

Afghanistan 101
Guest: Eric MARGOLIS
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Eric MARGOLIS is an award-winning, internationally syndicated columnist. As a war correspondent he has covered conflicts in Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, Sinai, Afghanistan, Kashmir, India, Pakistan, El Salvador and Nicaragua. He was among the first journalists to ever interview Libya's Muammar Khadaffi and was among the first to be allowed access to KGB headquarters in Moscow.

WOODS: I'd like you to paint a broad picture for my listeners of the situation in Afghanistan since 9/11. I have a lot of antiwar listeners who want the troops out. But I bet with a lot of us, if you wanted the details of what's going on, or if you were faced with a neocon who said, "No, no, no. Surrender is unthinkable. We must keep the troops there forever," it might be hard to answer that. So, I wonder if I could ask you some basic, broad questions about the situation, and then lead up to where we are today.

So let's imagine we're on the eve of 9/11. Can you describe for us what Afghanistan looks like? You've got the Taliban, and you've got the Northern Alliance. What is the origin of the Northern Alliance?

MARGOLIS: The Northern Alliance is an ethnic Tajik group from the north of Afghanistan. The Tajiks are the traditional blood enemies of the majority Pashtuns. The Tajiks are more cultivated, more cultured. They speak Dari, a Persian language. The Pashtuns are mountaineers. They're very tough, and they speak Pashtun. But they are all Muslims, Sunni Muslims largely. The Tajiks traditionally look more to Iran, whereas the Pashtun look south to their fellow Pashtun in Pakistan.

The Northern Alliance was formed by northern tribal chiefs who were fighting Taliban. Pre-Taliban, it was cobbled together by the Soviet GRU military intelligence. And when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1989, they claimed to be mujahidin fighting the Soviets. But, in fact, they spent most of their time, as I saw personally, fighting the U.S. backed-Pashtun mujahidin. They were infiltrated from top to bottom by Soviet agents and influence, and they were the primary movers and shakers in the opium business in Afghanistan. That's the Northern Alliance.

WOODS: So does the United States come into substantial contact with the Northern Alliance only in 2001?

MARGOLIS: It had some light contacts before that, particularly with the Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, who was ballyhooed by the Western media, was linked with French intelligence, but it has now been revealed, as we knew at the time back in the '80s, that he was a long-time agent of influence for the Soviet KGB and the GRU.

But the U.S. really didn't have much to do with him because it was behind the Pashtun in the south, until, as you say, after 9/11 the U.S. invaded, and it came in immediately to enlist the help of the Northern Alliance, who were fighting the Taliban, which was then in power. The Taliban was really just an extension of the U.S.-backed mujahidin of the '80s. And the U.S. used the Northern Alliance troops. In fact, when the Northern Alliance entered Kabul, finally, with American air cover, American B-52s flying ahead, and led by at least a 12,000-man division of troops from the former Soviet-ruled Uzbekistan in Afghan army uniforms led by a Soviet general. So, it was the nucleus of the communist party of Afghanistan. The Americans either didn't know about this, or else we just didn't care. We just wanted to get at Taliban and al Qaeda.

WOODS: So, the United States indicates that Osama bin Laden is responsible for the atrocities on 9/11, and it approaches the Taliban and says, "We demand you turn him over," and their response was, "Well, according to our custom, he's a guest here, so unless you supply us with the proof of his guilt, we're not going to turn him over." Was this disingenuous on their part?

MARGOLIS: No, it wasn't. Not at all. Bin Laden was a hero of the war against the Soviets. He gave great engineering help to the mujahidin. He was regarded as a man of honor, and Taliban leaders had nothing to do with 9/11, and they have no idea about it. We're not even sure to this day if bin Laden was behind it. The plot was not hatched in Afghanistan. It was hatched in Germany and in Spain. Very few people know this.

So, there were no visible links to Afghanistan, except there were some al Qaeda fighters there, a couple of hundred. But they were not there to plot against the West. They were helping Taliban to fight the communists of the Northern Alliance because bin Laden was violently anti-communist. This is how it develops.

So, yes, you are quite right. The Afghan spoke both as Afghan tribals and said, "We can't hand over a guest without proof," but they also asked Washington for a legitimate, formal, normal extradition request detailing bin Laden's alleged crimes. Washington said they would do it, and then they completely ignored it, and invaded Afghanistan. The Americans wanted revenge; never mind paperwork.

Later Secretary of State Colin Powell promised that his State Department would issue a formal white paper cataloging how al Qaeda, bin Laden, etc., was responsible for 9/11. This document was never published.

WOODS: Well, then, what was the nature of the so-called terrorist training camps that we were told the U.S. military was bombing?

MARGOLIS: Ah, very interesting. I was there. I saw them. They were not terrorist—well, if you were an Indian, they were terrorist training camps. The majority of them were camps that were run by Pakistani intelligence, ISI, and they were training fighters to go into the Indian-ruled

portion of Kashmir. And the U.S. knew all about it, but these were our allies, the Pakistanis, who were doing it.

There were some other training camps for Uzbeks whom bin Laden was working with in the hope of overthrowing the vile communist, brutal dictatorship in Uzbekistan, which is still empowered today, by the way.

And then there was another group of training camps for people from central Asia, and primarily Uighurs. These are Turkish ethnic, Turkish tribesmen from Chinese-ruled Xinjiang. And CIA was training them there as a possible eventuality if we ever had war with China. The CIA would release these Uighurs who were trained in Afghanistan, send them into China, western China, to cause disruption, give the Chinese a hard time.

There were no training camps, to my knowledge, of people being trained to attack western targets or doing anything. This was all local stuff.

WOODS: You know, we have in the U.S. a neoconservative commentator named Jonah Goldberg, who said roughly ten years ago that once in a while, the U.S. has to pick up some crummy little Third World country and throw it against a wall just to show we mean business. And he had Iraq in mind there.

But I wonder if that might also be applicable to Afghanistan, because if you're saying that the link to Afghanistan was tenuous to non-existent, what else, apart from stories about pipelines and so on, could account for the desire just to invade somewhere—anywhere—and why would they choose Afghanistan in particular?

MARGOLIS: Well, I don't quite subscribe to that view. I mean there's the old saying that an army has to be bloodied every once in a while to keep it efficient. But this Goldberg character is a typical chickenhawk neocon, never saw military service in his life probably—I doubt that he did—but is ferocious and bloodthirsty from the safety of his parents' home.

But that's nonsense. The U.S. military couldn't have picked a more logistically difficult country to wage war in than in Afghanistan. But there was an interest in Afghanistan that long predated 9/11. As you mentioned, pipelines. Oil. And the fact that Afghanistan looks down on the whole Caspian energy base, which had just been revealed at that point and it was producing some oil and gas. It prevents the Chinese from moving into that empty square on the chessboard. It's very strategic territory, so the U.S. had been thinking about it; 9/11 offered the pretext, "Let's go into Afghanistan," and a way of venting American shock and horror and dismay over the 9/11 attacks.

WOODS: Now, a lot of times we hear the objection that if the U.S. withdraws without full victory, whatever that would look like, then Afghanistan will once again become a haven for terrorism. But I guess part of your reply would involve the argument that you're making here, which is that it wasn't one, from the U.S. point of view anyway, in the first place.

MARGOLIS: That's quite right.

Now there were some al Qaeda there. I'm one of two people who says that al Qaeda was not necessarily as Washington is describing. They were not anti-Western terrorists. In fact, I knew very well the founder of al Qaeda, Sheikh Azzam, who was the teacher of bin Laden. Their whole *raison d'être* was anti-communist and liberating oppressed Muslim nations from despots, the biggest one being Saudi Arabia. So they weren't pro-Western, but their chief impetus was not to attack the West just for the sake of doing it.

Well, this argument of, "If we don't stay there, the place will be turned into a nest of terrorists again," is nonsense. Secretary Panetta said some time back there were between 25 and 50 al Qaeda members in Afghanistan. That's all. And the U.S.—believe me, I just flew over Afghanistan last week—the U.S. doesn't control 80 percent of it. So there is ample room right now in this wild, mountainous country for anybody who wants to do things there.

What's more important is now we see suddenly the dragon's teeth coming up. Al Qaeda in Yemen? Well Yemen's another wild and woolly place where the government's writ doesn't extend far. And it's a paradise for so-called terrorists. So is Somalia. So is Libya now.

WOODS: Now, anytime there is a U.S. intervention, you will get a faction of U.S. progressives who will say things like, "Well, at least we're bringing feminism to the country in question. We're bringing progressive Western values over there."

How has that actually worked out in practice? What's the difference in people's lives now as compared to how they were on September 10, 2001?

MARGOLIS: Well, it's ironic because when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, they used as one of their primary reasons they were coming to liberate women, and they were coming to bring education.

One of the reasons we see so much anti-education feeling among the Pashtun and the Taliban is that the Afghan and Soviet communists used the educational system to infiltrate Afghan society and try and promote communism through the schools and universities.

The West has brought some benefits to women in Kabul, but not anywhere else in Afghanistan, which remains a very primitive, medieval type of country. And whether it's the Pashtun, or whether it's the Northern Alliance people in the North, they are all beating their women, and the women are veiled, and it's deeply ingrained cultural things.

This baloney in selling the war in Afghanistan through the public because we're trying to liberate women is simply not true. The French used the same argument, too. It resonates, but it is in fact not the case. What we have brought to Afghanistan is massive corruption at all levels. Hundreds of billions of dollars in bribes. Everyone is bribed in Afghanistan. We've increased the

tribal and ethnic hatred in Afghanistan. And on top of that, we've seen the drug trade in Afghanistan grow, according to the U.N., by 50 percent over the last year. We own Afghanistan. We Americans own Afghanistan, and yet it is now producing 90 percent of the world's opium and heroin.

WOODS: What is Obama's most recent policy statement with regard to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan?

MARGOLIS: The official statement is that all U.S. combat troops will be withdrawn by 2014.

WOODS: Do you believe that?

MARGOLIS: Read the fine print. I just wrote a column about this. Just read the fine print of 14,000 to 16,000 troops will remain in U.S. bases. They are not combat troops. No, no. They are training troops and anti-terrorism troops, but it's just a label change. There will be 12,000 to 15,000 CIA mercenaries. The U.S. Air Force will patrol the skies. Drones will stay there. And, there's the Afghan puppet army, which is about 300,000 men, whom we pay to pretend to support the governments. So, the bulk of American troops will go out, but we will still have an imperial presence there, based in forts and air bases that I just said is identical to the way the British ruled Iraq in the 1920s.

WOODS: All right, Eric, I'm going to put you on the spot for our last question, which is: It's September 11, 2001, and you're the president of the United States. What do you do?

MARGOLIS: Oh, I listen to advisors who know anything about the area of Afghanistan, and I go to the Taliban and I say, "Okay, we'll just arrest bin Laden and any of the senior al Qaeda leaders," which they would have. Send them for trial in a Muslim country. They said they would. Send them for trial to Turkey, for example. Show the evidence. Or we'll pay you baksheesh to go and hunt them down, if we want to kill them all. You can have bombs or baksheesh. But, you have to do the courteous thing diplomatically. The people in Washington didn't know enough, didn't know never to tell a Pashtun you have to do this or else. They'll cut your throat, if you do that. They needed some diplomacy and some intelligence. Instead, we had a very stupid and ultimately totally ruinous policy in Afghanistan, and still have.

WOODS: Of course, you could imagine the U.S. president's response if any other country had demanded that the U.S. do such and such. Never.

MARGOLIS: Take the case of Italy, which has just indicted eleven CIA agents for kidnapping. We wouldn't turn them over. Told the Italians to go to hell. So, that's quite right.

But we blundered in this and that is because we have such ruinous policy in that part of the world because we never listen to the right people. We listen to these little armchair neocons rather than the old area hands who've seen it and done it and know what's going on.

WOODS: Well, Eric Margolis, I certainly appreciate your time, and this briefing for us. And of course, if only they'd listened to you—and I know you didn't say that, but I am certainly thinking it—we'd certainly be in a lot better shape than we are now. Thanks so much for being here today.

MARGOLIS: My pleasure.