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## USAID in Afghanistan

### Plunderers and Prey

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/12/05/usaaid-in-afghanistan/>

by MARK GRAHAM

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Whatever beneficence USAID has doled out over the years has come with a heavy price for Afghans and a heavy price tag for Americans. In fact, USAID is not an aid organization by any common understanding of the term, if by aid we mean helping people who are suffering out of the kindness of our hearts. Instead, USAID functions primarily as an instrument of counterinsurgency and as a pipeline by which public money moves into private hands. What happens after that transaction takes place matters little to policy makers in Washington.

It's a sad story that's been going on since at least the 1980s when the Afghan-Soviet War led America to initiate covert operations supporting Islamist guerilla armies and political parties in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the CIA played a huge part in the game, along with Saudi Arabia and ISI (Pakistani Intelligence) USAID stepped in to do its anticommunist part. With a grant of \$51 million dollars between 1984-94, it funded the University of Nebraska's Afghanistan Studies Center and its leader Thomas Gouttierre, who produced a series of now infamous textbooks for schoolchildren.

The most detailed account of these books was written by Craig S. Davis in his 2002 article for *World Policy Journal*, "A is for Allah, J is for Jihad." Instead of simply instructing Afghan children in the 3Rs, these texts inserted anti-Communist and religious sentiments into grammar exercises and word problems. For homework:

“One group of mujahidin attack 50 Russian soldiers. In that attack 20 Russians were killed. How many Russians fled?”

Dal [is for] Religion (din). Our religion is Islam. The Russians are the enemies of the religion of Islam.

By the time the United States had taken over the attack on Afghanistan from the Soviet Union, it was clear that this kind of short-sighted brainwashing had been a major force in shaping the fanatical worldviews of a generation of Afghan refugees—boys who would grow up to become members of the Taliban.

But jihadist textbooks are so yesterday, so Mom and Pop. Flash forward to the twenty-first century and you get USAID corporate style, doling out billions to a select circle of war profiteers. For the War on Terror, USAID turned to another contractor to provide education reform for the newly “liberated” Afghanistan. Creative Associates International, Inc. (CAII,) may sound like a literary agency but in fact it’s a Beltway Bandit with 90% of its funding coming from USAID. Not coincidentally, CAII handed Craig S. Davis a piece of the action in Peshawar. His article had deftly criticized CAII’s rival the U of Nebraska for its role in creating the Taliban while not once mentioning USAID’s financial support of the venture. Since finishing his PhD work at IU Bloomington on Mughal sovereigns, Davis (author of *The Middle East for Dummies*) seems to have spent most of his time studying the Middle East in-depth in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Just what exactly that study entailed can be explained by looking at CAII’s penchant for espionage.

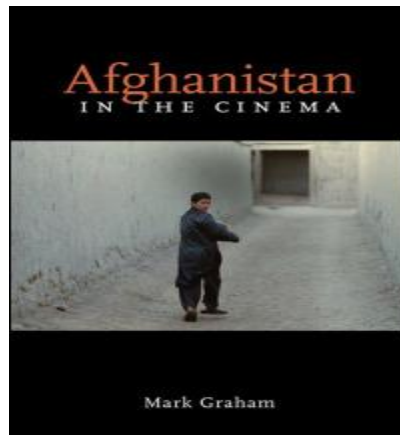
CAII’s track record elsewhere in the world testifies to a relentless pursuit of free market fundamentalism and vigorous counterinsurgency. Kenneth Saltman has documented CAII’s work “reintegrating Contra terrorists into Nicaraguan civil society through work training; influencing Nicaraguan elections; participating in both coups against Aristide in Haiti; and privatizing, commercializing, and Americanizing Haitian media and journalism particularly around election coverage.” In Afghanistan the purported goal of “promoting democracy” in reality fosters dependency on foreign sponsors, and privatizes and depoliticizes education and the media. Recently the Afghan Ministry of Education, which works closely with CAII, has decided to omit all recent history (read the past thirty years of war) from its curriculum. You can’t buy that kind of thought control—unless you have a few hundred million.

Of course CAII doesn’t just restrict itself to Orwellian revisionism. It also plays a part in covert operations. In 2009, Pakistani journalists Ahmed Quraishi and Shireen Mazari reported that the CAII headquarters in Peshawar was being used as a front for Blackwater/Xe mercenaries (aka the “CIA’s private army”) to stage raids into the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan. A CAII employee was formally expelled from the country, only to return sometime later. His name: Craig Davis. By now you might notice that an anagram for CAII is I, CIA.

For those in the great game of international development in Afghanistan, skullduggery goes hand in hand with more mundane kinds of criminality. Thus USAID has also invested billions in vastly expensive construction projects with lofty goals of bringing electricity to millions, building roads, replacing opium cultivation with sustainable agriculture and so forth. Not

surprisingly, these projects have little to do with improving the lives of Afghans and all to do with enriching the pockets of those select few contractors who follow the smoke of war like a clutch of vultures.

While everyone's heard of Halliburton, there are several others who have yet to become household names. Nevertheless corporations like Louis Berger and Black & Veatch play a major



part in Afghan “development.” Like most war profiteering corporations, Louis Berger has had major problems with fraud, corruption, and slapdash work. In eight years, they and a few other major contractors (with help from the British military) have been unable to complete work on the Kajaki dam in Helmand Province, despite pocketing hundreds of millions of dollars. U.S. Representative Ed Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts said, “Kajaki Dam was supposed to be a show piece of the strategy in Afghanistan, but it has gone nowhere.” If anybody profits from this it’s the Taliban—who collect revenues generated by the still unfinished dam. And of course, Louis Berger made a killing. In 2006 a whistleblower offered evidence demonstrating Louis Berger systematically overbilled USAID. They eventually paid a \$70 *million* dollar fine. USAID took it in stride, awarding them (along with Black and Veatch) a 1.4 billion dollar contract to renovate the Afghan electrical infrastructure, including the Tarakhil power plant, near Kabul.

USAID low-balled the estimate to Karzai’s government, which kicked in \$20 million of Afghan money to the project in the hopes it would, as promised, bring electricity to 500,000 people and bolster the popularity of the “Mayor of Kabul.” Once in the hands of LB and B & V, however, costs skyrocketed to \$257 million. Against the wishes of the Afghans, the beltway bandits concocted a facility that was not powered by natural gas from Afghanistan’s own Sheberghan gas fields, but instead with expensive diesel oil that had to be imported from Turkmenistan. With the price of diesel skyrocketing, the Afghans soon had a fabulously expensive and worthless power plant, the operation costs of which would equal 25% of Afghanistan’s entire annual tax revenue.

Oxfam's head of policy in Afghanistan, Ashley Jackson, has stated, "A system has emerged where USAID is basically like a pass-through for these contractors." American and other Western companies operate with impunity in Afghanistan, where human trafficking provides an "invisible army" of laborers working at slave wages. Meanwhile they can bill the government whatever they wish for services. One of USAID's major contractors, built a gravel road for which they charged American taxpayers 2.8 million dollars. It was supposed to cost \$290,000. Nevertheless, USAID continues to outsource development to unscrupulous profiteers, while thanks to budget cuts it has neither the staff nor the wherewithal to supervise where the money goes.

As a result, USAID persists in doing business with firms like PADCO, whose Alternative Development Program/North was to have built roads, improved agriculture, irrigated canals and constructed dams. Ostensibly for the purpose of weaning Afghan farmers off opium cultivation in Badakshan, PADCO's project did not get the green light because the Afghans there are hungry or need help. It's all part of the counterinsurgency drive to deprive the Taliban of their drug revenue. It ended in 2009 with millions of wasted dollars and still no electricity to the Afghans there. An Afghan engineer interviewed by the Christian Science Monitor said, "Fifty percent they didn't do. They just dug this ... and left." A 2.5 million dollar road PADCO built disintegrated in three months. Their shoddy construction on the million-dollar Baharak canal included "incomplete concrete walls and drainage culverts – result[ing] in landslides blocking water flow to the turbine and, in turn, electricity from reaching any homes." Meanwhile \$650,000 hydropower feasibility studies "disappeared." But every cloud has a silver lining. PADCO managed to construct thirty new veterinary clinics. At least the animals are happy—sometimes.

It's just the people who are miserable, including those serviced by Chemonics. Awarded hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts in Afghanistan, Chemonics ranks just behind Halliburton and Bechtel in scarfing up tax dollar-funded development projects. Like some of the other usual suspects in Afghanistan, it doesn't always take meticulous care in the execution of its projects. In Haiti, USAID hired Chemonics to build a temporary parliament building for \$173 million. When the contractor pulled out, parliament had a debris-laden, unusable frame that Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world, had to spend three quarters of a million to make habitable.

Afghanistan fared no better. Pulitzer Prize winner David Rohde has described Chemonics activities in Helmand province for Reuters, focusing on agricultural development. Naturally Chemonics itself didn't do the work. Like so many other USAID contractors, the corporation in turn subcontracted its projects to a series of shady operators including one "Williams" who made three quarters of a million doing substandard work, spending much of the money on security and making side-profits like renting rooms to contractors and journalists for fifty dollars a night.

Elsewhere in Helmand USAID reps Rory Donohoe and Loren Stoddard attempted to initiate chili pepper farms. The project was based on one Stoddard had pioneered in Guatemala, whereby farmers sold their US taxpayer-subsidized chili peppers to Walmart, for the purposes of further enriching the Walton family. After villagers began to take the chili peppers from their own fields, USAID hired armed security guards to keep the people from eating their own food. It's

an apt metaphor for USAID: using public money to force developing nations into growing food for private profit in the US. When the farmers try to feed themselves—shoot them.

This bonanza of bucks, fostered by an endless war, has drawn corporate parasites to the public feeding trough for over a decade. The results should be clear by now: rampant corruption, cut-rate workmanship, broken promises, failed opportunities and billions upon billions of American money squandered by corporate con men who not only defraud taxpayers but also the recipients of America's presumably well-meaning "aid." USAID does anything but promote democracy and development. Its association with the word "aid" is a cruel joke—masking its true objective: a new era of neoliberal colonialism that uses the raw material and desperation of vulnerable countries to augment the most predatory and immoral brand of gangster capitalism.