Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the Washington Post has been one of the most important chroniclers of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. His "Imperial Life in the Emerald City," a searing tale about the dysfunction that wracked our efforts in Iraq, was a National Book Award finalist. I was excited for his new work on Afghanistan, "Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan," however the thrust of the excerpts published last weekend in the Washington Post left me a bit skeptical. Even a cynical Marine bristles at what seems to be an affront to the service and the thought that Marine efforts were squandered in Helmand created many emotions in Marines. What is more, the idea that things would have been vastly different if we sent the Marines to Kandahar, not Helmand, did not square with my impression of the larger flaws in our campaign. I am decidedly pessimistic about our ability to successfully prosecute small wars, as I have explained at FP's Af-Pak Channel, so my impression of this argument was that it was only a step above arguing over deck chair placement on the Titanic.
Nonetheless, when I was offered the opportunity to discuss these issues with Rajiv, I jumped at it. I plowed through the book in one sitting late into the predawn hours of Saturday, recalling my graduate school days and found that “Little America” was an eminently readable, sensible, and balanced account. Even if I remain more cynical than Rajiv does, this is no rosy pro-COIN missive. Even the title parable underlines a skepticism about our past and our future in Afghanistan, as you will see below. While the excerpts make it seem as if Chandrasekaran gives the Marines a black eye, he pulls no punches with anyone and many others, such as the Department of State and USAID, come off looking far worse. In fact, his criticism of the decision of where to send the Marines is a reflection his respect for their tenacity and success in Helmand. "Little America" is a must-read account for those interested or invested in the war in Afghanistan. It is the best work yet in addressing our military-diplomatic campaign there and the dysfunction that stymies it. I would perhaps have liked a bolder prognosis for our efforts there, accompanied maybe by a starker description of the scope and reality of the carnage these efforts create, however Chandrasekaran is too diligent, humble, and balanced a writer to think that he has all the answers. I took him down this road in our discussion Saturday and found a much more nuanced and balanced skepticism than I would have expected if I stopped with the excerpts. I hope you will find the same. Before we get to the discussion, Rajiv asked that I point the SWJ community to his website and to encourage you to contact him with your thoughts there.

PJM: In the first chapter, you discuss the efforts of Morrison-Knudsen to irrigate the Helmand River Valley. This project went so far as to yield a Helmand Valley Authority, after our own TVA. The workers who came to implement this project were housed in a hamlet in a place called Lashkar Gah. They replicated the world they knew in this desert so faithfully that their town became known as Little America – hence the title. Among the many problems that they ran into, the one that struck me the most was the Afghan farmers’ tendency to flood their fields due to the lack of absorptive capacity of the soil there. When the water evaporated, the salt that was left behind stunted the growth that was planted. This seemed to be a metaphor for many of the largest missteps you recount. Based on our own New Deal experiences and the catastrophe of the Second World War and the Cold War that followed, we have desperately sought to remake many places around the world in our own image. Sometimes, though, we cannot even live up to the ideals we try to force others to adopt. In any case, do you see the Morrison-Knudsen story as a parable of this in that we don’t think things through, we throw excessive resources at a problem, and in the long run the society and economy cannot absorb those resources so they end up stunting the growth of the entity we are trying to build?

You totally got what I as driving at with the first chapter. By writing about the Little America period, I wasn’t just trying to give the reader a history lesson; I wasn’t just trying to tell the story of what Americans did six decades ago on the very same terrain that Obama’s surge would play out. There was a deeper lesson. As I read through the history of that period and talked to people who were involved, I came away feeling that if I just changed the dates and the names, I could have been writing about today. The effort six decades ago was a noble adventure, just as what we’re trying to do there now is noble – well intentioned. But it was plagued with fundamental problems. You put your figure on one of them – a big one – in the actual geography, the very nature of the ground there. Think of Helmand a planter box with no holes in it, and if you flood your field the water will pool if it’s not properly drained out. What happened in this project was that the proper work wasn’t done ahead of time to test the soil, to see what would work and what wouldn’t. We just assumed that the effort was simply too big to fail. And I believe a similar argument could be made about efforts today.

But there were other parallels. The contractor, Morrison-Knudsen, insisted every piece of equipment, no
matter how small, had to come from the United States, soon depleting the Afghan government’s funding for the project. So when we look at contractors in the modern age and say, “These guys are wasting our money,” contractors have been doing that for a long time. When you look at the US-Afghan partnership, this project wasn’t just driven by Americans, it was driven by English-speaking, modern-minded, urban-dwelling, suit-wearing Afghans – Afghans who had studied in the United States. They wanted to civilize their country. And they found in the Americans the ideal partners to work with. Just as today, we spend too much time talking to elites in Kabul and not enough time talking to rural power brokers when we are trying to fashion development and reconstruction strategies.

Back then, the American contractors wound up hiring up all of the Afghans with technical expertise to work for them. Meaning that when it came time for the Afghans to do their share of the work, they didn’t have the human capacity to do it. Just like today. Most of the educated Afghans find better opportunities working for ISAF forces, international diplomatic missions, UNAMA, or NGOs and so precious few of them actually work for their own government. The list goes on, but this history is incredibly instructive in showing that many of the fundamental challenges that we face – particularly on the civilian reconstruction front – have been enduring challenges in Afghanistan.

What was particularly shocking to me was that this history that I tell is not something that was locked away in vaults. This is stuff that exists in the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and in the files at USAID. Many of the reports actually are online. Had US officials wanted to understand the stuff in the years immediately after the 9/11 attacks or after we went into Afghanistan, or in 2009 when we surged into the south, all of that material was readily accessible.

PJM: It is hard to understand how we fail to learn our lessons in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and even lessons we could have learned from experiences in Vietnam or from other non-combat development projects. Maybe part of this stems from throwing resources, rather than thought, at problems. The 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade political advisor, Kael Weston, believed that the effort in Helmand was over-resourced – that if the Marines were not given the extra troops that they would have been forced to think more strategically and economically. In numerous places, you recount how commanders felt that they needed to keep pushing into new areas because they had the troops to do so. In the book, and especially the excerpts, the fault for this misallocation falls on the shoulders of parochial Marine leaders. Yet, you also recount how Army commanders openly defied the COIN guidance handed down by McChrystal and Petraeus, how State and USAID failed to properly support the campaign, and how national pride and stubbornness forced suboptimal decisions with regard to force disposition and tactics. Do you think that the senior leadership could have done anything differently to enforce discipline on their subordinates at the operational and tactical levels? Or was this simply an unavoidable symptom of fighting what was ultimately a war of choice, versus a war of clear and undeniable existential national interest, to some degree?

RC: I believe that we could have fought this war in a far smarter way. Fighting smarter does not have to involve an existential threat. If the President of the United States and his war cabinet determine that committing US troops and US civilians and American taxpayer money was a critical thing to do for our national security, then I believe the organs of our government had an obligation to employ those resources in the most judicious way possible. You outline a number of problems that I illustrate in the book. Each of the problems you cite has a different cause. Let me take a few of them.

The Marine decision to push for contiguous battlespace – let me say at the outset that this book is not in any way a criticism of the Marines who went to Afghanistan and fought so bravely. They did phenomenal work and I try to capture that in the opening chapters of this book. I recently found out that the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade is going to be awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, an incredibly
prestigious award. I think that a reader would determine from their work that I detail in the book that they were deserving of an honor like this. My criticism is with senior officers in the Corps in Washington, as well as our senior Pentagon leadership for sending the Marines where they were sent. There is no argument that Helmand is a bad place; lots of insurgents there. Helmand is the epicenter of poppy production. It was a nasty place, but was it the nastiest place in all of Afghanistan? Was it the most critical place?

I came away concluding after discussions with a number of smart military and civilian experts – and Afghans – that the real critical area was the city of Kandahar and the area around it: the country’s second most populous city, the spiritual heartland for the Taliban, the area which if they seized, they would have a springboard to move into other parts of the country much as they did in the mid-1990s. So, if that was the most important part of the country, shouldn’t we have taken the very effective new forces that were being added in early 2009, the Marine Expeditionary Brigade under the command of BGen Larry Nicholson, shouldn’t we have applied them to the most pressing problem? Sure, if we had 200,000 troops on the ground, yeah, plus up in Helmand, too. But there was a zero-sum calculus in Afghanistan. There were only so many troops and so you had to put them against the most crucial places.

The Marines have a legitimate insistence, I believe, on wanting to operate as a MAGTF (Marine Air-Ground Task Force) with their own organic air and logistics units. But, how does that MAGTF approach fit in the world of joint and coalition warfare and how can the MAGTF be better integrated? The feeling among non-Marine commanders on the ground in Afghanistan – those who were figuring out where the Marines should go – as well as the senior Marine leaders – the Commandant and others – was that it would be very difficult to employ the Marines of the MAGTF in an interoperable way in the areas around Kandahar. In my mind, that’s of concern because you don’t want your elite counterinsurgency forces--and I believe that Marine infantry units are elite COIN forces--to be off engaged in lower-priority missions. The central Helmand River valley, where the 2nd MEB deployed, is home to about 1 percent of Afghanistan’s population. If our strategy was COIN, it was population-centric operations, shouldn’t we have sent those units to the most populous of places that were at risk from the Taliban take-over, not sparsely populated desert communities? It is this issue that I really try to examine in the book and I think that for the Marines as well as other services, this is an issue that deserves serious ongoing discussion.

The what-ifs are pretty profound here. Had those Marines been sent to Kandahar, I believe we could have been a year ahead in the overall COIN campaign. It could have allowed Petraeus and John Allen to swing forces from the south to the east sooner. It might even have led McChrystal to have requested fewer troops which could have allowed for a longer-term mission, maybe even one without a deadline. Again these are what-ifs, but I do think that the deployment there came at a cost. Now, all that said, the Marines did great things in Helmand. But I have a scene at the end of the book and I’ll give it away to your readers. I’m having drinks with a senior Marine officer in a still-gentrifying neighborhood in Washington DC. I liken Afghanistan, in my conversation with him, to a block in the ghetto and ask whether we took the bulk of our community redevelopment funds and turned one tenement at the end of the block into a swanky mansion but left the rest of the buildings as boarded up messes. I said, “What if the history of Afghanistan is that we win Helmand, but lose the country?” And he said to me, “Well, that will be just fine for the Corps.” I know that certainly doesn’t represent the views of the rest of the Corps, but it does speak to a degree of parochialism that we should examine. Marine parochialism has many, many benefits; the esprit de corps, the ethos of our Marine Corps is phenomenal, but we need to know as a country that our Marines are being sent against the most important of challenges.
PJM: With the coming budget cuts and the potential for a bad outcome in Afghanistan, do you see this parochialism as a liability for the Marine Corps going forward? Does this parochialism, which is meant to defend the institutional survival of the Corps, actually threaten it?

I don’t see this as mutually exclusive. I think the Marines can fight as a MAGTF in a more interoperable environment. They need to show that they can do that. I think that what doesn’t serve the Marine Corps is to try to defend the MAGTF concept by fighting in places that are less important. The challenge here for smart Marine Corps officers is how to best integrate MAGTF operations into a joint and combined COIN environment. Maybe I am too much of an optimist. Certainly you can argue I am not schooled in all the intricacies of the Marine Corps. Maybe what I suggest is unrealistic, but I would like to think there is a way with enough smart thinking and planning that the Marines could have deployed with key elements of a MAGTF in Kandahar. It could have been made to work had Marine leaders and NATO commanders been committed to trying to achieve that outcome.

PJM: Was there any discussion from the Marines or requests for the Marines to go into Kandahar as a MAGTF?

RC: It wasn’t like there was a formal request put to the Marines to go to Kandahar and the Marines said, “No.” Nothing like that. The truth is, US and NATO commanders in Afghanistan also pushed Helmand over Kandahar, so the fault here does not lie exclusively with the Marines. That said, both groups made a miscalculation. I do believe that the US Army commanders and NATO commanders who advocated for the Marines to go to Helmand did so in part because of MAGTF concerns and as for the Marines, they advocated for Helmand over Kandahar because they felt it would be easier to bring the MAGTF there.

What you had was essentially this perfect storm brewing. You also had the NATO component. The Canadians in Kandahar were more reluctant to give up battlespace than the Brits in Helmand who wanted to reconfigure and wanted more American assistance, so there were a number of factors at play here, but the MAGTF issue was a key element of the calculations.

PJM: Some people, prominently Col Gian Gentile, have criticized what they call the “better war” narrative: the idea that if we had only done this or that, there would have been a better outcome. They believe that this is a faulty lesson to draw and that there were more fundamental problems with our COIN campaign. Along these lines, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry wrote in a controversial cable, “Our military… will clear anything we ask them to clear. They will hold anything we ask them to hold.” However, he continued, he was skeptical as to when or if we could build and transfer responsibility to a credible Afghan partner. When I was in Afghanistan in 2010, a senior general stated similarly that the military was recording great tactical success in Helmand, however he did not know how we were going to aggregate those successes into strategic progress. This was jarring to me. As I read through the failures of the civilian surge, the incredibly silly concept of a “government in a box,” and our attempts to keep a flawed foreign leader “on the rails,” that being our rails, I was struck by the thought that we have COIN all wrong. Unless we are ready to take on a neo-colonial or mandatory level of responsibility for governing a foreign land, we will have to accept the Afghan legitimacy of flawed actors. Actors like Sher Mohammed Akhunzada, Abdul Rahman Jan, and the Karzais are surely unsavory, but we have forgotten the Charles Tilly reading (see also Giustozzi) of the history of western state development in that states arise from warlords and organized crime. Even in America, politics of our recent past were far more unsavory than we are willing to admit. Thus, we shouldn’t be so surprised at the lack of success in rooting corruption, for example, with what a friend of mine in Kabul calls the “Anti-Gravity Task Force.” When you look at the troubled transitions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, is one of the biggest problems with COIN perhaps our misunderstanding of the messy process of building state capacity and institutions to the point at which democracy can have more constructive outcomes?
RC: That’s a great question. Let me try to answer it at a couple of levels. Just stepping back for a second to the book, I examine US efforts in Afghanistan at two different levels. There’s the strategic level which is “Did it make sense to pursue a COIN strategy there--to commit more forces, to try to rebuild the Afghan government, particularly to engage in efforts to create institutions of sub-national governance for the first time. Then there’s the second level, which we have been talking about in the earlier questions, which is operationalizing the strategy and that is where I raise the questions about Marines in Helmand versus Kandahar, the efficacy of the civilian surge, whether we put in too much reconstruction money. If you start from “This is the strategy that was approved by the President, how did we carry it out?” The record shows that the Pentagon, the State Department, and USAID all made some pretty significant mistakes in the execution or the operationalization of the strategy.

But you ask a more fundamental question, which regards the strategy itself. And you quote from Eikenberry’s cable, which I think was a prescient cable. But then as I note in the book, Eikenbeery got the diagnosis right, but then how we decided to treat the ailment was off base: that we were going to fight corruption, we were going to build local governments, we were going to connect people at the rural level to their provincial capitals and the provincial capitals to their national government, we were going to hope that resources were going to flow from the center to the periphery, we were going to sideline malign actors. All noble goals, but this was never something that could be done in a couple years with the resources that we had. And quite frankly, it was debatable how much the Afghans really wanted that. I don’t think that the Afghans have any great love for the Taliban, despite the fact that they promise law and order, but what we fail to grasp is that in many cases the Afghans do not have any great love for their government either—it is filled with warlords, corrupt power brokers, other sorts of thugs. So, when we went to the Afghan people and said that we want to connect you to your government, some of them recoiled and said “Government’s not what we want more of” - and we failed to really understand that.

Now that might sound like the opening to say that what we need to do is rebuild the government from scratch. Well, in an ideal world, perhaps. But I don’t think the Afghan people wanted us to sit around for 20 years to do that, nor do we have the patience, the financial resources to pull that off. So it was always going to have to be some sort of balance between entrenched power brokers and other sorts of malign figures with the hope that over time those figures would start to be eased out and governance would improve. But, there was this misguided notion that all of this could be done very quickly and with our hands. And I think what we’ve seen over these past couple of years is that a lot of these changes defy our timetables and our ability to really make them happen. In cases where we thought, this guy is a good legitimate actor, we’ll back him and he’ll be the face of government… In some cases we found out that these guys were also crooks--just that they were stealing in other ways that we didn’t immediately see.

Or, take Kandahar for instance. For months and months, for years we sought to build up the provincial governor. He worked in a vast palace that was largely empty. Sometimes there were more Westerners in his palace than Afghans, because Kandaharis didn’t see him as the legitimate leader of the city and the province, despite the fact that he was the man we wanted to work with and funnel resources through. They thought Ahmed Wali Karzai, the President’s late half-brother, the chairman of the provincial council, who we thought was a thug, who was corrupt – Afghans looked to him for leadership. You go to the provincial council offices and it was thronged with people. But instead of recognizing that’s who the Afghans saw as a leader – flawed as he was – we tried to build up somebody that very, very few people there thought was a legitimate leader.
PJM: There is some criticism of the book, and especially the excerpts, from the COINtras – opponents of the COINdanistas and the “better war narrative. They see your narrative, as extrapolated from the excerpts, as supporting the idea that if we had only done COIN better, with more forces in Kandahar, for example, then the outcome would have been better. That is not the message I came away with after reading the whole book. Do you consider this to be a pro-COIN narrative?

This is not a pro-COIN book; if anything, it is skeptical of COIN. Do I think that some of the COIN operations had an impact in Helmand? Yeah. But Nawa was a unique case where you didn’t have the same sort of tribal complexities. The efforts to try to do this quickly in places like Marja came to naught. And in Kandahar, much of the security improvements were the result of more narrowly focused CT as opposed to COIN. So, this is far from a book that is an apology for COIN. I think that what I try to do is lay out the facts and show people where COIN tactics led to changes on the ground, but also the limitations therein and how operations would fall more appropriately under the rubric of CT helped to lead to profound changes. But if you have concerns about the overall efficacy of the COIN campaign, which is legitimate, you can’t just write off a decision to place troops in a less important area. I’m making a strategic argument and an operational argument and it is easy to conflate the two.

PJM: In the book, you speak to the tension between varying conceptions of the war. The clearest expression of our goals came from the strategy announced by the Obama Administration. “To disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” However, advisors like Bruce Riedel and subsequently Generals McChrystal and Petraeus felt that it became their defining ideology. It became their defining ideology.” And this ideology became all-encompassing. As a friend of mine stated as we discussed the book and his experiences in Helmand, “COIN concepts got spun out of control, which led to mission creep. COIN is protect the populace, not ensure anti-corruption and ultimate adherence to a Rule of Law that was based on western values.” This is aptly summarized in Gen Petraeus’s “Anaconda Chart.” If COIN means everything, it means nothing. What is more, military leaders saw the conflict in good versus evil terms that sometimes strayed into polemical zealotry. Here I am thinking of LtGen John Kelley’s 2010 speech in St. Louis. When you have generals so invested in their military and so affected by nearly a decade of war at that time, generals who have seized on a simplistic good versus evil narrative for which the only antidote is COIN, generals who have been cast and have tried to live as supermen to the point that they faint before the Senate Armed Services Committee, are these generals really making fully rational decisions about what is possible in these conflicts and how to approach them? If not, then to whom do we listen? Are the voices of the growing club of military policy advisors, such as the Kandahari Sarah Chayes, Andrew Exum with his Greek scribbling, or Bruce Riedel – an intelligence officer fixated on al Qaeda and credited with leading the effort that had troops surging into Afghanistan to conduct COIN to defeat them – any better? In sum, were our policy elites so fascinated with COIN that they could not envision a more rational, more circumscribed effort to target the few hundred al Qaeda members still hiding in Afghanistan?
RC: One gets the sense in looking back over the 2009 White House strategy review that then led to the President’s decision to largely accept McChrystal’s request for more forces that the military’s view of Afghanistan was sort of like Henry Ford and the color of your car. You can have any strategy you like as long as it’s COIN. The senior military leadership really coalesced around one option and alternative points of view, such as a narrower focus on counterterrorism as advocated by Gen Cartwright, were really cast aside by the rest of the military leadership.

While we were trying to get our head around Afghanistan, I do think it behooved the nation’s military community to really more fully understand what happened with the surge in Iraq and the application of counterinsurgency. It had its benefits, but it had its limitations. It wasn’t a panacea, and understanding the truth of it and moving beyond the politics, is essential to understanding how this strategy can and should be applied in the future.

You opened your question with a fundamental disconnect in America’s war strategy. The goal was narrow – to go after al Qaeda – yet the approach was broad – population-centric COIN. And it did involve a civ-mil mission creep. I think both sides fed on each other. Yes, the military had a very expansive view on what to do with governance, anti-corruption, and so forth as epitomized by Gen Petraeus’s Anaconda slide, but the civilians in many cases were goading them along. Karl Eikenberry who outlined accurately the many failings of the Afghan government and the many reasons why a COIN strategy wouldn’t work as hoped for then went along with these grand efforts to try to rebuild the government, to create government in many cases where the Afghans didn’t have it— to bring in dozens and dozens of American investigators to pursue corruption cases which further frayed our relationship with Hamid Karzai. We tried to do two things that were in conflict. We wanted a war with narrow goals, but we fought it broadly. And that just doesn’t work. If really what we wanted to do was just go after al Qaeda, then that’s what we should have done. If the overall stability of Afghanistan, the defeat of the Taliban, the improvement of lives for the Afghans was something that we found to be in the American national interest, then a comprehensive COIN strategy was defensible. But if that wasn’t the overall goal, then the record shows that we should have been narrower.

I explain in my book how all this plays out on the ground over these years. It is worth emphasizing that our troops did what they were asked to do. They did so bravely, heroically, without complaint, with great sacrifice, but they deserved a very clear strategy and commitment from on high. This disconnect in the policy, not to mention infighting at high levels of the Administration, and civilian partners who did not
always fulfill their end of the deal, was not in the best interest of our men and women in uniform who were sent there, and by extension, not in the best interest of the American people.

PJM: In discussing Afghanistan with friends who are veterans of the war there, one of the group asserted that once we were in Afghanistan, COIN was necessary. But did we really need to be there so long in the first place, he asked. In reality, for all the certitude of the pundits, those who have been there have more questions than answers. And most of us are not objective in trying to answer them. Do you think that we needed to be in Afghanistan so long and do you think after seeing all you’ve seen, that you can be objective?

RC: I think there is little doubt that had we focused on trying to build a reasonably functional Afghan government and helping to build Afghan security forces and even sought to marginalize some of the warlords and power brokers very early on, we could have done so far more effectively with far fewer resources and far fewer casualties. But as we all know, the United States took its eye off of Afghanistan soon after the war began to shift its focus to the invasion of Iraq. And had we not done that, I think the history of our engagement in Afghanistan would be very, very different. But the real question here is, by the time we got to 2009 and Barack Obama assumed the presidency, should we have employed a different strategy than the one we embarked on.

The challenge with saying we didn’t need as big of a COIN effort and we should have focused on a narrower counter-terrorism mission and one that was more focused on the clearly defined security interests of the United States is also one that poses interesting moral questions. Our civilians and officers who were down there at the district level saw problems and as good Americans, wanted to fix them. When you see that Afghan kids can’t go to school, but really want to, and that the parents are illiterate because the schools haven’t existed there ever, or you see infants dying because there is no healthcare, or you see malnourished people because their farms are unproductive, we as Americans want to help, so you get drawn into this sort of COIN effort. And COIN may not be the right word for it. In cases it is simply be Americans wanting to do what they feel is morally right. And so how do you go in and say I’m only here for my own interests and not to help you people? That’s a tough thing for Americans to do. We believe in wanting to assist our fellow humans, particularly in a place that is as needy and deserving as Afghanistan. So when one thinks about how this should have been done differently and what the right balance should have been, perhaps the traditional COIN versus CT debate is too narrow. We needed elements of both, but maybe how we viewed those COIN elements needed to be different. Maybe it wasn’t remaking government, but maybe it was focus on providing assistance at the local level.

When people go around criticizing the United States for imposing American-style democracies on other countries, I say to myself: If only we helped the Afghans embrace a style of democracy that has made our country so great. We don’t centralize all our power in Washington. There’s a healthy balance between the center and the periphery. Yet, the Afghans have a system of government that we and the rest of the Western world helped them install that centralizes power to a degree seen in few other countries. It is North Korea-like. It’s absurd that the president can essentially hire and fire a district police chief. When we then set about in recent years to try to engage in bottom-up security initiatives, things like the Afghan Local Police program, I have to ask myself, “That’s great, but why aren’t we doing that on the governance front?” Why, if we’re so concerned about trying to rebuild schools in Marja, why are we telling the elders of Marja we’ll work with you to try to get Kabul to deliver these services? Why not try bottom up solutions? And so some of this sounds like it’s a defense of grand COIN. It’s not. It’s trying to figure out how we can engage in the necessary tasks essential for American national security while also helping the Afghans in a modest and sustainable way. Unfortunately, by surging as we did, by embracing such a robust COIN strategy, we exhausted ourselves and we exhausted the Afghans. As [former 2nd MEB
political advisor] Kael Weston always reminded me, Afghanistan is a marathon, not a sprint. But we sprinted. Had we been more modest, I’d like to think that we could have wound up in a better place.

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