



The Way Out of Afghanistan

Bing West

WE HAVE A problem. Our counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine states that “Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation-builders as well as warriors.” In ten years, we haven’t built an Afghan nation, but the effort to do so has diverted and weakened the warrior ethos.

The United States invaded Afghanistan in order to destroy the Al-Qaeda network. However, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban escaped over the border into Pakistan. Instead of pursuing them, America stayed in Afghanistan, vowing to build a strong democratic nation that would prevent the return of the terrorists.

To lead the new Afghanistan, the United States, acting in concert with the UN, selected Hamid Karzai in 2002, a politician from a prominent Pashtun family. The United States also facilitated a revision of the Afghan constitution to give Karzai authority to appoint all provincial governors. Karzai in turn placed tribal relatives and cronies in those positions of power.

Worse, the United States gave Karzai absolute authority in selecting military and police leaders. So command positions were put up for sale, requiring payoffs and political connections. The result was corrupt, unprofessional leadership that allowed the Taliban to reassert control in the countryside east and south of Kabul.

When President Obama took office, Afghanistan was lurching out of control. Obama stressed partnership with Pakistan, increased the number of American troops to 100,000, and promised to begin a withdrawal in mid-2011. During his first two years in office, three different American generals took command in Afghanistan, the U.S. military strategy concentrated upon population protection, Pakistan continued to shelter the Taliban, and Karzai proved erratic and unreliable.

Where Are We?

Let’s start with the enemy. The Taliban move unchallenged across the 1,400-mile-long border with Pakistan, easily avoiding Americans

The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army SPC Newton Carlizzi on his way back to his outpost from the village of Paspajak, Charkh District, Logar Province, Afghanistan, 20 June 2010.

encumbered by armor and heavy gear. In the north, the Taliban are supported by subtribes in the capillary valleys. In the south, they take a cut of the drug trade, while warning the poppy-growing farmers that the government will eradicate their livelihoods. Overall, some Pashtun villages are friendly, others hostile, and most unwilling to partner with Americans because firefights and destruction are sure to follow.

Jihad against infidels emerged as a powerful war cry of the Taliban. Eighty-four percent of Afghans identify themselves foremost as Muslims. An ideology as much as a religion, Islamic beliefs are intended to form the basis of governance. But the Kabul government has failed to project itself as the true protector of Islam, while the Taliban have won disciples among the rural mullahs. Worse, the Taliban, drug lords, and many rural Afghans continue to conspire to provide 95 percent of the world's heroin.

The strengths of the Taliban are their Islamist fervor and their sanctuary. Pakistan is determined to remain a supporter of some Taliban cliques in case the United States quits the war and the extremists again seize power. As long as Pakistani territory remains a sanctuary, the war will not end.

The vulnerabilities of the Taliban are threadbare logistics and popular disinterest. Having lived under Taliban control in the 1990s, most Pashtuns dislike rather than support the Islamist cause. While the Taliban add recruits every year, there has been no overwhelming groundswell of popular support.

In the net, neither side is winning. On the one side, the United States lacks the numbers to secure thousands of villages and the Afghan security forces lack confidence; on the other side, the Taliban cannot mass forces due to U.S. firepower. The Taliban believe that after an American withdrawal, the rural districts will topple like dominos.

What is Our Military Strategy?

Arrayed against the enemy are the 47 nations of the coalition. Most nations contribute only

political symbolism. The French, Dutch, Canadians, Australians, and British have been in the fray. But at this stage, it's mostly an American effort, with Afghan forces fighting alongside, or a few steps behind.

The coalition strategy of COIN is "to secure and serve the population"; in return, the population is expected to reject the insurgents.¹ This theoretical social contract was enshrined as doctrine in a 2006 U.S. Army and Marine Corps manual entitled *Counterinsurgency*.²

Secretary of Defense Gates endorsed the nation-building mission. In 2008, he told the students at the National Defense University, "Where possible, kinetic operations should be subordinate to measures to promote better governance, economic programs to spur development, and efforts to address the grievances among the discontented . . ." ³ The COIN social services—governance, economics, addressing of grievances—transformed our military into a giant Peace Corps. This was the enlightened way for soldiers to fight an insurgency.

Advocacy of enlightened counterinsurgency sprouted into a social network that boosted the careers of some military officers comfortable with academic theories and with expressing themselves in books, articles, and web sites. Battalion commanders learned to brief as mantra four lines of operations—security, development, governance, and rule of law. It wasn't enough to fight the guerrillas; American commanders became de facto district governors, spending most of their time upon nonmilitary tasks.

Nation-building by the U.S. military featured three tasks:

- Protecting the population.
- Giving money and conducting projects to stimulate patriotism.
- Linking the population with competent government officials.

Protecting the population. Protecting the population requires a vast number of troops. There are more than 7,000 Pashtun villages to patrol, and in 2008 the U.S. lacked the manpower to cover most of

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U.S. Army, SPC Carl L. Hardy, Psy-Ops

Afghanistan forces, in conjunction with U.S. Army soldiers, pass out anti-Taliban posters, 17 June 2009.

them. A patrol passing through a village once every two or three days could not constitute protection. And even when protected, the Pashtuns could not reciprocate by providing information against the Taliban or recruits for the Afghan army.

Arguments that the identical technique of population protection had worked in Iraq are misplaced. The Sunni tribes in Iraq have a distinct hierarchy and had come over to the side of the strongest tribe—the Americans—because they believed the Americans were winning. In Afghanistan, the Pashtun tribes are less hierarchical and most are staying neutral until they see who is going to win.

Giving money. The coalition has funded billions in projects so that the tribes would align with the government. The U.S. military coined the aphorism, “dollars are bullets.” Battalion and company commanders have doled out millions of dollars.

In response, Afghans from the top down have grabbed the money. Like President Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty,” nation-building has created a culture of entitlement and dependency.

Ironically, American liberals oppose the Afghanistan war because it diverts funds from domestic entitlement programs, while conservatives opposed to those programs at home support a war based on the same entitlements. Both the Kabul government and the Pashtun tribes are accustomed to receiving something for nothing and giving nothing in return. Afghanistan is the world’s second-poorest nation and the second-most corrupt.⁴

Linking the tribes with the central government. In the U.S. military, everyone is promoted based on performance, not connections. In Afghanistan, promotions are granted through a mixture of payoffs, blood relations, and ability. The government does not function under a set of rules that rewards competence. Many capable Afghan officials are assigned to districts, but it is on a catch-as-catch-can basis. Linkages between the villages and the government are friable.

The counterinsurgency theory of persuading the population to turn against the Taliban has proven wrong in practice. The coalition lacks the massive numbers to protect thousands of villages, and many

of the villagers have cousins who are Taliban. Pashtun elders accept government services like schools and roads, but don't urge their young men to join the government's army. The tribes survive by behaving, as General David Petraeus put it, as "professional chameleons."⁵ The people are the prize for winning the war, not the means of winning it.

In the summer of 2010, the International Council of Security and Development conducted extensive polling in Helmand and Kandahar.⁶ The results illustrated a high degree of popular skepticism, insular self-absorption, and xenophobia that call into serious question the American COIN strategy of "securing and serving the population." U.S. military operations were judged as "bad for the Afghan people" by 70 percent of the respondents. Working with foreign forces was judged to be wrong by 74 percent. A large majority in all three districts believed the NATO forces did not protect the local population or respect Islam and local traditions.

The local Pashtun populations view themselves as observers, not as participants in the war. Sociologists will say these attitudes show that NATO continues to lose the battle of the narrative. But we may be too hard on ourselves. The gulfs in culture, religion, language, and tribal traditions are too huge to be leapt by increased sensitivity training or drinking cups of tea. The fact is that giving billions of dollars has created a culture of entitlement and expectancy without a popular feeling of obligation among the Pashtuns to reciprocate by denouncing, informing upon, or fighting against the Taliban Pashtuns.

Yet our liberal doctrine of COIN is based upon this two-way social contract: Americans provide protection and services—the International Security Assistance Force mission is "to secure and serve the people"—and in return the people (Pashtuns) provide recruits for the Afghan security forces and passively and actively turn against the insurgents. The Pashtuns have done neither. The Pashtuns have not upheld their side of the social contract. They are determined to stay neutral until they are convinced which side is going to win.

The Nobel Prize winner Roger Myerson put it this way: "A government is legitimate when everyone believes that everyone else in the nation will obey this government . . . people everywhere

will ultimately accept the rule of a faction that is able to win decisive battles, kill its enemies, and protect its friends, even if the faction lacks any other culturally accepted symbols of legitimacy."⁷

The Taliban understand that; they believe they are the better fighters, and they are willing to kill their enemies.

The American military, on the other hand, has lost sight of its core mission to neutralize the enemy. For years, Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen have emphasized that "We cannot kill or capture our way to victory."⁸ The message has taken hold. Risk-averse senior staffs review the size and the movement of even small-unit patrols. American troops see few insurgents and are very careful when they shoot back. A lawyer sits in every battalion operations center to rule on whether a target can be struck, and no coalition soldier is permitted to arrest an insurgent.

Reports about arrests and raids are issued daily from the military headquarters in Kabul. These reports include a standard paragraph stating, "The security force did not fire their weapons and they protected the women and children for the duration of the search."⁹ When a wartime command feels compelled to announce that weapons are not fired, the warrior ethos has been eviscerated.

The cost of pursuing the "secure and serve" COIN mission has been neglect of the military means of defeating the insurgents. The U.S. agreed that NATO forces would serve under the sovereignty of the untrustworthy Karzai government. Karzai controls all promotions within the Afghan military, although our forces do the fighting and know which Afghan officers are good and bad. Our forces are not permitted to arrest insurgents, and we don't know what kind of deal Karzai is going to eventually cut with the Taliban.

Americans cannot invade Pakistan to remove the sanctuary, or remain in large numbers inside Afghanistan long enough to win over the Pashtuns.

Based on the past ten years, population protection and nation-building as U.S. military missions have failed. Indeed, President Obama has insisted that his strategy is "not fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation-building."¹⁰ Yet our mortal enemy, Al-Qaeda, is confined to Pakistan only due to our forces in Afghanistan. A full U.S. military pullout in the short term—say, by 2014—will result in a bloody civil

war likely to be won by the Taliban. This would invigorate Al-Qaeda, imperil a nuclear-armed Pakistan, and shake global confidence in America.

So what courses of action remain? There are two alternatives: negotiations or building up the Afghan forces.

Are Negotiations the Solution?

Karzai has behaved as if the war were between the Americans and the Taliban, with the Afghan government a neutral party seeking a settlement.¹¹ President Obama has ordered “working with Karzai where we can, working around him when we must.”¹² Undoubtedly, Karzai has issued the same instruction to his officials. Thus, negotiations are motivated by the American desire to cut back its commitment and by Karzai’s fear of abandonment.

In the fall of 2010, General Petraeus set out “to bleed the insurgency and pressure its leaders to negotiate.”¹³ He cited impressive killing rates by Special Operations Forces. For years, Petraeus and other senior officials had told the conventional forces to focus on the population and fight the enemy only when he gets in the way. If Special Operation Forces, only seven percent of the total force, were the hammer for a negotiated settlement, then the majority of troops assigned to population protection were having little effect upon the Taliban.

We are in danger of undercutting our own warrior ethos at precisely the time that our air-to-ground surveillance and strike capabilities offer us a decided advantage over any foe. We have a generation of combat-experienced leaders. But the warrior ethos requires an aggressive spirit of the offense, a desire to crush the enemy. Sitting on the defense with patrols in safe areas is not the way to demoralize or shatter the Taliban’s morale and mystique.

Negotiations ratify strength on the battlefield, not the other way around. Under the current circumstances, negotiations do not offer a reasonable solution or a safe way out of Afghanistan.

What Is the Way Out?

There are solid reasons to remain engaged. Our mortal enemy, Al-Qaeda, is confined to Pakistan only due to our forces in Afghanistan. As mentioned, a full U.S. military pullout in the short term will result in a civil war likely to be won by the Taliban.

We must implement a strategy that matches our reduced means.

So a stable Afghanistan is helpful, although not critical, to our national security. But we can’t afford to spend a \$100 billion a year on something merely helpful. We have been waging war using an ATM machine that has run out of cash. We must implement a strategy that matches our reduced means. Being poorer, we have to fight smarter.

That means cutting back on the marginally useful missions of population protection and democratic nation-building. The Pashtun population has refused to turn against the Taliban, and the unreliable Karzai—with dictatorial powers and four more years in office—has no intention of building a democracy. Our conventional battalions are exerting too much effort for too little return.

This war will be decided between the Afghan forces and the Taliban, not by a switch in sides by the tribes. Afghan soldiers, however, lack the motivation to challenge the Taliban. “Afghan forces will never take a lead role in fighting,” Special Forces Captain Matt Golsteyn said, “as long as the coalition is willing to bear the brunt.”

In the 2010 battle for Marja, Golsteyn was advising a battalion of 400 Afghan soldiers. But he had only ten mature Special Forces sergeants, too small a team for sustained combat. So the Marines placed under his command a rifle platoon, engineers, and fire support specialists. Thus, a captain commanded an advisor task force rather than a team, but his force enabled the Afghan battalion to perform credibly on its own.

That model deserves emulation. The primary U.S. mission should be to transition to a hundred such advisor task forces, while reducing our total force from 100,000 to 50,000. These advisors would go into combat with the Afghan forces, provide the link to fire support, and have a voice in who gets promoted. All these units should be overseen by a three-star general, because they will be the centerpiece of the American effort.

The American public will very likely support the war indefinitely if fought at lower cost. This

isn't a patriotic war. In 2010, the war did not rank among the top ten problems that concerned the public. However, neither the public nor the press has turned against the war, as happened in Iraq.

In 2005, a Marine squad in the Iraqi city of Haditha killed women and children. Exhaustive investigations failed to substantiate acts of murder. Nonetheless, Haditha remained on the front pages for months because for many in the press and Congress it conveniently symbolized a disastrous war.

In 2010, a few U.S. soldiers were charged with randomly murdering Afghan civilians for sport.¹⁴ Most of the press and politicians ignored the story. The Democratic majority in the House supported the war while liberal commentators in the press were loath to weaken Obama by inciting an antiwar movement.

Although this alignment of domestic politics suggests that support for the war can be sustained, Obama has made no pretense of his discomfort with the war. "I'm not doing ten years," Obama said. "I'm not doing long-term nation-building . . . There needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand-off."¹⁵

The advisors provide the means for that hand-off, and they're not upset that their commander-in-chief and most Americans have other concerns and

priorities. In October of 2010, I was talking with a group of advisors, all volunteers on their second tour. They couldn't wait to get back into combat.

"If I get clipped, I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me," a sergeant said. "I'm doing what I want to do. Some of us aren't coming back. We know that. Let's get on with the damn job!" The advisors cheered the sergeant for expressing their sentiment. In the Marines and Army, there are hardy, adventurous men who embrace the sweat, heat, cold, bruises, vomit, cordite smell, blasts, rifle cracks, screams, and camaraderie, knowing that some among them will lose limbs or bleed out. They don't need a patriotic war or sacrifices by the public. We cannot explain why they choose the rough life. They march to a different drummer. They like to fight and are highly skilled at it.

As the history of our battles in Afghanistan will illustrate, our advisors are feared by the Taliban and inspire loyalty and spirit among the Afghan soldiers. This war will be decided by grit. The Taliban are hardy, fierce fighters. Today, they have the spirit to beat the Afghan security forces. The mission of the advisors is to infuse a winning spirit into the *askars*, the members of the security forces. That, not population protection, must be the primary task.



U.S. Air Force, SSgt Brian Ferguson

SPC John Lombardo, left, and SPC Christopher Keefe pull security on a hilltop near Shinkay, Afghanistan, 6 January 2011. Specialists Lombardo and Keefe are assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Team Zabul, Qalat, Afghanistan.

The services will organize an advisor corps only if Congress or the president orders it. The Army envisions irregular war as the likely form of future combat. Yet the core unit for the Army and the Marines remains the conventional battalion, as organized in World War II. Both services have been unwilling to change. We don't want to fight the wars of others. We also don't want to allow Islamists to kill us. Therefore the Army and Marines must offer incentives and reward advisors with recognition and promotions greater than those reserved for conventional command billets. They will not do that without powerful external impetus.

As a nation, we must commit to stay in Afghanistan for as long as it takes, while cutting back our conventional forces and building an advisor task force. In addition, Special Operations Forces must hunt down Islamist leaders, while helicopter assaults by Ranger-type units continue along the border with Pakistan. Neutralizing the enemy, not protecting the population, must be the main mission. The task of the advisors is to build and support Afghan security

forces until they are as fierce in battle as are the Taliban. This will take years. The Afghan soldiers will fight if American advisors are alongside them; the Afghans will crumble without them.

Our mistake in Afghanistan was to do the work of others for ten years, expecting reciprocity across a cultural and religious divide. Given the huge size of the country, the tribal traditions and the vast sanctuary of Pakistan, protecting the Pashtun population and expecting them to reject the Taliban in favor of the Kabul government is a strategy too open-ended. The U.S. military must hand off nation-building to the State Department and de-emphasize population protection. It is self-defeating to cling to a theory that has enfeebled our warrior ethos and not led to victory. It is time to transition to an advisor corps that can invigorate the Afghan security forces and prevent an Islamist takeover.

Afghanistan was the wrong war for the counter-insurgency strategy. Our troops are not the Peace Corps; they are fighters. Let them fight, and let the Taliban fear. **MR**

NOTES

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4. Associated Press, Fact Check, 11 September 2010.

5. MSNBC interview, 15 August 2010.

6. International Council on Security and Development, Afghanistan, the Relationship Gap, <www.icosgroup.net> (28 November 2010), 6-29.

7. Roger Myerson, Foundations of the State, University of Chicago paper, 11 November 2008, 11.

8. See, for instance, Fox News, 10 September 2008; ABC News, 11 September 2008; or Pentagon SecDef Transcript, 15 July 2008.

9. See, for instance, <www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/index.php> (4 October 2010).

10. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010), 329.

11. Senator Lindsey Graham, Fox News, 22 August 2010.

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