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Uncut: Lessons Learned From Six and a Half Years in Afghanistan

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Friends in the Coalition,

As I depart, I would like to thank the thousands of fellow members of the Coalition with whom I've had the pleasure to serve these past 6 ½ years. I'd also like to pass on a few things for you to consider... for what it's worth. If you like the observations, make them your own.

This is definitely a stream-of-consciousness effort. I expect, though, that each of you will be able to readily grasp what I'm talking about because each of you has at least partially "seen the elephant". (More on that elephant later).

You may agree with some points / observations and disagree with others. That's fine, of course. My main purpose for writing this is to give you something to chew on.

Here are the topics I'll cover:

- [Disclaimer – The Blind Men and the Elephant](#)
- [The myth of the Uneducated Afghan](#)
- [Don't worry; your counterpart is getting it.](#)
- [Chronic Underestimation](#)
- [He who sticks his neck out...](#)
- [Building Bridges](#)
- [Making Progress](#)
- [Cronyism and the Bazaars](#)
- [Security thru commerce](#)
- [Are Afghan Logistics really the problem??](#)
- [The Bright Light Always Shines](#)
- [Relax. Take a deep breath.](#)
- [Get out and Get Around](#)
- [US Officer Development System - a two-edged sword](#)
- [Gravitating toward a comfort zone](#)
- [A canary in a coal mine](#)
- [Long lead-time projects](#)
- [The Main Effort is the Reserve??](#)
- [Unity of Command, Bizarro Style](#)

Disclaimer – The Blind Men and the Elephant

Lest anybody think that my writing this is an indication that I'm assuming to be all-knowing, I'll start with the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant.

The story goes – 6 blind men encounter an elephant and compare observations about it afterward. The first describes the elephant as a snake-like creature that wraps around a man and has two holes at the end... because he only touched the trunk. The second man says “You wrong. An elephant is long and narrow like you say, but it is smooth and hard and it comes to a point at the end”... because he only touched a tusk. The third man says, “Are you both crazy? An elephant isn't anything like that. It is round and flat and waves in the breeze”... because he only touched the ear. The fourth interjects, “You're all three mistaken. An elephant is big and round like a huge beach ball”... because he only touched the elephant's belly. The fifth man exclaims, “What are all of you smoking? I know what an elephant is because I've just encountered one. It is like a tree trunk”... because he only touched a leg. The sixth man says with exasperation, “I'm amongst a bunch of idiots. Gentlemen, an elephant is no wider than a garden hose and it has a furry tip almost like a broom”... because he only touched the tail.

Like the 6 blind men, many of us thought we knew how the Afghans think after a month or two of interaction with them. Also like the 6 blind men, many of us think anybody who sees the Afghans in a way that doesn't match our own observations must be an idiot.

I propose to you that none of us “knows the elephant”... that is, none of us knows the full picture of Afghan culture... and none of our brothers-in-arms is an idiot. Listen to the observations of others, no matter how long/short a time he's been here. There's something to learn there.

Most importantly, though – Listen to the Afghans. There's a whole lot to learn there.

However... I will continue with my list of “things I've learned” as if I do ‘know the elephant’. I'll leave it up to each you to accept or reject my assertions.

The Myth of the Uneducated Afghan

There is no such thing as an uneducated Afghan; they're just educated differently.

The folks you see walking around the cities and towns, working in the fields, driving the taxis, slaughtering the livestock, etc are all survivors of a past that was much tougher than anything any of us has faced. Each has likely seen more than his fair share of processes wherein one misstep means death. They would not have survived that without a little bit of luck and a whole lot of savvy. That savvy comes from an education process, albeit an education that has an entirely different focus than our own.

Granted, most may not know how to read or write any language... not even their own. Most may not have a grasp of higher math, fluid dynamics, or geography outside of Afghanistan. Indeed, few are educated in a way that most of us in the West would call an 'education'.

But they know how to read people. They know how to shape events to their advantage. They do it all the time, usually without their western counterpart ever noticing.

So how is it that they can almost always maneuver around us? I submit to you that it is because they have mastered the things that this culture places real value on.

In the west, we place a high value on mathematics, grammar, diction, articulation, all kinds of hard sciences, reading, writing... and a whole lot of other subjects that each of us were hammered with back in school. Those are the tickets to prosperity in the west.

In Afghanistan, those aren't the things that keep you alive. In fact, being well educated in those areas likely invited unwanted attention. Around here, that means grave danger. So those things are not emphasized here.

Don't Worry; Your Counterpart is Getting It

You might not ever see your Afghan counterpart demonstrate that he's internalizing the things to which you're trying to expose him... but that doesn't mean that he's not getting it. In fact, he probably is capturing all of it.

A lot of westerners come in and make suggestions to their Afghan counterparts in less-than-fully-private situations. This is usually unavoidable. However, even if there's only one other Afghan around when you're making suggestions... including your interpreter... any suggestion from you might be catalogued in his brain for use after you've departed.

Why? Because he is not going to allow anybody under his command to get the inkling that you are doing his thinking for him. That is a sign of weakness.

After you've departed and he has another mentor, he will start to use the suggestions you made... unless your successor makes the same suggestions in an obvious/semi-public way. In that case, he'll wait for the next mentor... or the next... or the next. He's got all the time in the world, but he is certainly not going to allow himself to be seen as dancing to the mentor's tune too obviously.

I've noticed this with the collective capabilities of units too. I've seen units muddle along without demonstrating any discernable competence, and then rise to the occasion in a crisis situation, demonstrating an astounding level of competence that they had never shown before.

Chronic Underestimation

The ANSF can do more than most of us are willing to imagine.

It has always amused me over the past 6 ½ years to watch the fairly predictable pattern that people and units go thru. When the new guy/group comes in, he/they look around, and say, “These guys (the ANSF) are all screwed up. We need to take charge and show them how to do things correctly before they’ll ever be able to handle it on their own.” Then, by the time they leave, they appreciate... at least to some extent... that the ANSF is much more capable than they originally observed. So they loosen up before they turn the operation over to another person/group who goes thru the exact same phases.

Think about it. Each ANSF guy has been thru about 8 years of these cycles by now. He’s probably more than a little frustrated with the “Amriki” by now.

Human nature is such that a man will instinctively think that something that doesn’t look/behave/perform in a manner that is familiar to him must be “screwed up”. The more experience the man has, the more he’s convinced that the wisdom he’s collected over the years is as close to a perfect collection of wisdom as is possible for a human.

Here in the coalition, we are a collection of very, very senior officers and NCO’s. Even the few of us who aren’t COL’s have “seen and done it all”. Each of us has been everywhere and knows exactly what “right” looks like.

And nothing the ANA does even remotely resembles our pre-conceived notions of what they should be doing... until we’ve been here about 11 ½ months, by which time we are already “smelling the barn”.

I recommend to each of you that you seriously consider “loosening the reins” on your ANSF counterpart... even if you just got here yesterday. He/They can succeed. He/They can excel. I predict that you’ll be pleasantly surprised if you have the courage to “let the horses run.”

He Who Sticks His Neck Out...

... gets his head cut off.

Unlike in the US, being conspicuous is not a good thing here.

In most western nations, conspicuous knowledge/aptitude/capability is celebrated. It is rewarded.

That’s not the case here in Afghanistan. Standing out in a positive way is the surest way to become somebody’s target.

I noticed it at every echelon. Each time I saw an officer or NCO demonstrate a level of competence that was clearly superior, I later noticed that same guy shrinking back into mediocrity. Sometimes, I would notice that same guy screwing something up in manner that was just as much outside-the-norm as his earlier demonstration of superiority. It was as if he was screwing up on purpose, just to show that he's not a threat to... whomever.

My conclusion... and I could be wrong, of course... is that each of these guys knows that conspicuous competence will likely be seen as a threat to the powerful (those of higher rank) and/or a threat to the fortunes of other ambitious peers. Shining too brightly could invite a smack-down from the boss or a back-stab from a peer.

Building Bridges

Believe it or not, Afghans can build bridges. They just usually don't want to.

Early in my time here, I lost count of the number of stories I heard about some bridge that we Americans built. It was always a bridge that eased travel between two villages. Apparently, without this new bridge, these two villages couldn't interact. We always felt good about it, and there was always some news article associated with the completion of the bridge.

Then a couple of years ago, I had a conversation with an Afghan guy who gave me a different perspective.

He told me that in probably every case where we built a bridge, there had earlier been no bridge because... get this... neither village wanted a bridge. If they had wanted a bridge, they likely would have built one for themselves. After all, it really isn't such a complicated thing.

He further told me that in every case, the village elders who asked for the bridge did so for one of two reasons – 1) because the elder thought his village was stronger than that neighboring village and a new bridge would allow his villagers to more easily exploit the neighbor's weaknesses, or 2) because the elder wanted to get his hands on some of the raw material from which the bridge was constructed (such as steel beams, wood planks, etc). Either way, he said, the bridges never last long because one village or the other tears it down to either prevent predation OR to sell / reuse the components.

I honestly haven't seen enough to either confirm or deny what I heard from my Afghan friend... but I do try to look at the condition of bridges between villages whenever I get a chance. I've seen a lot that looked like they were partially dismantled.

Making Progress

Since the late summer of 2003, I've seen an undeniable growth in both the Army and Police.

In my nearly 7 years here, I have seen many highs and lows. I have seen watershed events wherein our Afghan hosts demonstrated a collective competence far greater than that which any westerner would have credited them. I've seen the average Afghan's outward behavior shift from something that revealed disrespect and derision for the GIROA to an obvious glowing pride in the soldiers' professionalism and competence. I've seen the ANA grow from 3 incomplete brigades to a force that capably covers the entire nation. I've seen the ANP grow from... well, nothing... to a force that has presence throughout the nation.

My first memory of the ANA was of a collection of individuals who were... to be charitable... barely capable of doing much more than marching in step. Now they are routinely conducting combat operations in support of the Commander-in-Chief's intent, and doing it well.

My first recollection of the ANP in action came several months into my first tour here. This was well before the US had a role in developing the ANP. I was driving somewhere in Kabul... we could do that back then... and I came across a traffic light. I had, before that date, been pretty much all over Kabul and I had never seen a traffic light. While I was surprised to see the traffic light, I wasn't surprised to see that none of the drivers were paying any heed to the signals.

Then, a few days later, I came across that traffic light again and saw that an Afghan National Policeman was assigned to that intersection and charged with the responsibility of making sure that the drivers paid attention to the traffic light. He was whistling, swinging his paddle about, hitting cars, and yelling something at the drivers. Naturally, there were still no drivers paying attention to either the light or the policeman. It was both comical and sad.

My last recollection of the ANP was vastly different. In early 2010, the ANP succeeded... without any assistance from coalition forces... in thwarting a well-planned and well-organized insurgent attempt to disrupt the swearing-in ceremony for several newly elected officials.

To those who say that the ANSF isn't making any progress, I assert that you are mistaken.

Cronyism and the Bazaars

Westerners often castigate the Afghans for perceived endemic corruption. Our own POTUS has recently done that very thing in a public forum. I suspect, though, that few westerners try to take the time to view things from an Afghan perspective.

I will concede up front that I fully believe the good folks who run the bazaar on Fridays here are honest, hard-working folks. I also fully believe that the average Afghan merchant doesn't see it that way.

To us, the bazaar is an opportunity for the folks on Camp Eggers to purchase some local goods in the safe surroundings of our home base camp. To most of the Afghan merchants around town, the Camp Eggers bazaar is a venue where only the well-connected gain access to customers with more money than market-sense and who will pay grossly inflated prices. The majority of the

merchants around town do not have access to us, and therefore cannot do business with us. Hence, they have no stake in our security.

Which brings me to my next observation...

Security Through Commerce

Once upon a time, we used to have a pretty good level of freedom to frequent the local restaurants, shop at the local businesses, visit the local museums, play at the local golf course (yes, there is at least one golf course here), etc.

Back then, the local shop owners had an economic interest in ensuring our safety as we went through their areas. Our very presence constituted a patrol... we were armed, after all... but it was as non-threatening a patrol as possible. We were there to conduct business. The conventional wisdom was that the local business owners would charge us more than he would charge his Afghan customers, but that never seemed to bother any of us. As a matter of fact, I looked at that presumed 'fact' as simply being the cost of security. The extra expense was, in effect, a sort of insurance payment. And it seemed to work. IEDs in the local shopping areas were quite rare. For that matter, IEDs in Kabul were rare outside of J-Bad road.

I firmly believe that the locals policed the area and kept the insurgents out. They knew that a threat in their neighborhood would reduce pedestrian traffic... and customers. And not just any customers either; they would lose the customers who paid more per item than the local Afghan... if you subscribe to that theory.

It was actually a symbiotic relationship. They looked after our safety because they had an economic incentive to do so, and our frequent armed presence allowed the local businessmen to use that "threat" to keep insurgents at bay.

Then we changed our policy.

We stopped shopping downtown. We cut off access to local restaurants. Sure, some folks continued to defy the rules, but the majority of folks conformed and stopped conducting business outside the walls.

The local businessmen no longer had an economic interest in ensuring our safety. What's worse, we no longer offered an armed presence for the local businessmen to threaten the insurgents. The balance of power in the neighborhoods was tipped in the favor of the insurgents.

The local businessmen, therefore, were forced to choose sides. And their choice was an obvious one.

Now we have more insurgent activity in Kabul. Who'd-a-thunk it?

As a final note – Although I have no way of knowing exactly why GEN McChrystal ordered that all the on-post restaurants should close, my immediate assumption was that this move was a preliminary step to getting us back out into the economy.

Are Afghan Logistics Really *The* Problem??

Lots of folks bemoan the difficulty we have experienced in getting our Afghan partners to grasp the concepts that underlie the logistics system that we've designed for them. Know what? I fully agree. Our Afghan partners have been exceptionally slow at getting it down.

So we're all agreed that logistics is a problem... but not necessarily the root problem.

In my opinion, the root problem isn't Afghan reluctance... or Afghan ignorance... or Afghan corruption. The root of the logistics-related difficulty here stems from the fact that we've attempted to deliver the wrong kind of system to them.

Back in 2003 and 2004, there were a lot of Afghans talking about wanting to hit back at the Pakistanis for their apparent role in supporting the Taliban prior to the decision by the "Coalition of the Willing" to assist the Taliban's opponents. It hadn't been very long since the Taliban was in control of most of Afghanistan, and there were clearly some residual hard feelings back then. While we all understood the hard feelings, we were trying to get the Afghans now in positions of power to focus on merely protecting the homeland.

And yet we somehow managed to design an Expeditionary Army rather than a Homeland-Defense type army. I know how it happened, but the details aren't as important as the fact... or perhaps it is better to say 'the argument'... that it was the wrong kind of force and that that mistake has been the root of our problems in the logistics arena.

The logistics system here is based quite obviously on the US Army's logistics system. I know this *NOT* from inference but because I was here when the ANA units were designed. I wasn't the guy designing the log part, but I knew him. And he did what seemed most logical to him at the time – he designed the organic tactical-level logistics units after our Forward Support Battalions. It seemed to make sense at the time because, well, that's pretty much the way the rest of the ANA was designed back then – after the US Army's design.

Some of us thought we were pretty wise back then to say things like "We're not trying to make the Afghans into the US Army of the 21st Century, the 1980s, or even of the Vietnam era. We should aim at something like the US Army of WWII." But even that was off-target because the US Army of WWII was an expeditionary force, not a homeland defense force.

The key difference, in my opinion, is in the logistics area. An expeditionary force requires organic units to execute logistics functions whereas a homeland defense force can... and arguably should... rely on contracting with local vendors for that support.

I don't claim that everything would be perfect if we tried to go that route instead, but we certainly wouldn't be dealing with the frustration of trying to get our Afghan partners to embrace something they seem unwilling to even consider. They had been very accustomed to a foraging approach to logistics support, and contracting for logistics support isn't all that different.

An additional benefit of this approach is that it would inject capital into the local economy. Local contractors would need to employ local laborers. The contractors and their employees would have an economic interest in protecting the logistics assets and lines-of-communication. Everything would be sweetness and light!

Well, maybe not. Truth is that it would inject an entirely different set of challenges. For example, it would introduce a whole lot of opportunities for corruption. But I firmly believe that, unlike our current situation in the LOG arena, we'd at least be aimed in the right direction.

So says a career infantryman. Some will say that my lack of LOG pedigree negates any standing I may have on this topic. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether I'm on or off target.

The Bright Light Always Shines

Service in an environment like this shines a bright light on every character trait that each of us has.

All of your outstanding qualities will be on conspicuous display for all to admire, marvel at, and celebrate. So, too, will all of your negative traits be on display... if only for a moment or two from time to time.

Learn about yourself while you're here... and learn about others. Learn that everybody reaches a point of utter frustration so that he doesn't want to do anything... and everybody has the capacity to step up and carry the entire unit on his shoulders for awhile. Learn to recognize when you've "hit the wall", and learn to recognize it when others around you have hit it too. Learn how to enhance your strong points and learn to improve upon or mitigate your weaker points. Learn how to help others do the same.

Relax. Take a Deep Breath.

If you're not laughing at something here at least once an hour, then you're in serious need of a "chill pill".

As I've hinted in a section above, it is up to each of us to recognize and make allowances for others' idiosyncrasies. But that doesn't mean that we can't have fun with it. Just don't ever make anybody the perpetual butt of all jokes. Spread it around, and accept it when you are the goat for a moment or two.

Have fun. There is entertainment value in everything that happens here. Even the simple things.

Have a thick skin, and be aware of when you've hit somebody too hard.

Get out and Get Around

No amount of PowerPoint briefings or written products (like this, for example) will ever do you any good if you don't get outside the wire and interact with the Afghans.

We all have enough "nerd" in us to still be fascinated and impressed with all the cool stuff that PowerPoint, Excel, etc can do. The briefings we've all seen are quite impressive. All the moving icons, maps, sound effects, and dazzling artistry can really make a man think he's learned something after he's sat thru a briefing. But if making or attending briefings is all you do, then you are myopic and uninformed. You are like a man who merely spends his time looking at cars compared to one who spends his time actually working on them. Which of the two is likely to know how to make a car work properly?

Do yourself, your brothers-in-arms, and the Afghans a huge favor; don't let a week go by without getting out there and doing something meaningful.

US Officer Development System: A Two-Edged Sword

Several decades ago, the US Army used to have different SOPs in different places. The "III Corps way" was markedly different from the "VII Corps way"... which was markedly different from the "XVIII Abn Corps way".

Back then, I'm told, as an officer rose thru the ranks he had to adjust to his new surroundings. Arriving as a CPT or a MAJ or even as a General officer into a new and unfamiliar unit meant that the officer had to continually adjust to his new surroundings.

We "fixed" that by adopting doctrine which, for the most part, standardized things throughout the Army.

By the time I came into the Army, things were pretty standardized. I noted that as I changed from unit to unit, the systems and processes were pretty much the same. The adoption of the standardizing doctrine has been largely good for the Army.

But there has been a negative side, and it has reared its ugly head here. Senior officer often seem to no longer be able to adapt to unfamiliar organizations.

My theory goes like this:

- A 2LT is pretty wide-eyed when he arrives at his first unit. He knows that he's completely ignorant, and he's like a sponge soaking in new observations about 'what right looks like'.

- By the time that first tour is over, about 3 years have passed and the now-1LT has got the systems and processes down. Everything is familiar.
- Then he goes as a newly-promoted CPT to his next assignment. Because of standardization, the systems and processes there are the same. Moreover, the very structure of the organization is the same. The S3 does what the S3 did at his previous unit; the S1 does the same stuff; etc.
- Later, he serves at higher echelons. Those echelons have other staff sections like a G5, G7, etc. So he has to learn a few new things, but what he learns is standardized across the service.
- Then he serves as an S3 or an XO in a unit that functions exactly like all the others.
- Then he commands another unit just like all the others.
- Then a Brigade.
- And then he shows up here in Afghanistan. Suddenly, after 20 years of seeing the same design, he's in an organization that is constantly shifting. The mission isn't like anything he's ever done before. The staff structure hasn't been in place for any more than a couple of years because we are always changing. The staff sections don't function like any similarly-named section that he's seen before.

So the guy who has not had to adjust to anything really new for 2 decades is suddenly expected to adapt to new surroundings. A lot of folks pull it off pretty well. A lot don't. And part of the reason why they don't is because they have been conditioned to expect things to look, feel, and function the same way... but that's not what he gets here.

Which leads me to a follow-on point...

Gravitating Toward a Comfort Zone

One tends to eventually gravitate toward a comfort zone, often at the expense of the actual mission.

This observation is really a continuation of the last one and the first one. Plus, I've mixed it with a little bit of my own observations on how people typically cope with stress and unfamiliarity.

When folks show up here, each seems to be pretty gung-ho about making a significant contribution to an important mission. Most keep that gung-ho attitude for at least a month. At the end of that month, the newbie reaches a conclusion about what ought to be done. Then he spends another month fighting with everybody else about his conclusion. Then frustration sets in.

The root of that frustration seems to come from two phenomena to which I referred earlier – “The Blind Men and the Elephant” and “The Two-Edged Sword”, so if you haven't digested those two commentaries I suggest you go back and do that before you drive on with this one.

So the new guy coming into Afghanistan takes about a month to put this place into some context that makes sense to him. If he came from an Acquisition background, he asserts that this whole

mission is really one big Acquisition operation. If he comes from a maneuver background, he pegs some maneuver-related solution. If he's a Loggie, he gravitates to a log-related solution. If he's a Navy guy, well, who the hell knows what that guy would conclude? (You know that I had to take that dig at you Squids.)

He then spends the next month trying to push an agenda that is based on how he's pegged the nature of the mission. This is where the "Blind Men and the Elephant" comes in. In other words, he gets frustrated at the ignorance of others around him because they don't see the problem the same way he does.

So two months in, he concludes that he can't fight the system so he decides that he needs to focus on something that is within his comfort zone. Most of the time it isn't something really outlandishly off-base, but I've actually seen guys who spent the last half of their time here apparently focused on little other than training their Afghans to play soccer... as if the Afghans needed soccer training from an American.

The picture that this part of my commentary paints is probably a little more absurd than the reality, so make sure to not exaggerate your inference here. Most people's diversion into a comfort zone isn't noticeably off target. But when you are a leader in a situation like what Afghanistan presents, I suggest that you look for typical signs of coping to stress and unfamiliarity... because you'll certainly find them here.

A Canary in a Coal Mine

We are, whether we know it or not, a sort of "canary in a coal mine" for our Afghan hosts. They watch our protection posture for the first indication of GIRoA legitimacy and success.

Here's a logic chain written as if it comes from the Afghan perspective that "walks the dog" on how our normal posture plays in the typical Afghan eye:

- As an Afghan citizen, I expect little from my government other than that it will leave me alone and ensure that my neighborhood, my city, my province, and my nation are safe places so that I and my family can thrive and continually improve our lives.
- As an Afghan citizen, I accept that there are military forces from other nations here in Afghanistan, and that the purpose for their presence is to assist in making this place a safe environment for me and my family.
- I accept that, as a part of their mission, these foreign guys are going to have a military presence in places like the roads, airports, etc for as long as they need to be present... and no longer.
- I accept that even after the foreign guys' presence isn't needed for security that they will stick around for a long time, but that their long-term presence will have no impact on me other than that they will be buying the products in my store, hiring me to paint their

buildings, hiring me to transport something for them, etc. I'm aware that this is what they did in Germany, Japan, Korea, Italy, and other places; and that those other places seemed to fare well because of it.

- I assume that these foreign military folks wouldn't be wearing all that uncomfortable armored vests and stuff unless they had a good reason... and that reason must be safety-related.
 - I assume that, since these foreign military folks have proven that they can do amazing things with their technology, they must have access to information that gives them a good reason for going everywhere looking like camouflaged Star Wars Storm Troopers in 6-vehicle armored convoys that run everybody off the road.
 - These foreigners will continue to behave in this way until it is safe enough for them to not behave that way... and no longer.
 - Therefore, my first indication that my government is really gaining control will be when I see these foreigners blending in with traffic and/or conducting normal business just like me and my neighbors.
 - There will, of course, need to be other indicators of GIRoA legitimacy after I've seen the foreigners behave more normally; but it all starts with this indicator.
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Long Lead-time Projects

Some necessary systems take longer than our rotations will allow.

I'll illustrate this point with an example that is close to my heart. Some will correctly deduce that I'm venting on this section. But I hope to make a larger point than merely venting about recent frustrations.

Way back in 2004, I and a couple of other know-it-alls concluded that there were two things that this theater needed:

- A unit with the mission to validate the collective competence of the ANA (we didn't have responsibility for the police yet) and to ensure a standardized approach to assessments, and
- A system (involving a database and the appropriate computer-geek-type folks to run it) to routinely capture data produced by the monthly assessments which will give us the ability to note trends AND to gauge the extent to which MoD-generated systems are implemented down to the appropriate echelon.

Our logic held that these two things would be the backbone upon which a solid ANA-development-program could be built.

I was fortunate enough to be hand-picked to head the validation mission. After a very short absence from the theater, I was back in Afghanistan to take the lead on that mission.

Unfortunately, the two echelons of general officers who we had “sold” these ideas to had departed and, although almost everybody else was still there, the momentum behind the mission was lost. The new leadership deemed the whole validation idea to be one of those “good ideas whose time has not yet arrived”. The database notion never even got briefed. So after a very short lifespan, the Mobile Validation Team (MVT – the name we gave to that validating organization) ceased to exist.

The next year some folks at TF Phoenix reached the same conclusion about a database to capture the results of the monthly assessments and to store it for analysis. They got the ball rolling by establishing a web-based system which would allow the assessors scattered all over Afghanistan to input their data via the internet. However, that system proved to be unworkable because the load-time for their very uncomplicated system took too long for the guys out at the tip-of-the-spear. But they had at least proven what wouldn’t work, so that was a very useful effort.

Another year passed. In the meantime, CSTC-A had another general come and go. CFC-A was de-activated. Then another general officer came in and very quickly reached one of the same conclusions that we know-it-alls had reached 3 years prior – that we needed a Validation Team. So he created one.

The good news was that we had, in our previous effort to start up the MVT, gotten the personnel authorizations lined up. Those personnel had arrived and, since the MVT didn’t exist anymore, they were distributed to wherever TF Phoenix needed them. So, since the new CG had directed that we create the Validation Transition Team (VTT), we were able to snag those personnel resources. It wasn’t easy, and we inconvenienced a few folks in the process, but we managed to get the VTT started. And they are still in operation almost 3 years later.

The database idea is another story. Although we managed to learn the valuable lesson about the infeasibility of a web-based system here in Afghanistan, we seem to have to continually learn that lesson over and over again. By my count, we’ve got through at least 3 subsequent attempts to regenerate this sort of web-based program. In the mean time, we have also generated, fielded, and validated the efficacy of a Microsoft Excel-based system that actually works; but that system has recently been scrapped in favor of... you guessed it... another stab at a web-based input concept which has not been developed yet.

I’m sure that someday, somebody will succeed in getting that database established. However, there will be an unavoidably inverse relationship between the utility of the data and the efficacy of the system unless the developers get the many-times-proven-ineffective notion of a web-based input out of their brains.

My hope is that this cathartic narrative has illustrated that the rapid turnover here is hell on any effort to establish a program or system which has a long lead-time for resourcing.

The Main Effort is the Reserve??

This one is, in my opinion, perhaps the most baffling thing I've watched happen here in Afghanistan.

Way back... I'm assuming it was some time in 2002... somebody, somewhere, had to decide who would get which mission in Afghanistan. There were essentially two major missions to perform:

- Develop the indigenous Afghan Security Sector capability, and
- Conduct operations to provide a secure and stable environment within which the Afghan Security Sector development mission can take place.

One of those missions should logically be considered the main effort, and the other mission should be considered a supporting effort.

One of those missions involves executing collective tasks that every Active Component and Reserve Component maneuver unit in the Army have been training on for decades. The other mission involves skills and proficiencies that are outside of the METL any of our maneuver units, Reserve or Active.

One of those missions required that a unit should have a METL proficiency that would enable it to out-perform enemy units that were not exactly world class at tactical and/or operational levels. The other mission required a mastery of systems and processes from the Division level down to the lowest echelon and the gravitas to demand the respect and attention of the Afghan military leadership.

You're probably already figuring out where I'm going with this.

When the mission allocation took place, the Active Component naturally got the supporting mission to:

- Just be better than the guys who are living in the caves, and
- Keep that unorganized rabble from interfering with the Afghan Army development mission.

The Reserve Component, meanwhile, got the mission to:

- Become instant experts on the Afghan systems;
- Train and mentor your Afghan counterparts from Division* through battalion levels on the implementation and continued execution of systems and processes across the entire spectrum of staff functions, tactical proficiencies, and operational proficiencies;
- Provide combat multipliers to the ANA units during their operations;
- Replicate the functions that the ANA should be doing but are not yet capable of doing (such as FSB-like operations).

**It is actually called “corps” in the ANA, but it is the equivalent of a division for the US Army.*

Bottom line – The Reserve Component got the tougher mission while the Active Component got the mission that either of them could have done rather well.

In truth, though, both the Reserve and Active Component units were doing just fine... until the rate of ANA growth radically out-paced the US military’s ability to keep up with Joint Manning Document (JMD) changes. But that’s a longer discussion.

So what’s the lesson learned here? If we do this sort of thing again, I recommend that we reverse the missions.

Unity of Command, Bizarro Style

It is one of the Principles of War.

We all studied it back in one or more of our professional development courses.

Some of us studied it back in our undergraduate days.

Yet we still can’t seem to get it right. I’d even give us credit for having it right if we only had it ‘kinda’ right. But we don’t.

It used to appear to be in the too-hard-to-do box. When we assumed the Police Development Mission, we had to deal with the fact that INL jumped in and got some contractors out there on the mission at the same time that OSC-A did. So, since we suddenly had a two-pronged-yet-completely-uncoordinated effort between OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense) and DOS (Department of State), we couldn’t get the Unity of Command problem fixed.

Recent decisions, though, have assisted in solving that Unity of Command problem... while simultaneously creating an entirely new Unity of Command problem.

Now it appears that we are on the cusp of getting all the players dancing to the OSD tune. No more playing the DOS “mom” against the OSD “dad”. That’s great.

But we have now taken what ought to be the main effort (the ANSF Development mission) and fractured what Unity of Command we had by the creation of the IJC / NTM-A split.

A coherent program to develop the ANSF from the Ministry down thru the Kandak/District must allow those who have responsibility for Ministerial development to have visibility on relevant data. That means data that reveals the extent to which systems are integrated down to the lowest level.

In order for NTM-A to get that visibility, it must have command authority over the personnel who are present at these echelons. Since that is not the case, NTM-A has effectively been blinded by the recent IJC decision to cease executing the reporting systems which would give that visibility.

And that 2011 deadline isn't changing.

That's it for me. Until my next opportunity to contribute here, I'll be focused on another mission in another land. I sincerely wish the best for all who remain in Afghanistan, and I give a heartfelt thanks to them and to the thousands of other folks who have contributed in the past.

Dave

Dave Prugh is a Texan, a former US Army Infantry Colonel, and a 1985 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. He has served as a soldier and a contractor in combat zone leadership positions for over 75 cumulative months, most of it at the senior or directorial level. In his over 6 years in Afghanistan, Dave has worked closely with every echelon of the Afghan National Army from the battalion through the ministry, including several echelons above corps. He is scheduled to leave Afghanistan in mid-April 2010 after 6 ½ years of combined Active Duty and contracting service in Afghanistan.

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