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Der Spiegel

Two Views on Afghanistan Mission

'The War Is a Breeding Program for Terrorists'

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Germany's military deployment in Afghanistan has split public opinion back home. SPIEGEL talks to former German Defense Minister Peter Struck and Jürgen Todenhöfer, a prominent critic of the war, about civilian victims of American bombing attacks, negotiations with the Taliban and the role of al-Qaida.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Struck, is Germany safer today, after seven years of having the German army, the Bundeswehr, in Afghanistan?

Struck: Of course. Under the Taliban regime, the threat of terrorism coming from Afghanistan was much greater for us in Europe and in Germany. We will still have to defend our security in the Hindu Kush region. This statement will continue to be true until Afghanistan no longer poses a threat in terms of terrorism.

SPIEGEL: Do you also feel safer, Mr. Todenhöfer?

Todenhöfer: On the contrary. This NATO mission puts Germany in danger. The images of American bombing attacks, civilian casualties and destroyed villages flicker across the television screens of millions of Muslim households around the world. Obviously, there are young people -- even in our country -- who will not put up with this and will want to defend themselves. Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble is chasing terrorists in Germany that his fellow cabinet minister, Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung is creating in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan is a breeding program for terrorists.

SPIEGEL: You make it sound as if the deployment of German soldiers to the Hindu Kush was both naïve and irresponsible.

Todenhöfer: Even politicians are allowed to make mistakes. But they must have the courage to correct them. The SPD was always proud of being the party of peace. That's why I want

politicians like Peter Struck to have the courage to correct mistakes. I know several leading German politicians who consider this war to be bullshit, but who wouldn't dare say it out loud.

Struck: Former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt said exactly the same thing to our parliamentary group a few weeks ago: We have to get out of Afghanistan. That's indisputable. But it will take time. Much depends on the plans of the new American administration.

Todenhöfer: Why don't you adopt a resolution in the Bundestag calling on the American government to stop its bombing of villages? Anyone who protests against al-Qaida's suicide terrorism must also protest against the US's bombing terror.

Struck: Civilian casualties are horrible and unacceptable. We have been talking to the Americans about this for a long time. As far as I know, they have now changed their plans of action. But our influence on the Americans is, of course, limited.

Todenhöfer: But we are an independent country, not some vassal state.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Todenhöfer, have we understood you correctly? Are you putting al-Qaida and the American government on the same level?

Todenhöfer: It doesn't make any difference to a Muslim child whether he is ripped apart by an al-Qaida suicide bomber or an American bomb. The Bush administration killed far more Muslim civilians than al-Qaida killed Western civilians. We have to stop applying this double standard.

SPIEGEL: At this point, Obama has no plans to leave Afghanistan. In fact, he even wants to deploy more troops.

Todenhöfer: That's a mistake. The Afghans want fewer, not more American troops. Afghan President Hamid Karzai told me that he could very easily do without more German combat missions and additional American soldiers.

SPIEGEL: But the air attacks that you criticize are necessary precisely because there are too few soldiers deployed on the ground. In other words, the 30,000 additional GIs could very well eliminate the need for many of the bombing attacks.

Todenhöfer: The NATO ground troops immediately call in air support when they hear a single gunshot in their vicinity. And then the bombing begins. The Western troops would rather accept civilian casualties than fight. Five wedding parties were blown up in the last year alone.

Struck: The bombings, which claim the lives of innocent people, are terrible. Incidentally, Jim Jones, the US president's national security adviser, is actually a very level-headed man who weighs up decisions carefully. It's the soldiers and commanders in the field who, fearing for their own lives, tend to use force, irrespective of the consequences.

SPIEGEL: Are the Germans partly responsible?

Todenhöfer: Of course we are responsible. The information provided by German

reconnaissance aircraft isn't just available to the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force, but also to the US-led anti-terror Operation Enduring Freedom, which uses that information for bombing attacks.

Struck: I don't believe that Germans share the responsibility, nor do the Afghan people. We don't bomb in the region for which we are responsible.

SPIEGEL: But it was only last week that the Bundeswehr requested American air support when three German soldiers were killed near Kunduz.

Struck: Of course, there can be situations in which air support is necessary to save the lives of German soldiers. But it is important to avoid civilian casualties. To my knowledge, there were none in that attack.

SPIEGEL: The Bundeswehr operation is increasingly becoming a pure combat mission, which has already claimed the lives of 35 German soldiers. Has the German strategy of militarily backed reconstruction failed?

Struck: Absolutely not! Combat activities in the immediate vicinity of Kunduz have increased. But it is generally quiet in the rest of the large northern region. Of course, we are worried about the situation in Kunduz.

SPIEGEL: But surely it's become too dangerous to carry out development activities such as digging wells and setting up girls' schools.

Struck: That isn't entirely true. Reconstruction is moving ahead in many places, although the pace is admittedly too slow. The international community ought to do more in this regard. However, the fact that it has been quieter in the north until now ultimately has something to do with the way we interact with Afghans in the region. Civilian reconstruction has always been important to us, and it remains important.

Todenhöfer: Yet far too little is being done.

SPIEGEL: The truth is that the international community has spent only \$7 million (€5 million) a day on reconstruction in recent years. By comparison, the US military mission alone costs \$100 million (€71 million) a day. Civilian reconstruction doesn't seem to be all that important.

Struck: There's no getting around the fact that military campaigns cost money. However, it is true that the ratio of reconstruction aid to military spending is off. But no one expected that we would be there this long. We thought we would go in for a short while, stabilize the country and leave again. It was a miscalculation.

'Only Afghans Can Defeat Afghans'

SPIEGEL: Was it a mistake to go there in the first place?

Struck: No, it wasn't a mistake. After 9/11, the Americans had to react. If you recall, the Taliban had refused to extradite Osama bin Laden or shut down dozens of terrorist training camps.

Todenhöfer: Of course the Americans had to react to that attack. But did that mean that they had to bomb Kabul? It's absurd, bombing a country to fight a handful of terrorists who weren't even Afghans. The United States should have used special forces to eliminate Osama bin Laden. Instead, they allowed him to get away at Tora Bora, like in some slapstick comedy. And Taliban leader Mullah Omar was able to escape from them on a motorcycle.

SPIEGEL: What has to happen in Afghanistan so that NATO can withdraw?

Struck: Everyone involved agrees that we have to devote more of our attention to training the Afghan army and the Afghan police force. Unfortunately, this proceeded at a very slow pace in the past. The Bundeswehr is doing a lot more in this respect today.

Todenhöfer: The Afghans are born fighters. They have been the target of attacks for thousands of years. Every 14-year-old boy in Afghanistan can handle a weapon. They don't need a lot of training. They need money. Why should a young, unemployed Afghan join the national army, where he makes less than \$100 (€71) a month, if he can earn \$400-600 (€285-430) with the Taliban? We have to pay the Afghan national army better. Only Afghans can defeat Afghans.

SPIEGEL: The Americans are now taking the war to Pakistan. Is this the right thing to do, focusing more attention on the neighboring country, which is also unstable?

Todenhöfer: The US attacks are weakening the Pakistani government, because the population increasingly sees it as an accessory or lackey of the Americans. The American drone attacks in Pakistan are constantly killing civilians. Several dozen people attending a funeral were killed in a bombing just last week. The alternative to this madness is that Afghanistan and Pakistan proceed jointly against the Taliban.

Struck: I agree. An Afghan solution is impossible without Pakistan. We must succeed in convincing the Pakistani government to fight the Taliban together with the Afghans. Given the geographic circumstances, however, I believe a military solution is out of the question. In my view, diplomacy is the only option.

SPIEGEL: You want to talk to the Taliban, Mr. Struck?

Struck: Yes, that's the right approach. I have already spoken with Taliban officials in Kunduz. We have to include everyone, or at least the moderate Taliban. I would exclude someone like Mullah Omar. I've examined his record. He's a mass murderer.

Todenhöfer: By the same logic, the Afghans whose family members died in a hail of American bombs would also have to reject talks with the Americans. If you want to exclude radical members of the Taliban from negotiations, it's as if the Americans had said during the peace negotiations with Vietnam: We will only talk to the moderate Viet Cong. That's ridiculous. We need a reconciliation "loya jirga," a tribal council in which all insurgents participate.

SPIEGEL: Would you also negotiate with al-Qaida?

Todenhöfer: Al-Qaida no longer plays a role in Afghanistan. Even the American commander-

in-chief, General David Petraeus, says that. Anyone who claims that we would be leaving the country to al-Qaida if we withdraw is spouting nonsense. Criminals rarely return to the hiding place from which they have just been ejected.

SPIEGEL: If we are no longer hunting terrorists, what are we still doing in Afghanistan?

Todenhöfer: We are fighting a national, anti-Western insurgency in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is of geostrategic importance, because it is a place from which one can monitor Russia, India, Pakistan and China. The country is also phenomenally well situated in terms of the politics of natural resources. In fact, the Americans want to build a natural gas pipeline through Afghanistan.

SPIEGEL: You don't seriously believe that German soldiers are dying for economic interests?

Todenhöfer: I believe that our soldiers in Afghanistan are dying out of a falsely interpreted solidarity with the United States -- and that our politicians are perfectly aware of this.

Struck: Our soldiers are not stationed in the Hindu Kush for economic reasons. We want to prevent this country from becoming a failed state, one that constitutes a risk of terrorism for the West. For this reason, I will support continuing the mandate for as long as I remain in the Bundestag. However, I am extremely disappointed with President Karzai. He has not managed to effectively combat corruption.

Todenhöfer: But the international aid organizations are far more corrupt. Western companies are raking in profits of 400, 600 and sometimes 1,000 percent there. Only a fraction of the money passes through the Afghan government, while the rest ends up in private hands. In Kabul, a Western company submitted a bill for \$10 million (€7.1 million) -- for a 1.5-kilometer (0.9-mile) metal fence around the Zarnegar Park. Karzai had the matter investigated, and it turned out that this fence was worth no more than \$70,000 (€50,000). This doesn't exactly strengthen the Afghan's trust in Western development aid.

SPIEGEL: Public support in Germany for the mission is also declining with every new fatality.

Struck: That's true. The public's lack of recognition of their mission is very upsetting for the soldiers. Afghanistan is far away, and the dangers it poses have not penetrated into German minds.

SPIEGEL: Isn't it your job, as a politician, to explain this mission to the public?

Struck: That's the chancellor's job. Ms. Merkel must make it clear that the soldiers in Afghanistan are risking their lives every day, because we have sent them there.

SPIEGEL: To this day, the mission is being sold to the Germans as a peace mission. No one wants to call it a war. Instead, the Bundeswehr is being portrayed as a relief agency in camouflage.

Struck: I wasn't involved in that. It was wrong. It downplayed the seriousness of the situation.

SPIEGEL: Is it a war, then?

Struck: In the conventional sense, it is not a war, which is only waged between nation states. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are fighting the Afghan people and trying to force their war upon us.

Todenhöfer: One of the main reasons for the West's miscalculations is its ignorance of the Muslim world, which is why I support systematic high-school and university student exchange programs between Western and Muslim countries. Besides, every member of parliament who votes for the war should spend four weeks on the front lines. Just for once, they should experience, in an armored personnel carrier, the dangers they are asking our soldiers and the Afghans to face. If that happened, the number of wars would drop dramatically.

Struck: No Bundestag member votes for the mandate without careful consideration. Everyone is aware of the dangers to which German soldiers, female and male, are being exposed. Nevertheless, I strongly advocate that as many members of parliament as possible travel to Afghanistan. I am always encouraging people in my party's parliamentary group to do so, and many take my advice.

SPIEGEL: When will the goal of the mission have been achieved? Under what conditions can the mission be considered a success?

Todenhöfer: When the Afghan security forces are strong enough to deal with the Taliban and the drug barons on their own, and when the Afghans can develop and shape their country as they please.

Struck: I believe that we must significantly reduce our expectations. Nevertheless, I see no reason to give up and say: "I'm sorry, but unfortunately more than 30 German soldiers have died in vain. We are pulling out."

SPIEGEL: When will the Germans withdraw?

Struck: I'm afraid it could take another 10 years.

Todenhöfer: If it takes that long, it won't be just 35 dead German soldiers, but hundreds. And we will have completely gambled away our credibility within the Muslim world. Our politicians must present the Germans with an honest exit strategy before the Bundestag election in September, so that we can get out of this mess within two or three years at the latest.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Struck, Mr. Todenhöfer, we thank you for this interview.