

The Afghan Dilemma

(Afghanistan) On the road from the airport into the capital city of Kabul you pass a stone wall adorned with iron rings. These were used by the Taliban to chain Afghans who had transgressed in some way. Then the poor souls were publicly stoned to death. This was justice, Taliban-style.

Let's go back to the beginning. After the al Qaeda attack on 9/11, the United States quickly defeated the Taliban government, which had aided and abetted Osama bin Laden's terror killers. America could have walked away right then, leaving Afghanistan to whatever warlord could achieve power.

But once again, the USA tried to do something noble: The Bush administration poured billions into Afghanistan, where more than half the population is illiterate and life expectancy is just 44 years. Also, America convinced NATO forces to help occupy the country so that an infrastructure could be built and one of the most impoverished peoples on earth might have some hope for better lives.

For our trouble, we are now engaged in a vicious guerrilla war starring the remnants of the Taliban allied with al Qaeda killers. Right now, there are about 25,000 Americans in the Afghan theatre as well as approximately 26,000 NATO forces. These men and women are protecting the Afghan population as best they can, but chaos is everywhere.

That's because the neighboring government of Pakistan allows both the Taliban and al Qaeda sanctuary. U.S. and NATO forces are not allowed to hunt down the bad guys inside Pakistan; thus, they have a safe place from which to launch attacks.

The Pakistani border town of Quetta is command control for the Taliban. Every intelligence agency in South Asia knows this. Pakistani strongman Pervez Musharif could move against the Taliban and badly damage them. But he does not. He takes

billions in U.S. aid and allows these vicious thugs a good night's sleep after they murder at will.

Picture yourself at Bagram Air Force Base, a huge facility north of Kabul. The air is almost always full of dust because people seeking wood for fuel and grazing pasture for animals have destroyed the trees and grass. The terrain is barren and brown. The summers are brutally hot, the winters very cold. You are halfway around the world trying to help folks who are frightened and barely have enough to eat. You are fighting the good fight but you know that the ultimate battle will never be won until the terror killers are confronted in their lair. No matter how many engagements are won, there will always be more fanatical killers coming across the border.

Yet the Western forces soldier on, most in a disciplined, heroic fashion. The Afghan conflict is far removed from the minds of most people in the world, many of whom couldn't care less or blame America for worldwide terrorism.

Thus, Afghanistan remains one tough neighborhood. But in the past six years much progress has been made. There is a brilliant new hospital, hundreds of new schools and other public works are operating, and the beginnings of an organized society have taken root.

However, there are miles and billions to go before anybody sleeps. America and NATO are trying hard in this forlorn backwater, but most of the world is sitting it out. As usual.