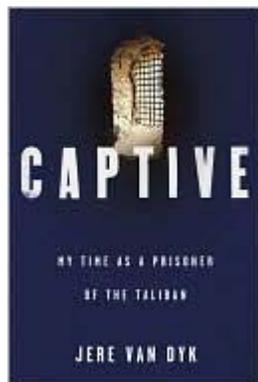


Captive: My Time as a Prisoner of the Taliban

Jere Van Dyk

Wednesday, June 23, 2010



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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to thank you all for joining us for the final event of this season.

Today our program is somewhat unusual. While discussion about the Taliban is not out of the ordinary, this time there is an unexpected twist, because today when we talk about the Taliban it will be in conjunction with the harrowing story of one man who was held captive in a Taliban prison for 45 fearful days.

That man is someone whom I was barely acquainted with before he left New York to write a book about the state of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the no-man's-land between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, when he returned, and after listening to what he had endured, I reached out to him and he became my friend. In writing this story, Jere Van Dyk, a former Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Council, was given an office here and became ensconced on the fourth floor.

As details began to surface, I slowly became privy to the intense fear and emotional trauma he was subjected to while being held against his will. I couldn't help but wonder if by writing about the unimaginable horror the emotions that reemerged could and would become the catharsis he needed to put this overwhelming chapter of his life behind. I was hopeful.

[Captive: My Time as a Prisoner of the Taliban](#) is the result of his effort, and it is as frightening as it is spellbinding.

In 2008, when Jere left for Afghanistan to travel to the frontier area, he was not a stranger to Afghanistan nor to the ways of its people. But when he set out from Kabul with three Afghan guides to meet with a local chieftain on the border, little did he know that the information he was seeking would become more than a fact-finding mission, but an experience that would leave invisible scars and would change his life forever.

The trip was inevitably risky. Yet, as one who had traveled with the [Mujahideen](#) in the 1980s and as one who had covered stories around the world for *The New York Times*, CBS, and *National Geographic*, Jere thought he was doing what he had always done throughout his career, which was traveling to places no one else dared to go to tell us a story we needed to know.

But this time the connections he had and the knowledge he possessed to navigate the tribal lands between Pakistan and Afghanistan were not enough. He was betrayed and captured by a fractious band of Taliban fighters.

It is difficult to imagine anything more frightening than to be held against your will, not knowing if you would live or you would die, and, if you survive, how to put your life back together. Without a doubt, an ordeal of this kind changes you and changes your views of those around you.

Nothing ever becomes real until you experience it for yourself, but a reading of this book comes very, very close. *Captive* is truly a gripping and emotionally terrifying tale of human endurance brought to life upon page after page.

But for me to tell you any more would not be fair, for it's Jere's story, not mine. Please join me in giving a warm welcome to a special friend, Jere Van Dyk.

Remarks

JERE VAN DYK: Good afternoon.

Joanne, thank you very much. We have become very good friends in the last few years. I feel like I've come home a bit today to be here back at the Carnegie Council.

It was through [Joel Rosenthal](#), the president of the Carnegie Council, that I met my editor and now a good friend, Paul Golub, who sent me directly on this journey about which I would like to discuss and talk to you today.

This afternoon, a few hours ago, I was doing an interview on Al Jazeera English. I was here in a studio in New York and the moderator was in Washington. They had a man named [Abdul Salam Zaeef](#), who is a former leader of the Taliban. Some of you may know him. He was on television all the time just after 9/11 as the ambassador to Pakistan. He was in Kabul.

So we had a conversation moderated by a man named [Riz Khan](#). It was political and it was easy to do.

Then he asked me: "Mr. Van Dyk, what was it like being a prisoner of the Taliban?"

Then he asked Mr. Zaeef: "What was it like being a prisoner of the Americans in Guantanamo?"

All of a sudden everything changed and it became emotional. I sat there and I listened to him—I had met with him once—and how angry he was. He kept going and going. There was something truly remarkable and touching about that and I felt very close to him.

I found it quite remarkable that here I was talking to this man whose men had captured me and provided me, however, with a reason that I did not know about, to live.

What was even more interesting was that in 1973, when I was a young man living in Paris, going to school on the GI Bill, that one day I saw a poster on a wall of Afghanistan and how it resonated inside of me.

School ended and it was this time in June, and a group of us were sitting around a table in a café and we were talking about the future and what we were going to do. One man said, "I want to be an economist." Another man said, "I want to be a lawyer." Another man said, "I want to work for the World Bank." Another man said he wanted to go to work for Sotheby's, the art auction house. I said, "I want to go to Afghanistan."

Where did that come from? I don't know. I wanted romance, adventure, excitement.

I was running track at the time. I went up to Scandinavia to do that on the European tour for a few months. I came back.

I called my parents. To this day my brother and I do not understand why they said yes.

I said, "I would like to buy an old car in Germany," where I had been in the Army, "and take my brother on a trip from Germany across to Asia."

They said yes.

So we set out on this journey. We had many adventures.

We landed in Afghanistan in the fall of 1973. At that time it was the "Wild West in the East." It was romantic, of course, but it was also very peaceful.

In Kabul schoolgirls wore short skirts and long socks, like Catholic schoolgirls here in the United States. You could hear the Rolling Stones mixed with the evening call to prayer in the evenings. According to my brother, there was a discotheque. There were outdoor cafés. There were restaurants. It was called "Paris of the East."

One day I went out by myself with somebody else, not my brother, and met a group of [Kuchi](#) nomads, the original [Pashtuns](#). The Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the founders of Afghanistan, and the largest ethnic group across the border in Pakistan.

They invited me into their home, their tent, and a woman gave me tea and sugar. I looked around. They didn't have anything, but they gave me all that they had. That was the very beginning of what I came to know later as what is called [Pashtunwali](#)—Pashtun, the ethnic group; *wali*, "the way of" or "ism"—"the way of the Pashtuns."

We ran out of money. I had to get a visa in Pakistan to sell the car. I drove down to the tribal areas. It was like a Sunday drive.

But what we did not know—we knew about this, but we didn't pay much attention to it—was that a few months before this a man named [Daoud Khan](#), the brother-in-law and first cousin of the king of Afghanistan, [Zahir Shah](#), overthrew him and created a republic, setting in motion the events that would eventually lead to 9/11. But we didn't know anything about that, of course, at the time.

There were about a dozen young men, mostly affiliated with the Islamic faculty in Kabul University, who were upset at the leftward leaning of this new government. They called him "the red prince."

Led by a man named [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), in his twenties, the same age we were, they fled across the border that no one in Afghanistan considered the true border, called the [Durand Line](#), into Pakistan. The Pakistani army took them in and began to secretly train them.

My brother and I returned to the West. I took a job in Washington, D.C., working for the senator from Washington State, where I grew up.

At that time, what we were interested in, as many of you may recall, was the [Arab oil embargo](#), [containing communism](#), and [the end of Vietnam](#).

In 1975, while this was the center of politics or international affairs in Washington, what was then called the Mujahideen, this group of young men taken in by Pakistan, launched their first attack into Afghanistan. We knew nothing about it, did we?

In 1979, I was home in Vancouver watching the CBS Evening News, and I saw the Soviet tanks come into Kabul. I said to myself, "I have to return." I didn't know why. I didn't ask.

A year and a half later I returned, this time to Peshawar in Pakistan. I went up along to meet all the various now what they were called Mujahideen groups. And who is the main one? The same young man who started it in 1973, a guy named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. I didn't like him. There was something feline and untrustworthy about him.

There was another man, however, named [Yunus Khalis](#). He was older. He had gnarled hands. There was something about him that reminded me of older cousins of mine who lived in Oregon that we used to go visit—strong, quiet men, who worked in the fields during the day and read the Bible at night.

Because of where I grew up, and what I realized when I was with the Kuchis, was that what I saw in Afghanistan, what I saw with these tribesmen, was like a certain thing about the Indians that we grew up around in Washington State. There was something about them, something about the wild.

My father always said to me, "Always ask an Indian the name of his tribe and treat them with respect." There was something deep inside of me. My father also taught me how to climb a mountain, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, and run.

But we were also deeply Christian. Today we would be called fundamentalists. But we were quietist, we were separatist. We were called [Plymouth Brethren](#). We were separate from the world. In that I was taught as a boy that man against God was nothing and that it is not our will that counts in life, but God's will. Many years later I would see the similarities between that and the men called the Mujahideen that I would live with.

In 1981 when I went back, I went with Yunus Khalis. He sent me down through the tribal areas. They were no longer like going on a Sunday drive now. There were roadblocks everywhere. But they sneaked me through.

I went up into the mountains and lived with a man named [Jalaluddin Haqqani](#). One day an Egyptian Army major came and lived with us. He and I did not like one another, but we had to live together in this baked-mud room for about a week. Years later I realized that he was the very beginning of al-Qaeda. This was in 1981.

Before I came back to the United States, what I also found there was a further extension of *Pashtunwali*, but mixed with Islam. Haqqani today, as many of you know, is one of the two or three principal leaders of the Taliban. When I came there that night after hiking in for a few days, they gave me a plate of honey, tea, and rice, when that's all that we had to eat, and they always served me before anybody else.

Three times with Haqqani's group and twice down in Kandahar with others they saved my life. I was a guest in their home. It's called *panah*, the part of Pashtunwali that says, "I will protect to the death a guest."

There's another part, called *melmastia*, which means hospitality—"we will give what we have." I became further enamored of and fascinated by *Pashtunwali*.

At the same time, I was intrigued by these men who had nothing but would put a rifle in a dirt and bow down to their God. There was a simplicity in the strength it gave them to [stand up against the mighty Red Army at that time](#), and I was intrigued by this, especially when they always said *Inshallah* (God willing). How similar this was to my upbringing. I became close to them.

I came back to the United States and I wrote my stories for the newspaper. *The New York Times* had sent me there. I wrote a book [[In Afghanistan: An American Odyssey](#)], gave speeches, and then one day the op-ed page editor [at *The New York Times*] asked me to write a piece. I did. I had also by doing this taken a stance. I was no longer a journalist.

In that article I wrote the plea that they had passed on to me: "We need something with which to shoot down the helicopters." That began the efforts by the United States to send Stinger missiles.

After that, [Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad](#), who was then an assistant professor at Columbia, came to me and asked me if I would run an organization called [Friends of Afghanistan](#).

I felt guilty for having written that op-ed piece. I wanted to help the Afghans. But I knew by calling for missiles that the war would only get worse. And it did.

So I became a director, but not a boss, of Friends of Afghanistan, that was run by the National Security Council and the State Department.

Many years later, when I was working for *National Geographic*, my editor, [Charles McCarry](#), a longtime CIA man and very good novelist, said, "That sounds like something we would have created."

One day here in New York, we put on a reception for what was then called the Mujahideen Government in Exile. These young men who first fled across in 1973 and in 1981 who had formed their political parties now with Pakistan and the United States were a government.

I was their guide in New York. Hekmatyar was the president. We sat down in his room in the Roosevelt Hotel. The White House called and they said, "It's set for Mr. Hekmatyar"—I still can't get over this—"Mr. Hekmatyar to meet with the president."

Hekmatyar sat on that bed and in his soft feline voice he said, "No, I can't do that."

There was something about this man. I knew he had torture chambers in the refugee camps. I knew he fought against his own men more than he fought against the Soviet Union. He had the courage or the audacity to stand up against the most powerful man in the world, who was then giving him millions and millions of dollars.

That same time there was another man there, [Hajji Din Mohammed](#), a representative of Yunus Khalis, who was the man I had traveled with. We put on this reception for all the UN members. He came in and he said, "When are you coming back? We miss you." He drew me in. This man later, 25 [inaudible] later, is the man I betrayed when I crossed the border.

At that time the United States was still involved very closely with Pakistan and was very anti-communist. I had written my op-ed piece. I had taken a stand. But the politics of it became too much. I traveled the world as a freelance reporter for *National Geographic*, going to faraway places, pushing as much as I could, but always I thought of Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda rose. In 1996 I saw [Osama bin Laden](#) return from Sudan to Afghanistan. He landed in Jalalabad. He went up and he stayed right next door to Yunus Khalis, the man I had gone in with, whose men had sent me in.

The Egyptian army major who had been with us, who had been with Haqqani, who was a Yunus Khalis man—there was a very close tie there I saw between al-Qaeda and the men I was with.

Before that, in 1998 [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), who was national security advisor to President [Carter](#), gave an [interview](#) to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a French magazine. He admitted for the first time that prior to 1979 we did all we could to draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan.

Later I would talk to Pakistani military officers who told me that they had gone in 1975 to the U.S. Embassy to ask for support for the Mujahideen. Our ties with the Pakistani government go back a long way. I was realizing this more and more.

Then came 9/11. I happened to be downtown doing some freelance work on Wall Street. I saw the buildings fall. I was walking around the block late that afternoon afterwards.

A woman in my building works for CBS Radio. She came up to me. She didn't say, "Hello," she didn't say, "How are you?" She just said, "Afghanistan. I'm so glad I saw you." I realized that Afghanistan had come roaring back into my life.

Three months later CBS Radio sent me to Afghanistan. I would do my work. But when I was finished my work or when I had the opportunity, I began to think how I could go back and find these men from the past.

In 2002 I went down to see Yunus Khalis. I went down to see him again in 2003, and I was the only journalist allowed to see him. I wanted to be alone with him. I wanted to find out what he could tell me about bin Laden.

No one would leave me alone in the room with him long enough, and my Pashtun was certainly not good enough. But I took an interpreter with me.

You can see in my mind—perhaps you can see it—I began to think: How can I do this? How can I do what no other journalist can do? I have these contacts. I'm not married. I don't have children. I'm older. But there's something inside of me that's driven to go back and find out what I don't think the American government is telling us, or perhaps in some way doesn't know.

In the next few years I went back and forth to Afghanistan. I kept going closer and closer to the border.

In 2006 I worked as a technical advisor on [Charlie Wilson's War](#). I had a dispute with the CIA advisor. I didn't agree. He didn't agree with me. Maybe the director, [Mike Nichols](#), did that on purpose, to create this tension. I became more agitated—"I've got to find out the truth"—because I felt he was just a little too close to the [ISI](#) [Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence], with how it was portrayed in the script.

Because of my athletic background, and because I had been in the Army, I was intrigued also by the [Pat Tillman](#) story. In 2006, after we finished *Charlie Wilson's War*, I went back to Afghanistan.

I went up along the border to where Tillman was killed. I put on Afghan clothes, I had a beard, and I went with Pashtun guides. Everyone told me, "Don't go up there."

It was the first time since the 1980s that I had returned to the world that I had, to be honest, liked very much. But this time I was afraid. I was no longer protected. I was the enemy.

When we came about three kilometers, a couple miles, from the border, I said, "Haqqani is over there, just across the border, in Miranshah. Maybe, just maybe, I can do this." But I, like everybody else, was frightened.

I had an opportunity to write a monograph for the U.S. Army War College, [Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia](#), which sent me back again. I traveled these different areas.

Just before my return, I got an email from a man that Joel introduced me to. He said, "I want to talk with you."

I came back. We met at a diner around the corner. We talked about possible books on Afghanistan. We came up with the idea to do a book on the tribal areas.

I began to wonder: Is it possible? Can I sneak across? I can't tell anybody what I'm doing.

So in August 2007 I went back. This time I let my hair grow long, I let my beard grow long. I didn't register at the U.S. Embassy. I stayed away from reporters. I didn't tell but one or two people what I was doing. Gradually I became closer and closer to the Afghans than I ever had.

Ramadan came and I fasted. I spent all my time with Afghans. My goal was to penetrate deep into Pashtun culture. In order to do that, I knew I couldn't let any Western, Pakistani or Afghan intelligence or military agency know what I was doing.

I also knew that I had one other card, if you will, that I could play that others couldn't play, and that was a book I had written in the 1980s. The text didn't mean anything. The pictures meant everything: "I was with you before. I'm not like other reporters. I was here when your backs were against the wall."

I also had an allegiance. I was part of a network, the Yunus Khalis network. It's like for some of you who may have gone to college and been part of a fraternity, social club, sports team, or even the military. It's what we call

"the old boy network."

In Afghanistan today, you have a great many people. Everyone's part of the Mujahideen. They're integral parts of the Afghan government at the highest levels. And you have others who are up in the mountains.

There were two up in the mountains, Jalaladin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and I wanted to get to them. I knew I was playing with fire, but I didn't realize it was a suicide mission.

Gradually, as I moved further and further away from the West, I became closer and closer to the Pashtuns, living along the border, staying in villages, and talking to tribal leaders.

In August 2007, as Ramadan came, I met some drug dealers. I had an interpreter. They agreed to take me across into Mohmand Agency.

In early September we crossed. We were there one day. We got out. We did it. It's possible.

The trouble is my interpreter was also friends with a man named [Ajmal Naqshbandi](#). It may not mean too much to you. But in April prior to that, there was an Italian journalist who was kidnapped by the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Ajmal Naqshbandi was his interpreter, who was beheaded, as was his driver. So my interpreter who was close friends with him couldn't go across again. His wife didn't want him to.

But what he did do was go with me again with the Taliban up in the mountains. We went. Six hours' hike south of Tora Bora. Then I had to find somebody else because he wouldn't do anything again.

So through an old Afghan hand I knew here in New York, I found the minister of education, who led me to his nephew, and his nephew said, "I'll do this. I've never been an interpreter before. We can do all these things."

I said, "He's being awfully cavalier."

Then he said, "Will you agree that my neck is your neck and that if anything happens to me you will take care of my children?"

I said, "He does know."

Four times we went to the Taliban. The first time he was shaking, he was so afraid.

The first time there was a member of al-Qaeda, about 5'8", looked about 19 years old, and he wore a Palestinian headdress and spoke in Arabic. But he didn't do anything to me. Each time the Taliban kept their word. I was their guest.

It was *Pashtunwali*.

But I knew I had to go deeper. If I was really going to find out what I wanted to find out, if I was going to try to get to Haqqani, I had to go deep into the tribal zones. I had to go live with the Taliban.

I found an Afghan who is a member of Parliament today, a prominent Mujahideen leader under Yunus Khalis' leadership. Many people feel—this is controversial—but [Mullah Omar](#) was also a part of the Yunus Khalis network. I can't prove that.

He said, "I have a Taliban commander in the tribal areas. He will take care of you." He assassinated [Haji Qadir](#), the vice president of Afghanistan. Haji Qadir was the brother of [Haji Din Mohammed](#), who welcomed me here in New York and said, "When are you coming back?". He was a member of the government, a Yunus Khalis member. Today he is the governor of Kabul.

I said, "That's Haji Din Mohammed's brother."

He said, "You cannot say anything to him."

By doing this I was becoming to a degree like the men I was traveling with. Along the border it's a world of betrayal, of darkness, of murkiness, of tribal loyalties and tribal betrayals. It is extremely hard to figure out.

By the time I was ready to go, I had about 12 men running up and down the border, because you have to keep somebody within their own tribal area. It took months to put this together.

It was February 12th when we left Kabul and we went back down. February 13th the man who had set this whole thing up called me and said, "Don't go. They have kidnapped"—and we all knew this—"the Pakistani ambassador. It's too dangerous."

I asked everybody along the border. They said, "Forget it. This is a strange game of the ISI. This is all a joke." So he didn't know.

What am I going to do? I asked my interpreter to call Haji Din Mohammed, the governor of Kabul. I said, "Okay, we're not going to go. I want to go up to Tora Bora instead."

Haji Din Mohammed said, "I'll set this up for you."

His driver came at the same time as a representative of the man I was going to go with came across the border to meet us. These two archenemies were in the same room. I had to make a decision in 15 seconds.

I said, "How long will we be gone?"

He said, "Three days."

I said, "Okay, let's go." I went against the advice of my old network.

I was going in with the assassins of my oldest and closest friend in Afghanistan. I was that driven, that committed. I wasn't going to let anything stop me. I had no choice.

I made a cardinal mistake, perhaps, if I made a mistake. There's an old [Rudyard Kipling](#) line that goes, "Here lies a fool who hustled the east," which is one reason why the United States is having such a hard time and General [McChrystal](#) is having such a hard time.

I think one reason he burst out [in the *Rolling Stone* [article](#)] is because he's so frustrated. This is why a general just the other day said, "We can't get into the Pashtun mind." And Major General [Flynn](#), McChrystal's chief of intelligence, said, "The CIA doesn't give us any intelligence. We don't understand. It's so complex."

Even the most sophisticated military operation, perhaps the most sophisticated intelligence agency on earth, can't figure it out.

February 16th my driver, who had taken me three times to the Taliban through al-Qaeda country, drove us towards the border, the main route, and then we took off up into the mountains. We stopped in the foothills.

As we got ready to go, my interpreter said, "Give him money for gas."

So I went into my pocket. I gave him a 20,000-rupee note. The driver, who always called me *Andawal* (my good friend), came up to me. I saw water in his eyes. He hugged me very gently and he kissed me on the cheek. No Afghan in 30 years had ever kissed me. I said to myself, "What I'm about to do is very dangerous." I didn't realize that the kiss meant something else.

So we crossed the border. I ended up with two bodyguards with rifles and bandoliers. We hiked for six hours through the mountains.

Towards sundown my two bodyguards were in the lead, I was next, my interpreter lagging behind about 20 yards. I looked up and I saw a tinge of black. I knew immediately it wasn't a sheep, it wasn't a goat. I froze.

They came running down the mountain, 12 of them, shouting, "*Kenna, kenna, kenna*"—Get down, get down! Rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, black turbans.

The next thing I knew a man was standing three feet from me with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher at my head, his dark gleaming eyes staring at me. I said to myself, "I'm dead, I'm dead."

With their rifle butts they tried to beat my bodyguards. They took me up on a ridge and they faced me west. I was in shock, so my back was straight. I sat there and I looked west. I thought of my family. I waited. I knew what was coming.

Then, very slowly, they took a black turban and they blindfolded me and then they tied me. They took us deeper into the mountains. It became darker and darker.

Then they separated us. They put me in a car. We were driving up into the mountains. It got colder and colder. All I thought about was How are they going to kill me?

We came to a room. Sitting on a cot, they took off the blindfold. I thought, Really I'm not alone. My bodyguards are with me. My interpreter is with me.

He sat next to me, the Taliban commander, and he asked me my name in Pashto. Then he asked me, "What is your father's name?"

I said to myself, "This is deep Pashtun culture." The most important question you can ask in Afghanistan is "Who was your grandfather?"

Everything is based upon lineage and tribe. These were the Taliban. For them Islam counts for everything. But the first question they asked me was the lineage of my family.

I couldn't keep up anymore with the language. I couldn't go any further. I said, "I'm an American." Then I said, "I'm dead."

"We'll judge you. We're going to do an investigation. If you have been invited, you are free to go. If not, we will judge you under Shariah a spy." I'm dead.

I looked around. I saw blood on the walls. I saw chains on the floor.

The Taliban left me and went next door. Two men who became our jailers came in with rifles.

My two bodyguards said, "If they start to torture or kill us, we have to attack them."

One jailer said, "I'll take him." Another bodyguard said, "I'll take him."

It's kill or be killed. We are going to kill them, we are going to try to kill them, which means I have to join them. I have no choice. Where is the safety on the Kalashnikov? Where is the safety? How do I do this?

So gradually, deeper and deeper it went.

They never laid a hand on me. They threatened me: "You have to convert to Islam or die." My Taliban commander was always called *Maulavi*—meaning one who has graduated from a madrassa. His sons needed kidneys. That was it.

When that time came I said, "No, no. I am not going to allow somebody into this dungeon, this dark room across which I cannot see. You only allow us out three minutes every night. You're not going to take my kidneys."

So I began to pace the room, and I said, "We have to escape."

They said, "No. We'll do anything but to escape. We'll sell land. We'll do anything."

I began to realize that they were not with me.

But also that day, for the first time, I felt strong. I was no longer a victim. I thought of people on [Flight 93](#). If you're going to die, the best way to go is to fight.

We became like animals in that room. We were the closest friends, but it was a matter of territory, a matter of who's the strongest, who's the most powerful.

My interpreter became increasingly alien from me, refused to translate most of the time.

I said, "I'm alone. I have no way out of here. No one knows where I am. There's no [Predator](#) above us. Is the Predator here watching? Does the U.S. military know I'm here? Or, because the Taliban keeps going, is this a Taliban way-station and we're going to get killed?"

It became increasingly dark. At the same time, there were times of laughter and respect. They gave me a nickname, *Mamur Sahib* (sir, clerk), because I could read and write.

Always they said, "We will protect you. We will never kill you. We will die before you die because you are our guest."

At the same time they would say, "You have to convert or die." So it was a constant rollercoaster.

I'm going to step back here. I want to read one small thing.

Finally, they had to figure out what they were going to do with me. They had to decide if they were going to ransom, ask for money, or if they were going to trade me for three men from Guantanamo. So we had a big interrogation one night. I want to read to you just a real brief part of that interrogation.

It's now a little after midnight. We've been going for a few hours. It's the Taliban commander and me. I realize I have to save my life, and there's a part of me that still thinks I have to save the life of the men I brought in with me.

He's sitting on the ground staring at me. His eyes are like a cat, gleaming. He's smart, he's quick. The questions keep coming for about two hours.

Then, finally, "We want to use you to exchange prisoners from Cuba or [Bagram](#)," he said. I felt cold. I felt a pit in my stomach. My hope disappeared. The United States did not negotiate with terrorists. I had to tell him.

"I am not important," I said. "I am only one small, insignificant man. America doesn't care about me. I am only important to myself."

"You are important for us," said the *Maulavi*—the *Maulavi* was the Taliban leader—"If you are small to America, you are important to us for release of our comrades in prison."

I would be here for months, and then they would kill me. I had to stop this. "The United States will not negotiate," I said. I was taking a chance. I was pushing it. I had no choice. I didn't dare call them terrorists. They were a brotherhood fighting to kill the invader, as their ancestors had fought countless invaders. They were young men anxious to create a more equal and perfect world.

We sat for hours and listened to Taliban recruitment tapes, Taliban suicide tapes.

"That is America's policy," I said. "It will never exchange prisoners for me. I am important to you, but not to America. I don't work for the government. I am by myself." I am dead, I said to myself.

The *Maulavi* motioned to one of his men, who placed two plastic sacks in front of him. He opened one and took out three toothbrushes, two bars of soap, a bottle of shampoo, toilet paper, petroleum jelly, and two towels and put all of this in front of him. It was *malmustia*, it's *panah*, being a good host. We must provide for our guests.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," I said. It was for us. They weren't going to kill me. He opened the second bag and took out Daoud's [my interpreter] and my change of clothes and felt them to make sure there was nothing hidden in them. He looked at me blankly, shook my hand perfunctorily, stood up, using his legs only, not his hands—he was fit—and walked out. His bodyguards followed him.

It was over. I looked at the others. No one showed any emotion. Their faces were blank." There were about 12 to 15 people in this dark room, with lanterns, flashlights, staring, never smiling.

He wouldn't have brought all of this for us if he was going to kill us immediately. I sat there.

A few minutes passed, and the *Maulavi* walked back in. He was holding my video camera. Behind him came two riflemen wearing fatigue jackets, black turbans, ammunition vests filled with clips of bullets, and sunglasses. They stood behind me. Another gunman, wearing a white *jamay* [tunic and pants set also known as *salwar kameez*] and with a piece of straw in his mouth, stood on the side, his face dark and cocky, looking at me.

The *Maulavi* was silent. He stood five feet away. He motioned to the gunmen to stand closer. They came forward. I could see their rifle barrels out of the corner of my eyes. This was it. It had all been a show. He had made his decision. He was going to kill me now. Me, of all people. I couldn't believe it. The irony of it all. They were going to kill me. I sat there, a pit in my stomach, as everyone stared at me. They would watch me die.

The *Maulavi* tried to turn on the camera. He gave it to Daoud, who tried and gave it back to him.

The *Maulavi* came forward and gave me the camera. "How do I turn this on?" he asked. His face was angry. I fumbled with it and reluctantly, nervously turned the camera on. "I am helping to film my own execution," I said to myself. I hung my head in fear, disbelief, and utter despair. The *Maulavi* gave the camera to Daoud. He said he didn't know how to use it.

Two months before, I had tried to show him [Daoud, my interpreter] how to use the camera. He flicked his wrist. "The camera is no good," he had said. "It's a cheap one." I was angry at his arrogance. Daoud fumbled now with the same camera. He had to learn now, or maybe they would kill him, too.

The *Maulavi* started to film me. I didn't know what to do. He motioned for the men behind me to come closer. I turned to my right and saw a Kalashnikov, with its barrel cut at an angle, a few inches from my head. The man moved closer. I felt the barrel against my temple. The *Maulavi* gave the camera to Daoud and told him to film me. He held the camera against his eye. I stared at it for a second, and then I looked down.

The *Maulavi* motioned, and a man behind me took my *pakool* [wool felt hat] off and threw it on the cot next to me. I felt more naked. It would make it easier for him to cut off my head, or was it so they could see me better in the video, or both? I had to be strong. I put my head down. I didn't want to die a coward. I couldn't keep my head up. I put my hand on my forehead, my elbow on my knee, and kept looking down. "I am going to die now," I said to myself. I felt my heart pounding. I was looking down to protect my throat. I kept looking down. I was trembling inside. I had to die with dignity. I had to be strong for my father, my brother, and my sister, and for my nephews and nieces. I said their names silently.

In 1981, when I went to Afghanistan, when I started in Pakistan, a correspondent for *The New York Times*, [Mike Kaufman](#), took me up into the mountains on the Afghan-Pakistani border. We looked across into Afghanistan and he said, "Don't worry about the story. It will come to you."

Paul, my editor, and I had an idea. I was going to write a book about the Taliban. I was going to write a book about the tribal areas. But no, I didn't accomplish my goal. I failed. I had been kidnapped.

But what happened was I was able to go as deep as possible into the world of the Taliban, and what the Taliban did was they enabled me to find out everything about them, and they also in doing so led me to find out about the deepest part of myself.

That's the story of the book. Thank you.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Absolutely riveting, sir. I think I speak for everyone here that at least my eyes were filled with tears, as I know yours were. I'm proud of you, sir. You've done a lot and you came to tell the story which needs to be told.

My question: You don't have a crystal ball, you have a crystal pitcher. What will happen ten years from now, if you can answer that? Thank you.

JERE VAN DYK: In 1973 there was no such thing in my view, in my eyes, as fundamentalism in Afghanistan. That began with the creation of the Mujahideen and events elsewhere in the world—next door in Iran, with the rise of [Ayatollah Khomeini](#); the rise of an element of [Wahhabism](#) in Saudi Arabia, where they tried to [take over the Grand Mosque](#), and they had to bring in French Special Forces to kill them.

Based upon all the time that I spent with the Taliban, each Taliban commander I was with, except one, said, "They're like you."

I said, "Who's like me?"

"The men that we have to go to," the commander said, "across the border into Pakistan to get information. They're *spin gier*, they're graybeards like you."

"Who are these graybeards?"

"Parts of the Pakistani army."

"Are they retired Pakistani army or are they present-day ISI, Pakistani intelligence?"

Until the United States, in my view, goes straight to Islamabad or Rawalpindi and talks to the leadership in the Pakistani military—not the civilian government—and says, "Cease your geopolitical goals, which are to perhaps prevent India from surrounding you, perhaps recreate, as many say, the ancient Mogul Empire, go up into former Soviet Central Asia, or in addition in your desire for water." Water is crucial, because all the rivers in Afghanistan feed into the Indus—Pakistan needs that desperately.

Pakistan is now the second-largest Muslim country in the world. It was once third, but the population has grown. India was second; now India is third, because of population growth [in Pakistan].

Until the United States levels with Pakistan and says, "Cease your backing of the Taliban," this in some form or another, in my view, will continue.

QUESTION: I have two questions. One question relates to actually a comment that was made on Saturday night by [William Dalrymple](#), the British journalist who did a wonderful job at the Asia Society. He wrote a book called [Nine Lives](#).

Dalrymple basically said that the main conflict is not necessarily between the West and Islam, but it's really—and he's citing Pakistan—within Islam, between the Wahhabis and basically those who have a more tolerant view, like for instance the Sunnis, who have sort of been relegated to a much more minor position.

I just wanted to get your view on whether it's possible to reverse or modulate all this teaching that has taken place, funded through the Gulf and the madrassas, which has made a much more martial spirit of the people who were refugees to begin with.

The second thing I want you to comment on, if possible, is to in some ways distinguish your case from [David Rohde](#) at *The New York Times*, who was kidnapped and actually escaped, which was a very different scenario.

JERE VAN DYK: Sure.

The first one. I was captured by Wahhabis. Islam first came to Afghanistan, across Asia. There is a man named [Mahmud of Ghazni](#), who in the 12th century established Sunni Islam in Afghanistan, and he became the archetypal Western invader, if you will, raiding India 17 times.

I talked to a man named [Shaukat Sultan](#), a major general who was President [Musharraf](#)'s spokesman. He said, "All our invasions come from the West."

So there is a very big part of Pakistan—I don't think it's just religion; it's also a battle between the Punjabis and the Indians.

When Britain was there, they recruited most of their soldiers from the Punjab, which is one reason why the Punjab is divided between Pakistan and India. They are afraid of the rise of Pashtun nationalism, the Pashtuns being the largest ethnic group in the world without their own homeland. That's one part.

When the British were there, they called the Wahhabis "Hindustani fanatics." The leaders of the Hindustani fanatics led the war on the border against the British. All the leaders were students who had gone to Saudi Arabia.

What you had when the British were there was also the rise of what is called [Deobandism](#). There is a university, called [Darul Uloom](#), in Deoband, India, which next to [Al-Azhar](#) in Cairo is the second-largest and second-most-influential Muslim university in the world. They were allied with [Gandhi](#) in creating this anti-imperialist way of living. "We are going to use Islam as a means to gather strength, to destroy the British." The Deobandi are the largest and the most influential Muslim group in Afghanistan and in parts of Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia, since the 1980s, has been extremely influential in infiltrating this area. They're no longer called Hindustani fanatics. They're called Wahhabis. They made it very clear to me that they had the purest, most honest, most powerful, most influential, and toughest form of Islam. And it is political and martial in some ways in my view more than it is religious, certainly more than it is in my view spiritual.

General [John Abizaid](#), who was head of [CENTCOM](#) [United States Central Command] in 2003, said, "This war will never end until such time as we deal with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan."

When I was kidnapped, it was almost six years to the day from when [Daniel Pearl](#) was kidnapped. I was the

second person who was kidnapped after him.

Then there was a man named [Sean Langan](#), an English filmmaker, who went with my first interpreter. He had a visa and he went from Peshawar up towards Bajaur Agency, and he was kidnapped. They called me and I got involved in trying to help them on that.

Then came a man named [John Solecki](#), who works for the United Nations, whose driver was killed in Quetta. John was taken by Baluch separatists, [Baluchistan](#) being the largest province in Pakistan, south of Afghanistan.

Then David. In September 2007, as we sat outside one night—another journalist had a dinner, and he and I were sitting together talking—he said, "I have this girlfriend and I don't know if it's going to work, and I have a book and I don't know if it's going to work." Coincidentally, the woman I had been going out with at the time was a friend of his friend.

He was trying to write a book on the history of Afghanistan, what's called *Little America* which started when Morrison Knudsen, an engineering company in Idaho, created an irrigation system in the Hillman Valley, and then from there go out.

He decided, sitting down with [Carlotta Gall](#), who's a *New York Times* freelance correspondent, "I better go with the Taliban one time. I better go once."

I haven't asked him this particular question—we've had some very, very good conversations together—why, knowing what happened to me, he did this. That's the only question I haven't asked him yet. But he did that, and he was picked up. He was picked up outside of Logar Province, about 40 minutes outside of Kabul, in the car, and then he was taken across the border.

A lot went on behind the scenes involving my case, an awful lot of things, involving private groups, the government, others. The same thing with David.

I went over to *The New York Times* and I talked to them about it. They asked me one day: "They call him the Red Rooster. What does that mean?"

I said, "That means they won't kill him." They called me the Golden Goose.

Ultimately, a lot of things happened. David's a fine man and a very courageous man. I think it's better for David to tell you those things when his book and his wife's book come out next year.

QUESTION: After all your experience, did you have any thoughts on this question: Does the United States and its allies or NATO have any chance at all of prevailing in their current mission in Afghanistan?

JERE VAN DYK: The shorter answer is no, because what I saw with the men who had me was there were times of warmth. But when they talked about war and they talked about Islam—my jailer had nine children, and he doesn't care about his children. He would be a suicide bomber. He said, "I'm trained to be a suicide bomber."

When you talk faith, you take religion and tie it with nationalism and then tie that to a martial race that is not necessarily literate. In a non-literate society the word is powerful, and they sit around and they talk about their history, about [Alexander](#) and about the British.

In fact, when the British [Prince Harry](#) was secretly over there, and then they let it be known, and he left, they mocked the British. That is one reason why I think maybe the British shouldn't be there. But that would not work in today's world. "They're here to try and gain revenge for when we defeated them."

So when you take all of those things together, sure, the United States—as General McChrystal said in that *Rolling Stone* article, "The Soviets killed a million and it didn't work."

I once had a man say to me, "When our satanic impulses come out, look out." They'll find it. They won't give in. The men who had me can never be bought off.

QUESTION: As I understand it, most of the madrassas in Pakistan are funded by Saudi Arabia, they're Wahhabi. I wonder what you think that portends for the future of the area.

And also, there is a school of thought, a group of people, who believe that the ISI's and the military in Pakistan's ultimate goal is to dominate and control all of Pakistan?

JERE VAN DYK: Is to control?

QUESTIONER: That Pakistan's ultimate agenda is to expand and to control Afghanistan?

JERE VAN DYK: I don't believe that the Saudis support all madrassas, because some madrassas are Deobandi madrassas, and their agenda is an evangelical missionary agenda, and that is Wahhabism.

You have [Jamaat-e-Islami](#) religious political parties in Pakistan. Haqqani was tied to them. Hekmatyar has been tied to some of them for decades. That money comes from common citizens. It could come from Punjabis, it could come from Sindhis, it could come from anybody who is Pakistani.

I think that there are elements in the Deobandi that are just as bad as Wahhabism, as the Wahhabis.

I think that Saudi Arabia has a very close relationship. They give Pakistan a better deal on oil. I've read articles in *Herald*, a Karachi magazine, about how Pakistan may be trying to help Saudi Arabia with its nuclear arms ambitions. There are all those articles in the paper about generals going on a sort of a miniature *Hajj* to Mecca. There's a very close tie between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. I think there is a part where that all comes together.

There is a man named [Naseerullah Babar](#), who was the interior minister under [Benazir Bhutto](#). He was the man who started in 1973, when he was a major general in charge of the Northwest Frontier Province. He told me how he took the Mujahideen in, Hekmatyar and the others, and was responsible—of course he was bragging—in a certain way for creating the Mujahideen.

When the Taliban in 1994 became a force in the south, there was what's called—and it still exists today—this trucking mafia in Pakistan. The first thing they did was to take from Chaman, down on the Afghan-Pakistani border in the south, a truck caravan on a road built by the Americans up to Tajikistan, north of Afghanistan. You know who led that convoy? It was [Naseerullah Babar](#).

That's why people say it's the recreation of the ancient Mogul Empire. There is a battle going on—well, it goes without saying—between India and Pakistan. Lord [Curzon](#) said that "the cockpit of Asia is Afghanistan" when he was one of the last viceroys of British India. It hasn't changed. It is ever more the cockpit of Asia, particularly now with minerals.

QUESTION: Is there any hope for [Karzai](#); and, if not, what do you expect after he is no longer allegedly in charge?

JERE VAN DYK: I don't think there's an alternative to Karzai.

One thing about Karzai that I find completely misunderstood in the West and in most newspapers is that—I spent about two and a half hours with him one evening when I was discussing this. Unfortunately, I had to keep everything off the record. We talked a long time about all the Afghan lands that were in the hands of the Pakistanis, "But, alas, we are so weak now we can't do anything about it."

Deep down he is—and even [Abdullah Abdullah](#), his archenemy politically, has said this—he is a patriot, he is a Pashtun.

When I visited him in his office—not the office where you see him when he meets with dignitaries, but we went into his back office—there was one photograph only on his desk. He has a very small desk. It was of King Zahir Shah from the [Popalzai](#) clan.

He sees himself in the eyes of the Afghans as a king. He represents the descendants of the founders of Afghanistan.

For a Pashtun, fundamentally the heart of *Pashtunwali* is honor. No Pashtun can ever accept being humiliated. When [Holbrooke](#), [Biden](#), and [James Jones](#) criticized him in public, they did nothing but alienate him.

When he says all the things that he says, he is trying to win over the Afghans. When he says he wants to join the Taliban, it is because he knows how important they are, and that they are an integral part of the culture. He is deep down an Afghan. Even though the Taliban killed his father, he is at heart, more than anything else, a Pashtun. I don't care how elegantly he dresses or how nice his English is. Deep down that's what he is.

That's what all those men are, and you cannot take that out of them. Pashtun law—when you really talk to Pashtuns, it exists just as much in Calgary or Zurich as it does in Kandahar.

JOANNE MYERS: Jere, I know how difficult this was for you. You have succeeded beyond all expectations. Thank you so much for being here.

Thank you all. Have a wonderful summer.

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