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## “I Could Live With That”: How the CIA Made Afghanistan Safe for the Opium Trade



Opium poppy. Photo: DEA.

“I decided I could live with that.”

– Stansfield Turner, Jimmy Carter’s CIA director, on the extreme level of civilian casualties in the CIA’s covert war in Afghanistan.

The first indelible image of the war in Afghanistan for many Americans was probably that of CBS anchorman Dan Rather, wrapped in the voluminous drapery of a mujahedin fighter, looking like a healthy relative of Lawrence of Arabia (albeit with hair that seemed freshly blow-dried, as some viewers were quick to point out). From his secret mountainside “somewhere in the Hindu Kush,” Rather unloaded on his audience a barrowload of nonsense about the conflict. The Soviets, Rather confided portentously, had put a bounty on his head “of many thousands of dollars.” He went on, “It was the

best compliment they could have given me. And having a price put on my head was a small price to pay for the truths we told about Afghanistan.”

Every one of these observations turned out to be entirely false. Rather described the government of Hafizullah Amin as a “Moscow-installed puppet regime in Kabul.” But Amin had closer ties to the CIA than he did to the KGB. Rather called the mujahedin the “Afghan freedom fighters ... who were engaged in a deeply patriotic fight to the death for home and hearth.” The mujahedin were scarcely fighting for freedom, in any sense Rather would have been comfortable with, but instead to impose one of the most repressive brands of Islamic fundamentalism known to the world, barbarous, ignorant and notably cruel to women.

It was a “fact,” Rather announced, that the Soviets had used chemical weapons against Afghan villagers. This was a claim promoted by the Reagan administration, which charged that the extraordinarily precise number of 3,042 Afghans had been killed by this yellow chemical rain, a substance that had won glorious propaganda victories in its manifestation in Laos a few years earlier, when the yellow rain turned out to be bee feces heavily loaded with pollen. As Frank Brodhead put it in the London Guardian, “Its composition: one part bee feces, plus many parts State Department disinformation mixed with media gullibility.”

Rather claimed that the mujahedin were severely underequipped, doing their best with Kalashnikov rifles taken from dead Soviet soldiers. In fact the mujahedin were extremely well-equipped, being the recipients of CIA-furnished weapons in the most “expensive covert war the Agency had ever mounted. They did carry Soviet weapons, but they came courtesy of the CIA. Rather also showed news footage that he claimed was of Soviet bombers strafing defenseless Afghan villages. This footage was staged, with the “Soviet bomber” actually a Pakistani air force plane on a training mission over northwest Pakistan.

CBS claimed to have discovered in Soviet-bombed areas stuffed animals filled with Soviet explosives, designed to blow Afghan children to bits. These booby-trapped toys had in fact been manufactured by the mujahedin for the exclusive purpose of gulling CBS News, as an entertaining article in the New York Post later made clear.

Rather made his heroically filmed way to Yunas Khalis, described as the leader of the Afghan warriors. In tones of awe he normally reserves for hurricanes in the Gulf of

Mexico, Rather recalls in his book, The Camera Never Blinks Twice, “Belief in ‘right’ makes ‘might’ may have been fading in other parts of the world. In Afghanistan it was alive and well, and beating the Soviets.” Khalis was a ruthless butcher, with his troops fondly boasting of their slaughter of 700 prisoners of war. He spent most[...] makes ‘might’ may have been fading in other parts of the world. In Afghanistan it was alive and well, and beating the Soviets.” Khalis was a ruthless butcher, with his troops fondly boasting of their slaughter of 700 prisoners of war. He spent most of his time fighting, but the wars were not primarily with the Soviets. Instead, Khalis battled other Afghan rebel groups, the object of the conflicts being control of poppy fields and the roads and trails from them to his seven heroin labs near his headquarters in the town of Ribat al Ali. Sixty percent of Afghanistan’s opium crop was cultivated in the Helmand Valley, with an irrigation infrastructure underwritten by USAID.

In his dispatches from the front Rather did mention the local opium trade, but in a remarkably disingenuous fashion. “Afghans,” he said, “had turned Darra into a boom town, selling their home-grown opium for the best available weapons, then going back into Afghanistan to fight.”

Now Darra is a town in northwest Pakistan where the CIA had set up a factory to manufacture Soviet-style weapons that it was giving away to all Afghan comers. The weapons factory was run under contract to Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). Much of the opium trucked into Darra from Afghanistan by the mujahedin was sold to the Pakistani governor of the northwest territory, Lieutenant General Fazle Huq. From this opium the heroin was refined in labs in Darra, placed on Pakistani army trucks and transported to Karachi, then shipped to Europe and the United States.

Rather belittled the Carter administration’s reaction to the Soviet-backed coup in 1979, charging that Carter’s response had been tepid and slow in coming. In fact, President Carter had reacted with a range of moves that should have been the envy of the Reagan hawks who, a couple of years later, were belaboring him for being a Cold War wimp. Not only did Carter withdraw the United States from the 1980 Olympics, he slashed grain sales to the Soviet Union, to the great distress of Midwestern farmers; put the SALT II treaty hold; pledged to increase the US defense budget by 5 percent a year until the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan; and unveiled the Carter doctrine of containment in southern Asia, which CIA historian John Ranelagh says led Carter to approve “more secret CIA operations than Reagan later did.”

Carter later confessed in his memoirs that he was more shaken by the invasion of Afghanistan than any other event of his presidency, including the Iranian revolution. Carter was convinced by the CIA that it could be the start of a push by the Soviets toward the Persian Gulf, a scenario that led the president to seriously consider the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Three weeks after Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul, Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, was in Beijing, arranging for a weapons transfer from the Chinese to the CIA-backed Afghani troops mustered in Pakistan. The Chinese, who were generously compensated for the deal, agreed and even consented to send military advisers. Brown worked out a similar arrangement with Egypt to buy \$15 million worth of weapons. "The US contacted me," Anwar Sadat recalled shortly before his assassination. "They told me, 'Please open your stores for us so that we can give the Afghans the armaments they need to fight.' And I gave them the armaments. The transport of arms to the Afghans started from Cairo on US planes."

But few in the Carter administration believed the rebels had any chance of toppling the Soviets. Under most scenarios, the war seemed destined to be a slaughter, with civilians and the rebels paying a heavy price. The objective of the Carter doctrine was more cynical. It was to bleed the Soviets, hoping to entrap them in a Vietnam-style quagmire. The high level of civilian casualties didn't faze the architects of covert American intervention. "I decided I could live with that," recalled Carter's CIA director Stansfield Turner.

Prior to the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan barely registered as a topic of interest for the national press, surfacing in only a handful of annual newspaper stories. In December 1973, when détente was near its zenith, the Wall Street Journal ran a rare front-page story on the country, titled "Do the Russians Covet Afghanistan? If so, It's Hard to Figure Why." Reporter Peter Kann, later to become the Journal's chairman and publisher, wrote that "great power strategists tend to think of Afghanistan as a kind of fulcrum upon which the world balance of power tips. But from close up, Afghanistan tends to look less like a fulcrum or a domino or a steppingstone than like a vast expanse of desert waste with a few fly-ridden bazaars, a fair number of feuding tribes and a lot of miserably poor people."

After the Soviet Union invaded, this wasteland swiftly acquired the status of a precious geopolitical prize. A Journal editorial following the Soviet takeover said Afghanistan was “more serious than a mere stepping-stone” and, in response, called for stationing of US troops in the Middle East, increased military outlays, expanded covert operations and reinstatement of draft registration. Drew Middleton, then a New York Times Defense Department correspondent, filed a tremulous post-invasion analysis in January 1980: “The conventional wisdom in the Pentagon,” he wrote, “is that in purely military terms, the Russians are in a far better position vis-à-vis the United States than Hitler was against Britain and France in 1939.”

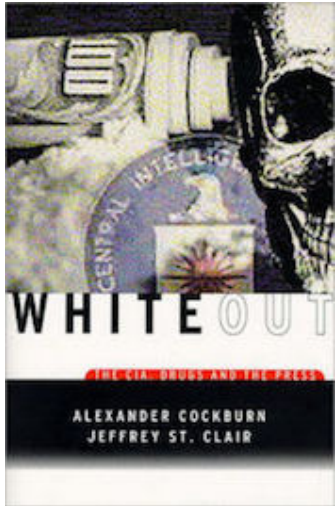
The Pentagon and CIA agitprop machine went into high gear: on January 3, 1980, George Wilson of the Washington Post reported that military leaders hoped the invasion would “help cure the Vietnam “never again” hangover of the American public.” Newsweek said the “Soviet thrust” represented “a severe threat” to US interests: “Control of Afghanistan would put the Russians within 350 miles of the Arabian Sea, the oil lifeline of the West and Japan. Soviet warplanes based in Afghanistan could cut the lifeline at will.” The New York Times endorsed Carter’s call for increased military spending and supported the Cruise and Trident missile programs, “faster research on the MX or some other mobile land missile,” and the creation of a rapid deployment force for Third World intervention, calling the latter an “investment in diplomacy.”

In sum, Afghanistan proved to be a glorious campaign for both the CIA and Defense Department, a dazzling offensive in which waves of credulous and compliant journalists were dispatched to promulgate the ludicrous proposition that the United States was under military threat. By the time Reagan assumed office, he and his CIA director William Casey saw support for their own stepped-up Afghan plan from an unlikely source, the Democrat-controlled Congress, which was pushing to double spending on the war. “It was a windfall [for the Reagan administration],” a congressional staffer told the Washington Post. “They’d faced so much opposition to covert action in Central America and here comes the Congress helping and throwing money at them, putting money their way and they say, ‘Who are we to say no?’ ”

As the CIA increased its backing of the mujahedin (the CIA budget for Afghanistan finally reached \$3.2 billion, the most expensive secret operation in its history) a White House member of the president’s Strategic Council on Drug Abuse, David Musto, informed the administration that the decision to arm the mujahedin would misfire: “I told

the Council that we were going into Afghanistan to support the opium growers in their rebellion against the Soviets. Shouldn't we try to avoid what we'd done in Laos? Shouldn't we try to pay the growers if they will eradicate their opium production? There was silence."

After issuing this warning, Musto and a colleague on the council, Joyce Lowinson, continued to question US policy, but found their queries blocked by the CIA and the State Department. Frustrated, they then turned to the New York



Times op-ed page and wrote, on May 22, 1980: "We worry about the growing of opium in Afghanistan or Pakistan by rebel tribesmen who apparently are the chief adversaries of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Are we erring in befriending these tribes as we did in Laos when Air America (chartered by the Central Intelligence Agency) helped transport crude opium from certain tribal areas?" But Musto and Lowinson met with silence once again, not only from the administration but from the press. It was heresy to question covert intervention in Afghanistan.

Later in 1980, Hoag Levins, a writer for Philadelphia Magazine, interviewed a man he identified as a "high level" law enforcement official in the Carter administration's Justice Department and quoted him thus: "You have the administration tiptoeing around this like it's a land mine. The issue of opium and heroin in Afghanistan is explosive ... In the State of the Union speech, the president mentioned drug abuse but he was very careful to avoid mentioning Afghanistan, even though Afghanistan is where things are really happening right now ... Why aren't we taking a more critical look at the arms we are now shipping into gangs of drug runners who are obviously going to use them to increase the efficiency of their drug-smuggling operation?"

The DEA was well aware that the mujahedin rebels were deeply involved in the opium trade. The drug agency's reports in 1980 showed that Afghan rebel incursions from their Pakistan bases into Soviet-held positions were "determined in part by opium planting and harvest seasons." The numbers were stark and forbidding. Afghan opium production tripled between 1979 and 1982. There was evidence that by 1981 the Afghan heroin producers had captured 60 percent of the heroin market in Western Europe and the United States (these are UN and DEA figures).

In 1971, during the height of the CIA's involvement in Laos, there were about 500,000 heroin addicts in the United States. By the mid- to late 1970s this total had fallen to 200,000. But in 1981 with the new flood of Afghan heroin and consequent low prices, the heroin addict population rose to 450,000. In New York City in 1979 alone (the year that the flow of arms to the mujahedin began), heroin-related drug deaths increased by 77 percent. The only publicly acknowledged US casualties on the Afghan battlefields were some Black Muslims who journeyed to the Hindu Kush from the United States to fight on the Prophet's behalf. But the drug casualties inside the US from the secret CIA war, particularly in the inner cities, numbered in the thousands, plus untold social blight and suffering.

Since the seventeenth century opium poppies have been grown in the so-called Golden Crescent, where the highlands of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran all converge. For nearly four centuries this was an internal market. By the 1950s very little opium was produced in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, with perhaps 2,500 acres in these two countries under cultivation. The fertile growing fields of Afghanistan's Helmand Valley, by the 1980s under intensive opium poppy cultivation, were covered with vineyards, wheat fields and cotton plantations.

In Iran, the situation was markedly different in the early 1950s. The country, dominated by British and US oil companies and intelligence agencies, was producing 600 tons of opium a year and had 1.3 million opium addicts, second only to China where, at the same moment, the western opium imperialists still held sway. Then, in 1953, Mohammed Mossadegh, Iran's nationalist equivalent of China's Sun Yat-sen, won elections and immediately moved to suppress the opium trade. Within a few weeks, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was calling Mossadegh a madman, and Dulles's brother Allen, head of the CIA, dispatched Kermit Roosevelt to organize a coup against him. In August 1953 Mossadegh was overthrown, the Shah was installed by the CIA, and the oil and



opium fields of Iran were once again in friendly hands. Production continued unabated until the assumption of power in 1979 of the Ayatollah Khomeini, at which point Iran had a very serious opium problem in terms of the addiction of its own population. Unlike the mujahedin chieftains, the Ayatollah was a strict constructionist of Islamic law on the matter of intoxicants: addicts and dealers faced the death penalty. Opium production in Iran dropped drastically.

In Afghanistan in the 1950s and 1960s, the relatively sparse opium trade was controlled by the royal family, headed by King Mohammed Zahir. The large feudal estates all had their opium fields, primarily to feed domestic consumption of the drug. In April 1978 a populist coup overthrew the regime of Mohammed Daoud, who had formed an alliance with the Shah of Iran. The Shah had shoveled money in Daoud's direction – \$2 billion on one report – and the Iranian secret police, the Savak, were imported to train Daoud's internal security force. The new Afghan government was led by Noor Mohammed Taraki. The Taraki administration moved toward land reform, hence an attack on the opium-growing feudal estates. Taraki went to the UN, where he requested and received loans for crop substitution for the poppy fields.

Taraki also pressed hard against opium production in the border areas held by fundamentalists, since the latter were using opium revenues to finance attacks on the Afghan central government, which they regarded as an unwholesome incarnation of modernity that allowed women to go to school and outlawed arranged marriages and the bride price.

By the spring of 1979 the character of Dan Rather's heroes, the mujahedin, was also beginning to emerge. The Washington Post reported that the mujahedin liked to "torture their victims by first cutting off their noses, ears and genitals, then removing one slice of skin after another." Over that year the mujahedin evinced particular animosity toward westerners, killing six West Germans and a Canadian tourist and severely beating a US military attaché. It's also ironic that in that year the mujahedin were getting money not only from the CIA but from Libya's Moammar Qaddafi, who sent \$250,000 in their direction.

In the summer of 1979, over six months before the Soviets moved in, the US State Department produced a memorandum making clear how it saw the stakes, no matter how modern-minded Taraki might be, or how feudal the mujahedin: "The United States'



larger interest ... would be served by the demise of the Taraki-Amin regime, despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan.” The report continued, “The overthrow of the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] would show the rest of the world, particularly the Third World, that the Soviets’ view of the socialist course of history as being inevitable is not accurate.”

Hard pressed by conservative forces in Afghanistan, Taraki appealed to the Soviets for help, which they declined to furnish on the grounds that this was exactly what their mutual enemies were waiting for.

In September 1979 Taraki was killed in a coup organized by Afghan military officers. Hafizullah Amin was installed as president. He had impeccable western credentials, having been to Columbia University in New York and the University of Wisconsin. Amin had served as the president of the Afghan Students Association, which had been funded by the Asia Foundation, a CIA pass-through group, or front. After the coup Amin began meeting regularly with US Embassy officials at a time when the US was arming Islamic rebels in Pakistan. Fearing a fundamentalist, US-backed regime pressing against its own border, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in force on December 27, 1979.

Then began the Carter-initiated CIA buildup that so worried White House drug expert David Musto. In a replication of what happened following the CIA-backed coup in Iran, the feudal estates were soon back in opium production and the crop-substitution program ended.

Because Pakistan had a nuclear program, the US had a foreign aid ban on the country. This was soon lifted as the waging of a proxy war in Afghanistan became prime policy. In fairly short order, without any discernible slowdown in its nuclear program, Pakistan became the third largest recipient of US aid worldwide, right behind Israel and Egypt. Arms poured into Karachi from the US and were shipped up to Peshawar by the National Logistics Cell, a military unit controlled by Pakistan’s secret police, the ISI. From Peshawar those guns that weren’t simply sold to any and all customers (the Iranians got 16 Stinger missiles, one of which was used against a US helicopter in the Gulf) were divvied out by the ISI to the Afghan factions.

Though the US press, Dan Rather to the fore, portrayed the mujahedin as a unified force of freedom fighters, the fact (unsurprising to anyone with an inkling of Afghan history) was that the mujahedin consisted of at least seven warring factions, all battling for

territory and control of the opium trade. The ISI gave the bulk of the arms – at one count 60 percent – to a particularly fanatical fundamentalist and woman-hater Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who made his public debut at the University of Kabul by killing a leftist student. In 1972 Hekmatyar fled to Pakistan, where he became an agent of the ISI. He urged his followers to throw acid in the faces of women not wearing the veil, kidnapped rival leaders, and built up his CIA-furnished arsenal against the day the Soviets would leave and the war for the mastery of Afghanistan would truly break out.

Using his weapons to get control of the opium fields, Hekmatyar and his men would urge the peasants, at gun point, to increase production. They would collect the raw opium and bring it back to Hekmatyar's six heroin factories in the town of Koh-i-Soltan

One of Hekmatyar's chief rivals in the mujahedin, Mullah Nassim, controlled the opium poppy fields in the Helmand Valley, producing 260 tons of opium a year. His brother, Mohammed Rasul, defended this agricultural enterprise by stating, "We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers." Despite this well-calculated pronouncement, they spent almost all their time fighting their fellow-believers, using the weapons sent them by the CIA to try to win the advantage in these internecine struggles. In 1989 Hekmatyar launched an assault against Nassim, attempting to take control of the Helmand Valley. Nassim fought him off, but a few months later Hekmatyar successfully engineered Nassim's assassination when he was holding the post of deputy defense minister in the provisional post-Soviet Afghan government. Hekmatyar now controlled opium growing in the Helmand Valley.

American DEA agents were fully apprised of the drug running of the mujahedin in concert with Pakistani intelligence and military leaders. In 1983 the DEA's congressional liaison, David Melocik, told a congressional committee, "You can say the rebels make their money off the sale of opium. There's no doubt about it. These rebels keep their cause going through the sale of opium." But talk about "the cause" depending on drug sales was nonsense at that particular moment. The CIA was paying for everything regardless. The opium revenues were ending up in offshore accounts in the Habib Bank, one of Pakistan's largest, and in the accounts of BCCI, founded by Agha Hasan Abedi, who began his banking career at Habib. The CIA was simultaneously using BCCI for its own secret transactions.

The DEA had evidence of over forty heroin syndicates operating in Pakistan in the mid-1980s during the Afghan war, and there was evidence of more than 200 heroin labs operating in northwest Pakistan. Even though Islamabad houses one of the largest DEA offices in Asia, no action was ever taken by the DEA agents against any of these operations. An Interpol officer told the journalist Lawrence Lifschultz, "It is very strange that the Americans, with the size of their resources, and political power they possess in Pakistan, have failed to break a single case. The explanation cannot be found in a lack of adequate police work. They have had some excellent men working in Pakistan." But working in the same offices as those DEA agents were five CIA officers who, so one of the DEA agents later told the Washington Post, ordered them to pull back their operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan for the duration of the war.

Those DEA agents were well aware of the drug-tainted profile of a firm the CIA was using to funnel cash to the mujahedin, namely Shakarchi Trading Company. This Lebanese-owned company had been the subject of a long-running DEA investigation into money laundering. One of Shakarchi's chief clients was Yasir Musullulu, who had once been nabbed attempting to deliver an 8.5-ton shipment of Afghan opium to members of the Gambino crime syndicate in New York City. A DEA memo noted that Shakarchi mingled "the currency of heroin, morphine base, and hashish traffickers with that of jewelers buying gold on the black market and Middle Eastern arms traffickers."

In May 1984 Vice President George Bush journeyed to Pakistan to confer with General Zia al Huq and other ranking members of the Pakistani regime. At the time, Bush was the head of President Reagan's National Narcotics Border Interdiction System. In this latter function, one of Bush's first moves was to expand the role of the CIA in drug operations. He gave the Agency primary responsibility in the use of, and control over, drug informants. The operational head of this task force was retired Admiral Daniel J. Murphy.

Murphy pushed for access to intelligence on drug syndicates but complained that the CIA was forever dragging its feet. "I didn't win," he said later to the New York Times. "I didn't get as much effective participation from the CIA as I wanted." Another member of the task force put it more bluntly, "The CIA could be of value, but you need a change of values and attitude. I don't know of a single thing they've ever given us that was useful."

Bush certainly knew well that Pakistan had become the source for most of the high-grade heroin entering Western Europe and the United States and that the generals with whom he

was consorting were deeply involved in the drug trade. But the vice president, who proclaimed later that “I will never bargain with drug dealers on US or foreign soil,” used his journey to Pakistan to praise the Zia regime for its unflinching support for the War on Drugs. (Amid such rhetorical excursions he did find time, it has to be said, to extract from Zia a contract to buy \$40 million worth of gas turbines made by the General Electric Co.)

Predictably, through the 1980s the Reagan and Bush administrations went to great lengths to pin the blame for the upswing in Pakistani heroin production on the Soviet generals in Kabul. “The regime maintains an absolute indifference to any measures to control poppy,” Reagan’s attorney general Edwin Meese declared during a visit to Islamabad in March 1986. “We strongly believe that there is actually encouragement, at least tacitly, over growing opium poppy.”

Meese knew better. His own Justice Department had been tracking the import of drugs from Pakistan since at least 1982 and was well aware that the trade was controlled by Afghan rebels and the Pakistani military. A few months after Meese’s speech in Pakistan, the US Customs Office nabbed a Pakistani man named Abdul Wali as he tried to unload more than a ton of hash and a smaller amount of heroin into the United

States at Port Newark, New Jersey. The Justice Department informed the press that Wali headed a 50,000-member organization in northwest Pakistan – but Deputy Attorney General Claudia Flynn refused to reveal the group’s identity. Another federal official told the Associated Press that Wali was a top leader of the mujahedin.

It was also known to US officials that people on intimate terms with President Zia were making fortunes in the opium trade. The word “fortune” here is no exaggeration, since one such Zia associate had \$3 billion in his BCCI accounts. In 1983, a year before George Bush’s visit to Pakistan, one of President Zia’s doctors, a Japanese herbalist named Hisayoshi Maruyama was arrested in Amsterdam packing 17.5 kilos of high-grade heroin manufactured in Pakistan out of Afghan opium. At the time of his arrest he was disguised as a boy scout.

Interrogated by DEA agents after his arrest, Maruyama said that he was just a courier for Mirza Iqbal Baig, a man whom Pakistani customs agents described as “the most active dope dealer in the country.” Baig was on close terms with the Zia family and other ranking officials in the government. He had twice been a target of the DEA, whose agents were told not to pursue investigations of him because of his ties to the Zia government. A

top Pakistani lawyer, Said Sani Ahmed, told the BBC that this was standard procedure in Pakistan: “We may have evidence against a particular individual, but still our law-enforcing agencies cannot lay hands on such people, because they are forbidden to act by their superiors. The real culprits have enough money and resources. Frankly, they are enjoying some sort of immunity.”

Baig was one of the tycoons of the Pakistani city of Lahore, owning cinemas, shopping centers, factories and a textile mill. He wasn't indicted on drug charges until 1992, after the fall of the Zia regime, when a US federal court in Brooklyn indicted him for heroin trafficking. The US finally exerted enough pressure on Pakistan to have him arrested in 1993; as of the spring of 1998 he was in prison in Pakistan.

One of Baig's partners (as described in Newsweek) in his drug business was Haji Ayub Afridi, a close ally of President Zia, who had served in the Pakistani General Assembly. Afridi lives thirty-five miles outside Peshawar in a large compound sealed off by 20-foot-high walls topped with concertina-wire and with defenses including an anti-aircraft battery and a private army of tribesmen. Afridi was said to be in charge of purchasing raw opium from the Afghan drug lords, while Baig looked after logistics and shipping to Europe and the United States. In 1993 Afridi was alleged to have put out a contract on the life of a DEA agent working in Pakistan.

Another case close to the Zia government involved the arrest on drug charges of Hamid Hasnain, the vice president of Pakistan's largest financial house, the Habib Bank. Hasnain's arrest became the centerpiece of a scandal known as the “Pakistani League affair.” The drug ring was investigated by a dogged Norwegian investigator named Olyvind Olsen. On December 13, 1983 Norwegian police seized 3.5 kilos of heroin at Oslo airport in the luggage of a Pakistani named Raza Qureishi. In exchange for a reduced sentence Qureishi agreed to name his suppliers to Olsen, the narcotics investigator. Shortly after his interview with Qureishi, Olsen flew to Islamabad to ferret out the other members of the heroin syndicate. For more than a year Olsen pressured Pakistan's Federal Investigate Agency (FIA) to arrest the three men Qureishi had fingered: Tahir Butt, Munawaar Hussain, and Hasnain. All were associates of Baig and Zia. It wasn't until Olsen threatened to publicly condemn the FIA's conduct that the Agency took any action: finally, on October 25, 1985 the FIA arrested the three men. When the Pakistani agents picked up Hasnain they were assailed with a barrage of threats. Hasnain spoke of “dire consequences” and claimed to be “like a son” to President

Zia. Inside Hasnain's suitcase FIA agents discovered records of the ample bank accounts of President Zia plus those of Zia's wife and daughter.

Immediately after learning of Hasnain's arrest, Zia's wife, who was in Egypt at the time, telephoned the head of the FIA. The president's wife imperiously demanded the release of her family's "personal banker." It turned out that Hasnain not only attended to the secret financial affairs of the presidential family, but also of the senior Pakistani generals, who were skimming money off the arms imports from the CIA and making millions from the opium traffic. A few days after his wife's call, President Zia himself was on the phone to the FIA, demanding that the investigators explain the circumstances surrounding Hasnain's arrest. Zia soon arranged for Hasnain to be released on bail pending trial. When Qureishi, the courier, took the stand to testify against Hasnain, the banker and his co-defendant hurled death threats against the witness in open court, prompting a protest from the Norwegian investigator, who threatened to withdraw from the proceedings.

Eventually the judge in the case clamped down, revoking Hasnain's bail and handing him a stiff prison term after his conviction. But Hasnain was just a relatively small fish who went to prison while guilty generals went free. "He's been made a scapegoat," Munir Bhatti told journalist Lawrence Lifschultz, "The CIA spoiled the case. The evidence was distorted. There was no justification in letting off the actual culprits who include senior personalities in this country. There was evidence in this case identifying such people."

Such were the men to whom the CIA was paying \$3.2 billion a year to run the Afghan war, and no person better epitomizes this relationship than Lieutenant General Fazle Huq, who oversaw military operations in northwest Pakistan for General Zia, including the arming of the mujahedin who were using the region as a staging area for their raids. It was Huq who ensured that his ally Hekmatyar received the bulk of the CIA arms shipments, and it was also Huq who oversaw and protected the operations of the 200 heroin labs within his jurisdiction. Huq had been identified in 1982 by Interpol as a key player in the Afghan-Pakistani opium trade. The Pakistani opposition leaders referred to Huq as Pakistani's Noriega. He had been protected from drug investigations by Zia and the CIA and later boasted that with these connections he could get away "with blue murder."

Like other narco-generals in the Zia regime, Huq was also on close terms with Agha Hassan Abedi, the head of the BCCI. Abedi, Huq and Zia would dine together nearly

every month, and conferred several times with Reagan's CIA director William Casey. Huq had a BCCI account worth \$3 million. After Zia was assassinated in 1988 by a bomb planted (probably by senior military officers) in his presidential plane, Huq lost some of his official protection, and he was soon arrested for ordering the murder of a Shi'ite cleric.

After Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was deposed, her replacement Ishaq Khan swiftly released Huq from prison. In 1991 Huq was shot to death, probably in revenge for the cleric's death. The opium general was given a state funeral, where he was eulogized by Ishaq Khan as "a great soldier and competent administrator who played a commendable role in Pakistan's national progress."

Benazir Bhutto had swept to power in 1988 amid fierce vows to clean up Pakistan's drug-sodden corruption, but it wasn't long "before her own regime became the focus of serious charges. In 1989 the US Drug Enforcement Agency came across information that Benazir's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, may have been financing large shipments of heroin from Pakistan to Great Britain and the United States. The DEA assigned one of its agents, a man named John Banks, to work undercover in Pakistan. Banks was a former British mercenary who had worked undercover for Scotland Yard in big international drug cases.

While in Pakistan, Banks claims he posed as a member of the Mafia and that he had met with Bhutto and her husband at their home in Sind. Banks further claims that he traveled with Zardari to Islamabad, where he secretly recorded five hours of conversation between Zardari, a Pakistani air force general and a Pakistani banker. The men discussed the logistics of transporting heroin to the US and to Britain: "We talked about how they were going to ship the drugs to America in a metal cutter," Banks said in 1996. "They told me that the United Kingdom was another area where they had shipped heroin and hashish on a regular basis." The British Customs Office had also been monitoring Zardari for dope running: "We received intelligence from about three or four sources, about his alleged involvement as a financier," a retired British customs officer told the Financial Times. "This was all reported to British intelligence." The customs official says his government failed to act on this report. Similarly, Banks asserts that the CIA halted the DEA's investigation of Zardari. All this emerged when Bhutto's government fell for the second time, in 1996, on charges of corruption lodged primarily against Zardari, who is now in prison for his role in the murder of his brother-in-law Murtaza. Zardari also stands accused of embezzling more than \$1 billion in government funds."



In 1991 Nawz Sharif says that while he served as prime minister he was approached by two Pakistani generals – Aslam Beg, chief of staff for the army, and Asad Durrani, head of the ISI – with a plan to fund dozens of covert operations through the sale of heroin. “General Durrani told me, ‘We have a blueprint ready for your approval,’ Sharif explained to Washington Post reporter John Ward Anderson in 1994. “I was totally flabbergasted. Both Beg and Durrani insisted that Pakistan’s name would not be cited at any place because the whole operation would be carried out by trustworthy third parties. Durrani then went on to list a series of covert military operations in desperate need of money.” Sharif said that he rejected the plan, but believes it was put in place when Bhutto resumed power.

The impact of the Afghan war on Pakistan’s addiction rates was even more drastic than the surge in heroin addiction in the US and Europe. Before the CIA program began, there were fewer than 5,000 heroin addicts in Pakistan. By 1996, according to the United Nations, there were more than 1.6 million. The Pakistani representative to the UN Commission on Narcotics, Raoof Ali Khan, said in 1993 that “there is no branch of government where drug corruption doesn’t pervade.” As an example he pointed to the fact that Pakistan spends only \$1.8 million a year on anti-drug efforts, with an allotment of \$1,000 to purchase gasoline for its seven trucks.

By 1994 the value of the heroin trade in Pakistan was twice the amount of the government’s budget. A Western diplomat told the Washington Post in that year that “when you get to the stage where narco-traffickers have more money than the government it’s going to take remarkable efforts and remarkable people to turn it around.” The magnitude of commitment required is illustrated by two episodes. In 1991 the largest drug bust in world history occurred on the road

from Peshawar to Karachi. Pakistani customs officers seized 3.5 tons of heroin and 44 tons of hashish. Several days later half the hashish and heroin had vanished along with the witnesses. The suspects, four men with ties to Pakistani intelligence, had “mysteriously escaped,” to use the words of a Pakistani customs officer. In 1993 Pakistani border guards seized 8 tons of hashish and 1.7 tons of heroin. When the case was turned over to the Pakistani narcotics control board, the entire staff went on vacation to avoid being involved in the investigation. No one was disciplined or otherwise inconvenienced and the narco-traffickers got off scot free. Even the CIA was eventually

forced to admit in a 1994 report to Congress that heroin had become the “life blood of the Pakistani economy and political system.”

In February 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev pulled the Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, and asked the US to agree to an embargo on the provision of weapons to any of the Afghan mujahedin factions, who were preparing for another phase of internecine war for control of the country. President Bush refused, thus ensuring a period of continued misery and horror for most Afghans. The war had already turned half the population into refugees, and seen 3 million wounded and more than a million killed. The proclivities of the mujahedin at this point are illustrated by a couple of anecdotes. The Kabul correspondent of the Far Eastern Economic Review reported in 1989 the mujahedin’s treatment of Soviet prisoners: “One group was killed, skinned and hung up in a butcher’s shop. One captive found himself the center of attraction in a game of buzkashi, that rough-and-tumble form of Afghan polo in which a headless goat is usually the ball. The captive was used instead. Alive. He was literally torn to pieces.” The CIA also had evidence that its freedom fighters had doped up more than 200 Soviet soldiers with heroin and locked them in animal cages where, the Washington Post reported in 1990, they led “lives of indescribable horror.”

In September 1996 the Taliban, fundamentalists nurtured originally in Pakistan as creatures of both the ISI and the CIA, seized power in Kabul, whereupon Mullah Omar, their leader, announced that all laws inconsistent with the Muslim Sharia would be changed. Women would be forced to assume the chador and remain at home, with total segregation of the sexes and women kept out of hospitals, schools and public bathrooms. The CIA continued to support these medieval fanatics who, according to Emma Bonino, the European Union’s commissioner for humanitarian affairs, were committing “gender genocide.”

One law at odds with the Sharia that the Taliban had no apparent interest in changing was the prophet’s injunction against intoxicants. In fact, the Taliban urged its Afghan farmers to increase their production of opium. One of the Taliban leaders, the “drug czar” Abdul Rashid, noted, “If we try to stop this [opium farming] the people will be against us.” By the end 1996, according to the UN, Afghan opium production had reached 2,000 metric tons. There were an estimated 200,000 families in Afghanistan working in the opium trade. The Taliban were in control of the 96 percent of all Afghan land in opium

cultivation and imposed a tax on opium production and a road toll on trucks carrying the crop.

In 1997 an Afghan opium farmer gave an ironic reply to Jimmy Carter's brooding on whether to use nuclear weapons as part of a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Amhud Gul told a reporter from the Washington Post, "We are cultivating this [that is, opium] and exporting this as an atom bomb." CIA intervention had worked its magic once again. By 1994, Afghanistan, according to the UN drug control program had surpassed Burma as the world's number one supplier of raw opium.

Note: This story was more than two years in the making. I started reporting it in 1995 for the premier issue of a Portland-based magazine called *Serpent's Tooth: Reporting the Drug War*, which was meant to be a cross between *Ramparts* and Paul Krassner's *The Realist*, with plenty of sex ads to pay the bills. In fact, Krassner also wrote a scathingly funny piece for that issue, some ribald tale involving three of his favorite subjects: Bill Clinton, LSD and the virtues of masturbation. Alas, a few weeks before the magazine was ready to go to press, the trust-fund publisher pulled the plug on the entire venture after getting into a brawl with the editorial collective. In my experience, any time there's an "editorial collective" in charge, the publication is destined for a ventilator, especially when cocaine is involved. So, after spending more than a year working on my big piece on the Afghan war and the opium trade, it was orphaned. Portions of the story later appeared in *CounterPunch*, the *Anderson Valley Advertiser* and the *Twin Cities weekly, City Pages*. And a version of it ended up as a chapter in our book *Whiteout: the CIA, Drugs and the Press*.

– JSC

### **Booked Up**

What I'm reading this week...

Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own

Eddie S. Glaudie, Jr.

(Crown)

The Green New Deal and Beyond

Stan Cox

(City Lights)

Marrow and Bone

Walter Kempowski

Trans. Charlotte Collins

(NYRB Press)

**Sound Grammar**

What I'm listening to this week...

Old Played New

Christina Vane

(Blue Tip Records)

EarthSeed

Nicole Mitchell & Lisa E. Harris

(FPE)

Color of Noize

Derrick Hodge

(Blue Note)