Our Humvee jolts and sways against another cold dirt track in Parwan Province, an hour north of Kabul. On the road thin shadows from barren winter orchards lie like dark lacework and flicker across the Humvee's hood and windshield.

A landscape of adobe-walled villages, empty fields, horse carts and dramatic sharp mountains slides by. Inside the armored Humvee we listen to music on a dusty iPod and two speakers that are jacked into the vehicle's nervous system. Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Sweet Home Alabama” rolls up on the iPod. The lyrics, though older than most of the soldiers on this patrol, capture the squad's mix of homesickness and political cynicism: "Now Watergate does not bother me / Does your conscience bother you?"

No one talks much about Afghanistan.

I am riding along with these two Humvees from the 164th Military Police Company to observe the American effort at keeping a lid on the Afghan caldron. I also want to compare US methods with those of the European troops who are taking over an ever larger part of the military mission here.

Specialist Willie Stacey stands in the gun turret on the SAW-249 machine gun. He taps his foot to the music's rhythm, and to the slight twinge of fear that animates us all. Four nights ago this unit was sprayed down with small arms fire, and earlier one of their number lost his leg to a landmine.

Only ninety-eight US troops died in Afghanistan last year; but the ratio of US casualties to overall troop levels makes Afghanistan as dangerous as Iraq. While Iraq's violent disintegration dominates the headlines, Bush touts Afghanistan as a success. During his recent visit, the President told Afghans that their country was “inspiring others...to demand their freedom.”

But many features of the political landscape here are not so inspiring—for example, the deteriorating security situation. Taliban attacks are up; their tactics have become more aggressive and nihilistic. They have detonated at least twenty-three suicide bombs in the past six months, killing foreign and Afghan troops, a Canadian diplomat, local police and in some cases crowds of civilians. Kidnapping is on the rise. American contractors are being targeted. Some 200 schools have been burned or closed down. And Lieut. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the senior American military officer here, expects the violence to get worse over the spring and summer.

Even in the once relatively stable northern and western regions of the country, foreign military bases and patrols are coming under sporadic attack, while civilian traffic faces a sharp rise in violent banditry. One security monitoring organization...
said they had seen a fourfold increase in such crimes over the past year.

The backdrop to this gathering crisis is Afghanistan’s shattered economy. The country’s 24 million people are still totally dependent on foreign aid, opium poppy cultivation and remittances sent home by the 5 million Afghans living abroad. Yes, there is a new luxury hotel in Kabul, but Afghanistan ranks fifth from the bottom on the UNDP’s Human Development Index. Only a few sub-Saharan semi-failed states are more destitute, more broken down.

Since late 2001 the international community—that consortium of highly industrialized nations, international financial institutions, aid organizations and UN agencies that in concert manage the world’s disaster zones—has spent $8 billion on emergency relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan. That’s a lot of money, perhaps, but given what the World Bank has called the aid sector’s “sky-high wastage” and the country’s endemic poverty, it’s simply not enough.

In the face of Afghanistan’s deepening troubles, the US government is now slashing its funding for reconstruction from a peak of $1 billion in 2004 to a mere $615 million this year. And thanks to the military’s recruitment problems, the United States is drawing down its troops from 19,000 to 16,000. In short, despite Bush’s feel-good rhetoric, the United States is giving every impression that it is slowly abandoning sideshow Afghanistan.

To pick up the slack, the primarily European- and Canadian-staffed, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force is increasing its troop levels from about 9,000 to 15,000. On the economic front an additional $10.5 billion in aid has been pledged for the next five years—$1.1 billion of that promised by the United States; the rest from Japan, the European Union, international institutions and seventy other donor nations.

Many European states see America’s unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as an opportunity to impress upon Uncle Sam that he must cooperate more with his junior partners—that he must give a bit more to the interests of the other rich economies. So they are moving in to help the United States by taking over as much responsibility as they can in Afghanistan. But the Europeans look at this opportunity with tremendous trepidation.

As one French diplomat working with the EU in Kabul put it: “The European powers all had to be dragged in one by one, kicking and screaming. They want to be the good allies and create obligation with the US, show their power, but they are very worried about casualties, about domestic fallout and about the costs and possible failure.”

Many observers hope that a European-led counterinsurgency strategy will be more sophisticated and effective than current American methods, which are rightly criticized as heavy-handed, overly focused on military means, inflexible, culturally insensitive and badly marred by the torture and murder of prisoners at the Bagram detention facility. The next five years—with a new round of funding and an infusion of fresh European troops—are seen as Afghanistan’s last chance to stanch the growing Taliban insurgency and build a functioning state. Will it work?

Despite Bush’s feel-good rhetoric, the United States is giving every impression that it is slowly abandoning sideshow Afghanistan.

The MPs from the 164th have a relatively straightforward but important job: to secure the Shomali Plain and the mountains surrounding the Bagram Air Base so that no one fires rockets into the base or shoots down any of its air traffic. To do this, the MPs use information-oriented tactics common throughout Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency doctrine, such as it is, holds that military action must be guided by accurate knowledge: not just “actionable intelligence” about specific threats but also a generalized, almost ethnographic, understanding of everyday life in the area of operations. What are the local grievances? Who is in charge? Where are the wells?

Learn these things, and the occupying forces can map not only the physical terrain but also the social world they must control, the community power structures and local economies. With this knowledge the occupying forces can effectively direct both economic development and, when necessary, military repression. Thus, part of what these MPs do is conduct village surveys to create an overview of life on the Shomali Plain. Or at least that’s the idea.

When I chat with the MP’s platoon leader, a lieutenant who has spent almost eleven months patrolling this valley, I am shocked that he doesn’t even know its ethnic makeup. “I think they’re Dari,” he says. Informed that Dari is a language, not an ethnicity, he tells me to ask one of the Afghan interpreters. “The terps know. These guys are smart.”

Moments later an MP learns that the ‘terps have suddenly been barred from the dining facilities on security grounds. “What the fuck? They’ve been eating there for a year,” says a GI. “They’re gonna be pissed.”

The pre-patrol briefing is perfunctory; little information about recent activity is passed on to the troops. Two days earlier the Bagram Air Base had been attacked by a mob infuriated by the Danish Muhammad cartoons. Someone in the crowd opened fire on the gates. Three protesters were killed when Afghan forces and American MPs returned fire. The meaning or possible implications of these events are not mentioned before we roll out.

After a day of meandering through the valley, we reach the village of Kham Rubah Pan, where the patrol leader, Sergeant Chesley, has decided to do a village survey. One side of the road is hemmed in by a high mud wall, the other by a small creek and a line of tall, naked trees.

The survey questions range from “Who is the local leader?” to “Where is the closest clinic?” to “Are there any ACM [anti-coalition militants] in the area?” The answers are pretty bleak: no good well, no school, no clinic, no work. But at least there are no ACM reported in the village.

One of the older men answering the survey, a returnee from the refugee camps in Pakistan, launches into a long tirade. “We
have seen nothing from this government. We can’t get to Karzai. The ministries do nothing.”

As consolation, Sergeant Chesley begins an aid handout. All the GIs on this patrol have mixed feelings about aid giveaways. “There are villages where they throw themselves in front of our Humvees demanding food and blankets because we’ve created a welfare mentality,” says Chesley. But his instructions are to occasionally give things away, especially in villages where no previous surveys have been conducted.

As the windup radios, blankets and gloves come out, the gaggle of men listening to the survey conversation suddenly swells to a boisterous crowd. The narrow road between the mud wall and the small creek is now full of men and children. There are no women over 15 in sight. Pandemonium is immediate.

Chesley and a village elder attempt to impose order, but it’s useless. Every object handed out is seized by several competing men. Shouting children squirm around underneath. Two younger men start punching each other over a pair of gloves; Chesley and a local intervene to break it up. Now the loser, a skinny guy in a loose shawer kamis and a Nike ski cap, not only lacks gloves but has hurt pride. More goods come out of the Humvee. A teenager assaults an older man who has just grabbed a blanket; the elder emerges with the blanket but loses his turban. People press in as the victors carry off their trophies.

I jump up on one of the Humvees and shoot video from the safety of the roof. The crowd below is a churning mass of men listening to the survey conversation suddenly swells to a boisterous crowd. The narrow road between the mud wall and the small creek is now full of men and children. There are no women over 15 in sight. Pandemonium is immediate.

When we finally pull out of the village, a trail of young boys and men jogging and riding bicycles follows us for about half a mile. Occasionally, one of the GIs throws an MRE out the window. I ride in the gun turret with Specialist Stacey. As far as I can see, the whole pathetic spectacle of the aid handout has had no positive political or cultural impact. “They call us infidels, but they’re begging for blankets,” says Stacey in his Alabama drawl. He shakes his head and tips a bag of M&Ms into his mouth.

The European troops work hard to build bridges to the locals, growing beards, taking off their boots indoors, learning some Dari.

The largest, poorest, least-populated province in Afghanistan, Ghor is a frozen, muddy desert inaccessible by road for much of the winter. Isolation sends local prices soaring and leaves Ghor’s population in permanent debt to merchants and landlords. A thousand years ago this place was heavily forested, but its hills also held mineral deposits, so Ghor’s trees were felled and burned to smelt the ore. Then the denuded region became the heart of Afghanistan’s medieval cattle industry. Now Ghor is so stripped down that the only fuel available to most people are small bushes gathered during the summer from faraway hills. At an altitude of 9,000 feet, even the air is thin.

The Lithuanian-run PRT also includes a small Danish contingent. I am assigned to one of their squads, called a Mobile Liaison and Observation Team, or MLOT. These teams of six soldiers riding in two SUVs are the PRT’s main means of operation. Their job is similar to that of the American squad I had been embedded with on the Shomali Plain. The MLOTs here comb their terrain of operations, driving for up to a week at a time, patrolling from village to village, gathering information, mapping the region’s strengths and weaknesses, building links to the local population and letting people know that the foreign supporters of the central government are out and about with their guns, grenade launchers and who knows what else.

The information collected by the MLOTs is all digested by the PRT’s intelligence and civil affairs sections and plotted on large maps and computer spreadsheets. “This will create institutional memory!” says a huge, enthusiastic Lithuanian civil affairs officer named Aleksiejus Gaeveviss. His databases track the whole province’s vast array of needs, and he correlates all this on the wall-mounted maps. In the intelligence tent the walls contain a tree graph of the local power structure, illustrated with snapshots of Ghor’s warlords. If violence flares, this information will help guide the military response. The accumulated knowledge is also supposed to help coordinate the efforts of NGOs and help avoid redundant efforts. But there are hardly any NGOs here.

One of the most difficult parts of the mission is collaborating with local authorities. The Danish intelligence chief describes the police commander as “the biggest crook out here.” The governor, on the other hand, is seen as honest but weak.

The next morning, we set out across the empty hills in the SUVs of the Danish MLOT. A year ago two local warlords fought a pitched battle in Chageharan, but the area has been quiet since then. The Danes are out to do a village survey and distribute some newspapers.

Unlike the American patrol, with its sloppy, halfhearted, ultimately divisive handouts, the Danes and Lithuanians limit their aid work to a few well-thought-out emergency-response projects: heat for an orphanage, shoes for the children of a displaced persons’ camp, a few other things.

The European troops work hard to build bridges to the locals, growing beards, taking off their boots for indoor meetings, learning some Dari. And their sympathy seems genuine.

“I understand why everyone is armed,” says Capt. Bo Jepsen
while we wait for one of his vehicles to be towed out of the mud. “There is no law and order out here. They have to protect themselves.”

At points on our patrol through the moonscape dotted with villages, I interview several local people. All are brutally frank: It’s been four years with no real change. They desperately want a better road so they can reach Herat to the west and Kabul to the east. Their sense of isolation borders on panic.

Later, in the civil affairs tent, a young USAID rep tells me he’s lobbying his superiors to set up a micro-credit scheme. The guy, who is not supposed to be talking to me, has a bunch of other ideas. But in the past four years this province of around 670,000 people has received only $6 million in USAID funding. With so little money invested here, many of the NGOs that arrived in the first wave after the US intervention have now pulled out.

This, ultimately, is the problem: Afghanistan is very poor, and the international occupation here is not doing enough to change that. Even if the Europeans go in with a sensitive approach and deploy their best troops, limited money will mean little or no progress.

Back in Kabul I get an interview at the US Embassy, where the official mood is all clean-shaven, fresh-pressed optimism, backed up by PowerPoint presentations and development-speak gibberish about stakeholders, capacity-building, business clusters and empowerment. I am allowed to meet a man who knows lots about USAID but whose handler insists he must be identified only as “a US government official.” It’s a ridiculous inside-the-compound contrivance. The unidentified “US government official” says several interesting things: Yes, USAID has problems with bureaucratic ossification. Yes, there is corruption in Afghanistan. But his final candid point is most important: USAID money for Afghanistan this year will be half what it was last year, and because of Iraq and Katrina, everyone in Kabul is pessimistic about the size of any midyear supplemental.

The trip south is hard, and our truck’s alignment is badly out of whack. In Ghazni City we switch to a taxi driven by a young, innocent-looking cabbie. I am wearing a shawer kamis, and he thinks I am Tajik like Ajmal. When I start speaking English, the kid seems nervous. After a few hours Mr. TV tells the kid to proceed to a police commander’s compound, where we drop off a payment and some Jim Beam. Then we head out into the desert. Now the kid is really nervous. Mr. TV tells him to drive the cab into a canyon, then to hide the vehicle in a wash. Ajmal, Mr. TV and I bail out and start hiking.

And suddenly there they are: The first Talib is perched up on a slope, dressed in black, cradling an RPG launcher. He’s straight from central casting.

There are five of them. They usher us up the side of the canyon into the shade against a wall. I wait for one of them to join us; instead they stand back, their guns trained on our chests. There is an awkward, somewhat terrifying moment. Then the head Talib, acting as if this is normal, says, “You can start asking your questions.” I switch on my little video camera and we begin to talk.

“We are fighting because we won’t let the American troops in our land,” says the Talib leader. “If their objectives were to rebuild our country we would not fight against them. But that is not their goal.” He thinks America is here to “destroy our country” and “not leave.”

How is the Taliban organized? “We are under one leadership. We have several groups, but we work together under one leadership. We have one command, but we have to operate in groups of five or six, because if we gather in groups of fifty we are afraid of the aircrafts. They would destroy us in big groups.” This jibes with what an officer in the Afghan National Security Directorate tells me. The NSD officer says the Taliban have three fronts but all answer to one Pakistan-supported and -based leadership.

And what about support from Pakistan? “Yes, Pakistan stands with us,” says the leader. “And on that side of the border we have our offices. Pakistan is supporting us, they supply us. Our leaders are there collecting help. The people on this side of the border also support us.”

Notably, the Taliban have not adopted full-on Iraq-style tactics of targeting the UN, NGOs and journalists. I ask them why not.

A s the empire drifts, the Taliban grow stronger. But who are the Taliban, and why are they placing bombs, attacking foreign troops, infiltrating ever deeper into Afghanistan and provoking a crisis for the international occupation? Some say the Taliban are fragmented beyond coherence and don’t even exist. Others say they are controlled by Al Qaeda. Still others say both are controlled by the Pakistani intelligence service.

Western reporters rarely make contact with the insurgents. But my colleague and interpreter, Ajmal, thinks we can meet them. He and I hook up with an Afghan TV journalist who was in the Taliban’s ministry of information and still maintains contact with the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is a rogue and a lush with no real political beliefs. We’ll call him Mr. TV.

The plan goes like this: We drive the rather sketchy but newly paved road south into Zabul Province, to the countryside just outside Kandahar. There we bribe the local security commander to get safe passage into a canyon where we meet the Taliban. The security commander is supposed to tell the local American base that any armed men in a certain canyon are paramilitary police and should not be fired on by passing airplanes.

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one. Our main concern is the government. The foreign troops must leave, and there must be an Islamic government.”

Then we hear a quiet droning, high in the empty blue sky. “That is a detective aircraft. You should go,” says the Taliban leader. We snap a few last photos and beat a hasty retreat out of the canyon.

A few days later Mr. TV, Ajmal and I reach Dr. Mohammed Hanif, one of two Taliban spokesmen who give out their satellite phone numbers to select journalists. The spokesman contradicts the fighters from Zabul on several key points. He claims responsibility for the suicide bombings. “We are changing our tactics. These martyrs are our Taliban.” He also takes responsibility for the school burnings, explaining that they want education for women but only when it is “safe.” Mixed schools will be burned. His main message is that the Taliban is unified and ramping up its tactics. None of this bodes well for the spring and summer.

Toward the end of my stay I meet a European “contractor” who is in fact a Western intelligence agent in charge of several important dossiers pertaining to Afghan security. All of this is confirmed through Afghan intelligence sources. But my “contractor” friend maintains his pretenses and I remain respectful of that, and we proceed with otherwise very frank conversations.

To my surprise, this agent to the great powers, this builder of empire, is the most cynical person I’ve met my whole trip. High-ly intellectual, he talks of Afghanistan as doomed, a hostage to history and to the idiocy, arrogance and Iraq obsession of the Bush clique. He passes me a series of “red gaming papers”—intentionally dissenting analyses of the Afghan situation written by and for the coalition.

The papers paint an arrestingly bleak picture of Afghanistan as a political “fiction,” a buffer state that no longer buffers, a collection of fiefdoms run by brutal local warlords. The coalition’s mission is portrayed as a fantasy game managed by sheltered careerists. One of the papers is by an American. It ends on this note: Nothing short of an open-ended blank check from the United States will keep Afghanistan from returning to chaos.

One of our meetings takes place at a dinner party. The contractor and I get rather drunk and talk politics by a big outdoor fire pit. He sums up the situation with a Kipling poem: “When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains/And the women come out to cut up what remains/Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains/An’ go to your Gawd like a soldier.”

I can’t believe how grim his view of things is (though he is cheerful), and I keep pushing him to test for exaggeration. “I know an Afghan commander who is with the government and has been at this for quite a long time,” says the contractor. “He described the current situation as 1983: The Taliban can’t take on armored columns yet, but they are building momentum.”

This analogy between the present and 1983 seems a bit unfair. “The mujahedeen had US backing,” I suggest. “The Taliban have no superpower patron.”

“Yes, but neither does Afghanistan,” says the contractor. He fills my glass once more with dark red wine and stares into the flames.

**WHY DID REPORTERS BECOME WHITE HOUSE CHEERLEADERS IN THE RUN-UP TO THE IRAQ WAR?**

Lap Dogs of the Press

If all the unhappy trends I have witnessed—conservative swings on television networks, dwindling newspaper circulation, the jailing of reporters and “spin”—nothing is more troubling to me than the obsequious press during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. They lapped up everything the Pentagon and White House could dish out—no questions asked.

Reporters and editors like to think of themselves as watchdogs for the public good. But in recent years both individual reporters and their ever-growing corporate ownership have defaulted on that role. Ted Stannard, an academic and former UPI correspondent, put it this way: “When watchdogs, bird dogs, and bull dogs morph into lap dogs, lazy dogs, or yellow dogs, the nation is in trouble.”

The naïve complicity of the press and the government was never more pronounced than in the prelude to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The media became an echo chamber for White House pronouncements. One example: At President Bush’s March 6, 2003, news conference, in which he made it eminently clear that the United States was going to war, one reporter pleaded the “born again” Bush when she asked him if he prayed about going to war. And so it went.

After all, two of the nation’s most prestigious newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, had kept up a drumbeat for war with Iraq to bring down dictator Saddam Hussein. They accepted almost unquestioningly the bogus evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the dubious White House rationale that proved to be so costly on a human scale, not to mention a drain on the Treasury. The *Post* was much more hawkish than the *Times*—running many editorials pumping up

*Helen Thomas is a Hearst columnist and dean of the White House press corps. This article is adapted from her forthcoming book, Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public. Copyright © 2006 by Helen Thomas. Printed by permission of Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.*
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