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# "Conflict in Afghanistan is Here-to-Stay : The Taliban's Second Coming"

by

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**February 18, 2004**

On May 1, 2003, in Kabul flanked by his obedient client, Hamid Karzai, Secretary Rumsfeld announced to the world that the United States had moved from a period of major combat activity to a period of stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan. The 'news' was gushingly reported by the U.S. mainstream corporate press, e.g., Matt Kelley of the Associated Press and a favorite of the U.S. colonels at the Bagram base.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Kelley, "Rumsfeld: Combat Activity Over in Afghanistan," Associated Press (May 1, 2003)

**Fact: between June 1, 2003 - February 1, 2004, about 1,000 Afghans died in the continuing civil and guerrilla war and in December 2003, U.S. forces carried out their largest deployment since December 2001 in Tora Bora.<sup>2</sup>**

On July 4, 2003, Arnold Schwarzenegger, paid a lightning visit to U.S. troops at Camp Victory off Highway Eight on the Baghdad airport road.<sup>3</sup> While there, he announced,

"I play the Terminator, but you guys are the real terminators."<sup>4</sup>

**Fact: those 'terminated' by the 'guys' include about 4,000 civilians in Afghanistan and another 10,000 civilians in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>**

**Fact: a little-known truth about the United States' two conflicts in Central Asia, is that the Afghan one is more deadly and far more costly than the Iraq one.** As the following **Table 1** documents, a U.S. soldier is three times more likely to be killed in Afghanistan than in Iraq. The comparison is not perfect insofar as U.S. troops have been in Afghanistan since December 2001, but only since April 2003 in Iraq. Most of the U.S. deaths in both Afghanistan and Iraq have occurred after the quick initial military successes.<sup>6</sup> Whereas there are fourteen times more U.S. troops in Iraq than in Afghanistan, the total numbers of civilians killed in Iraq are only 2.5 times greater than those killed in Afghanistan. The monthly cost to the U.S taxpayer of supporting one U.S. soldier for one month in Iraq is \$ 33,000, whereas in Afghanistan the figure is \$ 122,000. The difference is due to the far greater number of support troops outside the actual conflict zone in Afghanistan and that much of the fighting there has involved more expensive air power (both bombing and airborne assaults).

<sup>2</sup> on December 2, 2003, U.S. forces launched their largest military operation in Afghanistan since the Tora Bora offensive in December 2001. Named 'Operation Avalanche' it involved 4 U.S. battalions supported by helicopters and attack aircraft in the provinces of Paktia and Paktika.

<sup>3</sup> "Terminator Pays Lightning Independence Day Visit With US troops in Iraq," Agence France-Presse (July 4, 2003), at: <http://www.terradaily.com/2003/030704085315.q4mc55dx.html>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Carr, "Arnold Says US Troops Are 'Real Terminators'," Dawn (September 19, 2003), at: <http://www.dawn.com/2003/09/19/int16.htm>

<sup>5</sup> for details on Afghan casualties see my "A Day-to-Day Chronicle of Afghanistan's Civil and Guerrilla War, June 2003 - Present," at: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwherold>, and for deaths in Iraq, see "Iraq Body Count," at: <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>

<sup>6</sup> Bradley Graham, "Disparity in Iraq, Afghanistan War Costs Scrutinized," Washington Post (November 11, 2003), at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A23970-2003Nov10?language=printer>, and "'Afghan Death Toll Reaches 100," Associated Press (January 13, 2004)

**Table 1. Afghanistan and Iraq Compared, early 2004**

	<b>Afghanistan</b>	<b>Iraq</b>
U.S. military deaths	~ 110	~ 530
U.S. troops in theater	9,000	135,000
Ratio of deaths to troops in theater	1.2 %	0.4 %
Cumulative civilian deaths	~ 4,000	~ 10,000
Monthly cost to U.S. tax payer of occupation	(\$ 950 mn - ) \$ 1 bn	(\$ 3.9 bn - ) \$ 4.4 bn
Monthly cost to support one soldier in theater	\$ 122,200	\$ 32,600
US support troops outside theater supporting in-theater soldiers	35,000	87,000
Total forces involved	44,000	222,000
Monthly total cost per soldier in area	\$ 23,000	\$ 20,000

The U.S. spends per month on the Afghan occupation about what the Kabul regime receives from its Washington patron in a year. In Fall 2003, the U.S. was reportedly spending \$ 3.9 bn a month in Iraq and \$ 950 mn in Afghanistan, compared to a peak monthly outlay of \$ 5.1 bn in Vietnam in inflation-adjusted dollars.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dave Moniz, "Monthly Costs of Iraq, Afghan Wars Approach That of Vietnam," USA Today (September 7, 2003), at: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-09-07-cover-costs\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-09-07-cover-costs_x.htm)

I shall make three inter-related arguments in this *three-part essay*.<sup>8</sup> First, the specter of Vietnam is growing in Afghanistan, though with some important differences. Secondly, since the retreat of the Taliban and their allies from Kandahar in December 2001, the quality of everyday life has not improved for the great majority of Afghans.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Afghanistan is better described as "an outright humanitarian disaster" - violence is endemic, corruption and extortion are rampant, the countryside is balkanized into fiefdoms, opium is the crop of choice, most Afghans (87%) still have no access to clean water, the lot of women has barely improved, etc.. Thirdly, the twentieth century reality of two Afghanistans - largely comprised of Kabul and 'the Rest' - persists today. But, Kabul is an oasis and a mirage as pointed out by Thomas Eagleton, former U.S. Senator from Missouri.<sup>10</sup>

The United States, its proxy Karzai, and the U.S. mainstream corporate press seek to 'window-dress' the dismal reality, with for example, hollow proclamations of "remarkable progress being made in Afghanistan"<sup>11</sup> (@ Rumsfeld in December 2003 in Kabul), or of the Kabul-Kandahar highway being completed (appropriately called by some "Afghanistan's Highway to Nowhere"<sup>12</sup>), or of a new U.S. military command center opening in Kabul (in February 2004), or a new constitution which is no more than the Kabul City Charter (as stated in a New York Times editorial<sup>13</sup>) or of beauty salons and restaurants sprouting up in Kabul, etc.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> the other two parts of this essay are: Part 2. The Persisting Misery of Everyday Life, and Part 3. Mirage and Reality: Kabul and 'the Rest'

<sup>9</sup> see Ilene Prusher, "For Afghans, Life Gets Worse and Worse," Christian Science Monitor (December 23, 2003), at: <http://www.oneworld.net/article/view/75738/1>. See also John Pilger, "What Good Friends Left Behind," The Guardian (September 20, 2003), at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,1044925,00.html>

<sup>10</sup> Thomas F. Eagleton, "Kabul is an Oasis - and a Mirage," Saint Louis Post (December 4, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> "Rumsfeld: Remarkable Progress Made in Afghanistan," Voice of America (December 4, 2003). Some individual reporters working for the mainstream U.S. corporate do a heroic effort, e.g., people like Carlotta Gall, David Rohde, Scott Baldauf, Owais Tohid, Philip Smucker, Mike Collett-White, Barry Bearak, John Donnelly, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Whitney, "Afghanistan's Highway to Nowhere," Counterpunch (December 19, 2003), at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/whitney12192003.html>

<sup>13</sup> "High Risks in Afghanistan," New York Times (November 17, 2003), at: [http://truthout.org/docs\\_03/111803E.shtml](http://truthout.org/docs_03/111803E.shtml)

<sup>14</sup> Tom Squitieri of USA Today specifically mentions "several positive developments - including agreement on a new constitution, completion of a vital highway link and an economic boom in Kabul..." in "Aid Workers: Afghanistan in Jeopardy," USA Today (December 22, 2003)

## **Part 1. Afghanistan as an Epiphany of Vietnam: the Taliban's Second Coming**<sup>15</sup>

The specter of Vietnam began taking shape in 2002 with U.S. raids upon compounds, villages, and neighborhoods of cities.<sup>16</sup> The forced entries, frisking and abuse of persons (including women and children), the ransacking of homes, and the abductions merely served to heighten Afghan animosity towards the foreign occupier. John Pilger saw evidence of new Vietnams in: U.S. servicemen saying that once they leave their secured base, they are in a combat zone; renewed "search and destroy" missions carried out in villages across Afghanistan; and in the targeting of civilians (for arrest or execution).<sup>17</sup> Daniel Bergner who accompanied a U.S. force into the countryside south of Kandahar, reports the enemy is everywhere and nowhere,<sup>18</sup> and Liz Sly wrote about the same thing in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Nick Meo provided a superb first-hand account of the sheer unknown, the dangers and frustrations experienced by young American soldiers on a nine-month tour of duty in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Others noted the resurgence of the Taliban and its allies - Al Qaeda and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami group - by mid-2003.<sup>21</sup> In June 2003, the Taliban publicly named a new 10-man leadership council, including such veterans as former Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah, Minister and commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, and commanders Mullah Dadullah Kakar and Mullah Akhtar Usmani.<sup>22</sup> Mullah Usmani led Taliban forces in the south in late 2001 and was named as

<sup>15</sup> I've borrowed this phrase from John Wilson who used it in a different manner, arguing that Pakistan is now in allegiance with the United States, supporting the resurrection of a defanged Taliban. See his "'Taliban: The Second Coming," *Politics Agora* (November 2003), at: <http://www.politics-agera.com/thread5561-1>

<sup>16</sup> for details see my data base at <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwherold>, and especially my "U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan: Vietnam Redux" *Cursor.org* (October 31, 2002), at: [http://www.cursor.org/stories/vietnam\\_redux.htm](http://www.cursor.org/stories/vietnam_redux.htm). Scott Peterson makes interesting parallels between the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in his "Afghanistan's Lessons for Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor* (November 20, 2003), at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1120/p06s01-woiq.htm>

<sup>17</sup> John Pilger, "Bush's Vietnam," *New Statesman* (June 22, 2003), at: [http://www.zmag.org/content/print\\_article.cfm?itemID=3812&sectionID=49](http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=3812&sectionID=49).

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Bergner, "Where the Enemy is Everywhere and Nowhere," *New York Times* (July 20, 2003), at: <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0720-07.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Liz Sly, "In Afghanistan, Progress Mixes With New Concern," *Chicago Tribune* (September 15, 2003)

<sup>20</sup> Nick Meo, "The War That Just Won't End: the Hunt Goes on in Afghanistan," *The Sunday Herald* (July 13, 2003), at: <http://www.sundayherald.com/35223>

<sup>21</sup> see amongst many others, Victoria Burnett, "Afghan Officials See Taliban Resurgence," *Boston Globe* (September 25, 2003), "Taliban Resurgence Worries US," *Al Jazeera.net* (October 17, 2003 at 13:01 Makka Time), and Jason Burke, "Stronger and More Deadly, the Terror of the Taliban is Back," *The Observer* (November 16, 2003), at:

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1086197,00.html>. For a more recent statement, see Jim Lobe, "Concern Grows Over Taliban Resurgence, Opium," *Antiwar.com* (January 24, 2004), at: <http://www.antiwar.com/lobe/?articleid=1802>

<sup>22</sup> "Taliban Names Anti-US Leadership Council," *Reuters* (June 24, 2003) and James Bone and Zahid Hussein, "Taleban Fighters Regroup and Attack Coalition," *The Times* (June 25, 2003)

successor to Mullah Omar should he perish. Dadullah harks from Uruzgan and Usmani from Helmand.

By later 2002, U.S. political and military elites realized that the use of surrogates was needed. U.S. policy pursued two avenues: the funding and training of a national police force and an Afghan Army - akin to the policy of Vietnamization - and the search for allies willing to contribute troops and material. A primary impetus underlying U.S. thinking has been the perceived need to avoid U.S. casualties - body bags returning to the home shores. But, neither of these avenues has fared well. The dropout and desertion rates amongst the new Afghan Army is enormous and the reliability of its soldiers is very questionable.<sup>23</sup> The dropout rate at the large Pul-i-Charki training center - operated by U.S. and French troops - outside Kabul is over 30% - 2,000 recruits out of 6,000 simply vanished. Afghan militia forces working with U.S. troops are known to engage in beatings, torture, and pillage.<sup>24</sup> Few allies have been willing to donate significant numbers of troops and a desperate U.S. has found itself needing to cultivate the likes of Romanians, Croatians, and even Serbs (who fought against Muslims!).<sup>25</sup> Some nations like Canada have even decided to reduce commitments.

By later 2002, another Vietnam-era tactic was introduced. In Vietnam, the United States established the infamous U.S.A.I.D. Civic Action Teams, units of ~100 soldiers combining military and civilian officers. In Afghanistan, these have been resurrected though renamed as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), formed and slowly introduced in various cities, combining intelligence gathering, military operations and civilian reconstruction projects. To date, eight such teams have been formed. The tactic of militarizing humanitarian assistance has been roundly criticized by most in the non-governmental organizations as it blurs the distinction between military action and reconstruction.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the PRT operations are excessively costly and inefficient.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rupert Cornwell, "Vietnam's Ghosts Haunt the War in Afghanistan," *The Independent* (March 5, 2002) and Paul Watson, "New Afghan Army Plagued by Gripes, Many Dropouts," *Los Angeles Times* (December 4, 2003)

<sup>24</sup> Paul Watson, "Afghans Tell of Torture During Security Sweep. Villagers Say a Militia Working for the U.S. Went on a Rampage While Hunting the Taliban," *Los Angeles Times* (October 30, 2003), at: <http://www.agonist.org/archives/010410.html>

<sup>25</sup> David Rennie, "Serbs to Fight Beside US Troops in Afghanistan," *Telegraph* (June 10, 2003)

<sup>26</sup> for an outstanding analysis, see Peace Operations Working Group of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee, NGO/Government Dialogue on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan and the Militarization of Humanitarian Assistance: Final Report" dated December 4, 2003, at: <http://www.peacebuild.ca/whatsnew/PRT-Dialogue-FinalReport.doc>

The Vietnam-era practice of forcefully creating strategic hamlets has not been pursued for two obvious reasons. The fierce independence of Afghans would be severely crossed resulting in snowballing resistance. Secondly, U.S. forces are simply not large enough to pursue such a tactic. Instead, the U.S. has relied upon air power and rapid deployment ground forces (often heli-borne) from its three major bases - Bagram, Kandahar and Khost - with a sprinkling of smaller usually Special Forces fire bases scattered across the east and south of the country.

In effect, the U.S. has been caught between practicing either Occupation Heavy or Occupation Lite. The former was eschewed for fear of repeating the Soviet experience of the 80s in Afghanistan. The latter was adopted though with minimal results.<sup>28</sup> The effectiveness of central Afghan Army proxy fighting forces has been poor and the allegiance of warlord armies sporadic at best (e.g., best known case is that of one-time U.S. warlord Padshah Khan Zadran of Paktia, but also the powerful Ismail Khan in Herat).

Differences exist between the U.S. campaigns in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Most importantly, the terrain of Afghanistan combined with the extraordinary development of U.S. 'eyes in the skies' simply does not permit large concentrations of Taliban forces. The Taliban and allies must limit attacks to stealth forays by small units. Secondly, some like to point out that the Taliban and allies do not have a secure, friendly neighbor able to provide arms, sanctuary, etc.. But the strong tribal support for the Taliban in Pakistan's rugged western provinces de facto serves these functions, a reality strengthened in October 2002 with the election of a radical Islamic coalition to the state governments of the NWFP and Balochistan. The province of Balochistan which accounts for 43 percent of Pakistan's territory is particularly sympathetic to the Taliban as reported by Scott Baldauf and Owais Tohid of the Christian Science Monitor.<sup>29</sup> The Afghan-Pakistan border is virtually un-policeable and porous and the Pakistani side has become a safe

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<sup>27</sup> see James Ingalls, "Buying Hearts & Minds in Afghanistan," Z Magazine 16,2 (December 2003), p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> David Rohde, "Different Wars, Different Postwars," New York Times (July 13, 2003), at: <http://e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/0/D833A89C197171E087256D63000E6C2C?OpenDocument>

<sup>29</sup> Scott Baldauf and Owais Tohid, "Where the Taliban Go To Find Warm Beds and Recruits," Christian Science Monitor (December 10, 2003), at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-022202hunt.1.806160.story>



haven for the hunted Taliban and Al Qaeda.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Mullah Omar remains firmly in control of Taliban operations, directing such through a 10-man leadership council that was formed in June 2003.<sup>31</sup> The reorganized rebels appeared well-funded and highly motivated.<sup>32</sup> The ample cash served to acquire sophisticated equipment including sat phones and night-vision goggles.<sup>33</sup> By mid-2003, the Taliban resistance was making use of remote-controlled devices which increase the effectiveness of the guerrillas.<sup>34</sup> They had set up mobile training camps in the border regions.<sup>35</sup> In later 2003, the Taliban formed four committees - on political, military, cultural and economic affairs - to make their resistance against coalition forces more effective.<sup>36</sup> By August 2003, the reorganized Taliban appointed a military commander for the northern region, (including Faryab), Mullah Mohammad Asim Muttaqi.<sup>37</sup> A couple days later, a convoy of vehicles traveling on a road between Maimana and Almar in Faryab was attacked at night, killing 11 persons.<sup>38</sup>

Taliban spokespersons have publicly elaborated upon their politico-military strategy. The group's goal is to tie down the U.S. (and NATO) in Afghanistan and force it to spend huge sums on the occupation, responding to limited though geographically dispersed hit-and-run attacks, e.g. ambushes and rocket attacks. The mujahideen employ the classic pattern of insurgent warfare: the enemy attacks, we retreat; the enemy camps, we raid; the enemy tires, we attack.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. would gradually be sapped by such a slow, costly and grinding conflict and would abandon Afghanistan after 2-3 years.<sup>40</sup> The Taliban have increasingly directed their attacks precisely at the 'softer' proxy forces, killing 400-500

<sup>30</sup> see the description amongst many others by Jason Burke, "In the Lair of the Hunted Taliban," *The Observer* (November 10, 2003), and Juliette Terzieff, "Pakistani Tribesmen Stay Fundamentally Faithful to the Taliban. Farmers Put Down Polows to Take Up Arms Against US" *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 11, 2003), at: <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/1111-09.htm>, and Massoud Ansari, "On the Job With a Taliban Recruiter," *Asia Times Online* (November 26, 2003) at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/EK26Df03.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/EK26Df03.html)

<sup>31</sup> "Fugitive Taliban Leader 'Still in Control'," *The Guardian* (November 14, 2003), citing Reuters, at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,1084682,00.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Scott Baldauf and Owais Tohid, "Taliban Appears To Be Re-grouped and Well-Funded," *Christian Science Monitor* (May 8, 2003), at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0508/p01s02-wosc.html>

<sup>33</sup> "Cashed-Up Taliban Get Satphones," *The Australian* (September 23, 2003), citing Agence France-Presse

<sup>34</sup> Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Afghan Resistance Takes Shape," *Asia Times* (August 16, 2003)

<sup>35</sup> Owais Tohid, "Taliban Regroups - On the Road," *Christian Science Monitor* (June 27, 2003), at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0627/p06s01-wosc.html?related>

<sup>36</sup> "Taliban Form 4 Bodies," *Daily Times* (November 13, 2003), which gives the names of leading committee members.

<sup>37</sup> "Taliban to Extend Attacks to Afghan North - Report," Reuters (August 10, 2003) at 4:07 AM ET

<sup>38</sup> "50 Taliban Killed in Afghanistan," *The News* (August 26, 2003)

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Elkins, "An Elusive Victory in Afghanistan," LewRockwell.com (December 31, 2002), at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/elkins/elkins75.html>

Afghan troops between June 1, 2003 and January 1, 2004, while only killing less than ten American soldiers. For example, such sporadic, small unit attacks killed nine U.S. soldiers in the Shkin area of Paktika alone in 2003.<sup>41</sup>

The heavy-handed U.S. search-and-destroy forays over time swell the ranks of supporters, as the battle for Afghan hearts and minds tipped in favor of the Taliban.<sup>42</sup> U.S. aerial 'decapitation raids' frequently devastate small villages and families. In January 2004, two U.S. raids killed 15 children and not a single Taliban was either captured or killed. The reality of living daily in fear is captured in the words of a young girl in Loi Karez, Zabul:

"Whenever these tall people with blue eyes come to our village, we become very scared," said eight-year-old Saira Bibi as she fetched water from a well in Loi Karez. "They take away people and ask us about the Taliban. I haven't seen the Taliban. I don't know who these Taliban are."<sup>43</sup>

A similar perspective is offered in Qalat, Zabul province, in January 2004:

" .... for many people a much more visible aspect of American intervention is the steady stream of civilian casualties. And in Qalat, there is hostility to patrols by American special forces. From a Humvee a man gets out wearing a stetson and sheriff's badge, and proceeds to have a loud argument with a colleague carrying a sawn-off shotgun. As they move away, the locals stare after them. "We are so unhappy when we see them," says Rahmatullah, a bearded 29-year-old shopkeeper watching from across the road. "When the Russians came here we fought to save our liberty and independence. So also Americans came... and so we will be

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<sup>40</sup> David Rohde, "Taliban Officials Outline Plan to Defeat U.S. in Afghanistan," *New York Times* (September 12, 2003), at: [http://www-tech.mit.edu/V123/N39/long\\_2\\_39.39w.html](http://www-tech.mit.edu/V123/N39/long_2_39.39w.html)

<sup>41</sup> see David Rohde, "The Other Conflict Continues to Take a G.I. Toll," *New York Times* (November 24, 2003), at: [http://www.truthout.org/docs\\_03/112503F.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_03/112503F.shtml)

<sup>42</sup> "US Losing Battle for Afghan Hearts and Minds," AlJazeera.net (August 15, 2003) at 2:50 AM GMT citing a Reuters report . See also Luke Harding, "Heavy Hand of America Fans the Taliban Embers Into Life," *The Guardian* (June 18, 2003), at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,979617,00.html>

<sup>43</sup> "U.S. Troops Provoke Afghan Anger," Reuters (August 17, 2003), at: <http://www.marchforjustice.com/8.15.03.afghananger.php>

fighting them."<sup>44</sup>

During a search of the village of Atel Mohammed in Kandahar by U.S. Special Forces (and their allies of the Afghan Militia Forces) in the summer of 2003,

"scared Afghans in the southern province of Kandahar hid holy Quran and other religious items before United States troops searched their village, afraid the Americans would kill them for being Muslims."<sup>45</sup>

By December 2003, even The Economist was fretting over "the high price of hunting the Taliban."<sup>46</sup> In addition, many Afghans believe that a weary U.S will soon exit Afghanistan leaving the terrain to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. For villagers, survival when that happens means keeping mouths shut now.<sup>47</sup> In the border regions, deeply conservative Pashtun tribesmen take cash from Al Qaeda and Taliban supporters for food and other supplies and count 'blessings' from Al Qaeda.<sup>48</sup>

The other element of the strategy is to render much of the countryside inaccessible to aid-reconstruction effort, by carrying out strikes upon aid workers, selected high-visibility assassinations and kidnappings, destroying their facilities and equipment, and burning down schools. By mid-2003, even the U.S. mainstream corporate press has begun reporting upon a countryside inaccessible to agencies.<sup>49</sup> In December 2003, the Chicago Tribune's Liz Sly reported on the wholesale retreat of international aid agencies operations across the south and east of Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> For example, the staff of International Committee of the Red Cross in Kandahar province dropped to two by August from ten in March before the execution-murder of a Red Cross worker in March

<sup>44</sup> "Nation Torn Between Taliban and Uncle Sam," The Scotsman (January 18, 2004), at: <http://news.scotsman.com/international.cfm?id=63492004>

<sup>45</sup> "Afghans Hide Quran From US Troops," Dawn (July 26, 2003), at: <http://www.dawn.com/2003/07/26/int6.htm>

<sup>46</sup> "Making Enemies," The Economist (December 11, 2003)

<sup>47</sup> Bergner, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Owais Tohid, "Tribesmen Take Cash, Count 'Blessings' From Al Qaeda," Christian Science Monitor (October 29, 2003), at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1029/p01s03-wosc.html>

<sup>49</sup> Robyn Dixon, "Afghanistan Slipping Into Chaos, Warn Aid Agencies," Los Angeles Times (August 14, 2003), at: <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/6527601.htm>

<sup>50</sup> Liz Sly, "Afghan Violence Cripples Aid Effort," Chicago Tribune (December 21, 2003), at: <http://www.agonist.org/archives/012144.html>

2003.<sup>51</sup> The right-hand man of former Taliban Interior Minister Abdul Razzak himself, now military commander for the Taliban in the south and southeast, the notorious Mullah Dadullah, native of Uruzgan and one-time senior Taliban commander in the Kunduz region, ordered the killing of the 39-year-old Red Cross worker.<sup>52</sup> Taliban attacks were effectively undermining relief work by the United Nations.<sup>53</sup> A drop in aid workers and projects, fuels the impression that the West is pulling out.

A new component which contributes to the generalized insecurity has been added in 2003: suicide bombings in major urban centers, a tactic imported from the Palestine theater.<sup>54</sup> The first such attack took place in the heart of Kabul on June 7, 2003, when a car bomber drove his vehicle into a bus full of German ISAF troops, killing at least four.<sup>55</sup>

In a widely reported statement made on February 9, 2004, at the U.S. base at Bagram, U.S. Marine General James L. Jones, NATO's supreme commander in Europe, announced that "the (Afghan) opposition is running out of steam." Facts on the ground show otherwise. The Taliban military strategy of launching small attacks upon U.S. and Afghan facilities, killing personnel with suicide attacks, employing mines and improvised explosive devices to destroy convoy operations, and selectively murdering staff engaged in "reconstruction" was evident over just three days in Afghanistan in an area covering the west, the east and the central south :

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<sup>51</sup> Mike Collett-White, "Taliban Giving Tough Time to US, Afghan Government," *Dawn* (August 27, 2003), at: <http://www.dawn.com/2003/08/27/int13.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Todd Pitman and Kathy Gannon, "No Peace in Afghanistan," Associated Press (May 1, 2003). Dadullah's history is explored in J. Gettleman, "US Aids Hunt for Notorious Mullah," *Los Angeles Times* (February 22, 2002), at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-022202hunt.1.806160.story>

<sup>53</sup> see "Taliban Resurgence Undermining UN Afghan Aid Work," *China Daily* (October 25, 2003 at 15:07), at: [http://www1.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-10/25/content\\_275546.htm](http://www1.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-10/25/content_275546.htm)

<sup>54</sup> Liz Sly, "Blasts Shatter Kabul Calm," *Chicago Tribune* (February 1, 2004), at: <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/mld/sanluisobispo/news/world/7844904.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Luke Harding, "Taliban Are Back - And With a Murderous Vengeance," *The Guardian* (June 8, 2003), at: <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1501,973075,00.html>

**Table 2. The Taliban Military Strategy in Practice, February 2004 : 9 More Deaths**

Tactic:	Incident date:	Location:	Event:
Attack U.S. facilities	Feb. 12/13, 2004	Khost	21 rockets fired at Camp Salerno on Khost airport
Attack Afghan Army-Police facilities	Feb. 13, 2004	Khost	Remote-controlled mine exploded outside police station, kills 1 policeman and a shopkeeper
Suicide attacks upon personnel	Feb. 11, 2004	Khost	Taliban attacker kills Khost deputy intelligence chief than blows himself up to avoid capture
Mine or improvised explosive device attack	Feb. 13, 2004	Ghazni	An IED - antitank mine - explodes under Humvee of a US patrol, killing 1 and injuring 9 US troops
Attack foreign aid operations	Feb. 14, 2004	Faryab	Taliban attacked convoy of the NGO, OMAR, killing 4 Afghan deminers

As of late 2002, Afghanistan was becoming a classic (Vietnam) *quagmire*.<sup>56</sup> The prospect is of war without end, elusive guerrilla fighters, persisting violence, use of ineffective local proxies, corruption and impoverishment. The non-stop mantra in the mainstream corporate media about "remnants" of the Taliban being at the source of this conflict, misrepresents the depth and organization of resistance to the U.S. occupation and is part of the U.S. propaganda war. About all the U.S. occupation force could report on optimistically was its new 20-house military headquarters opened on February 3, 2004 in the posh Wazir Akbar Khan area of Kabul. That evening, two rockets slammed into Kabul.

A French journalist visiting Kandahar in December 2003, wrote :

<sup>56</sup> Jim Lobe, "Afghanistan Quagmire," *Foreign Policy in Focus* (September 6, 2002), at: [http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2002/0209afquag\\_body.html](http://www.fpiif.org/commentary/2002/0209afquag_body.html)

"One quiet afternoon in Kandahar, a convoy of U.S. military vehicles passed by. In the pharmacy where I was making a purchase, men who had been chatting animatedly stopped and watched the personnel carriers drive slowly by carrying young American soldiers chewing gum and pointing their rifles defensively at the locals. After the last armored vehicle passed, one of the Afghans spat in their tire tracks, and mumbled, "Inshallah, they will leave soon."<sup>57</sup>

Maybe the Taliban's most powerful weapon against the Americans is time.

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<sup>57</sup> Anne Nivat, "A War Eye on the Yanks and the Taliban," International Herald Tribune (December 18, 2003), at: <http://www.ihf.com/articles/121870.html>