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## The Drug Thugs of Afghanistan

By Lewis Perdue

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AFGHANISTAN MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU thought it was. According to Seeds of Terror, most of the Taliban's religious fanatics have been replaced by organized gangs of big-time drug thugs whose primary goal is to protect their cut of the multi-billion-dollar Afghan heroin trade. In this book, which is subtitled How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda, Gretchen Peters estimates that the Taliban gets at least 70% of its funding from the heroin trade, and that both Hezbollah and Al Qaeda also benefit from global dope.

While Western media pundits wring their hands about the Afghanistan troop surge turning into another Iraq, Peters, who covered Pakistan and Afghanistan for the Associated Press and ABC, writes that "the parallels are actually closer to Colombia. The Taliban and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia both got their start as modern-day Robin Hoods, protecting rural peasants from the excesses of a corrupt government. Strapped for cash and needing the support of local farmers, both groups began levying a tax on drug crops."

Then, Peters explains, both the FARC and the Taliban started providing protection for the drug lords, gradually taking control of the drug refineries and strongarming farmers to meet production quotas. Severe punishment or death awaited those who failed or refused. Finally, the FARC and the Taliban established themselves as alternate systems of a dictatorial government, ruling by fear and violence.

And like the FARC, which tried to maintain a virtuous "people's army" facade, the narco-terror leadership of today's Taliban uses jihad as a convenient public-relations cover to gloss over its greed and lust for power. Peters tells us that Helmand province -- one of the key battle areas for the current U.S. military surge -- produces more than half a billion dollars a year in opium.

"If it were a separate country," Peters writes, "it would be the world's leading opium producer....It's also where links between the Taliban and opium trade are the strongest."

Small wonder, then, that fighting is fiercest there today. But all across Afghanistan, wherever there are drugs, the Taliban is there with protection: attacking NATO checkpoints so opium shipments can get through, planting mines around opium fields and rigging explosives to take out soldiers who dare trespass on the poppies.

Seeds of Terror makes it clear that the Taliban could not have achieved its preeminent position in the illegal global drug trade without the blundering of every U.S. President beginning with President Carter. Peters tells us that Jimmy Carter, in 1979, signed off on secret aid to Afghan guerillas fighting against the Soviets despite warnings that the groups were moving dope. President Reagan continued the policy of looking the other way.

After the Russians left in 1989, President George H. W. Bush terminated most aid -- hundreds of millions of dollars worth -- to the guerillas and government. "Overnight, that left 135,000 armed Afghans and their families no way to support themselves," says Peters, quoting a former CIA officer.

When President Clinton took office in 1993, his administration eliminated what little financial support was still trickling toward Kabul, thus forcing the population to rely on its only cash crop, opium. Money did begin to flow with the second Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but the damage had been done: The Taliban had become a potent, well-financed adversary, and military errors to come only complicated matters.

The U.S. military, Peters tells us, "doesn't do drugs." That is, despite the fact that the Taliban insurgency runs on the lifeblood of opium, the military refused to support anti-drug operations. "One Green Beret complained that he had been ordered to disregard opium and heroin stashes when he came across them on patrol."

The results of these bone-headed decisions become more significant in the light of a Stanford University study Peters cites: "Out of 128 conflicts studied, the 17 which relied on 'contraband finances' lasted five times longer than the rest." Seeds of Terror offers layer after layer of fascinating information about the deadly consequences of decades of disastrous policy decisions. This is a well-written, well-documented and exemplary work of journalism.