

# 44 A MISSION THAT MATTERS

## REFLECTIONS FROM AFGHANISTAN IN A POST-9/11 WORLD

BY DEBORAH ALEXANDER

AS BLACK HAWK HELICOPTERS FLY OVERHEAD, I SIT IN a 10-by-16-foot portable storage container that serves as my home in Afghanistan, reflecting on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. On that tragic day, I watched in real time as the second plane hit the tower and knew in that moment, as many of us did, that our country had been attacked. What I didn't know was I'd spend most of the next 10 years in Afghanistan.

Less than a month after that long September day, U.S. and UK Special Forces landed in Afghanistan, kicking off Operation Enduring Freedom and launching America's longest war. My homeland had been attacked, and while I'm not a soldier, I do have the skills needed in the aftermath of war. I knew the U.S. government would call me to Afghanistan soon enough. The call came on Christmas Eve.

I am part policy wonk, field operative, democracy missionary, and community organizer. And those are precisely the talents needed for a post-conflict mission. In the late '90s, I was living in Syracuse and working as the deputy commissioner of elections for Onondaga County when I had an opportunity to transition from domestic to foreign policy. After the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords outlining a general framework for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the U.S. Department of State called and asked me to help administer elections in Croatia and Bosnia. After any war, there is the complex, frustrating, and worthwhile work of rebuilding a country, which requires supporting a stabilization and peace process, establishing new institutions of government and media, and assisting the revival of civil society.

I have skills—learned at the Maxwell School, put into practice in New York government service, and honed in conflict—that are useful in disaster, revolution, and counterinsurgency situations. These include coordinating operations with the military; advocating for the victimized and forgotten; engaging diplomatically with political leaders and parties, and bilateral and multilateral organizations; collaborating among diplomatic, development, and defense agencies; and building electoral and government institutions. And if the truth be told, there is nothing as exhilarating and tiring as working on a mission that matters. Post-9/11 was that kind of mission.

Many people may see only the perils in these environments. To be sure, the violence that shook the world on 9/11 finds its extremist expression daily in Afghanistan. I'm a survivor of two roadside bombings and an attack on the U.S. Embassy

in Kabul. I've lost so many friends and colleagues over the years that I've stopped counting. So it would be unreal if I denied the danger. But focusing on the risk would immobilize me, so I choose to think about the possibilities. Truthfully, it's not the violence that frightens me most—it's the immunity to the horrors of war that builds up over time.

I'm often asked why I've returned to Afghanistan so often and stayed so long. It's an easy answer: *It's what I do, what I love, and what is needed.* When I first arrived in Afghanistan in early 2002, I was the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) field officer living with U.S. Special Forces out in the provinces, representing the United States and working with community elders, women, and warlords to begin to repair communities. Later, the U.S. Department of State made me an offer I couldn't refuse, and I was appointed senior elections and governance advisor for two different ambassadors overseeing U.S. government policy and assistance to Afghanistan's first presidential election in 2004.

In 2009, at the start of the military and civilian surge, I went to the battlegrounds of the south as the state department advisor, embedded first with Army forces, and then with Marines in the heart of the fight in Helmand province. Now back at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, I focus my work on transition—planning for the drawdown of military troops, the downsizing of our 80-plus field locations and staff teams, the evolution of our counterinsurgency-focused mission to a more traditional diplomatic and development one. Given that I launched our first field reconstruction teams, it's a satisfying bookend to my career here.

Admittedly, it is with guilty reflection that I understand the tragedy and horror of 9/11 has afforded me opportunities unimagined. I've slept on the rooftop of a former Taliban out-



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post in the mountains of Bamyan, watching the sun rise over the destroyed sixth-century Buddha statues. Under a beautiful full moon in Kandahar, I stood in Taliban leader Mullah Omar's old office, singing American anthems with U.S. soldiers after the Taliban were run out of town. Over the years, I've had the privilege to travel, work, or live in every corner of Afghanistan, meeting thousands of Afghans of every tribe and ethnicity.

Pundits bemoan that Afghanistan has been the graveyard of empire and that peace is impossible. I was here for the Emergency and Constitutional *Loya Jirgas* (Grand Council or Assembly), where thousands of Afghans sat for days under big tents to argue and agree to a transitional government and a new constitution in the first months of a reborn Afghanistan. As an observer of the first presidential election, I watched as women in blue burqas waited in long lines to cast their first ever ballot. During a visit home, it was through teary eyes I watched Shaharзад—a wonderful young Afghan woman who lived in a refugee camp for years—graduate at the top of her Smith College class. I've witnessed the regeneration of civil society where young men and women marched side by side to protest the street harassment of girls and women. So, from my viewpoint, I look out over a de-

cade of work and see positive change.

We, as an international community, expect too much, too fast. A country wounded and worn down by 30 years of war isn't transformed overnight. A democracy isn't established after an election or two. Deep-rooted change needs a generation to grow. My hope for Afghanistan is lasting peace with a responsive, representative government that has the capacity and the will to resist extremism and brutality. I hope for a country that settles its neighborhood problems not through battles and bullets, but through political negotiation. My wish for Afghanistan is that it will never again be used by terrorists to attack the people of America, Afghanistan, or any other nation.

More than anything, I hope the millions of Afghan children now in school will never return to the days when their teachers were beheaded and their schools burned down. It may sound like a cliché, but education truly is the future and the answer to extremism, terrorism, peace-making, and economic recovery. My heartfelt wish for Afghanistan is that each spring its children will celebrate their new year by flying kites during the festival of *NowRuz* and that the world will once again taste the sweetness of Afghanistan's mulberries and pomegranates without the memory of 9/11. «