

Addicted to Afghanistan

Ted Rall

By BRIAN HEATER



In 2010, Ted Rall and fellow cartoonists Matt Bors and Steven Cloud spent four nights at the Pamir, an unfinished four-story hotel—which, at the time, was occupied by members of the Taliban—in the Ghor province of Afghanistan. The floor of the room was stained red from blood, and four bullet holes were scattered across a wall behind a window facing the street. Rall struck up a conversation with an elderly local in the hotel's restroom and asked him about Afghans' impressions of the American occupation. "After we kill you, we will welcome you back as honored guests," the man said. Rall used the phrase for the title of his forthcoming book; *After We Kill You, We Will Welcome You Back as Honored Guests* is due out in September from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

"I wrote [the phrase] on the outside of my notebook at the time," Rall says. "It kind of tells it all. A lot of Americans think [Afghans] hate our culture, they hate our way of life. This guy was reminding me about Vietnam. Twenty years after a horrible war, we can just go there as tourists and hang out. He said it will be just like that. It will be fine. We just can't occupy [the country]."

A self-described war junkie, Rall first visited Afghanistan for the *Village Voice* and Los Angeles radio station KRI two months after the 9/11 attacks—a journey that served as the basis for his book *To Afghanistan and Back* (IPG, 2002). "People try this once and they either find it repugnant or they get addicted," says Rall. "It's like smoking. In my case, I definitely got addicted. As Americans, we have crises in our lives like anybody else, but it's rare that we're really facing life and death, unless you're in the military or you're a first responder. For me, in my ordinary life, what constitutes a bad month is having to pay my mortgage with a credit card, instead of having the cash. Here, you are in

a situation where you quite literally can die and people are dying around you."

The group that Rall was traveling with in Ghor province in 2010 was far smaller than the one he accompanied on the post-9/11 tour. For privacy, the trio of cartoonists avoided joining large embedded press convoys—which are under the supervision and control of the American military—and hired local drivers.

"Mainstream reporters are definitely constrained," says Rall. "They're told not to go certain places, and they have to do things that aren't always ethical. A lot of news outlets insist that their reporters are embedded. Embedding is wretched. It shouldn't be permitted, and no news organization should have anything to do with it. In fact, it's actually more dangerous for the reporter."

Not that embedding was really an option for Rall: the cartoonist couldn't find a media outlet to back another trip, despite having published two books on the war in Afghanistan. (*Gas War: The Truth Behind the American Occupation of Afghanistan* [NBM, 2002] was the second.) So he did what any underfunded artist does in a time of crisis: he turned to Kickstarter. In January 2010, Rall asked fans to help him return to Afghanistan so he could find out firsthand just how American occupation had impacted the country in the previous decade. It worked, to the tune of \$25,999.



"The politics of Kickstarter are the politics of the Internet: if it's sexy, it works," explains Rall. "So, the statue of Robocop in Detroit worked. If you do the collected works of George Lucas, it works. At the time, Afghanistan was sexy. There were still enough people who were really curious about what was going on, and I had credibility on the topic, having written a couple of books about it."

Rall filed dispatches from the field—roughly drawn comic strips that detailed his firsthand experiences. Those strips found their way into *After We Kill You*, though the majority of the book is prose. "Experiential stories, at least for me, are more easily told through the comics," explains Rall. "It's impossible to get into complex geopolitics in any kind of interesting way in comics. I just need to do straightforward prose for that stuff. Frankly, whenever I read other cartoonists' attempts to do that deep political stuff in comics, it doesn't work for me. I tend to find it irritating. The pictures don't add anything. It's usually just a picture of al-Maliki or whoever. To me, if there's not a reason for the pictures to be there, they shouldn't be there."

Rall is already planning his next journey: a trip to Kazakhstan in May of next year—though this time, the plan doesn't lean on media outlets or crowdfunding: "This one looks like it will probably be on my own dime, but I want to do a book

about it. It's the great story that nobody knows about. Kazakhstan may have as much as six times as much oil as Saudi Arabia. It's a country where the average income has increased from \$2,000 a year to \$40,000 a year in the space of 10 years."

Yet another trip to Afghanistan is also in the realm of possibility. "It's extreme and it's changing every year," Rall says. "You can go every year and find a completely different country. It's not like going to Italy twice. I don't think Afghanistan is ever going to become a boring place where there is no news. It's not a secret that it's strategically important. People are always going to fight over it, and its people are wild and fractured. Afghanistan won't ever be over for me."

Brian Heater is a freelance writer living in New York who writes regularly on comics for Publishers Weekly.