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Humanizing “The Man:”

Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan

by A. Lawrence Chickering

In a recent issue of *Small Wars Journal*, Oleg Svet revisits the issue of the battle of perceptions, which he calls “crucial” to COIN’s long-run success in Afghanistan.¹ Svet argues that information and psychological operations (IO and PSYOP) have largely failed either to promote support for the U.S.-led coalition or for the Afghan Government; and he explores new “narratives” to strengthen the effects of these operations.

In this paper, I will argue there are three great challenges the coalition forces need to overcome in their search for narratives that resonate with Afghans and that ultimately will promote support for the coalition and for the government. First is the traditional and tribal Afghan antagonism to outsiders. Second is the lack of a *stake* that ordinary Afghans have in the larger system. And the third involves a conflict in impact of major activities in the country, a conflict between programs that empower Afghans and programs that disempower them.

The first two of these issues are related to the focus of tribal people on the tribe and not beyond it. Lack of stake in the larger system is a *cause* of tribal focus, and antagonism to outsiders is an *effect* of it. A new narrative will be most successful if coalition actions help address both problems.

“Outsiders” includes both the central government of Afghanistan and the coalition forces. It is difficult to address the outsider issue—which is the subjective issue of low social trust—with objective means alone (security and services). Trust begins with personal relationships and engagements, and reducing antagonism toward outsiders will therefore require some element of personal engagement in the strategy.

Lack of a stake—or lack of *ownership*—can be solved by allowing people to have property rights, which many do not have in developing countries. But it can also be solved by engaging them in sharing “ownership” of public spaces such as schools or community projects—not legal ownership, but an informal, non-legal stake. In either case, having a stake will play an important role in starting to redirect the attention of tribal people beyond the traditional *roles* that govern their lives toward other people and the system.

A narrative addressing these issues needs to move beyond supporting the government and attacking the Taliban, and needs to highlight movement toward *empowerment* of Afghans, gaining a stake in the system, and toward interpersonal *engagement and trust*. Adding narratives on engagement, both personal and to the system, will start (through engagement) to solve the

¹ Oleg Svet, “Fighting for a Narrative: A Campaign Assessment of the US-led Coalition’s Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan,” Posted on September 12.

problem of outsiders and will start (through ownership) to give people a stake in the system. These developments will strengthen their motivation to resist forces that are trying to bring the system down.

Adding these narratives will have the effect of redirecting the current narratives, which focus on the central government and the Taliban. Such redirection will dissipate the conflict and may even demotivate some Taliban fighters from wanting to fight.

The paper explores models for accomplishing these objectives by reviewing civil society initiatives that have addressed them successfully. Unfortunately, the challenge of creating positive narratives—this is the third challenge—is complicated by important initiatives, both military and non-military, that are *disempowering* in their impact and therefore conflict with programs that empower. In creating new narratives, an important objective needs to focus on eliminating these conflicts and clarifying the reality which the narratives need to describe.

The Challenge of Messages and Themes

Svet explains the failure of the coalition’s communications strategy in two ways: first, because the instruments used for communications are not reaching most Afghan citizens; and second, because the messages and themes are not resonating with them. My concern here is with his analysis of messages and themes.

Svet begins by stating the two major themes of the information and psychological operations: (1) “delineating the ‘evil actions’ of the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden” and (2) arguing that “The Partnership of Nations is here to help.” He concludes: “Not only has this not resonated with Afghans, who view any kind of outside intervention with skepticism, but it has also failed . . . [to gain] legitimacy for the Afghan central government.”

In his ensuing discussion, Svet repeatedly raises—without analyzing them—the puzzles that dog efforts to integrate these ideas.

The puzzles inhere in the challenge of fixing a failed, tribal state. The challenge is to promote loyalty to the central state in a culture that features strong sub-group loyalties to community and tribe and strong (related) resistance to centralized power and authority. This challenge is complicated, as Svet points out more than once, by the conflict between COIN’s marketing objective and the country’s resistance to outsiders. When tribal loyalties are paramount, the real problem is outsiders; and in this perspective, both the central government and the coalition forces are outsiders.

The need for new narratives is obvious from a moment’s reflection on this conundrum. The coalition side of the problem recalls a story told by a Pentagon general several years ago about counterinsurgency warfare in Iraq—it could as easily have been about Afghanistan. His most interesting point came in response to a question about how Iraqi citizens viewed American soldiers. He said that in every conversation he had with ordinary people there—and every conversation he heard about from others—the conversation would come to a point where people would finally say: “No matter how much we might like you, and no matter how much we might like what you are doing, when all is said and done, you are still The Man.”

The Man. You know it is not a compliment. The meaning is complicated, and designing a strategic communications plan requires deconstructing it: arrogant, superior, distant, oppressive. It is easy to see how this judgment could stir a defensive response: *but can’t they*

understand we are trying to help them? The question raises the complicated challenge of helping without resentment.

A society that distrusts outsiders focuses on sub-group loyalties and relationships, rooted in deep cultural patterns, which are *subjectively* important. Our current focus is on strengthening the government's difficult and *objective* efforts to deliver services and provide security. Although solving these problems is important, overcoming distrust of outsiders will depend, more fundamentally, on finding narratives that increase social trust and broaden loyalties and relationships beyond family and tribe. And personal engagement will promote trust far more than providing services or security. Both are important, but the relationship needs to begin, in Greg Mortenson's famous phrase, with the three cups of tea.

Stake becomes important here because in a tribal society it refers back to the tribe. Therefore, a narrative for broadening loyalties must focus on creating stakes in the larger system, encouraging people to see beyond family and tribe. A narrative about this will tell stories about real experiences.

Empowerment Models from Egypt and India

While COIN aims to win active cooperation of the population, it tends to operate from a basic donor/development assumption that poor people—and especially traditional people—are nevertheless essentially *passive*—having *needs* but no *assets*. This assumption about passivity amounts to a belief that people cannot do things for themselves and that governments (and foreign organizations) must do things for them to achieve legitimacy and win popular support.

It is easy to understand the origins of the belief that poor and traditional people are essentially passive. When one sees people as having only needs but no assets, it is common to think that there is nothing they *can* do—and also that they will have assets only when all of their needs are met. This view is not at all limited to developing countries; it is also strongly evident in many efforts to help the poor even in the United States.

It is easy to understand how such people—meaning poor and traditional people—feeling like victims of circumstances that are easy to blame on others, are vulnerable to recruitment into radical insurgencies. In passivity, people are depressed and not fully alive; and violent resistance can provide an appealing alternative to this condition, especially for young men.

Finally, it is easy to believe that people in traditional cultures are *by nature* passive and fatalistic, because tradition defines their identities in static rather than active terms. For example, it is common to believe that traditional cultures have some active animus against girls going to school. Yet people who work on the issue report from wide experiences that girls being out of school comes not from any active traditional or tribal value, but primarily from *tradition*: girls have never gone to school, so they don't go to school now.

People in traditional cultures do not, for the most part, *have* active beliefs; they do what they do for no better reason than that is what they have always done. People in these cultures don't, fundamentally, believe they can control their own lives. If you ask them to become involved in their school, they will say that is the government's business; or they will say they are poor, and they cannot make any difference. (This point, that people in traditional cultures do not have active beliefs, is meant to apply to the great majority of people. It does not apply, obviously, to revolutionaries, like the Taliban, who are trying to bring the entire system down.)

Many programs initiated by civil society organizations in many countries reveal a very different reality about traditional people, especially about their *potential* to become active participants in community life. In Upper Egypt, for example, UNICEF in the early 1990s launched a system of schools for girls in cultures so traditional that the men would not let their daughters out of their homes. But when the men became part of the governing structures of the schools, the schools stimulated a complete cultural transformation in these communities; and after four or five years many of the same men said they would be willing to let their daughters go to Cairo to college.²

The experience of the UNICEF Girls' Community Schools in Egypt is not at all unique. Programs like this show that when people are empowered to step outside their traditional roles, it opens their sense of possibility; and increasing trust connects them to realities beyond the narrow confines of family and tribe.

As an example of what is possible, I want to focus here on the experience of Educate Girls Globally (EGG), an organization I founded in 1999 and now run. Its experience in the very tribal state of Rajasthan in India shows that traditional and tribal people are not at all passive by nature and have the potential of working to develop an identity that does not depend on opposition, which is an important part of Svet's argument: that an Afghan identity must be an identity of opposition because that is how tribal societies are widely perceived. EGG's experience also suggests that traditional and tribal people could become active participants in COIN much earlier than is possible when they are passive, "living by tradition" in other parts of their lives.

EGG shows that traditional people have significant assets and can accomplish extraordinary things when their brains are "activated" (the technical neuroscience term). Louann Brizendine (*The Female Brain*) explains how EGG's program stimulates this activation, which begins to occur when girls who have dropped out of school stand up in a village meeting, step outside their traditional roles, and ask the men to give them a chance in life.³ At that moment, the fathers are visibly moved from indifference to education to active support of it. The fathers and daughters connect empathically as the men see their daughters step outside their traditional roles, and both then start to take conscious control of their own lives.

In its early experiments EGG's program featured girls in this way: addressing the men and re-enrolling on the spot girls who had dropped out of school. Although the girls' initial appeal did produce an important, visible response from the fathers, over time it became clear that this interaction made only a limited difference in school attendance. EGG found that changing the habit of girls being out of school required more active, sustained intervention, especially through the girls' student councils that EGG establishes, motivating the parents.

During this period of motivating families to let their daughters go to school, EGG works with PTA-like structures called School Management Committees (SMCs) to promote community projects. (SMCs exist everywhere but are often dormant.) Over this time villagers, who don't believe they can contribute either to their schools or to their communities, start to pay active roles.

² See A. Lawrence Chickering, Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*, 2006, especially chapter three.

³ Interview with Louann Brizendine, February 12, 2010.

Both the UNICEF program in Egypt—implemented in the “epicenter of Islamic terrorism” in the country—and EGG’s program in tribal India activate community members to take “ownership” of schools, using SMCs that plan and implement change. These models turn parents, teachers, children, and even bureaucrats into *stakeholders*—broadening their sense of possibility and broadening their sense of identity. For people touched by these programs, which were implemented in the most tribal (and in Egypt, the most violent) parts of the country, the problem of “outsiders” has receded if not disappeared.

Citizenship and Trust

In EGG’s process, people become citizens in a social network, creating an institution that can achieve many things they care about. EGG’s program offers no financial incentives at all; the only incentives it offers are empowerment and connection, which (experience shows) are very powerful incentives. During EGG’s two-year project in 500 schools, without any funding, 178 schools got clean water entirely because the people wanted and accomplished it. There is every reason to believe they can also mobilize for security. As stakeholders in the institutions they build, people develop a reason to resist forces that are trying to bring their system down.

Activated communities can help build human intelligence networks, and they increase the number of people doing nation-building. EGG’s program also turns citizens into service providers. As such, they work actively with government officials, promoting a governmental legitimacy that they can now share. When citizens become active, they help build institutional capacity—here in education, but also, potentially, in other areas of social need, starting with health. EGG’s program facilitates development of institutional capacity from the grass roots up through the ministry. In Rajasthan the program began in the state ministry of education, but it is easy to see how it could spread to other areas of social need and other ministries. This is the demand side of governance, which is an essential part of whatever democratic form of government the Afghans choose to adopt.

One of the greatest challenges of nation-building in tribal societies like Afghanistan is increasing social trust beyond family and tribe. Trust is important not only between groups in the society; it is also at least as important for COIN between local communities and the central government. Beyond reducing internal conflict, increasing trust is also important to promote economic and political development. (Trust is essential for market economies to encourage people to do business impersonally, beyond community and tribe; and it is also essential for democracies for people to honor and respect minority rights.)

Developing trust is difficult in traditional societies, in which people act out roles defined by differentiating qualities them—gender, tribe, religion, etc. Svet touches on how to solve this problem in focusing on the importance of engagement:

Engage the Local Population and Tribal and Clerical Leaders. Engagement in Afghanistan is key to establishing reliable social relationships that pay substantial dividends in the long-run. Taking the time to sit and engage with the population or local leaders might not seem like the normal function of soldiers, even information and psychological operators. However, engagement with local tribal and clerical leaders helps minimize unnecessary violence and quell it when it begins, and serves as an important source of information gathering.

This is of course the central message in Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*.

Svet and Mortenson emphasize engagement between tribal leaders and outsiders. While that is important, it is also important to expand trust and identity *within tribal communities*. Through conscious engagement, when people communicate across loyalties within a tribe, their vision of each other expands from their traditional roles (the role for girls is “out of school”) to individual and empathic connection, in which people see each other as human beings and *individuals*. In this changed relationship, now when the girls appeal to them about school, the men can respond beyond the roles to individuals.

Conscious engagement opens up opportunities for people to work with others and accomplish things with others that they could not achieve before. This reduces the importance of “differences” between people and reduces internal conflict. When people really do this, the problem of “outsiders” disappears.

Analyzing Current Programs through an Empowerment Lens

In this model both *empowerment* and *engagement* are important. Empowerment opens people to larger possibilities, and engagement beyond family and tribe starts to connect them with people who in the past have been outsiders: other families, other tribes, government officials. In connection, with people working together, things become possible that were impossible before. The clean water facilities that appeared in the 178 schools in EGG’s Rajasthan project would not have been possible without expanded connections and cooperation. In the same schools, in the same two years, the number of schools with toilets for girls increased from 45% to 70%. EGG provided no funding for this: these empowered communities found a way to do what was important to them.

From this empowerment perspective, it is hard not to be disturbed by stories of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) moving into communities and making improvements without consulting anybody. That is The Man acting. In the same way, there are stories even of famous and celebrated NGOs moving into places and doing work without asking—and NGOs working with large banners celebrating their work, as if they were running for public office.

EGG’s presence in places where it works is largely invisible. Somebody asked a local leader involved in an EGG school what role he thought EGG had played in what had happened, and he said: “Well, you haven’t done anything, really. You organized some meetings and encouraged people to talk, but *we* did all of the work that produced the physical improvements in the school, the improved learning—and all other benefits from the program.”

EGG did nothing. The people did it all. That is what an empowerment program does. When that happens, when people are working with each other, and when they are working with government officials, there *are* no outsiders; there are only insiders reaching out to each other in common purpose, working for a better future.

Standards sensitive to what empowerment really means need to be applied in scrutinizing much of what we are doing in Afghanistan and other places. Assuming all that matters is “us helping them” is a mistake. Help without empowerment and ownership tends to produce wells and schools that fall into disrepair. But worse than that, help without empowerment and ownership represents The Man reminding people that the whole operation is really about him, not about them. It is impossible to say this too often: helping can be empowering and positive if it is done in the right way, but it can be disempowering and negative if it is not. If done the wrong way, helping will inflict positive harm on COIN. Unfortunately, one hears many stories

of actions by PRTs and even NGOs that are not helping at all because they are motivated by The Man's belief that "helping" is all that matters.

A New Narrative

Current narratives, focused on supporting the central government and the coalition forces, struggle because they confront Afghans' suspicion of outsiders. But a narrative of empowerment and connection, emphasizing the empowerment of Muslims—perhaps with stories about Muslim-non-Muslim cooperation and partnership—would redirect attention from current narratives, honoring them and allowing them to engage both the central government and coalition forces as empowered equals. At that point, support through personal engagement could begin to appear, and people's fear of the government (outsiders) would decline along with their perception of The Man. They, meaning the Afghan people, could also be inspired by a vision of a different future.

This new line of narratives would be consistent with the Japanese martial art of Aikido, a metaphysical martial art that teaches not to confront aggression but to redirect it. A common strategy in Aikido is to change the subject, confusing the aggressor. Telling stories of empowerment and connection changes the subject from the government and the Taliban, but part of the new stories will be about cooperation between local communities and the government; and this will help reduce the conflict between them.

Telling stories of empowerment and connection will certainly open people to larger experiences and relationships and in that sense could make an important contribution to COIN. Such stories could also, possibly, have an interesting effect even on Taliban fighters.

That this approach might have an effect on Taliban fighters is suggested by a story told about the psychiatrist Milton Erickson, who was also said to be a practitioner of Aikido. According to the story, Erickson was once held up by a gunman on a public street. Without hesitating, he looked at his watch and said: "It is exactly 11:52 and fifty-three seconds." He then turned on his heel and walked away. Confused and paralyzed, the gunman just stood there, did nothing. Why did he not empty his gun into Erickson's back? One might imagine the reason is that they were in a powerful, aggressive relationship, one governed by conventions so strong that when Erickson violated and defied them utterly, the gunman was frozen in a trance of confused expectations.

Erickson did interesting work on implicit trances, which he believed sustain psychological problems, and which he developed approaches for breaking. He believed that *confusion* could be a powerful strategy for breaking trances, and confusion can often be triggered by radically incongruous messages or behavior.

In thinking about what this story shows about trance-like behavior and about a new, possible narrative on Taliban fighters, it is not unreasonable to imagine that people go into deep trances in their commitment to blow themselves up and kill innocent people. These trances are sustained by an extreme, totalist narrative about their relationship with "others": non-Muslims, women, and other forms of "other". This extreme narrative holds that "Muslims" (the quotations are necessary because the word is often a myth here—the reality is often extreme, traditional tribal culture) are victimized by non-Muslims, by Christians and Jews, by the West and by the U.S. The narrative also celebrates the heroism of Muslims fighting back.

People who become suicide bombers live in an obviously desperate world—a world marked by the pain of complete isolation from others, with no hope of connection with others apart from a brutal determination to kill them. This narrative about psychological isolation is sustained in the world by extreme social isolation from competing narratives and experiences, as in some religious madrassahs in Pakistan.⁴

Our new narrative, celebrating the empowerment and connection of Afghans—especially if drawn from real experiences in the country—would present a powerful counter-narrative to the Taliban narrative. It is possible that such a counter-narrative could at least confuse some Taliban fighters and thus demotivate them from their extreme brutality.

The narrative presenting stories of empowerment and engagement of local communities should be reported, as much as possible, through local media. In an empowerment model, which is about them and not about us, the stories should be *told* by them—again, as much as possible—rather than by us.

Some Real Examples of the New Narrative

An excellent example of a powerful counter-narrative story of engagement and connection is a soap opera developed by Search for Common Ground for use in fifteen countries. (Pakistan is one of the countries, but Afghanistan is not.) Entitled “The Team”, the soap is about a soccer team in each country (cricket in Pakistan) that features extraordinary tribal, religious, racial, and ethnic diversity. The team is torn by huge internal conflict, but the only way it can score goals and win is by pulling together.

Kenya is a country torn by tribal conflict. This show, which is called “The Team”, is so compelling for many Kenyans that has been running on the most important television channel in the country, and after one year it is the third most popular show in Kenya.⁵

A second example comes from Ethiopia. It is also a soap opera, called “Yeken Kignit” (“Looking over One’s Daily Life”). For two and a half years this soap of jealousy, revenge, and murder “created to deliver life-saving messages in an entertaining way” has enthralled audiences. The sponsor is U.S.-based Population Media Center. Its purpose is to promote women’s issues, especially a general elevation of the status of women in society; and there is evidence it is having significant effects in changing people’s behavior.⁶

These are fictional stories, and, as Svet has pointed out, trying to reach Afghans through television is problematic. But telling real stories about real people, communicated through a variety of local media and by local media professionals, could have an even greater impact than fiction: stories about girls appealing to their fathers about going to school and fathers’ letting them go, fathers and mothers actively participating in SMCs in schools, stories about how the creation of schools changed the lives of people in a community, perhaps stories about how schooling for girls helped promote health for her family, stories about Muslims and non-Muslims working together and honoring each other, people from different tribes engaging in a common project, bringing clean water to a school.

⁴ See *Newsweek* cover story, “The Lure of Al Qaeda,” September 13, 2010, issue.

⁵ See Search for Common Ground website: www.sfcg.org.

⁶ Comments are from *Ode Magazine*, April 2006 issue.

Afghanistan has a widely celebrated program that should provide a multitude of stories on community mobilization, promoting citizenship and social trust. The program is the National Solidarity Program (NSP), which was established soon after the war in Afghanistan to provide grants empowering communities to build community projects. The NSP puts decisions about projects in the hands of citizens at the village level, without any intervening entities such as PRTs or NGOs. While the program is not perfect—one very large difficulty occurred when funding for it was cut off for three years—it has operated at a very large scale, and there is little question it has promoted a sense of empowerment through citizenship and ownership. One expert on the country, who has visited hundreds of villages, reported villagers saying, again and again, “For the first time I feel like a citizen”, or “It is not the money, it is the fact we are entrusted to make a decision—this makes me feel human” or “This is not a government institution, it is our institution, but it enables us to trust our government.”

Given that the NSP is in about 30,000 villages, the obvious question is: If the NSP is working, why is the country not working? There are three possible reasons: first, the village councils, which were supposed to be elected from the bottom up to the district level, are in fact appointed top-down. Second, PRT and NGO programs, implemented without consultation—as discussed above—contradict NSP’s empowerment message. And third, the NSP never entered the narrative—again, as suggested above.

The NSP story makes it clear that there is a very large volume of powerful, positive empowerment activity going on in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the stories of this activity either are not being told, or they are being contradicted by conflicting stories about programs that are disempowering people.

Other Issues

Continued difficulties in the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan—and even concerns about the sustainability of the apparently successful campaign in Iraq—are rooted in our very modern belief that improving *objective* aspects of life alone will win people’s support of the government and of the coalition. If we give them freedom and clean water, we think they will pledge their support and oppose insurgencies. Everybody wants freedom and clean water; so why don’t they embrace us for giving these to them?

Our failure is a lack of understanding essential *subjective* elements of a tribal society—a society with a premodern, preconscious concept of self, with identity and self defined by traditional and tribal *roles*. Although Afghans want freedom and clean water, their movement to freedom must happen *subjectively*, from within, before they can embrace them *objectively*, from without. Moreover, part of the freedom they want must come from empowerment—freedom from the traditional roles that disempower them and limit their experiences in role-dominated relationships. Just giving these things, without engagement—and without creating a space for them to move beyond their preconscious roles into active engagement with each other—is to assault their world as The Man, an outsider.

Developmental change and personal engagement will facilitate creation of healthy, positive relationships with their government. Internal shift and *ownership* will change how they view a well. With ownership, they will feel responsibility, and they will maintain it. It might be possible to assess how much good we are really doing in Afghanistan by analyzing repair and maintenance work on wells and schools “given” to them. The hypothesis would be that where

facilities are not maintained, it is because there is no ownership and no empowerment. One hears many stories of wells and schools that are falling apart. It is likely that the reason is that they were built without establishing ownership.

The developmental process of movement from preconscious, tribal life to a life increasingly animated by more modern, conscious relationships *must come from them*. It cannot come from us—or from any “outsiders”, including the central Afghan central government. EGG’s process—and the process of programs like it, such as the UNICEF Girls Community Schools in Egypt—provide space for this transformation. The crucial developmental moment comes when the girls step outside their tribal roles, address the men, and ask them for a chance in life. Their plea, to which the men respond positively everywhere, is not only for a chance to go to school; it is, more fundamentally, for a chance to live engaged, conscious lives. It is a plea, in fact—to be alive. In every EGG school—there are no exceptions—the power of their plea is so powerful that the men respond and embrace their request, which, of course, also releases *them*, the *men*, in the same way, to be free of their traditional roles, free to be conscious and alive.

This is a powerful and poignant moment in their lives developmentally, in their subjective development, perhaps most of all because it opens to them the possibility, for the first time, of engaging *each other* as individuals, outside their roles.

This is also the crucial moment in a country’s embrace of *individual rights*. We tend to think individual rights come from the rule of law because individual rights are legal rights. But a society’s predisposition to create and enforce individual rights depends on this shift to consciousness, engagement, and trust—which allow people to see each other as human and *worthy* of rights. In this sense, the shift to consciousness and engagement represents the social and psychological foundation for legal rights—without which there would be no legal rights, either codified or enforced.

The need to create spaces, as in EGG’s process, that will allow consciousness and engagement to emerge out of tribal cultures is crucial for solving many of Afghanistan’s major challenges. Corruption is an important example. It is common to say that reducing corruption is an essential objective for the success of COIN. But in a tribal society, corruption, at least in part, is an instrument used by the center to bid loyalty away from various sub-groups. In a society without many of the instruments of modern authority, buying people off is the only way to get anything done. Without meaning this as an apology for corruption, this perspective adds complexity to our understanding of it. It also suggests that if other principles of loyalty to the center can be found, they will reduce the pressures for corruption to buy loyalty.

Conclusion

There are three great challenges that need to be overcome in the search for information and psychological operations (IO and PSYOP) narratives that will speak to Afghans. Because these challenges involve issues of reality, *on the ground*—issues that speak to people’s experiences—it is impossible to separate narratives or stories from the realities that make the narratives credible. The challenges are, first, the traditional and tribal Afghan *antagonism to outsiders*, and second is the *lack of a stake* that ordinary Afghans have in the larger system. New narratives will be most successful if the coalition can help address both problems. The third challenge is to eliminate the conflict between programs that empower Afghans and those that do not.

Traditional cultures are *personal* cultures, cultures emphasizing subjective qualities: relationships close by, duty, honor. The current coalition strategy, on the other hand—following the values of Western cultures generally—focuses on impersonal, utilitarian, objectively measurable qualities (services and security). Finding a narrative that speaks to Afghans will require speaking to their reality—and from it. Civil society models exist to do this, including EGG’s program, the National Solidarity Program, and others. At the same time, other programs, including many PRTs and NGO programs, are telling a conflicting message—“helping” without empowering; and these contradictory programs, which are very large in number and cost, are producing substantial “noise” that is undermining creation of clear narratives. Finding clear narratives telling stories of empowerment is crucial to success in the counterinsurgency. But creating those clear narratives will first depend on removing conflicts and establishing clear, consistent objectives in programs being implemented there.

A. Lawrence Chickering is a social entrepreneur who designs and implements civil society strategies in public policy. He is founder and President of Educate Girls Globally (EGG), which has developed a powerful program for promoting girls’ education and empowering traditional communities by reforming government schools, partnering with the government of the very tribal state of Rajasthan in India. He is coauthor of Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security (2006). This is his first article on counterinsurgency strategy.

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