

The Alienated Frontier: Why the United States Can't Get Osama bin Laden

by Vanni Cappelli

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Since the Russian-supplied Afghan army overthrew progressive President Daud in 1978, the nation has endured the long Soviet-Afghan war, the Taliban, and the arrival of U.S. troops. These military actions have only heightened the historical alienation of the Pashtun tribes who overspread the long-contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. These are the people who are almost certainly sheltering Osama bin Laden. The Alienated Frontier is a centuries-old problem that must be solved if we are to win the war on terror, and solving it will require rebuilding the infrastructure, developing alternatives to poppy cultivation, and solving the "Pashtunistan" question. The capture or elimination of given individuals will achieve little if the conditions that allow radicals to thrive are not addressed.

On December 7, 2004, as the Pashtun tribal leader Hamid Karzai was being sworn in as the first popularly elected president of Afghanistan at the Arg Palace in Kabul before an assemblage that included Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a swarm of weed-green NATO helicopters hovered far above the limbless beggars and leishmaniasis-scarred street children who congregate daily in war-battered Pashtunistan Square, in front of the presidential palace.

The choppers were but the latest performers in a quarter-century airshow over the square. First there were the Afghan army officers' Russian-supplied jets in 1978, overthrowing and assassinating the progressive president, Mohammad Daud Khan. These were followed by the Soviet helicopters that strove for over a decade to extend Russian control outside of Afghanistan's cities. After them came the American jets, which, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, drove the Taliban back into the frontier mountains from which they had come.

All of these foreign warplanes have tried to determine the destiny of Afghanistan solely by force. All of them have failed, and in their method lies the

key not only to the great current failure of the United States to get Osama bin Laden, but also to the historical alienation of the people who are almost certainly sheltering him, the Pashtun tribes who overspread the long-contested border of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Four years after the tragic events that opened our present crisis, and despite mounting attacks such as the July 7 bombings in London, apart from periodic exclamations of “Why can’t we get him?” emanating from politicians, the media, and citizens, Americans show a marked disinterest in grappling with the complexities of the issue. Afghanistan has fallen off the national radar screen amid the preoccupation with the war in Iraq. At the heart of this disengagement lies a lack of interest in the Pashtuns. What forces in their history have led some of them to give sanctuary to the most wanted outlaw in the world, and caused many of them to look up to him as a hero? The Alienated Frontier is a centuries-old problem that we have done little to ameliorate, but which we must solve if we are to win the war on terror.

“The Problem of the Tribes”

The traditional Pashtun homeland, which stretches from the Indus River in Pakistan to the Hindu Kush mountains in central Afghanistan, has long been fabled as one of the most wildly romantic regions on earth, a place whose stark topographic discords are echoed in the culture of its inhabitants. Within its territory one encounters rare natural beauty alternating with arid desolation, lavish hospitality concurrent with savage blood feuds, and secular moderation set against religious fanaticism. The remoteness, vastness, and breathtaking variety of the Pashtun frontier are often cited as obstacles to the great manhunt that is underway there.

Yet the difficulty of the land is nothing compared to the towering massif of alienation that frustrates the quest for bin Laden. “The problem with the Americans is that they don’t even try to get to know the people they are dealing with,” says one Afghan-American businessman who returned to his native land after a long exile in the hopeful spring of 2002. “They don’t have a clear picture of the framework they are operating in. And tribes, cultural traits, and disputed borders are the least of it. The Americans don’t have an insight into people’s minds. They don’t understand the nature of the grievances they are confronted with—or why they have become the latest target of these grievances.”¹

¹ Author interview, September 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.



The Pashtun region overlying the Afghan-Pakistan border.
Source: www.afghanistans.com

The complex alienation that is at issue here began with the formal sundering of the Pashtun tribes by conquest in the early nineteenth century, which created the “Problem of the Tribes,” as the British soldier and diplomat W. K. Fraser-Tytler memorably called it.² “There is a fate about this restless frontier which has been too strong for mankind ever since the days when the Greek rulers of Bactria died fighting in face of the invading nomads till now, when we have handed over the problem still unsolved.”

The ethnic Pashtun lands formed the core of the Afghan state founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, the country’s first king, and comprise what can be most naturally called Afghanistan (“Afghan” is a poetic variant of Pashtun). Famed for their warrior spirit, love of freedom, and strict adherence to their tribal code of Pashtunwali—a way of life that balances revenge and hospitality and stresses honor and the granting of sanctuary—the 20 million Pashtuns who find themselves split roughly in half by the present international border are one people in blood, language, and spirit. Yet a series of imperial conquests and successions have divided, brutalized, and stunted the development of this people, creating resentments that are at the heart of an

² Sir William Kerr Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan: A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia* (Oxford, 1950).

unresolved problem that was allowed to fester for many decades until it became a major threat to global security.

Taking advantage of instability within the Afghan state in the 1820s, the Punjabi Sikh potentate Ranjit Singh conquered the southeastern half of the Pashtun lands, which were incorporated into British India (known as “the Raj”) after the British conquered the Sikh state in the 1840s. Thus the most fertile, productive, and spirited parts of Afghanistan fell under foreign rule. Far from being merely a curious fact of long-forgotten imperial history, this conquest, its formalization by the Anglo-Afghan Durand Treaty of 1893, and the passing on of these territories to Pakistan upon the partition and independence of India in 1947 remain a toxic contemporary force, having set the parameters within which the war on terror in south-central Asia is now being waged. Never accepted and violently resented by the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line to this day, the conquest has been a continuing source of alienation and violence on the frontier over the last two centuries. But more importantly, it has been a prime factor in the poverty and lack of development that feed the extremism and bloodshed.

Countering assertions that the Pashtuns are incorrigibly backward and violent by nature, rather than kept in such a state by outside intervention, Fraser-Tytler gave some indication of the promise they held, had they been left to their own devices or subjected to enlightened rule:

Here was a country and a people wild, savage, and untamed, but a country and a people of great potentialities, the people virile, intelligent, and ready to learn, the country practically undeveloped but teeming with possibilities for the farmer, the mining expert, and the engineer. . . . Here was a chance for some wise economic and cultural planning, to raise the standard of life by the development of the country’s material resources, while at the same time raising the standard of thought by a careful scheme of educational development.³

That the British Raj made some progress along these lines in its century of rule on the frontier cannot be denied. But their policies towards the Pashtuns subordinated long-term considerations to narrow, perceived short-term strategic interests, an attitude that would have catastrophic consequences in these remote mountains and that would eventually culminate in global conflict.

Although some of the leading nineteenth-century British frontier experts—among them Charles Masson, Alexander Burnes, John Lawrence, and James Outram—advocated restoring the trans-Indus territories to Kabul in order to create a strong and allied Afghanistan and cement Central Asian security, their counsels were rejected. The results of this imperial myopia during the British-Russian Great Game rivalry in the region were three Anglo-Afghan wars and decades of brutal frontier skirmishing that bred distrust of all foreigners among a people previously fabled for their tolerance.

³Ibid., p. 201.

Realizing that differences in temperament and topography required different administrative approaches in different areas, the British in 1901 reorganized their portion of the Pashtun lands into the directly controlled Northwest Frontier Province and the more loosely administered Tribal Lands, an arrangement retained by Pakistan to this day. Though the rulers of the Raj were generally successful in keeping the peace and initiating development in the more settled districts closer to the Indus of the former area, the story of their relations with “the free tribes” along the Afghan frontier is a long and sorry tale of tribal revolts ineptly provoked and poorly handled.

Fraser-Tytler, who spent some forty years serving Britain on both sides of the Durand Line, pointed out that this failure was largely due to a British inability to answer the question, was the frontier problem primarily a civil or a military responsibility? This is the burning question facing the Americans and their tenuous Pakistani allies today. Fraser-Tytler argued that in failing to recognize that “it was in fact hardly a military problem at all,” the British again and again engaged in bloody and futile campaigns that only heightened the psychology of alienation on the frontier. He provided a roadmap for dealing with the intractable “Problem of the Tribes” without which the current adventurers into this trackless, quasi-mythic space will come to similar grief:

Had fate so willed it, I have no doubt that in the end the British would have solved the frontier problem. It would have taken a long time before the steady pressure of civilization, operating from both sides of the border, so altered the economic condition and the mental outlook of the frontier tribes that they discarded their weapons, their blood feuds, and their tribal customs for a more settled and peaceful way of life. But it could have been done, and it would have been done in the end by the British and the Afghans working each in their own fashion with the common aim of bringing peace and security to an area which has known neither peace nor security for maybe a thousand years.⁴

Yet as great as was the general failure of past empires to adopt the more enlightened policies that would have brought about this end, no act committed by the great powers who have played the Great Game in Central Asia has resounded with such destructive force in our own time as has their repeated suppression of homegrown progressive forces on the frontier.

The Frontier Gandhi and the Red Prince

Justifying Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: “Afghanistan has many problems owing to its extreme backwardness, which largely stems from the British rule. Therefore, it was quite natural that many Afghans wanted to help their people overcome medieval patterns, update state and public institutions, and speed up progress. But as soon as

⁴ Ibid., p. 270.

progressive changes were charted, imperialist quarters began to pressure Afghanistan from without.”⁵

This accurate summation of what went wrong on the frontier over the last eighty years suffers from one obvious defect: it was the Soviets themselves in the 1970s whose crushing of progressive Pashtun forces was the most disastrous. But though the violence of their methods was unparalleled, there was ample precedent for such an enterprise.

Two dynamic mid-twentieth-century figures working on different sides of the Durand Line, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Mohammad Daud Khan, attempted to syncretically fuse tradition and modernity among the Pashtuns. Both were intimately associated with the “Pashtunistan” issue of self-determination for the tribes living south and east of the border in Pakistan. The path from their failure to bin Laden and his allies’ success in promoting radical Islam to this people is brutal and direct. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a legendary figure known as “the Frontier Gandhi,” whose message of nonviolence, inter-religious brotherhood, and social reform inspired the Pashtuns of today’s Pakistan, was in every sense the anti-bin Laden. This disciple of the Mahatma and member of Nehru’s Congress Party waged a seventy-year struggle to win autonomy for the tribes and to empower the tenants and small landowners of the frontier’s impoverished rural society, only to be met by systematic persecution and eventual marginalization by a long succession of British and Pakistani governments. There can be no understanding of the religious extremism that pervades large areas of northern Pakistan today without coming to terms with this brutal suppression of a popular democratic movement of the opposite character by a major Western nation and its clients.

Taking up the developmental challenge spoken of by Fraser-Tytler, Ghaffar Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgar (“Servants of God”) movement tried from the 1920s on to encourage the Pashtuns to overcome their blood feuds and static traditionalism, attempting to persuade them that these phenomena were at the root of their poverty. Acting as champions of Pashtun identity, the movement was able to promote its vision of economic development, pacifism, women’s rights, and a liberal, modernist Islam by linking it to the idea of a resurgent Pashtun nation.

For a time they achieved great success. Progressive schools were opened on the frontier, Congress captured the provincial legislature, and Ghaffar Khan (Badshah Khan) became a folk hero, acclaimed as “King of Khans” for his Gandhian refusal to respond with violence to the torments to which he and his followers were subjected by the Raj. This all fell apart, however, in the 1947 partition struggle. As an advocate of a united India, Ghaffar Khan found little room to maneuver when the Muslim League and Ghaffar Khan’s rival Mohammad Ali Jinnah proclaimed Islam to be in danger as

⁵ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 177.

the Pashtuns were asked to choose between India and Pakistan. His movement was banned by the new Pakistani authorities, but Ghaffar Khan carried on his struggle in the new British-allied state by advocating an autonomous Pashtunistan within a federal Pakistan, but this endeavor met with severe repression. By the time of his death in 1988, he was a revered but powerless figure, his efforts to win autonomy for his people having been successfully stifled first by the British and then by the Pakistanis, who countered his Pashtun nationalism with Muslim nationalism.

Indian historian Parshotam Mehra summed up the legacy of these events when he wrote, “The end-result is there for all to see—an alienated frontier whose proud Pathans have added their mite to Pakistan’s myriad other problems.”⁶ The reverses of these years pale, however, before the tragedy into which the Pashtuns were plunged by totalitarian violence on the other side of the Durand Line in the 1970s and 1980s, which put an end to the other great attempt to bring harmony to the frontier.

The Soviet-Afghan War began with the destruction of the most progressive regime ever to rule Afghanistan, led by Mohammad Daud Khan. A member of the Afghan royal family known as “the Red Prince” for his lifelong advocacy of progressive solutions to the country’s problems, Daud’s two periods of rule (as prime minister from 1953 to 1963 and then as president of the republic he proclaimed after he overthrew the king in 1973) were times of unprecedented socioeconomic progress.⁷ An infrastructure of roads, dams, electric power, warehouses, and communications was laid down, and industry began to provide an alternative in what had been an agricultural economy. Education was vastly expanded, women’s rights promoted, and land reforms promulgated. Such a poor country could hardly carry out this transformation by itself, however, and it inevitably became a pawn in the Cold War superpower rivalry. The seeds of ruin were thus present even in the country’s build-up. Today’s crisis is the result of Daud’s inability to stave off the Soviet Union, combined with short-sighted U.S. policies.

Left-leaning, non-aligned, but well aware of the dangers posed by the presence of the Soviet Union on his northern border, Daud initially approached the United States for economic and military assistance in 1954. But the Americans were no more able than the British had been to see how vital a strong Afghanistan was to Central Asian security. Washington favored Pakistan, which it saw as the true bulwark against communism in the region, in Afghan-Pakistani issues such as the Pashtunistan question. It denied Daud’s requests for aid. Moscow was only too happy to fill the void, finally shaking Washington into an aid race in which the latter never caught up.

⁶ For more on the legacy of these years, see Parshotam Mehra, *The North-West Frontier Drama, 1945–47: A Reassessment* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 230.

⁷ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan—A History of Struggle and Survival* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 130.

The U.S. approach to Afghanistan at the time saw everything in terms of the perceived needs of the hour, paying no attention to either long-term considerations or questions of justice. George McGhee, a senior State Department official in the early 1960s, quite openly expressed this attitude when he wrote of the Pashtunistan question: "We attempted . . . to dissuade the Afghans from pressing this issue, since it could have led to war with Pakistan and created opportunities for Soviet intervention in both countries. Apart from these considerations the disposition of the Pathans has little strategic interest to us."⁸

Half a century later, Washington's frontier policy is essentially unchanged, and its parsimony and lack of sensitivity to Pashtun needs and grievances are denying it the necessary basis to counter bin Laden's influence effectively. Over the last quarter century the accusation that America has no regard for the Pashtuns other than to use them when it needs to gave many opportunities to America's enemies on the frontier, giving them a chance to prove to the tribes that their own concern ran deeper.

From One Extreme to Another

Daud was overthrown by Soviet-backed Afghan army officers in April 1978. This Saur Coup (named after the Afghan month in which it occurred) is little known outside of Central Asia, but it was a tragic turning point in modern history. As the prelude to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the next year, which turned the country into an incubator for radical Islamic fundamentalism, it was the catalyst that turned the tribal problem into a global menace. The shock of Soviet brutality was compounded by the manner in which America countered the invasion. Hopes that conditions could be maintained in which progressive influences could one day return to the Pashtun lands were dashed when the United States followed the Pakistani lead in supporting mainly the most radical mujahideen as a means of fighting communism, and then retreated from the new alienation which it had helped to create.

Fundamentalist Islamic groups had had scant success on the frontier before the Saur Coup. Afghanistan adheres to the Hanafi interpretation of Islamic law, the most liberal of the four schools of Muslim jurisprudence, and had long been known as a haven where persecuted followers of other religions, such as Bukharan and Persian Jews, could seek refuge. Conservative opposition to Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Daud had assumed the form of Pashtun or Muslim traditionalism; an attempted uprising by fundamentalists against the latter in the summer of 1975 attracted few followers.

Against this background, America's active preference for fundamentalist over traditionalist mujahideen resistance groups in the 1980s assumes a coloring of the darkest hue in an already vesperal landscape. Vikram Parekh,

⁸Ibid., p. 136.

an analyst for the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, states, “With activists of the fundamentalist parties dominating the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and the radical madrassas, the only institutions open to refugee children, education was filtered through a jihadi prism. The countryside in general on both sides of the Durand Line was radicalized by the wartime experience.”⁹

Traditionalist groups usually strive to maintain the status quo, in the Pashtun case with a nationalistic emphasis on the secular customs of their people. This can be a quixotic task among populations subjected to war and mass murder. Fundamentalists instead held forth a vision of a new millennium of religious purity and social justice, affirming that an earthly paradise would justify the enormous sacrifice and suffering that a jihad entails. The vulnerability of wartime psychology combined with the outside powers’ logic of perceived self-interest to create a new totalitarian menace that would come to haunt the world.

The tragic flaw in America’s support for the mujahideen was its uncritical reliance on Pakistan as its chief ally in the region, an approach to which it has reverted since 9/11. For Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, the fundamentalist military dictator ruling Pakistan at the time, the Soviet-Afghan conflict provided an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Fostering Islamic sentiment, even to the point of extremism, at the expense of Pashtun nationalism had long been the basis of Pakistani policy on the frontier. Now the crucible of war enabled Zia to deepen this policy in ways that furthered his own extremist ideology and grand plans for creating a fundamentalist confederacy in Central Asia at the expense of the Soviets. The ultimate aim was to achieve “strategic depth” as a bulwark against India, a Pakistani obsession since independence.

Fixed on the military concerns of the moment, the United States gave Zia a blank check for this dangerous policy. American material and financial assistance to the Afghan resistance was funneled through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a spy agency with strong Islamist leanings, for Islamabad to distribute as it pleased. It fed the more moderate mujahideen no more of this than it had to for appearances’ sake, giving the bulk of it to actors such as the fundamentalist Pashtun warlord Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, Zia’s preferred instrument for eventual postwar Pakistani dominance in Afghanistan.

It was in these years that bin Laden made his first appearance on the frontier. His participation and that of other “Arab Afghans” in the fighting against the Soviets not only gave them war-fighting experience and helped them build their networks, but also let them become part of a reciprocal interaction on a global scale by which the shift from nationalism to fundamentalism that Zia was fostering among the Pashtuns became a pan-Islamic

⁹ Author interview, September 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

phenomenon. As the French scholar Gilles Kepel has written, “The Afghan jihad has a cardinal importance in the evolution of the Islamist movement around the world. It supplants the Palestinian cause in the Arab imagination, and symbolizes the movement from nationalism to Islamism.”¹⁰

Inevitably this trend in the way the Muslim world sought answers to its problems of repressive native regimes and the hegemonic tendencies of the developed world circled back to reinforce extremism among the Pashtun. During the Soviet-Afghan War and its aftermath, the tribes came to see Westernizing leaders like Badshah Khan and Daud as having been unable to protect their own people from foreign subjugation. American, Pakistani, and Saudi aid policies closed the vicious circle by ensuring that no other vision was on offer on the frontier.

Having abandoned the region to its fate upon the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the United States should not have been surprised by the subsequent course of events. Though Zia was by now dead, his successors Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif pursued his policy of backing fundamentalist Pashtun forces in the interethnic Afghan civil war that erupted after the Najibullah regime fell in 1992. Washington stood by while Hekmatyar blasted Kabul into rubble with rockets provided by Islamabad. Little more attention was paid when Pakistan discarded the failed Hekmatyar to back the rising Taliban. Originating in the madrassas south of the Durand Line, the Taliban projected themselves into a space north of it that had been reduced to total despair by Daud’s fall and the desolation that had ensued. To a situation of civil war among Afghanistan’s largest ethnicities—the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and the Hazara—the Taliban restored order and a sense of *nang*, the honor around which Pashtun life revolves. That the Taliban’s ruthlessness was a perversion of both Pashtunwali and Islam was easily rationalized by a traumatized people.

Accepting the new theocracy’s offer of hospitality gave groups such as Al Qaeda opportunities to operate undisturbed in a forgotten part of the earth, and, more important, to deepen bonds already forged in war among a people whose multiple degrees of separation had been compounded by the sense of having been betrayed. Bitter former resistance fighters were easy converts for the jihadists, where the question of survival was of no small importance.¹¹

The Taliban phenomenon and its Al Qaeda corollary consummated the tragedy of the Alienated Frontier. Many Pashtuns had looked upon Taliban chief Mullah Omar as a visionary leader who restored his people’s primacy in Afghanistan, and his foreign ally bin Laden as someone who might occasion a similar revival of Islam’s standing in the world.

¹⁰ Gilles Kepel, quoted in Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 59.

¹¹ Karl E. Meyer, *The Dust of Empire: The Race for Mastery in the Asian Heartland* (2003), p. 135; Eliza Griswold, “In the Hiding Zone,” *New Yorker*, July 26, 2004.

A Vicious Circle Unbroken

September 11 should have been the watershed that broke the vicious circle of alienation on the frontier. Washington was confronted with the reality that this tragedy had resulted from Islamic radicals' being permitted to win over this impoverished people. Transforming the conditions that had permitted this now loomed before the United States as a prime national security imperative. It was widely acknowledged that this would entail far more than the apprehension of bin Laden and his confederates and the removal of the Taliban regime that had harbored them. Nonetheless, in time-honored fashion the Bush administration has chosen to address the frontier problem solely with force, failing to grasp the nature of the problem. The artificiality of the Durand Line has come back to haunt the Western powers who imposed it. By renegeing on its promise to rebuild Afghanistan and seconding the fight against the terrorists who have escaped south and eastward from its territory to a Pakistani ally of doubtful loyalty, the United States and its allies have only heightened alienation on the frontier.

"We will not abandon you again," British Prime Minister Tony Blair vowed to the Afghans upon the fall of the Taliban, followed by President Bush's talk of a Marshall Plan for the country. But these promises have gone unfulfilled. In traditional Pashtun culture, a promise made is a promise to be kept, a stricture with profound social and political consequences, and the economic condition of the frontier tribes has been allowed to remain desolate, with inevitable results on their outlook. The destruction of the infrastructure built under Daud and of Afghanistan's rural economy over a quarter century of war necessitated something no less significant than the Marshall Plan, and given the extreme political conditions in the country, it needed to be rapidly implemented. Key was reconstructing the fragile *karez* underground irrigation systems upon which agriculture has always depended in the arid south. These systems had been almost entirely destroyed by the Soviets and never rebuilt; a similar devastation of irrigation works by Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century turned once fertile areas into wastelands that never recovered.

UN and Afghan needs-assessments for the country as a whole were in the \$30-billion range, a reasonable investment considering what is at stake. So far, however, only \$1 billion of this aid has been implemented in the form of concrete programs. This is doubly tragic because just after the arrival of U.S.-led troops, the weary Pashtuns were ripe for friendly persuasion. The region's high poverty only feeds both criminal activities and religious extremism.¹² Frustration with this situation again became acute in winter 2004, as the severest cold that the country had known for twenty years killed thousands, many of them children.

¹² *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, International Crisis Group (2003).

“The Americans should be going to villages and asking ‘What do you need?’ and implementing those needs in a way that involves the villagers,” says Col. Akbar Sherzai, a former mujahideen under Abdul Haq who is involved in the rebuilding effort. “Just building schools doesn’t mean people are going to appreciate that. What good does it do to have a school without proper teachers and learning materials, or to have classes built for twenty holding seventy? Reconstruction must meet specific local needs, based on information obtained from the people of the area. Thus far that has not happened in the south.”¹³

“We have a saying in Afghanistan,” says Palwon Ya-Ya, a mujahideen commander who fought both the Soviets and the Taliban. “‘If you want to keep the mullahs from getting fat—having too much power—keep them talking, while you eat.’ There is no doubt that by keeping the people from eating, the United States is allowing the radical mullahs to get very fat.”¹⁴ The mullahs are not the only ones. By using the old warlords to unseat the Taliban and then failing to create the political, military, and economic structures that would have rendered warlording obsolete, the Americans have instead recreated the conditions that fostered the fundamentalist militia in the first place. Numerous reports by human rights organizations over the last few years have detailed a return to the old litany of abuses.

“We have to cut off assistance to the warlords,” says Col. Sherzai. “Working through warlords at this late date when everyone is crying ‘Stop!’ is only alienating people. ‘We were happier during the Taliban, we were safer,’ they say, then they think of looking to them for safety again. Only when you destroy the reason for helping the Taliban do you destroy the Taliban.”¹⁵

The same may be said for the exploding problem of opium poppy cultivation, which is pouring untold millions into warlord, Taliban, and Al Qaeda coffers via illicit transactions which bear little relation to the declared political loyalty of the traffickers.¹⁶ In the absence of serious rural reconstruction, many tribesmen have no choice but to raise these lucrative crops. The Defense Department recently proposed to deal with the issue by launching a massive \$257-million antinarcotics campaign, rather than offering farmers economic alternatives.

Most troubling are the increasing number of reports of the American military’s heavy-handedness in southern Afghanistan. Numerous accounts, emanating not only from human rights organizations but also from the Pentagon, have detailed abuses ranging from Abu Ghraib–style tortures and homicides to needless civilian combat deaths and the forced detention of whole villages.¹⁷ In the absence of any tangible benefits coming from the

¹³ Author interview, September 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

¹⁴ Author interview, August 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

¹⁵ Author interview, September 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

¹⁶ James D. Medler, “Afghan Heroin: Terrain, Tradition and Turmoil,” *Orbis*, Spring 2005.

¹⁷ Reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; Tim Golden et al., “In U.S. Report, Brutal Details Of 2 Afghan Inmates’ Deaths,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2005.

U.S. military presence, this behavior further distances the Pashtuns from their liberators-turned-occupiers, who in Pashtun eyes have become just another group of armed men whom they must fear.

The United States' discarding yet another opportunity to make Central Asia more secure by building a strong Afghan ally is all the more incomprehensible in that it has a capable partner for this in Hamid Karzai, a well-respected moderate Pashtun with strong traditionalist connections. His election victory in October 2004 created a genuine revival of optimism in the country, but it is doubtful this can endure absent financial and technical commitment to the nation's infrastructure from the United States.

For by summer 2005, the gap between the Bush administration's claims of progress in Afghanistan and the actual situation has become glaring. A pervasive sense of insecurity and pessimism flowing from a Taliban resurgence, escalating criminal violence, and the consequent halt in the reconstruction effort once again highlighted the inefficacy of a force-based approach to the frontier. Headline-making incidents such as rioting over allegations that the Quran had been abused by American soldiers at Guantanamo, the kidnapping of Italian relief worker Clementina Cantoni, and the downing by hostile fire of an American Chinook helicopter highlighted a climate that threatened not only the crucial parliamentary elections scheduled for September, but the Karzai government itself.

A level of fighting not seen since the fall of the Taliban raged throughout the spring and into the hottest months, claiming the lives of hundreds of insurgents, government soldiers, civilians, and fifty U.S. troops. Arabs and Pakistanis participated in the fighting, in which prominent pro-Karzai clerics were assassinated, and narcotrafficking increased by leaps and bounds. In March, Steve MacQueen, a capable and popular Scottish development expert who was working on rural reconstruction and developing alternatives to poppy cultivation, was assassinated on a downtown street. With all of the major extremist leaders of the region—bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and Hekmatyar—remaining free, the United States' failure to ameliorate the conditions upon which they thrive leaves Afghanistan as potentially dangerous to American security as it was before 9/11.

The Other Side of the Mountains

This disorder is what the outlaws who fled into the Tribal Lands of Pakistan after the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 see when they look back across the mountains at their former refuge. The picture is certain to make them feel more secure in their new home, which a senior Pakistani official has called "the hub of Al Qaeda operations in the whole world."¹⁸ Since this part of

¹⁸James Risen and David Rohde, "Stalled Pursuit: A Manhunt with an Escort; a Hostile Land Foils the Quest for bin Laden," *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2004.

the frontier is today within Pakistan, which has refused Coalition and Afghan troops the right of entry, U.S. military forces cannot legally pursue the hunt for bin Laden and his confederates there. Yet seconding the hunt to the Pakistanis has proved equally futile, for this tenuous ally is both unwilling and unable to deal with the problem of terrorists sheltering in the Tribal Lands.

Pakistan is unlikely to change its long-time policy toward the Pashtuns on account of what it views as a transient American presence in the region. It has had to accommodate the superpower since 9/11, but its establishment remains split between loyalists of President Pervez Musharraf and Islamists, who remain particularly strong in the ISI. Though only the latter maintains a covert agenda of assisting foreign extremists, the policy remains of encouraging Pashtun fundamentalism, with a view to scotching autonomist impulses among its own Pathans. "Pakistan created the Taliban, and it supports them still," affirms Commander Ya-Ya. "They want to keep this conflict alive, for strategic and even economic reasons."¹⁹ President Musharraf himself has a direct personal interest in combating the most intransigent fundamentalists: they have twice tried to assassinate him. But his efforts to confront them are hampered by Islamist elements in his own security establishment, by Islamabad's desire to use fundamentalists for their own strategic goals and by genuine fear of stirring up the tribes.

The Tribal Lands are far from a sea of Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters. Nationalist groups such as the Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party are openly antifundamentalist, and there has always been a strong anti-foreign sentiment among the tribes. The brutal Pakistani Army campaigns undertaken in the name of tracking down bin Laden, which commenced in spring 2004, have changed things considerably, however, stirring the old Pashtun passion for revenge.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed in these Army sweeps, in which the homes of tribesmen accused of sheltering terrorists have been destroyed. This only increases sympathy for fundamentalist militants. An air-raid in September 2004 near the village of Dela in South Waziristan is particularly noteworthy. In it, eighty members of the Mahsud tribe were killed. A British aerial bombardment of these same Mahsuds in September 1946 had, when wrongly attributed to Nehru's transitional Congress ministry, led to riots, a rise in religious extremism, and a fatal undercutting of Abdul Ghaffar Khan's position on the eve of the partition crisis. To the tribesmen, no matter who ordered the bombing this time, the United States is ultimately culpable.

In this context, the Bush administration's announcement in March 2005 that it will sell two dozen F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan, purportedly to help it fight terrorism, only fans tribal brush fires. The Pashtuns dealt successfully with many times that number of Russian planes during the

¹⁹ Author interview, August 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Soviet-Afghan War, and by now the idea of aerial bombardment has assumed mythic proportions to the Pashtuns. Only engagement on the ground can combat the terrorist threat in the Tribal Lands, and here too America is going about it in the wrong way.



Photo of the Afghan-Pakistan border taken at Torikdam, Afghanistan, in Sept. 2001 (AP).

Pakistan has vehemently denied reports that CIA and FBI agents are present in the area, operating in small groups out of stationary bases under the close watch of the ISI. If this is true, they, more than bin Laden, are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place in which the Bush administration frequently pronounces bin Laden to be situated. In a hostile land and wholly ignorant of its physical and mental topography, these operatives have hired scouts whose decades-long record in the region trumpets the reality that they have higher priorities on their agenda than bringing this particular hunt to a successful conclusion.

It is in this atmosphere that America launched a massive advertising campaign in Pakistan this year for the reward money that it is offering for bin Laden, which provides little other than public relations information. “What we’re looking for is some young Pashtun living in a town who knows the value of \$25 million and can figure out how to reach us safely,” Congressman Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) has stated.²⁰ This statement shows little understanding of what the Pashtuns value. Col. Sherzai asks, “Why should the people in the area where he is hiding help us find him?”

²⁰Tim McGirk, “A New Osama Push,” *Time* magazine, Jan. 23, 2005.

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Pashtuns live a traditional tribal life, based on customs and consensus, and are not interested in some one-shot reward money offered to individuals. They want peace, respect, and the restoration of a normal way of life that was shattered by the war. That requires a serious development effort that involves and reaches all of the people, down to the poorest. Unless the people themselves are convinced of their sincerity, how can the Americans win hearts? And if they do not win hearts, they will not find bin Laden.²¹

Though some development projects have been initiated by the United States in the Tribal Lands, their cost can be reckoned in the low double digits of millions, compared to the tens of billions being spent on the military effort in Central Asia. The most expensive of these is a road-building scheme, which the Pathans view as a military venture aimed at them.

Bin Laden is presumed to have successfully gained the sanctuary of some tribal leaders, but if so, it is not necessarily open-ended. At any time he may be asked to leave with no dishonor done to the spirit of Pashtunwali, as the protection they have already afforded him has been enormous. We can presume, therefore, that bin Laden and his Al Qaeda confederates are able to continue their sojourn among the Pathans because he has given them the inspiration and attention they are not receiving from other quarters.

In the absence of any serious efforts by almost sixty years of Pakistani governments to improve their condition, the Pathans have come to rely on the radical *madrassas* not only for the rudiments of education, but for essentials like food and clothing as well. This economic tie was deepened when Al Qaeda's entrance into the Tribal Lands after the fall of the Taliban opened opportunities to provide logistical support for the renegades and participate in the drug trade with them. By contrast, the United States' involvement in Pakistan since 9/11 has only benefited the country's military and commercial elites, strengthening the fundamentalists' argument that Islamabad's cooperation with Washington is not only anti-Islamic, but also self-aggrandizing.

Bringing Harmony to the Frontier

The Bush administration continues to act as if the Pashtun lands are merely the roaming ground for an American frontier posse. It is hard to say what the administration hopes to accomplish by pursuing a set of military goals almost as narrow as those Washington pursued here twenty years ago. The capture or elimination of certain individuals will do little real good unless the conditions that allow such radicals to thrive are addressed. For two centuries now the Durand Line has served not as a high-water mark of steady waves of civilizing influence, as Fraser-Tyler dreamed it would, but as either the pale beyond which a particular imperial power could devastate no further or the staging area for extremist incursions beyond. Denied self-determination and

²¹ Author interview, September 2004, Kabul, Afghanistan.

the ability to modernize on their own terms, the most alienated Pashtuns, by their support of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, have now presented the world with a global crisis eclipsing all others. But despite 9/11, the United States has yet to support the one thing—economic development—that could bring harmony to the frontier, whose desolate condition threatens it so dramatically. True, development, especially in such desperate circumstances, is the work of decades, while finding bin Laden is urgent. But a strong start in the aftermath of the Taliban's fall would have made a real impression.

Of equal importance is solving the thorny Pashtunistan question. There will be no peace on the frontier until the issue is settled, and the solution need not involve Afghan irredentism or the dismemberment of the Pakistani state. The Pashtuns of both the Northwest Frontier Province and the Tribal Lands have a strong sense of ethnic identity, and this needs to be translated into some concrete legal form.

Bin Laden is bidding for power on both sides of the Durand Line, subverting Kabul and Islamabad by playing to the legitimate grievances of their peoples. This foreign millenarian extremist who poses as their champion is in a far better position than the cynical Zia ever was to attempt to build an Islamic fundamentalist confederacy in Central Asia, one potentially armed with nuclear weapons.

Journalist Robert Kaplan writes of a U.S. Special Forces officer he met in Afghanistan who told him, "In order to defeat the enemy you first have to love him, and his culture."²² Of what "enemy" is the officer speaking? Is it the Pashtun people, or only that part of it which is sheltering bin Laden? What has turned them into enemies, and can this be reversed? Only a U.S. policy aimed at rectifying the injustices the Pashtuns have suffered and bringing them into the community of nations can safeguard U.S. interests on the Frontier. "The battle of ideas" with and within Islam will never be won unless beneficent deeds give the West's moral position concrete meaning. Achieving this victory is incongruous with inflicting "defeat" on the Pashtuns. For as Fraser-Tytler saw with such clarity over half a century ago, the tribal question is hardly a military problem at all. Succeeding in getting bin Laden by reversing the conditions that make his elusiveness possible can only be done by becoming brothers with the tribes, not their enemies.



²² Kaplan, "Hard Questions: 'The Interrogators' and 'Torture,'" *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 23, 2005.