

Afghanistan 2011

I visited Afghanistan for two weeks in March of 2010, traveling with the organization Global Exchange, and then returned in March of 2011 to spend two weeks volunteer-teaching at private school in Kabul. Below are three essays I wrote during and after the 2011 visit.

Deconstructing the U.S. Military; or How to Cut a Cool Trillion Dollars a Year from the U.S. Budget

by Dana Visalli

While in Kabul in March of this year, I visited the U.S. military base in that city, Camp Eggers. Knowing I would need a pretext to gain entry, I typed up a letter offering to give a presentation on wildlife in Afghanistan, which I had been studying. When approaching the base, one passes through an initial checkpoint, where a Hummer topped with a machine-gun nest stands guard. Then there is a 100-yard walk down a narrow corridor between high concrete blast walls, at which point one arrives at a guarded entry point through the wall. I showed my passport and letter, and was escorted through a second layer of blast walls to a little wooden information booth in this still-peripheral circle of defense. The pimply young lad manning the booth was flustered by my request; he had never seen anything quite like it. He did what all soldiers do when faced with something new; he phoned his superior for orders on how to proceed.

Permission was granted to pass to the next entry level. At hut #2 another friendly young male soldier by the name of Ryan was equally baffled by my written request, and he dialed up *his* commanding officer for instructions on what to do with me. Then, with Ryan as my escort, I made it into the inner sanctum of the base, where soldiers and military contractors strolled leisurely around the streets of the former Kabul residential area.

After being passed around to several more levels of authority, I finally ended up at the office of Morale, Welfare and Recreation. The female officer in charge there was as confused by my presence as everyone else had been, and after reading my proposal asked rather sternly, "How did *he* get on the base?" She reprimanded Ryan for bringing me to the center of Camp Eggers, then realized that she would have to phone *her* commanding officer because there was no standardized protocol on how to deal with me. As we retraced our steps, Ryan remarked that he certainly could not be held accountable for letting me on the base because all he had done was follow orders. In fact, the primary concern of



An MRAP, or Mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle. The US government has purchased 20,000 MRAPs at \$1 million apiece, for a total of \$20 billion dollars, although they are totally useless in the timeless battle in Afghanistan against severe poverty and environmental degradation.

everyone I interacted with at Camp Eggers was to follow the directives of their superiors; no one appeared to have the capacity to take responsibility for their actions.

In the mid-1960s, political scientist Hannah Arendt published a book-length study of how some of the great evils of history, such as slavery and the Holocaust, managed to occur. Her book, [Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil](#), concluded that generally such crimes are not carried out by fanatics or sociopaths, but rather by *ordinary people who accepted the premises of their superiors and their state* and therefore do what they are told to do, and participate with the view that their actions are normal. The word "banal" is [defined](#) as "something that is trite, normal, and commonplace." The root of the word comes from the Old French word *ban*, referring to feudal military service, which was compulsory and thus commonly accepted. Thus, military culture is by definition synonymous with banal, which my acquaintances at Camp Eggers demonstrated as they strove to find orders to follow and avoid responsibility for their actions.

Most members of the military establishment receive extensive training in combat techniques, including of

course [how to kill other human beings](#). One common drill at boot camp is to have recruits lunge repeatedly at mock human targets with mounted bayonets, shouting “Kill! Kill!” as they stab their imaginary victims. After months of such training, killing itself becomes banal, something normal and commonplace. The military culture of thoughtless submission to authority combined with heavy conditioning to snuff out human life creates a wide path towards the “great evils” that Hannah Arendt addressed.



Although the US has spent nearly \$500 billion in Afghanistan in the last 11 years on the war and occupation, it remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with an average income of less than \$2 a day.

Examples of what a sane society would call evil acts abound in the annuals of our current wars. For example, in 2010 a group of [five American soldiers](#) murdered a number of Afghan civilians “for sport,” and collected fingers of their victims as trophies. Killing for them had become normal and banal; it was in fact what the soldiers were trained to do.

In March of 2011 [two U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters](#) came upon 10 Afghan children ages 7 to 13 gathering brush to warm their huts and attacked them with heavy machine gun fire. When the parents of the children arrived on the scene, attracted by the gunfire, they could only collect body parts of their children. For the pilots of the helicopters, killing was their job, a normal part of military life.

On March 12, 2006, [four U.S. soldiers](#) entered the home of a 14-year old girl in the Iraqi city of Mahmudiya, took her mother, father and sister into a bedroom and shot them, and then gang-raped the girl. Afterwards, they shot her in the head and attempted to burn her body. They then reported the deaths as being the result of an insurgent attack.

On March 25, 2003, [Marine Sgt. Eric Schrupf](#) was participating in the U.S. invasion of Iraq when he spotted an Iraqi soldier in his field of view behind a female Iraqi citizen. He couldn't get a clear shot with the woman blocking his line of sight, so he shot her to get her out of the line of fire. “I'm sorry, but the chick was in the way,” Schrupf explained. Later he elaborated, “We had a great day. We killed a lot of people.”

Over the long term, most soldiers committing such murders become victims of their own lack of judgment, unable to live with the profoundly antisocial acts they have committed. Sergeant Schrupf is himself now [debilitated by PTSD](#), and can scarcely function in civilian society. He has attacked people in movie theaters because he mistakes their cans of Coke for military weapons. “I'll never be the same again,” says Schrupf, who seems

somehow mystified by the etiology of his emotional dysfunction.

Similar stories of the fruits of combat duty are limited only by time available to tell them. After serving in the Marines during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, [Lance Cpl. Walter Rollo Smith](#) returned home and soon killed his wife, Nicole Marie Speirs, the 22-year-old mother of his twin children. He drowned her in a bathtub without any evident provocation or reason. In reflecting on his heinous crime, Smith said, “I know for a fact that before I went to Iraq, there's no way I would have taken somebody else's life.”

After serving in the Army in Iraq in 2004, [Spc. Brandon Bare](#), 19, of Wilkesboro, N.C, came home and stabbed his wife Nabila Bare, 18, at least 71 times with knives and a meat cleaver. About three dozen of the wounds were on her head and neck. Killing is what he was trained to do.

Mental angst and dysfunction in soldiers returning from combat is commonplace. [A recent study](#) indicates that 62% of soldiers returning from the war in Iraq have asked for mental health counseling, with 27% showing dangerous levels of alcohol abuse. Suicide rates among soldiers and vets have increased dramatically in recent years. Over [100,000 Vietnam vets have now killed themselves](#), far more than died in the Vietnam War. More than 300,000 veterans of the U.S. military are currently homeless, [another study](#) reveals.

If war is in fact destroying the youth of America by turning them into trained and traumatized killers, one could at least hope that the wars themselves have some value to American society. Objective evidence indi-

icates otherwise. The actual conduct of war bears more resemblance to a circus act than the noble endeavor it is often portrayed to be. To cite one of the many examples of the senselessness of war related in the book [Achilles in Vietnam](#), author and Vietnam vet Jonathan Shay describes how, “During one patrol in the dry season, a U.S. Army squad ran out of water and was not resupplied. They walked for a day and a half in search of water in Vietcong-controlled territory. When men started to collapse from dehydration in the heat, an officer’s plea for emergency resupply was heeded: a helicopter flew over and “bombed” the squad with cases of Tab, seriously injuring one of the men. The major whose helicopter dropped the Tab was recalled to evacuate the casualty. There was no enemy activity. I subsequently read in the division newspaper that the major had put himself in for and had received the Bronze Star for resupplying the troops and evacuating the wounded ‘under fire.’ ” Remember that story the next time you see a soldier’s chest fill of medals.



The U.S. government has the world divided up like a pie into areas of American control and command. These "Com-centers" are served by over 1000 U.S. military bases and installations which cover the entire planet.

The Vietnam war itself was fought because at the end of World War II, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence from the colonizing French, reading from the U.S. Declaration of Independence to emphasize his people’s reasonable claim to self-determination. Instead of supporting this universal urge that humanity has for freedom, the U.S. supported the French effort to regain their colony for 10 long years (1945-1954). After the French were defeated, the U.S. fought the Vietnamese for another 22 years (1955-1975). Thus, 32 years of brutal mayhem took place, when all the Vietnamese people were asking for was their independence. The American lives that were ruined—the 58,000 combat deaths, 100,000+ suicides, 300,000 homeless men—were all expended for nothing, as were the 3.4 million Vietnamese who died in that war. To briefly mention another of our recent wars, today the nation of Iraq lies in ruins, the people impoverished, a million dead and 5 million living as refugees, while the entire basis of the U.S. invasion in 2003 is widely acknowledged to have been a [complete fabrication](#).

War itself is not only “a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed,” as [Dwight Eisenhower noted](#) in a speech in 1953, but war is also destructive to the physical earth, the very source of human life, and indeed of all life. The U.S. has dropped [15 million tons of bombs](#) on the earth’s surface in last 60 years, spread 1 [million](#)

[tons of napalm](#) on fields and forests, and sprayed [20 million gallons of defoliants](#) on some of the most diverse rainforests on the planet. By any measure, *the U.S. military is conducting a war against the earth itself*. Such an inane effort does not come cheaply. The total cost of all military expenses for 2012 is estimated to be [\\$1.2 trillion dollars](#), [one-third of the total federal budget](#). *It is the U.S. military that is driving the U.S. itself into bankruptcy.*

In summary, the U.S. military is destroying the lives of its own young men while at the same time it devastates other human cultures; it threatens the economic survival of the United States while it is fraying the ecological fabric that makes life on earth possible.

Mikhail Gorbachev once noted that the Soviet system was evil and had to be dismantled. The U.S. military is a similarly evil force loosened on the world. As was done to the repugnant Soviet system, the equally repugnant U.S. military should be completely dismantled, with all soldiers and ships and planes and weapons brought home from the vast web of [1000 American military bases](#) spanning the globe. The savings in terms of human lives, human suffering, ecological integrity and American dollars will be immeasurable. We can then begin to rebuild a national defense consisting of a small militia that can guard our borders and “repel invasions,” as called for in the U.S. Constitution, all the while remembering that the best defense is the making of friends.

This article is available with live links online at this URL: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig11/visalli4.1.1.html>

Rethinking Afghanistan, America, and Americans

by Dana Visalli



A school for 100 children, held outdoors because there are no resources available for a building. This village is just 5 miles from the billion-dollar U.S. Bagram Air Base.

I visited a small Afghan village of about 350 people today located at the end of a rutted dirt track about five miles from Bagram Air Force Base, just north of Kabul. As is the case with most rural Afghan communities, there was no electricity, no running water, and the houses were all made of pounded clay soil. Due to the proximity to Bagram, Blackhawk helicopters flitted overhead like dragonflies on their endlessly mysterious missions. Down on the ground, school was in session, outdoors under the mulberry trees. 100 children were crowded onto four large mats in the courtyard of the village mosque, each mat delineating a grade level, one through four. The children sat attentively with flimsy notebooks in hand, while instructors wrote on battered chalkboards at the front of each class. Because there is no lavatory at the mosque, the children have to use the adjacent farm fields for a toilet when nature calls. The lack of a bathroom, not to mention a school building, the lack of teachers, and the fact that the courtyard is already crammed with young children precludes adding further classes for older children.

One might wonder why the villagers don't just build a lavatory, or even a school. The answer lies in the circumstances of the village, shared by many in Afghanistan. The area's homes and fields were badly damaged in the Afghan civil war that raged from 1992-1996; in the following years under the Taliban this area north of Kabul saw continued conflict with the Northern Alliance. Most of the villagers fled to Pakistan, where they lived in refugee camps for many years. Upon their return after the U.S. invasion, they found their homes in ruins and the Afghan economy in shambles.

Today, eleven years after the U.S. first occupied the country, the economy remains in ruins, except for the sale of opium and heroin. In spite of the incessant helicopter patrols, opium production has expanded greatly during the American occupation (Afghanistan today supplies about 90% of the world's heroin). Profits go to the warlords and those they are connected to, while the average income for most employed Afghans is \$2 a day.

On the way into the village, my guide pointed out two large mansions, surrounded by extensive high walls, in the otherwise war-shattered landscape. He informed me that these belonged to "Taliban warlords," who had come to power back in the time of the war with the Russians. In that war, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia funded the fundamentalist mujehadeen (who fought the Russians) to the tune of [40 billion dollars](#). In fact 'Al Qaeda' translates from Arabic as 'the list;' it was originally the CIA's list of America's paid mujehadeen commanders. With billions of U.S. dollars at their disposal and a steady supply of high-tech American weapons, some of these commanders became [feudal warlords](#), and it is they hold the real power in the Afghan countryside today. Warlords destroyed Kabul in the 1990s during internecine fighting after the Russians withdrew, and they now reign supreme as local land barons. Some are Taliban and some are not. Many of them are members of the U.S.-funded Afghan government. Each warlord has his own militia, controls the local police force, and is greatly feared by the common people.

I was invited into the home of one of the local farmers, Najibullah, for several cups of tea and then a noon meal. Outside the clay-walled enclosure, small fields of wheat were greening, and the grapes were just beginning to bloom. Helicopters continued to pass overhead. Somehow in the course of his difficult life, Najibullah had become a humanist philosopher. “What is important to me,” he said through his sixteen year-old son, Abdullah, who is fluent in English (and also speaks Dari, Pashto, Arabic and Urdu), “is humanity. I feel the world is my village, and you are all members of this village. For this I love you. I like it very much that you are in my house.”

Abdullah, the son, added, “My father always tells me that the world is divided into two groups, those who build and those who destroy. The world is a village, and if you are destroying the village you are destroying the world. The military forces are always destroying. My father is always telling me to be part of the first group, the one that is building the world.” And so Abdullah’s goal is to become a doctor and help his people. “I must become a doctor,” he said, “or my life is nothing.”

Abdullah just took the national college placement exam, which determines what course of studies a student will be permitted to pursue. It is an unfortunate artifact of the moribund Afghan economy that of the 140,000 students who took the exam this year, only 40,000 will find a place in college, because there are so few schools. The rest will be discharged into a society in which there are almost no jobs for young people. Abdullah himself is so bright that he got the highest possible score on the placement exam, but because even the educational system is corrupt in Afghanistan, he was assigned to become a literacy instructor. Prospective doctors must buy their way into medical school.

Abdullah has seen the helicopters flying over his farm for all of the eight years that they have been back home. “What are they for, what are they doing?” he asked me. Given that the U.S. has now spent 500 billion dollars in Afghanistan while the economy continues to deteriorate and violence, both against women and in general is general rises annually, the only honest reply was, “Nothing, they are going nowhere.” Each

Blackhawk helicopter costs approximately \$10 million dollars. The Pentagon has purchased 2600 of them, or \$26 billion dollars worth of just this one type of helicopter; there are many others. It costs approximately [\\$4000 an hour](#) to fly each of them. Thus ten minutes worth of flight time would build a lavatory or composting toilet for the village schoolyard; an hour’s worth would build an entire school building. But no funds are available for lavatories, schools, villages or people.

What’s wrong with this picture? Two things. One, the United States is serving as one of the destroyer of the global village instead of one the builders. And two, you are paying the bill for the destruction wrought by the U.S. government. You were born free—free to lead an ethical life—and you have become slave to your own so-called government. That government allocates almost all of America’s discretionary financial resources go to war. The U.S. military budget for 2012, when all hidden costs are included, is [\\$1.2 trillion dollars](#), as much as [the rest of the world’s military expenditures combined](#). Meanwhile, global petroleum production is peaking, per capita grain production is falling, the world’s population grows by 80 million a year, and there are no jobs and no future for most of the children of the global family. The real issues of humanity are ignored while the military-industrial complex runs rampant. The destroyers will fall from their pedestal the moment you stop propping them up and paying their bills.

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.” Dwight Eisenhower, 1953

This article is available online with live links at this URL: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig11/visalli3.1.1.html>

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Afghanistan—But Forgot to Ask

by Dana Visalli



An estimated 30,000 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan by combined U.S. and insurgent violence since the U.S. invaded the country in 2001.

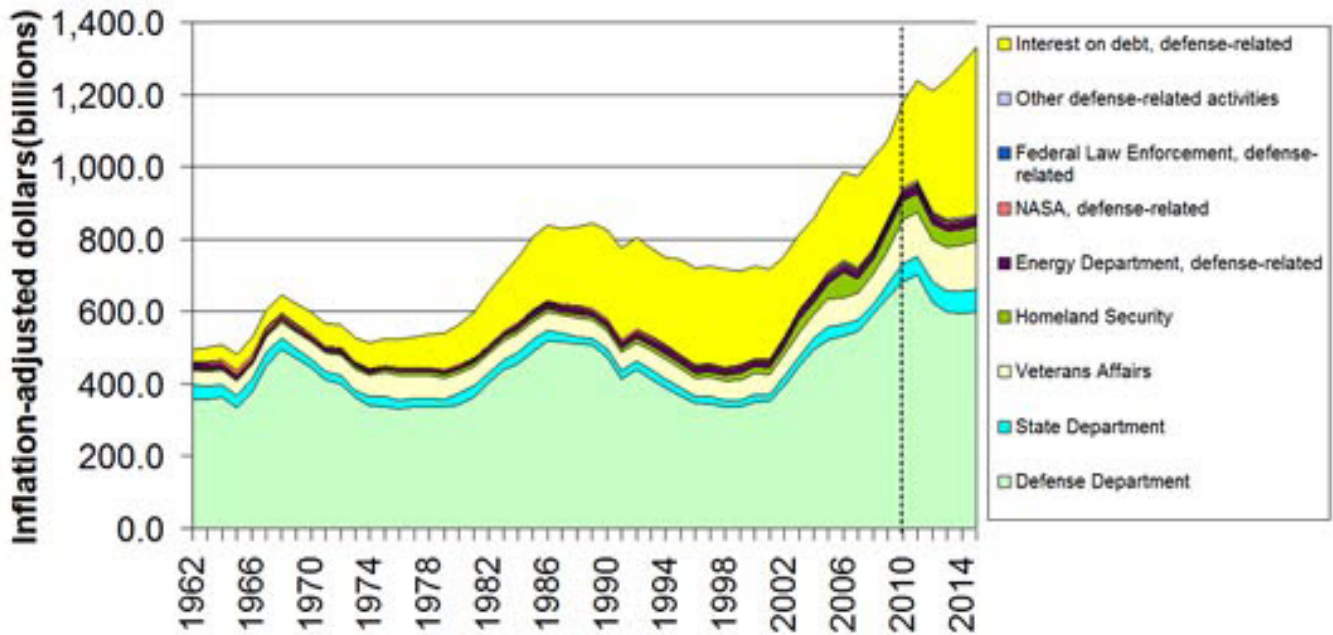
I received a number of warnings today that traveling alone around Kabul is not safe. I needed to take a taxi back from Kabul Educational University to the guesthouse, and Professor Zaher Wahab warned me not to eat anything that the driver might offer—it could well have a heavy sedative in it that would knock me out. I was instructed to sit only the back seat so that I could exit swiftly if necessary. And, Dr. Wahab warned, “There could even be a woman in the cab, who will let you touch her breast, but her skin will have something on it that will knock you out.” This particular hazard I have experienced elsewhere. People are so desperately poor, he said, that they will kill you for ten dollars. Thusly forewarned, I tentatively took a seat in the back of a yellow cab, ready to jump at the slightest provocation. But the driver took me home without incident, the greatest danger being the small TV screen on the dashboard which was playing Bollywood classics (consisting mostly of dancing women wildly gyrating in front of outrageously disinterested males) as we wove our way through the heavy traffic.

Later, as I was leaving the Afghan Leadership School, where I volunteer as a teacher, the young female students were shocked to learn that I intended to walk the mile back to the guesthouse (along a wide boulevard with various guards stationed along the way).

The 15-year old advised that I needed a set of brass knuckles with blades set in them for proper protection. The director of the school counseled that the thing to watch out for is a pickup truck filled with men; “They will put a gun to your head and it will be over in half a second (the kidnapping). Remember, you are worth more here than you are at home.” I couldn’t quite grasp the economics of that calculation, but the warning definitely heightened awareness of my surroundings on the way home.

Poverty in Afghanistan is pervasive. Dr. Wahab pointed out that many students in the Master’s program at the university do not have heat or running water at home, they can’t afford to buy books, and they eat only one meal a day. He characterized Afghan society as “impoverished, factionalized, sectarianized, brutalized, criminalized, gangsterized, traumatized, and militarized; it ranks at or near the bottom of every human development index. The country has been transformed into a hellhole with unimaginable poverty, disease, pain, and suffering.”

In one of the essays at his blog, he explains, “60% of the country’s 24 million population are under 18. You see them everywhere: educational institutions with little education taking place; standing or walking aimlessly in the streets; begging; selling little worthless



When all hidden costs are included, the U.S. current spends about \$1.2 trillion dollars a year on war and its military establishment.

trinkets; selling water, boiled eggs or homemade bread; polishing shoes; cleaning cars; carrying water, bread or other stuff; going through heaps of garbage looking for reusable items; tending animals; children taking care of children and adults; doing back-breaking adult work in shops, mines, construction or road work; repairing bikes; working in tea houses and restaurants; stealing; selling and buying drugs or cigarettes; fighting for or against the government-killing or dying; in juvenile or adult prisons; playing in the unpaved streets and dirty dusty fields; or risking their lives with unscrupulous human traffickers to reach Western countries. They are small, underweight, sickly, slow, lethargic and resigned. This is the future nation of the ravaged country. According to Daniel Toole, the South Asia regional director for UNICEF, Afghanistan is the worst place on the planet for a child to be born in.”

Unfortunately this statement was made after nearly ten years of U.S. military occupation of the country, and 500 billion dollars expended. The U.S. has spent about 750 million dollars on the Afghan education system since 2001, but that amount equals what is spent on the military approximately every two days in Afghanistan. The 140,000 U.S. and other international soldiers and an equal number of high-paid military contractors are fighting a largely-invisible force of about 5000 Taliban regulars shod in plastic flip-flops and traveling on Honda 90 motorcycles. The absurdity of this reality sinks in even further when one remembers that in the 1970s Afghanistan was a fabled garden land of pomegranates and pistachios; it is war that has left it a shattered image of its former self. War is the reason the Afghan people are impoverished. More war will not alter this fact.

Similarly, after two wars with the United States and 13 years of U.S.-imposed economic sanctions, the nearby country of Iraq is a smoking ruin where water, electricity, jobs, security, dignity and any hope for the 15 million children under the age of 16 are all in short supply. The U.S. price tag for the destruction of Iraq was approximately 1 trillion dollars. A similar fate befell Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Serbia, Nicaragua and Guatemala when the U.S. unleashed a total of 10 million tons of bombs (20 billion pounds) and 1.5 million gallons of napalm on the hapless peasants of these lands. It was in the midst of the intense bombing of the peasants in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1967 that Martin Luther King observed that “The United States is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” Today, in addition to the wars and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. also has side-show bombing campaigns in Pakistan and Libya.

There is a brutal but inevitable and poetic symmetry to the fact that the people of the United States, who show little or no empathy for or even awareness of the intense suffering, mass murder and ecocide that their government visits upon other members of the human family, are now faced with the economic collapse of their own country due to 100 years of military imperialism, and the impoverishment of their own children as one of the fruits of their incessant violence against other human beings and the earth.

This article is available online with live links at this URL: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig11/visalli2.1.1.html>

Professor Zaher Wahab’s extensive writings on Afghanistan are available at <http://media.lclark.edu/content/wahab/>