



# The Longest War

In March, the war in Afghanistan will become the longest military conflict in U.S. history. As our country's involvement escalated, we asked 11 photojournalists to select the one image that sums up their experience covering the war. Here, the pictures they chose, and why.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS FROM VII INTERVIEWS BY KIM BARKER

## Korengal Valley, 2009

**Adam Ferguson** first visited Afghanistan in early 2008 and has been back six times.

☪ It was my first day in the Korengal. I walked 600 meters uphill on an ammunition drop to the observation post that overlooks the military outpost there. This soldier was standing on the ledge over the valley and had a moment. He's in front of a beautiful landscape of mountains, and his head is in his hands. The guys really are under the gun. They live inside the wire, in the middle of nowhere, separated from the civilian population. They go out on patrol, and they get shot at or attacked almost every day. They never really penetrate that landscape, that culture. ☪

## Kabul, 2002

**Ashley Gilbertson** has worked extensively in Kosovo and Iraq. He made one trip to Afghanistan, in 2002.

☛ A kid watched a soccer game from behind the wreckage of a Soviet helicopter. Over there, kids play in the rubble, near tanks, in extremely dangerous areas. One kid, one moment, can affect you profoundly. He's, what, ten years old? He could be a kid from anywhere. But he's trapped in this horrible situation, and this is his everyday life.

Going back and finding him would be impossible. I didn't get his name. But I think about him. I wonder about thousands of kids. Who in my archives is still alive? 🍷



## Kabul, 1996

**James Nachtwey** has been covering conflicts around the globe since 1981 and has worked in Afghanistan about ten times since 1988.

☛ Afghanistan is fascinating. Except for the weapons and Japanese trucks, it could be 600 years ago. This had been the central business district of Kabul, destroyed following the 1989 withdrawal of the Soviets, when various factions were attacking each other. When I took the photograph, the Taliban were assaulting the city. People lived in these ruins. Some were being blown up by land mines when they scavenged for building materials and firewood. I think what's significant about this image, especially in light of where we are now, is that our attention to Afghanistan had lapsed. We forgot about it. In this photo, the woman looks almost like a ghost floating through the ruined landscape. Now this part of the city has been rebuilt. It doesn't look like such a moonscape. 🍷

## Kabul, 2001

**John Stanmeyer** spent much of the last decade documenting the political and social changes in Indonesia. He traveled to Afghanistan in 2001, returning five or six times.

☪ This picture happened the day after the Taliban fled Kabul. I had followed the Northern Alliance progression down from Kunduz in the north. It was as if we were driving through the wrinkles of God's hands. I felt so insignificant passing through those mountains. We arrived in Kabul and saw this breath of fresh air. It was suddenly a bunch of color walking around, such a contrast to the beige dirt everywhere in Afghanistan and the men all wearing those same beige outfits. The only color was that blue of the burka. Under the Taliban regime, there were no kites, no balloons, no music, no TVs. This picture signifies hope, life, celebration of humanness. Having colors, balloons, kites, and music was a monumental shift. Where did this man get the helium? ☪



## Kabul, 2001

**Gary Knight** began his career covering military conflicts in Southeast Asia. He has visited Afghanistan many times since 1988.

☪ By 2001, I had worked in Afghanistan for more than a dozen years. This picture was taken when hundreds of Afghan women came out on the street after the Taliban fled. Women had simply vanished under the Taliban. Now hundreds removed their burkas and revealed their faces in public at the same time. I loved it. I had my picture taken with them and sent it to my kids. It was just after 9/11, so it was a great thing to see something positive, affirming, so soon after that. It's quite sad now, when I look back. I wonder what's happened to these women, whether their dreams of that day were fulfilled. ☪

## Kabul, 2009

**Benjamin Lowy** started his career covering the Iraq war in 2003. He visited Afghanistan in 2007 and has been back three times.

☛ This picture was taken in the Russian Cultural Center, which has been completely bombed-out. It's ground zero for opium and heroin addicts in this city. On this morning, a couple hundred people were sleeping in their own filth in the basement. It felt like you were swimming through hell. It's the worst spot of misery and pain I've ever seen. Hypodermic needles stuck in my shoes as I walked over to take the photo.

The light was streaming through one mortar hole. This guy had just injected heroin. He lifted his head into the light, at a moment of extreme ecstasy. Afghanistan is the No. 1 exporter of opium and heroin, and this picture is a microcosm of everything that can go wrong in a country. It's the most awful story I've ever covered. ☛



## Kohe Safi Mountains, 2002

**Seamus Murphy's** new book, *A Darkness Visible: Afghanistan*, documents the rise of the Taliban and the impact of the U.S. invasion. He has traveled to Afghanistan 13 times since 1994.

☪ One year after the fall of the Taliban, I did an embed with the 82nd Airborne. My God, in 2002, there was so much hope. It was before corruption, before Iraq. It was when anything could happen. People were rebuilding their lives. The Taliban coming back? I don't think anyone had even thought about it. It was a more innocent time. These soldiers were searching for something out the back door of a helicopter; they could have been looking for anything, Osama, the Taliban, weapons. They're hopeful they're going to find it, in the beauty, bleakness, and vastness of that landscape. The mood was upbeat; there certainly weren't any fears of improvised explosive devices. Now it's pretty depressing. The reason I keep going back is that the Afghans are amazing. They're so resilient and have to be to live through what they've lived through. ☪



## Alasai Valley, 2009

**Eric Bouvet** has been photographing Afghanistan since 1986, documenting life under the Taliban, the mujahideen, and several foreign armies. He has visited the country about a dozen times.

☪ I've been doing this job for 28 years, with armies all over the world. I'd never seen this before. It's called a sandbox exercise, where the military trains soldiers by moving around plastic figures. I thought it was funny. Here, a French soldier was teaching the Afghans how to retreat from the enemy. The Afghans are courageous. They can run and shoot. But they don't know how to organize, take a position, defend it, or come back alive. They are not good at retreating. When they hold their rifles, they're pointing anywhere, near their heads. They walk like they're on a promenade. I played with these plastic soldiers when I was a kid. To see them here all of a sudden, at war, was incredible. The enemies are everywhere nearby. It's real life, not a game. ☪

## Korengal Valley, 2007

**Balazs Gardi** focuses on capturing the everyday life of those caught in humanitarian crises. He first visited Afghanistan in 2001 and has returned more than ten times.

☛ War is very cruel. My job as a photographer is to explain what's happening and to provoke emotions. I had been following a platoon in the Korengal Valley when the American soldiers intercepted a radio conversation from a house indicating enemy activity. They decided to hit it with rockets. It's hard to tell here who was killed because typically the other side take their wounded and dead fighters with them. The villagers said there were five dead and 11 wounded, all women and children. They put them all in one room. After the Americans showed up the next morning, the villagers asked permission to bury their dead. Then they brought out the injured children, one by one, for the American medics to treat. This boy had shrapnel wounds. He survived, but his injuries were very painful. Without any barrier of language, this photo makes you feel the horror of war, of what it has done to Afghans. ☛



### Kabul, 2008

**Donald Weber** has been documenting daily life in post-Soviet countries since 2005. He made one trip to Afghanistan, in 2008.

☪ I wanted to show something different from what I was used to seeing in pictures of Afghanistan—something positive. When I was in this room, I was quite shocked because, being a man, I thought it would be impossible to go inside Afghan women's homes. I was surprised by the warmth and hospitality they extended to me. And they were nothing like what I thought Afghan women would be or the images I had seen. They didn't have burkas, and they immediately came up and talked to me. This picture is of two girls working on an embroidery machine. The young ones have to power the machines. So they go to school, come home, and start pedaling. No shoes. Their mother was an entrepreneur. Her husband was an alcoholic; she saw that he wasn't going to do anything for her. She received a \$200 loan through a microfinance program run by a nonprofit. Every month, she had to pay them back \$5 or \$10. First she bought a sewing machine, then the embroidery machine. She eventually wanted to buy a cow. ☪



### Herat, 2005

**Stephanie Sinclair** first visited Afghanistan in 2003 and has been back four times.

☪ This picture [next page] shows how life goes on, no matter what. It was an engagement party, and all the kids tried to peek inside. The women were singing and clapping. Most had their burkas off. It was a place for them to let their hair down. Some girls came up to me with a camera. My headscarf had fallen down, so I pulled it up. They laughed and pulled it down again. They wanted a picture of me as I ordinarily would be. The only difference between us is where I was born and my opportunities. We have to fight for and take care of each other. Photography is the way I know how to do that. ☪

