



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Avoiding Dien Bien Phu

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On 19 December 1946, armed members of the Viet Minh, a communist Vietnamese resistance group, launched countrywide attacks on French garrisons in Indochina. After more than a year and a half of delicate negotiations, limited conflicts, and the French failure to legitimize their authority, Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh's leader, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the leader of its armed forces, launched a war that would continue for another eight years until a final French defeat in 1954. More than 300,000 Viet Minh, more than 150,000 Vietnamese citizens, and more than 80,000 French soldiers were killed during the conflict. The French fought the First Indochina War as Allied forces had fought in World War II, focused on controlling terrain and killing the enemy. The Viet Minh fought a different war, focused on winning the Vietnamese people while bleeding the French forces until their withdrawal or until a final guerilla offensive.

In October 2001, American Soldiers and intelligence officers began an offensive in Afghanistan against the ruling Taliban regime and its terrorist allies, al Qaeda. Using indigenous allies, American forces were able to drive the Taliban and al Qaeda from power and into hiding in the mountainous border region with Pakistan. After this initial defeat, the Taliban regrouped and gradually begin a strategy similar to the Viet Minh, focused on the rural and mountainous villages of Afghanistan. Though American strategy was broader in scope, the military strategy remained largely enemy focused, hoping to kill or capture High Value Targets and destroy Taliban, terrorists, and insurgents when engaged. American forces constructed bases throughout the countryside to serve as staging areas for raids, interdictions, and to prevent infiltration. Some units on the ground did conduct population focused counterinsurgency, but as a whole, the military conducted an enemy focused approach.

Similarly in Iraq, some units on the ground did fight a population focused counterinsurgency, but initial American strategy as a whole focused on the enemy. "The Surge" of 2007, a commitment of over 30,000 additional Soldiers and Marines with a new country wide population focused counterinsurgency placed American forces out among the populace in Combat Outposts (COPs), where their security and needs became the priority of the Americans. Living amongst and for the Iraqi people, relationships and trust grew; and after an initial spike in violence, insurgent attacks decreased as the people began to turn from the insurgents to the American and Iraqi forces. The new American Army "clear, build, hold" counterinsurgency doctrine, prescribed in the new Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, released in December 2006, requires American and indigenous forces to clear the enemy from an area, create a permanent security presence, and facilitate civil reconstruction and aid. Prior to the Surge, American and Iraqi forces tended to clear an enemy area and then withdraw back to their bases, allowing the insurgents to return.

The significant change to the new doctrine was the emphasis on hold, where American and Iraqi forces remain after the insurgents are killed or fled, then focus on rebuilding and restoring Iraqi Government legitimacy. In early 2009, President Barrack Obama announced the deployment of 21,000 additional American forces to Afghanistan, with the intent of continuing the lessons learned in Iraq. These new troops are intended to allow an expanded American and Afghan security presence in the south and east, where Taliban attacks and support are highest, and Afghan Government legitimacy is weakest. The likely key to this strategy will be the expanded construction and use of COPs, placing American forces closer to the Afghan people and closer to the insurgent threat as well.

Hoping to reclaim its lost empire after World War II, France committed its army to a war in Indochina and fought it as a new campaign in the World War. The Viet Minh, however, abandoned conventional warfare after initial defeat and began what the French would later categorize as Revolutionary Warfare. The French strategy focused on defeating the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh strategy focused on winning the Vietnamese people, which would guarantee at worst, a stalemate, or at best, a French defeat and withdrawal. The French military fought a conventional war against an unconventional enemy. The French focused on politics at the highest level, while the Viet Minh focused on the villages. The French built thousands of small forts to control territory and prevent enemy movement and infiltration. The Viet Minh bypassed these forts, or when able, isolated and destroyed them. The French forces grew in size as their operations grew in scale, but they continuously failed to identify the enemy they were fighting or the reasons it was fighting. Ultimately, failure to know their enemy proved fatal.

In December of 1946 and early 1947, the initial Viet Minh offensives were failures. The Viet Minh began as a guerilla force to resist the Japanese during World War II and then developed as a communist nationalist force focused on Vietnamese independence from France. They saw the easy Japanese victory over French forces in Indochina in 1945 as an indication of French weakness and transformed their guerilla bands into a conventional force with limited numbers and insufficient equipment. Tired of French refusal to accept Vietnamese independence or allow even limited self rule, the Viet Minh expected an easy initial French defeat that would drive them from Indochina permanently. Unfortunately, the Viet Minh forces were ill prepared or equipped to combat the conventional French forces with better equipment and firepower. Unexpectedly, this defeat ultimately proved beneficial to the Viet Minh and disastrous to the French as the Viet Minh leadership was forced to look within and adapt, while the French, however, mistook their success as validation, and merely expanded their commitment.

Indochina, the region in Southeast Asia consisting of modern day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, became a French colony in 1887 (Laos joined in 1893). The peoples of Indochina resisted foreign invaders from China for over 1,500 years, including 1,000 years of Chinese occupation, and the Vietnamese are one of the few peoples to defeat the feared Mongols in battle. They resisted French colonial rule and then opposed Japanese occupation during World War II. With the defeat of the Japanese, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence on 2 September 1945, with a new capital in Hanoi. This declaration was met with immediate occupation by the British in the south, and the Nationalist Chinese in the north. Weakened from defeat and war losses, the French had limited troops in Asia at war's end and ordered additional forces to regain

Indochina. Negotiations with the British allowed the French to return to the south in late September, but the French would not move north until February 1946.

The initial French presence in southern Indochina focused on pacification, with 40,000 soldiers establishing staging bases, and then sweeping the countryside to kill or capture the enemy. This initial campaign in the south met with some success, but was not totally effective due to the limited manpower.¹ The French controlled important terrain and the roads, but the enemy guerillas retained freedom of maneuver in the countryside, and harassed French forces when able. The Viet Minh in the north, continued growing their army for the expected conflict with the French, and focused on developing their political support amongst the Vietnamese people. Negotiations for autonomy or French withdrawal met with no substantive gains, as the French made limited concessions, as its leaders were more focused on regaining its lost colony than on meeting the needs or demands of its people.

The British succeeded in nearby Malaya because from the beginning of “the emergency,” they stated Malay independence as their goal once the communist insurgent threat was defeated. Had the French acted similarly, and assessed the political reality of Indochina, they could have worked with the Vietnamese people to avert war and possibly continue a French presence. With a large Buddhist heritage, and traditional rural values, many of the Vietnamese were not natural born communists, but the lack of political freedoms, continuing violence, and the failure of French civil actions drove many Vietnamese to the Viet Minh. Without the people, an insurgent or guerilla cannot win. The French ignored the people, and ceded them to the Viet Minh, who were willing to cede men and terrain for the people.

The December 1946 Viet Minh campaign failed and General Giap reassessed his strategy and organization. A communist from young age, Giap received Chinese military training and led guerillas during World War II. A student of Mao Tse Tung, Giap turned to his theorems and strategies for guidance and ultimately decided on the use of protracted war. This strategy added a new political dimension, with a focus on winning the will of the people. Mao described the guerilla as a fish, and the people as the sea amongst which the fish swims. Without popular support, a guerilla or revolutionary cannot survive. The military dimension of protracted war entailed three successive campaigns.

The first, the strategic defensive, is where the insurgent force maintains an active defense while developing and building its support amongst the populace.² Too weak to meet its enemy in full combat, the insurgent uses guerilla, hit and run tactics, only fighting when strong, and withdrawing when weak. Robert Taber describes this as “The War of the Flea.” He writes:

Analogically, the guerilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough... the dog succumbs to

¹ Taber, Robert. *The War of the Flea*. New York: Citadel P, 1970: 62.

² Tanham, George K. *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Vietminh in Indochina*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1961: 10-11.

exhaustion and anemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws.³

Acknowledging his weakness and need to rebuild his army while gaining further control of the populace, Giap embraced this strategy.⁴ His Viet Minh had tried a conventional offensive and failed; thus he redirected them to their guerilla roots.

The second phase begins as the insurgent's enemy is holding territory and consolidating his gains.⁵ The French held major cities with garrisons and established forts throughout the countryside to prevent infiltration and control the territory. These forts usually held strategic terrain, such as roads, passes, and mountains. They failed to control the actual key terrain, the people. The Vietnamese villager or farmer had little interaction with the French, and when he or she did, it was usually with a French military force that was searching for the enemy, and usually not concerned with the village's well being. Sometimes, the French forces were violent or harsh, causing civilian casualties or collateral damage. The French soldiers swept the villages looking for insurgents, not realizing that their actions were often creating more insurgents. Once the French left a village, a Viet Minh political or military agent would return to the village, assess any collaboration or cooperation, then continue the political indoctrination and civil actions. The Viet Minh maintained a presence and focus on the villages. The French did not.

The third and final phase of protracted war is the counteroffensive.⁶ As the insurgents bleed their enemy, they develop and grow a regular army, waiting until this force is sizeable or capable of combating its enemy in pitched conventional war. Giap slowly grew his regular force, and relied on his regional forces and popular troops to ambush, harass, and raid French forces.⁷ As the war progressed, and the French launched large scale conventional operations, Giap met them with his own forces and operations. The French continued their focus on the Viet Minh army and sought to force it into a pitched battle where French artillery, aircraft, firepower, and manpower would decisively defeat and destroy the Viet Minh. Giap, recognizing this, continued fighting the second phase.

After their initial successes in 1946 and early 1947, the French believed they had the right force and strategy to crush the Viet Minh uprising. Focused on the Viet Minh, and not the Vietnamese, the French wasted opportunities for negotiation or political concessions to resolve the conflict in 1947. Instead, its forces focused on further destroying Viet Minh forces, and on capturing or killing its leaders, especially Ho Chi Minh. In fact, one mission did come close to killing Ho, but it unlikely this would have solved the conflict.⁸ The Vietnamese wanted independence and Ho channeled those desires but did not create them. The Viet Minh fought for ideological reasons and political needs. Instead of targeting or countering these, the French focused on the Viet Minh as men. They failed to assess why they fought and how they survived.

³ Taber: 29.

⁴ Tanham: 13-14.

⁵ Ibid.: 11.

⁶ Ibid.: 11.

⁷ Ibid.: 41-47.

⁸ Taber: 64-65.

From 1947 through 1950, the French focused on the construction of forts and defensive positions to control terrain and prevent Viet Minh infiltration. Of particular concern was the Chinese border, as the Chinese communists continued to increase their support of equipment, supplies, and ideas. These forts varied in size from battalion positions down to team or squad pillboxes. Bernard Fall, the French journalist and scholar that chronicled the French experience in Indochina in Street Without Joy and other works, disparagingly described these forts as a new Maginot Line, referring to the large defensive structures the French constructed to prevent a German invasion.⁹ In 1940, the Germans went around and over the Line. The Viet Minh followed a similar path (though they lacked aircraft to go over the forts).

Casualties grew among the French, the Viet Minh, and the Vietnamese people. French generals continued their sweeps and offensive operations, seeking to crush the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh continued political action in the villages, raids and harassment attacks, and avoided full battles while its forces grew. Political support in France slowly turned against the war as casualties grew, expenses rose, and more manpower was sent to Indochina. The United States provided monetary and material support to the French, and expected results. Realizing time was not on their side, the French generals began new offensives in 1950 and 1951 that sought to further take the offensive to the Viet Minh and produce victories with tangible results.

The French built new strong points and reorganized into mobile groups, capable of coordinated, large-scale operations. These groups seized objectives and key terrain, expecting it to be enough, but routinely failed to win the Vietnamese people. With each apparent French victory, the Viet Minh merely withdrew and waited for the next fight. As the French expanded “their territory,” logistical requirements grew, and the French became more reliant on aircraft, boats, and roads for supplies. The further they moved into enemy territory, the further their supply lines extended. The Viet Minh struck at these supply lines, and ensured the French had no secure rear area.

French negotiations with Laos in 1953 drew the attention of the Viet Minh; and General Giap, who now controlled a multi-division army, decided to strike at Laos to undermine the French and keep his supply lines to China open. Recognizing Giap’s intent, the French sought to shift forces north to protect Laos and draw his army into a decisive pitched battle. The French leadership decided on an old World War II airstrip in a small valley in northern Indochina near the village of Dien Bien Phu. On 20 November 1953, three battalions of French paratroopers jumped into the valley, routed the Viet Minh defenders, and seized the airstrip. By 30 November, 5,000 French troops occupied the position. The defense rapidly grew, and soon a force of over 10,000 soldiers, artillery, engineers, and air defenses manned the base and its nine surrounding strong points. Assessments doubted the Viet Minh could move sufficient forces or artillery into the valley, so the surrounding ridges were left unmanned. Unfortunately for the French, the Viet Minh did not heed the assessment.

Despite its apparent strategic location behind “enemy lines” and its airfield, Dien Bien Phu is a poor location for a static defensive fortification. It sits in a valley, approximately 18 km long and 7 km wide, with the surrounding hills at approximately 1,000 meters elevation. The French

⁹ Fall, Bernard B. Street Without Joy. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1994: 180-181.

positions and fortifications largely hug the valley floor, leaving the high ground open with roughly 31 miles of perimeter to defend. By French estimates, one 700 man battalion could defend only 1,500 yards. At this ratio, Dien Bien Phu would have required 25,000 men just to guard the perimeter.¹⁰ Further, the position was hundreds of miles from the French supply hubs, requiring constant airlifts or long and risky ground movements. The French overestimated their own supply capabilities, and underestimated the enemy's capability to move weapons and men.

Giap ordered his forces to conduct small attacks to distract and harass the French while his multi-division force formed and his artillery stealthily moved into positions. Realizing their slowly degrading situation, the French conducted patrols to clear out the Viet Minh, but continued to ignore the surrounding ridges. By March 1954, Giap amassed nearly 50,000 soldiers and hundred of artillery pieces around the base. On 13 March, an artillery barrage initiated the assault of Dien Bien Phu and its surrounding positions. Totally unprepared for the hidden Viet Minh artillery, the bases took heavy casualties and French aircraft and artillery were destroyed. Day by day, the French force lost manpower and ground to the overwhelming Viet Minh forces and firepower. Surrounded, the French relied on aircraft for resupply and air support, but Viet Minh air defenses inflicted serious damage to the already limited French aircraft, and forced the French to pay a heavy price for holding Dien Bien Phu. By the end of April, the French were down to 5,000 defenders, and only a few positions. The Viet Minh, however, possessed over 35,000 fresh troops, massed artillery, and efficient supply lines. The final Viet Minh assault began on 1 May, and continued until a ceasefire at 1700 on 7 May. At 1900, the French fully surrendered, and Dien Bien Phu finally fell. With it, came the complete French defeat in Indochina.

Negotiations began on 8 May, and culminated with the complete French withdrawal in July 1954. Eight years of war ended with heavy casualties on all sides, French humiliation, and a Vietnam split between north and south. The struggle in Indochina would continue, as the United States replaced the French as the patrons of South Vietnam, followed by military advisors, and ultimately, another full scale war. The Americans fared little better, and withdrew their forces after nearly a decade of war against the North Vietnamese Army (formerly the Viet Minh) and the Viet Cong, communist insurgents in South Vietnam. The French learned many lessons from their experience in Indochina, developing strategies to counter "Revolutionary Warfare" as they called it, and put them into practice in Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s; though the French ultimately withdrew and failed to retain Algeria.

French forces in Algeria fought a campaign that focused on both destroying the enemy and cutting the enemy's support from the people, using a combination of populace control, village relocation, identification paperwork, persistent presence, and continuous patrolling.¹¹ For civil actions, "Destruction and Construction,"¹² a pre-cursor to "Clear, Build, Hold" recognized that merely destroying the enemy was not enough to win a revolutionary war. One must physically

¹⁰ Nagel, James R. "Dien Bien Phu 1954: A Historical Perspective." *Infantry* September - October (1994): 34

¹¹ Francois, Philippe. "Waging Counterinsurgency in Algeria: A French Point of View." *Military Review* September-October (2008): 63-64.

¹² Paret, Peter. *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964: 30-32.

build and construct to help the people, but must also build and construct relationships and trust. Ultimately, one must built legitimate governance, with buy-in and support from the indigenous populace. Without that, the guerilla will continue to swim in the sea. From Indochina, the French identified the political role in Revolutionary War, and the importance of the populace, but unfortunately, they continued a heavy handed approach and failed to build a legitimate government. While they succeeded in destroying insurgent organizations in many areas, they alienated much of the Algerian populace and failed to win political support for a continued French Algeria. The French identified the need to isolate the insurgents and win the support of the people, but widespread political oppression, raids, airstrikes, artillery barrages, collateral damage, abuse, and torture rightly failed to win “hearts and minds.”

Operation Enduring Freedom brought the attention of the United States, and the world, back to Afghanistan. Once the center stage of a proxy war between the United States and its Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union, the world largely ignored and abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Armed, funded, and recruited by western and Pakistani intelligence and military agencies, the mujahedeen, Islamic holy warriors, and Afghan warlords expelled the Soviet invaders, but quickly resorted to infighting and competition for power in Afghanistan. The joy of victory quickly faded as the country fell into another civil war. By 1994, a group of students, Taliban, educated in Islamic schools in Pakistan, rallied to an unknown religious leader near Kandahar, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and opposed the warlord imposed chaos. Bandits and their checkpoints were expelled or killed, and the movement gained traction. Fueled by Deobandism, a highly conservative version of Islam, and clandestine support from Pakistani intelligence, the Taliban gained momentum and control of Afghanistan, enforcing strict Sharia (Islamic law). Most Afghans practiced a moderate form of Islam, Sufism, but acquiesced to Taliban demands because they missed the law and order the Taliban instilled.

By 2001, the Taliban controlled almost all of the country, except for regions in the north, still held by a coalition of fighters called the Northern Alliance. al Qaeda, the terrorist organization led by Osama bin Laden, traced its roots to the war against the Soviets, and returned to Afghanistan in 1996 after expulsion from Sudan. Omar saw a similar religious cause with bin Laden, and needed the money, resources, manpower, and training bin Laden’s organization provided. bin Laden needed a secure base and was comfortable with the conservative Taliban, who he felt he could use to his best advantage. al Qaeda opened numerous training camps and Muslim fighters from around the world trained in Afghanistan before returning to fight in Chechnya, Bosnia, and other Islamic struggles. Terrorists also trained in the camps, before returning home to plan and conduct terrorist attacks. One such al Qaeda cell planned a coordinated attack using aircrafts as flying bombs. They struck on 11 September 2001 and in doing so, brought al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Afghanistan back to the front page. The attention they received, however, was likely not what they expected.

American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paramilitary forces and American military Special Forces embedded with the Northern Alliance and coordinated the use of American firepower and airpower. Backed by American firepower, the Northern Alliance was able to drive the Taliban from its positions, and eventually routed its forces from Afghanistan by December. The Taliban fled into the countryside, and many ran to Pakistan, where they shared similar ethnic and religious kinship. al Qaeda and Taliban leaders fled through the mountains of eastern

Afghanistan, while American special operations and conventional forces followed. In key fighting in the Tora Bora Mountains in December, the Americans attempted to destroy the retreating Taliban and al Qaeda fighters (possibly including its top leadership and bin Laden) with Afghan forces and airstrikes, but many escaped through the extreme mountainous terrain. Operation Anaconda in March 2002, attempted to cut off the remaining enemy in the Shahi Kot Valley, and destroy them with a ground force. Unfortunately, too few American forces were on the ground, and the allied Afghan fighters were reluctant to finish off the enemy. Combined with the highly restrictive mountainous terrain and weather, many of the key al Qaeda and Taliban leaders escaped to Pakistan. They left behind an Afghanistan in chaos, as once again, former warlords and American forces attempted to restore civil order and control.

From early 2002-2005, American efforts in Afghanistan focused on creating a legitimate Afghan government, and on destroying Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, especially its key leaders. Much like the Viet Minh in northern Indochina and China, the Taliban enjoyed a sanctuary in Pakistan, where it regrouped, rearmed, and launched attacks into Afghanistan. American forces hoped to build a legitimate and responsive Afghan government, provide civil aid and reconstruction, and then withdraw with a viable Afghanistan left behind. Arguably, a viable Afghanistan has never really existed, so this goal proved highly elusive and difficult. American and Coalition forces from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) worked to build an Afghan National Army (ANA) to protect the new Afghan state, and to hunt down and kill enemy fighters.

Reconstruction was a goal, but was very difficult for many reasons, including the terrain, weather, ethnic tensions, limited infrastructure, and coordination. Some describe many parts of Afghanistan as medieval and bringing standards of living and infrastructure to western standards may never be possible. Military and American government agencies formed Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) to coordinate and direct civil efforts, but they too were initially limited in number, scope, and coordination.

The American invasion of Iraq in early 2003 shifted American and international priorities and resources to the Middle East from Central Asia. NATO forces in the north and west focused on reconstruction, but some took limited military actions due to political restrictions from their home governments. British and Canadian forces in the south relearned counterinsurgency through trial, and suffered defeats in Helmand before regrouping and reassessing their strategy. Instead of targeting just the enemy, the British began focusing on the Afghans themselves.¹³ American units in the south and east faced usually resistant, if not hostile, Pashtuns that had long resented foreigners, especially white westerners, in their territory. In some places, the Pashtuns did not even recognize the Kabul government as legitimate. Their concerns were local, tribal, ethnic and religious. They lived in their villages and valleys for centuries, and planned to do so for centuries to come. Some American units did attempt to engage these locals, some even building COPs, but overall, there was no coordinated, countrywide effort to win the Afghan people. The focus remained preventing insurgent infiltration, destroying insurgent fighters, and capturing or killing their leaders.

¹³ Daniel, Marston. "British Operations in Helmand Afghanistan." Small Wars Journal (2008): 1-5. Small Wars Journal. 13 Sept. 2008. 5 June 2009 <www.smallwarsjournal.com>.

The French won a relatively easy victory against the Viet Minh in 1947, and shifted their efforts to finishing off the remnants, and killing its leaders. Similarly, the Americans won a relatively easy victory against the Taliban in 2001, and shifted their efforts to finishing off the remnants, and killing its leaders. The French did not recognize Vietnamese independence, and argued they were the legitimate authority. The Americans had no interest in colonizing Afghanistan, and worked to develop an inclusive and capable national government. President Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, mujahedeen supporter during the Soviet war and a Northern Alliance leader, hoped to rally the peoples of Afghanistan to its new government that intended to provide services and security to all the Afghan people. This had never been done successfully before, but unlike after the Soviet withdrawal, the Americans and international community were willing to provide troops, resources, and finances to help rebuild the Afghan state.

The French remained focused on defeating the Viet Minh, and therefore, controlling Indochina. For several years, the United States was strategically focused on the Afghan people, but tactically focused on the Taliban.¹⁴ The new commitment of troops and use of a countrywide population focused counterinsurgency strategy intends to change that, and create security and reconstruction at the tactical level, with the Afghan people. The Taliban, though not communist, have largely followed a revolutionary nationalist insurgency model, though their Islamic identity overshadows their national identity. Placing American and Coalition forces with the Afghan people, combined with development and reconstruction through the Afghan government, serves a better chance of success than the previous enemy centric focus. That said; two historical examples demonstrate that success is neither guaranteed nor easy.

1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment (1-32 IN), of the 10th Mountain Division, operating in eastern Afghanistan in 2006-2007, utilized COPs to expand their presence in the Pech and Waygal Valleys. Commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Cavoli, 1-32 IN expanded the use of patrol bases and outposts in its area of operation to build ties with the Afghan people and destroy the Taliban when able. Using a clear, build, hold approach, 1-32 IN attempted to win the residents of the area back to the Afghan Government. To accomplish this, it tripled the number of COPs and created a persistent American and Afghan security presence in the valleys. Through daily interaction, the American Soldiers and the Afghan villagers built ties and relationships that allowed for later development. One such development project of importance was the construction and securing of a road through the Pech Valley.¹⁵

Long isolated, and connected to their neighbors by only rough trails, the Pech and Waygal Valleys suffered economically and socially, and lacked security. To reverse this, 1-32 IN coordinated and supported the construction of a multimillion dollar two lane paved road. Colonel Cavoli believes that this road expressed goodwill from the American and Afghan governments, decreased its susceptibility to explosives, provided hundreds of construction jobs, allowed economic activity, and was popular to the people, thereby dangerous to the Taliban. As such, ambushes and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks decreased dramatically, as locals increasingly reported or turned in IEDs to American forces. Outposts near and along the

¹⁴ Barno, David W. "Fighting 'The Other War': Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan, 2003-2005." Military Review September – October (2007): 87-88.

¹⁵ Phillips, Michael M. "Tactic Wins Friends, Isolates Insurgents, But Boosts Casualties." Wall Street Journal [New York] 9 April 2007: 1-2.

road, combined with constant Afghan and Coalition traffic enhanced security along the route. 1-32 IN did not cede the road, and in fighting for it, won the support of the local Afghans.¹⁶

1-32's success did not come easy; however, as the unit lost nineteen Soldiers during the year, nearly half of the total casualties for its parent 5,000 Soldier Brigade. Venturing into veritable no-man's land, the American Soldiers expanded from their original bases, and fought into new territory inhabited by a populace that was distrustful of both Americans and the Afghan Government. 1-32 IN built austere outposts down in the valleys, with the populace, knowing the enemy would occupy and utilize the higher terrain and ridgelines. It was a risk, but risk is necessary in counterinsurgency. If Americans reside on large isolated bases and commute to the fight, they appear safer, but lose the interpersonal contacts, trust, and relationships that develop living with the populace, which actually increases their safety and security in the long run. The Army used 1-32 IN's performance as a model for Iraq and assigned Colonel Cavoli to train officers in counterinsurgency. Despite the obvious and numerous successes, in the end though, 750 Soldiers were required to secure several dozen miles of valley. There are countless valleys in Afghanistan, and America does not have the manpower to secure all of them.¹⁷

Building on 10th Mountain's approach to support the Afghan people, the 173rd Airborne Brigade attempted a similar strategy during its 2007-2008 deployment. The infantry battalions and their companies expanded from the larger Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and assumed company and platoon positions, many of which were created by 10th Mountain. The Brigade mixed development and interaction with the Afghan populace with offensive operations to kill insurgents, or prevent their infiltration through the mountainous valleys. Near the end of their deployment, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment (2-503 IN) planned the construction of a patrol base in the mountain village of Wanat in Nuristan Province. Earlier American units had successfully engaged the populace of the village, and 2-503 IN planned to shift its resources from one untenable position in the area to one in Wanat that promised more success and would expand the American and Afghan government footprint. Unfortunately, the support of the populace can be very fragile in counterinsurgency, especially in remote mountain regions of Afghanistan, and one mistaken attack can undo the positive gains.

COP Bella, in the Waygal Valley, suffered repeated indirect and direct fire attacks, and its forces were routinely ambushed moving in and out of the COP. Dismounted ground movement to the position was dangerous, and air movement proved the only reliable way into the position, though helicopters were under the constant threat of Taliban or militant anti-aircraft fires. After reports of further planned Taliban assaults, 2-503rd IN's leaders decided to close the position and shift its resources to Wanat.¹⁸ On 8 and 9 July 2008, an element from Chosen Company, 2-503rd IN established Vehicle Patrol Base (VPB) Kahler in the village of Wanat.¹⁹ One platoon of American Soldiers and one platoon of ANA soldiers with Marine advisors manned the position,

¹⁶ Ibid.: 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 2-3.

¹⁸ Unknown. "AR 15-6 Investigation Findings and Recommendations - Vehicle Patrol Base (VPB) Wanat Complex Attack and Casualties, 13 July 2008," *The Captain's Journal* 11 Nov. 2008. 1 May 2009. <www.captainsjournal.com/category/battle-of-wanat>: 3-4.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 5-9.

for a total of 72 soldiers.²⁰ During the early morning of 13 July, an insurgent force of up to 200 fighters infiltrated the village, and launched an assault on the VPB.²¹

After over three hours of intense close combat, artillery fires, and airstrikes, 21-52 enemy fighters were killed,²² but nine Americans died and 27 were wounded.²³ Intelligence reports for the previous week indicated a planned Taliban assault on Wanat, possibly by the force that intended to attack Bella, but as each day passed, no attacks occurred.²⁴ Similarly, villagers from Wanat warned of attacks, but offered no specifics. The night of the 12th, however, the villagers knew an attack was imminent, and quietly evacuated the village.²⁵ The enemy then infiltrated the empty village and took up assault and fire positions amongst its buildings. The insurgents came close to overrunning an observation post for the VPB, but the intense American firepower and the tenacity of the Soldiers and their ANA counterparts with Marine advisors held the positions. Had the villagers of Wanat not withdrawn, it is unlikely the enemy could have achieved such a coordinated surprise attack on the position.

The Americans were planning to bring reconstruction, development, and security forces to the village of Wanat and its wider surrounding district. The Americans were executing a population focused counterinsurgency; why did it fail? On 6 July, an American airstrike mistook an Afghan wedding near Wanat for a Taliban force and killed 47 people, 39 of them women and children. Several of the males were prominent and popular figures in the region, further exacerbating the damage.²⁶ Counterinsurgency is dangerous and difficult, and despite American best intentions, one mistake can undo the positive gains made, and cause American, Coalition, and ANA casualties. The official Army investigation, a 15-6 Investigation, and journalist accounts of the battle fault various reasons for the incident at Wanat, but downplay or ignore the role of this airstrike.²⁷ There were risks and threats in the plan to build the COP at Wanat, but 2-503rd IN was executing Army counterinsurgency strategy. Unfortunately, doctrine does not always assure success.

General Stanley McChrystal, the incoming commander of American forces in Afghanistan has stressed that protecting Afghan civilians will be a priority for American forces in the new campaign.²⁸ He states that killing the enemy will not be enough, saying, "Decapitation strategies don't work."²⁹ That said, he has not indicated if he will request additional forces to expand the American counterinsurgency, and National Security Adviser General James Jones stated that

²⁰ Ibid.: 25.

²¹ Ibid.: 25-26.

²² Ibid.: 27.

²³ Ibid.: 29.

²⁴ Ibid.: 35-36.

²⁵ Ibid.: 37.

²⁶ Dadkhah, Lara M. "Close Air Support and Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan." Small Wars Journal (2008): 5. Small Wars Journal 30 Dec. 2008. 5 June 2009 <www.smallwarsjournal.com>.

²⁷ Cavoli, Christopher. "Afghanistan Paper." E-mail to the author. 28 May 2009.

²⁸ BBC News. "US 'To Protect Afghan Civilians.'" BBC News. 12 June 2009. 12 June 2009. <www.bbcnews.com>.

²⁹ Spiegel, Peter. "Commander Maps New Course in Afghan War." Wall Street Journal [New York] 12 June 2009: A6.

American troop levels will likely not increase this year.³⁰ General McChrystal will ultimately command 68,000 American forces, combined with 35,000 Coalition forces. American commanders in Iraq during the Surge had over 170,000 Americans. A population focused approach is the right strategy, but he may not have the resources to fully implement it. The French followed the wrong strategy, but likewise lacked the manpower to secure every village in Indochina. Americans will not have the manpower or resources to man every village and valley, so they must carefully select where they can best execute development and provide meaningful security.

One can expect that American forces will expand from their bases to live with the Afghan people, but Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General David Petraeus warns that though similar to the Iraq surge, the new Afghan commitment will reflect the cultural and geographic realities on the ground. He suggests that American forces will establish, “outposts on high ground from which they can oversee nearby villages as well as roads leading in and out.”³¹ The experiences of units like 1-32 IN and 2-503rd IN indicate that winning the people is paramount but carries serious risks. Living on the high ground may restrict American movement and connection with the Afghan people, and hopefully, commanders on the ground will dictate and decide where their positions will go. The continuing debate over a May 2009 airstrike in Farah Province demonstrates that all American gains are tenuous, and that appearances and politics play just as large a role as tactical victory. The new American counterinsurgency will engage and destroy the enemy when needed, but will focus on the population, and not just the insurgents and terrorists. One must hope that this continues and despite the risks, Americans do not fall back to large FOBs, and thus avoid another Dien Bien Phu.

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He thanks Colonel Christopher Cavoli, Major Jason Williams, Captain Eric Robinson, and Mr. Leo Barron for their comments and recommendations.

³⁰ Woodward, Bob. “Troop Levels to Remain Flat in Afghanistan.” Washington Post [Washington] 1 July 2009: 1.

³¹ Tyson, Ann Scott. “Petraeus: ‘Tough Months’ Lie Ahead in Afghan War.” Washington Post [Washington] 12 June 2009: 12.

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