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Everything That Happens in Afghanistan Is Based on Lies or Illusions

By Ann Jones

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A Film That Captures Some Edgy, Fearful Truths

Kabul - I've come back to the Afghan capital again, after an absence of two years, to find it ruined in a new way. Not by bombs this time, but by security.

The heart of the city is now hidden behind piles of Hescos -- giant, grey sandbags produced somewhere in Great Britain. They're stacked against the walls of government buildings, U.N. agencies, embassies, NGO offices, and army camps (of which there are a lot) -- and they only seem to grow and multiply. A friend called just the other day from a U.N. building, distressed that the view from her office window was vanishing behind yet another row of Hescos. Urban life as Kabulis knew it in this once graceful city has been lost to the security needs of strangers.

The creation of Hescostan in the middle of Kabul is both an effect of, and a cause of, war: an effect because it seems to arise in response to devious enemy tactics that are still relatively new to Afghanistan, such as the use of roadside bombs (IEDs) and suicide bombers (though there has actually been no attack in Kabul for six months now); a cause because it is so clearly a projection, an externalization of the fears of men out of their depth. It is a paradox of such "force protection" that the more you have, the more you feel you need. What's called security generates fear. Now comes a documentary that projects that fear onto the screen.

It is 2006, late in the year. A reporter stands on a rocky hillside near the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan and points a wobbly camera at dark-clad gunmen ranged at a distance before him. They've wrapped the tails of their turbans to mask their faces. They carry their Kalashnikovs at the ready. The reporter shouts a question: "Does the Taliban receive support

from Pakistan?"

As the camera jumps about to find the Talib who is speaking, a translator voices his answer: "Yes, Pakistan stands with us. On the other side of the border, we have our offices there. Some people in Pakistan is supporting us and the government of Pakistan does not say anything to us. They provide us with everything."

The reporter -- Christian Parenti of the Nation magazine -- has his story. For years, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has charged Pakistan with backing the Taliban, while Pakistan's then-President Musharraf denied it, and officials of the Bush administration looked the other way. Now, Parenti has the word of armed Taliban. This is the kind of story a foreign correspondent can't get without a fixer; that is, a local guy who knows the language, the local politics, the protocols of custom -- and how to arrange a meeting like this in the middle of nowhere with men who might kill you.

A Talib warns of an approaching reconnaissance plane. "We should go," the scared reporter says. The camera spins wildly across a vast empty expanse of rock and pale sky. "We should go." Moments later, safely back in a car speeding away, Parenti turns the camera on his own grinning face: "This is the most relieved American reporter in Afghanistan," he says, and describes the man sitting beside him -- Ajmal Nashqbandi, a 24-year-old Pashtun from Kabul -- as "the best fixer in Afghanistan." But we already know what Parenti doesn't (because filmmaker Ian Olds has told us up front before the titles even hit the screen): soon the fixer will be dead, murdered by the Taliban. We will be witnesses.

If this sounds harrowing, it is. Fixer is the best documentary I've seen on Afghanistan -- so good it's hard to imagine a better one. It's all jagged edges, blurs, and disconnects, catching as it does both the forbidding emptiness of the land and the edginess of war-weary Afghans. One long segment, apparently showing the inside of Parenti's shawl as he conceals a camera from potentially hostile villagers, seems the visual correlative of the feeling that unsettles all outsiders from time to time in this country: the sense of being completely in the dark. In 2006-2007, as the Taliban surged back with kidnappings, murders, bombs, and jihadi suicide attacks, this is how Afghanistan felt. It's the feeling that still drives Hesco sales in the capital.

Full disclosure: both Parenti and I have written about Afghanistan for the Nation for several years. I write mostly about women, Parenti mostly about the war, and I admire his work. We met for the first time only a couple of months ago, after both of us were invited to take part in a conference on Afghanistan. He told me about Fixer, then playing at the Tribeca Film Festival. I went to see it, and when it ended I could hardly get out of my seat. Watching it again on DVD in Kabul made me weep.

By refusing to exploit Ajmal's murder for the sake of suspense -- by revealing it at the start -- Olds has chosen to make a film full of the kind of fear that seems to inhabit international centers of power in Afghanistan today. The film's nervous visual style is strikingly different from the clean-cut look of Occupation: Dreamland, his earlier documentary about American soldiers in Iraq. Critics will surely have much more to say about Fixer's importance as a film. It has already won a raft of prizes, including firsts at Documenta Madrid and the Pesaro (Italy) Film Festival,

and Olds took home a Tribeca award this year as the best new documentary filmmaker.

How Lies Begat Illusions Begat Lies

What I want to focus on, though, is the way the film resonates with conditions in Afghanistan today. Olds has the good sense to insert a quick history lesson in this film, on the grounds that you can't understand the Taliban without knowing about America's covert operations in the region in the 1980s. Back then, President Ronald Reagan's administration, mainly through the CIA, used the Pakistani Intelligence services to fund, arm, and train Afghan and foreign Islamist jihadis to defeat the Soviet army in Afghanistan. Pakistan subsequently used "channels built with U.S. money" to install in Afghanistan a friendly government -- the Taliban.

Later, after the George W. Bush administration invaded the country and the U.S. ousted the Taliban, it installed Hamid Karzai as president and returned many of the old Islamist jihadis to power in his government. Thus, this peculiar, well-established fact underlies the current war in Afghanistan: the United States sponsored both sides.

Some analysts say the U.S. "invented" all the "enemies" involved; others, that the U.S. (and Saudi Arabia) merely paid the bills, while Pakistan directed the action to its own advantage. Either way, this history -- much of it still secret or repeatedly re-spun -- leaves all parties to the current conflict in an intellectual sweat. They must plan for the future on the basis of a past they can't acknowledge. With national elections set for August 20th, the United States is planning for an Afghan future that still includes the jihadi buddies its officials know they should long ago have left behind.

Only the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has called, year after year, for a moral accounting. Its surveys of Afghan citizens consistently find that the people want lasting peace, and to attain it, they would prefer some sort of truth and reconciliation procedure, like the one that took place in South Africa, to cleanse the country and set it on an honest intellectual and moral footing.

For obvious reasons, the United States wants no part of the truth that would emerge from such a process. Just this week, the Obama administration first claimed it had no grounds to investigate General Abdul Rashid Dostum's infamous 2001 massacre of Taliban prisoners, even though Dostum seems to have been on the CIA payroll at the time, and his troops were backed by U.S. military operatives. Later, the president reversed course, ordering national security officials to "look into" the matter. In the end, President Obama may prefer to "move on." As does Dostum, who recently rejoined the Karzai administration.

I've elaborated here on Olds's quick history lesson to more fully explain why you may be finding it hard these days to understand how we got into what's already being called "Obama's War" -- and how to get out. Think of it this way: everything that happens in Afghanistan is based on (1) a lie, (2) an illusion, or (3) both. Then throw in mass illusion as well, carefully constructed so that each person tells others only what they want to hear.

Which brings us back to Fixer, a film steeped in stories of duplicity and self-delusion that are the

personal and political currency of Afghanistan today. In one telling incident, Parenti pushes to observe the famously corrupt Afghan judiciary in action. He's rewarded with a front row seat at a murder trial, only to learn that it has been staged for his edification.

In fact, a court official admits, the production Parenti witnessed didn't depict the way the court really works, but the way "it should work" according to international standards. The judiciary knows those international standards very well, since NGOs and private contractors supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development and other aid agencies have offered them training, and what's called "capacity building," for years. The trainers report success, which of course is what the aid agencies want to hear; and the trainees may be encouraged (as in this case) to perform for the public. If Parenti had played the part assigned to him in this exercise in mass illusion, he'd have reported a glowing story about the success of Afghanistan's new rule of law. (He didn't.)

Afghans have an expression -- "pesh pa been" -- referring to people who move relentlessly ahead by watching their own feet. Parenti, at least, could see when he was being tripped up. But the incident leaves you wondering: if officials of the Karzai government go this far for a single American reporter, what extravagant performances have they mounted all along for junketing Senators and cabinet members, and the likes of Donald Rumsfeld and Laura Bush, not to mention the recent rounds of Obama era visitors?

Even Ajmal the fixer repeatedly misjudges situations and his own people; and in the end, he proves to have been more of an innocent than Parenti. In an eerie moment captured on screen, Parenti predicts that one day the Taliban will kidnap a Western journalist. No way, says Ajmal, assuming that he and his clients are protected by Pashtunwali, his (and the Taliban's) tribal code of honor. Later, working for the Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomio, Ajmal fixes a fatal appointment with Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah. Taken hostage, Ajmal reassures his family in a Taliban video: "These are Muslims. We are in the hands of Islam."

Behind the Hescos Where History Is Being Re-Spun

Illusion and duplicity entrap the fixer, too, and spin his personal story into a political event. The Italians, who notoriously negotiate with hostage takers, persuade Karzai to exchange five Taliban prisoners for Mastrogiacomio and Ajmal. In the excitement of being freed, however, Mastrogiacomio fails to keep track of his fixer. The Taliban see an opportunity to recapture Ajmal and demand the release of two more prisoners. Karzai and his foreign minister, having freed the foreigner, then scramble to the moral high ground, refusing to negotiate with terrorists. Orders come down from Pakistan to kill Ajmal -- on April 8, 2007 -- to make Karzai look bad in the eyes of his own people. Mullah Dadullah sends a video of the beheading.

Ajmal's stricken father asks, "What kind of government doesn't protect its own citizens?" The answer is: a government that's bought, paid for, and answerable to outsiders, a government that has neither the need nor the inclination to care for its citizens. As Karzai explains the matter, "The Italians built us a road."

That's the government the international community is now spending more than \$500 million to

reelect. (Most of that money comes from the U.S.) International election officials, of course, are neutral -- so neutral that they look the other way as Karzai makes deals with rival warlords to ensure his reelection. One by one they come over to his side, and word leaks out about which ministries they've been promised.

International agencies responsible for mounting the election have already abandoned the goal of a "free and fair" vote. They're aiming for "credible," which is to say, an election that looks pretty good, even if it's not. In the context of accumulated illusions, this goal is called "realistic," and perhaps it is. As the fixer's grieving father says, "Our government is a puppet of foreigners. That is why we expect nothing from it."

As I write, 4,000 newly arrived U.S. Marines are trudging through the blistering heat of Helmand Province to push back the Taliban so local Pashtuns can turn out to vote next month for Karzai, their fellow Pashtun. What's wrong with this new Obama strategy? For one thing, in some areas the local Pashtun population has instead turned out to fight against the foreign invaders, side by side with the Taliban (who, it should be remembered, are mostly local Pashtuns). They're as fed up as anybody with the puppet Karzai. Like millions of other Afghans, they say Karzai has done nothing for the people. But saddled with history, Karzai remains the horse the U.S. rode in on.

Let me make it clear that Olds and Parenti don't draw these comparisons to current affairs in Afghanistan. Fixer is simply and appropriately subtitled *The Taking of Ajmal Nashqbandi*. It's a tribute to a trusted colleague. But watch the film yourself and you'll be immersed in duplicity: officials manipulate the truth, citizens fear to tell it, Americans can't bear to look it in the face. Watch the film and maybe you'll understand how hard it has become, here behind the Hescos where history is being re-spun, to size anything up, pin anything down, recognize an enemy, or help a friend.

[Note: Fixer will first be shown on HBO on Monday night, August 17th. It will be re-aired on August 20th, 23rd, 25th, 29th, and 31st. Check your local listings for the exact times.]