OBSERVER

An Academic in Afghanistan

By WILLIAM C. CORLEY

Kabul, Afghanistan

First light on Memorial Day, 2009. I'm awake without an alarm at 4:53 a.m. After a quick visit to the gym and a short run, I put on my uniform and go to work. Day 208 in Afghanistan begins.

I get a lot of cheap harassment when people hear what I do in civilian life: "I'm a college professor. I teach literature." The normal litany of stereotypes about liberal academe and absent-minded professors usually follows, but it isn't mean-spirited. We're here together — active-duty military, Reserve, National Guard. Teachers, cops, construction workers, engineers, lawyers, bookkeepers: Mobilization casts a wide net, and I'm serving (as a Reserve officer) alongside as representative a group of Americans as you could wish. There's even another professor. But neither of us gets dubbed with the nickname Doc. That is reserved for the crusty civilian Ph.D. holder from the Department of Defense who is older than dirt. Instead, I joke about making inventions out of coconuts that will get us off this island. The straight man to my left asks after Mary Ann. "Good going, Professor," invariably follows any violation I might make of military etiquette or procedure.

I sit at a desk with four computers. I have a name tent on top of my monitor with my title and a call sign: CASSANDRA. More people get it than you might expect. I'm an analyst. I work with smart people. Those who don't understand assume I'm making a joke about how my uniform is like academic drag. "Hey, the professor is really a woman." Dark humor here is not so much an emotional defense as it is an art form demonstrating the resilient integrity and hopefulness of leaders who use it to try to force insanity to make sense. Like Cassandra, I am cursed with seeing the future but never believed.

I say it so frequently that I'm sure it is polished beyond the point of believability: What I do here in Afghanistan is a lot like what I do in the States. I research; I analyze; I teach. Alternately, I read and think. The basic skill sets of an English professor and a military analyst are nearly equivalent. I say that to the active-duty soldiers who are my same rank but 15 years younger to explain why I'm doing so well here. Caveat: The Cassandra curse still applies.

Even the little things align. I'm on a NATO base. I work closely with the Spanish, Italians, Lithuanians, Germans, Norwegians, and even a few Australians who aren't in NATO but who are here anyway. At home, I teach in an English and foreign-languages department with an equally eclectic mixture of nationalities. Plus, this base has five cafes. Five. That is more than the number on any college campus I've ever taught at,
and this place is infinitely smaller. Since I can't bear to drink the boxed milk that doesn't require refrigeration to stay fresh, lattes are nearly my only dairy intake. As in the United States, coffee is an essential lubricant for thought and long hours. A good day is only 12 hours of work. A bad day is 18 hours or more. Most days are somewhere in between. My life in Afghanistan is not necessarily hard, but it is long.

If I wrote as much in the States as I do here, I would probably be tenured already. Scratch that — I'd be an academic superstar. Even more ironic for a professional writer, the papers I produce here, despite the inevitable sequestration due to classification levels, circulate more broadly and are read more closely than anything I've ever published as an academic, notwithstanding the aforementioned Cassandra caveat. Would I produce more popular work if I limited myself to two pages when writing on an academic topic? Perhaps the MLA should look into this.

Island castaways often look back on the world they've lost with newfound perspective. Think Melville in Typee, Robinson Crusoe, or the Tom Hanks character in Cast Away. In my case, the end of my tour here in Afghanistan looks like it will coincide with the shipwreck of my employer back home. The headlines before Californians voted down a series of budget initiatives in May were Cassandra-like: $400-million cuts to Cal State would mean shuttering two large campuses for a year; widespread layoffs and enrollment caps would be inevitable. Of course, the initiatives failed, but California would have been in the hole even if they had passed, and the governor has proposed a new round of even bigger cuts.

Though my dean was already aware of the bleak budget outlook when I told her I needed an unpaid leave for the entire 2008-9 academic year, she gave me very generous terms for departure and re-entry — tenure clock on hold, office shuttered with my books intact, laptop upgraded in time for my departure, and the promise of a summer appointment if I should return in time to take it. As California's economic crisis has deepened, I've hoped that the difference between my regular salary and the costs of hiring adjunct lecturers to cover the courses of mine that were still offered softened ever so slightly the huge cuts my department has endured.

Meanwhile, I have been in the economic safe haven of federal employment. As my fellow Californians face tax hikes, I'm benefiting from a combat-zone tax exclusion that eliminates tax liability while "in theater." My only solidarity with the financial crisis in the States is that the value of my newly purchased home has almost certainly dropped 20 percent or more below my mortgage balance. But that house is still a Taj Mahal compared with the 7-by-15-foot metal box I share here with two other soldiers.

Despite enduring personal losses and years of worsening budget cuts, my university colleagues have been my biggest in-country boosters by far. Dark humor laces their communiqués like raspberry sauce on much-longed-for cheesecake. In addition to several large boxes of snacks, toiletries, and coffee, they've sent me many encouraging e-mail messages, journal clippings, poems, and remembrances. Some of my colleagues even seem to be competing with one another over who can send me the most unique or desirable brew: the ubiquitous Starbucks, of course, but also Peet's, Belle Espresso, Kona, Ikea-labeled coffee, and unique roasts from favored neighborhood cafes. The preponderance of sugary snacks is making my deployment like a second childhood. My alternate nickname here is Porkchop. Thanks to the generosity of my colleagues, I can freely bribe others in my shop with Pop-Tarts, Oreos, and dried fruit. The civilians are particularly susceptible to subversion by mangoes.

I recently had the opportunity to meet some Afghan university students at a public event. When I introduced myself as an English professor, they weren't at all fazed. They are used to such marvels, I suppose. Looking past my uniform, they immediately tried to enlist me as a secret weapon for their English-language courses.
Would I edit their work? Help them with their writing? Get them better Internet access? (No; possibly once or twice; definitely not.)

Given the "civilian surge" being planned to accompany the increased U.S. military presence here, I'm confident that Afghan universities face a bright future of expanding budgets and improved infrastructure, quite the opposite of the situation in California. Yet the current spartan conditions here have not prevented this generation of college students from learning, hoping, and avidly planning how they will rebuild and reform their country.

These Afghan students know something that many of the freshmen who will enter my university this fall have yet to learn: The necessary components of education are in the end very few, and most of them reside in the minds and motivations of students themselves, not in state budgets or services. When I return home, I'll have to put aside my Cassandra hat and play a new role: the salty lieutenant who leads his nervous band of 18-year-old recruits through the perils of canceled courses, reduced services, and rising fees. "Earn this," I'll say as I pass out the syllabi. I may even buy some of them a latte.

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