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Visit Afghanistan's 'Little America,' and See the Folly of For-Profit War

By David Rohde

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First with an ill-fated Cold War-era project and now with the war today, Helmand province has been the source of enormously lucrative private contracting that has done little to improve peoples' lives

Eight years ago, a 72-year-old American aid worker named Charles Grader told me a seemingly fantastical story. In a bleak stretch of Afghan desert that resembled the surface of Mars, several dozen families from states like Montana, Wisconsin and California had lived in suburban tract homes with backyard barbecues. For 30 years during the Cold War, the settlement served as the headquarters of a massive American project designed to wean Afghans from Soviet influence.

American engineers oversaw the largest development program in Afghanistan's history, constructing two huge earthen dams, 300 miles of irrigation canals and 1,200 miles of gravel roads. All told, the project made 250,000 acres of desert bloom. The town, officially known as "Lashkar Gah," was the new capital of Helmand province and an ultra-modern world of workshops and offices. Afghans called it "Little America."

Intrigued, I hitched a ride to the town with Grader a few weeks later. A weathered New England blue blood, Grader was the last American to head the Kabul office of the U.S. Agency for International Development before the 1979 Soviet invasion. In 2004, he was back in Afghanistan working as a contractor, refusing to retire just yet and trying, it seemed, to do good.

From the moment we arrived in Lashkar Gah, I was transfixed by Little America, its history and its meaning. At enormous cost, a sweeping American Cold War effort had temporarily eased the destitution of one corner of Afghanistan but failed to achieve its lofty goals. Surveying the town, I desperately hoped America could do better.

Over the next eight years, an epic tragedy unfolded in Helmand. All told, 858 American and British troops have died in the province since 2001 - nearly twice as many as in any other Afghan province - and the U.S. and British governments have spent billions of dollars in a province twice the size of Maryland with a population of 1 million. Hundreds of foreign contractors arrived to train Afghan police, farmers and government officials as well.

A clear pattern emerged. When massive international efforts were made, real progress emerged. The provincial capital and other large towns in central Helmand grew more secure and thrived economically, and narcotics cultivation dropped by one-third. But in isolated rural areas poverty, corruption and Islamic conservatism defied a scattershot American effort. As American and British forces prepare to withdraw next year, fears are high that the gains will crumble.

Over the course of four years, from 2004 to 2008, I visited Helmand roughly every six months. I embedded with American military units but found myself drawn to the American civilian effort again and again. Creating a crude but functioning Afghan economy, government and schools, it seemed, was the key to long-term stability.

In the end, Helmand proved tragic. I met dozens of well-intentioned American and Afghan civilians who found themselves trapped in a system marred by inconsistency, short-term goals and a focus on American -- not Afghan- - priorities. Speed, visibility, and American political needs ruled. Patience, complexity, and deference to Afghans were shunned.

Instead of triumphing, many of the Americans I met there ended up dejected, confused, and cynical. What happened in Little America -- and what it says about America's place, role and future in the world -- haunts me as well.

* * *

In June 2004, accompanied by eight Afghan security guards, I drove into Lashkar Gah with Grader and found a bustling town of 100,000 people filled with shops and open-air markets. But the prosperity was illusory. The boom was largely fueled by Helmand's opium trade, which by then had been spreading across the province for two and a half years since the fall of the Taliban. In the center of town, the remains of Little America still stood. The one-story suburban tract homes built by Americans during the Cold War were inhabited by Afghan families that had erected walls around them, a sign of differing Afghan and American notions of privacy. Rows of pine trees still lined some streets. And the headquarters of the Helmand Valley Authority - an impressive two-story office building - was in remarkably good shape. In some ways, Lashkar Gah recalled a small town in Texas, which bustled in the morning and grew still in stifling afternoon heat.

The province's governor, Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, was allegedly enmeshed in the opium trade, residents later told me, and enriching his own tribe at the expense of others. When I asked him, Akhundzada repeatedly denied engaging in trafficking or targeting other tribes. Over time, though, the drug trade and the corruption it spawned would act as a cancer in Helmand, creating dubious fortunes, deep inequality and simmering anger at the government.

In a series of meetings with local officials, Grader promised to create public-works projects that would repair the province's American-built irrigation system, employ large numbers of farmers and give them an alternative to poppy growing. As we crisscrossed the town that day, he defended the Cold War effort in Helmand. Yes, it had enormous cost overruns and failed to irrigate the acres promised, he said, but it trained thousands of Afghans.

"I feel so good about the education here," he said after meeting a second Afghan engineer taught by Americans in the 1970s. "USAID trained a lot of people."

Lanky, with a thick shock of gray hair and a faded all-American look, Grader was a marker of how the American approach to development had changed since the Cold War. No longer a government worker, he was a private contractor paid \$130,000 a year by Chemonics International, a for-profit consulting firm based in Washington. From Kabul, he managed a \$130 million USAID contract to revitalize agriculture and slow the exploding cultivation of opium poppy, the raw form of heroin, across southern Afghanistan.

Instead of USAID implementing projects itself, the agency doled out government aid money to private contractors like Chemonics, who then hired a cascading series of subcontractors to actually carry out the work. Chemonics was one of dozens of Washington-based contracting firms known as "Beltway bandits" established in response to the privatization of government services by the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations. The owner of Chemonics at the time, Scott Spangler, worked for USAID during the first Bush administration. During the 1990s, he and his wife contributed \$98,000 to political candidates, all Republicans. By 2004, 95 percent of the firm's \$185 million in annual revenue came from USAID.

Afghans loathed foreign contractors, and cited studies showing that 40 percent of foreign aid eventually returned to donor countries in the form of contractor profits. An Afghan engineer who worked for Grader said both Americans and Afghans were corrupt. Americans made their money through high overhead and expense rates, he said. Afghans made their money through old-fashioned kickbacks and bribes.

"For you, it's white-collar crime," he told me. "For us, it's blue-collar crime."

Perennially clad in brown bucks, khaki pants, and blue Brooks Brothers button-down shirts, Grader was an eclectic Cold War throwback with a renaissance flair. He was the son of a postmaster and a housewife, and his family affectionately dubbed him "The Indiana Jones of Marblehead," a reference to the community north of Boston the Graders had inhabited since the 1700s.

After graduating from high school, he went to sea as a sailor on a Liberian tanker. Later, he attended the Coast Guard Academy, earned a bachelor's degree from Boston University, studied at the London School of Economics, received a doctorate in economics from the Fletcher School of Diplomacy and earned an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology .

In a USAID career that spanned the 1960s and 1970s, Grader made his name as an advocate for reducing American staff at USAID missions and increasing local national staff. After retiring from USAID , Grader served as CEO of the world's largest bauxite mine in Guinea for five years, ran the senior executives program at MIT for a decade and then returned to Afghanistan in 1996 as managing director of Afghan Aid, a British NGO.

A divorced father of two and lifelong vegetarian, Grader lived in a rented house in Kabul and spent his nights cooking cheese soufflés, listening to Italian opera and reading Thucydides. He worried that America was in danger of following the path of ancient Athens, overextending itself and succumbing to Sparta.

Sometimes, Grader overextended in his own life. In 1997, he was nearly captured and killed by the Taliban while working with his Afghan Aid team in northern Afghanistan. In 2003, airport customs officials arrested him in New Delhi after they found British colonial-era rifles from Afghanistan in his suitcase. Falsely accused of smuggling antiquities, he spent five weeks in a fetid Indian jail. When American diplomats came to visit Grader, they found him teaching microeconomics to other inmates.

After spending the night in Lashkar Gah, we made the long journey back to Kabul. During the drive, Grader grew pensive. American society had changed since the Cold War, he told me. Companies were less loyal to workers. Government agencies were more politicized. Expediency was the norm.

"I'm frightened by what we're seeing," he told me. "I really feel the integrity is less."

Later, I learned that Grader was right about USAID. The agency was a shell of its Cold War self. Exaggerated accounts of American aid being poured down "foreign ratholes" prompted Congress to slash its budget. USAID's worldwide staff had shrunk from a high of 17,000 during the Vietnam War to 3,000 in 2004. Following the 9/11 attacks, the agency's budget doubled, but it received virtually no additional staff to manage a torrent of spending.

Grader said that when he ran USAID Afghanistan in 1977, 100 Americans managed a \$25 million annual budget, monitoring roughly \$250,000 each. In 2004, 60 Americans managed roughly \$500 million, or \$80 million each. Staffers struggled to design, put out to competitive bid, and monitor hurried and sprawling reconstruction projects.

For Grader and other USAID veterans, the post-2001 effort in Helmand was an anemic epilogue to an intrepid American Cold War effort. "Our policy is screwed up, and it's costing us dearly in time, treasure and goodwill," he told me, warning that Afghans would quickly tire of foreigners. "It really bugs me how inept our government is operating."

At the time, I assumed Grader was exaggerating. Like generations before him, he saw youth as feckless and society in decline. Four months later, though, Chemonics fired Grader after only 10 months on the job. Company officials said they could not comment on personnel decisions. Grader said he was forced out after he dared clash with USAID officials about the agency's programs.

Several months after visiting Little America with Grader, I returned to Helmand to learn more about the contractors leading the U.S. effort. My guide was a 40-year-old ex-U.S. Army paratrooper who asked to be identified by a pseudonym - Bob Williams - for safety reasons. Williams's small contracting firm was the subcontractor Grader hired to actually carry out Chemonics's agricultural development work in Helmand.

An affable businessman with a soft spot for journalists, Williams agreed to give me a tour of his USAID-funded agricultural development projects in northern Helmand, one of the province's most dangerous areas. I was nervous. Williams relished the excitement.

As we sped across central Helmand's Dasht-e-Margo, or "Plain of Death," in a battered Toyota pickup truck, Williams casually chatted with me. Disdainful of the bulletproof vests worn by other contractors, Williams was dressed like a suburban American father on a Sunday afternoon. He wore baggy blue sweatpants, a loose white T-shirt, bright silver Nike sneakers and a baseball cap from "Ritchie Brothers Auctioneers," a Fort Worth, Texas firm that sold used construction equipment.

The vista outside our windshield was otherworldly. Instead of driving down a road, we followed a worn set of tire tracks across a gravel-strewn desert. The earth seemed eternally flat, with heat waves shimmering on the horizon. There were no trees, plants or other signs of life. Everything was a variant of the color brown.

Behind us, two of Williams's Afghan employees drove their own pickup truck as backup. So much chalk-like dust seeped into the cab that my ballpoint pen stopped working. After we crossed an asphalt road, Williams made a breathless announcement.

"We're north of the highway," he said. "This is bad guys' land."

As we continued driving, Williams's life story emerged. The son of a lawyer and a stenographer, Williams grew up on the East Coast. After serving in the army and graduating from his state university, he married his college girlfriend and moved overseas. Williams was an American adventurer like Grader, but of a different generation.

After the 9/11 attacks, business exploded. By the time I met him in 2004, he had a \$4 million operating budget, 50 employees and a dozen American government and United Nations contracts to build roads, repair irrigation canals and teach farming across southern Afghanistan. He specialized in completing projects in areas where other contractors dared not tread. Taking risks, he found, paid handsomely.

"This whole security thing has become a convenient thing for people to hide behind," he told me. "I'm no braver than anybody else."

In truth, the agricultural development program Williams implemented for Chemonics and USAID was a shadow of a similar USAID Cold War effort in Helmand. In the 1970s, a dozen Afghan extension agents worked in each district. In 2004, USAID - via Williams - employed only two per district.

In theory, using private contractors should have created competition for USAID contracts. Instead, Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan prompted many firms to decline to work in the area. With few competitors, Williams garnered windfall profits despite having little experience.

Williams had his critics. Chemonics officials praised his firm's agricultural work, but called his construction work shoddy. One Chemonics official told me a Thai engineer Williams hired to implement a \$700,000 USAID project to construct 19 small irrigation dams was incompetent, did not understand English and submitted an initial design that was "a crappy little drawing."

Westerners who worked for non-profit groups called Williams a war profiteer and said he hired away their best Afghan engineers.

"We've just been reinforcing the predatory practices," the American director of one non-profit told me, referring to corruption among Afghans. "If [Williams] is doing shoddy work and pockets the money, it absolutely reinforces the way the system works."

When I later asked Williams about the criticisms, he dismissed them and said he stood by his firm's work.

As we made our way farther north, I grew increasingly nervous. There were no foreign troops in the area. Following the fall of the Taliban, the only American forces to deploy to Helmand were several dozen Special Forces soldiers. They built a base in the center of the province in 2002, hired several hundred Afghan gunmen to protect them and focused solely on hunting Taliban and Qaeda remnants.

As Williams and I drove, the first of roughly 200 California National Guardsmen were arriving in Helmand to create a "Provincial Reconstruction Team." In theory, the unit would bring security to Helmand and coordinate construction. In truth, their arrival raised the total number of American forces in the sprawling province to a mere 350, a fraction of the number needed.

In the late afternoon, we arrived at our destination: a camp built by American engineers when they constructed the Kajaki dam in 1953. USAID had awarded Williams a contract to renovate and modernize the camp for workers from Louis Berger, an American engineering conglomerate. Under another USAID contract, Louis Berger would repair the dam's two turbines, which had received no major maintenance since the 1970s, and install a third turbine. The repairs and expansion, it was hoped, would increase electrical output by 60 to 70 percent.

As we entered the engineering camp, I was astonished. It was as if a replica of a 1950s-era American motel had been built in the mountains of southern Afghanistan. A cluster of small, one-story bungalows provided lodging. A large restaurant served American-style meals. A dilapidated tennis court and swimming pool provided recreation.

"We could fill that baby up," Williams said, referring to the bone-dry pool. "If we could get this going, damn, it would be nice."

He was exuberant about the past - and future - American effort in Helmand.

"This must have been so cool," Williams said. "I just want to make this nice."

Early the next morning, we made our way to the dam itself. As he drove, Williams sipped Crystal Light iced tea, his favorite drink. For a five-minute drive, 24 Afghan security guards in six pickup trucks accompanied us. They were from another contracting firm, United States Protection and Investigations, a startup security company run by a husband and wife from Houston. Instead of deploying the soldiers to secure contractors, the U.S. hired more contractors.

The dam was an 887-foot-wide, 320-foot-tall wall of earth that held back the swirling waters of the Helmand River. Behind it, an emerald reservoir shimmered brilliantly in the sunlight. During the Cold War, American and Afghan engineers rode paddleboats and picnicked here with their families.

We walked into the dam's powerhouse and found ourselves in a time capsule. The turbines, office furniture and bathroom fixtures had all been manufactured in the United States and shipped en masse to Helmand. The Golden Gate Switchboard Company of Napa Valley, California built the electrical panel. Westinghouse manufactured the turbines. A Youngstown, Ohio firm produced the gym lockers in the men's room. The building was a shrine to a bygone era of American manufacturing might.

For the last 20 years, Afghan technicians had jerry-rigged the turbines and somehow kept power flowing. Events since 2001 had puzzled them. Eighteen different groups of American officials, contractors and engineers had visited the dam since then, they told us. Yet the Afghans were still waiting for promised repairs to begin. Williams and I had no answers. We made small talk, praised the Afghans for their work and took a few souvenir photos. After a 30-minute visit, we left as well.

* * *

Struggling to contain a raging insurgency in Iraq, U.S. troops handed over security in Helmand to British forces in 2006. When I returned to Helmand in the summer of 2007, 5,000 British troops patrolled the province, a fifteenfold increase over the 350 National Guardsmen the U.S. had deployed.

Poppy growth, though, continued to spread. Six years after the fall of the Taliban, the province produced more narcotics than any country on earth, including Mexico, Colombia and Burma. Poverty, instability and an epic five-year drought made poppy a talisman.

On a blistering August afternoon, I met Williams in his base of operations in Lashkar Gah, a former USAID house. Williams rented out rooms to contractors and journalists for \$50 a night. A dozen Filipino construction workers employed by Williams lived in trailers in the backyard a few feet from a patio where Americans held parties and watched Hollywood movies during the Cold War.

A hand-painted mural on the living room wall was a vestige of the house's former life. It showed Afghan merchants selling their wares in a bazaar outside Lashkar Gah near Qala-e-Bost, a famed arch built by the Ghaznavid Empire in the 11th century. The artist had signed her name in neat, cursive letters. "Janet Howard," she wrote, "June 1968."

When the Taliban took over Lashkar Gah in the 1990s, they considered the mural blasphemous. Under their interpretation of Islam, any portrayal of the human form is forbidden. Using white paint, they blotted out every human figure in the mural.

That afternoon, I joined Williams in the living room as he met the brother and son of a truck driver recently killed by the Taliban. His firm had agreed to pay the man's family one year of his salary as compensation. With a translator at his side, Williams greeted the Afghans warmly and tried to console them.

"We just want to say that when somebody gets killed on a project, it is a big tragedy for us," Williams said. "Your brother, your father, he worked with us for some time, so I got to know him personally. He was a hard-working man and always ready for any task."

Williams praised the driver for several more minutes. Then he asked if there had been any progress in identifying the killers.

"Thank you for your wishes," the brother replied formally, displaying little emotion. "We have no information about these people."

"Are the police not interested?" Williams asked.

"The area is not under the control of the police," the brother explained. "So they cannot do anything."

"The only thing we want to do - and it's a small thing - is offer some compensation, which we will do," Williams said. "I wish we could do more."

"We are also deeply hurt by this," he added. "It also deeply affected our morale."

The brother sat silently. Williams looked at the son of the dead driver, a wiry young boy who appeared to be 12 years old. "How about the little one," he asked. "Is he going to school?"

"Yes, he is in the sixth grade," the brother replied, adding that the boy was the eldest of seven children. "The others are smaller."

After exchanging more pleasantries, Williams departed and a member of his staff handed the Afghans an envelope. The man and boy politely thanked him and departed. I later learned that Williams paid the boy \$1,500 for the life of his father, the same amount the Afghan government paid the families of civilians killed in American air strikes.

The following day, I met Rory Donohoe, the new USAID representative in Helmand. Donohoe himself, in fact, was an independent contractor. The agency was so short on personnel that it hired contractors to monitor its contractors.

A 29-year-old Californian, Donohoe had an MBA from Georgetown and brimmed with ambition. His age and limited experience reflected a reality of the post-9/11 effort. USAID and other civilian agencies struggled to get seasoned, mid-career professionals to take posts in Afghanistan. Some had children and were unwilling to risk their lives. Others went to Iraq, which was seen as more of a potential career builder.

Tall, with dark hair and a boyish face, Donohoe told me he viewed the free market as the answer to Helmand's ills. To curb poppy cultivation, he and USAID's new director of agriculture in Afghanistan, Loren Stoddard, were proposing sweeping new projects that would create markets for the export of legal crops.

One afternoon, Donohoe and Stoddard gave me a tour of Lashkar Gah's former Soviet airbase. They excitedly described a \$3 million plan to clear mines from the base and turn it into an industrial park and airport.

Standing a few feet from rusting Soviet fuel tanks and ambulances, Donohoe told me how pomegranates, a delicacy in Helmand for centuries, would be flown to emerging markets in India and Dubai. Marble would be cut and polished for construction. And a 40-year-old, state-run cotton gin would be privatized and expanded.

"This could be the commercial heart of southern Afghanistan," Donohoe told me.

A few days later, Donohoe and Stoddard showed me a project to teach Afghan farmers how to grow chili peppers on contract for a company in Dubai. A USAID subcontractor had brought three white Zimbabwean farmers to Helmand to help show Afghan farmers how to grow the peppers. The Zimbabweans had been driven from their farms by supporters of President Robert Mugabe.

"These kinds of partnerships with private companies are what we want here," Donohoe said. "We'll let the market drive it."

Stoddard, a burly 38-year-old former food broker from Provo, Utah, said he had launched a similar project in Guatemala where farmers sold chili peppers to Wal-Mart. From the start,

though, security problems plagued the Helmand effort. After local villagers snuck into the chili pepper demonstration farm and stole produce, USAID hired watchmen.

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, two dozen Afghan men with assault rifles staffed six wooden guard towers that ringed the farm, safeguarding the chili peppers.

"Some people would say that security is so bad that you can't do anything," Donohoe told me. "But we do it."

Asadullah Wafa, the province's new Afghan governor, told me that the American reconstruction effort was too small and "low quality."

"There is a proverb in Afghanistan," he said. "By one flower we cannot mark spring."

As their presence grew, the British vastly expanded the small American base in Lashkar Gah and built a one-story building that contractors called "The Hilton." British civilians lived in a modern dormitory bedecked with photos of Queen Elizabeth, Monet prints and widescreen televisions. Soldiers built volleyball courts, gardens and bars.

"There were too many people who were in Helmand that were not in Helmand," a British contractor who asked not to be named later told me. "They couldn't see beyond the walls that protected them."

British and American officials dismissed the criticism. They said they ventured into remote parts of the province for weeks at a time.

At night, I attended surreal cookouts in fortified Lashkar Gah compounds inhabited by British, Dutch and South African contractors. White Zimbabweans and South Africans grilled boerewors sausage and downed gallons of alcohol. To me, they embodied the mix of sincerity, greed and absurdity that marked the post-2001 effort. Some were desperate for work. Others were desperate for adrenaline.

At times, I felt pity for contractors saddled with Sisyphean tasks. In 2005, DynCorp, the American conglomerate the State Department hired to train Afghan police, sent two retired American deputy sheriffs to train Helmand's 3,000 police. One was a California native who had trained police in the Balkans. The other hailed from a small town in Wyoming. Before arriving in Helmand, he had never been east of the Mississippi River.

At other times, I was baffled by the schemes USAID approved. In 2005, a USAID administrator brought 11 Bolivian cobblestone road builders to Helmand to teach their craft to local people. Afghans, who had driven on asphalt roads for 30 years, were uninterested.

In general, the most effective foreign organization was the generously funded American military. Marine and army units mounted sprawling efforts to both kill Taliban and create jobs. Highly trained young officers and soldiers were generally impressive.

"The war is good for contractors, for journalists, for generals," I scribbled in my notebook during one visit, well aware that I too profited professionally from Helmand. "The war is not good for the Afghan people. How do we create 'The Good War' again?"

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In 2010, "Little America" became the epicenter of the Obama administration's troop surge. Over 22,000 American marines - 200 times the Americans deployed in 2001 - arrived in the province. Roughly 10,000 British soldiers battled the Taliban as well.

Marjah, an obscure farming area outside Lashkar Gah built by American engineers in the 1960s, became the focus of a sweeping Marine offensive. In 2010, the United States spent nearly \$1.3 billion in the district, or \$16,250 for each of its 80,000 residents. The vast majority of the funding paid for American military operations.

Following the influx of 30,000 foreign troops, security in Lashkar Gah and half the province improved. The number of Americans assigned to training the Afghan army and police finally reached the levels American commanders had requested for years. The number of USAID officials in Helmand rose from one to 11.

But a wave of Afghan civilian administrators promised by the Karzai government never showed up. Some effective local Afghan rulers emerged, but there were simply too few of them.

Donohoe, the young USAID contractor who oversaw other contractors, because a USAID staffer, stayed in the province for three-and-a-half years and finally left Helmand in October 2010. Contractors complained about him at times, but respected him for spending so much time in the province. He was the longest-serving USAID field officer in Afghanistan. Most USAID officials - and other civilians - rotated out of remote posts after 12 to 18 months.

In a recent interview, Donohoe defended USAID's record in Helmand. He said only 1 percent of the agency's budget went to the cobblestone road and chili pepper project. The agency completed the airport, doubled the electricity supply to Helmand and reduced poppy production by roughly one-third. His biggest challenge, he said, was curbing an American tendency to do things themselves instead of letting Afghans do them.

Eager to have concrete achievements during their one-year tours, American civilians and soldiers tended to implement projects themselves, Donohoe said. Afghan officials and firms often moved more slowly and struggled with quality. By the time he left, he felt there had been a change in philosophy among Americans.

"Everyone agreed that the only way for us to get out was for the Afghans to do things for themselves," Donohoe said. "The goal was to build an Afghan government that was capable of meeting the needs of its people."

During the Cold War project in Helmand, he said, Afghans had a large role in planning and decision making. And during his time in Helmand, Donohoe found that the U.S. achieved more when it focused on a small number of modest goals over a longer period and worked through local partners.. In the end, he argued, Americans had to trust Afghans to do it themselves.

"Helmand is never going to be the Little America that was envisioned," he said. "But I do think Helmand is going to be O.K."

If the U.S. continued to support the country, he added, it will find its way.

"I think ultimately, the Afghans, they will figure this out," Donohoe said.. "They know what's going on better than we do."

My time in Helmand left me convinced that one of the major symptoms - and causes - of the decay in USAID and other civilian government institutions was the rise of private contractors. At the peak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 260,000 contractors worked in both countries, outnumbering the American forces deployed there. The use of contractors minimized the number of American troops and hid the wars' human toll. Between 2001 and 2010, 8,550 U.S. soldiers and foreign contractors died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Forty percent of the dead were contractors.

Congressional investigators found that contracting proved more costly than employing government workers, and tales of shoddy work abounded. From 2001 to 2010, federal agencies paid a staggering \$206 billion to contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq. An estimated \$30 billion was lost to waste, fraud and abuse.

To be sure, many Afghan leaders performed even worse than foreign contractors. Afghan governors appointed by President Hamid Karzai profited from the drug trade in Helmand, seized land and attacked rivals. With no strong institutions, merit system or faith in the future, Afghans took whatever they could whenever they could for their families. Cynicism and graft ran rampant.

The idealistic Americans I came to know in Helmand met different fates. Grader, the cold warrior who served as my first guide in the province, never returned to Afghanistan. In 2010, he died in Marblehead after a brutal, two-year battle with brain cancer. Donohoe became a USAID staffer in Peru. Williams, the contractor who took me to the dam, continues to work in Helmand. The Taliban or drug traffickers have killed seven of his Afghan employees since 2001.

This spring, I met Williams in Washington when he was in town on business. Under the Obama surge, business boomed for him in Afghanistan. In 2011, Williams's firm had work in 19 provinces. With U.S. forces preparing to leave, the number of provinces where he worked had dwindled to seven. His company would never abandon Afghanistan, he vowed, and would continue to work there even if the Taliban take over.

The expansion of the Kajaki dam that he spoke about so excitedly eight years earlier had still not been completed. In 2008, a five-day military operation involving 2,000 British soldiers successfully moved a third turbine to the dam, and USAID hired a Chinese firm to install it. Yet

Taliban attacks blocked the delivery of 900 tons of cement needed to complete the job. Since 2004, USAID has spent \$72 million on the stalled project.

Missteps by contractors continue. Last year former employees of Chemonics said their superiors kept their mouths shut about failing programs in order to keep contracts flowing. A spokeswoman for Chemonics said the company is now employee owned and stands by its work in Afghanistan.

Louis Berger, the American engineering firm hired to repair the dam, paid a \$70 million fine after a whistleblower exposed systematic overbilling of USAID. The firm did not respond to a request for comment. And the husband and wife that ran the small, Houston-based security firm that escorted us to the dam - USPI - pleaded guilty in 2009 to overbilling USAID for \$3 million between 2004 and 2007.

The American military also stumbled. In January, a video of four American Marines urinating on the bodies of dead Taliban appeared on the Internet. Investigators later discovered it had been filmed in northern Helmand.

Williams loathed Karzai and other corrupt Afghans. But he also blamed American officials for failing to mount a serious effort until 2010 and instead relying on Afghan warlords to stabilize the country. In the process, they alienated the Afghan people.

"They see us coming and propping up these crooks," he said. "We do the same thing over and over."

Williams said he was ashamed of America's track record in Afghanistan.

"Our whole culture has changed since 2001," he told me. "What have we become?"

Looking back, Helmand acted as a mirror. The American military received 95 percent of the \$557 billion the U.S. has spent in Afghanistan since 2001 while an understaffed USAID and State Department struggled to devise and carry out complex political and development projects. At the same time, the American public's demand for quick, inexpensive solutions grew.

The result on the ground was a disjointed, wasteful and superficial effort. Projects became more about Americans impressing their bosses back home than creating lasting results on the ground for Afghans. American idealism - our great asset and flaw - faded. The name Little America took on a new meaning for me. It became a reference to a diminished America that had lost its way.

This article also appeared on Reuters.com, an Atlantic partner site. Portions of this story were previously reported in the New York Times in 2006 and 2007.