



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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What the *Afghan War Diary* Really Tells Us About the Changing Dynamics of the Conflict

by Javier Osorio and Christopher Sullivan

The major news headlines that followed the release of the *Afghan War Diary*, a collection of tens of thousands of leaked field memos from Afghanistan, describe how U.S. forces are battling an increasingly resilient and well-armed Taliban army. Coverage in the New York Times featured two major stories – an intensive review of events at Combat Outpost Keating, where U.S. forces defended themselves against an ever-growing and more violent Taliban enemy, and the analysis of a half dozen significant incidents highlighting the changing dynamics of the conflict. Coverage in the Guardian, meanwhile, focused on 200 “key events” that documented significant increases in the Taliban’s fighting capacity. Indeed, from these reports it appears as though U.S. efforts in Afghanistan are, at best, maintaining an uncomfortable status quo. At worst, the war is being lost to Taliban forces, whom we now know have been receiving aid from Pakistan.

But how can we draw inferences about a war involving more than 100,000 American soldiers and nearly 10 years of combat based solely on a smattering of documents hand selected by reporters? By purposefully choosing to report just a few hundred documents released as part of the *War Diary*, and ignoring the broad swaths of data contained in the rest of the records, the existing reportage has opened itself up to charges that the coverage is biased towards the perspective given off by those hand selected documents. A better strategy for understanding what the *War Diary* can tell us about how the war is faring would be to analyze all of the records and let the data speak for itself.

A statistical analysis of the more than 76,000 events so far released by Wikileaks reveals that the war is not faring as reported on in the major newspapers. The picture revealed is actually much worse.

To begin with, the data demonstrate an alarming rise in enemy activity. In 2004, the Taliban were averaging four attacks a day. By 2009, that figure had risen more than 15 times to 56 attacks per day. By comparison, U.S. actions over that time period rose only 9 times, from an average of 1.5 per day to 13.8.

Worse, statistical tests of the effects of U.S. actions on Taliban attacks, an estimate of how well our counter-insurgency strategy is fairing, show that the U.S.’ ability to deter enemy attacks is deteriorating. The analysis shows that Taliban forces are now reacting to U.S. actions with more violence, rather than less. During the early years of the conflict, significant U.S. actions (Sig Acts in military jargon) had no discernable effect on Taliban activity. But by 2007, U.S. forces were actually able to deter enemy actions. Every five SigActs engaged in by the U.S. military deterred a Taliban attack the following day. Beginning in 2008, however, this deterrent effect had transformed into an escalatory effect. In 2009, this escalatory effect had reached a

point where for every 2.5 actions the U.S. engaged in the Taliban committed one additional attack the next. U.S. actions are now making the Taliban more violent, not less.

Analyzing the full sample of released documents generates a more credible picture of what is revealed in the Wikileaks data compared to the individual reports already covered by the major news media. The investigative reporters who covered the story dug through troves of reports and pulled out key pieces of information to be brought to the public record. By shining light on particular incidents, they helped illuminate significant changes in the evolution of the conflict. But the non-random selection process reporters use to decide what incidents to report can systematically biases our ability to draw sound inferences, and must be taken serious in light of the known prejudice in the media coverage of political violence. In study after study, news coverage has been shown to systematically over-report large incidents vis-à-vis smaller ones. The old adage ‘if its bleeds, it leads,’ motivates reporters to ignore many day-to-day incidents of violence in favor of large scale fighting or massacres.

A better approach for understanding exactly what the *Afghan War Diary* data can tell us involves systematically recording and analyzing the entire universe of available documents, without selecting out individual events in any manner that could bias our conclusions. Once we expand our view to look at the full sample of documents and analyze shifts in the reports over time, we can see how that the *Afghan War Diary* records the rapid escalation of Taliban attacks alongside the deterioration of the U.S.’ ability to prevent such attacks. To the extent that the *Diary* represents an uncensored and accurate portrayal of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. efforts to defeat the Taliban are faltering.

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