

Beyond War

REIMAGINING AMERICAN INFLUENCE
IN A NEW MIDDLE EAST

David Rohde

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE
AUTHOR OF *A ROPE AND A PRAYER*



ALSO BY DAVID ROHDE

Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica

A Rope and a Prayer: The Story of a Kidnapping
(and Kristen Mulvihill)

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WAR

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**DAVID
ROHDE**

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To my daughter

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For personal reasons, I limited my travel while researching this book. In 2008, two Afghan journalists and I were kidnapped by the Taliban outside Kabul, taken to the tribal areas of Pakistan, and held captive there for seven months. Out of deference to the concerns of my family, I have not traveled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, or Egypt since the kidnapping. A list of the many journalists whose reporting, insights, and analysis from those countries this book relies on is in the acknowledgments, endnotes, and bibliography. I am enormously grateful to them for their intelligence, bravery, and outstanding work. Any and all mistakes, errors, and omissions in the pages that follow are wholly my own.

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2012, the American ambassador to Libya and three other Americans were murdered. A bizarre American-made amateur video that portrayed the prophet Muhammad as a libidinous child molester sparked anti-American protests across the Islamic world. The conflict in Syria raged. And Israeli leaders talked of preemptive military strikes against Iran's nuclear program.

To Americans, the Middle East seemed as inimitably volatile, radicalized, and anti-American as it did on September 11, 2001. Despite the sacrifice of sixty-six hundred American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan [and the spending of \\$1.2 trillion](#), the region seemed as unstable as ever. Reeling from economic problems at home, exasperated Americans wanted as little to do with the region as possible.

This book is an effort to describe a new, more pragmatic, and more effective American approach to the Islamic world. I believe that a more economic and less military-oriented effort will achieve more than the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan did. In some instances, drone strikes, covert operations, and lethal force may be necessary, but investment, education, and normalized relations are equally potent weapons. We must develop a more multifaceted understanding and approach to the region.

The murders of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans in Libya were part of a historic struggle between moderates and hard-liners over the future of Islam. Its outcome will affect the United States, its allies, and the global economy for decades.

Intensive media coverage of violent anti-American protests distorts American views of the Arab Spring. The Arab world is not a monolith. Nor are the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. In the weeks after the murder of the four Americans, tens of thousands of Libyans protested against the killings, apologized to the United States, and demanded that militias disarm. In public opinion surveys, clear majorities in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, and Pakistan called for democracy and personal freedoms—and Islam—[in political life](#).

The polling matched my experience in a decade of reporting across the region since 2001. Arabs and South Asians said they did not want to be dictated to by Americans. Nor did they want militants to impose an extreme version of Islam on them. Instead, they yearned for a third way where their countries could be both Muslim and modern.

In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt today, young people long for American high-tech investments, trade, and education. Public opinion surveys show an admiration for American technology, pop culture, democratic ideals, and [ways of doing business](#). They also show a deep suspicion of America's intentions in the Middle East and its commitment to democracy.

In its second term, the Obama administration should publicly ally the United States with Arabs

and South Asians who support and abide by democratic norms, oppose violence, and uphold international human rights laws, whatever their faith. The core focus of American policy in the region should be finding ways to quietly, consistently, and effectively strengthen those groups over the long term. The most potent long-term weapon against jihadists is moderate Arabs and South Asians, not American soldiers.

* * *

The process will not be easy. American policy makers must learn to differentiate among opaque organizations and movements. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist political parties that won elections in Egypt and Tunisia are not ideal. But our true enemies—and theirs—are violent Salafist militants.

Across the region, twin imperatives should guide American policy. Terrorist groups should be targeted but economic growth must be fostered as well. Today 60 percent of the Middle East's population are under the age of thirty. If they are to be gainfully employed, [more than 100 million jobs will need to be created in the region by 2020](#), according to the International Monetary Fund.

Change is also needed at home. Over the next four years, it is vital that the Obama administration revamps and revitalizes Washington's archaic foreign policy apparatus. From 2001 to 2009, I covered Afghanistan, Pakistan, and, to a limited extent, Iraq for the *New York Times*. During that period, Washington's outdated reliance on military force and its weakened civilian agencies severely limited its efforts. While numerous books have focused on the post-9/11 American military and intelligence efforts, the first half of this book will examine the over \$67 billion the United States spent on civilian aid programs in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Between 2001 and 2011, tens of thousands of Americans implemented a civilian effort designed to promote economic growth, build infrastructure, improve governance, strengthen institutions, expand education and health care, foster civil society, and train local police, judges, journalists, and human rights advocates.

By almost any measure those programs produced meager results. Washington squandered billions, neglected its true allies in the region, and failed to employ its most potent nonlethal tools: American technology, consumerism, and investment.

Of the roughly \$1.3 trillion the United States spent in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the global war on terror, [95 percent](#) went to the American military effort. When civilian initiatives were mounted, sweeping changes that would take years at best to achieve were expected within months. And to an extent never seen before in American history, post-9/11 Washington relied on private contractors to achieve its goals and waged for-profit war.

* * *

[At the peak](#) of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2010, 46,000 American contractors and 214,000 third-country and local contractors worked for the American government in both countries. At times, American government contractors outnumbered American troops.

Congressional investigators later concluded that the use of contractors minimized the number of American troops and hid the wars' human toll. Between 2001 and 2011, 8,560 U.S. soldiers and contractors died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of the dead, 28 percent were contractors. While newspapers across the country faithfully printed the name of each American soldier who perished, there has been

no such listing of contractors.

At the same time, privatization proved to be wasteful. Investigators found that contracting [was sometimes more costly](#) than employing government workers, and tales of shoddy work abounded. As told, federal agencies paid a staggering \$206 billion to contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 to 2011. Investigators estimated that \$31 to \$60 billion was lost to [waste, fraud, and abuse](#).

In Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, I met civilians, government workers, and contractors who were in pursuit of money, adrenaline, or escape. I also found well-intentioned civilians intensely frustrated by the American government's ill-suited strategies and tactics.

* * *

While working as a columnist for Reuters and the *Atlantic* in 2011 and 2012, I visited Turkey and post-Arab Spring Tunisia and saw opportunities to back moderates being squandered. There, and across the region, speed, visibility, and American political dynamics ruled. Patience, complexity, and deference to local cultures were shunned.

This book is a call for change. After analyzing the Bush and Obama administrations' civilian efforts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, it details the opportunities and risks that the rise of Turkey and the Arab Spring present.

In hindsight, Washington's unsuccessful civilian efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan exposed the dangerously weak state of its own civilian institutions. In the decades since the end of the cold war, the ability of the White House, State Department, and Congress to devise and carry out sophisticated political and development efforts overseas has withered. And while the complexity of global challenges has increased, rising partisanship and a twenty-four-hour news cycle in Washington have fueled demands for quick, inexpensive resolutions that are illusory.

The use of contractors is a symptom—and a cause—of the decay in American civilian institutions. In all three countries and so far in the post-Arab Spring, the result on the ground has been a disjointed, wasteful, and largely failed civilian effort. In a volatile and rapidly changing region, there is a desperate need for a new American approach. This book describes it.

PART I

For-Profit War

CHAPTER 1

Little America

In the spring of 2004, a seventy-two-year-old American aid worker named Charles Grader told me a seemingly fantastical story. In a bleak stretch of Afghan desert that resembled the surface of Mars, several dozen families from states like Montana, Wisconsin, and California had lived in suburban tract homes with backyard barbecues. For thirty years during the cold war, the settlement served as the headquarters of a massive American project designed to [wean Afghans from Soviet influence](#).

American engineers oversaw the largest development program in Afghanistan's history, constructing two huge earthen dams, 300 miles of irrigation canals, and 1,200 miles of gravel roads. All told, the project made 250,000 acres of desert bloom. The town, officially known as Lashkar Gah, was the new capital of Helmand province and an ultramodern world of workshops and offices. Afghans called it "[Little America](#)."

* * *

Intrigued, I hitched a ride to the town with Grader a few weeks later. A weathered New England blue blood, Grader was the last American to head the Kabul office of the U.S. Agency for International Development before the 1979 Soviet invasion. In 2004, he was back in Afghanistan working as a contractor, refusing to retire just yet and trying, it seemed, to do good.

From the moment we arrived in Lashkar Gah, I was transfixed by Little America, its history and its meaning. At enormous cost, a sweeping American cold war effort had temporarily eased the destitution of one corner of Afghanistan but failed to achieve its [loftier, long-term goals](#). Surveying the town, I desperately hoped America could do better now.

Instead, I would witness an epic tragedy that unfolded over the next eight years. Between 2001 and 2012, over nine hundred American and British troops died in Helmand—nearly twice as many as in any other Afghan province. At the same time, the U.S. and British governments spent billions of dollars in a desert province twice the size of Maryland with a population of only 1 million. Hundreds of highly paid foreign contractors arrived to train Afghan police, farmers, and government officials as well.

A clear pattern emerged in Helmand. When massive international efforts were made, real progress emerged. The provincial capital and other large towns in central Helmand grew more secure and

thrived economically, and narcotics cultivation declined. But in isolated rural areas, poverty, corruption, and Islamic conservatism defied a scattershot approach.

On each trip, I met dozens of well-intentioned American and Afghan civilians trying to achieve those goals. But instead of triumphing, many of them ended up dejected, confused, and cynical. As American and British forces prepare to withdraw from Helmand in 2013, Afghans fear that the gains will crumble. The failures of Little America—and what they say about America’s place, role, and future in the world—haunt me as well.

* * *

In 1946, Afghanistan’s ambitious young king, Zahir Shah, hired a famed American heavy engineering firm, Morrison Knudsen, to build dams, irrigation canals, and a vast electrical grid across southern Afghanistan. At the time, palace coffers brimmed with profits from the sale of one of the country’s few exports: [Karakul fur](#) from fat-tailed sheep. With European Karakul supplies cut off by World War II, the value of Afghan Karakul had soared, and with it, Afghan confidence.

Hubris filled the Boise, Idaho, headquarters of Morrison Knudsen as well. The firm embodied the growing industrial might and can-do ethos of post-World War II America. Its executives believed that the dams, canals, and roads they constructed around the globe continued the inevitable march of human progress. In 1954, *Time* magazine hailed the firm’s cofounder Harry Morrison as “the man who has done more than anyone else to change the face of the earth.” In the United States, the firm achieved its goals. In a forty-year span, it helped build the Hoover Dam, the Kennedy Space Center, and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. But in Afghanistan, its project quickly went awry.

Afghan officials dismissed recommendations from Morrison Knudsen that the soil in Helmand be tested before constructing the irrigation canals. When water later flowed into desert fields, salt deposits in the soil killed crops. As costs spiraled, the Afghan government struggled to pay Morrison Knudsen. The high-stakes scheme flirted with collapse.

Fearing a loss of American prestige to the Soviet Union if the project failed, the U.S. Export-Import Bank began providing loans in the early 1950s. Eager to outdo the Soviets, American officials eventually promised to create an Afghanistan version of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Depression-era hydroelectric system that spans five American states. The newly created Helmand Valley Authority would employ thousands of Afghan engineers and farmers and turn southern Afghanistan into the country’s new breadbasket.

In the spring of 1960, the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee visited Helmand and discovered “a piece of America inserted into the Afghan landscape.” Driving along miles of newly built canals, Toynbee felt as if he were traversing the southwestern United States, where American hubris seemed to have conquered nature. “The river that they are bleeding might be, not the Helmand, but the Colorado,” Toynbee wrote in a memoir of his journey.

Laid out in a neat square grid, cold war Lashkar Gah was a sweltering, dust-covered town of fifteen thousand perched above the swirling brown waters of the Helmand River. Afghanistan’s longest waterway, the Helmand sprouted green fields and orchards along its shores as it meandered through hundreds of miles of desert. The town had a four-lane, pine-tree-lined Main Street, a new hotel with a swimming pool and a tennis court, and southern Afghanistan’s only coeducational high school. Downtown, a new movie theater played the latest Indian films. A few blocks away, American families ate hamburgers and watched Hollywood movies in a USAID guesthouse with a backyard cinema and patio.

The Americans prided themselves on being different from the British, but hints of colonialism emerged. Lucy Shook, a New Mexico housewife and devout Mormon, managed the USAID guesthouse in Lashkar Gah from 1965 to 1970. Young Afghan men wore bow ties, cooked food, and worked as servants. Shook called them “her boys.” Educated Afghan engineers, doctors, and teachers from Kabul worked with the Americans on the project. Farmers, shopkeepers, and traders made up the remainder of the population.

The province and its massive development project even became the setting of a James Michener novel. After traveling through Afghanistan in the 1950s, Michener wrote *Caravans*, a 1963 yarn that described local Afghan disappointment with an expensive foreign aid project that failed to meet their expectations.

David Champagne, a Peace Corps worker from California who taught English in the local high school from 1968 to 1971, recalled a poor but peaceful community where Americans and Afghans alike never locked their doors. His wife, a fellow Peace Corps volunteer, worked as a nurse in the local hospital. They were “heady times,” he later told me.

Champagne worked at an experimental school where Afghan and American teachers tried to infuse students—particularly girls—with a sense that they could achieve anything through hard work. Trying to combine “realism and optimism,” he told young Afghans that long-term education and government reform could create prosperity.

In the end, the elaborate Afghan and American project irrigated only half of the acres promised, consumed twice as much American and Afghan government funding as planned and took three times as long to complete. But its training programs produced hundreds of Afghan engineers and technicians with “American mindedness,” according to Toynebee.

“Most of them have lived and worked and studied in the United States; some have married American wives,” he wrote. “The new world that they are conjuring up out of the desert at the Helmand River’s expense is to be an America-in-Asia.”

Among the young Afghans who were transformed in the process was Fowzea Olomi. One of the first girls to attend the city’s new coeducational school, she went on to become one of Helmand’s first women to graduate from college. When I met her in 2004, Olomi remembered only a handful of words in English. But she could still tick off the names of her American teachers and recite verses of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and “Puff the Magic Dragon.” After school, she played basketball with American children.

“It was a very good time,” Olomi told me, eulogizing the functioning schools, clean streets, and tranquility of Lashkar Gah in the 1960s and 1970s. “I was very happy.”

But her good fortune, like that of Lashkar Gah’s, would be short-lived. Americans abandoned the city in the summer of 1979 as violence spread across the country just before the Soviet invasion. Twenty years of guerrilla and civil war ensued.

By the early 1990s, soldiers-turned-thieves roamed Lashkar Gah’s streets, and warlords encouraged local farmers to grow opium poppies, the raw form of heroin. In 1994, residents welcomed the rise of the Taliban in Helmand’s remote villages and applauded when thieves had their hands chopped off on a local soccer field. Crime plummeted.

For Olomi and other women, life fell apart. Her husband, who had gone to Russia to study medicine and resettled there, abandoned Olomi. In Lashkar Gah, Taliban religious police closed a girls’ school she had opened to support herself. Olomi, who had chosen her husband at the age of twenty-five, watched helplessly as her daughter was forced by her husband’s brothers to marry a cousin at thirteen.

Her hopes rose again in 2001, when American bombs drove the Taliban from power. Olomi dreamed of another American-backed renaissance.

“At that time, we really felt so happy,” she said. “[We felt that we were free now.](#)”

* * *

In June 2004, I drove into Lashkar Gah with Charles Grader and found a bustling town of a hundred thousand people filled with shops and open-air markets. The prosperity, though, was illusory. The boom was largely fueled by Helmand’s trade in opium poppy, the raw form of heroin, which had been spreading across the province since the fall of the Taliban. Throughout the trip, eight Afghan security guards hired by Grader’s employer accompanied us for safety reasons.

In the center of town, the remains of Little America still stood. Afghans had erected eight-foot-high mud-brick walls around the one-story suburban tract homes the Americans had built during the cold war, a sign of differing Afghan and American notions of privacy. Rows of pine trees still lined some streets. And the headquarters of the Helmand Valley Authority—an impressive two-story office building—was in remarkably good shape. In some ways, Lashkar Gah reminded me of a small town in Texas, which bustled in the morning and grew still in stifling afternoon heat.

The province’s governor, Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, was allegedly enmeshed in the opium trade, residents later told me, and enriching his own tribe at the expense of others. When I asked him about it, Akhundzada denied engaging in trafficking or victimizing other tribes. In the years to come, the drug trade and the corruption it spawned would act as a cancer in Helmand, creating dubious fortunes, deep inequality, and simmering anger at government corruption.

In a series of meetings with local officials during our 2004 trip, Grader promised to create public works projects that would repair the province’s American-built irrigation system, employ local farmers, and give them an alternative to poppy growing. As we crisscrossed the town that day, he defended the thirty-year cold war American project from critics who called it a costly boondoggle. Yes, the project had enormous cost overruns and failed to irrigate the acres promised, Grader said, but it trained thousands of Afghans.

“I feel so good about the education here,” he said after meeting an Afghan engineer taught by Americans in the 1970s. “USAID trained a lot of people.”

Grader was a marker of how the American approach to development had changed since the cold war. No longer a government worker, he was a private contractor paid [\\$130,000 a year](#) by Chemonics International, a for-profit consulting firm based in Washington. From Kabul, he managed a \$130 million USAID contract to revitalize agriculture across southern Afghanistan and slow the exploding cultivation of opium poppy. The year before, Grader had spent six months in Iraq managing a \$62 million USAID education reform contract for a Washington for-profit consulting firm named Creative Associates International.

Instead of USAID implementing projects itself, the agency doled out government aid money to private contractors, who then hired a cascading series of subcontractors to actually carry out the work. Chemonics was one of several dozen Washington-based contracting firms known as “Beltway bandits” established in response to the privatization of government services by the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations. The owner of Chemonics, an Arizona businessman named Scott Spangler, worked at USAID as a political appointee during the George H. W. Bush administration. During the 1990s, he and his wife contributed \$98,000 to political candidates, all Republicans. By 2004, 95 percent of the firm’s \$185 million in annual revenue came from USAID.

Under George W. Bush, the amount of money going to contractors rose by 70 percent. In theory, the use of contractors created competition between firms that saved taxpayers money, slowed the growth of the federal work force, and provided better services. Contractors could also be hired quickly, avoiding glacial federal government hiring procedures. And they could be let go as soon as a project was completed.

But Afghans loathed foreign contractors. They cited studies showing that 40 percent of foreign aid eventually returned to donor countries in the form of contractor profits. An Afghan engineer who worked for Grader said both Americans and Afghans were corrupt. Americans made their money through high overhead and expense rates, he said. Afghans made their money through old-fashioned kickbacks and bribes.

“For you, it’s white-collar crime,” he told me. “For us, it’s blue-collar crime.”

Lanky, with a thick shock of gray hair and a faded all-American look, Grader was an eclectic cold war throwback with renaissance flair. Perennially clad in brown bucks, he wore khaki pants and blue Brooks Brothers button-down shirts. The son of a postmaster and a housewife, he grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, a community north of Boston that the Graders had inhabited since the 1700s.

After graduating from high school, he went to sea as a sailor on a Liberian tanker. Later, he attended the Coast Guard Academy, earned a bachelor’s degree from Boston University, studied at the London School of Economics, received a doctorate in economics from Tuft University’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and earned an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

His USAID career spanned the 1960s and 1970s, and Grader made his name as an advocate for reducing American staff at USAID missions and increasing the local staff. After retiring from USAID, Grader served as CEO of the world’s largest bauxite mine in Guinea for five years, ran the senior executives program at MIT for a decade, and then returned to Afghanistan in 1996 as managing director of Afghanaid, a British NGO. His family had affectionately dubbed him “The Indiana Jones of Marblehead.” A divorced father of two and lifelong vegetarian, Grader lived in a rented house in Kabul and spent his nights cooking cheese soufflés, listening to Italian opera, and reading Thucydides. He worried that America was in danger of following the path of ancient Athens, overextending itself and succumbing to Sparta.

Grader sometimes overextended in his own life. In 1997, he was nearly captured and killed by the Taliban while working with his Afghanaid team in northern Afghanistan. In 2003, airport customs officials arrested him in New Delhi after they found British colonial-era rifles from Afghanistan in his suitcase. Falsely accused of smuggling antiquities, he spent five weeks in a fetid Indian jail. When American diplomats came to visit Grader, they found him teaching microeconomics to other inmates.

After spending the night in Lashkar Gah, we made the long journey back to Kabul. During the drive, Grader grew pensive. American society had changed since the cold war, he told me. Companies were less loyal to workers. Government agencies were more politicized. Expediency was the norm.

“I’m frightened by what we’re seeing,” he told me. “I really feel the integrity is less.”

Later I learned that Grader was right about USAID. The agency was a shell of its cold war self. Exaggerated accounts of American aid being poured down “foreign rat holes” prompted Congress to slash its budget. USAID’s worldwide staff had shrunk from a high of seventeen thousand during the Vietnam War to three thousand in 2004. Following the 9/11 attacks, the agency’s budget doubled, but it received virtually no additional staff to manage a torrent of spending. Overwhelmed USAID officials bundled contracts together, creating enormous contracts that could be implemented only by large contractors.

Grader said that when he ran USAID in Afghanistan in 1977, one hundred Americans managed roughly \$250,000 in spending each. In 2004, sixty Americans managed roughly \$80 million each. Staffers struggled to design, put out to competitive bid, and monitor hurried and sprawling reconstruction projects.

For Grader and other USAID veterans, the post-2001 effort in Helmand was an anemic epilogue to an intrepid American cold war initiative. “Our policy is screwed up, and it’s costing us dearly in time, treasure, and goodwill,” he told me, warning that Afghans would quickly tire of foreigners. “It really bugs me how inept our government is operating.”

At the time, I assumed Grader was exaggerating. Like generations before him, he saw youth as feckless and society in decline. Four months later, though, Chemonics fired Grader after only ten months on the job. Company officials said they could not comment on personnel decisions. Grader said he was forced out after he dared clash with USAID officials about the agency’s programs.

* * *

Several months after visiting Little America with Grader, I returned to Helmand to learn more about the contractors leading the U.S. effort. My guide was a forty-year-old ex-U.S. Army paratrooper who asked to be identified by a pseudonym—Bob Williams—for safety reasons. Grader had hired Williams’s small contracting firm as the subcontractor to carry out Chemonics’ agricultural development work in Helmand.

An affable businessman with a soft spot for journalists, Williams agreed to give me a tour of his USAID-funded agricultural development projects in northern Helmand, one of the province’s most dangerous areas. I was nervous. Williams relished the excitement.

As we sped across central Helmand’s Dasht-e-Margo, or “Plain of Death,” in a battered Toyota pickup truck, Williams casually chatted with me. Disdainful of the bulletproof vests worn by other contractors, Williams was dressed like a suburban American father on a Sunday afternoon. He wore baggy blue sweatpants, a loose white T-shirt, bright silver Nike sneakers, and a baseball cap from “Ritchie Bros. Auctioneers,” a Fort Worth, Texas, firm that sold used construction equipment.

The vista outside our windshield was otherworldly. Instead of driving down a road, we followed a worn set of tire tracks across a gravel-strewn desert. The earth seemed eternally flat, with heat waves shimmering on the horizon. There were no trees, plants, or other signs of life. Everything was a variant of the color brown. Behind us, two of Williams’s Afghan employees drove their own pickup truck as backup.

So much chalklike dust seeped into the cab that my ballpoint pen stopped working. After we crossed an asphalt road, Williams made a breathless announcement.

“We’re north of the highway,” he said. “This is bad guys’ land.”

As we continued driving, Williams’s life story emerged. He was an American adventurer like Grader, but of a different generation. The son of a lawyer and a stenographer, Williams grew up on the East Coast. After serving in the army and graduating from his state university, he married his college girlfriend and moved overseas.

After the 9/11 attacks, business exploded. By the time I met him in 2004, he had a \$4 million operating budget, fifty employees, and a dozen American government and United Nations contracts to build roads, repair irrigation canals, and teach farming across southern Afghanistan. He specialized in completing projects in areas where other contractors dared not tread. Taking risks, he found, paid handsomely.

“This whole security thing has become a convenient thing for people to hide behind,” he told me. “I’m no braver than anybody else.”

In truth, the agricultural development program Williams implemented for Chemonics and USAID was a shadow of the earlier, thirty-year American effort. In the 1970s, a dozen Afghan extension agents worked in each district. In 2004, USAID—via Williams—employed only two per district.

Using private contractors should have created competition for USAID contracts. Instead, Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan prompted many firms to decline to work in the area. With few competitors, Williams garnered windfall profits despite having little experience.

Williams had his critics. Chemonics officials praised his firm’s agricultural work but called his construction work shoddy. One Chemonics official told me a Thai engineer Williams hired to implement a \$700,000 USAID project to construct nineteen small irrigation dams was incompetent, did not understand English, and submitted an initial design that was “a crappy little drawing.” Westerners who worked for nonprofit groups called Williams a war profiteer and said he hired away their best Afghan engineers.

“We’ve just been reinforcing the predatory practices,” the American director of one nonprofit told me, referring to corruption among Afghans. “If [Williams] is doing shoddy work and pockets the money, it absolutely reinforces the way the system works.”

When I later asked Williams about the criticisms, he dismissed them and said he stood by his firm’s work.

As we made our way farther north, I grew increasingly nervous. There were no foreign troops in the area. Following the fall of the Taliban, the only American forces to deploy to Helmand were several dozen Special Forces soldiers. They built a base in the center of the province in 2002, hired several hundred Afghan gunmen to protect them, and focused solely on hunting Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants.

As Williams and I drove, the first of roughly two hundred California National Guardsmen were arriving in Helmand to create a “Provincial Reconstruction Team.” In theory, the unit would bring security to Helmand and coordinate construction. In truth, their arrival raised the total number of American forces in the sprawling province to a mere 350, a fraction of the number needed.

In the late afternoon, we arrived at our destination: a camp built by American engineers when they constructed the Kajaki Dam in 1953. USAID had awarded Williams a contract to renovate and modernize the camp for workers from the Louis Berger Group, an American engineering conglomerate. Under another USAID contract, Louis Berger would repair the dam’s two turbines, which had received no major maintenance since the 1970s, and install a third turbine. The repairs and expansion, it was hoped, would increase electrical output by 60 to 70 percent.

As we entered the engineering camp, I was astonished. It was as if a replica of a 1950s-era American motel had been built in the mountains of southern Afghanistan. A cluster of small one-story bungalows provided lodging. A large restaurant served American-style meals. A dilapidated tennis court provided recreation.

“We could fill that baby up,” Williams said, referring to the bone-dry swimming pool. “If we could get this going, damn, it would be nice. This must have been so cool,” he added. “I just want to make this nice.”

Early the next morning, we made our way to the dam itself. As he drove, Williams sipped Crystal Light iced tea, his favorite drink. For a five-minute drive, twenty-four Afghan security guards in six pickup trucks accompanied us. They were from another contracting firm, United States Protection and Investigations, a start-up security company run by a husband and wife from Houston. Instead of

deploying the soldiers to secure contractors, the United States hired more contractors.

The dam was an 887-foot-wide, 320-foot-tall wall of earth that held back the swirling waters of the Helmand River. Behind it, an emerald reservoir shimmered brilliantly in the sunlight. During the cold war, American and Afghan engineers rode paddleboats and picnicked here with their families.

We walked into the dam's powerhouse and found ourselves in a time capsule. The turbines, office furniture, and bathroom fixtures had all been manufactured in the United States and shipped en masse to Helmand. The Golden Gate Switchboard Company of Napa Valley, California, built the electrical panel. Westinghouse manufactured the turbines. A Youngstown, Ohio, firm produced the gym locker in the men's room. The building was a shrine to a bygone era of American manufacturing might.

For the last twenty years, Afghan technicians had jerry-rigged the turbines and somehow kept power flowing. Events since 2001 had puzzled them. Eighteen different groups of American officials, contractors, and engineers had visited the dam since then, they told us. Yet the Afghans were still waiting for promised repairs to begin. Williams and I had no answers. We made small talk, praised the Afghans for their work, and took a few souvenir photos. After a thirty-minute visit, we left as well.

* * *

Struggling to contain a raging insurgency in Iraq, U.S. troops handed over security in Helmand to British forces in 2006. When I returned to Helmand in the summer of 2007, 5,000 British troops patrolled the province, a fifteen-fold increase over the 350 National Guardsmen the United States had deployed.

Despite the earlier efforts of Grader and USAID, poppy growth continued to spread. Poverty, instability, and an epic five-year drought made the crop a talisman. Six years after the fall of the Taliban, the province produced more heroin than any country on earth, including Mexico, Colombia, and Burma.

On a blistering August afternoon, I met Williams in his base of operations in a former USAID house in Lashkar Gah. Williams rented out rooms to contractors and journalists for fifty dollars a night. A dozen Filipino construction workers employed by Williams lived in trailers in the backyard where Americans had held parties and watched Hollywood movies during the cold war.

A hand-painted mural on the living room wall was a vestige of the house's former life. It showed Afghan merchants selling their wares in a bazaar outside Lashkar Gah near Qala-e-Bost, a famed arch built by the Ghaznavid Empire in the eleventh century. The artist had signed her name in neat, cursive letters: "Janet Howard," she wrote, "June 1968."

When the Taliban took over Lashkar Gah in the 1990s, they declared the mural blasphemous. Under their interpretation of Islam, any portrayal of the human form is forbidden. Using white paint, they blotted out every human figure.

That afternoon, I joined Williams in the living room as he met the brother and son of a truck driver recently killed by the Taliban. His firm had agreed to pay the man's family one year of his salary as compensation. With a translator at his side, Williams greeted the Afghans warmly and tried to console them.

"We just want to say that when somebody gets killed on a project, it is a big tragedy for us," Williams said. "Your brother, your father, he worked with us for some time, so I got to know him personally. He was a hardworking man and always ready for any task."

Williams praised the driver for several more minutes. Then he asked if there had been any progress in identifying the killers.

“Thank you for your wishes,” the brother replied formally, displaying little emotion. “We have no information about these people.”

“Are the police not interested?” Williams asked.

“The area is not under the control of the police,” the brother explained. “So they cannot do anything.”

“The only thing we want to do—and it’s a small thing—is offer some compensation, which we will do,” Williams said. “I wish we could do more.”

“We are also deeply hurt by this,” he added. “It also deeply affected our morale.”

The brother sat silently. Williams looked at the son of the dead driver, a wiry young boy who appeared to be twelve years old. “How about the little one,” he asked. “Is he going to school?”

“Yes, he is in the sixth grade,” the brother replied, adding that the boy was the eldest of seven children. “The others are smaller.”

After exchanging more pleasantries, Williams departed and a member of his staff handed the Afghans an envelope. The man and boy politely thanked him and departed. I later learned that Williams paid the boy fifteen hundred dollars for the life of his father, the same amount the Afghan government paid the families of civilians killed in American air strikes.

* * *

The following day, I met [Rory Donohoe](#), the new USAID representative in Helmand. Donohoe was, in fact, an independent contractor. The agency was so short on personnel that it hired contractors to monitor its contractors.

A twenty-nine-year-old Californian, Donohoe had an MBA from Georgetown and brimmed with ambition. His age and limited experience reflected a reality of the post-9/11 effort. USAID and other civilian agencies struggled to get seasoned, midcareer professionals to take posts in Afghanistan. Some agency veterans had children and were unwilling to risk their lives. Others went to Iraq, which was seen as more of a potential career builder.

Tall, with dark hair and a boyish face, Donohoe told me he viewed the free market as the answer to Helmand’s ills. To curb poppy cultivation, he and USAID’s new director of agriculture in Afghanistan, Loren Stoddard, were proposing sweeping new projects that would create markets for the export of legal crops.

One afternoon, Donohoe and Stoddard gave me a tour of Lashkar Gah’s former Soviet airbase. They excitedly described a \$3 million plan to clear mines from the base and turn it into an industrial park and airport.

Standing a few feet from rusting Soviet fuel tanks and ambulances, Donohoe described how pomegranates, a delicacy in Helmand for centuries, would be flown to emerging markets in India and Dubai. Marble would be cut and polished for construction. And a forty-year-old state-run cotton gin would be privatized and expanded.

“This could be the commercial heart of southern Afghanistan,” Donohoe told me.

A few days later, Donohoe and Stoddard showed me a project to teach Afghan farmers how to grow chili peppers on contract for a company in Dubai. Stoddard, a burly thirty-eight-year-old former food broker from Provo, Utah, said he had launched a similar project in Guatemala where farmers sold chili peppers to Walmart. A USAID subcontractor had brought three white Zimbabwean farmers, who had been driven from their farms by supporters of President Robert Mugabe to help show the Afghans how to grow the peppers.

“These kinds of partnerships with private companies are what we want here,” Donohoe said. “We’ll let the market drive it.”

From the start, though, security problems plagued the chili pepper effort. After local villagers sneaked into the chili pepper demonstration farm and stole produce, USAID hired watchmen.

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, two dozen Afghan men with assault rifles staffed six wooden guard towers that ringed the farm, safeguarding the chili peppers.

“Some people would say that security is so bad that you can’t do anything,” Donohoe told me, “but we do it.”

Asadullah Wafa, the province’s new Afghan governor, told me that the American reconstruction effort was too small and “low quality.”

“There is a proverb in Afghanistan,” he said. “By one flower we cannot mark spring.”

As their presence grew, the British vastly expanded the small American base in Lashkar Gah and built a one-story building that contractors called “The Hilton.” British government civilians lived in modern dormitory bedecked with photos of Queen Elizabeth, Monet prints, and wide-screen televisions. Soldiers built volleyball courts, gardens, and bars.

“There were too many people who were in Helmand that were not in Helmand,” a British contractor who asked not to be named later told me. “They couldn’t see beyond the walls that protected them.”

British and American civilian officials dismissed the criticism. They said they ventured into remote parts of the province for weeks at a time, were repeatedly attacked by the Taliban, and narrowly survived several suicide bombings.

At night, I attended surreal cookouts in fortified Lashkar Gah compounds inhabited by British, Dutch, and South African contractors. White Zimbabweans and South Africans grilled boerewors sausage and downed gallons of alcohol. To me, they embodied the mix of sincerity, greed, and absurdity that marked the post-2001 effort. Some were desperate for work. Others were desperate for adrenaline.

At times, I felt pity for contractors saddled with Sisyphean tasks. In 2005, DynCorp International, an American defense contractor the State Department hired to train Afghan police, sent two retired American deputy sheriffs to train Helmand’s three thousand police. One was a California native who had trained police in the Balkans. The other hailed from a small town in Wyoming. Before arriving in Helmand, he had never been east of the Mississippi River.

At other times, I was baffled by the schemes USAID approved. In 2005, a USAID administrator brought eleven Bolivian cobblestone road builders to Helmand to teach their craft to local people. Afghans, who had driven on asphalt roads for thirty years, were uninterested.

In general, the most effective foreign organization was the generously funded American military. Marine and army units mounted sprawling campaigns to both kill Taliban and create jobs. Highly trained young officers and soldiers were generally impressive.

“The war is good for contractors, for journalists, for generals,” I scribbled in my notebook during one visit, well aware that I too profited professionally from Helmand. “The war is not good for the Afghan people. How do we create ‘The Good War’ again?”

* * *

Between trips to Helmand, I looked at the American aid effort in other parts of the country. Across Afghanistan, contractors dominated.

Of the five major contracts issued by USAID in Afghanistan, only one—health care—was given to a nonprofit group. Louis Berger, the construction firm repairing the Kajaki Dam, received by far the largest, a \$275 million contract to build roads, schools, and health clinics. DynCorp won a \$164 million contract for training police. BearingPoint, the global management consulting firm formerly known as KPMG Peat Marwick, received a \$41 million contract to reform the finance ministry and the economy. Management Systems International, a Washington, DC, consulting firm, won a \$15 million contract to improve governance. And Creative Associates International, another Washington, DC, firm, won a \$16 million contract to reform education. Other American companies won contracts to reform Afghanistan's defense ministry and help the CIA gather intelligence.

The Americans employed by the contractors ran America's political and cultural gamut. The head of DynCorp's operations in Afghanistan was a deeply religious and patriotic retired brigadier general from Arkansas who said blessings before every meal. Now in his midsixties, Herb Lloyd was one of only three Americans to rise from private to general in the United States military. While growing up in Hope, Arkansas, he knew Bill Clinton as a "chubby little guy" a few years behind him in school. Clinton went on to Georgetown. Lloyd went on to Vietnam. Wounded during two tours with a Vietnamese parachute battalion, he served a third, winning two Silver Stars, seven Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts. He later commanded troops in the United States, Germany, and Korea, and taught at West Point.

Since retiring from the military, Lloyd had worked for DynCorp administering American government-funded police training programs in Bosnia, Nigeria, East Timor, and now Afghanistan. Bearish, balding, and divorced, Lloyd exuded the energy of a man half his age and carried an M4 assault rifle wherever he went. He had narrowly survived a 2004 car bombing that killed four Americans and three Afghans just outside DynCorp's Kabul compound. He leaned Republican, spoke openly of his faith in God, and had an enormous desire to help the downtrodden. One of his proudest achievements was his "chickadee dees"—forty-eight young Bosnians he had helped win college scholarships to study in the United States on the condition that they return home to help rebuild their country afterward. All but one of them kept their word.

An unflinching believer in his country, culture, and company, Lloyd was convinced that the sheer power of the American example would transform Afghanistan's bedraggled and corruption-riddled police force.

"Our motives are selfless. Human beings can sense that," he told me. "They can pick it up right quick."

Lloyd vowed to stay in Afghanistan until "the job is finished" and the "very culture" of the Afghan police had changed. Americans had no choice but to succeed in Afghanistan, he said. Otherwise, terrorism would again threaten the United States.

"There is no option other than victory," he said. "Otherwise, America as we know it will cease to exist."

Phyllis Cox represented another side of America. A Harvard-educated lawyer and the daughter of a famed Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox, she was hired by Management Systems International to implement a USAID program to modernize Afghanistan's courts. Blue-eyed, with an angular face and short gray hair, Cox grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and received a master's degree in international relations from Tufts University.

Shying away from politics and pedigree, she moved to Colorado, got married, had two daughters, got a law degree from the University of Denver, and built a thriving legal practice of her own. After a divorce, she signed up for a short-term legal reform project in Cambodia in 1994. Captivated by the

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