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## Afghanistan: A Wonderful War for Contractors

By Joseph J. Honick

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Some days ago, the media incongruously screamed both the launching of the 2010 Winter Olympics and the United States assault on the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Olympic grand opening left much to be desired, in my opinion. One can only hope that the well publicized in advance assault is much more effective, given the enemy knew it was coming.

It may well be that our courageous Marines and Afghan soldiers, what there are of the latter, will drive the Taliban clear out of its alleged stronghold in a place called Marja...and then what? Even assuming the success of this latest “surge”, more new questions will join the many others that have been left unanswered.

Even as the “surge” surges and a Taliban biggie or two is captured, not in Marja but in Pakistan!....we are left with some puzzlement about the overall strategy.

The Wall Street Journal reported that Dyncorp International, Inc., won Army contracts valued around \$15 Billion over the next five years to build about 74 bases and other infrastructure for U.S. forces in Afghanistan! The report continued with: “The deal shows how lucrative contracts in Afghanistan will be since the country has a far less developed infrastructure than Iraq.”

So, assuming success in the specific Afghan region where the new strike was launched, what then? What do we do with the reported 74 bases to be created over the next five years after all the humanity (military and civilians)and the many billions of dollars already invested?

It might be a bit humorous were it not potentially so tragic that this strike was given the kind of advance promotion usually reserved for new action movies or major athletic events.

Though it has been and will continue to be massive and powerful, where was the surprise for the Taliban? Even the D-Day invasion of Europe was not announced until it was underway and General of the Army Eisenhower told the world of the event and its implications....and its risks. Result, the Taliban were able to plant explosives on bridges, roadsides and in civilian neighborhoods. They also struck fear of retribution in the hearts and minds of the local citizenry who know better than to be easy whistle blowers to the Americans.

According to the Associated Press and others, the city of Marja is supposed to be the “linchpin of the militants’ logistical and opium-smuggling network.”

So we are to believe that, having been given days if not weeks of warning about our “surge”, the Taliban would not make other arrangements to minimize the impact. But, even assuming the wonderful news we have cleared out the Taliban from this region, persuaded the Afghans to stop growing opium poppies and created the miracle of wondrous acceptance of some new kind of economic activity, what then? What then indeed!

For openers, there are those estimated 74 new bases to be created over the next several years that no one has had the chutzpah to suggest will simply be turned over to the Afghans and their well known corrupt government. And don’t you think many of the unemployed here in the United States might wonder why the promised public works jobs have gone to Afghanistan? Not only who will build those bases, who will man them and for how long? And at what nonstop expense even as politicians of both parties rage at each other about deficits?

So what are we getting for our investment of military men and women and the more than trillion dollars so far between Iraq and Afghanistan? Who is most likely to benefit in the short and longer run? If we somehow declare victory now and send our forces home to their loved ones, are we to believe the theoretically defeated enemy will simply give up their own mission and settle down to be good family men and women? Even the late Dr. Seuss would not consider this as a book plot.

Perhaps the answers to just these questions can be found in a long and detailed report boringly titled but containing information that needs the broadest distribution. The report: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE CONTRACTORS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS. The report is dated December 14, 2009, hardly something that has been locked away in musty files for a long time. Among other things, it shows there are approximately 218,000 CIVILIAN CONTRACTORS compared to the reported 195,000 uniformed personnel! The implications of these data are so far reaching that still more detailed reports are forthcoming from the non-partisan Congressional Research Service.

It takes little time or intellect to know that, in an otherwise fragile economy, those civilian contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan have little interest in any short run solutions to the situations in those areas and have spent plenty to lobby for further government investment. As noted in

other similar stories here, more than a billion dollars have gone to the “marketing” of the military operations through civilian PR and advertising operations. Neither political party can claim much in the way of either leadership or slowing down and eventually stopping our expensive involvements in the two countries. Finally, there remain a minimum of the following questions that have been raised and ignored in the past:

1. Precisely what is our mission in Iraq and Afghanistan?
2. Why have we had to shoulder virtually the entire bill for these operations?
3. How can so relatively few “insurgents” be so effective against the most powerful forces like ours and our allies?
4. Who is supplying the Taliban with arms, training and materials and how are the Taliban paying for them?
5. How have the Russians suffered for having been run out of the region?
6. Why is no one of either political party raising these questions?
7. What are all those profiteering contractors doing to help our men and women fighting this war?
8. When we leave both countries, what then?

As I said at the outset, the incongruous parallel of the Winter Olympics opening ceremonies and the massive assault in Afghanistan may diminish the necessary attention to the seemingly endless nature of the latter. When the sound and glory of the Olympics run their course, what then with Afghanistan, the projected new bases over the next five years and all the costly rest? ...and, worst of all, why are so few asking? Is it any wonder that the only person in American military history to win TWO Medals of Honor, a former commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and the man who blew the whistle on American industrialists seeking to unseat President Franklin Delano Roosevelt with an actual coup...would write a book and title it: WAR IS A RACKET?

That man was the fellow with the odd name of Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler. The Marines who “surged” into Marja may well have trained at the base in Hawaii named for him.

As some of us struggle with the roles frequently played with powerful impact by PR professionals, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it might be useful to step back and review what we have wrought.

Somehow Tiger Woods and Toyota seem like background stuff.