



Lynsey Addario

Photography's Newest
MacArthur Genius Is
"Determined And
Layered In Courage"

By Bruce Young

WESTERN AFGHANISTAN
PHOTOJOURNALIST LYNSEY ADDARIO WAS in Herat, in Western Afghanistan when I spoke with her, having just eaten dinner after a three-hour flight to get there. I asked her what was served. "Same thing as every night," she said with a laugh: greasy eggplant, rice, and chicken. "There's so much grease in the vegetables," a nasty yellow stuff that, from her description, makes the food hard on an American palate. Out there, they apparently didn't realize they were serving a certified genius.

Addario was one of 24 recipients announced in September of a "genius award" from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Technically the MacArthur Fellows Program, the grants give the recipient \$500,000 over five years with no other limits or conditions. The idea, the foundation explains on its Web site, is "to encourage people of outstanding talent to pursue their own creative, intellectual, and professional inclinations." In other words, take the money and do whatever you want.

What Addario is doing, at the moment at least, is working for *National Geographic*. She told me, over a remarkably clear cell phone connection, that she expected to be joined by a

HOLDING THE HIGH GROUND. *Ayub Khan, a member of a Taliban security detail for Munsaf Khan, a Pakistani Taliban commander, stands near the mountain border where Taliban fighters often cross over to Afghanistan. Photograph by Lynsey Addario*

reporter shortly, but was in Herat scouting and getting in some early pictures. She is the only photographer to receive the MacArthur grant this year, and since it began in 1981, with over 750 fellows, there have been fewer than 10 photographers.

It all began in Westport, CT, when her father, a hairdresser, was given an old Nikon by a client. He passed it on to his daughter, who was 13 at the time and quickly developed an obsession with photography. She read books and experimented with photographing the moon from the roof of the family house. A friend of her mother, a professional photographer, taught her the technical basics and she remembers she “spent a lot of time in the darkroom in high school.”

Nonetheless, in college at the University of Wisconsin she studied international relations and Italian. Photography remained a fascination, but she assumed it was an impractical career. She saw herself “at the United Nations or something like that.” After graduation, she spent a year in New York, talking her way into a photo assistant job at a studio, but was disappointed to find herself a glorified secretary. The photographer, she thinks, couldn’t trust someone with no formal training or experience.

Frustrated, she moved to Buenos Aires to study Spanish. Once there, she went to a small, English-language newspaper, *The Buenos Aires Herald*, literally walking in off the street to ask for a job as a photographer. Again, she faced a barrier because of her thin resume. Tiring of daily visits and her refusal to quit, the editors finally made her a bargain: If she could get a photograph of Madonna – in Argentina at the time filming “Evita” – that they could run on the front page, Addario would have a job.

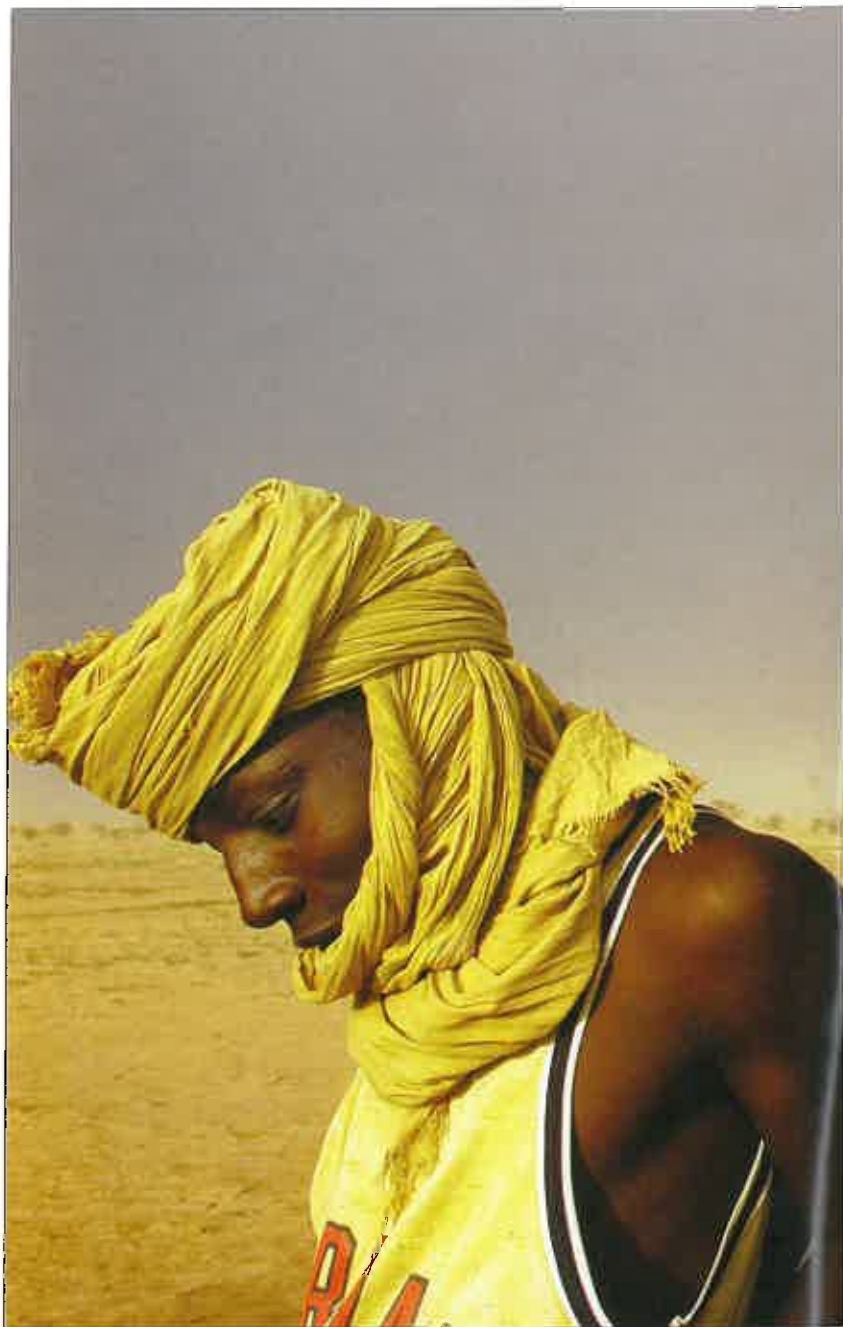
Arriving at the set, she found access blocked by burly security men – “basically bouncers from New York” – to whom she proceeded to plead for admittance. “Where’s your ID?” “I haven’t got one.” “Get lost.”

Finally, she found a sympathetic ear. “If you let me in,” the 23-year-old Addario said, “I promise you I’ll be famous, and I won’t forget this.” He relented, and she soon found herself on the small press platform overlooking the set. Her only problem was that her only equipment was still that ancient Nikon with its 50mm lens ... and Madonna was some 300 meters away.

“Take off your lens,” said a voice from behind. Another photographer on the platform took her camera and attached it to his “Hubble telescope of a lens,” as she remembers it now. Looking through, it was like magic. Madonna filled the frame. Excited and nervous, Addario couldn’t steady her hands enough afterwards to get the film on the reel in the darkroom, and had to get someone else to develop her pictures.

She spent a year working for *The Buenos Aires Herald* before returning to New York, where she did freelance work for the Associated Press. “That’s where I basically learned how to be a photojournalist,” she says. AP staffer Beбето Matthews mentored her, reviewing her film, giving her guidance on how to improve. “He helped me hone my eye,” she remembers, “and he told me to throw my flash in the garbage.”

“We met at a time when [she was] a young photographer





CULTURES OF WAR AND PEACE.

Sudanese Liberation Army soldiers (above) sit by a truck while stuck in the mud in Darfur, Sudan, in 2004. The SLA was but one of several Sudanese rebel groups who were controlling parts of Darfur, where as many as 50,000 people have been killed and more than one million have fled their homes since the conflict began in 2003. Addario (far left) in an Ura village during the traditional Tsechu festival. In Faro, Bhuian, monks line up for a “disciplinary session” during which older monks check younger monks’ robes for cleanliness (at left).

Photographs by Lynsey Addario





starting out with a great deal of uncertainty,” Matthews eMailed me. It was, he explained, “a familiar place for anyone starting an unfamiliar journey, requiring appropriate guidance and no bullshit.” She had an eye, he thought, but also something more. “When she engages it’s with truth and trust. Her spirit is determined and layered in courage. These elements in her character [were already] evident.” As for the flash, he said: “You see, she was already carrying more light than a flash could illuminate.”

UNTIL THIS TRANSFORMATIVE period, Addario had no ambitions in news photography. “I had no idea that photojournalism was this perfect marriage of international relations and photography” – her two great interests – but after three years in New York she was on that path and moved to India at her own expense. “My interest was always international, but I knew I had to go through some stepping stones,” she explains. “I was really determined.” Her AP connections helped get press credentials and make contacts, but she just went there on her own, as she would to other places in the years after.

From India for example, she made regular trips into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan – just because it interested her. “I had been reading John Burns’ articles about Afghanistan,” she says now, “And I was curious.” There was no client, and it was a lucky encounter that finally got the pictures marketed through SABA. She then went to Mexico, following a *Boston Globe* reporter who had given her regular work. While there, she also began doing jobs for *The New York Times*. Her curiosity drew her to other places: Cuba, Darfur, around the Middle East, often looking into the lifestyles and problems of women in those cultures, returning to places again and again to see the story over a longer, deeper timeline.

When the attacks of 9/11 occurred, the *Times* sent her back into Afghanistan and then to Iraq, where she covered the war for two years. “I basically never had a dime to my name,” she says, until the Iraq job. All her money went to paying for the moving and travel, spent without thinking about the consequences. “I’ve sort of always worked hard and tried to position myself in countries that need freelancers.”

Not that it isn’t dangerous. In May, while she was working in Pakistan, her car drove off a mountain road. “I was asleep when it happened,” she says. Piecing it together later with the help of the reporter who was also in the car, she thinks the driver fell asleep. He was killed. “I’ve had some close calls over the years,” she says, like the time she was almost kidnapped (or perhaps kidnapped and released) by Shiite militia

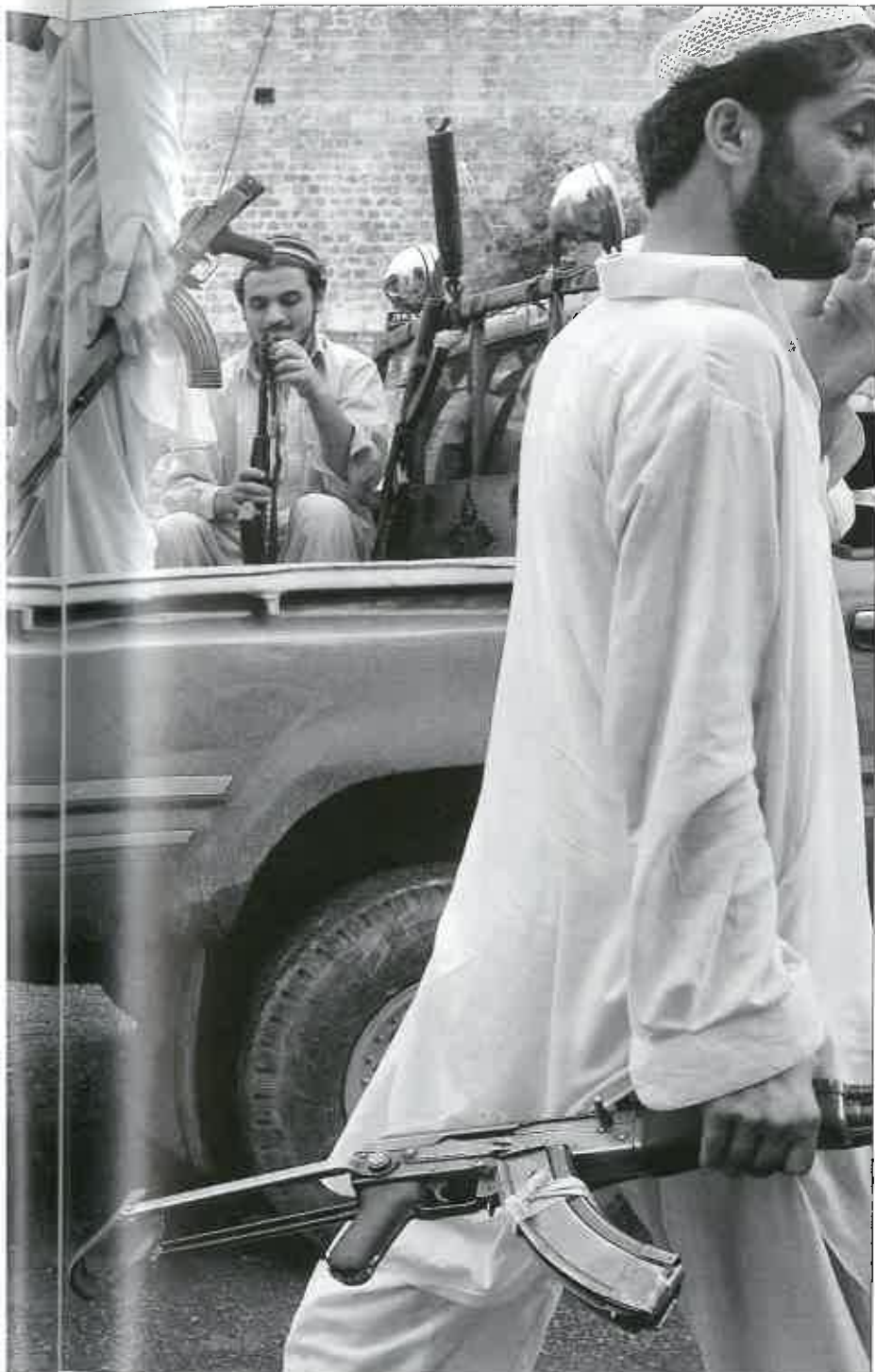


WARS’ WOUNDED. In Afghanistan, soldiers with the 173rd Division, Battle Company, carry the body of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Larry Rougle, 25, killed on October 23, 2007, when his scout team was ambushed by the Taliban in the Kunar Province (top left). Spc. Carl Vandeburge was shot in the stomach during the same ambush (lower left). In Iraq, U.S. military surgeons treat a soldier in the Balad Air Force Base trauma center (center), where after surgery the critically wounded ride a bus to a waiting hospital aircraft for a flight through Germany to the States. Photographs by Lynsey Addario



AMIDST TALIBAN, WORKING AS A WOMAN.
Pakistani Taliban fighters (above and at right) jump out of a truck in Bar Kambar Khel, in the Pakistani tribal area near Afghanistan's border, on July 4, 2008. In Islamabad, Addario covers a protest when marchers rally against the American attack on Afghanistan (center). In Iraq, a woman walks through a plume of smoke rising from a massive fire at a liquid gas factory as she searches for her husband in Basra in 2003 (at far right).
Photographs by Lynsey Addario





in Iraq, so she finds it ironic that it was a simple car accident that almost killed her. Her only memory is waking up in a clinic, disoriented. "We were very lucky."

DOES THIS UNCONTROLLED curiosity and continuing coverage of subjects like the effects of conflicts on civilians and particularly the lives of women in the Islamic world make her one of Cornell Capa's "Concerned Photographers?" Well, the International Center of Photography – founded by Capa – gave her its Infinity Award in 2002, but she dismisses any special level of concern on her part. "I don't think anyone can do this job without being a concerned photographer," she says, explaining that the long hours, hard travel, and unpleasant situations make the work by definition a trial. "Anyone who does this job has to be concerned and feel strongly about it."

At any rate, work for *The New York Times* led to a cover story in that paper's Sunday magazine, "Talibanistan," that in turn led to a Pulitzer Prize this year, joining an Award of Excellence from Pictures of the Year (1999), that ICP Infinity Award, and the Fujifilm Young Photographer's Award at *Visa pour l'Image* (2005) among others in her crowded awards cabinet. She's also had fellowships (including one from Columbia College in 2008) and other grants (Soros Foundation), so the MacArthur shouldn't be too much of a shock ... or should it?

After all, the MacArthur genius grant does have a mythical status. It's the real, secular miracle in the modern world. Like a benign, Olympian god, the MacArthur Foundation watches in secret, somehow learning of your special status (you can't apply for it; if you do, you're automatically out) and gathering information about you from your peers.

One friend told me that he'd been contacted by the MacArthur Foundation once, opening with a draconian warning that if he told the subject or anyone else about the evaluation, that person would be instantly disqualified. They explained that my friend was contacted because he didn't know the subject personally, but was considered an authority in his field and so able to add insight to their deliberations. One is left to wonder if Dan Brown has a novel planned about all this.

But we all have the same fantasy: the mysterious phone call with the news, as shocking as the Nobel people calling the White House. You don't believe them – surely a practical joke – but in the back of your mind you know. Someone has seen all the extra work, and come to reward that total dedication and belief you had in what you do.

Addario's reactions are what you'd like to think you would say. "I'm grateful," she told me, "and it's incredible." She hopes it brings attention to photojournalism around the world. What will she do? Well, it will bring less worry about income. Funding is harder now, she said, with magazines cutting back. "In that sense, the MacArthur comes at just the right time," she told me. And it will let her spend more time on long-term projects and goals. In the meantime: "Well," she says over that scary clear phone connection to western Afghanistan, "I'm here." After our talk, it was bedtime for her, then up early to photograph at a hospital. ■



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