

Unfinished Business

Defeat in Iraq is a humiliation, but failure in Afghanistan produces a real threat.

By Stewart Nusbaumer

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN—When I arrived in Afghanistan a month ago, people were relaxed, optimism was in the air. Now Kabul has a nightly curfew, and military aircraft are in the air.

The nervous buzz is that nonessential U.S. Embassy personnel will be sent home after one more riot or bombing. Aid workers are moving from the countryside to the cities—too dangerous in many rural areas. But there's no safety in the cities either: last week in Kabul, I was surrounded by cracking gunfire and protesters screaming, "kill Americans!" That destroyed my idea of Afghanistan being a cakewalk.

I've seen many wars—Vietnam, Beirut, El Salvador, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Honduras, Peru, Philippines, Kosovo. In none of these did protesters scream to kill American civilians. In none of these wars did I avoid public taxis for fear of being kidnapped. In none did I carry a gun as a reporter. And never did the situation plunge from public optimism to military curfew in just one month.

Sure, there was talk of a stronger Taliban offensive this spring or summer, but that's said every year. There were complaints about the reconstruction of the country, but reconstruction is always cause for complaint. (Cambodia is a UN political/security success, but it's an economic disaster zone.) There were concerns that Afghanistan was having a bumper poppy harvest—that did catch my attention. But I did not hear that a traffic accident could turn Kabul into a shooting gallery.

Last week, after a U.S. military vehicle slammed into a line of cars and caused one Afghan fatality, an anti-American rampage ripped through Kabul. There was gunfire, lots of gunfire, and dead people. Automobiles were set afire, shops were looted, international aid offices were sacked, and foreigners' guesthouses were torched. For several hours, I was surrounded by nasty gunfire and outraged protestors.

The *Times* of London correspondent wrote, "I've been in Kabul for nine months and there has never been anything like this before. There is a real feeling in the air that today Kabul changed."

"This place is starting to unravel," says Dan, whose employment is a little mysterious. Sitting in his comfortable living room, he makes us another drink. "Did you know they just increased the price of Jack Daniels by 25 percent, Stewart?" When the price of a staple skyrockets, you know the country is in trouble.

I came here to write that Afghanistan is not Iraq, that Afghanistan is looking promising, while Iraq is utterly hopeless. In one month, Afghanistan flipped from looking promising to starting to unravel. So I don't know what to write.

Dan, his friend Mohammad, and I trudge along a wicked dirt road with peaks resembling the Swiss Alps and depths similar to the Mojave Desert—this in the center of Kabul. At the corner, we're mugged by a gang of desperate nomads: a half-dozen hyper kids and two whimpering burkha-covered women

clinging infants with deadpan faces. To give money is considered dangerous, inviting a deadly stampede the next time you venture on the street; not giving money is considered dangerous, inviting a deadening of your humanity. A mammoth United Nations SUV roars past nearly deadening all of us.

Turning the corner, we run into another Afghanistan danger: a high-grade rush of raw sewage. "After almost five years, why still not better?" Mohammad asks as we sip tea at a roadside restaurant, too close to an open sewer for my tastes. "You know what we call Kabul? The Toilet! That's what we call our capital."

The capital Toilet has a load of nasty stats: 80 percent of Afghan adults are illiterate; only one in 20 houses has electricity; 40 percent of Afghans do not have enough to eat; Afghanistan has the second worst child-mortality rate in the world; 50 percent of the workforce have no jobs; average life expectancy is 43 years—Afghans don't plan on much of a middle age.

The sidewalks here are interesting ragged cement chunks at slippery angles interspaced with ankle-breaking canyons. Dan scans a group of men ahead—tall and lean with fiery dark eyes and angry dark beards, wearing dark turbans. He inches his right hand closer to his hip, where his handgun is hidden under a loose-fitting shirt. I slowly move my hand around to the small of my back near my pistol. Mohammad instinctively drops back, fingering the weapon in his pocket.

In the last two weeks, a surge in fighting has produced 400 dead, the heaviest number since the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban government. Some days there are more dead and wounded in Afghanistan than in blood-drenched Iraq. The Taliban owns four provinces in the south, and attacks are spreading throughout the country. Suicide bombings are becoming more common, a horror imported from Iraq. Instead of the ignored other conflict, Afghanistan may soon be the new Iraq War.

European nations are sending thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan, while the U.S., which had planned to reduce its troop level this year, is reconsidering. But can there ever be enough troops?

We walk past several men shoveling globs of black sewage out of an open ditch and onto the back of a truck. Gruesome. An old man without a leg, using crude wooden crutches, approaches with an outstretched hand. A Lexus SUV races by, nearly amputating the old man's outstretched hand.

There is another Kabul. Rising outside the walls of the Le Monde Guesthouse where I live is a four-story residential building, on another side a two-story house, behind the compound a French restaurant just opened up. In several sections of town there is a boom in retail construction, mostly small shops—electronics stores, neighborhood grocery outlets, boutiques, motorcycle dealerships. There are now an enclosed shopping mall and new condos on the outskirts of Kabul.

"Yes, yes," Mohammad says impatiently. "There is much money now, much building, but not for us! Things go up, we still have no money."

Out of the corner of my eye I spot a contingent of street kids racing toward us. Suddenly a fighter jet swoops down and blasts past.

"Everything going up in price," Mohammad is saying. "Foreigners have much money and make prices higher. We can't afford anything."

"The price for food and housing has skyrocketed," Dan says as he pushes the gate buzzer at my guesthouse. "Salaries have remained pretty much the same, so Afghans are being squeezed—unless they work for an international organization."

"Karzai is not our president," Mohammad says. "He's your puppet." Dan adds matter-of-factly, "Without foreign troops Karzai wouldn't last a day—maybe an hour."

A tiny boy pulls on my pant leg, "I have no mother, no father, no brother, you give me dollar?"

The anti-American riot that ripped through Kabul, pinning me behind my guesthouse walls, had roots, it seems to me, in nearly five years of promises unfulfilled—promises that Afghans would have security, reconstruction, and democracy. Instead Afghans have omnipresent poverty, nonexistent public services, rising power of insurgents, declining support for government, privileged foreigners—a volatile mixture that exploded in gunfire on the streets of Kabul. When you have only desperation, promises are taken seriously.

Vanni Cappelli, president of the Afghanistan Foreign Press Association, says the deterioration could have been avoided if the Bush administration had committed enough troops, built up the Afghan security forces while disarming the warlords, and allocated sufficient funds for reconstruction. "The Bush administration was never serious about national reconstruction," Vanni says with sharp dark eyes. "It went to Afghanistan as a response to 9/11, and moved on to its real obsession, Iraq."

I do know that in Afghanistan and Iraq the Bush administration was clue-

less about the wars it faced, declaring victory before the real wars began. The neocons wrote a silly script that had Afghans and Iraqis pulverized by our hi-tech war machine and quickly capitulating, as if the Vietnam debacle never happened, as if the world's guerrilla fighters never learned how to stymie and slowly bleed the world's premier conventional military.

With the U.S. military unable to establish security in Iraq and Afghanistan, our "armies" of reconstruction were soon marooned. Listen to American NGO workers in Afghanistan: "When I came here I thought we would accomplish a lot, not now." "We can't go out in the field anymore, so we can't accomplish much." "If I can help just one farmer, then I will be satisfied." "Nothing is going to change in this country." That is our frontline for reconstruction.

America's consistent failure at modern war-fighting and nation-building reflects a country oblivious to its limitations—even superpowers don't have super powers. The Bush administration's profound miscalculations and deep ignorance merely encouraged our failures. We have never defeated a guerrilla force or succeeded at true nation-building.

So now what? If we walk away from Iraq, we will shed a failed president's obsession. If we walk away from Afghanistan, we might lose much more.

In one month I witnessed the plunge of Afghanistan; in two months I don't want to witness the rise of a genuine threat to America. We need to figure out how to keep al-Qaeda from taking over the Toilet that we never cleaned up. But no more unfulfilled promises to Afghans. I've had enough hunkering down behind Kabul walls. ■

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Border Bargaining

The House must decide whether to block amnesty or split the difference with the Senate.

By W. James Antle III

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for the Senate's sweeping immigration program to face its first hurdle in the House of Representatives. The problem was process, not policy: the Senate legislation required illegal immigrants to pay back taxes as a condition for receiving amnesty and made newly minted guest workers subject to the federal income tax. The Constitution, however, requires that all revenue-raising measures originate in the House, and the Ways and Means Committee asserted its jurisdiction to temporarily block consideration of the bill.

"These kinds of blue-slip issues come up all the time," says a Capitol Hill staffer. "It is totally about procedure." Usually these technical glitches are easily resolved, but nothing will be simple about reconciling House-Senate differences on immigration. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) suggested a typical legislative maneuver—attaching immigration to a House tax bill already on the floor—to resolve the impasse, only to encounter problems on both sides of the aisle. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) rejected Frist's proposal, which required a House vote to take effect—thus running the risk that lower-house conservatives might try to vote the Senate bill down.

So before the House and Senate even began formal immigration-reform negotiations, headlines appeared suggesting a stalemate. And this was the easy part. As the legislators move beyond parliamentary wrangling and delve into policy specifics, the problems are bound to get worse. The leader of the House negotiating team, Judiciary Committee Chair-

man James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), has described the two chambers as being "oceans apart" on the issue.

He isn't exaggerating. In December, the House passed an enforcement-only bill that called for a 700-mile security fence along the southern border, a mandatory employment-verification system, and no amnesty of any kind. The Senate version shrank the border fence, weakened the employer-verification provisions, and would legalize approximately 85 percent of the illegal immigrants already in the country.

To avoid the blanket amnesty label, the Senate adopted a tiered system for dealing with illegal aliens. Undocumented workers who have been in the United States for more than five years can apply for legal status without leaving the country; those who have been here for two to five years must go home and apply from a point of entry; illegals who have been here for less than two years are ineligible. But with limited bureaucratic resources and unreliable documentation, these distinctions may prove illusory.

Less familiar sections of the Senate bill are also arousing controversy. The measure's proponents insist that it is not amnesty because even illegals who have been here for more than five years must learn English and pay \$3,200 in fines plus back taxes. But it turns out that 40 percent of their back taxes will be forgiven—a luxury denied American citizens—and they will receive credit for Social Security taxes paid using invalid numbers. The Congressional Budget Office projects that the Senate approach

would double legal immigration over the next 20 years; Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation finds these estimates too conservative.

Among House members, however, nothing elicits stronger opposition than creating a path to citizenship for illegal aliens. Congressman Peter King (R-N.Y.), chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, told reporters, "People would rather see no bill than to see 11 million illegals legalized." Sensenbrenner has insisted that compromise is impossible unless these provisions are removed. The *Washington Post* estimates that 75 percent of House Republicans oppose the Senate bill, largely on these grounds.

Critics aren't limited to the GOP's conservative wing. Congressman Christopher Shays of Connecticut is one of the most liberal Republicans in the House, and he has called citizenship for illegals "a huge mistake." Congressman Charles Bass (R-N.H.) voted with the American Conservative Union just 58 percent of the time in 2005, but he prefers the House bill to the Senate's.

"The congressman believes it is necessary to enforce border security first," says Bass spokeswoman Lindsey Jackson. "He strongly opposes amnesty in any form and wants to avoid anyone jumping in line ahead of those who immigrate legally."

The GOP's near-unanimity on this issue shouldn't be surprising. Moderate Republicans are among the most vulnerable incumbents this fall. Their districts tend to be more competitive, and the Democrats have been unusually successful at candidate recruitment. At-risk