

The CIA and Polio in Pakistan

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If this were 1951, American families would be bracing right now for another summer of the polio terror.

Those younger than say, 55, may not be able to relate. The worst scare we've had these days is waiting ten hours in line for a shot for a swine flu plague that never came (though an estimated 1,282 children across the country [did succumb](#) to the H1N1 virus from 2009-2010).

Polio, on the other hand, killed 12,187 American children from 1950 to 1960 and left countless others living in the [dreaded iron lung](#), or with lifelong paralysis.



From the book [A Paralyzing Fear: The Triumph Over Polio in America](#) (1998):

By then, polio epidemics were second only to the atomic bomb in surveys of what Americans feared most. Bomb and virus alike were terrible agents of destruction that might arrive at any moment to devastate a family, a community, or an entire nation. The disease seemed like an omnipresent threat, and its cure became a national responsibility.

A national responsibility. We certainly marshaled, and when Joseph Salk was able to perfect a vaccine and then Albert Sabin came up with an oral dosage, the U.S. was able to wipe polio off its map. In 1988 a major international effort was able to the same for the developing world.

How ironic that it's our Global War on Terror that threatens to undo our global intentions to eradicate deadly infectious diseases. We're talking about Pakistan, which, according to the World Health Organization, [is teetering on a polio crisis \(yes, in 2012\)](#), and our U.S. counterterrorism effort has just now given it a great big push in the wrong direction.

U.S. officials were [stomping mad late last month](#) when a tribal court in Peshawar sentenced Dr. Shakil Afridi to 33 years in prison because he had allegedly collaborated with the Central Intelligence Agency in zeroing in on the Bin Laden family's compound in Abbottabad. CIA surveillance helped to capture bin Laden there in May 2011, but [Afridi's collusion with us may have resulted in far deadlier side effects than our super spies had ever planned for](#).



Dr. Shakil Afridi

Afridi was used to set up a [phony public immunization campaign](#) in Abbottabad so he could collect DNA samples the CIA had hoped would confirm the location of bin Laden's people. According to [The New York Times](#), "American officials have said that although Dr. Afridi never gained DNA samples from the compound, his work aided the mission that led to Bin Laden's death." Well and good, but now Pakistanis believe every public health screening and vaccination program is a CIA-backed connivance, and they are staying away at the expense of decades of polio eradication efforts.

On March 2, [The Guardian](#) reprinted in part a letter from InterAction, a coalition of several international aid groups to CIA Director David Petraeus:

The CIA's use of the cover of humanitarian activity for this purpose casts doubt on the intentions and integrity of all humanitarian actors in Pakistan, thereby undermining the international humanitarian community's efforts to eradicate polio, provide critical health services, and extend life-saving assistance during times of crisis like the floods seen in Pakistan over the last two years.

In a recent *Foreign Policy* article titled "[Losing Polio: Did the CIA Ruin Our Chance to Eradicate One of the World's Worst Diseases?](#)" Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer Laurie Garrett noted that after India declared the last 12 months "polio free," the three countries that account for the last stubborn vestiges of the polio scourge worldwide are Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"Nigeria has struggled with polio control since 2003, when a group of imams in the country's Islamic north declared the vaccine was deliberately contaminated with either HIV or contraceptives, the result of an alleged CIA campaign to wipe out Muslim children," Garrett wrote. "The conspiratorial view of polio control was shared by some imams and Muslim politicians in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

“So last July, when it was disclosed that the CIA had used Afridi and a false vaccination campaign to gain access to the Abbottabad complex, I co-authored a [warning](#) with Dr. Orin Levine that the CIA had ‘destroyed credibility that wasn’t its to erode.’ We wrote: ‘It was the very trust that communities worldwide have in immunization programs that made vaccinations an appealing ruse. But intelligence officials imprudently burned bridges that took years for health workers to build.’”

Our U.S. leaders like to say how Pakistan has let us down, but the truth is we have used them just as they have used us. It’s the nature of the game. But having dropped our bombs and inserted our [military](#) (and [para-military](#)) and intelligence agents on their soil, our exploitation leaves a much more potent legacy, and extends to a civilian population already wracked by extreme [poverty](#) and [illiteracy](#).

There is nothing resembling our health care system in Pakistan. Consider the story of honors student Kamran Khan 13, [who set himself on fire and died](#) in Pakistan in March. Reports indicate that he was ashamed his family could not afford the school uniform and that he had fought bitterly with his mother, a maid, who had given up a baby girl two years before because the family could not afford her. Sadder yet, is that his mother could not pay to tend to his badly burned body, and he died a few days later without assistance.

[Shahnaz] Bibi collected donations and took her burned son in a relative’s car to two hospitals in Peshawar — but one would not admit him, and the other did not have a burn unit. She then took the boy to a military hospital with a burn center in the town of Kharian in Punjab province.

She said the hospital wanted 500,000 rupees, or about \$5,500, to treat Kamran — a sum impossibly beyond her reach. By then, Kamran was near death.

The mother ended up selling her gold earrings to pay for an ambulance to transport her son’s body back to their home town for burial.

One could only imagine how poor polio-wracked children in Pakistan gulping for air, or paralyzed for life, would be treated by this Darwinian health care system. Men and women in their 60s in America [are still living in iron lungs today](#) — do you think the Pakistani people, 60 percent of whom are [living on less than \\$2 a day](#), could invest even a fraction of those health care costs over time?

Dr. Afridi might have thought he was doing his duty by helping to catch Osama bin Laden (which is exactly how Washington portrays the relationship, though reports indicate he did not know who the CIA was targeting at the time). But did Afridi know of Washington’s nasty habit of leaving those who help us behind, often to face the horrific consequences alone?

Take the tale of our Iraqi translators and informants. [“Thousands ... who worked for now-departed American troops live in fear”](#) of retribution in Iraq, according to reports. They are waiting for a way out. Many former U.S. soldiers have petitioned hard to get them asylum. Some finally managed to squeeze through a brief window of opportunity between 2008 and 2010. [But that spigot has closed](#), according to reports, thanks to two fool Iraqi immigrants who were fingered inside the U.S. for allegedly plotting to send weapons and cash to al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2010.

Now, immigration advocates are telling Iraqis seeking entry into the U.S. that “the urgency

is lost” and “not to count on America,” according to a *USA Today* report in March.

In 2007, *New Yorker* writer George Packer traveled through Iraq and several refugee camps in neighboring countries and became disillusioned by what he saw as a “betrayal” of Iraqis who once worked as translators for the American cause. He penned a play called simply, “Betrayed,” which has since been performed at theaters nationwide.

“They had no one to defend them,” [Packer said before a June 2011 run at Stanford University](#). “They didn’t have their own militia. They didn’t have the Iraqi military police, who often thought of them as traitors. And they didn’t have the Americans. Individual Americans cared, but institutionally, the U.S. government was washing their hands of this terrible problem.”



Children with polio in Sierra Leone (courtesy of the World Health Organization)

So far, Congress has reacted to the tale of Dr. Afridi with anger over his jailing and the Senate Appropriations Committee has even [moved to slash its foreign aid to Pakistan by \\$33 million](#) – one million for each year of his sentence. Meanwhile, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., [has introduced legislation](#) that would accelerate efforts to get Afridi released from jail, give him U.S. citizenship and award him the Congressional Gold Medal.

It’d be hard to say Afridi didn’t get a raw deal: his court proceedings appear unfair and stacked against him (strangely, the official charge is he associated with a militant group, which his family denies) [and until last week](#), he hadn’t spoken to his family in a year. U.S. officials say they’ve been working “quietly” behind the scenes for a lower sentence or even release. Question is, if he were such a hero, why wasn’t more done for him in the first place?

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, 76, Lindsay Graham, 56, Richard Durbin, 67, and John McCain, 75, all children of the polio era, have all made fervent declarations in Afridi’s defense, but they never once question the ethics and wisdom of paying a local doctor to set up a pretextual hepatitis B vaccination drive among a populace already piqued by conspiracy theories and mistrust.

In fact, [if you listen to the entire webcast](#) of the Senate committee hearing where the aid was cut, the only time the vaccination program is mentioned at all is when Feinstein says Afridi “is not a spy,” and that he was running a “bona fide immunization program.” Not true, [according to reports](#). And Graham even goes so far to say the doctor made Pakistan “safer.”

Today, stories of the “dreadedcrippler” in the U.S. are like nuggets of history, summer campfire stories. In Pakistan it is a reality and it may be getting worse. Everywhere.

More from Laurie Garrett: "With millions of children in India and some other countries now experiencing waning immunity, time is decidedly against us," she wrote. "If wild polio hasn't been eliminated from the final three countries by the end of 2012, the virus could well resurge in sites of alleged eradication, all over the world. And thousands will suffer."

But at least we got bin Laden.

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