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Us or Them in Afghanistan?

By Tom Engelhardt

9/20/2009

In Washington, [calls](#) are increasing, especially among [anxious Democrats](#), for the president to commit to training ever more Afghan troops and police rather than [sending in more American troops](#). Huge numbers for imagined future Afghan army and police forces are now bandied about in Congress and the media – though no one stops to wonder what Afghanistan, the [fourth poorest](#) country on the planet, might actually be like with a combined security force of 400,000. Not a “democracy,” you can put your top dollar on that. And with a gross national product of only [\\$23 billion](#) (a striking percentage of which comes from the drug trade) and an annual government budget of only about [\\$600 million](#), it’s not one that could faintly maintain such a force either. Put bluntly, if U.S. officials were capable of building such a force, a version of Colin Powell’s [Pottery Barn rule](#) for Iraq would kick in and *we*, the American taxpayers, would own it for all eternity.

On the other hand, not to worry. As Ann Jones makes clear in her revelatory piece below, the odds on such an Afghan force ever being built must be passingly close to nil. Such a program is [no more likely](#) to be successful than the massively expensive Afghan aid and reconstruction program has been. In fact, for all the talk about the subject here, it’s remarkable how little we actually know about the staggering expensive American and NATO effort to train the Afghan army and police. Stop and think for a moment. When was the last time you read in any U.S. paper a striking account, or any account for that matter, in which a reporter actually bothered to observe the training process in action? Think how useful that might have been for the present debate in Washington.

Fortunately, TomDispatch is ready to remedy this. Site regular Jones, who first went to Afghanistan in 2002 and, in an elegant memoir, [Kabul in Winter](#), has vividly described her years working with Afghan women, spent time this July visiting U.S. training programs for both the Afghan army and police. She offers an eye-opening, on-the-spot look at certain realities which turn the “debate” in Washington inside out and upside down. *Tom*

Meet the Afghan Army

Is it a figment of Washington's imagination?

The big Afghanistan debate in Washington is not over whether more troops are needed, but just who they should be: Americans or Afghans – Us or Them. Having just spent time in Afghanistan seeing how things stand, I wouldn't bet on Them.

Frankly, I wouldn't bet on Us either. In eight years, American troops have worn out their welcome. Their very presence now incites opposition, but that's another story. It's Them – the Afghans – I want to talk about.

Afghans are Afghans. They have their own history, their own culture, their own habitual ways of thinking and behaving, all complicated by a modern experience of decades of war, displacement, abject poverty, and incessant meddling by foreign governments near and far – of which the United States has been the most powerful and persistent. Afghans do not think or act like Americans. Yet Americans in power refuse to grasp that inconvenient point.

In the heat of this summer, I went out to the training fields near Kabul where Afghan army recruits are put through their paces, and it was quickly evident just what's getting lost in translation. Our trainers, soldiers from the Illinois National Guard, were masterful. Professional and highly skilled, they were dedicated to carrying out their mission – and doing the job well. They were also big, strong, camouflaged, combat-booted, supersized American men, their bodies swollen by flack jackets and lashed with knives, handguns, and god only knows what else. Any American could be proud of their commitment to tough duty.

The Afghans were puny by comparison: Hundreds of little Davids to the overstuffed American Goliaths training them. Keep in mind: Afghan recruits come from a world of desperate poverty. They are almost uniformly malnourished and underweight. Many are no bigger than I am (5'4" and thin) – and some probably not much stronger. Like me, many sag under the weight of a standard-issue flack jacket.

Their American trainers spoke of “upper-body strength deficiency” and prescribed pushups because their trainees buckle under the backpacks filled with 50 pounds of equipment and ammo they are expected to carry. All this material must seem absurd to men whose fathers and brothers, wearing only the old cotton shirts and baggy pants of everyday life and carrying battered Russian Kalashnikov rifles, defeated the Red Army two decades ago. American trainers marvel that, freed from heavy equipment and uniforms, Afghan soldiers can run through the mountains all day – as the Taliban guerrillas in fact do with great effect – but the U.S. military is determined to train them for another style of war.

Still, the new recruits turn out for training in the blistering heat in this stony desert landscape wearing, beneath their heavy uniforms, the smart red, green, and black warm-up outfits intended to encourage them to engage in off-duty exercise. American trainers recognize that recruits regularly wear *all* their gear at once for fear somebody will steal anything left behind in the barracks, but they take this overdressing as a sign of how much Afghans love the military. My own reading, based on my observations of Afghan life during the years I've spent in that country, is this: It's a sign of how little they trust one another, or the Americans who gave them the snazzy suits. I think it also indicates the obvious: that these impoverished men in a country without work have joined the Afghan National Army for what they can get out of it (and keep or sell) – and that doesn't include democracy or glory.

In the current policy debate about the Afghan War in Washington, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin wants the Afghans to defend their country. Sen. John McCain, the top Republican on the committee, agrees but says they need even more help from even more Americans. The common ground – the sacred territory President Obama gropes for – is that, whatever else happens, the U.S. must speed up the training of “the Afghan security forces.”

American military planners and policymakers already proceed as if, with sufficient training, Afghans can be transformed into scale-model, wind-up American Marines. That is not going to happen. Not now. Not ever. No matter how many of our leaders concur that it *must* happen – and ever faster.

“Basic Warrior Training”

So who are these security forces? They include the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). International forces and private contractors have been training Afghan recruits for both of them since 2001. In fact, the determination of Western military planners to create a national army and police force has been so great that some seem to have suppressed for years the reports of Canadian soldiers who [witnessed](#) members of the Afghan security forces engaging in a fairly common pastime, sodomizing young boys.

Current training and mentoring is provided by the U.S., Great Britain, France, Canada, Romania, Poland, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Australia, as well as by the private for-profit contractors [MPRI](#), [KBR](#) (formerly a division of Halliburton), [Pulau](#), Paravant, and [RONCO](#).

Almost eight years and counting since the “mentoring” process began, officers at the [Kabul Military Training Center report](#) that the army now numbers between 88,000 and 92,000 soldiers, depending on who you talk to; and the basic training course financed and led by Americans, called “Basic Warrior Training,” is turning out 28,800 new soldiers every year, according to a Kabul Military Training Center “fact sheet.” The current projected “end strength” for the ANA, to be reached in December 2011, is 134,000 men; but Afghan officers told me they’re planning for a force of 200,000, while the [Western press](#) often cites 240,000 as the final figure.

The number [400,000](#) is often mentioned as the supposed end-strength quota for the combined security forces – [an army of 240,000 soldiers](#) and a police force with 160,000 men. Yet Afghan National Police officials also speak of a far more inflated figure, 250,000, and they claim that [149,000 men](#) have already been trained. Police training has always proven problematic, however, in part because, from the start, the European allies fundamentally disagreed with the Bush administration about what the role of the Afghan police should be. Germany initiated the training of what it saw as an unarmed force that would direct traffic, deter crime, and keep civic order for the benefit of the civilian population. The U.S. took over in 2003, handed the task off to a private for-profit military contractor, [DynCorp](#), and proceeded to produce a heavily armed, undisciplined, and thoroughly venal paramilitary force despised by Kabulis and feared by Afghan civilians in the countryside.

Contradicting that widespread public view, an Afghan commanding officer of the ANP assured me that today the police are trained as police, not as a paramilitary auxiliary of the ANA. “But policing is different in Afghanistan,” he said, because the police operate in active war zones.

Washington sends mixed messages on this subject. It farms out responsibility for the ANP to a private contractor that hires as mentors retired American law enforcement officers – a Kentucky state trooper, a Texas county lawman, a North Carolina cop, and so on. Yet Washington policymakers continue to couple the police with the army as “the Afghan security forces” – the most basic police rank is “soldier” – in a merger that must influence what DynCorp puts in its training syllabus. At the Afghan National Police training camp outside Kabul, I watched a squad of trainees learn (reluctantly) how to respond to a full-scale ambush. Though they were armed only with red rubber Kalashnikovs, the exercise looked to me much like the military maneuvers I’d witnessed at the army training camp.

Like army training, police training, too, was accelerated months ago to ensure “security” during the run-up to the presidential election. With that goal in mind, DynCorp mentors shrunk the basic police training course from eight weeks to three, after which the police were dispatched to villages all across the country, including areas controlled by the Taliban. After the election, the surviving short-course police “soldiers” were to be brought back to Kabul for the rest of the basic training program. There’s no word yet on how many returned.

You have to wonder about the wisdom of rushing out this half-baked product. How would you feel if the police in your community were turned loose, heavily armed, after three weeks of training? And how would you feel if you were given a three-week training course with a rubber gun and then dispatched, with a real one, to defend your country?

Training security forces is not cheap. So far, the estimated cost of training and mentoring the police since 2001 is [at least \\$10 billion](#). Any reliable figure on the cost of training and mentoring the Afghan army since 2001 is as invisible as the army itself. But the U.S. currently [spends](#) some \$4 billion a month on military operations in Afghanistan.

The Invisible Men

What is there to show for all this remarkably expensive training? Although in Washington they may [talk about the 90,000 soldiers](#) in the Afghan National Army, no one has reported actually seeing such an army anywhere in Afghanistan. When 4,000 U.S. Marines were sent into Helmand province in July to take on the Taliban in what is considered one of its strongholds, accompanying them were only about 600 Afghan security forces, some of whom were police. Why, you might ask, didn’t the ANA, 90,000 strong after eight years of training and mentoring, handle Helmand on its own? No explanation has been offered. American and NATO officers often complain that Afghan army units are simply not ready to “operate independently,” but no one ever speaks to the simple question: Where are they?

My educated guess is that such an army simply does not exist. It may well be true that Afghan men have gone through some version of “Basic Warrior Training” 90,000 times or more. When I was teaching in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006, I knew men who repeatedly went through ANA training to get the promised Kalashnikov and the pay. Then they went home for a while and often returned some weeks later to enlist again under a different name.

In a country where 40 percent of men are unemployed, joining the ANA for 10 weeks is the best game in town. It relieves the poverty of many families every time the man of the family goes back to basic training, but it’s a needlessly complicated way to unintentionally deliver such minimal humanitarian aid. Some of these circulating soldiers are aging former

mujahedin – the Islamist fundamentalists the U.S. once paid to fight the Soviets – and many are undoubtedly Taliban.

American trainers have taken careful note of the fact that, when ANA soldiers were given leave after basic training to return home with their pay, they generally didn't come back. To foil paycheck scams and decrease soaring rates of desertion, they recently devised a money-transfer system that allows the soldiers to send pay home without ever leaving their base. That sounds like a good idea, but like many expensive American solutions to Afghan problems, it misses the point. It's not just the money the soldier wants to transfer home, it's himself as well.

Earlier this year, the U.S. training program became slightly more compelling with the introduction of a U.S.-made weapon, the M-16 rifle, which was phased in over four months as a replacement for the venerable Kalashnikov. Even U.S. trainers admit that, in Afghanistan, the Kalashnikov is actually the superior weapon. Light and accurate, it requires no cleaning even in the dust of the high desert, and every man and boy already knows it well. The strange and sensitive M-16, on the other hand, may be more accurate at slightly greater distances, but only if a soldier can keep it clean, while managing to adjust and readjust its notoriously sensitive sights. The struggling soldiers of the ANA may not ace that test, but now that the U.S. military has generously passed on its old M-16s to Afghans, it can buy new ones at taxpayer expense, a prospect certain to gladden the heart of any arms manufacturer. (Incidentally, thanks must go to the Illinois National Guard for risking their lives to make possible such handsome corporate profits.)

As for the police, U.S.-funded training offers a similar revolving door. In Afghanistan, however, it is far more dangerous to be a policeman than a soldier. While soldiers on patrol can slip away, policemen stuck at their posts are killed almost every day. Assigned in small numbers to staff small-town police stations or highway checkpoints, they are sitting ducks for Taliban fighters. As representatives of the now thoroughly discredited government of President Hamid Karzai, the hapless police make handy symbolic targets. British commanders in Helmand province [estimated](#) that 60 percent of Afghan police are on drugs – and little wonder why.

In the Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban is strong, recruiting men for the Afghan National Police is a “problem,” as an ANP commander told me. Consequently, non-Pashtun police trainees of Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, or other ethnic backgrounds are dispatched to maintain order in Pashtun territory. They might as well paint targets on their foreheads. The police who accompanied the U.S. Marines into Helmand province reportedly refused to leave their heavily armed mentors to take up suicidal posts in provincial villages. Some police and army soldiers, when asked by reporters, claimed to be “visiting” Helmand province only for “[vacation](#).”

Training Day

In many districts, the police recently supplemented their low pay and demonstrated allegiance to local warlords by stuffing ballot boxes for President Karzai in the presidential election. Consider that but one more indication – like the defection of those great Islamist fundamentalist *mujahedin* allies the U.S. sponsored in the anti-Soviet *jihad* of the 1980s who are now fighting with the Taliban – that no amount of American training, mentoring, or cash will determine who or what Afghans will fight for, if indeed they fight at all.

Afghans are world famous fighters, in part because they have a knack for gravitating to the winning side, and they're ready to change sides with alacrity until they get it right. Recognizing that Afghans back a winner, U.S. military strategists are now banking on a counterinsurgency strategy that seeks to "clear, hold, and build" – that is, to stick around long enough to win the Afghans over. But it's way too late for that to work. These days, U.S. troops sticking around look ever more like a foreign occupying army and, to the Taliban, like targets.

Recently Karen DeYoung [noted](#) in the *Washington Post* that the Taliban now regularly use very sophisticated military techniques – "as if the insurgents had attended something akin to the U.S. Army's Ranger school, which teaches soldiers how to fight in small groups in austere environments." Of course, some of them have attended training sessions which teach them to fight in "austere environments," probably time and time again. If you were a Talib, wouldn't you scout the training being offered to Afghans on the other side? And wouldn't you do it more than once if you could get well paid every time?

Such training is bound to come in handy – as it may have for the Talib policeman who, just last week, [bumped off](#) eight other comrades at his police post in Kunduz province in northern Afghanistan and turned it over to the Taliban. On the other hand, such training can be deadly to American trainers. Take the case of the American trainer who was [shot and wounded](#) that same week by one of his trainees. Reportedly, a dispute arose because the trainer was drinking water "in front of locals," while the trainees were fasting for the Muslim holy month of Ramazan.

There is, by the way, plenty of evidence that Taliban fighters get along just fine, fighting fiercely and well without the training lavished on the ANA and the ANP. Why is it that Afghan Taliban fighters seem so bold and effective, while the Afghan National Police are so dismally corrupt and the Afghan National Army a washout?

When I visited bases and training grounds in July, I heard some American trainers describe their Afghan trainees in the same racist terms once applied to African slaves in the U.S.: lazy, irresponsible, stupid, childish, and so on. That's how Afghan resistance, avoidance, and sabotage look to American eyes. The Taliban fight for something they believe – that their country should be freed from foreign occupation. "Our" Afghans try to get by.

Yet one amazing thing happens to ANA trainees who stick it out for the whole 10 weeks of basic training. Their slight bodies begin to fill out a little. They gain more energy and better spirits – all because for the first time in their lives they have enough nutritious food to eat.

Better nutrition notwithstanding – Sen. Levin, Sen. McCain – "our" Afghans are never going to fight for an American cause, with or without American troops, the way we imagine they should. They're never going to fight with the energy of the Taliban for a national government that we installed against Afghan wishes, then more recently set up to steal another election, and now seem about to ratify in office, [despite incontrovertible evidence](#) of flagrant fraud. Why should they? Even if the U.S. could win their minds, their hearts are not in it.

One small warning: Don't take the insecurity of the Afghan security forces as an argument for sending yet more American troops to Afghanistan. Aggressive Americans (now numbering 68,000) are likely to be even less successful than reluctant Afghan forces. Afghans want peace, but the *kharaji* (foreign) troops (100,000, if you include U.S. allies in

NATO) bring death and destruction wherever they go. Think instead about what you might have won – and could still win – had you spent all those military billions on food. Or maybe agriculture. Or health care. Or a civilian job corps. Is it too late for that now?