# Out of Afghanistan: Why Matthew Hoh resigned

by Amy Frykholm in the March 23, 2010 issue

*Matthew Hoh is a former Marine Corps captain who has served with the U.S. Department of State in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last fall he resigned his post in Afghanistan, declaring in his resignation letter: "I find specious the reasons we ask for bloodshed and sacrifice from our young men and women in Afghanistan. If honest, our stated strategy of securing Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda resurgence . . . would require us to additionally invade and occupy western Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan [and] Yemen." He argues that current U.S. policy fuels corruption, supports drug lords and does little to support the majority of Afghans.*

**What was your experience of the war in Iraq and the effectiveness of U.S. policy there?**

Our senior leadership—both military and civilian—was slow to admit that there was an insurgency in Iraq, and then it took a long time for them to figure out that there were multiple parts to the insurgency and that we could drive wedges between the different elements. Some elements were supporters of al-Qaeda, which has ambitions of world religious domination; others were Sunni nationalists who didn't want their country to be occupied. Others were Shi'ite militias bent on political control. For years we refused to recognize these differences, and that was maddening.

**What were you hoping to accomplish when you were posted to Afghanistan?**

I wanted to be working at the lowest tactical level possible. That was where I felt I could make the greatest difference. After working in Jalalabad and getting a good overview of the situation, I took a position with a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Zabul Province in the south of Afghanistan, which is very remote and rural.

In Zabul Province I was the adviser to a governor in an area completely controlled by the Taliban. It was difficult, challenging and inspiring in a lot of ways. People there are desperately poor—one level above living in the ground. They are subsistence farmers who are just trying to draw food and water out of the ground to survive. There is not much in the villages—no electricity; no sanitation or hygiene; maybe a hand-pumped well. It is a very dirty, diseased place. The life expectancy is 44 years. Men have multiple wives, a practice that reflects a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad but also the fact that there is a good chance a wife will die in childbirth. You have a lot of children because one in five children die before their fifth birthday.

Because of the terrain, these villages are isolated from each other. It is a culture that has developed to be very protective of itself.

Whatever side of the conflict they fall on, 90 percent of the people in Afghanistan would just like to be left alone to try to give their children a better life. They have no interest in who has power in the central government. It doesn't affect their struggle to stay alive.

**What struck you most about the Afghan people?**

Afghanis are the most gracious, hospitable people I have ever come in contact with. Even villagers who were ostensibly enemies were always hospitable to us—when they weren't shooting at us.

When I went to southern Afghanistan I expected to see a lot of animals pulling carts. Instead I saw a lot of people pulling carts. The people—you see only the men and boys—are very gaunt and thin. They are very tough. They have survived abject poverty and 30 to 35 years of brutal war. You can see that experience in their faces. They have a drained and tired look.

**What is your main objection to U.S. policy in southern Afghanistan?**

The biggest problem is the idea that we are going to build up an Afghan security force and an Afghan central government that will deliver services to and protect and educate the people. The plan is that we will provide a better alternative to what the Taliban is offering, so the people will choose it. This is a sound counterinsurgency theory, and it has worked in other conflicts.

But in Afghanistan, we are applying a counterinsurgency campaign to a civil war that has been raging for 35 years. When we rightfully intervened in Afghanistan after September 2001, we removed the Taliban, a group that represented 35 or 40 percent of the population and the rural Pashtun part of the country. We put the Northern Alliance in power, the people that the Taliban had been fighting. We never did anything to end the political differences that had been causing conflict for decades.

When the Afghan army comes to southern Afghanistan, they are seen as occupiers and carpetbaggers. They are outsiders just as much as you or I would be. Historically, in these areas, people have governed themselves at the valley and village level. They do not want people in the next valley coming over and telling them what to do, let alone people who are not ethnically aligned with them and with whom they have been at war for 35 years.

The central government is seen as an outside power. The U.S. is trying to foster and develop Afghan security forces and an Afghan government that are unwelcome in the rural south and east.

**Is there anything that gives you hope for southern Afghanistan?**

As medieval as life there seems, every Afghan male has not one but two or three cell phones. The information age is reaching those really poor and remote parts of the country. In terms of bettering their lives, improving women's rights and educating the people—it will come. Information will come through technology. Life will get better. It will take some time, but it will get better.

I'm very encouraged by what I've seen recently in the willingness of U.S. leaders to engage the Taliban in talks. That's the only way we are going to end this thing: a negotiated political settlement. I hope our government will lead this effort, with India, Iran and Pakistan also involved in the process.

**You've been involved in two conflicts that ostensibly were responses to the threat of al-Qaeda. How do you assess the threat that al-Qaeda represents?**

Al-Qaeda is not a mass movement. It has not gained in popularity over the past decade, even though the U.S. has invaded and occupied two Muslim countries. Out of a billion-plus Muslims, al-Qaeda is only a couple thousand strong. Al-Qaeda is

small but very dangerous, particularly if it were to acquire a weapon of mass destruction.

Al-Qaeda has evolved, and we need to as well. We are sending thousands of troops and hundreds of thousands of pounds of vehicles and equipment to the region. Al-Qaeda's response is to send one Nigerian man on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit. Al-Qaeda exists as a virtual organization. It is not a command and control operation. It has a figurehead leadership—Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri—who provide inspirational guidance. They are a message, an ideological cloud that floats on the Internet.

**How can we counter this threat?**

We have to keep to the things that have made America great, not just economically but culturally: progressive thought and education, openness and information. That's how you defeat an ideologically based organization like al-Qaeda—you provide a better alternative. That does not include invading countries and toppling their governments in hopes of forming democracies.