

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

U.S. Taxpayers Subsidize Afghan Insurgents

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Less than a week after President Barack Obama made a surprise visit to Afghanistan and proclaimed, “We broke the Taliban’s momentum,” the chairs of the Senate and House intelligence committees offered a candid assessment of the U.S. mission. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), alongside Representative Mike Rogers (R-MI), [said](#) on CNN’s “State of the Union,” “I think we’d both say that what we found is that the Taliban is stronger.”

Their observations are the type of unvarnished truth that our military and civilian leaders typically avoid. U.S. and NATO officials meeting in Chicago later this month should take heed, especially since American taxpayer dollars are helping to fund the insurgents we’re fighting.

In a not-much publicized [report](#) last August from the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, researchers found that after the illegal opium trade, [the largest source of funding for the insurgency was U.S. contracting dollars](#). It found that Afghan companies under the Host Nation Trucking program use private security contractors who then turn around and pay insurgents and warlords who control the roads we must use. Although the Commission on Wartime Contracting report did not mention how much was funneled to the insurgency, a similar protection racket was also uncovered a couple of years ago.

Task Force 2010, assembled by General David Petraeus, examined the connections between insurgents and criminal networks on the one hand and Afghan companies and their subcontractors for transportation, construction, and other services on the other. The task force [estimated](#) that \$360 million in U.S. tax dollars ended up in the hands of insurgents and other “malign actors,” including criminals, [warlords](#), and power-brokers.

The \$360 million “represents a fraction of the \$31 billion in active U.S. contracts that the task force reviewed,” Associated Press reporters Deb Riechmann and Richard Lardner explained. As Brussels-based [International Crisis Group](#) observed in a depressingly frank [June 2011 report](#):

Insecurity and the inflow of billions of dollars in international assistance has failed to significantly strengthen the state’s capacity to provide security or basic services and has instead, by progressively fusing the interests of political gatekeepers and insurgent commanders, provided new opportunities for criminals and insurgents to expand their influence inside the government. The economy as a result is increasingly dominated by a criminal oligarchy of politically connected businessmen.

Is it any wonder why pouring massive piles of cash into a broken and war-ravaged system resulted in failure? Those who follow the news from Afghanistan will see how [rent-seeking](#) inadvertently strengthens that country’s twin evils: corruption and insecurity. As journalist Douglas A. Wissing writes in his eye-opening new book, [Funding the Enemy: How U.S. Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban](#), in addition to foreign development advisers preoccupied with their own career advancement, development money itself was not countering the insurgency but rather paying for it. Combined with an enemy whose strategy was always about exhaustion, the result has been catastrophic.

Wissing writes, “I learned that the linkage between third-world development and US national security that foreign-aid lobbyists peddled to American policymakers was a faith-based doctrine with almost no foundation in research.” Year after year, the American public was spoon-fed government reports that lacked honesty about why our top-down security and development programs were constantly failing. Buildings were poorly constructed. Projects were bereft of proper oversight. Schools were built without teachers to staff them. Road construction contracts financed insurgent racketeering operations.

The undistorted evidence of a European-based think tank, a bipartisan congressional commission, and a report from military experts, assembled by the war’s former commander, leads to one conclusion: the war is inadvertently throwing American taxpayer dollars at insurgents killing American troops. What about this self-aggrandizing system is making Americans safer? Moreover, what about the safety of the Afghans whom planners in Washington swore to protect from the Taliban? In spite of the tripling of U.S. troops since 2008, a recent report by the U.N. mission concluded that [2011 was the fifth straight year in which civilian casualties rose](#).

As Feinstein said to CNN on Sunday, “The Taliban has a shadow system of governors in many provinces. They’ve gone up north. They’ve gone to the east. Attacks are up.” After over a decade of inadvertently funding the enemy and alienating the local people, Americans should not be surprised with such a dire outcome. If anything, they should be surprised that their elected leaders are finally telling the truth.