



SPEAKING OUT

How to Truly Transform Afghanistan

BY EDMUND McWILLIAMS

Those of us in the Foreign Service who have served in Afghanistan over the past 40 years have seen that country's fortunes run the gamut from the relatively halcyon era of Zahir Shah's rule through the politically turbulent rule of President Daoud to the tragic period of the Soviet invasion and occupation. There were essentially no American witnesses for the last and most painful epoch in Afghanistan's recent history, encompassing the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, subsequent civil wars and the brutal rule of the Taliban, which was based on aberrant interpretations of Islam that were as foreign to most Afghans as to most of the Muslim world.

Over the past year a new generation of Americans has returned to Afghanistan, not only as witnesses, but, to a greater extent than at any time in the previous decades of the bilateral relationship, as shapers of the country's future. Following the swift, though by no means bloodless, eviction of the Taliban and their al-Qaida patrons by U.S.-led international forces in October 2001, and the reopening of Embassy Kabul last December, U.S. civilian and military officials have been leading international efforts on the ground to transform Afghanistan.

In March, I made a private journey of my own back to Kabul, partly in search of old friends but mainly to assess prospects for the rebirth of a nation that I, like so many of my fellow Foreign Service officers, had come to love. Sadly, the impressions I

Many Afghans fear that U.S. interest will not last long enough to secure a full transformation of their country.



gathered then, reinforced by subsequent conversations with more recent visitors to Afghanistan, are not encouraging.

A Country Divided

The capital itself embodies the country's mixed prospects. Kabul's northeast has become a boom town, with bustling shops and fierce competition for office space and housing among the latest "occupation force" — thousands of U.N., diplomatic and NGO personnel. But the southwest district, a lawless wasteland where ethnic and tribal rivals compete for dominance, typifies the incomplete and possibly temporary results of international efforts to restore Afghanistan as a responsible member of the international community.

The broader Afghan political/military landscape is similarly dominated by ethnic or tribal-based warlords (the term of art is "regional leaders") whose mini-realms function as local arbiters of power. While open confrontation with President Karzai's gov-

ernment is rare, so too is genuine central control. Many of these independent regional leaders are much more responsive to their own interests (and foreign influence) than the urgent needs of the Afghan nation-state. One recalls the British aphorism that Afghan warlords can be rented but never bought, underscoring the transitory nature of purchased loyalty.

Meanwhile, the ethnic and tribal fault lines that have long crisscrossed Afghan territory and history seem to be growing more active. Perhaps out of necessity, the U.S. forces entering Afghanistan a year ago allied themselves with the most significant anti-Taliban force in the field, the Northern Alliance. That force consisted primarily of Panjshir Tajiks and other northern forces organized essentially along ethnic lines. Except for warlord leaders in the south, notably in the Kandahar area and small forces loyal to Hamid Karzai, Pashtuns — the largest Afghan minority — did not play a notable role in the defeat of the Taliban or, most significantly, in the capture of Kabul.

Since pushing the Taliban out of Kabul, the U.S. has done little to allay growing fears among Pashtuns, and others not part of the Northern Alliance, that the U.S. is enabling the Tajiks to gain unprecedented power in Kabul. Pashtuns I spoke to there earlier this year, and have talked with since my visit, have cited a growing list of Tajik/Northern Alliance affronts they believe have transpired with U.S. acquiescence:

- A pogrom mounted against



Pashtuns living in the north earlier this year has led to an exodus of approximately 50,000 Pashtuns who had lived in the north for generations.

- Pashtuns captured as “Taliban” fighters in the north have been subjected to inhumane conditions in Northern Alliance detention facilities which, while not under U.S. control, are visited by U.S. personnel searching for al-Qaida or senior Taliban personnel. Many of these “fighters” were in fact themselves victims of the Taliban, dragooned into Taliban ranks as war erupted in late 2001. Some have been ransomed back to relatives in the south by their Northern Alliance captors; others were victims of mass killings following their surrender in the battle of Kunduz.

- Pashtuns deeply resent the manner in which the U.S. was seen as blocking a potential groundswell of support for Mohammad Zahir Shah, the former Afghan king, at the June national assembly (Loya Jirga). The appearance of U.S. officials in the entourage surrounding Zahir Shah as he renounced any ambition to lead Afghanistan, on the eve of that gathering, was seen by many Afghans as a sign of an American role in that announcement.

- Pashtuns have tended to be, by far, the most common victims of tactical “mistakes” by U.S. forces in recent months. The human cost of these errant strikes and Washington’s reluctance to acknowledge them and make restitution has diminished the U.S. in the eyes of many Afghans.

- The still-unsolved murder of prominent Pashtun Vice President Haji Quadir is yet another bone of contention in U.S.-Afghan relations.

Staying the Course

During my visit to Afghanistan in March, Mary Robinson, former chairwoman of the U.N. Human Rights Commission, told me that the funda-

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mental challenge in Afghanistan was not human rights abuse, but rather, security. “Without security,” she observed, “there are no human rights.”

Similarly, the Afghan contacts who escorted me inside and outside the capital warned that Taliban adherents and other opponents of the regime were still active, a point underscored both by the periodic assassinations of Afghan officials and attacks on U.S. and allied forces and a more pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty. Even in Kabul, many Afghan women told me they continue to wear head-to-toe veils because the Taliban-era men (the “vice and virtue” thugs) who whipped and clubbed them for failing to obey strict dress codes were still in the streets and markets. “They don’t all wear the black turbans now, but we know them.”

Recent reporting from Konar Province and other eastern and southern provinces indicates preparations are under way for organized fundamentalist resistance to U.S. forces and to the weak central government, drawing on the centuries-old Afghan capacity for stealth, deception and betrayal. Monitoring the anti-Soviet war from Embassy Kabul (1986-88) and as a special envoy to Afghanistan based in Pakistan (1988-89), I observed the effective use of such tactics to wear down and defeat the much stronger Soviet force.

While U.S. and international forces are vastly better equipped, trained and more nimble than the Soviets were, we and our Afghan allies are vulnerable to the same guerrilla tactics of ambush and assassination. Such losses in the field will likely weigh far more heavily on strategists in Washington and other Western capitals than they did on the totalitarian Soviet leadership.

As a result, many Afghans are apprehensive that — as happened over a decade ago following the withdrawal of the Soviet occupiers — U.S. interest and involvement will not be sufficient to secure a full transformation of Afghanistan that goes beyond military liberation to achieve political and economic reconstruction.

It is true that there is still genuine appreciation for U.S. action in ousting the Taliban from power. Most Afghans even appear prepared to accept the significant civilian casualties from the U.S. bombing campaign as the cost of transforming Afghanistan into a peaceful, democratic state. But the growing disillusionment of Pashtuns with the underfunded and largely ineffective government led by President Hamid Karzai (himself a Pashtun) and their fear of continued dominance of state security organs by Tajiks have made them increasingly reluctant to give active support to U.S. and allied forces. As a result, efforts to establish an Afghan national army have barely gotten off the ground. There have been massive desertions among the early trainees, especially Pashtuns, many of whom chafe at an officer corps that is mainly Tajik, staffed by the U.S. military’s key ally, the Northern Alliance.

To supplement that effort, the Karzai government, the United Nations and many NGOs have called for an expansion of the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force to areas outside of Kabul. Only

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the ISAF, they argue, can act as arbiter between and among rival regional forces and begin the very difficult but essential task of decommissioning arms, including those in the hands of warlords.

Until recently, the Bush administration rebuffed such calls, but it has now expressed a willingness to at least consider doing force expansion. This is a welcome development, but it is essential that the new mission be broad enough, and U.S. support strong enough, to ensure that ISAF forces do not themselves become targets. Moreover, the ISAF must have a clear mandate to support central government authority against the ambitions of warlords who have been emboldened by their relationships with U.S. forces. Indications the U.S. may use its diplomatic leadership to induce other governments to fulfill pledges they made to provide financial assistance to Kabul are also welcome, though tardy.

Even if this approach works, Afghanistan's history underscores the fact that there are no guarantees. But we can be sure of one thing: absent sustained U.S. assistance for stabilizing the security situation, real transformation will remain on hold and increasingly doubtful. ■

Edmund McWilliams entered the Foreign Service in 1975, serving in Vientiane, Bangkok, Moscow, Kabul, Islamabad, Managua, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Jakarta and Washington, D.C. He opened the posts in Bishkek and Dushanbe and was the first chief of mission in each. In 1998, he received AFSA's Christian Herter Award for creative dissent by a senior officer. Since retiring as a Senior Foreign Service officer in 2001, he has been working with various U.S. and foreign human rights NGOs as a "freelance" volunteer.



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