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I Can't Believe We Are Losing To These Guys

Vegetius

“The greatest threat to the Afghan government is the Afghan government.” This was the conclusion of a report on the Taliban compiled in the 2005 by the Defense Adaptive Red Team (DART) for the Department of Defense. The report further went on to say that the Taliban are the slow learners of the Islamic fundamentalist world. The report predicted that, if the Karzai government did not reform itself, and if the Taliban ever became a learning organization, the Afghan portion of the Global War on Terror could get very ugly indeed.¹ It is 2009; the Karzai government has not reformed, but the Taliban have. We should not be losing this war, but it now appears that we are losing. One is reminded of John Lovett’s Michael Dukakis character in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch during the 1988 presidential election. The faux Dukakis listens to an inarticulate pronouncement by Dana Carvey’s faux George H.W. Bush, and exclaims, “I can’t believe that I’m losing to this guy.” That is a fair analogy about where we are in Afghanistan today.

This war is not lost, but we need to make some major changes if we are to turn it around. This was the clear message sent to President Obama by his commander in Afghanistan in August and leaked by the *Washington Post* on September 21st. General McChrystal was making a clear case for more troops in his report, but lost in the uproar was a strong statement that the Karzai government will have to mend its ways. All the king’s horses and men will not help in Afghanistan if the Taliban are allowed portray their equally flawed governance approach as a viable alternative to the increasingly corrupt kleptocracy that the Karzai government has become.

As this is being written, there are reportedly several options on the table as alternatives to General McChrystal’s recommended approach of sending more troops and fully employing the counterinsurgency doctrine that worked in Iraq (FM 23-4, Counterinsurgency).² Some of these proposed alternatives are good supporting tools, but they won’t work by themselves. McChrystal is right; there will not be an easy way to end this war. If the war is worth fighting, which the President said it was during the 2008 campaign, it is worth fighting properly. This piece suggests some specifics for turning it around in the manner that McChrystal suggests.

¹ The executive summary brief from *A Cold Wind From the Mountains: A Study of Afghan Anti-Government Forces*, The Defense Adaptive Red Team Hicks and Associates Inc. (now SAIC), November, 2005,

² Senator Carl Levin is prosing building up the Afghan security forces as an alternative to sending more American combat forces. Critics have responded that this mirrors the failed American strategy in Iraq in 2005-6 that was replaced by the successful surge. Vice President Biden has proposed a redoubled a redoubled effort to go after Taliban and al Qaida leadership cadres as an alternative to more American troops on the ground. Both ideas have merit as techniques, but they are not a substitute to what McChrystal is suggesting. For a more detailed discussion, see Karen DeYoung, “General’s Review Causes Rupture” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2009, p. 1

In Afghanistan, we have problems at every level of war; however, at the tactical level, our troops can be trusted to learn from experience and be every bit as adaptive as the enemy. This article outlines the tools that they need at the strategic and operational level of war to get the job done.

Strategic Fixes

We have been wedded to a badly flawed ally at the strategic level. Unless the Karzai government heals itself, we will never see a successful outcome. This can be done. In Vietnam, we made a terrible mistake when we supported a coup that killed President Diem. Diem, like Karzai, was probably relatively honest. However, he was surrounded by a circle of family and political allies who were incredibly corrupt. Rather than take the time to work with Diem, we eliminated him, but we failed to create the mechanisms that would eliminate the corruption which was one of the root causes of the Vietnamese failure of governance which the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong puppets were successfully exploiting. We never created a truly legitimate South Vietnamese regime.

Two decades later in El Salvador, we got it right. We patiently reformed the existing government to a point where the leftist insurgents became comfortable with the possibility of continuing their struggle at the ballot box rather than through guerilla warfare. Today, the successors of those insurgents who came in from the cold rule the country having come to power through internationally sanctioned elections. This would appear to be the way to proceed in Afghanistan. The Karzai government cannot survive without us. We need to use that leverage to force it along the path to legitimacy. Rajiv Chandrasekaran of *The Washington Post* recently told *National Public Radio* that the Afghans that he has talked to understand that we must force the Afghan government to reform itself.³ That is a similar read that this author has received from Afghan acquaintances.

A Day of the Long Knives. Let's forget our fear of appearing to be neo-colonialist. We have a tremendous amount of leverage left in Afghanistan; there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Karzai family will be back running a chain of kabob joints in suburban Maryland without the support of the US government.⁴ What disappoints the Afghan people is that we have not used this leverage to insist on better governance. We can, and must, do better by them if we hope for a successful outcome against the Taliban and their criminal enablers.

We, not the Karzai government, should pick out the fifty most corrupt members of the Afghan government and insist on their replacement. The people who replace them should have a U.S. or NATO nation advisor assigned to spend the first three months with the new appointee cleaning up the mess. At least ten of the fifty should be members of the extended Karzai family in order to show that no-one is beyond the reach of the government clean up. The message behind this should be clear to the rest of the government; "you could be next!"

³ Interview with Chandrasekaran by Terry Gross on the *National Public Radio* program *Fresh Air*, September 24, 2009

⁴ Ibid. Chandrasekaran

Where would we get the fifty advisors given the slow ability of the civilian arms of the U.S. government to provide the “civilian surge” long called for in Afghanistan? There are several options. We could use American civil affairs officers; there are plenty of them in Iraq and Afghanistan manning increasingly bloated staffs. Another source of manpower could come from cleaning out the attaché offices at the Embassy and sending them out to field until the civilian surge catches up in recruiting qualified civilians. A third source might be Iraq where there are Provincial Reconstruction Teams that are wrapping up their missions. The State Department could transfer them on a voluntary basis if it puts its mind to it. The bottom line is to send the message that we are prepared make heads roll in the Kabul government, and to do this on a three month rotating basis until we see results.

Until the kleptocrats in Kabul and the provinces have the fear of Allah put in them, there will be no reason for the Afghan people to assume that a reformed Taliban are not a viable alternative. That brings us to the provinces.

Reform in the Provinces. As a start, the top levels of the governments of the five worst governed provinces in Afghanistan should be replaced. Again, this should be our call, not Karzai’s. For at least a month, the replacement officials on the provincial governance team should be paired with their advisors from the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) at an offsite location and receive solid governance training. It is hard to train people under fire. The loss of what passes for current governance in the target provinces for a month or so can be more than offset by the enhancements of bringing a trained and functional governance team on line after offsite training. This approach should be repeated province by province as new PRTs become available.

Again, the American and NATO training cadre should have absolute power to replace those trainees who fail to grasp the concept. This calls for the extreme in tough love.

Alternative Political Parties. One of the fantasies that have sprung out of the war in Afghanistan is that factions can be turned at the drop of a hat.⁵ It is true that changing sides is a time honored tradition in Afghanistan, but the thought that they will flip without a good reason is not valid. Afghan tribal leaders and warlords switch sides when they think they see a winner. We are not winning at this point.

If we want to get members of the insurgency to change sides, we need to turn the tide and show signs of progress; there will be no cheap victories in this war. However, there is hope in providing an alternative to armed resistance for those who truly seek national reform. The creation of a legitimate reformist political coalition that armed insurgents could join with some pledge of not returning to armed struggle is not out of the question. This approach worked in El Salvador, but the creation of such a mechanism in Afghanistan will need strong American and NATO top cover. There will be no incentive to come out of the cold if the insurgency is continuing to gain strength or if the insurgent defectors fear assassination after seeking legitimacy.

⁵ This was the subject of discussion by several panelists in a September 22 segment of the National Public Radio Diane Rehm Show. A more nuanced discussion can be found in the article: Fonti Chrsitina and Michael Semple, “Flipping the Taliban” *Foreign Affairs*, volume 5, number 88, July/August, 20009

Operational Fixes

No Province Left Behind; an Economy of Force Campaign. The one area where this author takes strong exception to the McChrystal approach is in any attempt to cede ground to the various Afghan insurgent groups loosely known as the Taliban.⁶ They should be made to bleed for every gain as an economy of force measure. Here, we can take a page from the Iraqi play book. In Iraq, we created militias to resist foreign jihadists through a combination of tribal pressure and funding. Afghanistan is not Iraq; it is much more complicated, but if we begin to understand the local culture and politics of each locality, we achieve similar results.⁷ The fact that Afghanistan is more complicated than Iraq is often seen as a challenge. It is also an opportunity. There are more factions, and that means more opportunities to create fissures in the opposition.

Most Taliban “offensives” have been uncontested affairs where they walk into undefended villages and say to the locals, “there will be a battle here; you can stay or go as you please.” With no place else to go, the villagers often choose to stay. They then fall into the hostile camp and become collateral damage in International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) attempts to retake the ground. The increasingly sophisticated Taliban information operations network then takes advantage of the casualties.

We need to turn these villages into anti-insurgent strong points. This has worked in some areas in Afghanistan, but we need to integrate it into our overall strategic-operational approach. We need to approach the villagers and ask what they most need. It could be a well, an irrigation project, an access road or something else. The bottom line is that the project(s) should be a local call, not something that we assume that they need. The deal in providing the project should be that the village population will form a popular force unit to protect itself and the project(s). We can arm them and pay for the militiamen’s time, but they need to do the defending themselves. If we use mobile air assault forces to back up these popular forces, we can deny the Taliban the quick, relatively bloodless victories that they have achieved so often in the past.

The argument of many anti-war leftists in the United States is that the Taliban will find sanctuary in any part of Afghanistan that we cannot defend is only valid if we willingly cede territory.⁸ Non lethal terrain denial has worked in Iraq, and it can work in Afghanistan as well.

Micro Sensors and Weapons on Stun; Putting Technology to Work. General McChrystal has stressed the need to reduce collateral casualties among Afghan civilians as part of his strategy for securing the population. However, that guidance, poses the danger of unduly putting our own

⁶ Greg Jaffe, “U.S. Forces Told to Shift Focus to More Populated Areas” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2009, p.1. In fairness to McChrystal, without the proper resources he has to make hard choices. This entire debate is about proper resources

⁷ We have been creating Human Terrain Teams to capture exactly that type of knowledge

⁸ This was suggested by a former CIA operative on the National Public Radio, Diane Rehm Show on September 22, 2009

forces at risk. This is already becoming an issue in the media and in American and allied public opinion.⁹

We can make better and more innovative use of technology in Afghanistan than we have done to date. Technology cannot solve all of our problems, but it could address the specific problems that we are discussing here.

Non Lethal Technology. A more advanced version of the Directed Energy Active Denial System that exists today could incapacitate civilians and combatants taking shelter in the same building eliminating the need to use lethal means to retake areas when they have been lost to the Taliban.

¹⁰ This would decrease the danger to our troops posed by current the current directives against putting civilians in undue danger while giving them a tool to accomplish that mission without putting themselves in undue danger.

Small Eyes on Target. We now have the technology to put many more eyes on the ground through the use of micro-cameras on very small sensors and robots that can cover areas where NATO and Afghan soldiers do not have enough “boots on the ground” to be strong everywhere that we would like to be. These sensors are very difficult to detect and have a very long field loitering time. Some micro sensors can actually recharge themselves with sunlight giving them virtually unlimited loiter time. We could do a much better job of securing Afghanistan’s borders and filling in the white space between the strategic villages advocated earlier in this article through the use of such sensors. This is an idea very similar to the “McNamara Line” concept designed to isolate South Vietnam from North Vietnamese infiltration along the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. We did not have the technology to realize McNamara’s vision then, but we do today. Sensors are not a substitute for manpower, but they can be a force multiplier.

The problem is that both of the technologies advocated in this piece are under-resourced. We need a Manhattan Project-like approach to quickly give our soldiers and Marines the tools that they need and deserve to accomplish the missions that they are being given.

The Patton Principle or the Carter Conundrum?

“Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser.” George Patton’s sentiments in one of his famous pep talks to his troops, rings true today can be contrasted with Jimmy Carter’s 1979 speech in which he was perceived to blame the American people for a great national malaise. Patton would not accept the notion of defeat; Carter appeared to embrace it.

⁹ There have been a number of stories in the media regarding the father of a young Marine who was recently killed in Afghanistan. The father, a retired Marine Corps First Sergeant, has articulately protested the restrictions on the use of force that he feels are putting our troops in undue danger.

¹⁰ The millimeter wave based Active Denial System excites the top layer of skin of people exposed to it causing a near unbearable burning sensation that does not cause lethal effects. Once the device is no longer aimed at the target person, the effect stops without causing death or injury. A more advanced version of the system could cause a similar debilitating effect, essentially instant heat prostration, allowing our forces to disarm everyone in a building or an area where civilians and fighters are intermixed without killing anyone, thus allowing our forces to sort out the enemy combatants from non combatants. Total non lethality can never be completely guaranteed, but this technology would greatly reduce lethality to non combatants. The Joint Non Lethal Weapons Directorate Website has a good discussion of principles behind directed energy non-lethal weapons.

We have addressed the challenge of sending a message of change to the Afghan people by making heads role in the government, but we must convey a sense of the possibility of mission accomplishment to the American people. The current debate in the administration is being portrayed by insiders as due deliberation; many Americans view it as a case of wobbly knees. In 2006, American public opinion was against the war in Iraq because we appeared to be losing; today, that talk has largely evaporated regarding Iraq, but the perception of losing is tarring Afghanistan:

A Marine Corps Major and his team who were advising Afghan Army forces was recently shot to pieces while officers up the chain of command debated whether or not to give him fire support because of prohibitions about the potential of killing Afghan citizens. The major was forced to admit, “We lost today.”¹¹ The American people want to hear about victories not defeats. We need to give the major and people like him the tools to deliver victories.

The perception of failure can become self fulfilling. This is why the likes of Winston Churchill, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan are considered to be great leaders; they would not accept the notion of defeat and would not tolerate it event as an intellectual abstract. Jimmy Carter and Lyndon Johnson are remembered as losers because they accepted the possibility of defeat and communicated their fears to the American public; Americans indeed will not tolerate losers.

The challenge that faces President Obama as a war leader is simple. He needs to decide whether to accept the Patton Principle or the Carter Conundrum.

Vegetius is a government employee who has experienced four wars including Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹¹ Jonathan S. Landay, McClatchy Newspapers correspondent, “We’ve Lost Today’, *Stars and Stripes*, Mideast edition, Thursday, September 10, 2009

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