama bin Laden and your al-Qaeda for 9-11, for you brought us all these goodies for free!*

It may all lead to nowhere and nothing except blood and dollars dropped down that dry well, but we did throw out the then-feared and despised Taliban, who had effectively brought law-and-order at the muzzle of a gun and ignored any bureaucratic aspects of governing—such as roads, schools, water, electricity—and who (*hold the phone here, another irony coming up*) nowadays are looking better and better to the



GIs return fire, reacting to a distant ambush.

Pashtun Afghans, as at least the Talibs are Pashtun, brothers, unlike the fifty-thousand foreign "*infidels*" who have "*invaded*" their land. And as those who threw out the Taliban and have given billions of dollars

worth of all the bureaucratic governing things the Taliban ignored presently plan to increase their "*infidel*" numbers in the country, (*Warning: We are parked squarely in Irony Central now*), they, these "*infidels*," the Americans and NATO partners, will be mistrusted, despised and hated even more. And you think you're going to get a thank-you? Remember, the uncle's crazy, or he's a vagrant, not even a blood relative. Or, is he? Again, who the hell is he?

## No Thanks, Please

*Don't ask, don't tell* as applied to Afghanistan suits our leaders just fine, and the military folks on the ground here are expected to unquestioningly fight a war and (€)build a country "*putting an Afghan face on it.*" In a tiny spark of wisdom in recognizing that the Afghans do look at us as infidel invaders, our leaders, in a desperate attempt to downplay and whitewash our presence here, demand that all our gifts of schools, clinics, roads, hydro-electric dams, pens, bags of wheat, battlefield victories, government institutions and standards and practices have an "*Afghan face.*" That is, have

Afghan government up front, whether federal or local officials, the ANA, ANP, whatever, as if it is the Afghans who are bringing and giving the wells, schools, clinics, roads, pens, bags of wheat, victories, institutions, etcetera.

The Afghan people may be ignorant and uneducated, but they are not stupid, and they certainly know their own culture and fellow Afghans, and regardless of the face the U.S. tries to put on the giving, the Afghans know that the



gifts don't come from their fellow Afghans. Afghans give as hosts only, it is shameful not to, but they are tribal in their sense of obliged shared responsibility, not provincial and definitely not federal. They know their own people. They know that their politicians in their provincial capitals or in Kabul, if they had a road, a school, a bag of wheat, or a hydroelectric dam to give away, they'd keep it for themselves or for their own tribe rather than let some other tribe get it. Remember those competing warlords after jointly throwing out the Russians and overthrowing the communist government turning on each other, *If I can't have it neither can you?* Without being negatively judgmental, allowing Afghans to be whichever way they want to be—*This land is your land, this land is my land*—should we not at least, if we're giving away those bags of wheat, hydroelectric dams and our son's lives and limbs, know who we're giving them to?

That the Afghans have made so little of their land for more than two thousand years is due equal parts to fate and choice. There is an Afghan saying that goes something like this: *When God made the earth, He had all kinds of rocks left over, and He dumped them all in Afghanistan.* I would add, *And then He created the Pakistanis, so that the Afghans could have a permanent enemy and someone to hate and to blame for all their problems,* and I wouldn't be able to find an Afghan even who would disagree with that.



More, the Afghan would go on and expound for thirty minutes why the Pakistanis *are* the root of all their problems and, what God didn't do with the rocks, the Pakistanis are doing just because they're Pakistanis.



Streetscene, Kabul. Mother and her four children.

The Afghans do deserve credit for surviving on and making something, however little, out of such a worthless land. They have taken those rocks and the dirt of a dry earth and without mortar or cement have built

their houses and villages, and they have taken those rocks and terraced the inclined foothills and with them have laid down and lined irrigation ditches to bring the water from the snow-covered mountains down into dry soil to grow their patches of wheat, vegetables, fruits and nuts, hashish and, of course, opium poppies. More importantly, centuries ago they realized that the real value of their land was in its geography, as a transverse point, a way station, between East and West, and they made themselves the gatekeepers, the toll takers, living contently on the tariffs extracted, mostly by bandits, for little or no work done and even less product produced or provided. When conquerors invaded, from Alexander, to the Persians, to the Mongols, to the British to the Russians, the Afghans collapsed docilely, holding out their hands and taking what was offered, then asking for more and taking it happily, then, when a return



A French soldier on combat patrol with the ANA his platoon mentors.

(those strings) was asked or demanded of them, they unified into a strong force of absolute passive aggressive disobedient non-compliance, or directly aggressive warrior armies, with the positive end result the same: the invaders, considering the effort way not worth the bottom line of what they'd get from the land or people, leaving. Leaving the Afghans with nothing more than they'd had before the invasion and, apparently, winsomely content with that. *Anyone got the pot of chai boiled up yet?*

Ignoring for now the Islamic religious and cultural conversion post-Mohammed, the semi-arid desolation, the wretchedness, the near absolute worthlessness of most of their land itself is a pretty valid excuse for the Afghans having given the world nothing really of tangible value. No moon shots, no wheel, no vaccines, no Boulder Dams, no 32-gigabyte jump drives, no *Citizen Kanes*, no William Faulkners, no Groucho Marxes even. Again, ignoring for now the Islamic religious and cultural conversion, the common American soldiers' speculation upon first reacting to the Afghan landscape and people in a sense of wondered disbelief, "*Man, it's like going back to Biblical times,*" is less a condemnation or insult upon the people than a quiet statement of reality.

Yes, indeed, and then came the Americans.





The all-powerful Americans it was back in 2002-03. As soldiers, whether in the cities, villages or settlements, we would arrive, and the men and boys would stop what they were doing and just stare at us, mouths often agape, eyes intense and curious—it was awe. They would even crowd close, not to touch, they would not do that, but just to draw near, magnetized by a radiance of power. All-powerful. And that's what it was, what they were in awe of. We were taller than them, bigger than them—healthy, strong,



well fed, well bred  
Americans—and our clothes  
and weapons and equipment  
were different and modern.  
And deadly. So deadly that,  
even if the people had not  
seen our brothers before us in  
combat action, they'd heard  
the stories about them, and to  
them we were the same

soldiers, it did not matter, of a power that was so mighty that it had just defeated in a matter of weeks the Taliban enemy that their own brothers of the Northern Alliance could not defeat in years of fighting and still now, today, 2008, seven years later, would not have been able to defeat. They would still be stalemated, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, at a draw.

Heralded worldwide as great warriors, the Afghan fighter has an undeserved reputation, unless it's his bravery we're talking about. He's got bravery in spades, as I've witnessed dozens of times, as he'll run toward the fight, run toward the





bullets. Our own militia soldiers, back in '02-'03 when I was a warrior too here, would insist on putting themselves in front of us to take the bullets to protect us. It's a part of their culture, a good part, where a man's courage is a part of his honor.

As for the other qualities of soldiering—discipline, accountability, responsibility, technical knowledge, tactics and consistency—the Afghan is piss-poor at best. For one, he just doesn't care. It's the *inshallah* (if God wills it) part of the culture. Leaving everything to fate. For another, he just doesn't like to take orders. It's the stubborn, hard-headed independent part of the culture. That hard-headed independence is the great irony of the culture that is tribal, paternal, warlord. A man is subservient to the family, tribe and warlord, yet little more than a showing of respect for the family, tribal elders and warlord is asked of him, except that he not bring shame upon the family or tribe. Shame—

remember the flatulence?—is big in the culture, it's huge, and it might be the best explanation for the Afghan warriors' reckless bravery and piss-poor soldiering. There is family and tribal shame in running



Afghan National Police road checkpoint, Kabul outskirts.

away from the bullets; there is none in not caring about or being lousy or mediocre at one's job. *Inshallah*.

Ironical also is that soldiering is the perfect job for an Afghan. There is almost no skill required—just know how to load and shoot a Kalashnikov, no aiming necessary—with even less work. Soldiering is like a family or tribe, with meals and lodging provided, and it's men being with men all the time. All the time, which is what Afghanistan is all about. Men doing nothing, hanging around with men. Basically, daily soldiering. Even a

couple of Afghan soldiers on gate guard duty, there will be with them two or three more



not on duty but just hanging out and maybe another four or five civilians too—all sitting, squatting, whatever, just shooting the breeze. Oh, yes, and drinking chai. Hour after hour after hour. In no hurry to do anything else. Which makes the Taliban/Northern Alliance stalemate years of the 1990's seem reasonable and

natural. I was not there among them, but I can imagine a group from one stumbling upon a group of their enemy sitting around drinking chai, and the enemy inviting the first to join them, and they all do, rinsing the chai cups and boiling up a couple more pots, chit-chatting the afternoon away. They separate in the evening, and the next day, one group casually shoots a couple of RPGs at the other from one ridgeline, and the other returns fire with a couple of RPGs, and they separately call it a day and report to their commands it a battle well fought.

Then along comes the U.S. in a wham, bamm, 30-second match knocking out the Taliban, it's normal that the people would be awed by such a power. A power that had rained down 500-pound



bombs from heard but unseen jets, and we too a year later, when needed, all powerful,



would beckon those jets above. And call them down to fly low, at treetop level at ear-splitting decibels, shaking the ground like an earthquake, for their split-second flight overhead, terrifying. All powerful.

It's no wonder the people would stop and crowd and stare. In awe. That stopping and staring and crowding—for ten minutes, for an hour, it was the same—we called it "Afghan TV." We were on Afghan TV. We were the only channel, we were on all the channels. We were the show. No cameras, no television sets needed; it was live. Must See Live TV. We would leave the villages, and we would know that the Afghans would go back to their homes and, like us around the water cooler a few years earlier rehashing the previous night's *Seinfeld* episode, they'd be replaying the show they'd just seen, *The Americans Coming to Town*.

By 2006, the awe was gone. As well as the crowding. In the cities the people would just glance up and by at the American soldiers, then go back to what they were doing. In the villages they'd still stop and stare, it was still Afghan TV. But the mystique of power was gone, though the Americans' equipment, weapons and vehicles were yet again bigger and even more deadly. Without that mystique the Americans were



Afghan TV



accessible, approachable, and the kids would come close, to ask, with hands out, for candy, or "Pen," or "Book," in English. No question mark in the asking. Just, "Pen." "Book."

## When Fear & Awe Turn to Scorn

In the villages this year, 2008, it's still Afghan TV, and in the friendly ones, the kids will crowd the soldiers, chattering "Pen," "Pen," "Pen," quick like clucking hens—again, statements, demands, not questions. In the unfriendly villages in Taliban sanctuaries, where the nature of warfare demands so many American patrols go, it is still Afghan TV, but the boys don't come close, and will even be behind the men, who are all squatting, silent, with stares that are closed, angry, threatening. And one knows that these Afghans would change the channel if they could, because this show they don't want to watch. Most times they are not even Taliban, they're just villagers, but the Taliban are around, near, somewhere, or are coming back, and the men fear the Talib reprisal should it be learned that they spoke with the American soldiers, never mind actually helped



Medevac dust-off for wounded Afghan civilian

them. In a nutshell, the villagers fear the Taliban, they do not fear the Americans. They would change the channel, they don't want this live show; they

just want the Americans not to have come, and their hard stares relate that. There is no good that can come to them from the Americans' visit. When questioned by the soldiers, they mumble indecipherable answers and shoo away the relevance of being questioned with fibs, and then, noting the politeness of the Americans, confident that they will not be

harmd by them no matter what, they grow ever bolder and laugh it all off with the outright lie, translated, "Taliban? No, no, we have not seen Taliban here for two years. Two years. More." And, *please*, their eyes are saying behind the false chuckles and spoken words, *leave, leave us alone*.

And the American soldiers do leave, and that night or the next or the one after, their base will be rocketed or mortared, which is no big surprise. With fancy high-tech gear they can accurately pinpoint the POO (or Point of Origin) of the rockets/mortars, and guess what, believe it or not, the POO will be right there smack dab in that village where "we have not



seen Taliban here in two years." If the Americans send their own mortars, artillery or jet-released 500-pounders down on that POO, within hours the Taliban newswires will declare three innocent women and a half-dozen innocent children killed in the infidel bombing—with videotape proof—and by morning, President Bush and his commanding generals in Afghanistan will be getting red-phone calls from President Karzai crying, "Why are you killing our innocent people?!" *Tic toc, tic toc, Jeopardy is back, bing!* "The answer is: What is, We're sorry, and we won't do it again."



U.S. Army, night mortar fire.

But the Americans will do it again. It is a guerrilla war they are fighting, in a foreign land, as guests of Mr. Karzai and his IROA, under the constraints of fighting under civilized rules of warfare a guerrilla insurgent force for whom there are no rules. One way rules. You've got to love it...if you're the guerrillas. Most likely illiterate but not dumb, they know that the Americans can pinpoint the village POO site, and they, the guerrillas, the Taliban, use that to their advantage. Whether A or B, it's a No Lose. A: The Americans don't fire back for fear of causing civilian casualties, leaving the Taliban free to use the place as a launch site or more; and B: The Americans do fire back, killing civilians in the process and thus giving the Taliban a nice little international PR coup. This, now, remember, all from guys, every time I've seen them either captured or dead, who are wearing those 7th century seven day shit suits. It says something for modern warfare, I guess.

In truth, no matter how deliciously clever, that shit suit name didn't really stick with the soldiers, whether it was because it was simply too long to say or simply too inappropriate to



Headmaster, Kabul school.

use among the politically correct Army officer class. Besides, that "shit" part is a little misleading because Afghans don't do their business, whether No. 2 or No. 1, very often. They're not like Americans, guzzling liquids by the 32-ounce Big Gulps and eating three or four times a day like every meal and snack is the last day before Lent, we're maxing out our sewage treatment plants. Afghans rarely drink much water. It's chai, and, since the caffeine in chai is a diuretic, one would think that that would make them have to urinate often, but overall they don't drink enough water for their bodies to get rid of much of it. I cannot count the number of Army rural medical missions I've witnessed when



every last Afghan man came in complaining of daily headaches. Dehydration is always the diagnosis, especially in this hot, dry climate. Drink water. Not chai, water. If you could pour it down their deaf ears it might help. *Chai good, water naaah*. The shepherds crossing the deserts with their herds, I never see them carrying water. The ANA soldiers going out on patrols, mounted or on foot, they don't carry water unless they grab up the bottled stuff from their American partners' supplies. As for food, the Afghan diet is meager—flat bread, rice, beans, some vegetables, and a little meat perhaps once a week. As nature goes, the less one eats the less one shits, and the Afghans eat little and shit less. And, as an American medic at one of those rural missions once pointed out, "The worms are getting half of what they eat." Intestinal worms, small, medium and tape.

"Shit" suit wasn't really fair and it wasn't even missed as it faded off, as the name that stuck among the GIs for the male baggy garb is "man jammies." As in pajamas. For men. It really is the perfect description. Man jammies. Kind of cute too, and nothing



pejorative about it, as "jammies" reminds one of the sweeter time of childhood. There is also nothing pejorative about another term the soldiers freely use, calling most things native "hajj" or "haji," as in, "Yeah, it was hajj food they had," "The workers on the fob are all haji," or "I bought the pirated *Indiana Jones* DVD at the haji bazaar." It's not an

insult, it's not disrespectful, it's an immediate, simple descriptive communication. Sure, technically, the hajj is the journey to Mecca that all Muslims are expected to make in life, and haji is what one is called who has made the trip, used as a respectful address, "mister." My best guess would be that 95% of all Afghans have never made the hajj and never will, but 99.999% of all Afghans are Muslims, so the term, seemingly ill suited, isn't.

Using "man jammies" and "haji," the dumb ol' non-college attending GI *"stuck in Iraq"* in Afghanistan knows these people better than Condi Rice, her ambassadors and for certain the two presidential candidates. Even the college educated GIs here know better. Such as one, a young lieutenant, an extremely brilliant graduate from an elite liberal arts



American soldiers check locals at a night checkpoint in rural Ghazni province.

college, who told me a couple of days after, when he was no longer under the spell of the rush of the battle and had had time to reflect upon it, that during the terrifying ambush his platoon was in (to which I arrived minutes later) in

which one of his men was killed, while the RPGs and AK rounds were raining down striking their Humvees, his thought was, he remembered so clearly, "This is not worth dying for." This, Afghanistan, the Afghans. As nine out of ten GIs would say, in their succinct immediate strike at reality with a phrase as common as "duh"—"No shit, Sherlock."

That lieutenant, he's still here. He's still leading his men. Going out on those patrols. Expecting more deadly RPGs. And, like just about every other GI whom I know here now, with the exception of some platitude-vomiting senior officers, he won't tell you

he's here for Afghanistan or the Afghans; he's here because it's his volunteer job, his volunteer duty, and he's here for the guy next to him. And, unlike Condi, the diplomats, the politicians and all our pompous media editors, he should not have to, or be forced to, ask himself just who the hell the man in the attic is; he already knows. Which might very well explain why he's not here for him.



CH-47 Chinook doorgunner, in flight.

If there is one immediate visual image to draw from the Afghan culture it might be that of Afghan men in their man jammies sitting around on their haunches drinking chai from clear glass coffee cups. Anywhere and everywhere. It's done in the extended-family

compound, to be sure, in the furniture-less living room/dining room where the men take their meals and hang out drinking their chai. It's done even more outside the compound, in bazaar shops, outside the shops, along the streets, in the fields, the entry gates of their military forts. It is never just one shopkeeper or one shepherd or one farmer or one soldier having his chai alone, maybe reading a newspaper; there are always three or a half-dozen men around, doing nothing, with him. Along the streets, cities or villages, there are always just men, young men and boys hanging out doing nothing, with someone behind them somewhere in a dark doorway heating up a kettle of chai. Men, young men and boys, and little boys too. Babies. Everywhere. More and more of them with each year. A swelling population, even taking into account the one in four, or one in five (depending on which NGO's stats you want to believe), who die before they make it to five. Twenty to twenty-five percent don't make it to five. That is a stunning fact of life and death that would not be tolerated in the West. In particular, considering that most of the deaths are those of infants in their first few months from easily curable intestinal diseases such as dysentery....and all those small, medium and tape worms. Is it any



wonder that Afghan culture so easily embraces *inshallah* and its acceptance of fate, *God's will*, as the overriding determiner of one's destiny?

Still, regardless of the child death rate, it is men, young men, boys and little boys all over Afghanistan. In their man jammies. And the women, young women, girls and the little girls? The Afghan-born author of *The Kite Runner* knew enough not to



Beggar kid, Kabul.

include them, females, avoiding that sticky, thorny, downright electrocuting subject completely. The topic of females in Afghanistan is like Social Security is to American politicians—it's the third rail. The topic, that is the third rail, while the females themselves, they're the other two rails—powerless without an electrical charge, hammered out, laid and permanently spiked down, and continuously run over on.



## Women, We Don't Need No Stinkin' Women

*"I'll take 'Man Jammies' for four hundred dollars," says the brave contestant in Double Jeopardy. "A billowing, all encompassing outfit," reads Alex, "that covers an Afghan woman from head to heel." Ding! ring in all three contestants at once, shouting uncontrollably, "What is a burqa!"*

Oh yes, everyone in America knows about the burqa, who couldn't? It's that other-worldly, mysterious, haunting, blue, sheet-like, sail-like cloak that makes Afghan women appear to be ghosts or mummies gliding down the street. So other-worldly, in fact, that GIs don't have a name or nickname for it. No "woman jammies." It's just "burqa." Though one guy once threw out the brilliantly inspired "cloak a dope." But on the whole the burqa is hardly mentioned by GIs. Never, really. Just perhaps occasionally, in an indirect reference, as in the great little joke that I know has never been on *Leno* or *Letterman* or is known anywhere outside GI circles here and goes something like this:

*Seasoned GI: "Hey, guess what, we saw some T and A on patrol out in the villages today."*

*New Guy GI: "Yeah, really? Afghani women, you saw tits and ass?"*

*Seasoned GI: "Toes and ankles."*

Har-dee-har-har, it actually is funny, in spite of the fact that it shouldn't be. It gets a chuckle or two, in spite of the fact that, for all that it implies, it should get our wrath. Whether it's the burqa or, as is more common in the rural areas, simply multiple layers of long, billowing skirts and blouses, topped with a headscarf open only where there's a slit behind which eyes are invisible in the shadows, a woman does not exist in the Afghan environment outside the tiny confines of her family compound other than as a moving shape, an





always-in-motion form under a burqa or those thick clothes. She is always moving, she is not stopped, she is not interfered with, she is not recognized or acknowledged. She does not exist. There are a few exceptions—the rare school teacher, the nurse, the Tolo TV news announcer, the female *Afghan Idol* contestant—and I am willing to grant a more



openness among the Uzbeks and Hazaras, but in this Pashtun-dominated culture women are to be neither seen nor heard.

And it gets worse.  
Here's an adage I made up:  
*Afghan women are nothing more than the bearers.* They

bear the children, they bear the water from the wells or streams, they bear the firewood, they bear the crops from the fields and they bear the burden of raising their children. Hidden, away, non-existent. During my Green Beret days in the country, a teammate of mine said it even better, stating so simply a profound truth that, were this in a war of truths, his thrust would be the fatal blow struck to the heart—"I'd rather be a dog in America than a woman in Afghanistan."

Further, in America dogs are allowed to walk beside or in front of a man, not made to walk behind, unnoticed, unacknowledged. In America dogs are recognized in public. In America dogs are



Searching suspected insurgent compound in rural Paktika province.



allowed to bark, to anyone and everyone, at home or in public. In America it is a crime to beat a dog.

Our leaders are neither stupid nor misinformed, so they have to know of this regressive, unjust, pre-medieval cultural repression of women here in Afghanistan. They must know and they do, but they pretend not to or pretend it has no significance, and would even chuckle at that T and A joke above. They will not recognize it as an issue because we the American people, upon learning how deeply ingrained and serious this apartheid repression is—



yes, I said apartheid—would say, *Hold on, wait a second, you're telling me we're spending our blood and money on a country that treats its females, its entire gender of females, worse than dogs and has no intention of doing otherwise and you now want us to spend more indefinitely, is that what you're telling me?*

No, until now, except for an aside remark among soldiers long ago, no one's been telling anyone about "*worse than dogs.*" Instead, the issue is clouded and shrouded, as we Americans are given worthless statistics touting "*this many millions of girls are now going to school in Afghanistan.*" Whoopee, they are? Until what age—nine, ten? For how many hours a day—one, two? In totally segregated classrooms. No question mark, let me be perfectly clear: totally



Afghan construction worker establishing a new Army base.

segregated, boys and girls even at first grade level are not mixed. Can we begin to comprehend this? Even girls, little girls, they haven't even reached puberty yet (when they do, to steal from the soup Nazi, *"No school for you!"*), and thus are not even the sexually attractive flirts that might justify keeping them separate from boys. Aw yes, separate...and not equal. Worse, America and NATO with their



provisional reconstruction teams are building many schools with either separate buildings for boys and girls or on two levels—one for each. Segregated. Well howdy-do, bless our little hearts, America- and NATO-sanctioned segregation. *"Lordy, Maude, who'd o' believed it!"* One would think that that would get the National Organization for Women, the Senate, the *Cosmo* and *Redbook* editorial staffs, the LPGA, Oprah, Susan Sarandon and every equal-rights minded woman and man in America just hopping mad, steam coming out of their ears. Naw, not a word said. Except more sweet, distracting statistics, such as, *"Oh, there are women members of Parliament, you must know that."* Yeah, mandated by law, a certain number of seats set aside for women. It's not democracy; a woman receives one vote—her own, most likely—and she wins. Does she have any power in Parliament? Alex? Contestant? *"Answer:" says Alex, "Where is, A man can beat or kill his wife or wives and not be criminally charged."*

*"Oh, it's their culture,"* is the educated, diplomatic excuse thrown down harshly when the subject can't be avoided. *"And we can't change their culture,"* is spat so condescendingly. And another refrain, *"It's Islam, and we're not here to change Islam."* And the kicker, *"It's not for us to judge one culture from another."* It isn't, it's not for us to judge?! This from the same moralistic diplomatic mindset that demanded through international economic sanctions that another independent country, South Africa, put an

end to its culture of apartheid? *"It's in their religion, and they are The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, if you didn't know."* Yeah, and South Africa shoulda just changed its name to The Apartheidic Republic of South Africa, would that have done the trick?. *"You're being ridiculous, you can't compare the two!"* This from the same high-minded intellectuals who pontificate on the immorality of America's Jeffersonian culture of slavery? This from those who are so quick to self-loathing and condemnation for their own ancestors' westward-ho culture that believed it fun to slaughter the mighty herds of buffalo and it manifest destiny to wipe out the Native Americans? Even more simple and

basic: This from those who are so dead-man-walking outraged by the sinister baseness of a culture, ours, that deems fit to kill those who have been convicted of



murder? Can't compare cultures? Not for us to judge a culture? We're judging all the time. Would these same non-judgmentalists deem morally equal to our own Western cultures those African tribal cultures which practice female genital mutilation? Of course they would not, and they'd condemn me for making the moral equivalence between that and a simple burqa. A simple burqa?! Holy cow, we in America don't even require our dogs to wear burqas! *"The Afghan female chooses to wear the burqa. It's their culture, and the women choose it."* Yeah, and those tribal hottie African babes choose that mutilation as well. Gee, it's the culture. And, okay, you want me to buy it, I will—if we can't judge and condemn cultures and all cultures are created equal, then all sub-cultures must be too. Can't condemn a culture, can't force a culture to change, you sure can't then start condemning a certain sub-culture you don't agree with, which would mean we'll just



have to keep the FBI from kicking in the doors of the high-walled compound of some 53-year-old reverend of some whacked-out, Looney Tune religious sect down in Texas or Utah who has forty-two wives, down to as young as eleven or twelve. It's their culture. Our laws be damned, change the laws, for culture is paramount and all cultures are equal!

In Afghanistan, did I mention, a man can have as many wives as he can afford to buy and keep, and he can get them as young as...as young as...name your age. Pick up one at a bargain price at six, wait a couple of years, then take her under your covers. And with America pouring billions of dollars a year into the Afghan economy, with so many of those construction contracts going to the locals, who are quickly getting rich, one can be confident that it is our American dollars that are buying more than a few bedsful of those pre-pubescent, cute-little-let's-not-judge-the-culture brides. Gee, I wonder if they actually get to throw the bouquet to....let's see....their six-year-old sisters?



Seething mad?  
You're not? Come over

here and watch the blue forms going by. The burqas. Blurred burqas, they're not people, they're not women. Just burqas. Wake up, Oprah! Wake up, Susan! Wake up and start your shouting, 'cuz, by the way, that there's your billions of dollars here buyin' them there flow'ry bouquets they're tossin'.

Did I tell you about the one about the farmer's daughter? It's a hoot. A laugh riot. I was with some GIs, on patrol in the middle of nowhere, along Taliban movement routes. We set up near a small village, and a young farmer came out, with his two-year-old daughter in his arms, asking for help. The girl's hand and wrist were badly burned; the story was mumbled and unclear, but it was, as is so often the case, most likely from a fall into the cooking fire. No matter who's watching or not watching the child, accidents

happen. The medic checked her out and determined that without extensive immediate



Men and boys leave the females behind as they crowd to be seen by American Army medical personnel during a village MedCap.

care the little girl was probably going to die, if only from infection. The captain requested from higher and was granted a medevac flight, which is no small thing, considering it means scrambling two helicopters—one medevac, the second as security wingman. With

the helicopters arriving, the father was told that he would have to accompany his daughter, as it is U.S. policy that all female medevac patients be accompanied by a male family member. A primary reason is to prevent misrepresentations of molestation and rape that will be so readily rumored and accepted as fact of the Americans' actions back at the bases. The

father refused to go.

Whether it was because of his fear of flying in a helicopter, his trepidation about going to an American base or he just had lots of farming to do, he refused. Even told that his daughter could not



American GI on patrol.

go and be treated without accompaniment, he refused, it did not matter. He would take her back to his compound. She could die. The American captain became incensed. A young man himself, with a wife and three young daughters at home in the States twelve



thousand miles away, the captain argued to the farmer that he would do anything, anything, anything—even giving up his own life—if it meant saving the life of one of his daughters. The captain's passionate words fell on deaf ears—the father was not getting on that helicopter. Quick words from the terp, and a bent-over old man stepped forward. He was the father's uncle, and he would accompany the little girl. He did, and the helicopter took off with them. And the farmer, the old man's nephew....he walked back to his compound.

And the GIs and I, we laughed about that all evening and into the night. Laughed until tears ran from our eyes. Laughed and laughed and....and to believe that, you'd have to automatically want to believe the worst about American soldiers. No one laughed. No one, not once. And everyone understood that had that little girl been that farmer's son, that father would have been running to the helicopter with him. Running and hopping aboard.

It's not just the Afghan women who exist simply as the bearers, it's the girls and little girls too, except that they hold the promise of a nice little dowry upon their arranged marriage. Cash



cows. Well, but they're not fat like cows, especially the ones under ten. And it's only a one-time payout. By puberty, females are required to cover their faces in public, burqa or head scarves, one or the other. Girls younger than that aren't, but they do wear the headscarves and in any contact with an adult male, in particular a Westerner, they will automatically, by learned habit from seeing mothers and aunts and older sisters and cousins do it forever, pull the scarf over their mouth or lift a hand or hands to cover their



mouth. Learned, automatic subservience. Witnessed only on those occasions when a male stranger is allowed somehow to get close, for photographs perhaps.

Remember Afghan TV, with the men and boys, even today still in the villages, lined up squatted or sitting, doing nothing, just watching the visiting American soldiers?

Men and boys, not women and girls. If there are some girls among the watchers, they are generally no older than four, and they're at their father's or brother's side.



Wouldn't one

think that the village women and girls would be just as curious as are the men and boys about these strange visitors on live TV right in front of them? Of course they are, it's human nature. And one can see them peeking out from the cracks of barely opened steel doors, or some of the girls will come outside, remaining close to their compounds, backs against the mud walls.

They will inch forward, slyly, shyly. They want to see more, they want to hear. Closer still they'll creep, slowly, moving along the edges of our vision.

And I'll be out of the Humvees, and if



One of four American soldiers killed when their Humvee hit a roadside bomb. He was thrown 50 feet from the vehicle.

it's a new bunch of guys I'm with, I'll say to the ones outside with me or to the gunner up in the turret, "Hey, I ever tell you I'm also a magician?" Quizzical looks from the guys, *huh, what's he mean?* "Yeah," I'll say, "a magician." And I'll step toward the small cluster of girls, and even from the distance one can see their eyes widen, and I'll pull up my cameras away from my chest, and I'll take a few rapid strides as if I'm going to run to them, and they scatter like frightened baby ducks, out of sight around corners or back behind the steel doors. I'll turn back to the guys and, "I can make girls disappear," I'll tell them, and it's always good for a little laugh.

It's all right to do that with little girls, but not with women. Women passing, even in the distance, bearing their water or firewood, doing their work while the men and boys sit and watch Afghan TV—am I to raise my cameras in their direction, the men and boys will jump up alarmed, and the closest ANA soldier among our patrol will immediately put his hand in front of my lens and shove my camera away. They are going to protect their women, they are, by God, they are! Sociologists, anthropologists, proctologists, all kinds of –ologists a lot more educated than me will tell you it's the honor, the sanctity, the holiness of the

women these  
*"more natural,  
 back-to-the-earth"*  
 cultures are  
 protecting.  
 Hogwash. Un-  
 ologist me will be  
 just as absurd and  
 say it's nothing  
 but tiny-weenie  
 insecurity



syndrome. I'll as pompously postulate that the men cover up, hide, restrict, repress their women because they're scared someone will lure them away from them with the pleasures of real sexual satisfaction because, God knows, in a culture in which the female is powerless and can be freely used and abused as a simple receptacle for a man's selfish,



quick orgasmic lust, I'm sure as hell not hearing any of Sally's screams "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" shaking the walls of the gals' bedrooms. Let's put that theorem in the college textbooks, why don't we? Then again, what could I hear, what do I know; I've never been close to one of those bedrooms. For every Afghan friend, terp, politician or soldier's homes or compounds I've been a guest in, I can count the number of wives, daughters, sisters or female cousins whom I've met on....one hand. Counting three as an "enlightened" member of Parliament and her two young daughters, and the fourth was a two-month old infant. The last was a terp's mother who, after we had eaten so many meals that she had cooked at their house, an American buddy of mine insisted—no, cajoled and begged—our terp friend that we be able to meet his mother to finally thank her. The terp disappeared back into the dark bowels of the compound then returned with his mother. She was sweet and gracious for the minute we spent with her, thanking her....and she mostly held the headscarf half hiding her mouth.

Old habits die hard. Subservience is difficult to grow out of. Power is tough to give up, nearly impossible voluntarily.

America is here in Afghanistan trying to rebuild a country from nothing, and the American people back home do see the burqas and know what they mean, partially, and we know they are



wrong, but we are told that *We cannot challenge or change a culture, but we will, slowly, over time, as the people become educated, and then they will become more like us and the burqas will go, but it might take a generation.* Two generations is more like it, or three, or never, but even one generation from now is about the time that our own Social



Security goes bankrupt, but that's the third rail of politics, and we're right back where we started, which means *Shut up and forget about it*.

Apartheid.

Not black. But female.

But apartheid still.

There, forgotten about? Want to argue that it's not apartheid? Fantastic, we should welcome that, at least there will be no shutting up, the issue will be out. Want to argue that it will just take education over the course of a generation's time to fade that apartheid culture out? Go ahead, the floor is yours, make your case, at least an analysis and a judgment will be finally heard.



"You don't get it," a smart soldier told me just the other day while discussing this very topic. "All they want," he said, meaning the Afghan men, "they don't want their daughters to be Britney Spears



Memorial at rural outpost for four American soldiers killed.

and Lindsay Lohan." Not that he meant that the Afghans know who Britney and Lindsay are or know their names; it is what they represent that he was referring to, and he's right. The reach of the 21st century media is worldwide, even into the remote Afghan villages, if only through scraps of told stories and rumors, and what the Afghan man fears is his culture being corrupted by the culture that produces the Britneys and Lindsays. He fears the open, freedom-of-choice culture that accepts the Britneys and Lindsays as a small price to pay for that freedom of choice and achievement and the wealth that comes with it, such as the moon shots, the MRIs, the cis-platinums, the HVACs, the Golden Gate Bridges, the Silicon Valleys, the Chevy hybrids, the Facebooks, the iPhones, the Oprahs, the Susan Sarandans, the Mia Hamms, the Sandra Day O'Connors, the Condi Rices, the Hillarys, the Rosie the Riveters. Oh, he wants the iPhones, the MRIs, the HVACs, the hybrids, the wells, the roads and anything tangible we give him, as long as it is not mandated that he work for it. But he does not want—he fears as much as he does the Britneys and Lindsays—the Oprahs, the Rices, the Hillarys, the Rosie the Riveters.

### No Strings Attached

If we are to accept temporarily today the Afghan culture and its abhorrent repression of women and inform our friends the Afghans that with all these gifts we give them—starting with our sons' blood—their culture will eventually change for the better to be open and free like our own, the Afghans will smile without comment and hold out their hands and take more blood and all the wells, roads, schools, bags of wheat, hospitals, small battle victories, hydroelectric dams, Coca-Cola factories and those damn pens that



we give them without strings attached, and they won't do a thing. Not a thing, they won't

change a thing. The culture won't change.

If we attach strings, the Afghans will just stay smiling, with their hands still held out, and they'll nod *"yes yes yes, strings, no problem,"* and they'll continue taking all we give and continue just doing what they damn well please, which, first off, with their fierce independence will be to ignore the strings completely. If we mandate, absolutely lay down the law and demand, that they act upon the strings, in particular, that one which stipulates that we as Americans cannot and will not allow the burqa and the apartheid that goes with it, the Afghans will smile politely still, hold their tongues, keep taking what we're still patronizingly stupid enough to be giving, and they will in private start to watch



more seriously and pass around more widely the videos and DVDs the Taliban will distribute that show Britney and Lindsay and *Girls Gone Wild* and *Desperate Housewives*, and they'll listen more intently now to the Talib stories of American soldiers with their Oakley X-ray sunglasses that can see through their women's clothes

and of the American soldiers who come into the villages, *"A village just like yours,"* to rape their wives and deflower their virgin daughters, and the Afghans will do what they have proved so successful at doing in the past, and it won't matter how long it will take them and won't matter how many die in the process, but they will chase out the Americans and their NATO partners. Hardheaded independent tribal seventh century men and young men and teenage boys, wearing thin cotton man jammies and only a wool wrap even in the frozen winters, piss-poor undisciplined soldiers with mediocre aim and worse tactics, with nothing but a jihadist spirit and all the time in the world, drinking chai all day with their buddies, always with their buddies yet always farting in absolute solitude, they will have the Americans following right on the heels of our NATO cohorts, choosing to leave all our blood and treasure behind, throwing up our arms and saying, *"What the f---, this place and these people ain't worth the trouble."*



It's not Afghan TV, but it's a television set on nonetheless, tuned to either American Forces Network or a satellite channel, here in the dining facility at this comfortable U.S. forward operating base, and it's playing *Jeopardy*. It's back from a commercial now, and real or imaginary, *"Final Jeopardy category is," says Alex, "Crazy Uncles in the Attic. Answer: Seventh century repressive apartheid country where America is spending three billion dollars and about ten soldiers' lives a month with no honestly declared purpose, no clearly reasoned strategy, no moral conditions of sacrifice, and no end defined or even remotely imagined. Contestants, you have thirty seconds to write your answer in the form of a question."* Da da da da, da da da, da da da da dit di dididit...

