

Introduction

I WENT TO AFGHANISTAN to cover a team of Midwestern farmer-soldiers who were on a mission to improve Afghan agriculture. They'd picked their destination, a province along the Pakistani border called Khost, because it was green on a map—indicating water in an arid land. “We can work with that,” they said. Only later did they learn Khost was the most violent province in Afghanistan.

Trundling around mountainous eastern Afghanistan in the team's armored vehicles, dodging ambushes and hitting IEDs, I began to hear grotesque tales of corruption and failed development. Soldiers, diplomats, and development officials told me of a vast collusion between American and Afghan officials that resulted in US taxpayers funding the Taliban. “We're funding both sides of this war,” one sergeant blithely told me. At first, it seemed preposterous. But as I encountered story after story, I began to realize the soldiers and aid people were telling the truth. There was a toxic system that connected distracted American careerists, private military and development contractors, Afghan kleptocrats, and wily jihadists. “It's the perfect war,” one US intelligence officer sardonically told me. “Everyone is making money.”

Trained as a historian, I wanted to know the origins of this pernicious system. As a journalist, I wanted to see how the patterns played out on a day-to-day level.

My questions started me on a journey back to the Afghanistan front lines and into the long corridors of power in Washington. I talked to generals and grunts in the field; ambassadors and everyday Afghans; aid workers and dissidents; congressmen, government staffers at a dozen levels, academics, wartime contractors, and journalists; apologists for the status quo and people fervently opposed to the current war and development cultures. While I found most to be hardworking, dedicated people—patriots in the best sense of the word—they were operating in a dysfunctional, self-aggrandizing system that

demanded short-term results in a war with generational timelines. The perfect war might have worked for the beneficiaries of the system, but it was for the most part catastrophic for the Afghan people and the American taxpayers.

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My subsequent coverage of a number of development teams operating in eastern Afghanistan provided a great window into the whole spectacle of counterinsurgency, from combat and conflict-zone development to interagency initiatives and cross-cultural interactions. I discovered that war and development policies that sounded so foolproof from the podiums of Washington played out much differently on the front lines of Afghanistan. I observed the voraciousness of a corrupt Afghan government manipulating an arrogant, ADD-afflicted American bureaucracy. I learned that the linkage between third-world development and US national security that foreign-aid lobbyists peddled to American policymakers was a faith-based doctrine with almost no foundation in research. Development experts told me that foreign aid might be the right thing to do for humanitarian purposes, but there was little data to indicate it made America safer. Indeed, some research indicated poorly administered foreign aid actually destabilized countries. Like Afghanistan.

So *Funding the Enemy: How US Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban* depicts what I experienced and what I learned. Following a generally chronological order, the book explores the roots of the problem in the post-9/11 US government decision to ally with Afghan warlords who were tied to their centuries-old tribal culture and the international opium trade. The decision provided a cheap way to subdue Afghanistan as the Bush administration raced toward the ill-starred Iraq invasion. But the devil's bargain in Afghanistan fostered a culture of corruption, fueled by a rampant opium industry and massive sums extorted from US development and military logistics contracts.

With the United States focused on Iraq, the strategy in Afghanistan shifted repeatedly—almost a strategy *du jour* as commanders and mission directors rotated in and out on absurdly short tours of duty. As the Afghan insurgency flared, Washington executed the typical bureaucratic response to a problem: throw money at it. But it just made it worse. More money, more corruption, more insecurity. Attracted to the increased appropriations, the guns-and-aid crowd flocked to Afghanistan, engendering the “Kabubble,” wartime Kabul awash with international aid money and the private military and development contractors who fed on it.

As the Bush administration departed, the US government belatedly and reluctantly recognized the mess in Afghanistan. Consequently attempting to roll out a dandied-up counterinsurgency strategy and reformed development policies, the Obama administration encountered a now–deeply entrenched system with a host of beneficiaries. The result was the perfect war.