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The Tea Fallacy

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Shock and awe don't leave much room for empathy. The doctrine, technically known as "rapid dominance" may have devastated the military capability of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in short order, but America's failure to win the peace in either Iraq or Afghanistan with overwhelming military force has galvanized a profound re-thinking of the concept of war, the process of peace, and the challenges of failing states. This is evident in national strategies, doctrines, policies, manuals and the quadrennial defense review, as well as countless other official and unofficial statements, both military and civilian. Reflection on such a scale on so many levels and across such a broad range of disciplines and agencies is rare and impressive. The output has been dramatic, the implied self-criticism penetrating, and the insights promising, but there is a potentially a profound misunderstanding at the heart of much of this that could result in failure, defeat, and death.

The central epiphany of the new thinking is the recognition that the object of war, at least of the kind of wars that have been prevalent in recent decades, is the people. This message comes through clearly in such documents as the recent military field manuals on counterinsurgency, stabilization operations and unconventional warfare, not to mention General McChrystal's recent strategic analysis of the Afghanistan war. The population dimension has also been re-discovered by diplomats who lament the loss of our previously robust public diplomacy capacity. For the development community the focus and main constituency for their efforts has traditionally been the population, though on occasion that focus has been lost in the halls and offices of ministries throughout the developing world capitals.

Writing about population centric operations, counterinsurgency and the human terrain has become a cottage industry. Something of a cult has arisen around such military figures as General David Petraeus and General Sir Rupert Smith of the UK, who are considered leaders in the "new" military thinking. Lesser saints of the cult, such as former military officers Dr. David Kilcullen and Dr. John Nagl have authored successful and insightful books on counterinsurgency emphasizing the "human element." The emerging population centric approach to conflict has been codified in recent years in such military manuals as FM 3-24 (*Counterinsurgency*; 2006) and FM 3-07 (*Stability Operations*; 2008). In the former we learn that, "The interconnected, politico-military nature of insurgency and COIN requires immersion in the people and their lives to achieve victory." Successful counterinsurgency requires that, "Relationships with host nation counterparts in the government and security forces and with the local populace are developed and strengthened. These relationships increase the flow of human and other types of intelligence. This intelligence facilitates measured offensive operations in conjunction with the host nation

security forces.” The reader is informed that, “Genuine compassion and empathy for the populace provide an effective weapon against insurgents,” and that, “Once the unit settles into the area of operations, its next task is to build trusted networks. This is the true meaning of the phrase “hearts and minds.” Since 2005 the Department of Defense has recognized that “stability operations are a core U.S. military mission,” and that, “they will be given priority comparable to combat operations.” Accordingly the Stability Operations Manual explains, “Military forces must go beyond defeating the enemy. They must secure the trust and confidence of the population.”

The belated realization that we were losing the peace in both Afghanistan and Iraq forced the military to concede it needed help. It reached out to civilian agencies and social scientists (above all anthropologists) to help decipher the “human terrain.” Today Human Terrain Teams are embedded with combat forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to help the warriors understand the local culture and the local people. Provincial Reconstruction Teams consist of military, diplomatic and development personnel working jointly to accomplish common goals. All this is more than commendable – it is extraordinary. As these doctrines are gradually internalized our soldiers will become renaissance men and women with cultural and psychological knowledge and linguistic skills to aid them in their interactions with host nation populations. However it is not certain they are that yet.

The “hearts and minds” concept at the heart of counterinsurgency has a more vulgar version and this is where there is a real risk of profound misunderstanding. I call this vulgar version the “three cups of tea” doctrine. It suggests – perhaps inadvertently – that the act of spending time getting to know, interacting with and developing cordial relationships with local populations will win them over to our cause, and encourage them to help us fight a war we assume they feel is theirs, the way we feel it is ours. The critical nuance that is missing here is between not creating additional insurgents – accidental guerrillas as Kilcullen calls them – by offending their social, cultural, religious, security and physical sensibilities; and turning the local population into a military asset.

It is one thing to sit with the local shura or elders, or children, or militias to try to learn what makes them tick and what ticks them off. It is quite another to expect that by sitting with them and sharing their tea – no matter how many cups, and for how many months – we will establish the relationships of trust and confidence that will lead them to tell us where their Taliban uncle meets his al-Qaeda counterpart at night.

I envision relatively young and completely earnest U.S. soldiers interacting with the local population, showing family photographs, kicking soccer balls around with the local kids, or even talking about politics or Islam through interpreters. They will have read FM 3-24 and 3-07 and have internalized their guidance. They will know the importance of the human terrain. Unfortunately the annals of diplomatic and development history are littered with equally enthusiastic and earnest diplomats and development experts who engaged their local counterparts only to be fooled into the false sense of mutual trust, understanding and respect. When you are in the field and you develop a cordial relationship with a local counterpart it is easy and tempting to believe, especially if your counterpart is of senior stature, that you have a bond, insight and understanding of their motivations and of the complex forces, factors and tensions that make up

the local environment. That feeling of privilege reinforces our self-esteem, sense of professional accomplishment and cultural savvy; it can even be intoxicating. What is frightening is the prospect of these earnest soldiers and civilians reaching out, drinking tea and establishing relationships with Afghans but being manipulated, fed with misleading information or disinformation, misinterpreting information, or worse exposing themselves or their compatriots through misunderstanding to great personal risk and even death.

In a recent paper by Major Jim Gant of the U.S. Army Special Forces called “One Tribe at a Time,” we learn how he and his unit, “demonstrated month in and month out that a small effective fighting force could unite with an Afghan tribe, become trusted and respected brothers-in-arms with their leaders and families, and made a difference in the U.S. effort in Afghanistan.

It apparently all started in 2003 when a local tribal leader invited Gant and his teammates, “to sit down and drink some tea and talk. I (Gant) made it a point to relax and put my weapon aside.” Good move. Gant goes on to describe how he took sides in a local conflict after befriending the leader of one tribal faction without ever meeting the leader of the other tribal faction, and how the conflict was resolved by their alliance in favor of his new friend. Perhaps the outcome was just. Based on his written account though it is just as likely Gant was manipulated by one canny local leader into upsetting a delicate equilibrium in the local political eco-system, in a way that is lopsided and self-serving for his local ally. How could Gant and his men be expected to know?

Major Gant’s bottom line is that, “we must support the tribal system because it is the single, unchanging political, social and cultural reality in Afghan society and the one system that all Afghans understand.” This despite the unequivocal conclusion of the experts of the U.S. Army Afghanistan Research Reachback Center that, “...a very large percentage of Afghans in fact are not tribal at all,” and that “talking about tribe in relation to these groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, etc.) makes no sense...” These experts further conclude that “scholars who have performed research in Afghanistan are unanimous in the view that Pashtun ‘tribes’ aren’t political units that act collectively.” (“My Cousin’s Enemy is My Friend,” TRADOC G2 Human Terrain System, 2009). This group of military experts warns that, “Most of Afghanistan has not been ‘tribal’ in the last few centuries...” and that, “the desire for ‘tribal engagement’ in Afghanistan along the lines of the recent surge strategy in Iraq, is based on an erroneous understanding of the human terrain.”

Major Gant argues, “They (the Afghans) need to know that we have their best interests in mind.” In fact seasoned and perceptive Afghans will see through our attempts to do this. They know that we won’t be there much longer. They know that if US forces were to capture Bin Laden and Zawahiri we would declare victory and be out of there the next day. They know that our political and social culture is completely different from theirs and that while we may wish them freedom and prosperity, we will not commit the resources necessary to sustainably modernize their country. Indeed the U.S. interest in Afghan democracy or modernization is arguably no greater today than it was in 1996 when the Taliban seized power there, and they know the extent of our response then.

Afghans know that our cordiality is instrumental. Indeed though we may try to disguise it we don’t effectively hide that fact. The Stabilization Operations Manual states, “Civil Affairs forces

help to shape the operational environment by interacting with the local populace to facilitate military operations. A supportive local populace can provide valuable resources and critical information that supports friendly operations.” Even Major Gant tells us that, “After a relationship has been built with the tribes, we will be able to gather relevant and actionable intelligence on the Taliban, HIG, and al-Qaeda networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Some would argue this level of trust – to confide in representatives of another world and culture against members of your own world and culture – would take many years. Still, without pre-judging the quality of the intelligence derived from personal relationships developed between American forces and Afghan counterparts, it is fair to say that the Afghans understand our motives, and that they have their own agendas.

The point here is not to discredit the valiant efforts of Major Gant and his team, nor to disregard the dramatic advances in U.S. military doctrine represented by the counterinsurgency and stabilization operations manuals. The point is rather to warn that no amount of cordiality or tea with Afghans will persuade them that we are like them, that our war is their war, or that our interests are their interests. Although the Taliban may be unpopular in Afghanistan, most Afghans undoubtedly have far more in common in terms of cultural and political values and experience with the Taliban than with us. They know that Talibanism, whatever that may specifically mean to them, is well-rooted in Afghanistan, and is a force that will have to be reckoned with. They look at Iraq and must ask themselves; if the US is willing to say to the Iraqi leadership, “it is time for you to look after your own security,” how long before the US will say the same to the Afghan leadership?

We can no longer make a first impression on the Afghan people. We have been there in large numbers for nearly a decade. What may have been possible eight years ago, or even four years ago is not possible today. The belligerent practices and attitudes that accompanied the shock and awe mentality, including breaking down doors and invading the homes of thousands of Afghans, man-handling Afghan women and physically intimidating all Afghan citizens, our detainee practices, and our cavalier attitude toward civilian collateral damage shocked all Afghan sensibilities and left an indelible impression. No change in behavior now can undo that legacy. Nevertheless basic decency must become the standard operating procedure for U.S. forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Sensitivity to the human terrain must be an end in and of itself. Respect for human dignity should not be instrumental – extending the hand of friendship to Afghans should not be in the expectation of actionable intelligence. If there is an ulterior motive behind our new sensitivity it should be toward the more modest goal of not creating unnecessary “accidental guerrillas;” that is those who oppose us because of our offensive behavior.

The war in Afghanistan is not about persuasion or tea – it is about power. With their intimate knowledge of conflict derived over the past several decades, and of the delicate power relations that permeate their country, we should assume Afghans will calibrate very carefully and precisely their options based on an accurate assessment of coalition commitment. Our military power and the power of our ideas have not to date led to a decisive victory in Afghanistan, and it is difficult to envision a decisive victory. The Afghans cannot but realize that coalition political will is flagging, and that the power equation is shifting. We must realize that all the tea in China, all the sensitivity to the local human terrain, and all the optimism of our new doctrines are no

substitute for the power we are either willing or unwilling to apply to the conflict – and we should calibrate our expectations accordingly.

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