

Opium in Afghanistan: How a Pink Flower Defeated the World's Sole Superpower

America's Opium War in Afghanistan

By [Prof Alfred McCoy](#)

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Note from the editor of Tom Dispatch: In October 2001, the U.S. launched its invasion of Afghanistan largely through proxy Afghan fighters with the help of Special Operations forces, American air power, and CIA dollars. The [results](#) were swift and stunning. The Taliban was whipped, a new government headed by Hamid Karzai soon installed in Kabul, and the country declared “liberated.”

More than 14 years later, how'd it go? What's “liberated” Afghanistan like and, if you were making a list, what would be the accomplishments of Washington all these years later? Hmm... at this very moment, according to the latest reports, the Taliban control [more territory](#) than at any moment since December 2001. Meanwhile, the Afghan security forces that the U.S. built up and funded to the tune of more than [\\$65 billion](#) are experiencing “[unsustainable](#)” casualties, their ranks evidently [filled](#) with “ghost” soldiers and policemen — up to [40%](#) in some places — whose salaries, often paid by the U.S., are being pocketed by their commanders and other officials. In 2015, according to the U.N., Afghan civilian casualties were, for the seventh year in a row, at [record levels](#). Add to all this the fact that American soldiers, their “combat mission” [officially concluded](#) in 2014, are now being sent [by the hundreds](#) back into the fray ([along with](#) the U.S. Air Force) to support hard-pressed Afghan troops in a situation which seems to be fast “[deteriorating](#).”

Oh, and economically speaking, how did the “reconstruction” of the country work out, given that Washington pumped [more money](#) (in real dollars) into Afghanistan in these years than it did into the rebuilding of Western Europe after World War II? Leaving aside the pit of [official corruption](#) into which many of those dollars disappeared, the country is today [hemorrhaging](#) desperate young people who can't find jobs or make a living and now constitute what may be the [second largest](#) contingent of [refugees](#) heading for Europe.

As for that list of Washington's accomplishments, it might be accurate to say that only one thing was “liberated” in Afghanistan over the last 14-plus years and that was, as [TomDispatch regular](#) Alfred McCoy points out today, the opium poppy. It might also be said that, with the opium trade now fully embedded in both the operations of the [Afghan government](#) and of [the Taliban](#), Washington's single and singular accomplishment in all its years there has been to oversee the country's transformation into the planet's number one narco-state. McCoy, who began his career in the Vietnam War era by writing [The Politics of Heroin](#), a now-classic book on the CIA and the heroin trade (that the Agency tried to suppress) and who has written on the subject of drugs and Afghanistan before [for this site](#), now offers a truly monumental look at opium and the U.S. from the moment this country's first Afghan War began in 1979 to late last night. Tom

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By **Alfred W. McCoy**

After fighting the longest war in its history, the United States stands at the brink of defeat in Afghanistan. How can this be possible? How could the world's sole superpower have battled continuously for 15 years, deploying 100,000 of its finest troops, sacrificing the lives of 2,200 of those soldiers, [spending](#) more than a trillion dollars on its military operations, [lavishing](#) a record hundred billion more on "nation-building" and "reconstruction," helping raise, fund, equip, and train an army of 350,000 Afghan allies, and still not be able to pacify one of the world's most impoverished nations? So dismal is the prospect for stability in Afghanistan in 2016 that the Obama White House has recently [cancelled](#) a planned further withdrawal of its forces and will leave an estimated 10,000 troops in the country indefinitely.

Were you to cut through the Gordian knot of complexity that is the Afghan War, you would find that in the American failure there lies the greatest policy paradox of the century: Washington's massive military juggernaut has been stopped dead in its steel tracks by a pink flower, the opium poppy.

For more than three decades in Afghanistan, Washington's military operations have succeeded only when they fit reasonably comfortably into Central Asia's illicit traffic in opium, and suffered when they failed to complement it. The first U.S. intervention there began in 1979. It succeeded in part because the surrogate war the CIA launched to expel the Soviets from that country coincided with the way its Afghan allies used the country's swelling drug traffic to sustain their decade-long struggle.

On the other hand, in the almost 15 years of continuous combat since the U.S. invasion of 2001, pacification efforts have failed to curtail the Taliban insurgency largely because the U.S. could not control the swelling surplus from the county's heroin trade. As opium production surged from a minimal 180 tons to a monumental 8,200 in the first five years of U.S. occupation, Afghanistan's soil seemed to have been sown with the dragon's teeth of ancient Greek myth. Every poppy harvest yielded a new crop of teenaged fighters for the Taliban's growing guerrilla army.

At each stage in Afghanistan's tragic, tumultuous history over the past 40 years — the covert war of the 1980s, the civil war of the 1990s, and the U.S. occupation since 2001 — opium played a surprisingly significant role in shaping the country's destiny. In one of history's bitter twists of fate, the way Afghanistan's unique ecology converged with American military technology transformed this remote, landlocked nation into the world's first true narco-state — a country where illicit drugs dominate the economy, define political choices, and determine the fate of foreign interventions.

Covert Warfare (1979-1992)

The CIA's secret war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s helped transform the lawless Afghan-Pakistani borderlands into the seedbed for a sustained expansion of the global heroin trade. "In the tribal area," the State Department would report in 1986, "there is no police force. There are no courts. There is no taxation. No weapon is

illegal... Hashish and opium are often on display.” By then, the process had long been underway. Instead of forming its own coalition of resistance leaders, the Agency relied on Pakistan’s crucial Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and its Afghan clients who soon became principals in the burgeoning cross-border opium traffic.

Not surprisingly, the Agency looked the other way while Afghanistan’s opium production grew unchecked from about 100 tons annually in the 1970s to 2,000 tons by 1991. In 1979 and 1980, just as the CIA effort was beginning to ramp up, a network of heroin laboratories opened along the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. That region soon became the world’s largest heroin producer. By 1984, it supplied a staggering 60% of the U.S. market and 80% of the European one. Inside Pakistan, the number of heroin addicts went from near zero (yes, zero) in 1979 to 5,000 in 1980 and 1,300,000 by 1985 — a rate of addiction so high the U.N. [called](#) it “particularly shocking.”

According to the 1986 State Department report, opium “is an ideal crop in a war-torn country since it requires little capital investment, is fast growing, and is easily transported and traded.” Moreover, Afghanistan’s climate was well suited to this temperate crop, with average yields two to three times higher than in Southeast Asia’s Golden Triangle region, the previous capital of the opium trade. As relentless warfare between CIA and Soviet surrogates generated at least three million refugees and disrupted food production, Afghan farmers began to turn to opium “in desperation” since it produced such easy “high profits” which could cover rising food prices. At the same time, resistance elements, according to the State Department, engaged in opium production and trafficking “to provide staples for [the] population under their control and to fund weapons purchases.”



As the mujahedeen resistance gained strength and began to create liberated zones inside Afghanistan in the early 1980s, it helped fund its operations by collecting taxes from peasants producing lucrative [opium poppies](#), particularly in the fertile Helmand Valley, once the breadbasket of southern Afghanistan. Caravans carrying CIA arms into that region for the resistance often returned to Pakistan loaded down with opium — sometimes, the *New York Times* [reported](#), “with the assent of Pakistani or American intelligence officers who supported the resistance.”

Once the mujahedeen fighters brought the opium across the border, they sold it to Pakistani heroin refiners operating in the country’s North-West Frontier Province, a covert-war zone administered by the CIA’s close ally General Fazle Haq. By 1988, there were an estimated 100 to 200 heroin refineries in the province’s Khyber district alone. Further south in the Koh-i-Soltan district of Baluchistan Province, [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), the CIA’s favored Afghan asset, controlled six refineries that processed much of the opium harvest from the Helmand Valley into heroin. Trucks of the Pakistani army’s National Logistics Cell, arriving in these

borderlands from the port of Karachi with crates of weaponry from the CIA, left with cargos of heroin for ports and airports where it would be exported to world markets.

In May 1990, as this covert operation was ending, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that the CIA's chief asset Hekmatyar was also the rebels' leading heroin trafficker. American officials, the *Post* claimed, had long refused to investigate charges of heroin dealing by Hekmatyar, as well as Pakistan's ISI, largely "because U.S. narcotics policy in Afghanistan has been subordinated to the war against Soviet influence there."

Indeed, Charles Cogan, former director of the CIA's Afghan operation, later spoke frankly about his Agency's choices. "Our main mission was to do as much damage as possible to the Soviets," he told Australian television in 1995. "We didn't really have the resources or the time to devote to an investigation of the drug trade. I don't think that we need to apologize for this... There was fallout in term of drugs, yes. But the main objective was accomplished. The Soviets left Afghanistan."

The Afghan Civil War and the Rise of the Taliban (1989-2001)

Over the longer term, such a "clandestine" intervention (so openly written and bragged about) produced a black hole of geopolitical instability never sealed or healed thereafter.

Lying at the northern reaches of the seasonal monsoon, where rain clouds arrive already squeezed dry, arid Afghanistan never recovered from the unprecedented devastation it suffered in the years of the first American intervention. Other than irrigated areas like the Helmand Valley, the country's semi-arid highlands were already a fragile ecosystem straining to sustain sizeable populations when war first broke out in 1979. As that war wound down between 1989 and 1992, the Washington-led alliance essentially abandoned the country, failing either to sponsor a peace settlement or finance reconstruction.



Washington simply turned elsewhere as a vicious civil war broke out in a country with 1.5 million dead, three million refugees, a ravaged economy, and a bevy of well-armed warlords primed to fight for power. During the years of vicious civil strife that followed, Afghan farmers raised the only crop that ensured instant profits, the opium poppy. The opium harvest, having multiplied twentyfold to 2,000 tons during the covert-war era of the 1980s, would double during the civil war of the 1990s.

In this period of turmoil, [opium's ascent](#) should be seen as a response to the severe damage two decades of warfare had inflicted. With the return of those three million refugees to a war-ravaged land, the opium fields were an employment godsend, since they required nine times as many laborers to cultivate as wheat, the country's traditional staple. In addition, opium merchants alone were capable of accumulating capital rapidly enough to be able to provide much-needed cash advances to poor poppy farmers that equaled more than half their annual income. That credit would prove critical to the survival of many poor villagers.

In the civil war's first phase from 1992 to 1994, ruthless local warlords combined arms and opium in a countrywide struggle for power. Determined to install its Pashtun allies in Kabul, the Afghan capital, Pakistan worked through the ISI to deliver arms and funds to its chief client Hekmatyar. By now, he was the nominal prime minister of a fractious coalition whose troops would spend two years shelling and rocketing Kabul in fighting that left the city in ruins and some [50,000 more Afghans dead](#). When he nonetheless failed to take the capital, Pakistan threw its backing behind a newly arisen Pashtun force, the Taliban, a fundamentalist movement that had emerged from militant Islamic schools.

After seizing Kabul in 1996 and taking control of much of the country, the Taliban regime encouraged local opium cultivation, offering government protection to the export trade and collecting much needed taxes on both the opium produced and the heroin manufactured from it. U.N. opium surveys showed that, during their first three years in power, the Taliban raised the country's opium crop to 4,600 tons, or 75% percent of world production at that moment.

In July 2000, however, as a devastating drought entered its second year and mass starvation spread across Afghanistan, the Taliban government suddenly [ordered a ban](#) on all opium cultivation in an apparent appeal for international recognition and aid. A subsequent U.N. crop survey of 10,030 villages found that this prohibition had [reduced the harvest](#) by 94% to a mere 185 tons.

Three months later, the Taliban sent a delegation headed by its deputy foreign minister, [Abdur Rahman Zahid](#), to U.N. headquarters in New York to barter a continuing drug prohibition for diplomatic recognition. That body instead imposed new sanctions on the regime for protecting Osama bin Laden. The U.S., on the other hand, actually rewarded the Taliban with \$43 million in humanitarian aid, even as it seconded U.N. criticism over bin Laden. Announcing this aid in May 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell praised "the ban on poppy cultivation, a decision by the Taliban that we welcome" and urged the regime to "act on a number of fundamental issues that separate us: their support for terrorism; their violation of internationally recognized human rights standards, especially their treatment of women and girls."

The War on Terror (2001-2016)

After a decade of ignoring Afghanistan, Washington rediscovered the place with a vengeance in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Only weeks later, in October 2001, the U.S. began bombing the country and then launched an "invasion" spearheaded by local warlords. The [Taliban regime collapsed](#), in the words of veteran *New York Times* reporter R.W. Apple, with a speed "so sudden and so unexpected that government officials and commentators on strategy... are finding it hard to explain." Although the U.S. air attacks did considerable physical and psychological damage, many other societies have withstood far more massive bombardments without collapsing in this fashion. In retrospect, it seems likely that the opium prohibition had economically eviscerated the Taliban, leaving its theocracy a hollow shell that shattered with the first American bombs.

To an extent not generally appreciated, for the previous two decades Afghanistan had devoted a growing share of its resources — capital, land, water, and labor — to the production of opium and heroin. By the time the Taliban outlawed cultivation, the country had become, agriculturally, little more than an opium monocrop. The drug trade accounted for most of its tax revenues, almost all its export income, and much of its employment. In

this context, opium eradication proved to be an act of economic suicide that brought an already weakened society to the brink of collapse. Indeed, a 2001 U.N. survey found that the ban had “resulted in a severe loss of income for an estimated 3.3 million people,” 15% of the population, including 80,000 farmers, 480,000 itinerant laborers, and their millions of dependents.

While the U.S. bombing campaign raged throughout October 2001, the [CIA spent](#) \$70 million “in direct cash outlays on the ground” to mobilize its old coalition of tribal warlords to take down the Taliban, an expenditure President George W. Bush would later hail as one of history’s biggest “bargains.” To capture Kabul and other key cities, the CIA put its money behind the leaders of the [Northern Alliance](#), which the Taliban had never fully defeated. They, in turn, had long dominated the drug traffic in the area of northeastern Afghanistan they controlled in the Taliban years. In the meantime, the CIA also turned to a group of rising Pashtun [warlords](#) who had been active as drug smugglers in the southeastern part of the country. As a result, when the Taliban went down, the groundwork had already been laid for the resumption of opium cultivation and the drug trade on a major scale.

✘ Once Kabul and the provincial capitals were taken, the CIA quickly ceded operational control to uniformed allied forces and civilian officials whose [inept drug suppression](#) programs in the years to come would, in the end, leave the heroin traffic’s growing profits first to those warlords and, in later years, largely to the Taliban guerrillas. In the first year of U.S. occupation, before that movement had even reconstituted itself, the opium [harvest surged](#) to 3,400 tons. In a development without historical precedent, illicit drugs would be responsible for an extraordinary 62% percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2003. For the first few years of the U.S. occupation, Defense Secretary [Donald Rumsfeld](#) “dismissed growing signs that drug money was being funneled to the Taliban,” while the CIA and the U.S. military “turned a blind eye to drug-related activities by prominent warlords.”

In late 2004, after nearly two years in which it showed next to no interest in the subject, outsourcing opium control to its British allies and police training to the Germans, the White House was suddenly confronted with troubling CIA intelligence suggesting that the [escalating drug trade](#) was fueling a revival of the Taliban. Backed by President Bush, Secretary of State Powell then urged an aggressive counter-narcotics strategy, including a Vietnam-style aerial defoliation of parts of rural Afghanistan. But U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad resisted this approach, seconded by his local ally Ashraf Ghani, then the country’s finance minister (and now its president), who [warned](#) that such an eradication program would mean “widespread impoverishment” in the country without \$20 billion in foreign aid to create “genuine alternative livelihood[s].”

As a compromise, Washington came to rely on private contractors like DynCorp to train Afghan [manual eradication](#) teams. However, by 2005, according to *New York Times* correspondent Carlotta Gall, that approach had already become “something of a joke.” Two years later, as the Taliban insurgency and [opium cultivation](#) both spread in what seemed to be a synergistic fashion, the U.S. Embassy again pressed Kabul to accept the kind of aerial defoliation the U.S. had sponsored in Colombia. President Hamid [Karzai refused](#), leaving this critical problem unresolved.

The U.N.’s *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007* found that the [annual harvest](#) was up 24% to a record 8,200 tons, which translated into 53% of the country’s GDP and 93% of the world’s illicit heroin supply. Significantly, the U.N. stated that Taliban guerrillas had “started to

extract from the drug economy resources for arms, logistics, and militia pay.” A study for the U.S. [Institute of Peace](#) concluded that, by 2008, the movement had 50 heroin labs in its territory and controlled 98% of the country’s poppy fields. That year, it reportedly collected \$425 million in “taxes” levied on opium traffic, and with every harvest, it gained the necessary funds to recruit a new crop of young fighters from the villages. Each of those prospective guerrillas could count on monthly payments of [\\$300](#), far above the wages they would have made as agricultural laborers.

In mid-2008, to contain the spreading insurgency, Washington decided to commit [40,000 more](#) American combat troops to the country, raising allied forces to 70,000. Recognizing the crucial role of opium revenues in Taliban recruitment practices, the U.S. Treasury also formed the [Afghan Threat Finance Cell](#) and embedded 60 of its analysts in combat units charged with launching strategic strikes against the drug trade.

Using quantitative methods of “social network analysis” and “influence network modeling,” those instant [civilian experts](#) would often, according to one veteran analyst, “point to hawala brokers [rural creditors] as critical nodes within an insurgent group’s network,” prompting U.S. combat soldiers to take “kinetic courses of action — quite literally, kicking down the door of the hawala office and shutting down the operation.” Such “highly controversial” acts might “temporarily degrade the financial network of an insurgent group,” but those gains came “at the cost of upsetting an entire village” dependent on the lender for legitimate credit that was the “vast majority of the hawalador’s business.” In this way, once again, support for the Taliban grew.

By 2009, the guerrillas were expanding so rapidly that the new Obama administration opted for a “surge” in U.S. troop strength to 102,000 in a bid to cripple the Taliban. After months of rising troop deployments, President Obama’s new war strategy was officially [launched](#) on February 13, 2010, in Marja, a remote market town in Helmand Province. As waves of helicopters descended on its outskirts spitting up clouds of dust, hundreds of Marines sprinted through fields of sprouting opium poppies toward the town’s mud-walled compounds. Though their target was the local Taliban guerrillas, [the Marines](#) were in fact occupying the capital of the global heroin trade. Forty percent of the world’s illicit opium supply was grown in the surrounding districts and much of that crop was traded in Marja.

A week later, U.S. Commander General Stanley McChrystal choppered into town with Karim Khalili, Afghanistan’s vice president, for the media rollout of a new-look counterinsurgency strategy that, he told reporters, was rock-solid certain to pacify villages like Marja. Only it would never be so because the opium trade would spoil the party. “If they come with tractors,” one [Afghan widow](#) announced to a chorus of supportive shouts from her fellow farmers, “they will have to roll over me and kill me before they can kill my poppy.” Speaking by satellite telephone from the region’s opium fields, a U.S. Embassy official told me: “You can’t win this war without taking on drug production in Helmand Province.”

Watching these events unfold nearly six years ago, I wrote an essay [for TomDispatch](#) warning of a defeat foretold. “So the choice is clear enough,” I said at the time. “We can continue to fertilize this deadly soil with yet more blood in a brutal war with an uncertain outcome... or we can help renew this ancient, arid land by re-planting the orchards, replenishing the flocks, and rebuilding the farming destroyed in decades of war... until food crops become a viable alternative to opium. To put it simply, so simply that even Washington might understand, we can only pacify a narco-state when it is no longer a narco-state.”

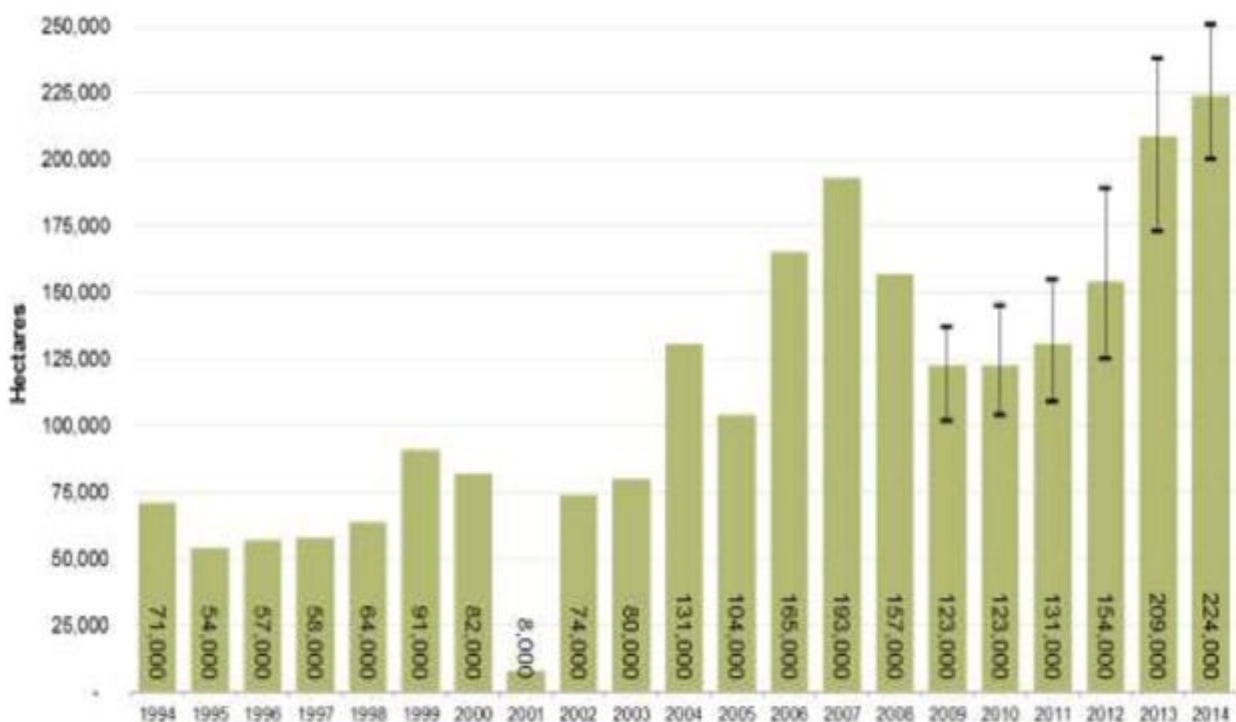
By attacking the guerrillas but ignoring the opium harvest that funded new insurgents every spring, Obama’s surge soon suffered that defeat foretold. As 2012 ended, the [Taliban guerrillas](#) had, according to the *New York Times*, “weathered the biggest push the American-led coalition is going to make against them.” Amid the rapid drawdown of allied forces to meet President Obama’s December 2014 deadline for “ending” U.S. combat operations, reduced air operations allowed the Taliban to launch mass-formation [attacks](#) in the north, northeast, and south, killing record numbers of Afghan army troops and police.

At the time, John Sopko, the U.S. special inspector for Afghanistan, offered a telling [explanation](#) for the Taliban’s survival. Despite the expenditure of a staggering \$7.6 billion on “drug eradication” programs during the previous decade, he concluded that, “by every conceivable metric, we’ve failed. Production and cultivation are up, interdiction and eradication are down, financial support to the insurgency is up, and addiction and abuse are at unprecedented levels in Afghanistan.”

Indeed, the 2013 opium crop covered a [record](#) 209,000 hectares, raising the harvest by 50% to 5,500 tons. That massive harvest generated some \$3 billion in illicit income, of which the Taliban’s tax took an estimated \$320 million, well over half its revenues. The U.S. Embassy [corroborated](#) this dismal assessment, calling the illicit income “a windfall for the insurgency, which profits from the drug trade at almost every level.”

As the 2014 opium crop was harvested, fresh U.N. figures suggested that the dismal trend only continued, with the areas under cultivation rising to a [record](#) 224,000 hectares and production at 6,400 tons remaining near historic highs. In May 2015, having watched this flood of drugs enter the global market as U.S. counter-narcotics spending climbed to \$8.4 billion, Sopko tried to translate what was happening into a single [all-American image](#). “Afghanistan,” he said, “has roughly 500,000 acres, or about 780 square miles, devoted to growing opium poppy. That’s equivalent to more than 400,000 U.S. football fields — including the end zones.”

Figure 1: Opium cultivation in Afghanistan, 1994-2014 (Hectares)



In the fighting season of 2015, the Taliban decisively seized the combat initiative and opium seemed ever more deeply embedded in its operations. The *New York Times* [reported](#) that the movement's new leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, was "among the first major Taliban officials to be linked to the drug trade... and later became the Taliban's main tax collector for the narcotics trade — creating immense profits." After months of relentless pressure on government forces in three northern provinces, the group's first major operation under his command was the two-week seizure of the strategic city of Kunduz, which just happened to be [located](#) on "the country's most lucrative drug routes... moving opium from the poppy prolific provinces in the south to Tajikistan... and to Russia and Europe." Washington felt forced to slam down the [brakes](#) on planned further withdrawals of its combat forces.

Amid a rushed evacuation of its regional offices in the threatened northern provinces, the U.N. released a map in October showing that the Taliban had "high" or "[extreme](#)" control in more than half the country's rural districts, including many where they had not previously been a significant presence. Within a month, the Taliban unleashed [offensives](#) countrywide that aimed at seizing and holding territory, threatening military bases in northern Faryab Province and encircling entire districts in western Herat.

Not surprisingly, the strongest attacks came in the poppy heartland of Helmand Province, where half the country's opium crop was then grown and, said the *New York Times*, "the lucrative opium trade made it crucial to the insurgents' economic designs." By mid-December, after overrunning checkpoints, winning back much of the province, and setting government security forces back on their heels, the guerrillas came [close to capturing](#) that heart of the heroin trade, Marja, the very site of President Obama's media-saturated surge rollout in 2010. Had U.S. Special Operations forces and the U.S. Air Force not intervened to relieve "demoralized" Afghan forces, the town and the province would undoubtedly have fallen. By early 2016, 14-plus years after Afghanistan was "liberated" by a U.S. invasion, and in a significant reversal of Obama administration drawdown policies, the U.S. was [reportedly dispatching](#) "hundreds" of new U.S. troops in a mini-surge into Helmand Province to shore up the government's faltering forces and deny the insurgents the "economic prize" of the world's most productive poppy fields.

After a disastrous 2015 fighting season that inflicted what U.S. officials have termed "[unsustainable](#)" casualties on the Afghan army and what the UN called the "real horror" of record [civilian losses](#), the long, harsh winter that has settled across the country is offering no respite. As cold and snow slowed combat in the countryside, the Taliban shifted operations to the cities, with five massive [bombings](#) in Kabul and other key urban areas in the first week of January, followed by a [suicide attack](#) on a police complex in the capital that killed 20 officers.

Meanwhile, as the 2015 harvest ended, the country's opium cultivation, after six years of sustained growth, [slipped](#) by 18% to 183,000 hectares and the crop yield dropped steeply to 3,300 tons. While U.N. officials attributed much of the decline to [drought](#) and the [spread](#) of a poppy fungus, conditions that might not continue into 2016, long-term trends are still an unclear mix of positive and negative news. Buried in the mass of data published in the U.N.'s drug reports is one [significant statistic](#): as Afghanistan's economy grew from years of international aid, opium's share of GDP dropped steadily from a daunting 63% in 2003 to a far more manageable 13% in 2014. Even so, the U.N. says, "dependency on the opiate economy at the farmer level in many rural communities is still high."

At that local level in Helmand Province, "Afghan government officials have also become

directly involved in the opium trade,” the *New York Times* recently [reported](#). In doing so, they expanded “their competition with the Taliban... into a struggle for control of the drug traffic,” while imposing “a tax on farmers practically identical to the one the Taliban uses,” and kicking a portion of their illicit profits “up the chain, all the way to officials in Kabul... ensuring that the local authorities maintain support from higher-ups and keeping the opium growing.”

Simultaneously, a recent U.N. Security Council investigation [found](#) that the Taliban has systematically tapped “into the supply chain at each stage of the narcotics trade,” collecting a 10% user tax on opium cultivation in Helmand, fighting for control of heroin laboratories, and acting as “the major guarantors for the trafficking of raw opium and heroin out of Afghanistan.” No longer simply taxing the traffic, the Taliban is now so deeply and directly involved that, [adds](#) the *Times*, it “has become difficult to distinguish the group from a dedicated drug cartel.” Whatever the long-term trends might be, for the foreseeable future opium remains deeply entangled with the rural economy, the Taliban insurgency, and government corruption whose sum is the Afghan conundrum.

With ample revenues from past bumper crops, the Taliban will undoubtedly be ready for the new fighting season that will come with the start of spring. As snow melts from the mountain slopes and poppy shoots spring from the soil, there will be, as in the past 40 years, a new crop of teenaged recruits ready to fight for the rebel forces.

Cutting the Afghan Gordian Knot

For most people globally, economic activity, the production and exchange of goods, is the prime point of contact with government, as is manifest in the coins and currency stamped by the state that everyone carries in their pockets. But when a country’s most significant commodity is illegal, then political loyalties naturally shift to the clandestine networks that move that product safely from fields to foreign markets, providing finance, loans, and employment every step of the way. “The narcotics trade poisons the Afghan financial sector and fuels a growing illicit economy,” John Sopko [explains](#). “This, in turn, undermines the Afghan state’s legitimacy by stoking corruption, nourishing criminal networks, and providing significant financial support to the Taliban and other insurgent groups.”

After 15 years of continuous warfare in Afghanistan, Washington is faced with the same choice it had five years ago when Obama’s generals heli-lifted those Marines into Marja to start its surge. Just as it has been over the past decade and a half, the U.S. can remain trapped in the same endless cycle, fighting each new crop of village warriors who annually seem to spring fully armed from that country’s poppy fields. At this point, history tells us one thing: in this land sown with dragon’s teeth, there will be a new crop of guerrillas this year, next year, and the year after that.

Even in troubled Afghanistan, however, there are alternatives whose sum could potentially slice through this Gordian knot of a policy problem. As a first and fundamental step, maybe it’s time to stop talking about the next sets of boots on the ground and for President Obama to complete his planned troop withdrawal.

Next, investing even a small portion of all that misspent military funding in rural Afghanistan could produce economic alternatives for the millions of farmers who depend upon the opium crop for employment. Such money could help rebuild that land’s ruined orchards, ravaged flocks, wasted seed stocks, and wrecked snowmelt irrigation systems that, before these

decades of war, sustained a diverse agriculture. If the international community can continue to nudge the country's dependence on illicit opium down from the current 13% of GDP through such sustained rural development, then perhaps Afghanistan will cease to be the planet's leading narco-state and just maybe that annual cycle can at long last be broken.

Alfred W. McCoy, a [TomDispatch regular](#), is the Harrington professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of the now-classic book [The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade](#), which probed the conjuncture of illicit narcotics and covert operations over 50 years. His more recent books include *Torture and Impunity: The U.S. Doctrine of Coercive Interrogation* and [Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State](#).

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