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"Our situation is like a football match. The superpower countries are the players, and we are just the ball to be kicked around." This sentiment, expressed by a young man from North Waziristan, has been echoed throughout many of our conversations with ordinary people here in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. Most are baffled that the United States, with the largest and most modern military in the world, can't put a stop to a few thousand militants hiding out in the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Just about everyone we have spoken with, Pashtuns included, has little to no sympathy for the Taliban or their tactics. Many people have lost limbs, homes and loved ones to the brutal assaults of suicide bombers or the indiscriminate violence of IEDs. Yet, people expressed frustrated confusion over uncertainties regarding U.S. government goals in relation to the Taliban. Some believe that the United States might be working with the ISI (Pakistani Intelligence Services) or at least not working against them, to enable continued Taliban resistance. If there is no resistance, according to this view, a military presence in the region cannot be justified. Nor can a so-called humanitarian presence further flood the Pakistani and Afghan economies with millions of dollars in aid that most often lines the pockets of the politicians, elite bureaucrats, and United States corporations involved in construction and security.

The fact that very little aid money has reached the impoverished and war weary people who need it most has been confirmed to us by members of the Afghan and Pakistani governments, human rights organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations and several very unfortunate families forced to live as refugees. As Hyder Akbar, a Pashtun working on NGO

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assessments in Afghanistan, said to us, "If you are pouring 100 million dollars into a tiny and impoverished province like Kunar and seeing no results, you're obviously doing something wrong." With a population of less than 500,000, you could easily give each Kunar resident over a million dollars. But, several seasoned analysts agree that money alone can't solve problems faced by impoverished people in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Both Dr. Mubashir Hassan, former finance minister of the Peoples Party of Pakistan, and Nur Agha Akbari, from the Ministry of Agriculture in Afghanistan, strongly believe that efforts to bring people out of poverty in South Asia must be initiated, at district and village levels, through consultation with grass roots, indigenous community groups. Mr. Akbari stressed that there is still an opportunity for the United States government and people to play a positive role in Afghanistan, but that role will not be possible until the United States stops giving orders and starts listening to community groups living in Afghanistan.

It's also time that the United States drop the facade of humanitarianism that guides our national discourse concerning Afghanistan and Pakistan. For too long, most people in the United States couldn't find Pakistani areas such as North Waziristan or Orakzai on the map. They had no idea where Helmand or Kandahar were located. Now, with our newspapers less preoccupied by Iraq, we learn to be worried for Afghan and Pakistani women if there is a Taliban take-over in the area. This isn't to say that the United States should not care about the rights of women in both countries or the implications of a spread in extremist ideology. But, military intervention is not curbing the growth of Islamic militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and U.S. "strategic interests" in the area certainly guide most U.S. policy makers more than altruistic concern for women. For instance, the United States government seldom mentions the rights of women who are forced to live, as a result of U.S. policy, in refugee camps just outside of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Women and children almost always have less physical and food security in refugee camps, and they are easier targets for sexual violence.

One doesn't have to spend much time in South Asia to find many people who feel that tactics like the U.S. offensive in Kandahar, torture and indefinite detention at Bagram, and the drone strikes in Pakistan are fanning the flames of resistance and increasing the ranks of violent groups that manipulate Islam for their own purposes.

Muslims in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have asked that we tell people in the United States that Islam is a religion of peace. "A man who uses violence has no religion," says Abbas, a young man from Islamabad.

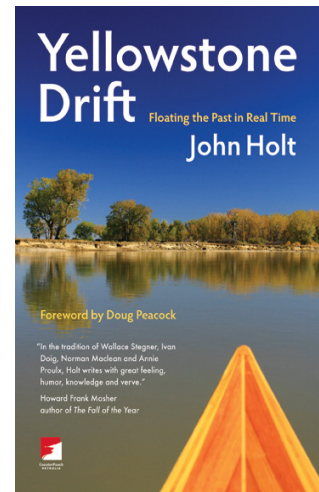
Students, professors, and human rights advocates in both countries affirmed that relationships, independent of military force, could be built between the people of the U.S. and South Asia. Those who've told us that military force is necessary to confront extremism have invariably added that the timing and control of military action should be in the hands of those who live in the region and know the society.

The United States bears a huge responsibility to make reparations to people of Afghanistan and Pakistan after pursuing nearly 10 years of destructive warfare that has destabilized both countries. There is a looming fear that, in Afghanistan, the United States is going to abandon the country and its people, returning Afghanistan to a Taliban or pre-Taliban era. But the withdrawal of troops does not require the U.S. to abandon Afghanistan.

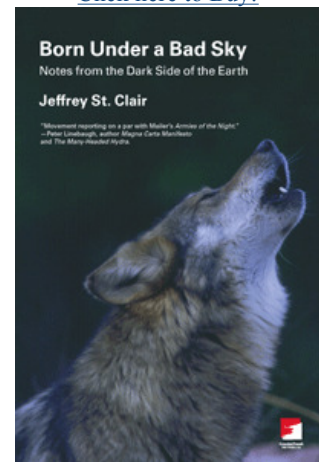
There are models for securing development efforts, in conflict zones, that do not require hundreds of thousands of troops, networks of military bases, and the overwhelming force of aerial surveillance and bombing.

Mr. Abdul Rahman Hotaki, a lawyer and director of the the Afghan Organization of Human Rights & Environmental Protection (AOHREP), points out that, roughly, only 20 per cent of the funds given the U.S. Army Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) ever reach the stage of investment in an actual project. Even when PRTs effectively build a road or a school, gaining the trust of a community is problematic because the lines between military and humanitarian work become blurred. Schools, roads and other projects are often sabotaged under the suspicion that the projects are built more to serve U.S. imperialistic interests than to help Afghans.

In Afghanistan, it's helpful to evaluate the construction of schools by Community Development Councils (CDCs) which, from start to finish, included participation of people living in the locale where the school was



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being built. In the CDC model, communities start by putting up some funds or guarantees in advance of the project and then provide their own security throughout the process. Ashraf Ghani, former finance minister of Afghanistan, initiated the setup of these CDCs under the National Solidarity Project, which was loosely based on a model proposed by Nur Agha Akbari and Ahmad Shah Massoud. Not a single school built by the CDCs has been attacked by Taliban or other forces. Hyder Akbar attributes this to the sense of ownership by the community which creates security for the schools. USAID and other international donors have lauded such models but then revoked funding before projects could get off the ground. Both Mr. Nura Agha Akbari and Mr. Abdul Rehman Hotaki expressed frustration about having been involved in extensive preparation for CDC modeled projects, only to see their communities let down when donors from the U.S. and Canada decided they had other priorities.

The Italian NGO, Emergency, provides another solid example of dedication to Afghanistan that both philosophically and practically surpasses the United States' policy of continued warfare as a means to achieve security. Emergency's goal is providing health care and medical treatment to civilian victims of war and poverty. And they do it well. Their involvement in Afghanistan first began in 1999 through construction of a Surgical Centre in Anabah, a village in the Panjshir Valley. Emergency has since developed three major hospitals and 28 first aid posts and medical centers, treating over 2.5 million people. They treat all sides in a conflict without discrimination and they charge nothing to their patients. Although they operate on a modest budget and can't afford to pay the higher salaries offered by other NGOs, they attract and keep employees who admire Emergency's work. Their employment rosters steadily show staffing that is half Afghan and half international. Most employees we met told us they are motivated by principle rather than profit. "Utopia? No," says Emergency's founder, Dr. Gino Strada, M.D., "We are convinced that the abolition of war is a political project to realize, with great urgency. For this we cannot be silent in the face of war, any war. We are guilty of proposing the abolition of war."

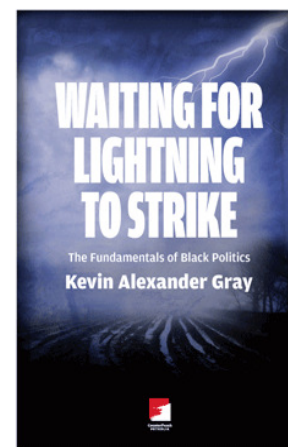
Altruistic principles are evidently not driving the continued presence of the defense corporations operating in Afghanistan. As Bill Quigley, legal director of New York City's Center for Constitutional Rights points out, executives for the three largest U.S. defense corporations, Northrup Grumman, Lockheed Martin and Boeing, have received a combined 177 million dollars in personal compensation over the past three years. With profits rolling in at this rate, there is not much incentive for weapons suppliers to encourage the Obama administration to enact a speedy withdrawal of U.S. forces and their weapons from Afghanistan.

Even the NGOs and aid organizations have something to gain from a continued war economy. Peter Marsden, author of [Afghanistan: Aid, Armies and Empires](#), worked with British NGOs in Afghanistan from 1989 to 2005. His book describes the way in which the United States has provided money for its own NGOs instead of directing money to the Afghan government. This policy causes a flood of overpaid charity workers from all over the world, most of whom buy supplies from their own countries. Not only do they spend their money elsewhere, but these aid workers usually draw a salary as large as 150 to 300 times the average Afghan income, which sits around \$200, per person, per year.

Though the United States constantly threatens and carries out drone strikes in Pakistan, the Obama Administration insists that it has goodwill towards Pakistan and that the U.S. economic and military presence in the country is intended to be mutually beneficial.

In its most recent National Security Strategy outline, the White House proposes to build cooperation with its international partners through "governance reform of the IMF and the World Bank." The administration also says it is renewing U.S. leadership in the IMF, leveraging its engagement and investments, to "strengthen the global economy" and "lift people out of poverty."

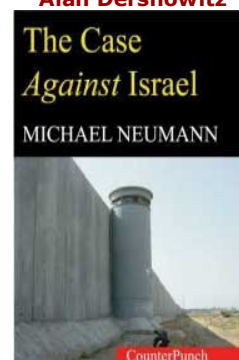
This rhetoric falls short of reality in Pakistan where the IMF, under U.S. leadership, is pushing through an aid package of US\$ 7.27 billion for the Pakistani economy. On the surface, \$7.27 billion dollars sounds quite generous, but the deal will subordinate Pakistan to U.S. military and strategic interests and comes with another string attached, the Value Added Tax (VAT). Quite contrary to "lifting people out of poverty," the VAT amounts to an additional 15 per cent sales tax on Pakistani products throughout every step of production. Practically, it amounts to a tax on the poor in a



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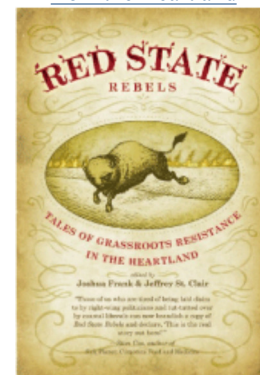
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country that already has 60 million persons living below the poverty line and inflation reaching 40 per cent. There have been demonstrations against the VAT and U.S. interference in Pakistan nearly every day throughout the past month that we have been in the country.

There is no simple answer or brilliant conspiracy theory that sums up exactly why the United States is at war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. War profiteering, energy resources, the Trans-Afghan pipeline, strategic geo-political positioning and even the narcotics trade may all play a part. But whatever the case, it is clear that the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan have become a football to be kicked about by the powerful players in world politics. If the United States truly wants to move away from this sort of selfish strategy and be appreciated as a genuine partner in the region, it should move towards an approach that values the lives and input of those most vulnerable in Afghan and Pakistani society.

Kathy Kelly (Kathy@vcnv.org) and **Josh Brollier** (Joshua@vcnv.org) are co-coordinators of Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org).

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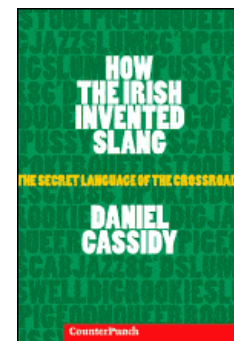
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